

NPG Forum

A “U.S. Population Policy” – *Let’s Talk*

by John R. Bermingham

Proposals relating to a “U.S. population policy” are circulated from time to time and several have been circulated in 1997. All seem to have been prepared by persons who – like myself – wish the U.S. population were smaller than it now is and who would very much like to see our growth slowed, stopped, and then reversed.

None of the proposals contain specifics on how a national population policy might achieve such a goal, and this vagueness is bothersome even though I am sympathetic to the goal. The time has come to ask questions.

I am prompted to take this approach by a recent newspaper column praising Fred Friendly’s instruction to participants in his PBS discussion series – a series that brought together Supreme Court Justices, Senators, Columnists, nationally known law enforcement officials, and other prominent Americans. His instruction was this: “Our job is not to make up anyone’s mind, but to open minds – to make the agony of decision making so intense that you can only escape by thinking.”

So, what follows is a collection of questions and for many of them – probably most – I do not claim to have answers. Instead, this is a plea for help with my own agonizing.

A Population Policy Must Contain Both an Immigration Policy and a Fertility Policy

I am sure that all will agree with this basic equation:

GROWTH equals
BIRTHS plus **IMMIGRATION** minus
DEATHS and **EMIGRATION**

Since I am also sure that increases in deaths and emigration must be ruled out as elements of a politically acceptable population policy (other than deportation of illegal immigrants), the only means to slow, stop, or reverse U.S. population growth are through reductions in immigration and fertility. Is there any escape from the basic equation? In other words, whenever we open a discussion of a policy to slow,

or reverse population growth doesn’t the reality of the equation immediately force us into discussions of immigration policies and fertility policies? (I would include tax incentives as a portion of a fertility policy).

Any Worthwhile Policy Requires Mechanisms for Implementation

Implementation of any policy is necessary or the policy is a nullity. I am reminded that prior to Fidel Castro, the Batista government decreed that all Cubans had a right to two weeks vacation with pay. The hitch was this – there was no policy or procedure to implement this right. At the other extreme, our Fifth Amendment right that no person shall be deprived of liberty “without due process of law” only has meaning thanks to the Constitution’s guarantee of the Writ of Habeas Corpus.

So, to declare a U.S. population policy that growth should be slowed, stopped, or reversed without simultaneously getting bloodied in debates over some very specific immigration and fertility reduction recommendations seems totally unrealistic.

In short, can any population policy proposal have any practical value unless it (1) makes explicit policy proposals for reductions in fertility, and (2) also states explicitly the means and mechanisms by which immigration and fertility reduction policies are to be implemented?

Should Efforts to Reduce Immigration and Fertility Be Kept Separate?

If it is true that a population policy must consist of an immigration policy and a fertility reduction policy, then – rather than first making an effort to persuade America that there are “too many people” – would not the desired policy result be achieved most expeditiously and efficiently by working directly and immediately, but separately, on fertility and immigration?

Congress is the ultimate arbiter of U.S. policy – certainly for immigration and probably for fertility. How does one get a majority in Congress? Is it better to put

all eggs in one basket or work separately on the different parts? Consider the experience of the splitting of last year's immigration bill.

How Should Efforts Be Allocated Between Immigration and Fertility?

If the goal is slowing, stopping or reversing growth, then how should our limited resources be focused? Can agreement be reached on the focus of efforts without agreement first being reached on the contribution of immigration as a share of total U.S. population growth? For the year 1994 the three recognized calculation methods have produced answers of 23.2%, 45.1% and 60.1%.¹

If immigration produces less than one-fourth of our growth then shouldn't most efforts be focused on the fertility component, but if immigration produces 60% of our growth then shouldn't that component receive the most attention?

Perhaps the calculation issue will never be resolved – what then? Doesn't this possibility suggest that our best bet is to encourage friends and allies to work on whatever interests them the most – some giving help to those who already are focused on the immigration issue and others helping those who are already focused on the fertility issue?

