

THE REPORT ON POPULATION¹

THE Royal Commission on Population was appointed in 1944 to investigate the significance of demographic trends in Great Britain which during the 1930's had caused widespread anxiety. Although the population figures had continued to grow between the two world wars at the rate of about 180,000 per year it was suspected that the birth-rate had fallen below replacement level even to the extent of 'a substantial margin' (p. 60).

The main factors influencing the natural increase (excess of births over deaths) of a population are the death-rate and birth-rate. The vast majority of births are to married women and therefore this factor is dependent almost entirely upon the number of marriages and the size of the family. The causes of the changes in the demographic trends in this country over the past seventy years may therefore be sought in four main contributory factors: migration, mortality, marriage and the size of the family.

Migration.

Comparison of the figures for natural increase with those for migration shows that, while the latter had its influence, the decline in the population of this country is to be attributed mainly to the former (pp. 10, 15-17, 66, 92-95, 122-125). The significance of this is increased by the fact that the former factor is the more difficult to influence and, unlike migration, natural increase can be raised only as the result of a very long-term policy.

Mortality.

After giving the relevant figures, showing a steady fall in mortality since 1850, the Report states that 'these reductions in mortality constitute a revolution in the conditions of human life . . . a revolution due to achievements in water supply, urban cleanliness, sewage disposal, progress in medical knowledge and the development of social services' (p. 18). Thus the mortality rate for the new-born in 1940 is only about 33 per cent of that prevailing in 1840. The rate falls about 10 per cent in childhood, 25 per cent up to forty years of age, and to between 60 per cent and 85 per cent for the age groups between sixty-five and eighty-five.

Marriage.

The proportion of the population who are or have been married in any given year has remained remarkably steady (12-15 per cent unmarried) over the period between 1870 and the present day. The age at which marriage has taken place has shown some fluctuation, and this matter will be discussed later with particular

¹ *Report of the Royal Commission on Population.* His Majesty's Stationery Office, London; price 4s.6d.

reference to the last fifteen years. The proportion of women married has been consistently slightly lower than that of men and this discrepancy has risen slowly since 1870.

Size of Family.

Since it is established that the number of births has fallen appreciably below that of sixty years ago in a population whose total numbers have over the same period risen considerably, and since as pointed out above the proportion of the population who have married has not decreased, it follows that the average size of the completed family has fallen over the past half century. For marriages contracted in the mid-Victorian period the average stood at 5.5 to 6.0, at the beginning of this century at 3.37, and for the 1929-30 period at 2.19.

From other statistical evidence that the Report provides some interesting observations can be made:—

i. That whereas for marriages contracted in about 1860 the 'only child' formed the smallest category, for marriages of 1925 it formed the largest category.

ii. That for the 1860 marriages families of over ten children represented 10 per cent of the total, as did families of five, six and seven children. In the 1925 group, families of over 10 represented 0.3 per cent, and families of five, six and seven children represented 5, 3 and 2 per cent respectively of the total.

iii. That for the 1925 group families of 1 and 2 children represent together no less than 50 per cent of the total. They were 11 per cent for the 1860 group.

iv. The proportion of childless couples has about doubled between 1860 and the present day. Over the same period there has been a great growth in medical knowledge of involuntary infertility and understanding of how to correct it.

v. That the average size of the families of the professional and higher administrative classes who married about 1860 represented only 86 per cent of the average for the whole population whereas the averages for unskilled labourers, agricultural workers and miners were 105, 106 and 110 per cent respectively. This trend has continued in subsequent years.

vi. According to the Report 'the decline has been slower among Roman Catholics than among Protestants' (p. 29, but 'much slower', p. 34, and 'considerably slower', p. 219). The Commissioners go on to observe that 'the extent of the difference can easily be overstated' as it can also presumably be understated. They state dogmatically that average family size 'has declined *greatly*' among Roman Catholics (*italics ours*). The justification for the assurance with which this statement is made is not to be found in the Report. On the

contrary we are told (p. 29) that 'the statistical information on the subject is scanty'. We are told that there is 'some evidence' on this subject but the details are not given, and it is perhaps the only subject on which no statistics are provided in a document which bristles with figures. If such figures exist there is little meaning in the remark quoted above that 'the extent of the difference can easily be overstated'. The census which the Commissioners conducted in 1946 (which 'was essential to our examination of the facts relating to population trends') covered only one-tenth of the married women in the country and asked for information on the 'age, date of marriage, date of birth of children and occupation of husband' (p. 2) but there is no mention of religion in it. When on pages 158 and 159 we read the written and oral evidence of representatives of the Catholic Church there is no suggestion that they gave, or for that matter were asked to give, any evidence on demographic trends among Catholics. They did on the other hand defend Catholic teaching on the value of voluntary abstention from marital intercourse and on the essential distinction between the use of mechanical methods of contraception and the restriction of intercourse to the safe period. On the latter point it is significant to note that the Commissioners (p. 33, note i) placed the use of mechanical and chemical contraceptives and the safe period in the same genus.

