THE DEVELOPMENT OF POPULATION POLICY IN BRITAIN

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Between 1960 and 1964, the projected population of the United Kingdom at the end of the century was revised from 64 to 75 million. Ecologists and others clamored for a policy aimed at controlling population growth before it placed intolerable burdens on resources and amenities. Skeptics retorted, however, that population policy was not a substitute for environmental policy, that average family size (about 2.5 children) was already relatively low, and that the problems were being exaggerated. Successive British governments showed little enthusiasm for the adoption of a positive policy on population growth. In the late 1960s public birth control services were extended, but these were regarded as a part of health care and not as an instrument of population policy. The only measures to limit numbers were those adopted in the 1960s to restrict immigration from the British West Indies and other parts of the Commonwealth. In 1971 the government set up a panel of experts to assess the available evidence on the significance of population trends.

A much more purposeful attitude had been adopted toward the problems associated with uneven distribution of population. After the Second World War, plans for building construction and most other forms of development had to conform to physical planning policy. New towns were established to draw population from congested urban areas, and businessmen were given incentives to expand in those areas where unemployment tended to encourage migration to more prosperous parts of Great Britain.

Demographic issues entered the arena of British politics at the beginning of the 19th century, after Malthus produced his *Essay on the Principle of Population*. Malthusian pessimism about the relationship between growing population and dwindling resources, however, appeared to become irrelevant in Britain. A fertility decline began in the 1870s: mean ultimate family size dropped from 6.16 for those married in the 1860s to just over 2.0 for marriages of the 1930s.

In 1913 the English socialist Sydney Webb offered evidence to support his view that the fertility decline was taking place primarily among those members of every class who showed the most providence, foresight, and self-control. He foresaw the prospect of either national deterioration, or a loss of the country to the Irish and the Jews (1). But more influential than such speculations were some widely publicized forecasts, made in the 1930s, of a coming population decline. According to one extreme estimate, the population of England and Wales would fall from 39.9 million in 1931 to 4.4 million by the year 2035. The seriousness with which such estimates were taken was probably reinforced by the adoption in Germany of a comprehensive pronatalist policy. Similar policies had also been pursued in France, Belgium, and Italy for several years.

The Population (Statistics) Act of 1938 was indicative of the increased interest in population trends. The Act changed the vital statistics system, making possible the calculation of precise reproduction rates and the analysis of current changes in fertility (2).

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Suggestions that population growth be made the subject of an official enquiry were heard before the Second World War. In 1944 a Royal Commission on Population was established, assisted by three specialist committees. The Commission's enquiries, which lasted 5 years, included a study on fertility and a special family census. The final report was reassuring (3). One of its findings was that family size, after falling continuously for half a century, had been comparatively stable for the previous 20 years. The level was only about 6 per cent below the level needed for replacement given prevailing mortality rates. The total population of Great Britain, it was thought, would probably go on growing for at least one or two decades, but only by a few million.

Although sanguine about general prospects, the Commission had no hesitation in concluding that "a replacement of family is desirable in Britain at the present time. It is impossible for policy, in its effects as distinct from its intentions, to be 'neutral' in this matter since over a wide range of affairs policy and administration have a continuous influence on the trend of family size." The Commission recommended that the economic and social hardships of large families be reduced by a number of social policy measures. It also recommended that the newly established National Health Service include facilities to advise married persons on contraception.

The Commission's Report was never debated in Parliament, and most of its specific recommendations were ignored by successive governments. Even so, the Report and the work of the Royal Commission's specialist committees shaped much of the study and subsequent discussion of population trends.

In contrast to the neutral attitude toward growth rate, a strongly positive policy was adopted in the postwar period toward population distribution. During the 19th century, the proportion of the country's population living in large towns increased from 20 to 80 per cent. However, until the 1940s there were no controls over land use, and nothing prevented the congestion, poor housing, and destruction of natural amenities which came to characterize the industrial towns. Also, when traditional industries such as coal mining and ship building started to decline in this century, migration began to the relatively prosperous South and Midlands since the affected areas could no longer offer adequate employment opportunities for their labor forces.

