

Jim Dobbin KSG KMCO – Member of Parliament and Chairman of the British Parliament’s All Party Parliamentary Pro-Life Group

Jim Dobbin, the Labour MP for Heywood and Middleton, has died aged 73. He chaired the All-Party Pro-Life Group in the Westminster Parliament.

His final speech in the House of Commons, just before his sudden death, was to urge caution over producing “*three-parent designer babies*” through the controversial mitochondrial replacement technique.

He said that Parliament was being rail-roaded into a decision with profound ethical and public safety implications, without adequate debate: “*Denying Parliament the opportunity to examine these results seems difficult to defend. In effect, it would be asking the House to vote blind on the safety of techniques that the House might reject outright on the basis of the results. Let us be clear and honest about this: the results could not be published and peer reviewed in time for the rumoured vote in the autumn.*”

Following his warnings, the influential *New Scientist* magazine has now joined the calls for greater scrutiny of the proposals.

Jim Dobbin put his experience and background as a micro biologist to good use in fighting against genetic manipulation, the destruction of human embryos, the cloning of animal-human hybrids and in defending the sanctity of the life of the unborn child. His personal family experience of disability issues made him an avowed opponent of eugenics and of euthanasia. His belief in the inalienable right to life made him a staunch defender of the vulnerable and a fierce opponent of anyone who trampled on the weak. He spoke up in defence of marriage and the family.

His lifelong commitment to “*the common good*” and to defending the voiceless, the poor and the marginalised led him to champion unpopular causes at home and overseas.

In recent years he had served as my Vice Chairman of the All Party Group on North Korea and participated in the work of other all-party groups, such as the Parliamentary Working Group on Human Dignity. He attended the inaugural conference of the International Catholic Legislators Network, believing that Catholic parliamentarians and legislators should work have a network within which they could develop friendships and ideas; and was an active member of the British Chapter of the ICLN.

He was a supporter of several charities and each year participated in the annual fund-raising sponsored walk for *Right to Life*, always encouraging people to stand up and be counted for the unborn.

Jim came from a Scottish working-class background and was the son of devout Roman Catholic parents. Born in Kincardine, in “*the Kingdom of Fife*”, on the north shore of the Firth of Forth, his father, William, was a miner and his mother, Catherine (nee McCabe), was a mill worker. His parents had experienced industrial chronic respiratory mining diseases like pneumoconiosis in their working lives and this had led to them encouraging Jim to seek education as an exit route from the mines.

He worked for three decades in Britain’s National Health Service and developed a passion for promoting public health. In addition to defending the rights of unborn and those at the end of their lives, we had worked together in recent years in promoting research into the asbestos related disease, mesothelioma. He saw all of these issues through the same lens: that all are made in the Image of God and are, therefore, of infinite worth.

Jim studied at St Columba's High School, Cowdenbeath, and St Andrew's High School, Kirkcaldy, before studying bacteriology and virology at Edinburgh’s Napier College.

His working life then took him, his redoubtable and devoted wife, Pat (nee Russell), whom he married in 1964, and two sons and two daughters, south of the border to live in the north of England. It was here, in the Borough of Rochdale, that, in 1983, he became involved in local government; becoming Leader of the Council in 1994; and then, in 1997, he became one of the Borough’s two Members of

Parliament.

As a local councillor he won a reputation for brave and steadfast decency; in the House of Commons he quickly became respected on all sides as a principled man who stood up for his deeply held beliefs rather than blindly following the dog whistle of party politics.

Quietly determined and persistent Jim earned a reputation as a man who would not easily be deflected with John Bercow, the Speaker of the House of Commons, who attended his funeral in Manchester, rightly describing him as “*a deeply principled and independent-minded parliamentarian*”.

In Parliament, Jim Dobbin campaigned for a reduction in the upper limit at which women may abort their unborn child, from 24 to 13 weeks. He highlighted the eugenic clause in British law which allows the abortion of babies with disabilities up to birth; and drew attention to “*gendercide*” – the abortion of little girls merely because of their gender.

His passion for the rights of disabled people was undoubtedly influenced by the disabilities experienced by two of his grandchildren – one of whom has just begun undergraduate studies at the University of Oxford. Jim was enormously proud of him.

Unsurprisingly, when, in 2006, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecology called for a debate on Dutch-style “*mercy killing*” of severely disabled babies, Jim compared the proposal to the eugenics policies of the Nazis and said: “*This sends the message that only the perfect are acceptable and the disabled can be discarded.*”

Jim was proud of his Christian Socialism and his membership of the Co-operative Movement (which had its origins in the Rochdale Pioneers) – and his ideas were rooted in the social teachings of the Catholic Church. These ideas had once been a bulwark against Marxism within the Labour Party and the Trades Union Movement. Jim was disturbed to see the emasculation of this tradition, particularly by virulent secularists who promoted a new form of sectarianism and anti-Catholic attitudes, leading him to write in 2008

to the then Prime Minister and Labour Leader, Gordon Brown, warning that Labour must be wary of losing touch with its roots and alienating the country's six million Catholic voters.

Although Jim was a devout Catholic, a regular fixture at the Wednesday night Parliamentary Masses, and in recognition of his commitment to his faith and the Church received a Papal Knighthood from Pope Benedict XVI and became a Knight of the Sacred Military Constantinian Order of St. George, there was not a drop of sectarian blood in him. He was an active member of the Parliamentary Christian Fellowship and, in a sign of the esteem in which he was held by Christians from across both Houses, he was asked to act as Chairman of the National Prayer Breakfast, held annually at Westminster.

Throughout his political life he was given unswerving support by Pat, who shared his causes and convictions with equal passion.

Their love and commitment to one another gave Jim great strength. Pat and their family will be devastated by Jim's sudden death, while overseas in Poland on parliamentary business, and his friends will be holding them all in their thoughts and prayers.

Jim Dobbin, born May 26 1941, died September 6 2014. *Requiescant in pace.*

David Alton – Professor Lord Alton of Liverpool KCSG – was a friend and colleague of Jim Dobbin MP.