Immigration Issues

To implement a population policy is there any escape from the necessity to become involved in Congressional debates over both legal and illegal immigration? How can the immigration issues be resolved other than in Congress?

If immigration issues must be resolved by Congress, then population policy advocates need to put themselves in the shoes of members of Congress. To what extent should legal immigration levels be changed and in what manner? Should more emphasis be placed on education levels or relatives, etc.?

Similarly with respect to illegal immigration. This is not the time or place for a laundry list of the issues – it is sufficient to note that the array of issues that advocates of a population policy must sooner or later take positions on is very broad: Border enforcement issues; Budget for INS; Workplace enforcement and employer sanctions; Expulsion of illegals; Minimum wages for farm workers; NAFTA; Financial assistance to Mexico; etc.

How can any collection of population activists be held in the same harness on these many issues? Isn't it best to separate them now?

Fertility Issues

The problems relating to fertility issues are also many in number and very divisive. Should a fertility reduction policy address only "unwanted pregnancies" or should it target Mexicans, Indians and other specific high fertility groups? If policy is to focus on unwanted pregnancies only, should policy proposals produce alternatives or supplements to improve upon what Planned Parenthood is doing already? How can these issues be avoided?

Everything is hitched to everything else. Should a fertility reduction policy get into: Sex education in schools; Dollars appropriated by Congress for abstinence programs; Sex ratings for TV shows; Abortion; etc.? What about the proposed Constitutional Amendment that would bar citizenship to children of illegal aliens?

Can the "Cultural Issue" Be Excluded from Discussion?

The extremely provocative "cultural issue" is like a cancer creeping into both the immigration and fertility domains. Is cultural concern the same as racism? Of course not, but all too often that is exactly what it is called. Doesn't the cultural issue exist whether we like it or not? Can we arbitrarily rule it out of order in all discussions?

Is every minority group to be locked into its present proportion of the total? Can or should any effort be made to affect the now projected changes in the ethnic and racial mix of America fifty years from now? What will a Population Policy do about American Indians who want their populations to increase? Should they be exempted from any reduction policy?

If 60% of growth is due to immigration, won't lowering the fertility of white America bring on an "Alien Nation" reaction with a vengeance? How will this be handled? Teaching two languages in schools rather than just English means teaching less of something else. While this may be acceptable for a small proportion of students, doesn't society have a problem if a large number of students require courses in two languages and have only reduced time for science, the arts, history, etc.? Can this debate be ignored?

Overconsumption

People recognize that land use and congestion problems are exacerbated by population growth, but will any significant number respond to overconsumption as a trigger for action on population? I doubt it. Consumption is responsive to economic forces and environmental pressures on manufacturers, etc., but how much have consumption patterns actually changed due to talk about overconsumption during the past few years? Very little, I suspect.

Nevertheless, one overconsumption argument is sure to arise: A farm worker in Mexico adds little or nothing to the CO₂ buildup, but upon becoming an American he will sooner or later have an automobile. Isn't this another argument that will be given the "racism" tag? How will this be handled?

Carrying Capacity

The overconsumption arguments are often bolstered by studies that show that the United States is already living beyond its carrying capacity, that we are already in an overshoot mode, and that our much touted American lifestyle cannot be sustained. They make their arguments with great persuasion and they cite the $I = P \times A \times T$ equation to show that to bring Impacts down to a reasonable level not only must our Population be reduced but we must also reduce our Affluence (i.e., consumption patterns) and Technological harms.

It is at this point that an extremely sensitive issue arises. Is there anyone in the "we must lower consumption" school who does not believe that to achieve this goal some major shifts must be made in our economic system? Realistically, how many in the "we must lower consumption" school will argue that our economic system need not be changed? And, if the "we must lower our population" advocates go to the public arm in arm with the "we must lower our consumption" advocates, who cannot hear Rush Limbaugh and his talk-show buddies pounding the airwaves with, "Don't you realize these anti-population people are trying to tear down our cherished free enterprise system?"