In the year 1940 the Report of the Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population (4) recommended the decentralization or dispersal of both industry and population away from congested urban areas and the encouragement of a reasonable distribution of industrial development throughout Great Britain. It urged that urban growth be restrained by the adoption of a policy of developing new towns and expanding existing towns. In 1944 Sir Patrick Abercrombie's Greater London Plan proposed a series of new towns, each accommodating 60,000 to 80,000 people, together with industry from the overcrowded capital. A "green belt" would intervene between the towns and the London suburbs.

Postwar legislation was formulated around these ideas. Areas were established where development was restricted or even prohibited. At the same time support was given to the creation of homes and jobs in parts of the country where, it was hoped, people would live and work. The Town and Country Planning Act of 1947, and subsequent legislation, established a centralized planning system, imposed compulsory planning duties on local authorities, and made most building construction and other forms of development subject to the consent of the authorities. Twenty-eight new towns were established, each planned and managed by a development corporation appointed by the government. Population distribution was also promoted by town expansion schemes: arrangements were made

between cities with problems of "over-spill" and smaller towns willing to accept people and industry from those cities. In addition, under a series of Acts beginning in 1945, businessmen were given incentives to expand into disadvantaged areas.

The postwar plans to move people and industry from London to the new towns and expanded towns assumed that there would be very little increase in population. It was also assumed that the policy on redistribution of industry would be sufficient to restrain migration to the South. Both assumptions were proved to be incorrect. There was a rapid population increase, as well as continued migration to the South. In addition, there was substantial net migration from overseas to Greater London and other conurbations from the mid-1950s onward. The increase in population was accompanied by a continuous rise in real income. This had the effect of increasing the amount of dwelling space individuals regarded as an acceptable minimum. It also had the effect of increasing the individual's range of movement. By the 1960s many were ready to believe that population trends in Britain presented a need for remedial action.

One action by the government in the 1960s was the substantial reinforcement of measures to reduce regional disparities in employment opportunities. The relatively poor and erratic performance of the economy was becoming a major political issue at this time, and the question of regional disparities began to be seen as a problem of economic growth rather than primarily a social problem. Emphasis was placed on the contributions the regions could make to the achievement of a higher national rate of growth. Areas qualifying for government assistance were enlarged, and a start was made on a regional economic planning. Certificates permitting office and industrial development were granted in a way that favored the problem areas. Increased help was given to firms willing to develop in those regions in the form of investment grants and tax concessions. In September 1967 a Regional Employment Premium was introduced in the form of a labor subsidy to employers in manufacturing industry. The intensified regional policy has apparently had a powerful remedial effect on regional problems (5, 6).

In 1965 prospects of another substantial increase in population led to the establishment of an official study group to examine population trends, patterns of settlement, and other relevant factors, up to the year 2000. The study group concluded that land shortages could become acute by the end of this century. Population pressures in the areas surrounding conurbations were thought likely to become severe, especially since the adjoining countryside provided conurbations with the most readily accessible recreational land. Comprehensive planning was recommended to determine an optimum pattern for development (7).

Another development in the 1960s was a major change in Britain's policy on Commonwealth immigration. Until 1962 Britain was alone among Commonwealth countries in admitting citizens of other Commonwealth countries without restrictions. In the 1950s the flow of colored immigrants from the Caribbean, India, and Pakistan grew considerably. Unfavorable employment conditions at home and reports of easily obtainable jobs in the United Kingdom prompted much of the increased flow. Workers were actively recruited in the West Indies by London Transport and other British employers. The imposition in 1952 of restrictions on immigration to the United States made Britain the only major industrial country open to large-scale migration from the British West Indies.

Although the size of the colored population was modest compared with the size of the white population, it was concentrated in the cities and often in areas with severe housing shortages. Many saw the immigrants as an additional and unwarranted burden on

amenities that were already distressingly inadequate. Some advocates of control claimed that the immigrants brought with them an alien and unacceptable way of life. The immigrants themselves complained, with justification, of racial discrimination in the housing and employment markets. Measures against racial discrimination were the subject of Acts in 1965 and 1968 (8, 9).

