Population Investigation Committee

The Report of the Royal Commission on Population: A Review
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The Report of the Royal Commission on Population:[1] A Review

By Frank W. Notestein

For demographers the *Report of the Royal Commission on Population* is a valuable but tantalizing and somewhat frustrating document. It is valuable because an unusually competent analysis of the demographic situation and prospects is used in a sober consideration of national population policy. It tantalizes the professional appetite with selected results and generalized descriptions of procedures from work containing much that is new and valuable both as to methods and findings. It is frustrating because, having made a good beginning in basing its consideration of policy on the results of careful analysis, the Commission nevertheless failed to make full use of its opportunities. Taken as a whole it is a remarkable document that should greatly facilitate the discussion of population policy in Britain and attract the world-wide interest of students of population, sociology and economics, as well as that of political scientists who are willing to read between the lines.

The *Report* is presented in four parts: (1) The Trend of Population, (2) Population and the National Interest, (3) Trend of Population and the Family, and (4) Summary and General Conclusions. In fact, however, the major division of the *Report* lies between Part I, which contains the demographic analysis, and the last three parts which are devoted to a consideration of policy. Each group is excellent as an individual piece of work, but the careful reader will be inclined to believe that each was too largely precisely that.

The first five chapters of *The Trend of Population* present an excellent recapitulation of British demographic development, and of the causal factors at work. For demographers these chapters are principally interesting as a straighforward non-technical account of familiar materials—the best, in the reviewer's judgement, that has thus far appeared. New and important evidence on reproductive capacity and on the role of contraception is briefly summarized. It indicates the validity of the views that have been generally accepted on the basis of less adequate evidence. However, appraisal of the details of that work must await the appearance, as a paper of the Royal Commission, of E. Lewis-Faning's *Report on the Enquiry into Family Limitation and its Influence on Human Fertility During the Last Fifty Years.*

The Recent Increase in Births

The analysis of the recent increase in births is crucial to the problem of projecting future trends of population. Up to the early thirties there had been 60 years of virtually unbroken decline in the birth rate, followed by a slight rise between 1934 and 1939, sharp swings during the war-time experience, and an unprecedented birth

[1] London, His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1949, 259 pp. Cmd. 7695. Price 4*s*. 6*d*. net.

boom in 1946–8. The boom began to show signs of falling off by the latter part of 1947. Do the changes reflect merely the superimposition of depression, recovery, war-time ebb and flow, and demobilization on an older trend, or has there been a fundamental shift in trend?

The disentangling of the record is as difficult as it is important to the assessment of future prospects for population change. The Commission's attack on the problem is valuable both for its results and for its methodological advances. The principal gains have come from: (1) acute awareness, not shared by many demographers, including the reviewer, of the limitations of the conventional analysis by means of age-specific fertility rates, and (2) the results of the Family Census of 1946 which supplied sufficient detail to provide an alternative to conventional procedures. With them it has been possible to treat family formation and family building separately. Two conclusions are of major importance: (1) the increase in marriage, incident to a declining age at marriage, has been the major factor in the revival of births; (2) family-building habits are apparently little changed. There have been years in which births were postponed and years in which the 'deficit' was reduced, but by 1948 the number of children born per couple married after 1927 did not differ much, duration for duration, from that of the couples married in 1927. To ferret this evidence out of a period of such freely swinging birth rates is a major achievement, and ample evidence of the value of real-cohort analysis which the published work of Hajnal has foreshadowed.

The record of two decades, therefore, suggests that the long period of declining family size has come at least temporarily to an end. Indeed, tentative evidence suggests the possibility of a slight upturn. On the whole fertility was a bit higher after 1939 than in the years just prior to it. Moreover, there is a suggestion that while the size of family among manual workers continued to decline between 1939 and 1948, that of the non-manual workers may have risen. Such an upturn in the group in which fertility has been notably low and under control might foreshadow an upward trend.

