he “fertility crisis” has been the subject of active debate in the last year or so. We have been subjected to newspaper headlines such as: “Populate or stagnate”, “Procreate or perish”, “Marry and multiply”, “Adapt or depopulate”. It has certainly been a fertile area of endeavour for sub-editors!

The debate has ranged far and wide, and has included issues to do with work and family, women's participation in the paid workforce, the ageing of the population, paid maternity leave, child care, the structure of family payments, the environment, the future of immigration, to name a few.

But some contributors, such as Malcolm Turnbull, have emphasised that for governments to address low fertility raises difficult issues. In an article in The Age (16/7/02) entitled “The crisis is fertility, not ageing”, Turnbull notes that: “The task of policy formulation is extremely challenging and complex. The answers are far from self evident . . . but we should be identifying policies that actively promote ‘united caring families’ and the social values they represent.”

Some have suggested the need for a “population policy” for Australia. According to Paul Kelly of The Australian (“It’s breeding obvious”, 4/9/02): “The core aims of such a policy should be to reverse the fertility decline, to devise a strategy of long-term population growth, and to support women in integrating family and job.”

The Hon. Kevin Andrews MP, the Minister for Ageing, has emphasised that Australia’s low fertility rate is one of the main causes of our rapidly ageing population, and has called for national discussion on the issue. In The Age (21/8/02, “The challenge: procreate or perish”), he noted that: “There are limitations to what governments can do about boosting fertility rates, but it is important we do something. We have an obligation to future generations and we ignore the falling fertility rate at our peril. Every year we fail to tackle the declining fertility rate is a precious year wasted so far as future generations and the economic welfare of the country is concerned.”

The Treasurer, The Hon. Peter Costello MP, circulated an “Intergenerational Report” at the time of the 2002–2003 Budget (14 May 2002), to assist in considering the Commonwealth’s fiscal outlook over the long term, and to identify emerging issues associated with an ageing population. While Australia is considered to be well placed to meet the challenges of an ageing population, it is noted that “the current generation of taxpayers is likely to impose a higher tax burden on the next generation”. The report observes that “the trend towards having fewer children, later in life, is a key influence on Australia’s changing population structure”. The Treasurer has also emphasised that: “fertility rates can be moved to some degree by financial incentives, but the movements are small and the incentives need to be very large” (Herald Sun 9/8/02, “Paying for babies”).

Professor Peter Saunders of the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales has noted that “the research suggests that while pro-natalist politics can have an impact, they are unlikely to bring about major changes over the short term, particularly where the (financial) magnitudes involved are small” (SPRC Newsletter, no. 82, November 2002).

In a speech to the Sydney Institute on 2 July 2002 (“Is the Australian family an endangered species?”), the Shadow Minister for Family and Community Services, The Hon. Wayne Swan MP, emphasised that: “In the long term, Australia must dramatically rethink its approach to supporting families . . . If families are forced to choose between either work or family, our birth-rate will continue to decline to a point where our future economic capacity as a nation will be put at risk.” And he has argued that “we need comprehensive policies that allow families to combine work and child-rearing” (Sydney Morning Herald 23/7/02, “$10 a week won’t fix mothers’ problems”).

We need to keep in mind that there has been a long history of debate on this issue in Australia. Indeed, way back in 1904 a New South Wales Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth Rate defined the then fertility
decline as a grave problem attributable to the deliberate control of reproduction by women who were “led astray by false and pernicious doctrine into the belief that personal interest and ambitions, a high standard of ease, comfort and luxury are the essential aims of life”.

In 1942 an official inquiry was established by the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia to investigate the causes of the decline in the birth rate, a problem “such as to cause, even now, the gravest anxiety about the future of the Australian people”.

These debates formed an interesting backdrop to the introduction (with bipartisan support) of universal child endowment to support all mothers with children. A package of economic, social welfare and medical services to families were seen as necessary to provide an incentive to child-bearing and child-rearing. (See Bettina Cass, “Population policies and family policies: State construction of domestic life”, in C. Baldock and B. Cass, Women, Social Welfare and the State in Australia, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1983.)

As an aside, it is interesting that the “father” of the post World War II Welfare State in the UK, Sir William Beveridge, was also a strong advocate of tax-financed universal children’s allowances. Such a scheme was introduced in the UK in 1945. In part, Beveridge thought such provisions would help to assist the decline in the birth rate. In his famous 1942 Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services, he observed that: “A means of reversing the recent course of the birth rate must be found. It is not likely that allowances for children or any other economic incentives will, by themselves, provide that means and lead parents who do not desire children to rear children for gain. But children’s allowances can help to restore the birth rate, both by making it possible for parents who desire more children to bring them into the world without damaging the chances of those already born, and as a signal of the national interest in children, setting the tone of public opinion.” (p. 154)

Beveridge formed these views in the 1930s after he had called for more research in the area. His biographer records how in 1931/32 Beveridge took part in a series of BBC programs on “Changes in family life”, involving the circulation of a questionnaire to radio listeners on such topics as family size and structure, choice of marriage partners, sharing of housework, use of leisure, and pooling of family income. This apparently provoked much discussion at the time on family and population questions in the national press! (José Harris, William Beveridge. A Biography, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977).

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