The demands for immigration control were vigorously opposed. It was argued that the economy needed the immigrant's labor; that the government should respond compassionately to the desire to work in Britain of people from poor countries with long historical ties to the United Kingdom; that Britain had a tradition of admitting people of other nationalities; that fears of "the aliens" were understandable but misguided; and that Britain had a duty to treat immigrants fairly and to take positive measures to remove the underlying causes of tensions (10). A study by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, published in 1970, concluded that the economic cost of an unduly restrictive immigration policy could well be high ". . .especially since the natural demographic forces in this country are such that, certainly up to 1980, the rate of increase of the labour force will be even less than the small expansion experienced between 1960 and 1965"(11).

Nevertheless, controls were instituted and were subsequently made increasingly restrictive. The first measure, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, made entry into Britain subject to an official employment voucher. After the Act, immigrants from the Commonwealth were primarily dependents joining relatives already settled in the United Kingdom.

Although actual population policy in the 1960s was directed toward influencing distribution and immigration, the dominant theme of public discussion was the rate and implications of natural increase. A boom in births, starting in the mid-1950s, led to major upward revisions in projected population growth. The heavy Commonwealth immigration contributed to this projected increase. Over the period 1960-1964, estimates of the United Kingdom population at the end of the century increased from 64 to 75 million (12).

During the decade of the sixties it became public knowledge that the world's population was growing rapidly. From about the mid-1960s onward, greater emphasis was given to the view that not only poor countries, but the world as a whole, was threatened by the effects of rapid population growth. It was argued that developed countries like Britain would fare badly in the struggle for survival; that Britain's own population was already larger than she could support; that the projected population growth would outstrip the nation's resources and impose hazardous demands on the environment; and that the country should have a positive population policy directed toward a substantial reduction in numbers.

Probably the single most effective stimulus in bringing about the discussion of such a policy was the presidential address by Sir Joseph Hutchinson to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in September 1966. In this widely publicized speech, Hutchinson told his audience, ". . . make no mistake, this country already carries a population as great as the environment can support without degeneration, and it will call for all the knowledge and skill we can command to prevent irreparable damage before we achieve a stable population, even if we set about stabilization without delay"(13). He suggested that Britain aim for a stable population of 40 million. Concern with these issues led to the creation, in 1966, of the Conservation Society, as a pressure group for population control (14).

In February 1968, 326 Members of Parliament signed a motion calling on the government to establish permanent and adequate machinery for examining the difficulties which might come about through population growth "and for giving early warning to Parliament of such difficulties and to advise what steps should be taken to overcome them well in advance of crisis point."

In 1969 the Institute of Biology convened a symposium on the Optimum Population for Britain. Ninety per cent of the participants affirmed the view that "the optimum population for Britain has already been exceeded." In a vivid contribution to the symposium, P.R. Erhlich contemplated the position of Britain in a world forced by mounting population toward nuclear war, worldwide plague, and "eco-catastrophe." He predicted that, if these calamities could be avoided but current population trends were to continue, the United Kingdom would, by the end of the century, "simply be a small group of impoverished islands, inhabited by some 70 million hungry people, of little or no concern to the other 5-7 billion people of a sick world"(15). Views of this kind were presented with increasing frequency from the second half of the 1960s onward. Newspapers and television programs treated the subject as a matter of major public interest.

In a special issue of *The Ecologist* in January 1972 (16), radical proposals for reducing pressure on the environment were made. These included a proposal that Britain try to reduce its number of inhabitants to 30 million, a population, it was thought, which could be fed from the country's own agricultural resources. That issue of *The Ecologist* was published with an endorsement signed by 33 scientists, including 17 professors. In the same month nearly 140 "scientists concerned with ecology" signed a letter to *The Times* (17) contending that "it is a matter of urgency to stabilize the world population and forthe British Government to formulate a population policy for this country, not only in our own interests but also because developed countries such as ours make far greater demands on scarce resources and create far greater pollution per capita than do the peoples of the rest of the world."

In January 1970 a subcommittee of Parliament's Select Committee on Science and Technology began an enquiry into the possible repercussions of population growth in the United Kingdom. In its Report, published in May 1971 (18), the Committee said "the Government must act to prevent the consequences of population growth becoming intolerable for the everyday conditions of life". The Conservative, Party's Annual Conference held in October 1971 accepted by an "overwhelming majority" a motion put forward by the Young Conservative National Advisory Committee: "that this Conference expresses its concern at the problem of population growth in Britain and the world and calls upon Her Majesty's Government to aid practical schemes of population limitation" (19).

