



NEGATIVE POPULATION GROWTH

THE NPG FORUM

CLINTON ON POPULATION, PART 2.

Waiting For AI

by Lindsey Grant

The preceding NPG FORUM described the wreckage of hopes of developing a national population policy. That failure itself underlines the task ahead: to create a national sense of urgency about population growth. Earlier FORUM papers have from time to time carried articles suggesting how immigration might be controlled and lower fertility achieved, given the will. In this article, we will offer some thoughts as to how the will might be generated.

The writer is an erstwhile Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Environment and Population Affairs.

Tom Lehrer used to sing a song about Vice President Hubert Humphrey: “Whatever became of Hubert?... Are you sad? are you cross? are you gathering moss?...Oh, Hubert what happened to you?” (My memory of the lyrics may be inexact, but that was the idea.) Vice Presidents are not supposed to be heard, and Al Gore has disappeared into the traditional obscurity. He is doing some useful but unsung work — “reinventing government”; cleaning up the bureaucracy — which may well be swept away by the sledgehammer proposals for cutting government now being voiced.

There are a few people in government who have made the connection between population growth and environmental decline. Among them is the Vice President. More than any other national U.S. political leader, he has grasped the reality that growth cannot continue forever in a finite space. He has not yet applied that wisdom to his own country, but the United States has reached a level of population and consumption that brings “forever” into sight. He might yet play a role in bringing population into policy, and one of his ideas — for better foresight machinery — could be employed in a deliberate effort to build a consensus for a population policy.

This in itself is good reason for trying to enlist the Vice President.

Sources of Opposition

Earlier FORUM articles have mentioned some of the resistances that make population a particularly difficult and unpopular topic to take on. To list several of them:

- Immigration and fertility. These are the only two variables available to influence population change. To limit immigration is to break the faith for many people who are imbued with the “one world” dream. To address population growth through fertility stirs up hornets on both sides: doctrinaire feminists who fight any proposal to meddle with women’s decisions about child-bearing; and right-to-lifers who equate family planning with abortion.

- Multiple agendas. There has been an explosion of groups seeking social justice of one sort or another. Very few of them have made the connection with population growth. The political landscape is full of lobbies working at cross purposes or competing for resources. They do not see the ways in which population growth and intensified competition block their own agendas, and consequently they look upon the population movement as a competitor.

- Innumeracy (in Garrett Hardin’s memorable neologism). How often I have heard people resist the idea of a population policy because “it’s not just a matter of numbers”, when they don’t know the numbers. In fact, demography is supremely a matter of numbers, and those numbers affect the pursuit of most personal and social goals. Comparative national math proficiency tests repeatedly demonstrate that Americans by and large are less able to deal with numerical concepts than other nations’ students. The deficiency makes it difficult to reach people with numerical arguments.

- Relativism. Any proposal to address population

growth encounters the response: “but you must take cultural differences into account.” True, but that applies to the way in which the population argument is presented, and to the approach that different cultures might take to limiting fertility. It does not somehow vitiate the impact of population growth on a society. (Interestingly, this “cultural difference” argument disappears when advocates are pressing their own agenda. At the Cairo population conference last September, the feminist agenda was hardly muted in deference to Vatican and conservative Arab views.)

Other attitudes play a role. Many young people, in particular, ferociously criticize their own society and idealize others, defer to the immigrant and ignore their own less fortunate compatriots. I am hesitant to get into psycho-history, but there does seem to be an element there of hatred and rejection of their own society.

Whatever the source of opposition, the response is denial. Deny there is a population problem, and you do not face a challenge to your own mindset.

- Passivity. At the other end of the line, at various levels of government, population growth is taken as a given — an “independent variable” — that must be accommodated but cannot be changed. This attitude can be seen in Washington and among the professional planners in my county of Santa Fe, even while the voters have elected City and County councils on “no-growth” tickets.

Beyond these attitudes, there is a fundamental block to an effective population policy. It is the mindset that growth is the natural and necessary solution to immediate problems.

Growth as a “Solution”

We pointed out in the preceding NPG FORUM that even those politicians who abstractly recognize the population problem instinctively revert to growth as a solution to the problems facing them. President Clinton has said some of the right words about population growth, but when faced with a real problem such as unemployment, he reverts to the thoroughly American and Romantic idea of growing out of them.

