

Why Is the Birth Rate Constantly Declining?

Results of an Inquiry Conducted in England by National Council of Public Morals, Which Seeks to Regenerate the British Race

STUDENTS of sociology have for many years been calling attention to the decline in the birth rate. Many of the broad facts are fairly familiar to people in general. But the war has given a new impetus to the whole inquiry, its tremendous toll in human life assuring that the subject will be much discussed in the next few years. More than one nation will attack the problem on the theory that neglect of the cradle may be even more dangerous to a country than neglect of the sword.

There is a peculiar interest and timeliness in the report on the question just issued by a commission appointed in 1913 by the National Council of Public Morals in England. The body was not a Royal Commission, but was instituted, with official recognition, by the National Council, twenty-seven members of which—men and women—signed the report that arrives at the following findings of fact:

1. That the birth rate has declined to the extent of approximately one-third within the last thirty-five years.
2. That this decline is not, to any important extent, due to alterations in the marriage rate, to a rise of the mean age at marriage, or to other causes diminishing the proportion of married women of fertile age in the population.
3. That the decline, although general, has not been uniformly distributed over all sections of the community.
4. That throughout the decline has been more marked in the more prosperous classes.
5. That the greater incidence of infant mortality upon the less prosperous classes does not reduce their effective fertility to the level of that of the wealthier classes.

The council also considers that the following conclusions may be stated, although based upon less substantial evidence than the first five.

6. Conscious limitation of fertility is widely practiced among the middle and upper classes, and there is good reason to think that, in addition to other means of limitation, the illegal induction of abortion frequently occurs among the industrial population.
7. There is no reason to believe that the higher education of women (whatever its indirect results upon the birth rate may be) has any important effect in diminishing their physiological attitude to bear children.

The book, which consists of 450 pages and is published by Chapman & Hall, Ltd., London, announces in its preface that the National Council of Public Morals has for its object the "spiritual, moral, and physical regeneration of the race, (and as its motto the felicitous words of our King, 'The foundations of our national glory are set in the homes of the people, and they will only remain unshaken while the family life of our race and nation is strong, simple, and pure.')

The Commission of Inquiry was composed of the following members: The Right Rev. Bishop Boyd Carpenter, Chairman; the Right Rev. W. R. Inge, the Right Hon. Sir J. Gorst, Dr. A. News-holme, Principal Medical Officer, Local Government Board; Dr. T. H. C. Stevenson, Superintendent of Statistics for the Registrar General; the Duchess of Marlborough, the Lord Bishop of Birmingham, Lord and Lady Willoughby de Broke, Lady Aberconway, the Bishop of Barking, the Right Rev. Mgr. Canon W. F. Brown, Professor Sir J. Macdonell, the Right Hon. Sir T. P. Whittaker, M. P.; Sir J. Crichton-Browne, Sir Malcolm Morris, Sir H. B. Donkin, M. D.; the Rev. Principal A. E. Garvie, Rabbi Professor H. Gollancz, the Rev. J. M. Gibson, Rev. R. F. Horton, the Rev. F. B. Meyer, the Rev. Thomas Phillips, Professor G. S. Woodhead, Professor L. T. Hobhouse, Dr. Major Greenwood, Statistician to the Lister Institute; Dr. T. B. Hyslop, Dr. J.

W. Ballantyne, Lieut. Col. F. Freemantle, M. D., R. A. M. C.; Dr. A. T. Schofield, Dr. C. W. Saleeby, Dr. Mary Scharlieb, Dr. Florence Willey, (Lady Barrett); Dr. Agnes Savill, Dr. Ettie Sayer, Mrs. General Booth, Mrs. George Morgan, J. A. Hobson, A. G. Gardiner, Walter Heape, H. B. Grylls, and James Marchant, Secretary.

The objects of the inquiry are set forth by stating that the public is accustomed to the headline in the press, "The Declining Birth Rate," and to the announcement made by the Registrar Gen-

rural, and religious (if possible;) statistics showing the proportion of sterile to total marriages (to find out whether smaller families or total childlessness is the cause of the fall;) foreign statistics showing the extent of declining birth rates, special attention being paid to France and the Jews.

