The New Atlantis
A Journal of Technology & Society

The Confused Congresswoman

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Diana DeGette is a sixth-term Democratic congresswoman from Colorado's first district, and the Democrats' chief deputy whip in the House. Ever since her arrival in Congress, replacing the retiring Pat Schroeder in 1997, DeGette has focused her attention on abortion, reproductive issues, and—most prominently—the stem-cell debate. She is one of the chief sponsors of a bill to use tax dollars to encourage the ongoing destruction of human embryos for research. The measure, which would overturn President Bush's stem-cell-funding policy, had the distinction of being the first bill vetoed by Bush and the only bill he has vetoed twice (in 2006, and in 2007).

Sex, Science, and Stem Cells: Inside the Right Wing Assault on Reason
By Diana DeGette
Lyons ~ 2008 ~ 272 pp.
$24.95 (cloth)

In her new book, *Sex, Science, and Stem Cells*, DeGette seeks to relate the harrowing drama of her defense of abortion rights and advocacy of stem-cell research, and especially to describe, as she sees it, the great Republican assault on science in America.

As biography, the book is an interesting and at times even moving read. DeGette's wonderfully American family story and her unusual rise through Colorado politics make for a good yarn, and her recollections of her daughter's first diagnosis of juvenile diabetes offer both a loving picture of her family and an insight into the intense tenacity of her stem-cell advocacy. But these personal stories are quickly dispensed with in the book's first few chapters, and with them go all of its strengths and charms. When she turns to substance, DeGette unleashes a dizzying mix of rank propaganda, factual inaccuracies, scientific distortions, personal venom, and embarrassing confusion. More importantly, she reveals an attitude that must leave us worried about the ability of the Democratic majority in Congress to govern on issues that touch upon science.

For anyone familiar with the subjects DeGette takes up, her gross and repeated factual misstatements must surely be the most peculiar feature of this most peculiar book. In areas in which she has been deeply involved for years, DeGette seems unaware of basic facts. She provides an almost comically erroneous

description of the so-called "Dickey-Wicker Amendment," which governs federal funding of embryo research. She wrongly claims that research on stem cells from aborted fetuses is not funded by federal dollars. She believes federal funds had supported embryo research before 2001—when in fact President Bush's policy provided funding for the first time, under ethical constraints. She speaks of "the 110 million Americans suffering from diseases who stood to gain from potential applications" of stem-cell science—asserting, it seems, that every third American is dying of a terrible illness. She imagines, too, that "there's a general public consensus about the ethics of embryonic-stem-cell research in this country."

DeGette seems entirely unaware that she has voted to provide funds to encourage the practice of embryo adoption for the last six years—a program sponsored by Senator Arlen Specter, her close ally in the stem-cell fight. And she declares, in one of the book's numerous instances of shameless, audacious, arm-waving boasting, that when President Bush vetoed her funding bill for the second time, in 2007, he was almost ashamed to do it, and "there was no veto ceremony, no East Room spectacle, no press conference." Actually, there was precisely an East Room "spectacle," and no shame to be found.

But DeGette's most egregious factual errors are on matters of science, not policy and politics. In some cases, she spouts ludicrous talking points as scientific facts, arguing, for instance, that the word "abortifacient" was made up by pro-lifers and is not a medical term. But on questions of stem cells and human cloning, she is either systematically deceptive or appallingly ignorant.

"What most people don't know," she writes, "is that there are generally two types of cloning under discussion among bioethicists, lobbyists, activists, and legislators, as mentioned earlier: reproductive cloning and so-called therapeutic cloning, also known as somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT), which involves the replication of cells for research purposes only." In fact, at no point does any kind of human cloning involve the mere "replication of cells." Cloning always involves the creation of a new human embryo that is genetically identical to another human being. The difference between the two types of cloning she describes has to do not with the procedure involved, but with what is done with the embryo produced by cloning: it is either transferred to a woman to develop to birth (reproductive cloning), or it is destroyed for research (so-called therapeutic cloning or SCNT). But DeGette repeatedly masks this fact with erroneous descriptions of cloning. "With SCNT," she writes, "cells are taken from the body, and the nuclei are replaced. The cells are thus capable of being made into stem cells, which can in turn be programmed to become any type of cell in the body."

Again, no. Cells are not "turned into stem cells." An embryo is created by cloning and then destroyed, and stem cells are removed from its inner mass.

After repeated examples of this kind of error, the reader is left wondering if DeGette is trying to fool us or is herself simply ignorant of these basic facts. Her related forays into ethical reasoning tend rather to support the latter view. "Reproductive cloning is a whole other issue," she writes after incorrectly describing therapeutic cloning.

> This is the process of replicating a human being for no scientific or therapeutic purpose whatsoever. It's replication for the sake of replication—and the dangerous implications of this type of research are immediately and everywhere apparent. It promotes the troubling view that human beings can be designed or manufactured to demonstrate certain characteristics; it blurs the line between nature and science; it ignores the need for genetic diversity in the general population; it opens a dangerous door on the buying and selling of human life; it's unsafe, unproven, unnecessary.

Of course each of these arguments applies also to therapeutic cloning, and in most cases even more emphatically. If she is troubled by these kinds of concerns, the career she describes in the book becomes very difficult to understand.

