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Stationary population as theoretical concept and as policy vision for Canada

Introduction

Stationary population as a desirable demographic configuration, or as an inevitability in due course, has lost much of the appeal it enjoyed among earlier generations of economists, from John Stuart Mill to more recent proponents of Zero Population Growth and Limits to Growth, passing through the much debated doctrine of the economic maturity or stagnation of the inter-war years. The 1970s and 1980s saw a flurry of model building, showing combinations of demographic variables and time paths to achieve a stationary population, but they were primarily heuristic in scope rather than policy advocacy. The latest heuristic kind for Canada is that by M.V. George, at the PAA Meeting in 2003. Yet, it seems to this writer that demographic, social and technological developments in recent decades world-wide, and more so in the economically advanced countries, are of a nature that warrant a fresh look at the concept of stationary population.

In this brief outline, I shall first remind the reader of Mill's stationary state, then identify the rationales of its desirability, and finally raise the question of its feasibility in Canada and, by implication, in other countries having reached demographic maturity.

Mill's stationary state

Any discussion of stationary population would have to start with John Stuart Mill (1848). He was the first who spoke of the inevitability and desirability of a stationary state, and articulated it as a goal towards which humanity should strive. "It must always have been seen, more or less distinctly, by political economists, that the increase of wealth is not boundless: that at the end of what they term the progressive state lies the stationary state..." (1965: 746). He thinks that for "civilised" societies the stationary state is already in sight. Mill did not speak of the stationary population per se, in isolation, but rather as an integral part of a broader societal picture with both capital and population moving in unison towards the stationary state. His approach to population is basically Malthusian, he stresses the importance of public foresight and individual prudential attitudes towards procreation, to prevent the increase of numbers from outstripping the increase of capital. The slowdown in capital will automatically entail a slowdown in reproduction. "If it were evident that a new hand could not obtain employment but by displacing, or succeeding to, one already employed, the combined influences of prudence and public opinion might in some measure be relied on for restricting the coming generation within the numbers necessary for replacing the present" (748). The stationary state does not mean the arrest of progress in knowledge and arts; but he believed that the fruits of progress could be channelled toward the improvement of humankind's condition, health, education, more leisure and the just distribution of wealth.

What makes Mill's concept of the stationary state unique, and appealing to me personally, is its humanism, unlike the materialism that prevails in economic thinking. He writes, ".I cannot regard the stationary state of capital and wealth with the unaffected aversion so generally manifested towards it by political economists of the old school. I am inclined to believe that it would be, on the whole, a very considerable improvement on our present condition". And he continues, "I confess, I am not charmed with the ideal of life held out by those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other's heels, which form the existing type of social life, are the most desirable lot of human kind, or anything but the disagreeable symptoms of one of the phases of industrial progress. It may be a necessary stage in the progress of civilisation" (748). This posturing may sound far too idealistic. Yet, Mill's humanistic vision of the stationary state may be a worthy antidote to a world moved by a self-perpetuating ever-expanding consumption, where "wants are increasingly created by the process by which they are satisfied" to quote Galbraith (1958: 128), and in which profit and growth are so paramount.

Rationales for a fresh look at stationary population as a vision of the future and policy option

The concept of stationary population stands to fascinate inquiring minds concerned with the mankind's future. Its virtue is that it avoids, on the one hand, the prospect, however remote, of demographic saturation in finite space, in which the increase of wealth is not 'boundless'; and, on the other, the prospect of extinction of the human species with continuous demographic implosion. But beyond these somewhat ontological arguments, there are more immediate demographic realities in economically advanced countries that invite us to take renewed interest in the concept of stationarity.

What are these realities and rationales for revisiting the concept? Let me identify some of them.

(1) *On the demographic front.* The situation in recent decades has turned upside down: concern with *ever growing* population has given way to concern with *ever diminishing* population. The sub-replacement fertility regime has become a permanent fixture of demographic reality in developed countries; in many western countries the fertility rate is closer to one- than to two-births per woman. If left to its own device, the sub-replacement fertility regime seems to be irreversible.