Clinton is not alone. Our society is emerging from an era that William Catton has called “the Age of Exuberance.”¹ Endowed by a seemingly limitless abundance of fossil energy, first the United States and then Europe and Japan have been swept up in a remarkable spurt of growth. Growth has seemed to work before, and the natural response to challenges is to go back to that solution. If we are running out of oil, create incentives so the industry will find more. If people are hungry in the third world, they need a “green revolution”.

For a time, success succeeds, but eventually it may generate its own destruction. Since petroleum resources are finite, incentives simply hasten their exhaustion. The green

revolution was only a temporary fix, to provide a little time while the third world tries to stop population growth from eating up the increase, as Norman Borlaug, the leading figure in that “revolution”, has pointed out.

Most of the world thought that growth was the divine order of things and a permanent condition, when in fact its continuation is both a danger and, eventually, a mathematical impossibility.

Failure of the Decision Process

Let me take **energy** as one important example of the ways in which the U.S. Government is digging us into a hole because it has no mechanism — no “process” in Tim Wirth’s words — to weigh the impacts of our population growth on the pursuit of policy.

Overall, we depend on imports for 22 percent of our national energy needs, compared with 6 percent in 1970. For petroleum, we crossed the 50 percent line last year, relying on imports for more than half our consumption.² The figure will keep rising. The big oil companies have pretty much given up on the United States other than Alaska. They are shifting their exploration energies elsewhere.

Meanwhile, Sen. Murkowski (R/Alaska) is the new Chairman of the Senate Energy Committee, and he has announced that he plans to press to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to exploration. With luck, we may gain a year or two of consumption, at the expense of the kind of mess typified by the **Exxon Valdez** disaster.

Our dependence on Middle Eastern petroleum grows. The Gulf states have lived very high on oil revenues, creating lollipop economies where most of the citizens’ needs are supplied free or at reduced prices. Saudi Arabia has run out of money and has had to raise taxes and cut expenditures some \$7 billion, which has not made it popular. From another quarter, the kingdom has begun to face open criticism from some of its intellectuals for the lack of democracy. It has worried the king enough so that he leaned on Britain not to give political asylum to the critics.

Arab fundamentalism has been on the rise in the Middle East; unrest, assassinations and security problems have dogged the region. It is not a stable area. Does the U.S. Government look with equanimity on our increasing dependence? It moved very quickly when Iraq threatened to destabilize the Arab peninsula. At least we had allies in the region. There is a specter of widespread chaos threatening our fossil energy-built economy, along with those of Western Europe and Japan. We would be under immense pressure to mount a “peacekeeping force” — very possibly against Arab opposition — to try to keep the wells pumping and the pipelines open. Not a pleasant prospect.

There are even more compelling long term reasons not to be dependent on fossil fuels. It took millions of years for plants to store all that carbon in the ground and create a carbon/oxygen balance in the atmosphere that made possible the advent of animals. For a century, our thoughtless species has been putting it back into the atmosphere. We are attacking the very balance that supports us, and promoting global warming in the process. The proportion of carbon in the atmosphere creeps relentlessly up. It has risen 6 percent since 1980. That is a very short time.

The country has responded to the oil crises of the '70's by using 60 percent more coal, the dirtiest of fossil fuels, than in 1970. We pledged following the 1992 UN Rio de Janeiro Conference on Environment and Development to reduce our carbon dioxide emissions to 1990 levels by 2000. Not an ambitious target, but the reversion to coal makes it more difficult to meet.

Nationally, we look in every direction but population growth to address our energy problems. We are trying to become more efficient in our use of energy. We have made progress. We use only 60 percent as much energy per dollar of GNP (in constant dollars) as we did in 1970. Part of the gain has been because of the growth in services, which don't generally use much energy. Very good, but you can only carry that process so far. You cannot eat services, or wear them, or live in them.

Our energy use has risen 27 percent since 1970 — right in step with our population growth — despite the increased efficiency. And efficiency gains become progressively more difficult to achieve as the easier gains are used up. Right now, population growth makes solutions ten percent more difficult with every passing decade. We don't need that hurdle.

Japan is often cited as the model of efficiency. It is, but it is not so far ahead of the United States as some comparisons suggest. On its tight little archipelago, living in tiny houses and flats, with a population dense enough to support public transport, distances too short for aircraft, and not much room to drive or park automobiles, Japanese use just over half as much energy as Americans do, adjusting for the difference in GNP per capita.³ We can move in that direction — theoretically if not in the real political world — but it would take some fundamental changes in living habits, and it would take time. Having gotten people out of their energy-intensive cars and into smaller houses, the question would arise: what do we do next?

