

Current conditions of birth rate 1936

So much has been written on the birthrate from a sensational or propagandist standpoint, that it may be worthwhile to get the present position into perspective, by reference to the changes that have taken place in the last two generations, and to the parallel changes in other countries. The figure usually quoted as the birthrate, or, when some of its limitations are appreciated, as the crude birthrate, is simply the number of children born per annum, divided by the number of thousands in the population in which they appear. So that a registration district of ten thousand persons is said to have a birthrate of fifteen if the annual number of births is 150. As a measure of the activity ~~with~~ ^{certainly deserves to be} which large reproduction is going on, the birthrate ~~is properly~~ called crude, since it takes no account of what proportion of the population are in the earlier years of married life, during which, for the most part, reproduction occurs, what proportion are children, what proportion are unmarried, and what proportion are elderly or aged. Without knowledge of, at least, the age distribution of the population, comparisons of the crude birthrate are, for this reason, frequently misleading; for the age distribution differs in different countries, and in our own country has changed greatly in recent times.

The increased expectation of life has not been the main cause of these changes. The most conspicuous fall in the deathrate has been during the first year of life, in which only

one child in twenty now dies, as compared with one in five or six during a great part of the last century. The decrease in infantile mortality has thus offset, to a small extent, the actual increase in the number of children born. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the birthrate had commenced to fall, but, as the population was increasing, the actual number of births increased until 1903, when the falling birthrate overtook

the population increase, and since when the annual contingent of births has been diminishing. At the turn of the century, therefore, the population was very young. Persons of sixty or over were the survivors of the small birth contingents born prior to 1840, while the children belonged to the large birth-contingents of the nineties of the last century.

Since that time the older age-groups have been filling up. The numbers over forty are still increasing, and the relative increase over sixty is yet more rapid. But, beginning with the babies, the numbers in the younger age-groups commenced to decrease, and in recent years the decrease has reached those of reproductive age. The number of potential mothers passed its maximum about 1932, and is now on the decline. Consequently, the fall in the crude birthrate during the present century, great as it has been, has much underrepresented the fall in the actual rate of reproduction. Especially is this so when the crude birthrate is compared with the crude death-rate, since the high proportion of young adults and the low proportion of

infants and old persons, while specially favourable to a high birthrate, is specially unfavourable to a high deathrate. Actually, the crude birthrate has exceeded the crude deathrate during the last fifteen years, although it has been known that during that period the birthrate has been insufficient to maintain permanently a stationary population. In the slight European politics, at the end of the Century, were largely governed by the expansion of the German and other North European populations, as compared with France, where the birthrate had fallen to a level where depopulation was threatened. England was in an intermediate position, and up to the date of the War, could be regarded as an expanding population capable of sending emigrants all over the world. During the War, as was natural, the number of births fell immensely, but by 1921 it had risen to a peak, presumably due to the recent marriage of many demobilised men. The fall from this peak was astonishingly rapid, a decrease of not less than 6% per annum, in comparison with which the decline of recent years has been almost trifling. By 1927, however, births in England and Scotland were found to be only 82% of those needed to maintain a stationary population, and at the present time they cannot much exceed 75%. The population of these islands is retiring from the world's stage at the rate of about a quarter in each generation. It is, I believe, principally because current ideas as to population prospects are still based largely on what were facts in

the nineteenth Century, that the British population appears to be quite generally unaware of what it is doing.

Meanwhile, the decline has affected most of the peoples of Northern and Western Europe, though not so severely as the British. The birthrate in France, which has fallen only slowly, is higher than ours, in spite of their being a slightly older population. Their birthrate comes probably within 5% of 10% of maintaining their numbers, which have, in fact, ~~xxxx~~ been maintained by foreign immigration. The German birthrate fell as drastically as the British, though never to quite so low a level, and the energy and determination of the Nazi regime^m have since been rewarded by an actual increase in births. Whether this increase can be carried so far as to render the German people again self-supporting is a question of interest, not only to Germans, but to other nations who may have reason to profit by the example of the remedies used. The Scandinavian birthrate has also fallen heavily to values not much higher than the British. It is only, probably, in the last five years that Poland and the United States have crossed the line which separates growing from ~~xxxxxxxx~~ dwindling populations. Russia and Italy are the two prominent European nations showing a genuine population increase, although in both cases the birthrate is falling. They may be merely following in the footsteps of nations more advanced in civilization.

As to the cause of the falling birthrate, some distinguished writers have put forward suggestions which strike me as fanciful. As, for example, that the physiological fertility of the race is diminishing, that its "vital power" is running down, or, more mystically, that its "will to live" is exhausted. For myself, I can see no need of any explanation other than the commercial availability of methods of contraception. "Birth control" is scarcely the term at a time when contraception seems to be out of control. P The avoidance of the financial burden of parenthood is, I should judge, the prevalent motive, though many men and women seem also to have an exaggerated fear of the pains and dangers of childbirth. Both the financial apprehension and the physical seem to be most strongly felt by the childless. For the lower birthrate has done nothing to equalize the numbers of children born to different couples. The standardized "two child system," which is sometimes spoken of, is a myth. Many couples have two children, but many also have one or none. Families over six are more exceptional than they were, but they were always exceptional.

Many nations have sought for remedies for a falling birthrate, and there is no reason for calling them ineffectual, though they may never have been effectual enough. Prior to the knowledge of contraception a tax on bachelors has often seemed the proper remedy. At the present day it would seem practically useless. The French have devised a scheme by

which family allowances may be paid as part of wages and salaries. The employer of men with large families is recompensed by his fellow employers through an equalization fund. This system is now universal and compulsory in France and Belgium, and perhaps accounts for the fact that the French birthrate has not fallen more rapidly. The more striking recent success of Germany has been perhaps due to financial recompense being reinforced by active propaganda, and the bestowal of public honours.

BOND

MADE IN GREAT BRITAIN