It is too soon to draw sweeping conclusions. The period under review was one of depression, recovery, war and victory with rapid fluctuations in the psychological, political and economic climates. The Family Census of 1946, apart from the sampling problems of a voluntary census, inevitably presented difficulties. It gathered information concerning the trend of family building from the memory of survivors in 1945. It presumably classified couples by the occupations pursued in 1945 rather than in early years of married life. In a period of considerable social mobility, the procedure offers possibilities for several selections. It is presumably for such reasons that the Commission itself does not draw any firm conclusions. It holds that one assumption about the future should be that family size will remain stationary, but that neither the possibility of an upturn nor that of further decline should be ruled out.

On the critical side it should be noted that little evidence is given concerning either occupational or regional trends, although such evidence must be available. It is difficult to believe that its careful analysis would not have yielded more informa-

tion on the meaning of past trends than is presented in the *Report*. It is to be hoped that the technical papers will fully exploit the data of the Family Census and of the other special investigations conducted at considerable effort and expense for the Commission. The *Report*, as a document for the thoughtful public, gives only the high-lights of an invaluable body of information. Finally, the reviewer regrets that no attention has been given to order of birth. This variable, coinciding with the actual choices of parents, is one of inherent importance.

Projections of Future Population

The results of the analysis of recent trends govern the procedures used in projecting future population. Mortality and migration are sensibly but conventionally handled. In the case of fertility, the procedures are new and important. The statistical abstraction of age-specific fertility is discarded for variables that have close counterparts in actual life: (1) family formation and (2) family building.

As to family building, the central assumption is one of stability in the total number of children born per married couple at the levels characterizing couples married in the years 1927–38. A low alternative contemplates a decline to 80% of that level for the couples marrying in 1962–7. A high alternative contemplates a level 6% above the central assumption about family size which, on the other central assumptions, would give growth for a time but eventually would result in an almost stationary population. The Commission makes no choice of its own. If the reviewer were to guess, he would, with geographic and economic differentials in mind, be inclined to favour a figure somewhat below the central assumption of fixed family size.

Given the total number of children assumed to be born to married couples, it becomes necessary to distribute them year by year throughout married life. If recent stability in the size of family gives comfort in the projection of stable family size, the same cannot be said for recent experience in the timing of births within marriage. In populations in which fertility is controlled and families are small, the course of external events has a powerful effect on birth timing. There are periods in which childbearing is postponed, those in which postponements are made up and, indeed, periods in which there is, so to say, an advance accumulation of inventory on speculation. Unfortunately, these short-run swings are so unpredictable that annual childbearing must be projected in an orderly fashion for lack of any knowledge except the virtual certainty that it will not be orderly. The problem is not unique to the method of projection used in the *Report*, which has the advantage of clearly differentiating the steps that are relatively predictable from those that are wholly unpredictable. The result, however, is that the waves which will certainly be passing through the age structure cannot be shown in advance. They are important for a variety of reasons, one being that a population thus irregularly distributed must maintain the social equipment to care for its peak loads in each age class. This equipment would considerably exceed that required by a population of the same size but more regularly distributed.

The counterparts of relative stability and sharp variation in family building are found also in family formation. The proportion of persons who eventually marry has been relatively stable in the past, whereas the distribution of marriage ages has been subject to sharp annual variation. To some extent these influences can be separated. This has been done for the 'low' assumption concerning the proportion eventually married by altering the distribution of marriage ages to show the results of a further decline and of a rise in the average. The principal result is to illustrate the fact that only a progressive lowering of marriage ages could prevent a sharp decline in the number of marriages. So far as the future yearly fluctuation in marriage is concerned, just as in the case of annual births, there is no alternative to the assumption of some orderly trend that is certain not to be reflected by the facts.

The strength of the method that treats family formation separately, in order to build a population of married couples, lies in the control of two factors that cannot be made explicit in the standard projection of age-specific fertility. In the first place, it yields an automatic adjustment of projected births for the fact that people who would 'normally' now be marriageable have already married and begun rearing children. In the second place, it directs explicit attention to the fact that an adjustment should be made for the passing of the abnormal shortage of males, and the accompanying generation of spinsters, left by the heavy emigration and the casualties of the First World War.

