

IS IT GETTING COLD IN HERE?

STILL THINK THE GLOBE IS OVERPOPULATED? THINK AGAIN. WITH FERTILITY RATES TUMBLING BELOW REPLACEMENT, A NEW DOCUMENTARY DISCUSSES THE COMING DEMOGRAPHIC WINTER

by Tyler Chamberlain

If you aren't concerned about population decline now, you will be after watching *Demographic Winter: The Decline of the Human Family*. The documentary opens on renowned demographer Phillip Longman, Schwartz Senior Fellow at the New America Foundation, a Washington D.C. public policy think tank, describing the dire nature of our waning numbers. Overpopulation? "The population bomb was popularized by non-demographers and by the press back in the 1970s, and real demographers – even back then – knew [depopulation] was coming," he says.

Currently, 70 nations are at below replacement levels of 2.1 children per woman and still many others are falling. Fewer bambini means the ratio of retirees to workers is shifting. The population pyramid on which our public health care, Canada Pension Plan and other assorted benefits are based, with many workers at the bottom supporting relatively few retirees, is gradually flipping.

The concern is that our economies will be nothing more than small workforces supporting our massive public pension and health care plans for the elderly. For private enterprise, there's the concern of not having enough workers – which could correct itself over time, but the economy would have to downsize first.

So what? Aren't fewer kids better for families? They can attend Harvard, where families with 10 kids have to ration who gets to play hockey. Not really: The film looks at Italy and Spain, and argues that the effects of population decline there are already apparent; youth

rate for Quebecers 15 to 24 years old was 13.6 per cent, compared to the national average of 11.6 per cent.¹

Come population crunch time, the wrong policies could hinder, instead of helping. But today, most decision makers just avoid the problem. Some still live in a Malthusian dreamland. And the solutions, which include strengthening the family and having more kids, aren't exactly politically correct. Longman actually goes so far as to say this in the film: "[We need] a return to traditional values. And specifically to patriarchy, properly understood, which was a value system that, at the end of the day, persuaded both men and women, not only to have children, but to take responsibility for them." Those words aren't exactly a vote winner.

When *The Nation*, a left-wing American journal, recently ran a piece about demographics, it was to mock those concerned about the decline as xenophobic misogynists with an irrational fear of losing Western civilization at the hands (or was it knives) of swarthy migrants.² But *Demographic Winter* highlights the global nature of the freeze; many Middle Eastern countries are experiencing plummeting fertility rates, too. Iran's has fallen to 2.0 from 2.8 since 1996, and Egypt's has dropped from 7.0 in 1960 to a predicted 3.0 in 2010.

It's interesting that women are having fewer children, but in many countries, they actually want to have more. Ian Dowbiggin, author of *Where Have All the Babies Gone? The Sterilization Movement in the Cold War Era*,³ cites a 1997 Gallup poll of 16 countries on four continents indicating that "people would be happy to have more children if their societies validated bigger families." Dowbiggin writes, "[o]ne in three Canadians said the ideal family size was three or more children."⁴

Part two of the documentary is forthcoming; they ought to explore the idea that government's social safety net might be at least partly to blame for the breakdown of the family in the first place. Children and families were the social safety net prior to interventionist social policies and the welfare state. Still, *The Demographic Winter* does an admirable job of highlighting the consequences of family breakdown and depopulation. When it starts to get cold, don't say you weren't warned: There is much we can do to decrease the chill, if we are at least aware of the realities of the situation.

SO WHAT? AREN'T FEWER KIDS BETTER FOR FAMILIES? THEY CAN ATTEND HARVARD, WHERE FAMILIES WITH 10 KIDS HAVE TO RATION WHO GETS TO PLAY HOCKEY

unemployment is in double digits, despite the smaller demographic. And higher taxes can be one result of smaller populations, which in turn creates unique burdens on individuals, business and the labour force. In Canada, Quebec has lower than average fertility rates, high taxes and a high unemployment rate, to boot. In 2005, consistent with previous years, Quebec's fertility rate was 1.52 compared to Canada's 1.54; Quebecers are notoriously heavily taxed and the unemployment

endnotes

- 1 National fertility and unemployment rates can be found on the Statistics Canada website: <http://cansim2.statcan.ca/>
- 2 Joyce, K. (2008, March 3). Missing: The "Right" Babies. *The Nation*. Retrieved online: <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080303/joyce>.
- 3 Ian Dowbiggin. (2008). *Where Have All the Babies Gone?: The Sterilization Movement in the Cold War Era*. Oxford University Press.
- 4 Ian Dowbiggin. (2006). Where Have All the Babies Gone?: The "Birth Dearth" and what to do about it. Presented on September 26, 2006 at the IMFC Family Policy Conference. Retrieved online: http://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/Dr_Ian_Dowbiggin_Birth_Dearth_FINAL.pdf.