

Exploding Population Myths

From an address by Dr. COLIN CLARK

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THE simple method of judging the trend of population by comparing current births with current deaths is open to an objection so obvious that many people fail to see it, namely, that while current births relate to the present generation of parental age, current deaths relate on the average to the much smaller generation born some seventy years ago. If current deaths are equal to current births, therefore, this must mean that population in the future is certain to decline. Now we are facing depopulation.

World power depends, even more than it did in the past, on having a large population, not primarily in having large numbers of recruits to the armed forces; but principally in having sufficient taxpayers to pay for the enormously costly equipment which modern armed forces require.

The cause of our infertility must be sought, it seems, in our social psychology, in a profound disillusion with the civilisation in which we live. People will undertake the undoubted hardships and difficulties of bringing up children if they have firmly fixed in the backs of their minds the belief that there is something good in the civilisation in which they live, that they live in a world worth bringing children into.

All previous civilisations have had a faith by which they lived. We have almost entirely lost ours, and are becoming totally disillusioned with our civilisation.

When I said at a public session of the ANZAAS 1976 Conference in Hobart that these declines in reproductivity, if not checked, would bring our civilisation to an end, a substantial part of the audience indicated by their applause that they thought that this was a desirable objective.

Another observation to be made of civilisations in decline is that they are becoming increasingly bureaucratic and overtaxed. Governments, even more than businesses, tend to have high overhead costs, i.e., those which show little or no alteration with the size of the population which they have to serve. A stationary or declining population thus increases the comparative burden of government expenditure. It also increases the temptation on governments, faced with difficulties in raising money by taxation or borrowing, to try to get out of them by inflation.

It is significant that France, which for a long period has had an almost stationary population, since

the nineteenth century should have suffered more persistent devaluations than most Western countries.

It can only be some irrational force of social psychology at work which led such large numbers of supposedly rational people to accept with enthusiasm the obvious nonsense about the prospect of the immediate extinction of our industrial civilisation through the exhaustion of mineral and agricultural resources, while at the same time being overwhelmed by pollution. If such people really believed what they were saying, they would have bought agricultural land and mining shares, both of which would obviously be rising rapidly in value if the world really were on the point of exhausting its resources.

Estimates have now been made for several countries which show that pollution could be almost completely cured by the expenditure of between one and two per cent of Gross National Product. When it comes to the point, however, we are unwilling to face this expenditure.

In 1925, when I was a first-year student of chemistry, our lecturers assured us that world supplies of oil would run out in about 1940; as 1940 approached, I was told that supplies would run out in 1955; and so on. Most mining companies conduct their exploration so as to have only about fifteen or twenty years supplies in reserve. They have to earn dividends for their shareholders, or pay high rates of interest on borrowed money, and must therefore apply a high rate of discount when valuing possible returns fifteen or twenty years in the future against present (high) costs of exploration.

Quantities of metals estimated to exist within reach of the earth's surface exceed by factors of hundreds or more the mining companies' estimates of current reserves. Chemical processes are known



for extracting aluminium from common clay, but they are substantially more costly than obtaining it from bauxite.

If, in fact, we were approaching the exhaustion of our reserves of metals, their prices would be steadily rising relative to those of other commodities. This is

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not the case. Prices of metals are not changing significantly relative to the general price level, except for aluminium, which is becoming cheaper.

Economies in the use of iron and steel are particularly remarkable. Those of us who are not professional engineers may fail to realise how much material can be saved by improvements in design.

It is likewise a serious mistake to assume that the demand for energy must advance in proportion to national product. Countries such as Japan, France and Italy, where fuel is mostly imported and costly, have developed advanced industrial economies with comparatively low energy consumption.

Our fears about energy shortage should be dispelled when we consider the beneficial consequences of rising fuel prices, our still abundant reserves of coal, or uranium and also thorium, of the virtually limitless inflow (though at present costly to harness) of solar energy, and finally the prospects, which may be quite near, of being able to exploit nuclear fusion (of hydrogen) rather than nuclear fission.

I hope that nobody still believes that two-thirds of the world is hungry (this mis-statement turned out to have been based on a simple statistical error) or even that half the world is mal-nourished. (FAO eventually had to admit that the only evidence that they could produce for this statement was that half the world did not eat as much as the inhabitants of Britain and France, many of whom are suffering from liver complaints and other obvious diseases of over-eating).

The reason for these antics on FAO's part is that it is an organisation run (at our expense) by agricultural politicians and public relations men, whose principal concern is to get their reluctant governments to go on subsidising the production of food surpluses. Their task is facilitated if they can spread stories about a starving world waiting hungrily to consume any agricultural surplus that the advanced countries may produce.

It is of course wrong to give the opposite impression that there is no hunger in the world. I have published an estimate in India, that about 25 per cent of the population is below the hunger line; a serious matter, but very different from talk about half the

world.

While many sufferers show clear clinical symptoms of protein deficiency, scientists, particularly in India, have found that in most cases they have adequate protein in their diet, but cannot assimilate it if they are in calorie deficiency. What India and other poor countries need, therefore, is not protein supplements but more abundant supplies of their staple foods.

The greater part of the world's potential cultivated land is unused, and most of what is used is cultivated extremely badly. Using not experimental farm methods, but only those which are already being applied by good farmers, the amount of land required to produce the food and other agricultural (including forest) products required by the average Australian is about a quarter of a hectare. Using only the available good-rainfall land throughout the world, without any extension of irrigation, we could produce an Australian-type diet for many times the world's present population.

Another widely circulated piece of mis-information is that, in the developing countries, food supplies are not keeping pace with population. The developing countries are gaining, but the principal feature is the great increase in the advanced countries, which threatens world agricultural surplus, not shortage. The sudden rise in food prices in 1973 and 1974 was due to bad harvests, principally in Russia, China and India. But it has to be temporary.

In the long run world agricultural supplies have about kept pace with demand, with periods favourable to agriculture in the 1920's and the early 1950's. Agriculture is always seriously affected by general world recessions, such as those of the 1890's and 1930's.

The methods of giving farm support in all advanced countries are not confined to helping poor farmers (for which there might be some justification) but subsidise the rich and poor farmers alike to increase their output. One might almost think that it had been designed deliberately to worsen the world terms of trade for agriculture.

The economic benefits from farm subsidies and tariffs quickly become "crystallised" in high land values, thus creating a very powerful vested interest.

Not the Right Single Tax

B.W.B.

TO the cynic, the introduction of a new tax is the process in which an economist gets a bee in his bonnet, the Chancellor gets a gleam in his eye and the public get a pain in the neck—or perhaps in the pocket.

Of course, not all new tax ideas merit such disparagement. And you do not need to be an economist to be a tax inventor. Farel

Bradbury, whose book *How to Fire the Tax Man** presents his idea of levying all taxes on our consumption of energy, labels himself a technocrat, which presumably means an engineer.

Mr. Bradbury's idea is to concentrate all taxation on what we

used to call fuel and power. Under his plan the whole of government revenue would be obtained by taxing oil, coal, gas, nuclear power, timber, chemicals, water power, sugar and tobacco.

Sugar? Yes, sugar is included because it is "a specific product associated with energy." Also, apparently, because it is bad for our health and teeth. And tobacco

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