The effect of unusual sex ratios is excellently discussed in a chapter on *The Question of Replacement* and in a technical appendix by Mr W. A. B. Hopkin on *The Measurement of Reproductivity*. It is clear that the usual projections, including one with which the reviewer was associated, have completely neglected the fact that age-specific fertility has been held low by the dearth of potential husbands, and that groups now entering the childbearing period do not suffer this handicap. Moreover, since the projections do not deal with the effects of future major catastrophes (or, perhaps little different, with those of a discovery of the means for selecting sex at birth), it is evident that the sex ratios of the future will be, by assumption, relatively normal. Considerations of this nature lead the Commission to use as its 'high' alternative the marriage rates of males in 1942–7, as its 'low', the marriage rates of females in the same period, and as its central assumption, a number of marriages midway between that given by the high and low assumptions. It seems to the reviewer that the base period had a higher rate than is likely to be maintained year after year in the future. This, however, is a difference in minor guesswork. The important thing is that the method takes explicitly into account two hitherto neglected variables: (1) the volume of marriage in the recent past, and (2) the impact of change in sex ratios on future reproduction. These are considerable advances.

Similar ranges of choice are given for mortality and migration. The result is a huge number of possible combinations—presumably well over one hundred. Apparently something between a dozen and eighteen of the combinations have been worked out in some detail. In the *Report*, however, they are given only in partial and abridged form. For details we shall have to await the publication of the Commission's technical papers. In general, it is evident that great advances have

been made in the technique of projection by bringing the statistical steps more nearly into agreement with the actual stages of reproductive behaviour. It is equally clear that population projections remain, what they have always been, more or less idealized models of reality which aid analysis but do not precisely forecast the future. It is evident, moreover, that the Commission fully understood that fact.

The Commission's projections show a considerable period of slowing growth. If family size shrinks further, the decline of population may begin before 1977 and become rather sharp. If the central assumptions hold, including that of stability at pre-war levels of family size, slowing growth will continue until about 1980, but the population of the year 2000 will remain, in the absence of emigration, larger than it is at present. If family size increases by 6%, the population, on the other central assumptions, will increase by about 4 million in the coming 100 years and thereafter remain stationary.

The contrast between these results and earlier projections emphasizes the limitation of projections in general. They have chiefly in common the fact that they point the direction of change—one of slowing growth with the possibility of ultimate decline, and of an ageing population and labour force. The order of magnitudes involved, however, and the dates of the turning points are wholly different. The *Report* envisages larger populations than those of the earlier projections, because of: (1) net immigration in recent years, (2) the decline in marriage age, and (3) the fact that the earlier projections of the pre-war decline in age-specific fertility were made in ignorance of the relative stability of family size among couples married since 1927 and in disregard of the future's more balanced sex ratios. The first two represent unanticipated changes of the situation. The last is mainly the result of superior technical work in the current projections. However, still another element is involved. Before the fact, no one, so far as the reviewer knows, expected anything but lower fertility from the war-time experience, or anticipated the broad changes in public policy that the war brought about. In fact, the size of family did not decline because fertility in the years 1939–48 was, on the average, somewhat higher than in the years just prior to 1939.

That the experience of the war and its aftermath should lift reproduction is indeed a notable, and unpredicted, fact. It carries a warning. Population policy can be very strong without being explicit. In the interest of national health, security and production, many of the normal peace-time forces that focused on fertility were almost reversed. Unemployment was unknown, money was plentiful, and scarce goods were subsidized and rationed in ways that favoured mothers and children. There probably has been no period in recent decades when children were more cheaply maintained, and when the alternative uses of funds were so few. Indeed, one may wonder whether any national policy now feasible can provide as powerful a stimulus to childbearing as that of the war-time controls which are now beginning to disappear. It must immediately be admitted that such speculation would be more cogent if it did not come after the fact. Before the fact, the reviewer did not expect even such strong measures to override the uncertainties, hardships, and plain terror of the war-time experience. Nevertheless, the belief that a relatively weak explicit

policy is likely to replace a strong implicit policy, is another reason leading the reviewer to expect that the central alternatives of the projections forecast larger populations than are likely to be attained.

