

The Most Important Decision-Making Process

DANIEL PATRICK MOYNIHAN

I call your attention to a subject with which public policy has almost nothing to do, but which has almost everything to do with public policy. I refer to the subject of demography.

The word “demography” is a made up Greek word. It first appears, in French, in 1878, and in English in 1880 and it means the study of births and deaths, the incidence of diseases in populations and that sort of thing.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to say this — I’m not sure — but there is simply nothing so important to a people and its government as how many of them there are, whether their number is growing or declining, how they are distributed as between different ages, sexes (different groups are different in this regard) and different social classes and racial and ethnic groups, and, again, which way these numbers are moving. Moreover — as best I can tell — while these dynamics have a profound influence on government, government has almost no influence on them.

I have often wondered whether Government pays so little seeming attention to these issues for the simple reason that when it does so Behemoth must confront the fact that the great decisions of the world are made by solitary couples — male and female — and are made in bed to boot.

Let me hasten to say, however, that demography is a little like the weather. It is all very well to observe that everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it. Even so, we spend a lot of effort forecasting it, and with good reason. The same is true of demography, and true in rather the same way. Long run forecasts aren’t much good. But the near term is quite predictable, and rewards those who predict it.

The Importance of the Birth Rate

I will go further. If I were to be asked what are the most important qualities a young man or woman can bring to public life and the participation in public affairs, I would say first, a sound knowledge of English composition; second, a modestly

exact acquaintance with the birth rate.

There is a saying among demographers that society is regularly invaded by barbarians. This is true of any society, including, I suppose barbarian societies as well. Now who are the barbarians? They are young males and females — mostly, I fear, males — in that turbulent time which we arbitrarily define as the years sixteen to twenty-four, the period between being a child and being an adult. This is when people settle into their lives, and do or do not settle in about on the lines of those who preceded them. The question of how much change they make (which some would describe as how much trouble they make) very much depends on the ratio of their numbers to the adults who preceded them. Demographers refer to the latter group as the defenders, facing the former group, the invaders.

I should perhaps at this point note that there is much to be said for barbarians. These are the years when people do wonderful things: run the fastest, dance the longest — dance the best. In the very highest of arts — music and mathematics for example — this is when the most creative work is done, at least most often done. But, as I say, much turbulence accompanies this.

Now the 1960s was a period when the invaders almost overwhelmed the defenders — by sheer numbers. Not since Genghis Khan and his hordes came roaring out of the steppes have we seen anything quite like it.

If you go from 1890 to 1960, you find the size of this subgroup, fourteen to twenty-four, growing a little bit each succeeding decade: 10 percent, 8 percent, sometimes not at all, but usually growing a little bit. In the whole of that seventy years, 1890 to 1960, the total increase in the population of that age group, the total increase of the “cohort,” as we say, was 12.5 million persons. Then, in the 1960s, it grew by 13.8 million persons, an increase of 52 percent in one decade, five times the average rate of the preceding seventy years.

Nobody was prepared for this, and many of our institutions were almost overwhelmed — or were overwhelmed. And this is the interesting point. Because it had happened *years* before the effects were felt. And hence it would have been an easy enough matter to see it coming. But we didn't. I was a member of the President's Science Advisory Committee during 1971 and 1972 and it was only there — after the decade of the 1960s

was over — that we began to see the demographic basis of so many of its so remarkable features.

The End of the Youth Explosion

But it did come to an end. What is more, during the 1970s this cohort will grow only by 600,000 persons — remember it grew by 13.8 million in the previous decade — and *next* decade it will *decline*.

At the beginning of 1973 I gave a lecture in Massachusetts entitled “Peace.” I said that if demography is any guide to the future, all that teenage turbulence, especially on the campuses, was behind us. And indeed it was.

