



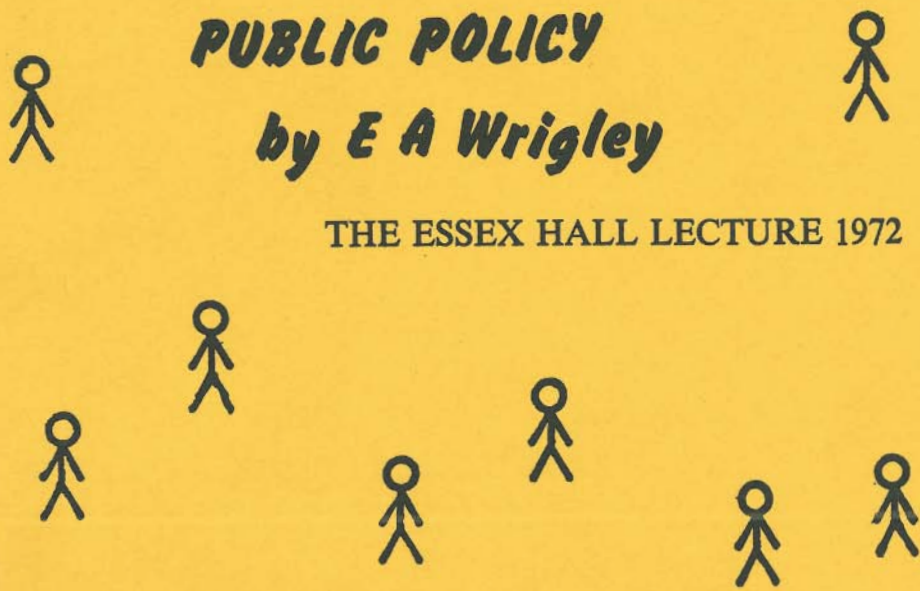
POPULATION:

PRIVATE CHOICE AND

PUBLIC POLICY

by E A Wrigley

THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE 1972



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This is the Essex Hall Lecture for 1972, and was delivered at University College, London on 9 April, 1972. Essex Hall is the headquarters of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, and stands on the site of the building where the first avowedly Unitarian congregation met in 1774. The lecture was founded in 1892, and many distinguished men in varied fields have contributed to the series. The delivery of the lecture is one of the leading events during the annual meetings of the Assembly.

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A BABY born today has about a ninety-three per cent chance of reaching his fiftieth birthday. One hundred and fifty years ago his chances were only about forty-five in a hundred. If he was unlucky enough to live in the more insanitary parts of a large city the likelihood of his reaching fifty is considerably less, perhaps twenty-five in a hundred. Above the age of fifty the change in life chances has been much less dramatic, especially at great ages, because medical science and modern public health measures, though extremely effective in combating infectious diseases which invade the body from without, are largely powerless to do more than soften the symptoms of diseases which develop from within and are associated with increasing age.

The fall in mortality which has occurred has changed many aspects of social and family life. It is now comparatively rare for parents to be faced with the death of a baby or small child, a grief which was a commonplace of life to parents in the past. It is much rarer than it used to be for a child to be orphaned and to live with step-parents and half-sisters or brothers, or outside a family setting in an institution, such as an orphanage or poorhouse. When we compare our relatively happy state today with the far greater uncertainties of the past, it might be thought that we have good cause to give thanks that death cuts short young lives so much less frequently. Very few would wish to return to the state which prevailed until recently. Yet the new situation has brought with it new, teasing difficulties, for unless fertility falls as much as mortality, numbers will grow. In the view of many commentators today, the western world has only succeeded in climbing out of the frying pan at the proverbial cost of falling into the fire. What is the nature of these new problems? And how ought we to view them?

Let us begin by contrasting the past with the present. In so doing our contemporary dilemmas may grow clearer.