Some bank on immigration to make up for the birth deficit. They feel that a generous immigration policy is preferable to pro-natalist policy on economic and humanitarian grounds (Heer, 1972). Furthermore it is in keeping with the professed goal of establishing a transnational state, as articulated by the proponents of critical theory and post-modernism (Habermas, Derrida,).

(2) *Reassessment of immigration.* But a policy relying heavily on immigration to make up for birth deficit is not without problems. It is clear that a continuous, large scale

immigration to a country whose native population no longer reproduces itself, is bound to radically change its cultural and ethnic make-up with potential consequences for its national identity and social cohesion. Such an outcome is being taken increasingly seriously: the tightening immigration control in many western countries, reducing the influx of immigrants or making it more selective. Much of the justification for immigration is economic. But this too is being questioned. Beaujot and Kerr quote the Economic Council of Canada that "higher levels of immigration have consequences for the total size of the population and thus for the economy, but the per capita effects are negligible, though slightly positive" (p. 115). Coleman and Rowthorn go further. In a recent study of immigration to the United Kingdom (2004) they conclude "that the economic consequences of large-scale immigration are mostly trivial, negative, or transient" (p. 579). The economic benefit, if any, may be outweighed by social and ecological costs. The migration is a problem for itself. It is no longer just an orderly movement of people across national borders it used to be. Human traffic on large scale is a well recognised problem.

(3) *Know-how versus body displacement.* In the era of great technological advances in communication much of the skill and knowledge that once could only be achieved by the displacement of actual bodies can now be achieved by means of wireless low-cost transfers (Sowell, 1996). There are many striking examples of movement of capital without the movement of people. Cases in point are today's economic giants in the Asian Far East which have benefited from their abundant domestic cheap labour force and initial investment, primarily from the USA. While we greet many Korean and Japanese tourists in North America and Western Europe, we hardly see any job seekers among them. A more recent form of job displacement without body displacement is the transfer of jobs from highly economically developed countries to cheap labour countries. 'Job outsourcing' has become a hugely controversial issue in the USA (see the reporting of CNN's Lou Dobbs).

(4) *Elderly: an untapped human resource.* There is lot of talk nowadays about population ageing. We are aware of the problem and underlying arguments, mostly loaded with apprehension. But not all is negative, quite to the contrary, as Susan McDaniel has argued well in *Canada's Ageing Population* (1986). It is to the credit of our civilisation that most of us can survive to quite an advanced age and remain healthy. For economically advanced societies, the growing segment of healthy, well-educated elderly is an asset rather than a liability. It is a matter institutional adaptation to realise this untapped source of human resource and turn it into an effective, productive force, in paid or unpaid benevolent services.

(5) *Labour-saving automation.* Spectacular technological developments in labour-saving automation reduces the need for manpower while increasing productivity.

(6) *Ecological considerations.* We do not need to espouse the apocalyptic visions of the Roma Club and Medow and his associates from MIT about the collapse of the eco-system unless population growth and over exploitation of non-renewable resources are curbed. But the concerns for ecological health of the planet, the deleterious side-effects of

technology and overexploitation of natural riches, pollution, global warming etc, are legitimate concerns. A stationary population, and in certain cases a reduced population, could alleviate some of the threats, real or potential, to our planet.

(7) *The fallacy of an empty country.* Some people both inside and outside see Canada as an empty land that should be open to more settlement. "...people from heavily populated countries can come to resent Canada's vast land and resources..." (p. 128), write Beaujot and Kerr. Well that may be so. Yet for all its vastness, Canada's settlements have developed in the narrow stretch along the US borders. Those uninhabited landmasses, covered by snow for the better part of the year, with their huge forests, myriad of lakes, water reserves, and even that long lasting snow, are not wastelands. They are important natural assets not just for Canada but also for the Eco-system of the world at large. These riches ought to be preserved for the future, wisely managed and not dissipated. Nor should the aboriginal peoples' interest, their land rights and their way of life, be ignored.

(8) *International relations.* The interest in stationary population has also an international dimension. To reduce international problems to population would be outright an exaggeration. But it should not be downplayed either. Population has been and will remain, directly or indirectly, a factor in international relations, as long as demographic and economic disparities across the world persist. The military conquest of territories may be thing of the past (for the time being). But various forms of peaceful, if one may say so, conquests may be in the offing, some spontaneous, some deliberate. Internal, interethnic conflicts too may be softened in the absence of population pressure.

