Fertility Futures: Implications of National, Pronatalist Policies for Adolescent Women in Australia

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Abstract

The Australian Federal Government has responded to the projected, adverse economic repercussions of an ageing population with pronatalist, family-friendly tax incentives, policy rhetoric, and a lump sum Baby Bonus[1]. Tangentially, amid circulation of birth-dearth predictions, the media is positioning fertility as a precious, personal asset not to be squandered. Women in Australia are being subjected to a synergism of new - or renewed - societal forces to "procreate and cherish" that may have unintended consequences on the most vulnerable: newly-pubescent, adolescent women[2].

Introduction

As governments grapple with projections of plummeting populations, a phenomenon set to emerge without intervention within fifty years, each nation's total fertility rate (TFR) is becoming a 'Dow Jones' futures index of the viability of its economy. Demographers warn that decline of the future labour force and escalation of ageing populations will be immanent sources of deep strain on all global economies, both in the developed and developing worlds, unable to be addressed adequately by immigration. Just-in-time production takes on a new realm of meaning as birth-dearth predictions circulate. Paradoxically, while increasing rather than decreasing populations contribute to resource strain and ecological impacts, and with projections of the global population reaching nine billion inhabitants by 2030, Australia and other OECD nations are attempting to boost fertility in the interests of future economies.

How can these two sets of contradictory messages be reconciled? On the one hand, the world is already overpopulated, according to the ecologists (Huggins & Skandera, 2005), and on the other, the Federal Government is advocating that Australia needs more children. Thus, enhanced receptiveness to procreation must enter the collective consciousness, to change the hard-wired, over-population messages of the past forty years, and to push against ecological alarm, if the downward trend of fertility is to be steadied, if not reversed. For the TFR to increase from its present 1.83 to the (apparently[3]) preferable replacement level of 2.06, seduction of the national psyche to procreate is via the public purse. In tandem, the average age of a woman bearing her first child would need to decrease, because the older she is when her first child arrives, the less likely she will (be able to) have the all-important, third child who, demographers say, is 'the important child as far as fertility policy is concerned' (McDonald, 2002)[4]. Such societal messages will affect, indubitably, newly-pubescent females and their attitudes toward potentialising motherhood.

Pronatalist rhetoric

Articulation of pronatalism began in Australia in 2001. Heard (2006) identifies its commencement as an almost buried aside in Prime Minister Howard's Federal Liberal Party campaign launch in October 2001, when he announced the First Child Tax Refund (the original baby bonus): 'assistance with family formation is very much in Australia's long term interests'. Since then, from Heard's timeline tracking of the development of pronatalism under Howard, the rhetoric of, first, gender equity theory and, then, preference theory surrounding the pronatalist agenda has softened the sensitive matters of the 'government-in-the-bedroom' and social engineering, so successfully that the carefully worded *Intergenerational Report,* released on the occasion of the Federal Budget 2002-03 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002), aroused no quarrel in the press. Phrases such as 'emerging issues associated with an ageing population', and 'fiscal outlook over the long term' were becoming more acceptable. Momentum gathered from the Federal Budget of July 2004 onward,

[1] The Baby Bonus payment for each newborn paid to the birth mother was introduced in July 2004 as $3000, increased to $4000 in July 2006, set to increase to $5000 in July 2008.

[2] Adolescents are taken to be 12 to 19 years-of-age, and the oxymoron of 'adolescent women' is deliberately chosen.

[3] See Huggins and Skandera (2005), *Population puzzle: Boom or bust?* for other demographic models and theory.

[4] Australia does not have a population or pronatalist policy, 'in the strict sense,' says McDonald (2003). Jackson (2006) says otherwise, that Australia has an 'explicit fertility policy in the form of a Maternity Payment.'

strengthened by the Federal Treasurer's oft-quoted exhortation, 'have one for your husband and one for your wife and one for the country'. In effect, Australians were being stimulated to reproduce with a sense of national pride, and being prepared to accept the new ideal: the three child family.

Policies That Promote Birth Rate Increase

As has been established by research conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (Weston, Qu, Parker, & Alexander, 2004), the majority of Australians aged 20-39 years, anticipating or already involved in parenthood, aspire to have three children, although, in reality, they are more likely to have two. For conditions for third-child aspirations to be realisable, the Federal Government needed new discussions with Australian families, to push against what Wattenberg (2004) dubs as a "near-Copernican shift" in procreation ideology. Governments seeking to break from over forty years of persistent alarm about overpopulation will encounter 'a very powerful set of objections' to policies that promote an increase in the birth rate (McDonald, 2006).

Thus, the pursuit of a long-range vision has been met with considerable resistance: in revising family tax benefits, the Australian Government has received criticism[5]; in repudiating universal, paid maternity leave, it has been found wanting[6]; and in attending to more childcare centre placements, although part way addressed, it has faced controversy[7]. The one "vote winner"[8] is a direct cash transfer to mothers of newborns, a "policy which scores highly. Because of its directness", McDonald (2006) believes, it "strongly affirms that society values children", not only financially but also symbolically. Yet this payment, too, carries a burden. Its utilitarianism may have unintended consequences: the powerful message being made by the Baby Bonus may be received by "the wrong people" (McDonald), which includes teenage girls internalising messages meant for their (much) older sisters.