Second, alleged causes of the decline were investigated, under the headings of physiological causes, (for example, the effect of town life, &c., upon lateness of marriage, fertility, number of marriages,) prudential motives, and methods of re-

report; "the natural increase of whose own populations would not effectively occupy them in centuries. They will do their uttermost to fill their untenanted lands, and will continue, as in the past, to look upon Britain as a central reservoir whose overflow will be their chief dependence. A stationary birth rate means that the central reservoir will cease to have an overflow."

But the economic compulsion on the empty dominions to acquire population will continue, it is pointed out, and, failing to receive population from Britain, they will accept it from other lands—inevitably those in Central and Eastern Europe which have not yet come under the influence of the sumptuary forces which restrict birth rate. Thus, as a consequence of a falling birth rate in Britain, the prospect is disclosed that the filling up of the empire will fall to non-British races, who might even become the dominant elements.

Brief reference is made to evidence derived from foreign statistics, the purpose being merely to note some salient factors, and provide a short bibliography for the assistance of readers who desire to obtain fuller information. The following table shows the decline in the birth rate in certain European countries:

	Decade of Highest Rate.	Highest Rate.	1900.	1912.
Denmark	1851-1860	32.5	30.2	25.6
Norway	1851-1860	33.0	30.4	25.2
Finland	1851-1860	35.9	32.1	27.1
Germany	1871-1880	39.1	36.1	27.5
Netherlands	1871-1880	36.4	32.5	28.2
Belgium	1871-1880	32.7	28.9	22.6
Austria	1871-1880	39.0	37.1	31.3
Italy	1881-1890	37.8	35.3	31.7
Hungary	1881-1890	44.0	40.4	36.8
Serbia	1881-1890	45.4	41.9	38.0
France	1801-1810	32.2	22.1	19.0

These figures are taken partly from Prinzing, who gives the rates in decades and from the Registrar-General's Annual Report for 1912. In Continental Europe the birth rate rose after the Napoleonic campaigns, fell toward the middle of the last century, then rose again before the marked and consistent decline, which is now practically universal, set in.

An additional report, signed by nearly all the members of the commission, points out one of the national dangers of restriction as it is at present practiced. "The decline in the birth rate at present is not eugenic, but dysgenic," it says. "Restriction prevails most in the classes in which the conditions of family life are most favorable, and the largest families are found under those conditions, hereditary, environmental, or both, which are most adverse to the improvement or even maintenance of the quality of the population."

So far as the decline is due to abortion, the report says it is unhesitatingly to be condemned; and the use of mechanical and chemical preventives, injurious to health, must also be censured. Some representatives of religion, however, make a reservation in regard to methods not injurious to health.

The signatories set forth reasons why they consider an increase of population desirable so far as it is consistent with improvement. They point out that with more intensive culture of the land England could satisfactorily support a larger population, and that this possibility is much extended if the British Empire is taken into account.

It would appear that due weight must be given to the evidence of Dr. J. Brown-



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Bishop Boyd Carpenter

eral with almost mathematical regularity that "this is the lowest rate since registration began." The book continues:

It may or may not be a good thing that fewer children have been born to occupy vacant places, so that each has more elbow room. It may or may not be true that the quality of human life has improved pari passu with the decline in quantity. But, subtuges aside, we have to recognize that the birth rate has declined and is still declining. Whether the decline has gained such momentum that it cannot be overtaken is another and a most opportune question; but a decline which has been steady and almost persistent for thirty-seven years disposes one to the opinion that a further fall is inevitable. . . .

Some questions follow:

Is there a general decline in fertility among Western civilized nations? Is the declining birth rate an index of physical deterioration? Or why are our families smaller than they were? The marriage rate has scarcely varied during the period under survey; the marriageable age has remained fairly constant, although later marriages are becoming the rule, especially among the professional classes, and the population increases, yet our birth rate declines.

The catalogue of explanations is limited only by the ingenuity of the makers. But when it is finally exhausted, "the one question which all must dread comes uppermost: not whether the birth rate is falling, but whether the fertility of our people is failing."