Japan has answered that question for itself. It is approaching zero population growth. Our Government should also be looking at population growth as part of the issue.

The pursuit of benign and reliable energy technologies should be near the head of our national priorities. It will be an expensive change, involving high capital costs and more

expensive energy. A deliberate effort to reverse the growth of the demand side — population — is much less expensive. It would lead to rising efficiencies, as the pressure on our resources diminishes, rather than raising costs as we try to squeeze every ounce of energy out of nature, and it would contribute to the solution of many issues aside from the energy problem.

One could run the same sort of analysis of social and urban problems, agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and most other areas of economic and social activity, but this paper is about decision making, not about the problems themselves.

Demographics and Decision Making

How do we bring demography into national thinking as the government goes about making decisions? There is no ground swell of support for a population policy. There is no reason to hope that politicians will get out in front of public opinion, or to expect that they will automatically think of population when they are addressing seemingly unrelated policy decisions.

Moving a Reluctant Government. The administration's performance so far (as summarized in Part 1 of this two part series) would suggest that politicians do not yet dare take on the issue frontally and say "growth must stop." If that is so, they can more safely approach it by asking, in one context after another: "what are the impacts if we don't stop?"

As a nation, we need mechanisms to bring the practical consequences of population growth into focus on a case by case basis — a conscious national process of self-education, if you will. The process would improve governmental decision making. At the same time, if the decision process can be made more open so as to reach the public, it would help to move population up the scale of people's awareness. Once people have seriously thought of the connections between immigration and population growth, they will probably never look at immigration in quite the same way again.

A Cure for Tunnel Vision. Let me start with the immigration example and propose a straightforward mechanism to avoid ad hoc decision making such as happened when the Haitian and Cuban boat people set out to sea.

One may be pretty sure that immigration policy, when it has reached the White House at all, has been dominated by the usual "big players": the National Security Council, State, Defense, Justice, Treasury. Simply because of the problem of coordinating diverse views, most of the consequences are not addressed when decisions are made on "foreign policy" or "Justice Department" issues.

I suggest that the White House take the lead in creating a permanent inter-agency policy group on population and

immigration. It would provide individual agencies such as the Department of Labor or HUD with an opportunity to consider the role of immigration in the pursuit of their goals. Out of the inter-agency group would come an improved sense of what U.S. immigration policy should be, which in turn would inform the decision process when issues arise such as the surge in boat people from Cuba and Haiti. It might even influence the thinking when Congress undertakes one of its periodic "reforms" to increase immigration in behalf of one or another interest group.

Immigration impinges on almost every area of government, both directly and because of its effect on U.S. population growth. Because of that demographic impact, every department of government is (or should be) interested in immigration policy. For some examples:

- The Department of Labor needs to bring in its perspective about the impacts on jobs and wages.
- The Department of Agriculture should be heard on the connections between U.S. population growth and our continued ability to export food over the coming decades, or even to supply the projected U.S. population.
- HUD should be asked how the additional population input, most of it at economic levels that will need subsidized housing, will affect current housing availability and future housing budgets.
- HEW could bring several interesting perspectives into the debate: tuberculosis and AIDS control; public health costs; welfare budgets; local, state and national expenditures to provide schooling.

There are antecedents for such a policy group. In the '80s, following the creation of the Domestic and Economic Policy Councils, inter-agency groups were created to address cross-cutting issues such as acid precipitation. In the Carter administration, there was an NSC-chartered Interagency Task Force on Population and a less formal Interagency Committee on International Environmental Affairs, both of them chaired by the Department of State and both (unfortunately) dealing only with international aspects of population and environmental policy.

The White House held ad hoc inter-agency consultations when making the decisions about policy toward the boat people. My proposal is that the machinery be made inclusive and permanent, that it be at a policy level, and that it be charged with addressing the long-term issues such as the connections between immigration, population growth and agriculture. Or wages. Or housing.

That shouldn't be too difficult. It would begin the process of seeing the implications when national decisions are being made.

The Critical Trends Assessment Act. One reason for singling the Vice President out for this perhaps unwanted attention is that he has addressed the population issue so

forthrightly in the past and he has described processes to bring it into governmental decision making. The immigration/population consultative machinery described above could be folded into this broader proposal if it ever got off the ground.

The Vice President during his time as congressman and senator repeatedly introduced a bill called the Critical Trends Assessment Act. The proposed Act was the best of several proposals to create "foresight" machinery in government to address cross-cutting issues such as population growth and its effects. He submitted the bill because the **Global 2000 Report to the President** in 1980 made it very clear that the nation lacks the capability to get out of its tunnel and see the side effects of what it is doing.