The fundamental population problem until very recently was always the same. No more people could be supported than could be fed, clothed and housed. And since the productivity of a pre-industrial economy could not

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usually be expanded rapidly, and might be very hard to expand at all, a rapid and sustained growth in numbers tended to involve grave difficulties. Fertility and mortality had to be maintained in balance if severe economic, social and political strains were to be avoided. In a sense, it is true, this was a self-correcting problem. If population growth was too rapid over a long period, and human ingenuity proved incapable of increasing production commensurately, the grim reaper walked abroad with his scythe, and brought a society's numbers and its power to produce back into rough balance. Most societies underwent this discipline at times. A few know it still today, but early modern England had already moved a long way from this most simple and terrible way of securing an equilibrium between birth and death.

With very rare exceptions populations in the past grew extremely slowly over the long term, though they might fluctuate in a more lively way over short periods. This is the same as to say that fertility and mortality were seldom far apart. But an equilibrium point with births and deaths in rough balance could be established at quite different absolute levels, even though the natural resources and material technologies of a number of hypothetical societies were the same. If, for example, a society was so constituted that every girl married young and thereafter most had children at frequent intervals, fertility would clearly be high. Mortality would, by definition, have to be equally high to prevent population growing, and the absolute size of the population would also tend to be high, rather like a balloon puffed up under heavy pressure with a small hole in it from which the air could escape equally fast, but only when pressure inside the balloon had built up to a high level. If, on the other hand, the balloon were inflated under a gentler pressure, it would not reach as large a size before the inflow and outflow of air were in balance.

To put matters this way is to suggest that the initiative always lay with fertility — that when it was high mortality had also to be high. The relationship could equally well be the other way, however. In a peasant society, for example, if a man must have land before he can marry, and if there is strictly impartible inheritance of land, then before one man can marry another must die. In such a case, a rise in mortality, by causing an unusually large number of holdings to fall vacant, will enable more men to marry, and as new families begin to be formed, fertility will rise. Conversely a period of exceptionally mild mortality will delay the succession of lusty young men to their fathers' land and fertility will be reduced as a result. It can be shown that a social custom of this sort can in principle maintain numbers in rough equilibrium indefinitely. In more complex situations, instead of either fertility or mortality holding the initiative, there is interaction between them — what is now often called feedback — but the upshot may be the same. In short,

even though all pre-industrial populations were subject in greater or lesser degree to a prohibition on rapid and sustained increase, this did not mean that the ratio between their numbers and the resources available to them for the production of food and other goods was everywhere the same.

In early modern western Europe demographic affairs had assumed a shape not found elsewhere in the pre-industrial world, for — to use the balloon analogy again — western Europe had acquired social customs which more easily enabled a low pressure equilibrium to be achieved than was common in other pre-industrial societies.

In any society there will always be a wastage of the population by death (even today it has been estimated that the maximum expectation of life at birth that can be achieved, unless there is a revolution in medical knowledge which makes it possible to arrest the process of ageing, is about 78 years). In traditional societies, in which members of the population might be expected to suffer from time to time from diseases such as tuberculosis, typhus, smallpox, dysentery, malaria and perhaps plague, the minimal level of mortality in a population was necessarily quite high, but it was not fixed and inflexible. It was comparatively low in parts of Elizabethan England, for example, where expectation of life at birth was as high as forty years, but it could easily be driven up higher where intermittent malnutrition was common, or where population densities were high and communicable diseases spread easily, as in towns.

It follows that if a society was able to maintain its fertility at a level high enough to offset what might be called the unavoidable mortality given the prevailing hazards of life, while at the same time low enough to prevent population pressure building up to the point where high fertility simply produced a countervailing high mortality, those who lived in that society could be better fed and less plagued with malnutrition, disease and premature death, than others who lived in similar societies but with fertility and mortality both at higher levels. Early modern western Europe was comparatively well placed to hit this elusive target because of the unusual marriage customs which prevailed there. And it is interesting, in view of our present population dilemmas, which hinge upon the issue of private choice of family size, that the advantage of western Europe stemmed from the relative freedom of private choice about the timing of marriage which characterised western European society.