The inquiry was made in four directions. First, the extent and character of the decline were considered under such headings as the present British birth rate and infantile mortality, general and classified, according to income, occupation, province and county, urban and

straint, (moral, mechanical, and chemical.) Third, the effects of the decline of the birth rate were searched for, under the headings of effect upon the children, upon the man and woman, upon married people, and upon home life. Fourth, economic and national aspects are dealt with, and the commission considers the alleged results of a rapid increase of population in a country where the land is fully cultivated, of a permanent surplus of workers upon the condition of the working class (in the matter of unemployment, overcrowding, &c.) in the case of a declining or stationary population, and the danger of a disproportionate increase in other nations.

An actually declining population is in prospect, it is asserted, and what that means, in an imperial sense, the smallest knowledge of the character of the empire will reveal. "It is composed of vast and sparsely populated tracts," says the

lee, Statistician to the Medical Research Committee under the Insurance act, and Dr. A. K. Chalmers, Medical Officer of Health at Glasgow, pointing to the occurrences of cyclical variations in the birth rate. One point seems to be established: "That to whatever extent causes independent of the voluntary action of individuals, such as conditions of housing, may operate to diminish or increase the fertility of parents, there is an appreciable and increasing fall in the number of births taking place through involuntary interference with what may be called the course of nature."

This does not affect Great Britain alone. It was with regard to Germany, the enemy with whom Britain is now engaged in a life and death struggle, and to the variations in birth statistics in different parts of the German Empire, that a witness, Dr. C. V. Drysdale, the Secretary of the Malthusian League, said:

"There can be no doubt whatever that ignorance and recklessness at the present time are essential to high birth rates."

The following opinion is then expressed:

Whatever view we may hold as to this, we may be certain, at all events, that where the birth rate has fallen through the voluntary action of potential parents it will not be the increase either of ignorance or of recklessness that will raise it. It will rather be the dissemination of the ambition to have children, as education explains the prudence of such a course, whether from a personal or from a national and patriotic point of view.

Economically speaking, the commission finds that the lowest strata of the population have little or no responsibility for the decline in the birth rate. Responsibility in the form of diminished families begins to be well marked in the better paid ranks of the working classes, and continues to very nearly the top of the social scale. The position now reached, it is asserted, is that of a nearly stationary population, which soon will be maintained even at that only by the improvement of the death rate. As in France, an actually declining population is in prospect.

The report continues:

A stationary population indicates (a) absolute saturation, large parts of India and China, Java, Jamaica, Barbados. On a higher level of culture, Belgium and the Channel Islands are almost as full as they can hold; (b) a high and stable culture under democratic institutions, encouraging love of comfort, social ambition, and fear of sinking in the social scale (France, the American-born population of the New England States); (c) unprogressive barbarism (Turkey and most uncivilized countries).

Every rise in the condition of the artisan tends at present to lower the birth rate in his class. Wherever political and social conditions bring a man or a class into a position in which he hopes to rise or fears to fall, the family will be restricted. That class of motives which we may blame as love of comfort, snobbishness, vulgar ambition, timorousness, or praise, as proper pride, desire for self-improvement, and prudence, is the most potent cause of family restriction. And here it is difficult to exaggerate the importance of a wise distribution of State burdens. Any form of State relief which favors the reckless at the expense of the prudent will in itself have the effect of multiplying the former and diminishing the latter.

Viewing the matter from a world standpoint, the commission inquires:

Supposing it to be true that the population of this or any other country may advance rapidly without experiencing any injurious pressure, may, or must, this policy react injuriously upon the world at large, by hastening the time when the available resources of the whole earth may be unduly taxed to maintain the total population? A country like ours may shed any surplus by emigration, and it may absorb into its own system foods and materials from other lands; but by both of these processes it may be hasten-

ing the arrival of the period of general overpopulation.

There seems no volume of evidence sufficient to prove that the available supplies of foods and other materials in the world cannot and will not be expanded to meet the growing demands of population for a long time to come, the commission asserts, adding that of general overpopulation in any absolute sense of the term there is no evidence. In the matter of quality of population, of the sort of men who are increasingly to people the earth, the prime question arises: "Have we any reliable criterion of desirability in respect of races and race blends? Is there any evidence that a mispopulation of the earth is taking place, in the sense of a refusal of 'higher' and intrinsically fitter races to multiply, while lower and intrinsically less fit peoples are spreading more numerously over the earth?" On these matters the commission says:

The necessary limitations of our knowledge about human qualities and their relative values for the civilization of the future, as well as our racial and patriotic biases, render it impossible to give a confident answer to these vital questions. There is recent evidence to indicate that the supposed differences in inherent racial qualities are much slighter than has been alleged, and that education and cultural environment explain the greater part of what were considered ethnical differences.

