

SOME REFLECTIONS ON POPULATION POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES

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After describing with broad brush the major demographic changes of American history, Dr. Taeuber emphasizes the unpredictability of the next 30 years and the formidable difficulties encountered by any national population policy. Since I am currently in the population policy business, I would like to address some of these difficulties.

Let me focus my attention on the population growth side of the problem and leave distribution aside because the latter is both more confounding and probably less manipulable. Even with zero population growth our "problems" of population distribution would remain. However, the growth of metropolitan areas now and increasingly in the future will be a function of natural increase as the transition from a rural to an urban to a metropolitan to a megalopolitan society runs its course. So let me concentrate my few remarks on Dr. Taeuber's conclusion that the "deep need that is manifest in the history of the twentieth century is regularity in growth or, more precisely, the achievement of continuity in reproduction at replacement levels"—a conclusion with which I basically sympathize.

In predicting the future, demographers and other social scientists tend to be very much influenced by recent developments and changes of fashion. The classic example of this was the forecasts prepared in the 1930's by the precursor of this Commission, the Committee on Population Problems of the National Resources Committee whose projections in 1938 of the population in 1980 were surpassed in the 1950's. In a volume to which I had occasion to return the other day—*FOUNDATIONS OF AMERICAN POPULATION POLICY* published in 1940 by Frank

Lorimer, Ellen Winston and Louise Kiser—I noted with sobering reaction the following conclusion:

The real alternatives in the long-range prospects for the total population of the U.S. are not rapid population increase or stabilization but rather stabilization or decrease. In fact, a period of population decrease beginning a few decades hence seems almost inevitable. By that time, if present trends continue, the intrinsic reproductivity may be only three-fourths or two-thirds of that required for permanent population replacement.

Perhaps their observations were 30 years premature. More seriously, the prefatory phrase "if present trends continue" seems to have been of little predictive utility in the past 30 years and there seems to be little basis for assuming that it will be any better of a guide for the next 30 years. As fertility becomes increasingly a matter of choice it becomes more sensitive to fashions and more changeable and unpredictable in the short run. And the short run of course can have enormous long-run demographic consequences as the legacy of the high fertility of the 1950's testifies. An example of what seems to be a response to fashion can be read from some statistics on the number of children female college freshmen say that they would like to have eventually, compiled by the College Research Center at Educational Testing Service in Princeton. Between 1965 and 1969 there was hardly any change. The proportion wanting none or one averaged around five to six per cent. In 1970 it climbed suddenly to ten per cent. The proportion wanting four or more children fell from about forty per cent during the 1965-69 period to a little over twenty per cent in 1970. The mode shifted from "four to more" to two. Without debating the implications of such responses for actual fertility behavior, there has clearly been an abrupt change in reproductive fashions, probably caused by the environmental fever sweeping the campuses. As my colleague Ryder wisecracked on hearing the statistics, these campuses have probably been visited by Paul Ehrlich. The point is that such fashions can change quickly—and probably will continue to do so.

For many involved with policy issues today the main concern has been problems of growth—a kind of belated awareness of the social and economic problems of the past two decades with an assumed connection with population. This point was stressed by President Nixon in his Population Message to Congress of July 18, 1969, when he said: "I believe that many of our present social problems may be related to the fact that we have had only fifty years in which to accommodate the

second hundred million Americans." And the thought of a third hundred million in another forty years is a sobering one.

On the other side there is the view held by an increasing number of observers that we may be back on the road to replacement and perhaps even below-replacement fertility. They point to such things as the attitudes of young people, women's rights' ideologies, the emergence of new concepts of family, the liberalization of abortion laws, the improvement of contraception, the emergence of the Government in providing family planning services and the fact that fertility has been declining throughout the developed world. This certainly seems a plausible basis from which to predict a further reduction in fertility. But there is little reason to believe that such a direction is inevitable, even though plausible. Fashions change and perhaps family-size preferences will also. There are counter pressures developing in the abortion area; the perfect contraceptive is not in sight; and eliminating unwanted childbearing altogether may prove impossible. Various programs to improve the status of women may turn out ironically to have pro- rather than anti-natalist effects. And there is some evidence that income and family size are positively correlated among those able to control fertility. If this is so the improvement of control and rising incomes may conceivably combine to augment fertility.