Of the three great demographic events, birth, marriage and death, only in the case of marriage was much conscious choice involved. Very few men make a conscious decision to die, and in the past it is probably just to suppose that little was done by parents consciously to control fertility within marriage, but marriage itself was the outcome of conscious decision. True,

the decision was often taken less by the individual groom and bride than by their families (though the extent of family domination in making this decision is easy to exaggerate in early modern western Europe), and it is true also that convention set close bounds to the ranks of society within which a man or woman might normally look for a spouse. Yet nevertheless there was a great deal of conscious weighing of the pros and cons of various possible matches both by the principals involved and by their families. This was true of all societies. The novelty in western Europe was that there was wide room for manoeuvre about the timing of marriage. Women married quite late in life, considerably later in seventeenth century England, for example, than today. Age at marriage, instead of being fixed by age at menarche, or some similar evidence of maturation, as was normal in other societies, responded flexibly to economic and social pressures. It was not thought shameful to her parents and herself that a mature girl should remain unmarried. An average age at marriage in the late twenties, such as was then common, by restricting fertility, may result in a much less severe pressure of population on resources than would be produced by Asiatic marriage customs.

Private decision always takes place within a framework of social convention, of course (though it is also true that, in a sense, these decisions constitute the social convention). And it can therefore always be argued that the allegedly greater freedom of choice over the timing of marriage is an illusion produced by semantic sleight of hand. But this is true also in relation to the control by private choice of fertility in marriage today. At all events, the result of these marriage customs seems to have been helpful in alleviating the typical demographic tensions of a pre-industrial society. If women do not marry until a third, or even a half of their potential total fertility has been lost because of delayed marriage, the pressure of air in the balloon is unlikely to build up to high levels. That very low fertility levels can be attained by delaying marriage, even if fertility within marriage is unrestricted, is evident from the recent history of Ireland; and the marriage patterns of Ireland half-a-century ago are only an extreme example of west European phenomenon with a long history behind it.

Death is still today seldom a matter for personal choice, but birth is now much more a matter for conscious decision on the part of parents, and in consequence, the essential difference between the world today and yesterday, viewed demographically, is sometimes seen as the shift of a second major demographic event out of the shadows of biological accident within marriage into the clearer light of conscious planning on the part of parents. This gives to marital behaviour a personal responsibility with which it was not previously burdened. In the old days fertility within marriage might be

influenced by social conventions without abstinence from intercourse or traditions about the age of weaning of children, and was conditioned by genetic and biological circumstance; but conscious planning usually played a minor part in determining marital fertility levels.

With the spread of the use of contraception to prevent births in marriage and outside it couples have ceased to be puppets jerked by the strings of custom and genetic accident. The strings are now placed in their own hands. In a sense, of course, the old situation has continued. It remains true that custom and convention deeply influence our behaviour, and also that at some stage if population growth continues unabated and unaccompanied by a commensurate growth in productive capacity, famine, disease or war may still cut back numbers savagely by what Malthus once called positive checks. But whereas in the past the individual could do little else but compose his mind to meet the dangers that might lie ahead, now such dangers as follow upon population growth are avoidable since children in western countries now come into the world in the main only if their parents want them to do so, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that unwanted births are no longer unavoidable. This has given a new dimension to parenthood, entailing issues of choice, or morality, which were previously dormant. In the past a man might debate with himself his ability to maintain a wife before the conscious act of marriage, but would seldom debate with his wife their ability to support a further child. Now he and his wife may be several times consciously faced with this issue. And for men acting collectively in the person of the state there are also new problems since the state may wish to try to influence the decisions of spouses about their family size.

Knowledge commonly brings with it not only power but moral dilemmas. The knowledge of how to prevent a conception taking place and of how to terminate a pregnancy at very slight risk to the mother is quite a good example of this. Men can no longer blame fate for their population problems. They must add them to the growing list of blights for which they have to bear responsibility themselves.