The section of the Report devoted to the involuntary causes of the decline in the size of the family can hardly be described as conclusive. The statement (§ 76) that 'we have a good deal of information about the actual childbearing of women who lived their reproductive lives before 1880, but we know nothing of their capacity to bear children' requires at the very least amending. We know that 63 per cent of them did in fact produce families of between 5 and 10 or more children. We know that only 12.3 per cent of married women today have families of comparable size. Here therefore is a measure of fertilities providing at least one basis for a comparison of fecundities. Even if we did know the definitive potentialities of Victorian women that would not affect the practical issue for the 1940's. The evidence before the Commission 'demonstrates conclusively that present day couples would not find it impossible to have families as large as those of Victorian times if they wished to do so'². The next sentence however states that 'this finding does not dispose of the view that reproductive capacity has declined'. The 'conclusive demonstration' on which the Commission

² Compare the *Health Education Journal*, 1947, v. p. 71., 'This research has fostered the belief that infertility is increasing in many European nations, but statistics are inclusive and difficult to interpret'.

bases its assurance that fecundity is normal in women of this generation is further qualified by the cautious statements that 'it is indeed arguable that modern urban life . . . tends to cause a reduction in sexual activity' and that 'it is not impossible that some of these theories (of declining fecundity due to many features of modern life) point to an influence that does tend to diminish reproductive capacity in some degree' (p. 32).

The factors of modern life mentioned in this context are: increasing demands upon human nervous energy, greater worry and nervous strain, alternative outlets for free time and energy, and even hot baths and artificial fertilisers in agriculture, and these are not likely to decrease. They may very well increase. The *Health Education Journal* (loc. cit.) points out moreover that 'contraceptives can be an indirect cause of infertility by delaying attempts to have a family until a woman's fertility is waning or until the recognition of inherent infertility comes too late for correction and successful treatment'. This is an aspect of the problem to which the Royal Commission does not refer although the postponement of a family is most likely to occur during the earlier years of married life when, on the one hand, economic conditions are likely to be hardest, and on the other hand, fecundity is likely to be greatest.

The Report nowhere refers to the law of Doubleday which states that fertility is inversely proportional to changes in the standard of living. What exactly constitutes that complex of factors associated with a high standard of living is unknown but it might well be that the agent with the greatest effect on fecundity was founded not so much in the characteristic and obvious elements of a high standard of life (improved health, food, clothing, education, etc.) as in some incidental and unsuspected concomitant. The fact that such a factor even if identified was incapable of exact measurement would not even in this Age of Weights and Measures exclude it from serious consideration. The law of Doubleday need not, in one rather superficial sense, be troubled about in a community which practises contraception widely since its verification is ruled out or at least complicated, but there is another sense in which it is more necessary than ever that the defertility factors at which it points should be given the fullest consideration. From this point of view especially it is regrettable that the differential fertility rates of those with religious reasons for not using contraception should be dismissed so thoughtlessly.

The Report considers the influence of both birth control and abortion on the birth-rate. Of the latter it remarks that its effect on the birth rate is important and increasing. A recent article in the *Lancet* (8th January 1949, p. 47) stated that between 110,000 and 150,000 abortions occur in England and Wales each year of

which about 60 per cent are legalised. With a recent annual birth-rate of about 700,000 the significance of abortion may be appreciated.