But unemployment was ahead of us. In May for example, teenagers made up 24.5 percent of all the unemployed. This is in part because from 1970 to 1975 the size of the teenage group increased by 4.4 million — that same cohort rolling into the work force. But in this half of the decade, the size increases only two million. Then a long decline commences. Take college age youth, age 18 to 21: there will be 2.5 million fewer such persons in 1990 than in 1980.

Now what does that mean? Well for one thing it means youth unemployment will be much less a problem thirteen years from now than it is today.

The Future of Social Security

But there is a less than cheerful side to this. I hate to think what taxes our young people will be paying thirty or forty years from now to support the vastly enlarged number of old people we will have once those kids of the 1960s turn 65.* The point I wish to make, however, is that keeping these numbers in mind is one of the very best ways of knowing

* *Editor's Note:* Robert Schuettinger in *Saving Social Security* (Council on American Affairs, Washington, D.C., 1977) notes on page 11 that “Early in the next century an important demographic change will become painfully apparent to the Social Security Administration. At that time the babies born in the boom years of the late 1940’s and 1950’s will reach retirement age. Then it is expected that there will be only two workers paying taxes to support one recipient. That is, there will be a one-third reduction in the number of workers per beneficiary.”

In an editorial on March 3, 1976, *The New York Times* warned “If nothing were done to change the existing pattern of benefits or revenues, [social security] tax rates would have to be more than doubled by 2050. This would increase payroll taxes alone to an estimated 22 to 24 percent of income (divided equally between employer and employee).”

anything about the future, and I sometimes think the only way.

There is more good news and bad news, if you will. The good news is that the world population explosion seems to be coming to an end.

In the period 1970-1975, the world population growth rate per annum was about 1.7 percent. This is a significant reduction from 1.9 or 2.0 percent recorded in 1965-1970.

A large part of this drop was in Asia. From 1965 to 1975, its rate slowed from 2.6 percent to 2 percent. China's rate is now thought to be down to 1.4 percent, from 2 percent in the 1950s. In Latin America, fertility has dropped 15-20 percent in the last decade. Population is accelerating in Africa, but this is due to increased life expectancy rather than to a higher birth rate, and is in any event much more than outweighed by the reductions in Asia and Latin America.

As a result, population projections are greatly reduced. The projection for 2000 used to be 6.5 to 7 billion, but is now more likely to be 5.5 billion — a full billion less. Stability in world population was thought likely to be achieved in about 2030, at a population level of 10-13 billion. Now, stability may be achieved in 2010 or 2015, at only 8 billion or so, and perhaps at a figure as low as 7 billion.

These are the estimates of my friend, and sometime Harvard colleague, the brilliant young demographer Nick Eberstadt.

No one knows just why it happened, although it's not government that did it, and yet it seems to be happening everywhere. Mr. Eberstadt, for example, notes that population movements in China and Europe were remarkably synchronized during periods when the civilizations had virtually no contact with one another.

Our Declining Population

What this comes to is that the population growth of the United States is slowing down rapidly. For those of us who have not altogether despaired of the wisdom of government let me add this perhaps final blow. Back in 1969 the President of the United States sent to the Congress the first message ever on the subject of population. I know because I wrote it. And it was a fearsome message. The world was drowning in people. America was drowning in Americans.

By some unwritten rule, almost at that very moment, the fertility rate for American females dropped below the reproduction rate.

In order for a population to reproduce itself, each female must have 2.1 children. The average, that is. In 1972 the rate for American females fell below this to 2.02 percent. The estimate for 1976 is 1.76 and it may be even lower.

In the whole of this decade, as a consequence, one quarter of the population increase in the United States will come from immigration.

This does not mean that our population will actually decline in the years immediately ahead (thanks in part to immigration), but it will decline eventually, and not that far off (again depending on our immigration statistics).

And what does that mean? I will offer you one guess. We will get glum. A people who don't reproduce themselves are saying something. I don't want to get into a lot of trouble by saying what I think they are saying. I'll warrant it's not anything cheerful. The distinguished Johns Hopkins professor Margaret Bright had remarked, for example, that in the 1930s much of the gloom of the democratic nations, and much of the fury of the totalitarian nations, was a response to the thought that they were dying out.