Over the same period that has seen a new dimension given to personal choice in demographic matters, the nature of the population problem has also changed completely. This has come about because of the industrial revolution. Before the industrial revolution the perennial tension was between the pace at which population could grow in the absence of all checks, and man's ability to extract products from the soil, the chief source both of food and industrial raw materials. The productivity of the land could at best be expanded rather slowly and with increasing difficulty as less good land was brought into use, or better land was pressed to produce more. In all but the very long term the productivity of the land in a country which had been

long settled could be regarded as fixed. Population growth beyond a certain point must mean increasing misery for the bulk of the population.

The industrial revolution changed all this because it gave to society the ability to increase production rapidly and without apparent limit at rates which were higher than the rate of population growth. Therefore, instead of population growth and individual prosperity being in opposition, both could go forward together. The production of goods and services might grow at, say, three per cent per annum; population at, say, one per cent per annum, and individual prosperity, real income per head, could therefore rise at two per cent per annum, a rate of growth which implies a doubling of living standards over a period of about thirty-five years. Population growth ceased to be a problem or evil in itself, at least as far as the earlier tension between its growth and living standards was concerned. Latterly, to put it paradoxically, it has not so much been standard of living as standard of life which has been at risk. Attention has shifted from the dangers of dire poverty or even outright starvation to the effects of over-crowding and pollution, from the quantity of resources available to sustain the wants of a community to the quality of the life which they can support, from a population reduced to want by a shortage of agricultural land to a land reduced to an ecological desert by the very productive processes which make us rich in the machines and gadgets of modern technology.

In these circumstances it is much more difficult than in the past to point to population totals beyond which it would be disadvantageous to rise. Population can grow in England today while living standards, measured in real incomes per head, continue to rise. If we are content to measure progress in terms of colour television sets, there is much scope for further advance even though numbers go on rising. If, on the other hand, we value space, quiet and rural beauty highly, any further increase may seem intolerable.

The possibility of determining fertility by conscious choice therefore comes at a time when what was once the strongest incentive to avoid population growth has lost its earlier, compelling prominence in western countries. Moreover, while population trends may have an important bearing on our environmental problems, the absence of population growth is not a cure-all. Merely to avoid further population increase will not solve such problems, since even without larger numbers, rising incomes may produce much the same effect, causing the continued growth of industry, an increasing sprawl of urban settlement, aggravating pollution problems, and so on. It would be foolish to expect any major problems to be solved, or even to be greatly eased by the cessation of population growth. Nor is the cessation of population growth such an unmixed blessing as some of its more fervent advocates tend to assume. For example, if mortality rates remain at

their present low levels (which one must assume all will wish to happen) the absence of population growth must mean low fertility, and this in turn, since fertility levels largely determine the age structure of a population, will mean an elderly population. For those who attach importance, therefore, to a young and flexible workforce, or who dread the effects on political life of an electorate top-heavy with old-age pensioners, continued growth of population is an inescapable concomitant of the condition they regard as desirable.

Notwithstanding the difficulty about deciding upon either an optimum or a tolerable maximum level of population and the drawbacks which would attend the cessation of population growth, let us assume that it is agreed that at *some* stage population growth should cease, and further that it should cease while mortality rates are still at a low level, or in other words should cease in circumstances which will restrict the average couple to about two children each. What is entailed in a conclusion of this sort? Would it mean severe moral, social and political problems? Does it involve something quite new in the range of issues which affect the individual and the state or society more generally? Is it only a new form of an age-old problem? Is it indeed a problem at all?