But what DeGette is most troubled by, it seems, is the right and its invidious influence. The book drips with disgust at social conservatives and with exasperation at the very fact of having to contend with such people and views. DeGette describes herself "logging these long, ridiculous hours on Capitol Hill, getting into long, ridiculous debates on practical, common-sense initiatives that were somehow regarded in this conservative political environment as subversive." She attributes differing views on questions of reproduction and abortion to pure squeamishness about sex, adding "and then on top of that squeamishness we have the many tentacles of the Catholic Church, trying to influence a dialogue that's already difficult to begin with."

Indeed, she saves her harshest venom for religious conservatives. "In my fifteen years in elected office," she writes,

> I have seen the power of the Christian Coalition and its members. While not representative of the views of the majority (or even a large minority) of Americans, this group wields disproportionate influence over our politicians. Why? Because it is a single-issue group that has enormous power to control campaign donations and the votes of its members. If voters who belong to this group are told to denounce a politician because he or she opposes the wishes of this group, they will. No

> questions asked—and this right here is one of our fundamental problems.

Yes, she said "the Christian Coalition." In this army of the ignorant and easily-led she even finds some of her congressional colleagues, and collegial courtesy does not restrain her from naming them. "Whenever I listened to a guy like Tom Coburn," she writes of the physician-turned-senator from Oklahoma, "my skin would start to crawl and I'd get to thinking, *Oh my God, what if I had a guy like that as my doctor?*" After another colleague draws a distinction between miscarriage and abortion, DeGette tells us, "I simply couldn't get past the fact that a member of Congress would make the odious claim that if a woman miscarried it was no fault of her own, but if she had an abortion there was fault to be assigned."

This complete inability to comprehend the arguments of her opponents characterizes DeGette's depictions of all the political struggles she describes in the book. Nowhere does she actually discuss what the other side might be arguing, or indeed what her own ethical premises might be. Indeed, she revels in her ignorance of the opposing arguments. "Because the right wing's objections were at least consistent, I never gave them much thought," she tells us. That much is certainly clear from the book.

At no point does DeGette seem to believe that there are any genuine ethical questions at issue in the debates over stem-cell research, abortion, and other reproductive issues. "Over time, I realized that the politicization of science by the Republicans and the religious right was at its most insidious over any issue relating to human reproduction," she writes. "This brought me to the inevitable conclusion that too many of our elected officials are simply incapable of thinking rationally about sex. I could think of no other explanation." None? In the stem-cell debate, in particular, DeGette simply dismisses the possibility that any serious ethical question exists. At no point does she offer any arguments about the moral or even biological standing of the human embryo. She sees embryos in fertility clinics as merely valuable raw materials, and sees no need to explain her view. Speaking of patients and those who care for them she writes, oddly: "Together we're counting on those embryos to see us through and take some of that weight off our shoulders and set our world right once again." In a lengthy discussion of the Bush stem-cell policy, she never suggests there might be some *reasons* for the president's approach. She can only say that "his objection is in essence a religious one."

And here we find the deepest and most troubling difficulty revealed by this troubling book. DeGette takes any argument about science that is

not itself a purely scientific argument to be essentially illegitimate. Reviewing some aims laid out in an administration document about abstinence education, for instance, she writes, "While many of the goals stated in the guidelines are admirable, they are not science-based." But of course the goals of policy need not be science-based, even if some of the means toward achieving them might be. DeGette, however, can see no way to permit other kinds of views—philosophical, ethical, moral, traditional, or religious—to influence any policy issue in which science plays a role.

All these other kinds of views, she argues, are merely personal, and only science is universal and public. The attitude of the right "confuses a personal system of beliefs with a responsible approach to science," she warns. Of the Bush stem-cell-funding decision she notes, "Clearly, this was not a scientific decision. It was a political decision, make no mistake." But of course, the president is a political leader, not a scientist, and must consider the larger public good as he understands it in making policy, including science policy.

The worldview that emerges from DeGette's book would deny our democratic institutions any real say over science policy. The advancement of science is the only goal they are allowed to pursue, and they must clear away every obstacle to doing so. Science, as DeGette describes it, is the great organizing principle of modern life, and government ought not to interfere. "The scientific method is necessary to preserve order in our world, and at the same time pursue sound public policy," she writes in one characteristically bizarre passage. Especially because the science she generally has in mind is the pursuit of medicine and health, its aims are taken to be higher than any "personal" or ideological concerns about ethics, and so to merit preeminence and protection.

This attitude, which we should not be surprised to find at the highest levels of the Democratic party in Congress, is among the most serious dangers to American self-government in our time. It runs the risk of blinding the left to its responsibilities to public ends no less important than the pursuit of public health, and at the same time of causing the right to overreact in a defensive lurch that could damage American science policy and the scientific enterprise itself. It speaks of a profound loss of perspective all too evident in the science debates of recent years. Science, and especially biomedical science, carries immense promise and potential; but it sometimes also raises some serious ethical challenges and dilemmas, and a democratic society must be able to call upon more than science alone to address them.

To understand the proper relation of science and politics is no easy task, but it is an increasingly unavoidable

one, which will grow all the more urgent in the coming years, as biotechnology presents us with some daunting prospects. To make the most of new advances, we must be capable also of resisting abuses. DeGette's book is a warning about the inability of our leaders to meet these challenges. Beyond the book's careless reckless rhetoric, beyond the ignorant derision, beyond the smug and pompous arrogance, is a deep and genuine cause for concern.

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