The Report points to the latter part of the nineteenth century as the origin of contraceptive practice when the inspiration behind this movement was Malthusian (in the sense at least that Malthus and the neo-malthusians shared the same end though they were at opposite poles on the subject of means). As the Report points out, it is improbable that individuals would limit their families through a fear as remote as that of over-population although that fear was certainly made the basis for the birth control campaign of the late nineteenth century. Equally it is improbable that individuals today will be moved by the fear of *under*-population (even though this is if anything more urgent than its counterpart of seventy years ago). There is I think food for thought for Catholics of this generation in the assertion that it was not the fear of over-population that won for contraception such a wide appeal but rather 'the eminence in science and letters of its advocates and their known disinterestedness'. The same point is reflected in the Report's references to social example as a factor in the decline of family life. The Report of course ignores original sin. According to the evidence given (§ 190) 10 per cent of the total number of births in recent years have been 'unwanted births' to couples practising family limitation. The important aspect of this assertion is that if, and in proportion as, contraceptive methods give what the Report calls 'greater security against conception', this 10 per cent which is described as 'a *minimum*' estimate will be eliminated. Here therefore is a further source of reduction in the birth-rate which the Henderson Commission dismisses because the Biological and Medical Committee has told it that 'nothing which would have this effect (of eliminating the 10 per cent.) is in sight'. Why the B. and M. Committee is so certain of this at a time when the extent of any technical advance is quite unpredictable we are not told. The Royal Commission sees fit however to dismiss this 10 per cent of the actual present day birth-rate; to call for the removal of every ban on the dissemination of contraceptive instruction and to commend this to the members of the Health Service as a matter for their immediate attention; to describe demographic trends in this country today as 'somewhat disquieting'.

The Commission refers to 'excessive childbearing' as a factor in the growth of contraceptive practice. An excess of something of course prompts one to have less of it but it is somewhat *a priori* to assert that mothers in the past regarded their maternal obligations as *excessive* (a letter from Queen Victoria to her uncle hardly constitutes evidence of objective value). According to the Report

the breakdown of the cottage industry economy was a factor in the 'equality for women' movement, and that this in its turn contributed to the decline in the size of the family. Women who had been 'partners in the home industry' lost this source of 'a more varied life and independent status' with the removal of cottage industries to the centralised factory industries. They became what the Report calls 'producers of children and household drudges' (the Report is brilliant at the *mot juste*). It is therefore intended that we should view the decline of the family and the 'removal of the taboos against contraception' as a revolt against this loss of status and enslavement. Underlying the Report there is much of such special pleading directed at proving that contraception is 'a fundamental adjustment', an inevitable reaction, to the circumstances of modern life. We are told that any attempt to 'bring women back into the home would run against the democratic conception of individual freedom'. Is the purpose for which the Commission was appointed likely to be achieved by informing the potential mothers of the community that any attempt 'to bring them back into the home' would be undemocratic and contrary to individual freedom? For in the context the reference to women being brought back into the home can only mean calling them back to the duties specifically related to the home and motherhood. Whether they have ever abandoned them or not in fact, they have certainly done so in the opinion of the Henderson Committee. The right of *women* to pursue a career unhampered by any prejudice against their sex has been asserted by the present Pope who went on to point out that *married women* should bear in mind that they were called to the special vocation of motherhood and not to the office or the workshop. The question of bringing married women *back* into the home, if necessary at all, ought to be a primary and urgent policy, instead of which it is described as undemocratic and contrary to liberty. It is as a means to the pursuit of this vocation that family allowances etc. are related.

The fundamental problem in any discussion on population trends concerns replacement—'how far the number of children born year by year is sufficient to replace the generation to which their parents belong'. The Report shows how the birth-rate fell below replacement level in the early 1920's and remained at 0.2 below it in the ten years before 1939. The parallel rise in the birth-rate and fall in the death-rate in more recent years has suggested that the population is again replacing itself. But the picture is complicated by the fact that over the past fifteen years there has been an abnormally large number of marriages—most noticeably in the younger age groups. To this great increase in marriages almost the whole

increase in the birth-rate is to be attributed. The average fertility rate (number of children per married couple) has not increased appreciably while this is the factor which will determine the birth-rate over any length of time. The Report points out that the proportion of persons married in the total population is unlikely to increase over a long period. Between 1870 and the present day, despite many other changes in demographic trends, the proportion of the population aged 45-54 who were or had been married varied only between 85 and 88.5 per cent. The high marriage-rates of the last few years have been achieved at the expense of what the Report aptly calls 'a borrowing from the future', and to some small extent to a number of late marriages carried forward from the economic slump period of the 30's. In the period of raised marriage-rates people have been marrying at an earlier age than normally, a process which cannot be maintained for any length of time. When it ceases marriage-rates will return to normal with a possible period of lowered rates intervening. The recent tendency to marry younger has not resulted in any rise in fertility. 'For the earlier part of the period of raised marriage rates (up to 1939) the expansion in the married population was rather more than sufficient to account for the slight increase in annual births which actually occurred' (§ 121). After 1939 the situation was complicated by a variety of war conditions which were in any light abnormal and in relation to married life exceedingly so. After much weighing of pros and cons the Report finally sums up with the words 'We should expect some increase in the birth-rate from this cause (raised marriage-rate) but would not expect it to be large if the married couples in question retain the same general attitude towards parenthood as their predecessors' (§ 143). Of the future population trend the Report forecasts 'with a good deal of confidence a substantial decline in the annual number of births over the next fifteen years'. If fertility returns to the pre-1939 level, the birth-rate will have fallen by 1960 to a level 'somewhat lower' than that of the immediately pre-war years. Even if fertility remains 6 per cent above the pre-1939 level there would be a fall of one-sixth by the mid-1960's. As the Report concludes, 'Possibilities of further shrinkage are far from negligible'.