Views on these questions and their bearing on parental fertility choice differ markedly. One influential view, for example, has been that babies are valued by their parents because of the satisfactions they bring, and will be actively wanted by them as long as their consumption standards and those of the existing children in the family are not injured by further arrivals. Babies are held to be rather like consumer durables. On this assumption rising real incomes tend to aggravate the problem by making it easier for parents to have larger families with little sacrifice in material comforts. In these circumstances the marginal satisfaction of having a further child may well outweigh that of a second car or a cottage in the country. The average man is thus placed in the position of wanting to have a fairly large family himself — say, four children — but of wanting others to keep their families small so that the roads and beaches are not too crowded and the price of building plots soars less quickly. Wearing his citizen's hat, therefore, he may feel that a tax system which penalised large families was a good thing, while at the same time, wearing his family man's cap, he may prefer to have all the help he can in paying for the costs of raising the large family which he has learnt to love. If this appreciation of the population problem is just, there can clearly be very serious tensions between private and public interests, an explosive clash between the state and the individual.

What it is fashionable to worry about will naturally vary according to the problems which appear most pressing at any given time. During the late 1950s and early 1960s fertility in this country, however measured, showed a

tendency to rise, and at the end of this period the Registrar-General began to revise his forecast of the population of England and Wales at the end of this century sharply upwards, encouraging us to expect a large increase of population by the year 2000. From the mid-1960s onwards, however, fertility has been falling almost throughout the western world, and although the fall has been less spectacular in England than in some other countries, it has nevertheless been considerable, and it is again growing plausible for those who find the itch to make population forecasts irresistible, to stress the danger of fertility falling soon to the point where the population is failing to replace itself. More effective contraceptives, and especially the pill, an increasing tendency for married women to continue to work for a time after marriage, and perhaps to treat marriage as something to be run in parallel with a career rather than as an alternative to it, perhaps even a change of attitude towards marriage as a social institution, have all been mentioned as factors which may explain the recent fall in fertility and as reasons to expect fertility to fall further in the future. On this line of argument the tension between the state and the individual over population, if it is to come about, will be more over the measures which the state may wish to take to avoid a fall in population (as in the 1930s) than over those which would help to prevent a runaway population growth. In short, the assumption that excessive fertility is always and everywhere the main problem is likely to prove wrong.

Nevertheless, an underlying problem remains: unless it is safe to assume that population, responding to pressures which may not be consciously understood, automatically adjusts successfully to new demographic difficulties, so that no intervention or conscious forethought in demographic affairs is called for, then the fact that fertility has in the last century become largely a matter for calculation on the part of married couples implies new problems of choice both for them and for the societies of which they are the members. Population growth problems will solve themselves eventually, if only in the way which Darwin assumed to hold true for all animal populations, by the early death of a high proportion of each new generation. But we are no longer obliged to depend on this means of adjustment, nor are we any longer dependent upon decisions about the timing of marriage to secure a measure of control. Instead fertility, both within marriage and outside it, can be easily, accurately and fairly cheaply controlled. We can afford to do without severe restrictions upon sexual relations such as were at one time the only alternative to living standards brought close to the edge of subsistence by the pressure of high fertility; but we can only afford this relaxation in control without paying a heavy penalty if there is a fair prospect that couples will have only sufficient children to keep numbers much as they are. In this

connection one might notice in passing that the intermittent enthusiasms for compulsory euthanasia are irrelevant to this problem since they take the form of urging voluntary death at ages well beyond those of child-bearing and so have no bearing on the long-run rate of population growth, but only on its absolute size at any given point in time.

Is it then likely that family size will in future reach on average that level — just above two children per married couple — which would mean neither rise nor fall in total population? In short, is there a problem to worry about? No one can be sure of the future, but a review of the recent past can be instructive.