The heart of the proposal was to create a process in the White House to insure that new and unfolding national and international trends are identified and their policy implications assessed. It was not a perfect bill. For one thing, it did not contain a provision for the automatic scanning of proposals reaching the White House, to consider the side effects. Nevertheless, it was a good start.⁴

Sponsorship by the White House of a bill to create a broader and better thinking process might just catch the public eye. It would certainly fit in with the Vice President's recent work on "reinventing government." It might even be endorsed by the Republicans. Several years ago it was co-sponsored in the House by Newt Gingrich, of all people. This might be one of the few imaginable bills that could get top level bipartisan sponsorship in the present political stand-off in Washington.

To Be Optimistic...

Friends ask why I press for policies that seem so unachievable. Perhaps they are right. This article is fueled by hope more than by expectation.

Nevertheless, a break may be coming. The "foresight" concept is not just a personal brainstorm. The Vice President pushed for it for years until he became Vice President and was muzzled by discretion.

The proposal for a national foresight process is still the only specific policy proposal in which most of the environmental and population community is formally united.⁵

Immigration problems may begin to force the nation to look at the population issue, if governments can be brought to see the connection. In California, Florida, Texas, New York and Arizona, immigration has become a very serious political issue, and they are likely to keep it on the political stage.

The Clinton administration realized that it had to say "enough" when the Haitian and Cuban boatlift started.

Perhaps this and the Proposition 187 firestorm in California have sufficed to bring the real effects of immigration into the open and permit a national debate a step above the present level of shouting "racist" at those who would raise the issue.

It would be an act of statesmanship to create the machinery to make us hold that debate. It is, as I have said before⁶, a good job for the Vice President.

The Role of Advocacy

What, if anything, can be done by non-governmental advocacy groups to help move the population issue?

A Little Genteel Hardball. The circumstances argue for pragmatism. In the land of the possible, go for immigration control. The ground has shifted beneath us. Traditional allies are of little help. The environmental movement has feet of clay. Planned Parenthood is led by a militant feminist and has no position on population growth.

Population advocates should consider supporting those who would do something about immigration. I do not argue that we abandon environmentalism or vote automatically for anybody who would limit immigration. There is too much single-issue voting already. We should, however, praise any politician for a "good" position on immigration and warn the others that they may lose support if they are too wary or too timid to embrace the issue.

We are entitled to tell the family planners that they may narrow their support base by failing to make the social argument for their activity. By way of example, my local Rio Grande chapter of Planned Parenthood solicits contributions with an envelope bearing an ancient quote from Margaret Sanger asserting women's absolute right to control their own bodies and denying that government has any role. (That was when governments encouraged higher fertility.) The Planned Parenthood group should be reminded that their pledge envelope may turn off those supporters who believe that society has a stake in how many children women have.

We should perhaps be telling our environmentalist friends "whether or not you pay attention, population growth is a central issue in the deterioration of our country." The local Sierra Club chapter is ahead of the national organization on population. However, it supported Bill Richardson for Congress. Richardson gets high ratings from local environmental groups because his voting record on the usual environmental issues is pretty good. On population, however, he has regularly supported bills that would increase immigration. He even voted against a proposal to require the federal government to reimburse the states for the costs of illegal immigration. When I was asked by the Club to support Richardson, I asked whether they had included his population and immigration positions in their rating. They said no, but perhaps they should. We'll see.

Environmental groups, even if they avoid immigration and fertility as too "hot", should be willing to press for the creation of real foresight machinery in government. They are already on record as favoring the process. It might help to educate them in the importance of population as a national issue, as it educates the government. There is no harm in reminding them.

Reaching the Public. Active popular advocacy would be the most solid base for a national population policy. The problem is in getting there. One way perhaps would be to emulate the environmental movement, which has enlisted public idols such as movie stars in its cause. Promoting grass-roots advocacy is not my long suit. I can simply point to the lack of it.

Similarly, children get a great deal of environmental education in school nowadays, but population policy apparently is a topic too hot for inclusion. My grandchildren come home from school with all sorts of materials and ideas about the environment but none about population. Zero Population Growth and the National Audubon Society have developed teaching materials on population growth and its ramifications. It is a first step. The need is enormous.