Population Policy

The technical aspects of the *Report's* demographic analysis have been discussed in some detail in the belief that they represent notable contributions to the literature, which are less likely to be adequately discussed than the parts of the *Report* that deal with matters of policy. The latter are also treated in a responsible and thoughtful manner, but the reviewer will confine himself to a few criticisms of a somewhat general nature.

In Part II, 'Population and the National Interest', the Commission concludes that, at least at present, no case can be made either for rapid population growth or rapid decline. Some additional growth, which in any case is the most that could be hoped for, would not be dangerous. Moreover, 'There is much to be said for the view that a failure of a society to reproduce itself indicates something wrong in its attitude to life which is likely to involve other forms of decadence' (p. 136). The balance of judgement is '...definitely on the side of avoiding a decline in numbers, except conceivably as an incident of a larger scheme of Empire migration' (p. 136). The position is based in part on a careful calculation of economic and political interest, and in part on an almost mystical, but universal and probably healthy, reluctance to see one's own group dwindle in size.

The Commission holds that the maintenance of a continuous stream of emigration to the Commonwealth is important. The reviewer suspects that the position is based more on sentiment than on a rational calculation of national or Commonwealth advantage, but he is not certain that his own adverse reaction is not similarly grounded. Emigration, the Commission finds, would help bind the political ties of the Commonwealth, and assist in maintaining markets for British goods. The economic argument is weak. It is costly to rear the labour force for another nation free of charge, which is virtually what emigration amounts to. One suspects that a similar investment directed toward increasing the efficiency of production and sales would do more for British markets. Migrants, like other folk, tend to buy where they can get the most for their money.

From the point of view of the home situation, the discussion of emigration stands in peculiar contrast with the tightly reasoned and humanitarian tone of the remainder of the *Report*. Throughout, it is held, rightly, the reviewer thinks, that some 'spontaneous' population growth would involve no substantial economic strain for the nation, and that the process of decline would at least entail some difficult adjustments. Here the argument is virtually reversed. For example, on p. 123, it appears that declining numbers might be unfavourable to emigration by enhancing the opportunities for jobs at home, and, indeed, that it might tend to foster immigration by creating a short supply of native labour in comparatively unattractive industries. This certainly implies that, at least for certain age groups, population decline would be advantageous. The interpretation is also a curious reversal of that

expected. The humanitarian tenor of the *Report* would lead one to expect the Commission to conclude that a short supply of labour might force presently unattractive jobs to be offered on more attractive terms. Instead, the fact that emigration might create a shortage of labour is, in effect, put forward as at least one reason for welcoming an increase in family size. For the Commission, emigration, which formerly was a valuable means of relieving the pressures of too rapid growth, has become an end in itself to be sought by means of somewhat larger families. Similar questions can be raised about the political case, which is defended by analogy to past migrations that have negligible prospects of recurrence. One suspects that the Commission felt from the first that, where migration and Britain are concerned, it is more blessed to give than to receive. Fortunately, the discussion of migration is a small section of Part II, which is otherwise generally excellent.

Part III, *Trend of Population and the Family*, like the chapter on migration, gives the impression of a section produced somewhat independently from Parts I and II. In the latter the position is that Britain needs somewhat larger families to provide a stream of emigrants, forestall eventual decline, and perhaps yield a small growth. In Part III the emphasis shifts. In Chapter 16, *Aims and Scope of Proposals*, the main object appears to be to secure social justice for medium-sized and large families. Steps in that direction are justified by equity alone. 'They are justified on population grounds, since the handicaps of parenthood have played a large part in the fall of average family size below replacement level. . . . All that is required is the negative contention that if the average size of family were to increase somewhat in consequence of measures of family welfare, this would not constitute to-day a serious disadvantage' (p. 157). No firm conviction is expressed that the measures recommended on the basis of equity would in fact yield larger families, or result in qualitative improvements. In fact, so far as can be judged from the *Report*, the Commission gave little attention to problems of population quality. The *Report* shows clearly that most of the children are brought up in homes having lower than average living conditions. Apparently, however, the Commission did not investigate the actual effects of this fact on health, intelligence and education. Indeed, the main conclusion concerning the impact of its recommendations on either quantity or quality of population is that more knowledge of the subject is needed.