In all western European countries, North America, Australasia, Japan, almost all of eastern Europe and much of Russia, there has been a very marked and consistent swing away from large families. Whereas in mid-Victorian England more than seven hundred in every thousand women who lived in marriage to the end of the child-bearing period had four or more children, and about a hundred and seventy-five in every thousand had ten or more children, by the middle of this century only about a hundred and thirty in every thousand such married women had four or more children and the number who have ten or more children has become so small that it can fairly be termed negligible — a figure of well under one per cent. The trend away from large families has continued even during the recent period of somewhat increased fertility. The increase took place because of a slight shift in preference away from childless or one child families towards those of two, three or four children. There is no good ground for supposing that large families are ever again likely to be widespread. Very few men or women, when interviewed, express a preference for large families. Most replies cluster within the range which represents actual performance in recent decades. It should be borne in mind, incidentally, that the move to small families in the last hundred years owed very little to the invention of mechanical and chemical methods of preventing conception. At the time when fertility in England was at its lowest point in the 1930s the form of contraception which was much the most widely practised was *coitus interruptus*, perhaps with resort to abortion in cases of failure.

While all forecasting is hazardous, therefore, it does appear reasonably certain that there is no danger of a voluntary return to large families. Large families have become very rare and if, occasionally, a couple find that they wish to have a family of six, seven or eight children, the impact of decisions of this sort is negligible. It is illogical, therefore, to imply that parents should feel a duty not to exceed a particular family size of, say, two or three children creating a sense of guilt in the minds of such few parents as wish to have larger families will cause distress to them which would not be offset by

any appreciable change in the overall pattern of fertility. If we wish either to prevent further population growth or to ensure against its decline it is probably safe to assume that the changes to be brought about will entail only a very small shift in the relative frequencies of families in a very restricted range of sizes.

The demographic stability of western countries turns on very fine margins of change in fertility. If family sizes were consistently to be as large as seemed likely about ten years ago — that is on average about 2.6 children per married couple — this would mean a doubling of population in less than a century, and might fairly quickly result in a serious deterioration in the quality of life in a country like England where population densities are already high. Yet a comparatively minor shift in family size preferences, or increase in the proportion of women who never marry, or some combination of the two, would result in each generation simply replacing itself, while a return to the situation of a generation ago would mean the opposite problem of population decline. These are all changes on a scale so modest that they would barely be perceptible in terms of life style, family size and household composition. They are not even remotely comparable to the scale of the changes which occurred between 1870 and 1930 when the large family went out of fashion definitively.

In the light of all this, is there a problem, a moral issue, and if so, what is it? The first point to be made is that if family sizes among the current generation of parents prove to settle down at the level suggested by current fertility rates, it is unlikely that rapidly rising numbers will be a problem, since fertility is quite close to the point at which a population replaces itself without any long-run tendency either to grow or fall. Or, in other words, if there is a problem its nature is still not clear. We are still some way from reaching the situation in which any woman who wishes to obtain expert advice on contraceptive technique, can readily obtain it. If in, say, ten years time every woman is fully conversant with modern contraceptive methods, and if, at the same time, those who want children but have difficulty in achieving their wishes because of subfertility, can also easily obtain the best advice and treatment for their conditions, it will be clearer whether the population of this country left, so to speak, to itself, will tend to rise, to fall, or simply to mark time in total numbers.

Assume, however, for argument's sake that the bogey which is so often brought before us proves to have substance, and that it becomes clear that average family size is such as to cause a steady growth in population. Further, that a general consensus exists that population growth should cease. There would then be a conscious wish by parents to have children in numbers which would be inconsistent with the conscious wish of society to avoid increasing

population. In that event, is it reasonable to fear the necessity of drastic and novel societal action? Must we contemplate a system like that sometimes sketched in which each couple is restricted by law to a certain family size, what might be called the ration book system? Or a system of random licensing like a lottery in which a lucky few might have a large family, while others might be denied children, and where perhaps the high value tickets would acquire a high resale value? Might the pressures be such as to impel society towards compensating him for the extra expenses of an addition to his family. of mental or physical excellence to have prior claim should enjoy reproductive privileges forbidden to their less fortunate contemporaries? What about prohibiting all reproduction of the traditional type and substituting reproduction by impregnating selected ova with selected sperm in some Orwellian reproductive laboratory?