Do not take this to be a personal plea to do anything about it. As I said, exhortation from governments, or legislatures, seems to have precious little influence on such matters. And a good thing, too. But they are fascinating matters, and I hope in the years ahead all of us will give them occasional thought.

(Continued from page 6)

HAROLD M. HOCHMAN is Professor of Economics and Public Administration in The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He is a frequent consultant to government agencies and contributor to scholarly journals. He is also director of the International Center for Economic Policy Studies.

ALLAN H. MELTZER is Maurice Falk Professor of Economics and Social Science in Carnegie-Mellon University Graduate School of Industrial Administration.

ROBERT MOSS is the author of several books, including *The Collapse of Democracy*, and is Director of the National Association for Freedom. He is currently completing a book on the "secret" war in Angola which was serialized in *The Sunday Telegraph*.

ROGER PEARSON is President of the Council on American Affairs and General Editor of its *Journal of Social and Political Studies*. He is also Editor of *The Journal of International Relations*. A former Academic Dean, he has taught anthropology at several universities and received his PhD at the University of London. He is the author of several books on anthropology and world affairs.

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER, JR. is a professional staff member of the U.S. Congress and a Research Fellow of the Hudson Institute. A member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, he is the co-editor of the newly published *Arms, Men and Military Budgets*, and the co-author of five other books.

GORDON TULLOCK is University Professor of Economics and Public Choice in Virginia Polytechnic Institute and editorial director of the Center for Public Choice.

ERNEST VAN DEN HAAG is Adjunct Professor of Social Philosophy at New York University and a prolific writer. Besides contributing to *Ethics*, *Encounter*, *The American Scholar*, *Commentary* etc., he is the author of *Political Violence and Civil Disobedience*, *Passion and Social Constraint* and other books.

The New Foreign Policy Network

ROBERT L. SCHUETTINGER

Foreign policy-making in most nations has always been in the hands of an elite, and the Carter Administration, with all its talk of "populism" and a "new spirit" has done little to change this. Despite Hamilton Jordan's pre-election promise to quit if men "like Vance and Brzezinski" were put in charge of foreign policy¹ a small group remains in charge.

As *New Republic* editor Roger Morris noted in *The Washington Monthly* (September, 1976):

Of the 23 names on the Carter foreign and defense policy task force, all but a token few belong to the same tiny, incestuous world—Brookings, the magazines *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy*, the foundations, the investment and law firms—it is a seamless web in which perhaps a hundred people circulate, talking to each other, reading each other's articles (as much, one suspects, to keep track of rivals as to learn), promoting each other, and of course positioning themselves for calls from the Jimmy Carters.

There has been considerable public discussion of the comings and goings of the senior appointees in the State Department, the National Security Council and related posts in other agencies. Much has been written of the affiliations of Cyrus Vance, Warren Christopher, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Walter Mondale, Michael Blumenthal, Harold Brown (and Jimmy Carter) with the Trilateral Commission. Most of the top office holders are also members of the Council on Foreign Relations (and have attended Bilderberg or Bohemian Grove conferences at one time or another or have lectured at Foreign Policy Association or United Nations Association or League of Women Voters seminars).

There is a much lesser known network² (as it has been called by

1. As this article went to press, he hasn't quit. Perhaps he knows something most of us don't?

2. Evans and Novak in their *Washington Post* column (January 31, 1977) referred to the "left-of-center foreign policy network" which had managed to pull off what one source described as a "coup d'etat" to give themselves effective control of the State Department. Lest anyone misunderstand, there is no question of a conspiracy to seize power. There is little doubt, however, as will be demonstrated, that such an informal network does exist. Its composition and how it works make for a fascinating study of American bureaucratic power in 1977.