Compared with the Victorian age the present day picture has changed in one aspect which has great demographic and economic implications. With a falling birth-rate and a falling mortality-rate the proportions of people in the older and younger age groups reverse. This process even if its effects are not felt at the present day is in progress. Between 1911 and 1947 the age groups 0-14 years have fallen from 30.8 to 21.5 per cent of the total population.

The age groups over 65 years have in the same period risen from 5.3 to 10.5 per cent. As the proportion of people in the younger age groups falls (which will follow rapidly if this 'shift' once started is not arrested) the fertility and replacement value of the population as a whole will decline. The material and cultural productivity of the population will shrink proportionately. As the proportion of the older age groups to the whole rises the ratio of consumers to producers increases. The fact that the care of the aged and provision for their needs is not a sentimental whim or commendable custom but part of the virtue of justice throws a more urgent light on this matter.

In the more distant future the population trend will depend entirely on the level of 'marital fertility'. The Report dismisses the possibility of any appreciable decline in fecundity; therefore this reference can only be to the practice of contraception. All will depend on it. Yet the Commission in its practical proposals recommends that the National Health Service should accept as a duty the giving of contraceptive advice to married persons and the removal of all existing barriers to the dissemination of such instruction. One presumes that the Henderson Commission would wish to see reversed the demographic trends which point rather clearly to declining numbers in this country. Its policy of advocating an even wider practice of birth control than we have already experienced in this country can therefore only be compared to a policy of distributing typewriters in order to restore the art of handwriting. For if we are to argue that people are not less likely to have fewer children (to word it with studied moderation) when they are provided with gratuitous advice and equipment intended of their nature to make them have no children at all, one might equally well argue that people are not likely to write less when they are provided free of charge with a machine intended of its nature to relieve them of the necessity of writing at all. At best a Royal Commission on Population is leaving it entirely to chance whether the sum total of individual decisions shows a balance of fertility or sterility. In its concluding sections the Report advocates a vast array of material grants and concessions to parents (many of which are great improvements on existing legislation and long overdue) which it insists on describing as of *positive* value. The problem which this country is facing is not to be overcome so lightly. The mere fact that the Report itself has proved what was already known, that the greatest decline in fertility is amongst those who have the least urgent financial problems, is in itself sufficient to show that this is not the case. The problem is how to effect a change of heart in a people who have lived too long in a society which generally speaking has

deliberately drawn up its balance sheet without reference to family life, being content to devote part of its financial balance (where there was one) to having children. Such a profoundly unchristian notion as that of 'voluntary parenthood', expressing as it does a deliberate choice of means for their own sakes and an equally deliberate rejection of the ends to which they are related, could not avoid so deep an insult as that which asserts that parenthood is to be practised or set aside as government policy reflects the needs of the moment. The Henderson Commission writes a great deal about married couples only having children 'if they want to'. One would imagine that this was not already the case, whereas the Report states again and again that contraceptive practice is part of the very fabric of our national life.

If parents are faced with grave financial difficulties as a result of their efforts to bring up a family, *then* is the time for the State to assist them. But the effectiveness of this assistance demands that parenthood should be undertaken as the fulfilment of a personal vocation and as the objective end of married life and not merely as *one* of the aims of a union between two individuals. Such an outlook on parenthood cannot exclude its truly voluntary character. It is voluntary in the sense that its acceptance would never exclude the explicit acceptance of any hardship that it might also entail. It is characterised by its recognition of divine providence in which it sees both a source of benefits in which it places its trust and the explanation for any possible hardship which it freely accepts. It does not expect to be blessed while shirking responsibility. It does not seek privileges divorced from obligations. In the Report of the Royal Commission one finds by contrast divine providence ignored not merely in a negative, but in a positive sense. Inevitably therefore the idea that there could be any other purpose for the individual to fulfil except his personal and self-determined design is repudiated. In its insistence that an individual is required to do only what *he* wants to do, the Report shows a profound ignorance of human nature. History does not support the contention that subjective wishes can be counted upon to coincide with what is objectively desirable. History may therefore repeat itself with disastrous consequences for the future of this country.

THOMAS HARPER.