In my view not only is the form of the population problems of the future unclear, but also, if the problems take a clearer shape and appear to require societal action, it is highly unlikely that their solution will require a violent break with past forms of action. If Orwellian expedients are adopted it will not be because the problem of population proved insoluble in any other way. If the problem when it crystallises proves to be one of excessive growth, the very slight shift in family size preferences which is all that is likely to be needed to arrest growth may well be obtainable, for example, by minor changes in the tax system. At present, for a man paying tax at the standard rate, the saving afforded to him in tax liabilities will go a considerable way towards compensating him for the extra expenses of an addition to his family. If the system were modified, for example by tapering off the extent of tax relief for every child after the second and extinguishing it for any child above rank four, or simply by reducing tax relief generally for all children, the required change might very probably be affected without any other action. Conversely it is quite possible that juggling with income tax and/or family allowances might enable any dangers of the opposite sort to be overcome.

And it needs to be stressed that it is not yet clear that, to borrow a legal phrase, there is a case to be answered. Over the whole period since the mid-1920s, the average level of the net reproduction rate has been remarkably close to 1.00. For the first half of the period it was below 1.00: since the end of the 1940s it has been above it. There was a long downswing in the 1920s and 1930s, a recovery in the 1940s and a marked upswing in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and latterly a new downswing. The net reproduction rate is only one of several ways of measuring reproductive performance, but other methods show much the same pattern. Over a really long period of time, say a century, the effect of a cyclical movement of fertility round a level that would represent a stationary population is much the same as a constant level

of fertility at the point that represents neither growth nor decline. If the course of events in the last half-century were to be repeated in the next, the situation in the year 2020 would be quite satisfactory from the point of view of those who fear excessive population growth.

If you depart from different premises you may naturally reach different conclusions. If, for example, you consider that population is already too large, and that the quantity of pollutants produced on average by each man or woman is either poisoning the ecosystem or in other ways detracting tragically from the quality of life, then to stand still will seem inadequate, and only measures which secure a substantial absolute fall in population will seem sufficient. Ignoring for simplicity's sake the possibility of large-scale emigration, this might mean changes in fertility levels for quite a long period so great as to make it doubtful whether the modification of existing administrative arrangements could be effective. More extreme and untried expedients might well prove necessary. Equally, at the other extreme, if it were public policy to secure a doubling of the population in a comparatively short time (de Gaulle, it will be remembered, used to talk wistfully of a France of one hundred millions), then also extraordinary measures might prove necessary.

Should the state then have a population policy? To have such a policy is no new thing. Most states of seventeenth century Europe were influenced by the view, often found in Mercantilist writings, that the wealth and strength of a state depended on the plenitude of men, and did what they could to stimulate the growth of population (for example, by encouraging cultivation of food and certain types of immigration). In pre-war Europe Germany pursued populationist policies. So has France for many years. Equally, many of the states of the developing world today, and most notably India, have spent very large sums of money in trying to reduce the rate of population growth by disseminating information and contraceptive appliances. In a sense, it is impossible for a state not to have a policy, or at all events not to conduct its affairs in such a way as to have no effect on demographic behaviour.

The British Government at present has no formal population policy, except over immigration, and there the reasons for the policy are only rather indirectly to do with the increase in the total number of the population. I see no immediate necessity for such a policy, though I would urge the importance of making a much greater effort to ensure that individual citizens are aware of the potential conflict between their private decisions as parents and their wishes on grounds of public policy for the preservation of the amenities of the country in which they live. If it should prove to be the case in another ten years' time that fertility has once more recovered, so that there will by then have been a period of more than a quarter of a century in which fertility was consistently above the level necessary for replacement, then a formal

acceptance of the view that the long-term rate of population increase appropriate for this country is nil, might be necessary, and with it the adoption of modifications to the tax system designed to penalise high fertility. But at present the indications about the future fertility trends are confused and it is as likely that we shall be worrying about decline, or contemplating the prospect of effectively stationary numbers, as that we shall be concerned about further increase.