The population movement tends to preach to the choir. We do not reach the poor and the uneducated who are, by and large, the ones having the babies. We should perhaps look at one intriguing idea from the third world. With the support of American groups such as Population Communication International, "soap operas" have been developed for TV audiences in several third world countries, and apparently they are effective in getting out the message about population (at least at the family level) and family planning. Are Americans too cynical? too hardened to respond to such messages? How would the messages be developed and aired? Is there any hope that public television, beleaguered as it is, could touch such programs? What other channels exist?

It would be much easier to move the politicians if they were being pushed.

Finding Allies. Above all, the population movement needs to find ways to reach other advocacy groups to persuade them that a population policy could help them in the pursuit of their goals.

How do we make contact?

At the risk of boring those readers who read for information and are not themselves involved in advocacy, let me try out an idea: There is by now a group of writers and advocates who share many of the same broad concerns about the impact of population growth. The most severe limiting factor in their effectiveness (other than their advanced average age) is probably the lack of an organizational base to promote the wider dissemination of their ideas.

There is need for an institution that identifies target audiences and undertakes to bring the existing literature to their attention. It would not itself publish or promote the publication of articles and books. However, such an organization would —

- maintain up-to-date target lists of opinion formers in different areas, such as minority organizations, labor unions, farmers' organizations, urban welfare advocates, national social policy groups, the League of Women Voters, and so on.

- make these lists available to organizations wishing to reach them with a specific publication, or perhaps even itself mail relevant publications to the leaders of such target groups.

- maintain a clipping service of individuals writing or speaking on radio or television about population issues, and encourage non-population advocacy groups to listen to them.

- place materials with libraries, or supply lists of major libraries to advocacy organizations for placement of appropriate materials.

- maintain a Congress watch, and alert advocacy groups to upcoming legislative proposals that relate to the groups' interests, identifying the specific individuals involved.

- establish and maintain contact with talk show hosts and programmers to remind them of the connections between demography and currently newsworthy issues and to suggest names of potential talk show participants.

On particular issues, there may be an opportunity for networking. For example: a coalition with labor groups on an impending immigration bill.

Some of this is being done, but sporadically and piecemeal. The effort is beyond the systematic reach of small organizations. Population advocacy needs something like the capability of the big political advocacy groups.

I submit the idea to any foundation executives who may be reading this paper and who are bold enough not to retreat before the dread word "advocacy."

*

In this fractioned society, one generation's literary allusion is Greek to another generation. Perhaps I should clarify the allusion in the title. There was a play in the 1930s by Clifford Odets named *Waiting for Lefty*, and another in the '50s by Samuel Beckett titled *Waiting for Godot*. Neither Lefty nor Godot ever showed up.

NOTES

1 *Overshoot. The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980.)

2 AP Washington 1-18-95.

3 The comparisons in this section are taken from the *U.S. Statistical Abstract, 1994*, Tables 920, 1366, 1370, 1393 and earlier issues. GNP is in constant dollars per capita, energy use per capita, and the comparison is adjusted (Table 1370) to reflect the somewhat lower real GNP per capita in Japan, in terms of purchasing power.

4 Lindsey Grant *Foresight and National Decisions. The Horseman and the Bureaucrat* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988.)

5 In December 1981, the Global Tomorrow Coalition, a broad coalition of most major U.S. environmental and population organizations and many futures study groups and interested individuals, unanimously adopted at its first annual meeting a position statement entitled *The Need to Improve National Foresight*. It called for the government to "establish in the Executive Office of the President an improved capacity to coordinate and analyze data... on the long-term interactions of trends in population, resources, and environment — and their relationship to social and economic development — and to provide information relevant to current policy decisions..."

6 *A Congenial Job for the Vice President*, NPG FOOTNOTE 1993.



NEGATIVE POPULATION GROWTH, INC.

210 The Plaza, P.O. Box 1206, Teaneck, N.J. 07666-1206. Telephone: (201) 837-3555

NPG, Inc., is a nonprofit organization founded in 1972. Annual dues are \$30, and are tax deductible to the extent the law allows. It publishes from time to time in the *NPG FORUM* articles of particular interest on population, immigration, resources and the environment. The views expressed by the authors do not necessarily represent those of **NPG**.

The papers are priced at \$1.00 each, including postage and handling. Copies of each paper are sent to members and are free to the media. For orders totalling ten or more, the price is \$.25 each. Papers are free to libraries, if orders are accompanied by one self-addressed stamped envelope for each paper ordered. Papers longer than 4 pages require a 9" x 12" envelope with a 55¢ stamp.