Just as "free choice" became baggage for the population movement following *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, will not joining force with advocates for lower consumption only make work on immigration and fertility more difficult?

Getting People to Talk

Immigration, unplanned pregnancies, teen pregnancies, welfare pregnancies – these are hot topics today

and efforts to work on them will resonate with broad sections of the American public. People will come to meetings and give of their time to discuss these topics. However, will individuals interested in immigration be willing to invest their time sitting through discussions on how to reduce fertility and vice versa?

Let's face it – population is not a "hot" topic and overconsumption even less so. Broad swaths of the public will not come to meetings or give of their time to work on this topic. Is there any need to bring together focus groups to tell us this fact? Is it not best that we recognize at the outset that the environment and carrying capacity issues will not energize any significant number of Americans on the population issue?

There are certain to be opponents to proposals to reduce population. Some will refuse to listen or engage in any discourse of any sort, some will listen politely but refuse to engage in true discourse, and some (probably a very small percentage) will actually exchange ideas. So, discourse with population policy opponents, such as Wattenberg, Simon, and their followers cannot be expected. Instead, will they not simply counter attack? What organized steps should be taken now to develop the most compelling rebuttals to their arguments?

Use of Words Such as "Fair", Optimum, Maximum, Etc.

It is always good public relations to finish one's own proposal by wrapping it with words such as: "fair" – "equitable" – "comprehensive" – "ethical" – "coherent" etc. However, whether these words accurately apply to the substance of what is proposed depends upon the eye of beholder. There will always be those on the fringes who disagree with the majority's idea of what is fair and equitable, etc. Optimum population, maximum population, and carrying capacity are concepts that cannot be quantified without value assumptions with respect to quality. How can these words be used or quantified without generating charges of elitism or being narrow-minded? How fruitful will it be to spend time and energy attempting to obtain broad public agreement on these concepts?

Other Questions Needing Answers Before Proceeding

Business and labor and their lobbyists as well as countless economists in academia have been debating the pros and cons of population growth for generations. The Cato Institute advocates an increase in legal immigration. Is it the purpose of those pushing in favor of a U.S. Population Policy to persuade all those

with existing positions to join together in a consensus or is it to create a pressure group strong enough to vanquish the opposition? Which is the better strategy for success to carefully focus on getting majority votes in Congress on specific issues or to make an attempt at persuading the whole world?

Is there any escape from the conclusion that those who push for a U.S. population policy have an underlying agenda of wanting fewer people? Can this perception be avoided? Will anyone who promotes the idea of a U.S. Population Policy be satisfied by any policy statement that calls for anything other than a slowing, stopping or reversing of population growth? Who will be surprised if those who want a population policy reject any other outcome?

Are the population policy pushers at a point at which they should obtain a number of "devil's advocate" reactions to their proposals before trying to obtain foundation funding for their projects?

Before making an effort to produce consensus, shouldn't advocates of a national population policy have in hand a sampling of population policies of other countries? How can they be obtained? What can Americans learn from England, France, Germany and other European nations that are struggling with immigration issues?

How have successful "movements" of *any* kind been organized in the past? Should not an answer to this question be obtained before moving further towards

adoption of a process or procedure for developing or changing America's positions on population, immigration and fertility?

Conclusion

Do population policy pushers want a free "trust me" blank check in answering these many and varied questions? If the more important of these questions are not answered in advance, isn't it likely that a number of groups that have unthinkingly signed on will then fall away once the discussions start? Is it not best to address the issues early on?

If not now, when? Questions such as these are certain to be raised almost immediately once population policy discussion groups are assembled. Is it not best for those pushing for a national population policy be in agreement on how these questions are to be handled before precipitating discussions with the public at large?

Notes

1. See *Immigration's Share of U.S. Population Growth, Focus*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 68-72.



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