What is new about today's demographic situation is not simply alarm that population is increasing unduly fast, or that growth is likely to continue. It is also the extent to which population trends are influenced by private choice. In the past the social mechanisms which restrained fertility, which existed in all societies to some degree, were the result of following patterns of behaviour which were accepted as part of the order of things, and so not in general the subject of separate, individual conscious choice. Some of these mechanisms were drastic and effective, and especially so in western Europe where convention combined with a measure of individual choice produced a very late average entry into the married state for all but a very small minority. But their coming into existence and operation, though highly beneficial in many cases to the societies in which they developed, seldom involved much conscious choice. Attention focused on related matters, rules of inheritance for example, rather than directly upon trends themselves. Of course there were exceptions to this rather sweeping rule. There are instances reported in certain Australian tribes, for example, of formal debate within the group about whether a newly born child should be allowed to live, that is whether the food base of the community was large enough to support it. But in general the mechanism of population control, elaborate and subtle and responsive though it might be, was part of the general fabric of social behaviour. It did not depend on the conscious calculation of individual parents.

The causes of the change to a modern pattern of fertility limitation by conscious decision within marriage are still not well understood. It is known and it is interesting that one of the first groups in Europe to switch to the small family system were the bourgeoisie of Calvin's city of Geneva. The Genevan bourgeoisie as early as the late seventeenth century found the inconvenience of large families so pressing that they began to behave like members of the late Victorian middle class in Britain and limited their family sizes quite rigidly. Given a sufficient incentive and a sufficient psychosocial independence of mind, a change to the modern pattern of individual decision can occur quite rapidly. In general, however, the change came much later, sometime during the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. In time it has spread throughout all ranks and conditions of men. The central feature of this

revolutionary change has been the transfer to the individual of a choice of momentous importance — that of creating new life — which had previously been in an important sense outside individual regulation. Society has always had a hand in these matters, not by formal legislation but by sanctioning rules which govern marriage, the suckling and upbringing of children, and so on. But as a result of the fertility revolution of the last hundred years, married couples now take to themselves decisions which would once have been regarded as a matter for God's disposition. When there is talk of the state interfering in decisions which properly belong to parents (that is, trying to prescribe the number of children they should have), the novelty of state interference is stressed. The novelty of parental decision is less often stressed but is equally worthy of remark.

Since the revolution in fertility behaviour which has made the small family the norm, an immensely important sector of human behaviour has, so to speak, changed status. Conscious decision has replaced social disciplines. Women are no longer condemned to childbirth by marriage any more than men are condemned to eat only by the sweat of their brows. When Malthus stressed the power of what he delicately termed the passion between the sexes, he assumed that if one granted its power one also conceded the inevitable pressures caused by surplus fertility.

All this has gone by the board, and it is in this that the essence of modern population problems lies. It is a normal part of the baptism service to stress the responsibility which the parents take upon themselves. Nowadays the service comes in a sense nine months too late. It is no longer that, a birth having occurred willy-nilly, the parents should be enjoined to understand their responsibilities. It is, or should be, that having decided upon intercourse without contraceptive protection, they should understand that they are in high probability about to embark on a course of action which will bring a new life into the world with results which must affect not only themselves and the new baby but all their fellow men and women.

So far, in my view, whether by happy accident or from the working out of those pervasive social pressures which are still so ill understood, the upshot of many millions of such individual decisions has been to produce fertility levels surprisingly close to those which would mean stationary numbers in the long run. If in future years this no longer holds true, it will not be enough to argue from the assumption that intervention by the state is a new and fearful departure from the past practice, unless it is also clearly recognised that behaviour within the family also takes place in a completely different setting. What is sauce for the goose may then also be sauce for the gander. If conscious decision has replaced passive acceptance in one sphere, the same may perhaps justifiably take place in the other.

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