All these combinations of demographic configuration and technological innovation open prospects for making the stationary population a reasonable vision of the future and possibly a policy option. Its virtue is that it places a lesser demand on childbearing performance of our modern consumer-driven societies, on the one hand, and lessens the need for a sustained large scale migration (certainly much smaller than under conditions of one percent target increase). Such a vision, if attainable, would alleviate concerns for the national identity while allowing for a better integration of a smaller and more selective immigration.

Is stationary population achievable?

The stationary population can not be achieved spontaneously. Although it is not quite irrelevant to recall that the humanity lived in quasi-stationary state thousands of year almost up the onset of demographic transition. Nor can it be achieved by decrees, even under totalitarian regimes. It can only be the outcome of a sustained policy aiming at migration and fertility leading to a more or less stationary population in the long run.

This said, many questions need to be raised and answered before something more firm can be said of the feasibility of the stationary population. I will raise just three questions in the way of illustration:

(1) *What is the State's capacity in social engineering?* It is generally argued that the liberal democracy lacks such capacity. In my view the judgement needs to be qualified. The major and radical social reforms that have been effected in western European countries and here in Canada, often in spite of prevailing popular opinion and without its assent, testify to the efficacy of liberal democracies in social engineering. The problem of the liberal state is that its action horizon is four years, until next election, whereas the long-term goals are hardly in its purview, and that most targeted are special group interests, often small but enough to tilt the balance. Yet, achievement of the stationary population is a long-term goal.

(2) *What is the economics of fertility?* The question is that of the allocation of national resources between *production* and *reproduction*. Under the prevailing economic regime, this is decisively skewed toward the former. It seems to me that more family *friendly* arrangements will not make it to bring fertility up to the replacement level. It would take much more. Financial independence is the greatest factor that drives so many women into gainful employment and away from motherhood. (It would be interesting to run a simulation of the impact on the economy if a fair proportion of women, say 25 %, is withdrawn from the labour force and receives something of a maternal salary?)

(3) *Can a combination of pronatalist policy and immigration bring about a stationary population?* If the conditions laid down under (2) can not be met, it is not unrealistic to think that a more modest but still generous pro-natalist policy could yield, if not a full child, than a third or a quarter of child. The shortfall may then be made up by a well-targeted immigration to achieve the stationary population. Beaujot and Kerr argue that "... it may be possible in Canada to promote both immigration and fertility as means of sustaining the size of the population" (p. 175).

Tentative assessment of the virtue of stationary population

Speculation about how the demographically stationary society will actually perform economically and socially is beyond the scope of this outline, but Lincoln Day (1972) may be right in arguing " .. to the extent that population structure is [itself] a determinant of social conditions, the concomitants of a stationary population are far more likely to be desirable than undesirable— both for the society and for the individual" ..(p. 673).

(It would be interesting to undertake a study to determine whether demographic growth, brought about by a higher fertility or immigration or combination of the two, is a significant agent of economic growth, or to put more broadly, of the wellbeing? Or can stationary population make it, under Canada's prevailing social and economic conditions?)

The stationary population is *not* the solution to all problems. Perhaps it can be part of the solution to the Canada's dilemmas:

- fertility versus immigration;
- transnational versus national state;
- multicultural versus ethnically homogenous society;

- and balancing out the purely economic imperatives with the social well-being, in a spirit reminiscent of John Stuart Mill's (though with different accents in a contemporary society).

Concluding comment

I am offering one vision, one policy option for Canada, for the consideration of colleagues interested in population policy. Others may offer different options -- a growing population, or, why not, a smaller population, by reducing immigration, the birth rate being already under replacement level. Still others may opt for a *laissez faire* approach arguing that any population policy is pointless, particularly in the global economy, and that not only should the government keep out of the childbearing business, but all barriers to migration should be removed as well.

All options should be on the table for uninhibited debates. But any discussion about population policy calls for a broader theoretical framework with some vision of the future. There ought to be some finality to a policy.

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