Clem:Vellucci listens to voters

Cambridge City Councilor David Clem was interviewed by The Tech on Jan. 28 as part of a biweekly survey of local government. The survey was last published issue; the final instalment appears below.

The Tech: What is the feeling about Mayor [Alfred] Vellucci’s attitude toward the city council—right—on political move or does he genuinely believe the research is dangerous to do in Cambridge?

Clem: Well, I think Mayor Vellucci is personally opposed to recombinant DNA research at the P3 and P4 levels to include the P3 levels. I think to a certain extent the mayor recognizes that there is a significant constituency in the city that is opposed to recombinant DNA research, at least based on the information it has received in the press. The mayor, being an elected representative, is sensitive to that constituency.

It’s up to the city councilors acts without an understanding of the political implications of that decision, which I think is inappropriate with his office, [but] I don’t believe that all city councilors should respond solely to their own political advantage. In this case, the mayor has received a good deal of comment and reaction from people in his neighborhood and in the eastern half of the city, and he has responded to their wishes.

Some of those complaints are against the research, some of those complaints are against universities in general. So it’s difficult to isolate in a concrete way the total motivation for his opposition.

The Tech: There are a lot of people, both in the recombinant DNA field and in general, are talking very seriously at the moment about genetic engineering. What’s your feeling about that—do you feel that the manipulation of genes in this way should be used to control human diseases, or do you think that the abuses of that kind of technology would be too serious to make it worthwhile?

Clem: I think you hit the nail on the head when you said “the abuse of that technology.” I think that the scientific community has the capacity now, (or will within the next five years) to seriously involve itself in what you loosely described as genetic engineering. I personally am quite troubled by that—right that society does not have the institutional vehicles to make decisions as to what constitutes legitimate abuse of the technology and what constitutes legitimate use of the technology.

I think it’s inappropriate for any one segment of society to make decisions of that magnitude, consequences. I am apprehensive about society’s ability in the future to approach this issue and establish a responsible mechanism to deal with it.

That is one reason why I have been supportive of the CLERB process in Cambridge, and of our moratorium and debate here and hopefully the subsequent implementation of a Cambridge Biotechnology Committee. At least, that is the start, of a more thorough and broader review of scientific inquiry. I am encouraged by the response of the institutions in recognizing that this is going to be an ever-increasing problem and that they had better come to grips with it while their institutional frameworks.

I believe MIT is going to sponsor a seminar in the spring and the summer to deal with the issue of limits to inquiry. I think that we have to face this issue, which is an exceedingly difficult one, well in advance of having to be tested by it in a crisis situation.

I am sure that we will establish institutional vehicles or societal vehicles to resolve and reconcile this issue and they will be inappropriate, and fail, and will have to be replaced, and I think that we must start that process soon so that when we face a serious issue of genetic engineering we will have a vehicle which has been tested and tried and proven to have some utility in resolving complicated, emotional issues such as this one.

I am not prepared to say that all genetic engineering is inherently bad. I think that, for instance, if we were to be able to utilize our knowledge to alter the course of limits to inquiry. I am encouraged by the broader review of scientific inquiry. I think that it is the start of that process.

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Interview

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