All of this has two implications for policy—that it should not be based in any irreversible way on aiming fertility in this or that direction, and that zero growth, although probably a desirable target, is also probably an illusory one in any literal sense. Let me elaborate these propositions in just a few words. That the population policies currently in the making should not aim only at reducing population growth—especially if that means introducing measures that are in any sense irreversible and not desirable in their own right aside from their demographic implications—seems clear from the unpredictability of the future direction of fertility. A similar caution should accompany any proposed change in immigration policy. Many now point out that immigration currently accounts for one-fifth of annual population growth, but this proportion is mostly an artifact of the low level of the birth rate; for example, if our rate of natural increase were zero, net international migration would constitute 100 per cent of our growth. (And if the rate of natural increase were negative, the percentage accounted by immigration would be quite peculiar indeed.) The 400,000 net international migrants could probably be reduced (realistically) by one-third, but the political price one would have to pay would hardly

be compensated by the demographic gain. Even with 400,000, Coale has calculated the demographic cost of a stationary population to be only a total fertility rate of 2.0 rather than 2.1 and an ultimate size of six to seven per cent greater than without any immigration. My own view is that we should begin to sensitize immigration policy to demographic considerations in terms of the possible future desire to increase the rate of growth, in other words as a kind of demographic insurance against the nationalistic anxieties usually provoked by the possibility of below-replacement fertility (Rumania, Hungary, the USSR and Japan are recent cases in point).

To say that zero growth in the long run is inevitable is true though platitudinous and a not-very-useful observation for the policy maker. To say that zero growth in the short run is illusory means not only is zero as a mathematical value no more or less unique than other values in the approximate vicinity but also that no firm empirical base exists from which to predict the kind of stability usually implied by such a notion. A safer bet would be an average growth rate of zero with many short and occasional long swings in both directions.

Aside from the control of immigration it is unlikely that we can fine-tune population growth anyway—probably even less than the economy can be fine-tuned. Where does that leave the policy maker? The proposition that population growth aggravates social, environmental, governmental and other problems in the U.S. and makes their solution more difficult has at least strong intuitive appeal if not the force of scientific evidence. Population stabilization seems to make a great deal of sense from many points of view. By and large it is a much more convincing proposition than the obverse would be that the U.S. would *benefit* from increased growth. But it ceases to be overwhelming in its logic when compared with the *laissez faire* position of ignoring it, especially if the costs of intervention are high in terms of infringing on freedom of choice.

My own developing view—and I wish to stress that this is *my* view and not that of the Commission, which really hasn't reached this stage of deliberations yet—is that we should do everything we can to maximize that freedom of choice. There is a tremendous problem of unwanted childbearing in this country that we have documented elsewhere. This is a social problem of the first magnitude, a problem that if conceived in public health terms would be classified as one of major epidemic proportion. Like many such problems it is one that falls disproportionately on the least privileged members of society. The elimina-

tion of unwanted fertility would not only be desirable from every point of view—that of the child, the parents, the community and the nation—but accompanied by the apparent changes in attitudes of young people toward family size, it would also probably result in near-zero growth, perhaps even a negative rate of growth. Few policies promise such a return on investment as would an all-out effort to prevent unwanted fertility.

Maximizing freedom of choice and responsibility for choice in the arena of reproductive decisions means that we increase the rationality of such decisions in terms not only of eliminating ignorance and inequality of access to the means of fertility control but also by educating parents to the costs of such decisions for themselves and their community. It also means ideally that pro-natalist laws and social pressures should be neutralized. Women should have the same opportunities as men, an ideal that should be promoted even if its consequences turn out to be pro- rather than anti-natalist. As Dr. Taeuber concludes: "The limitations to consensus, the mores of propriety, and the concepts of the role of the government provide underlying resistances to natalist policies in either direction."

Of course we run some risks this way. Even with complete control over fertility and complete awareness of and perhaps even responsibility for the real costs, Americans may still elect numbers of children well above the replacement level, or well below for that matter. At the moment this does not seem likely. And because the seriousness of the risk depends upon the evaluation of the consequences—and here reasonable people disagree—the most judicious policy at this point in our history would seem to be to maximize individual choice on the hope and assumption that what is good for the individual and family will be good for the community and nation. And after all we can always take another look when events unfold further and greater knowledge presumably accumulates; indeed we should monitor the whole process much more closely than we have in the past. Perhaps at this stage of our development that is what population policy ought to be all about.

DISCUSSION

Frank Lorimer: I have no defense of the book that Westoff cited, which was intended as a sequel to the National Resources Committee's report: *THE PROBLEMS OF A CHANGING POPULATION*; but I would

like to say a word in defense of the report. The staff accepted the population projections that Thompson and Whelpton prepared for our use, as the most reliable ones available at that time. It is obvious, in the light of hindsight, that there should have been greater emphasis on the unreliability of all population projections used as estimates of expected future trends—even with the more sophisticated techniques now available. The staff did, nevertheless, attempt to allay the alarm that was widely current at that time about the dire consequences of declining fertility. The major emphasis of the whole report was placed on regional inequalities in population trends and related inequalities in income, education and other social conditions.