Regarding the effect of war upon the quality of the population, it is generally admitted, says the report, to exercise a selective power that is dysgenic. For it exposes to the risk of death a larger proportion of the more virile, the physically stronger, and, so far as the voluntary method of enlistment prevails, the more public-spirited of the male population, reducing their contribution to the stock of the next generation. Certain witnesses maintained that there is no sufficient reason to conclude that the recent reduction in Great Britain's birth rate has so far been inimical to the well-being of the nation. Others maintained that, if a higher birth rate or a check upon further reduction of the birth rate be deemed desirable, or if an improvement in the character of the birth rate is to be obtained, such reforms would be facilitated by certain social-economic changes.

Those who hold the latter view believe that greater security and regularity of income, with adequate insurance against unemployment among all ranks of workers, would be of material assistance. On the other hand, statistical evidence that is available for establishing a comparison of the birth rate among the different social and pecuniary grades of England's population indicate to the commission that the more prosperous classes restrict more closely the size of their families, and that even among certain of the wage-earning classes the birth rate varies inversely with the income.

Proposals, many of them of an economic character, are put forward for consideration. They include a living wage, bonuses for families under certain conditions, relaxation of the income-tax arrangements, increased facilities for good education, adequate housing accommodation at reasonable rents, and measures to encourage the full development of natural resources both at home and in the dominions beyond the seas.

The evidence on the housing question was limited to London, and all points in one direction—that children are the crux of the question. All the witnesses are quite emphatic on this point. Landlords do not cater for large families; in fact, they prefer tenants who have no children.

They object to families with children, especially young children, purely on business grounds. "In so doing," the commission adds, "they are not to be regarded as any more grasping or selfish than other business people who in their dealings seek to get the best return on their money."

But if the position in the towns is bad, it is incomparably worse in the villages. The commission puts on record its deliberate opinion that the housing question, both in town and country, makes the rearing of large families by the working classes a matter of great difficulty and also affects the birth rate.

The Very Rev. Dean Inge, acting as Chairman, at one of the sessions said:

I suppose we may take it that there is no doubt that there is a natural limit to the number of people that can be supported in the world, nor that if the birth rate had no restrictions upon it in any part of the world that limit would be reached in less than a century. The productiveness of the human race would appear to have been evolved in such a way as to meet the losses due to war, famine, pestilence, and other causes.

In the Middle Ages, for instance, the birth rate was about 45, and the death rate about the same. Within the last century the death rate has been reduced from the mediaeval level to 14, and if the birth rate were maintained at anything like its natural level, about 40, all over the world, the population of the globe, which is now 1,700,000,000, would in 120 years have reached 27,000,000,000, or about ten times as great a number as the earth could probably support. That, it seems to me, is the fundamental fact we have to recognize, and one that makes a drastic

limitation of the birth rate an absolute necessity.

The Chairman added that, with regard to England, he did not think it desirable that the country should contain sixty, or seventy, or eighty millions of persons, entirely divorced from the land, employed in large towns in producing commodities under cheap conditions. "Is that," the Chairman asked the witness, J. A. Hobson, "a state of things which could possibly produce a satisfactory or healthy nation?" The witness replied:

There is no doubt that there has been an increase in the population of the world which has gone on a wheat basis, but that is a very different question; you have to consider that there is certainly in Canada and South America, as well as in Siberia and possibly the Sahara, the potentiality of enormous supplies of food. I do not myself think that the growth of the population of the world is likely in the early future to press very insistently upon the food supply. I see no reason, for instance, why, within the next twenty years, the railways we are building with our spare capital all over the world may not increase the supply of food per head of the population even of the world.

"When the war ends," says a writer in *The Lancet*, England's leading medical paper, "we may see a more sober and earnest nation reviewing the situation in which it finds itself; for ourselves, we believe that the young men and women who have taken part in and witnessed the great struggle will become the parents of a generation not so selfishly frivolous as that into which they themselves were born."