

"WE HAVE ALREADY passed the point of no return. By the turn of the century, this country will have a population of about 70 million—a population which we will be totally unable to support."

The currently mounting hysteria about the "population explosion" is typified by those words of Dr. Robert Eyre, senior lecturer in geography at Leeds, as quoted in the *Daily Mail* of November 3rd. The statement is typical not only in its tone, but also in the complete inaccuracy of its statistics! The Registrar General's official estimate of the population of England and Wales at the end of the century is now 58 million—a huge drop from the 70 million figure quoted by Dr. Eyre, which was in fact the official prediction of a few years ago. Indeed the projected population for the whole of the United Kingdom in the year 2,000 is only 66 million—and the official estimate has in fact been reduced by eight and a half million within the space of the last five years.

Below the Replacement Rate?

Why has this drastic scaling-down of population estimates, of which Dr. Eyre is apparently unaware, taken place? The reason is that immediately after the last war there was an enormous rise in the number of births, and those born at that period have now reached the child-bearing age. Consequently we have been expecting a tremendous increase in the birth rate—and hence the high population projections of a few years ago. However precisely the reverse has happened and since 1963 the birth rate has declined steadily. For example, during the five-year period from 1964-69, the number of births in England and Wales dropped by 10 per cent from 875,972 in 1964 to 798,000 in 1969. Some authorities, such as Professor D. E. C. Eversley of Sussex University, have even suggested that in a few years the birth rate in this country may drop below the replacement rate. He observed at an Institute of Biology symposium two years ago: "There is now a serious unbalance of the sexes, about five per cent more boys than girls in the younger age group, so that they could not all marry even if all girls were willing to do so. There is still a certain amount of involuntary, as well as voluntary, sterility, and of course a certain almost unavoidable wastage between birth and marriage (congenital defects, accidents)". The result of all this, according to Professor Eversley, is that the present completed family size "is not in the long run enough to replace the parent generation."

U.S. Population Projections

Britain is not the only advanced country which has had to reduce its population predictions drastically. In 1958, shortly after the United States birth rate reached a post-war peak, one U.S. Census Bureau projection pointed to an increase of 38.6 million persons during the Sixties: that projection turned out to be 59 per cent higher than the growth which actually occurred. Interestingly enough, when the Bureau issued a set of four population projections in August 1970, it made some

PART I

Over-population or Not?

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significant changes. The previous set of estimates, issued in 1967, which had assumed that births were being postponed and that fertility would eventually return to the high rates of the Fifties, were dropped as being no longer realistic. (Indeed in 1969, two years after these estimates were made, they were already two million too high).

A Twenty-two-mile Radius

Of course, the fact that the British and American populations are increasing only very slowly would be irrelevant if their absolute size were already a problem—and, if this were so, one would expect the size of the denser British population to be the more worrying. Yet the area of land needed to house the 1968 population of the British Isles would fit comfortably within a twenty-two-mile radius of Charing Cross! This estimate is on the basis of sixteen houses (each containing four people) to an acre, making a total density of sixty-four persons per acre—which is considerably less than the 100-200 persons per acre which is the average in many built-up residential areas today. At a lower density of only eight houses to the acre, the radius would be thirty-one miles. The rest of Britain would then be available for factories, offices, shops, public buildings, farms, mines, and so on.

Population and Pollution

Perhaps the silliest aspect of the current alarmism about population growth is the attempt to pin the blame for the problems of pollution and the depletion of resources on the world's birth rate. In the United States the hysteria has reached such proportions that people now drive around with car stickers bearing slogans such as "babies are pollution" and "the next baby may kill us all." It is of course perfectly true that the USA has the worst pollution problems in the world—yet at the same time it is one of the world's most sparsely populated countries. Indeed if all the world's present population were put into the USA, the density would be the same as in England now. Clearly, then, population density can hardly be the reason for pollution: the major problem is the way in which the ever-expanding industrial economy of the United States has been allowed to run riot.

A consideration of pollution in Britain also leads to the unambiguous conclusion that population growth is not

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the major cause of the problem. Indeed in certain respects pollution in this country has diminished while our population has increased. Dr. Kenneth Mellanby, the Director of Monks Wood Experimental Station, observed recently: "During the last hundred years the population has more than doubled, but in many ways our environment, particularly in our cities, has improved. The air of London is far less smoky, the Thames is no longer a sewer."

Other problems, however, have intensified and could well become worse in the future. For instance, if we consider such things as the number of cars on the roads or the demand for water, both of which are responsible for environmental damage of various kinds, we find that both are expected to increase by over 100 per cent by 2000 AD. Yet the increase in population over the same period will be only about 20 per cent on current projections (and, as we have seen, even these projections may well be too high). Similarly, if we look back, it is clear that road traffic increased rapidly in the late 1950s and early 1960s because more people required cars, and only to a minor extent because there were more people. Even if our population were reduced overnight from its present 56 million to the 38 million we had in 1900, it would take less than ten years for this population to have the present total of 16 million cars on the roads.

So population control would emphatically not provide a solution to the problems of pollution: to overcome these problems would require the implementation of a whole list of constructive measures, not the mere parroting of slogans about "too many people."

Overcrowding

Are there, then, no problems in this country connected with population as such? The *Financial Times* hit the nail on the head in its editorial of May 20, which observed: "The problem lies now and will lie for the foreseeable future not so much in the absolute size of the U.K. population as in its distribution." At present about 50 per cent of our population live and work on only three per cent of the land area. Some parts of Britain are tragically depopulated, and because there are so few local employment opportunities, there is a steady migration from these areas to the larger towns.

The problems of depopulation are well illustrated by a memorandum by the Welsh Office to a Parliamentary Select Committee last year, which observed: "The new town in Montgomeryshire is one of a series of measures taken to influence population trends in Mid Wales. This area is one which has experienced depopulation for generations owing to a decline of employment opportunities in agriculture and other rural crafts. Although some industries have been established in the area these have not been sufficient to halt depopulation. Income levels have tended to lag behind those in surrounding areas and the decline in population has created difficulties with the provision and maintenance of public services."

The U.S. is facing a similar situation. Her censuses of 1970 showed that more than half the 3,042 counties in the United States *lost* population in the decade from 1960; yet over the same period "Megalopolis," the 450-mile long by 150-mile wide belt from Boston to Washington, had gained 3.6 million people and now contains one sixth of the nation.

Maldistribution of population is the problem, not "overpopulation;" and this is a problem which can be solved only by sensible regional and land policies, not by ill-informed hysterics about population size.

Everyone Knows the Answer

THE JULY 1971 edition of *Christian Action Journal* contains a fascinating collection of interviews by Peter Adamson with people he met in India. This extract is taken from an interview with an Indian businessman in West Bengal:

"Why are all these people from the country coming to live in a dreadful place like this? It's because the rural areas are stagnating and, as the population grows, all these men can't earn a living in agriculture any more.

"Everyone knows that the answer is not population control but rural reform. The rural areas are capable of providing a good living for more people than we have, even now. If the large estates were broken up and land given to tenant farmers and landless labourers then the problem would begin to solve itself.

"But this doesn't happen even though everybody knows it is needed. And why doesn't it happen? It's the old, old story. The state governments have control over rural reform, and the state governments are made up of and dominated by the large group of quite well-to-do middle-sized farmers, who are the very minority that would suffer from such reform. It's really as simple as that. India is dominated by industrial and agricultural elites who have this strong vested interest in the present ridiculous situation. And notice that it's usually this elite which shouts loudest about birth control."