The protagonists of control provoked a number of counterarguments from skeptical opponents. The head of the Economic and Statistical Analysis Division at the Ministry of Technology pointed out that, although Britain's population density was eleven times that of the United States, it was at the same time 60 per cent lower than that of Holland. If the growth rate remained just over 0.5 per cent per annum, and if average family size were 2.25 instead of 2.5, population would eventually stop increasing (20). The professor of population studies at Sussex University argued that, since family size was already controlled by a majority of parents at a level determined by their living standards, it was impractical for policy to have much effect on fertility (21). The Director of the Population Bureau at the Overseas Development Administration argued that, even if it

were possible, the attainment of zero growth could do nothing to improve the quality of human life, prevent pollution of the environment, or alter consumption of nonrenewable resources. According to him, the zero growth movement had romantic, not scientific origins, and represented a particularly careless example of round-number preference (22). A leading article in the journal *Nature* derided the scientists who were campaigning for control. They were accused of taking part in a reprehensible attempt to stir up public anxiety over problems which had either been exaggerated or were nonexistent (23).

Although not one of those opposed to a population policy, David Glass pointed out that, among women in England and Wales who had been married 15 to 19 years at the time of the 1961 census, those women who had 5 or more live births represented only 1.6 per cent of the total. This was scarcely evidence of irresponsible parenthood on a substantial scale. The most striking feature of the present situation, Glass observed, was that family size was relatively small and fairly uniform. By revealing that almost all married women had used or intended to use birth control at some time, surveys had shown that the practice of birth control had permeated society (24).

However, another point of contention was the extent to which fertility would be reduced if birth control services were improved. According to one very popular view, much, if not all, of the necessary reduction could be achieved simply by extending birth control services, thereby enabling parents to avoid giving birth to unwanted children. Supporters of this view argued that a substantial proportion of births took place despite the wishes of the parents. According to one pressure group, the Birth Control Campaign, some 150,000 live births each year in Britain resulted from unwanted pregnancies (25).

Such estimates, however, were often based on unreasonable assumptions. For example, it was often assumed that births which were unwanted because they were inconveniently timed (including many illegitimate births) could be regarded as avoidable additions to ultimate family size. In fact, of course, in a substantial proportion of cases these births would represent not additions to ultimate family size, but simply premature contributions to it. Another common assumption was that a parent's statement that a particular birth had been unwanted could stand as a valid indication of the parent's feelings. No account was taken of the possible real significance to the individual either of the event or of the conduct that would have been necessary to avoid that event.

Despite their weaknesses, arguments for improved birth control services did increase parliamentary support for legislation to bring about improvement of birth control services, although these services have nevertheless continued to be regarded as a part of health care and not as an instrument of population policy.

The public birth control services was begun with a 1967 Act, under which local authorities were enabled, although they were not required, to provide free advice on contraception and to supply free contraceptives to any person who had need of them. Since that Act, state help to the services has increased substantially and will be increased further.

Another Act of 1967 liberalized the abortion law. The number of legal abortions carried out on residents of Great Britain increased from an estimated 30,000 a year before the Act to about 101,000 in 1971. It is believed that a high rate of illegal abortions preceeded the Act.

Some advocates of fertility reduction have also proposed the removal of what they see as incentives to larger families. The Conservation Society and others have argued that tax concessions and family allowances for dependent children were effectively pronatalist and should be modified (14). These proposals were countered by the argument that families

with dependent children generally have a substantially lower standard of living than families without dependent children. It was held that the former spend very much more than does the government bringing up their children, even taking into account the state's expenditure on education (26).

There have been no expressions of official interest in measures to influence the British population growth rate, apart from support for birth control services. The government is currently considering the report of a panel of experts who were asked in 1971 to assess available evidence on the significance of population trends. Meanwhile, fertility has declined. The estimate of United Kingdom population for the end of the century was scaled down by 1971 from the 1964 figure of 75 million to a new projection of 63 million (27).

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