The programme put forward has many facets, but the heart of the positive element is the recommendation of larger family allowances to be paid from general funds for all but the youngest child, and substantial income-tax exemptions for dependent children.

The difficulties of constructing a population policy under present circumstances are understandable. The time is not one in which increased taxes are lightheartedly recommended. In a democracy committed to the principle of progressive taxation, many difficulties lie in the path of regressive state payments for children. Wage allowances for children have long encountered trade-union opposition. It is interesting to note the promptitude with which the Commission rejected such proposals for manual workers, only to urge their voluntary development in the un-unionized professions. The upshot is a proposal for flat allowances for children

to be paid from general funds. Nowhere in this section does the Commission frankly face the consequences of its own analysis in Part I of the causes of the decline of the birth rate. On the evidence of that section, one might almost reverse the argument of Section III. The reversal could run to the effect that by taxing more heavily the upper income groups, where fertility has declined most readily in response to economic pressure, the birth rate of that group could be reduced. Meanwhile, by distributing the income from such taxes to the poorer and more fertile sections of the population, the taste for higher levels of living could be fostered so that they, in turn, would reduce family size still further. This is, of course, a partial and exaggerated statement, but it serves to indicate the nature of the difficulty. This difficulty, and that of the qualitative problems, seem to have forced the Commission to seek its rationale in general propositions about social justice. The fact is that so long as fertility is inversely related to economic status, proposals to lift family size by economic relief to disadvantaged families through taxes will be difficult to defend.

To the reviewer, the difficulty in a rationale of general social justice does not lie in its error, but in its inefficiency. The *Report* traces the major economic problems of parents of large families, faces the facts of the economic situation, and finally proposes a mild form of relief that may or may not have the desired effect on family size but leaves the ends of justice unfulfilled. A more direct approach would have presented greater political difficulties, but one wonders whether it might not have been more useful.

It is evident that no careful equilibration of social justice in the distribution of Britain's national income will change the fact that true justice must come mainly from an enlarged national income. A more explicit recognition of that fact might have changed somewhat the emphasis of the Commission's work. It might, for example, have forced a more explicit recognition that Britain lives by selling its skills to the world, and that in the long run high skill is to be obtained from a healthy and well-trained youth. It might have forced greater recognition of the fact that the nation's huge and growing investment in the aged is an investment in the past, whereas investment in the nutrition, medical service, and education of youth is an investment in the future. The Commission might have asked itself how, in terms of policy, the desired results for children could be most efficiently attained, and whether, in view of existing needs in that direction, the matter of emigration and enhanced family size was of very great immediate importance. The reviewer is not certain that such an approach would have yielded essentially different results, but he believes that the results obtained would have been more soundly grounded in the national interest.

Finally, on two points the *Report* leaves nothing to be desired. The Commission unequivocally holds that: 'Control by men and women over the numbers of their children is one of the first conditions of their own and the community's welfare, and in our view mechanical and chemical methods of contraception have to be accepted as part of the modern means, however imperfect, by which it can be exercised' (p. 159). It urges the health services to give free contraceptive advice to

all married couples who want it. Secondly, it recognizes that the full participation of women in the life of the society and economy is a necessary and desirable part of modern life, and that society should find the means of maintaining itself without sacrificing that participation. In some matters the Commission has trimmed its sails to the wind of expediency, but in many others, and notably in these, it is a staunch defender of the dignity of free parenthood and of free parents.

No brief review can do justice to the *Report*. This one certainly does not, for it selects rather heavily the matters on which the reviewer finds himself in a critical mood, neglecting the solid merit of the *Report*, which makes the whole an outstanding piece of work. Highest points of all, for demographers, are the analysis of past trends, the discussion of replacement, and the projection of future population. These contributions seem to the reviewer to represent the greatest advances in the field since Lotka put forward the theory of the stable population.