Importance of Age at First Childbearing

McDonald (2002) describes the psychological threshold of having the first child as the highest, because 'a high proportion of the indirect cost of having children comes with the first child'. The first child is, in terms of family, the most important movement over the threshold into the higher status of parenthood, and the motivator for a possible second. Australian family culture is less than enthusiastic about an only child, desiring the ideal of a sibling for the first child and, a further ideal, one of each sex (Kippen, Gray, & Evans, 2005). But it is the third child that most interests many demographers, with studies of third-child capacity especially prevalent in recent demographic literature (Hoem, Prskawetz, & Neyer, 2002). For families to have that third child, the decision invariably rests with female age at first childbirth.

Carmichael and McDonald (2003) offer a vital consideration: 'age at the commencement of child-bearing is a major determinant of ultimate family size'. Support for this position comes from an average-age-at-first-birth comparison: women born between 1908 and 1912 in Australia had their first birth, on average, at 26.4 years old; women born between 1933 and 1937 had an average age for first birth of 23.3 years old (the youngest of the century), a cohort which reached the highest completed fertility rate (3.0) for any cohort of the 20th century. That the peak in cohort fertility was achieved by the youngest-average-age-at-first-birth group 'is not without significance. This calculation supports an argument that age at the commencement of childbearing is a major determinant of ultimate family size' (Carmichael & McDonald). Rephrased, 'when women have their first child in their 30s, the time left to have other children is cut by half relative to those who had their first children in their 20s' (D'addio & d'Ercole, 2005). In other words, the earlier a woman has her first child, the more likely it is that she will go onto having not just a second, but possibly a third child.

How to address the threshold impediment successfully is integrated through two dimensions: the Howard Coalition Government's approach toward that 'barbecue stopper', the work/life balance and family-friendly policies (politically-canny speak for pronatalism), and the popular press. Fertility has been positioned more strenuously in the media recently, as a limited resource ebbing with (female) age, exhorted as a precious, personal asset not to be squandered. The hourglass with the sands of the fertility window trickling away replaces the biological clock ticking. A synergism of imperatives slides into position, resting roundly on women's shoulders: the earlier she has her

[5] The Howard Government 'has used the financial carrot of the Baby Bonus and Family Tax Benefit Part B to entice women from the workforce, and the financial stick of Family Benefit Part A and the Childcare Benefit (CCB) to penalise women who stay in full-time employment' (Summers, 2003).

[6] Then Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Tony Abbott, claimed that a compulsory, universal paid maternity leave system would be adopted 'over this government's dead body, frankly, it just won't happen under this Government' (Radio National, 2002).

[7] 'It's a myth child care is hard to find and too expensive, a new federal Treasury analysis says' (Colebatch, 2006).

[8] The Nicholson cartoon in *The Australian* on July 1, 2004 depicted Federal Treasurer Costello in a hospital bed, 'giving birth' to the Baby Bonus, with Prime Minister Howard's words as the caption, 'Congratulations! It's a vote winner!'

first babe, the more fortunate she will be, a misty message, indeed, for a newly-pubescent girl.

A Particularly 'Wicked Problem'

Bridgman and Davis (2004) draw on the term "wicked problem", a 1973 coinage by Rittel and Weber, to describe "those issues that cannot be settled and will not go away … Much of social and economic policy is about managing (but not solving) wicked problems". Bridgman and Davis provide a synopsis of a particular - and particularly – "wicked problem":

> The federal government has been grappling with the complexities of what John Howard has called "the biggest social debate of our time". The objectives of the "work and family" policy package are to allow families to combine caring for children and paid work and, on a broader scale, to arrest the decline in Australia's birthrate … Both sides of politics acknowledge the complex nature of the problem … Work and family policy is an area in which clarity of objectives and confidence in policy instruments are hard to achieve.

Governments prefer incremental solutions, when an existing response to a problem is modified, thus saving an entire policy cycle and capitalising on previous work (Bridgman & Davis, 2004).

The Baby Bonus falls into this category. Introduced in 2001, the pre-existing baby bonus with its cumbersome conditions "was quietly abolished in the 2004 budget and replaced with a more generous maternity payment", observes Megalogenis (2007). "The baby bonus flopped", he adds, "because the stay-at-home mothers it was aimed at didn't exist in the numbers that Howard's advisors thought when the policy was being drawn up. The error rate was about 50 per cent." The revamped baby bonus in 2004 officially became the "maternity allowance" or, sometimes, the "newborn maternity payment" but, to add confusion, has since been popularly adopted in the capitalised form as the Baby Bonus, an incremental solution that masked a social policy mistake with recycled nomenclature.

The Baby Bonus

In the package of Australia's pronatalist incentives to boost the TFR, the centrepiece is the Baby Bonus. The lump sum Baby Bonus, a procreation incentive that O'Donnell (2004) attributes to the "peculiar genius of Howard and Costello", and Megalogenis (2007) to the "Prime Minister's clairvoyant-like ability to pick which button to press on the electorate's cash register", is the only payment exactly of its kind. Paid directly to the mother for each newborn as a lump sum, unconditional payment, some commentators at the payment's inception questioned its intended effectiveness as incentive enough to have a baby. One was that "the Maternity Payment would have to be at least ten times higher before it would affect fertility rates" (Hakim, cited in Morehead, 2004). Another pundit dismissed the possibility that "teenage girls will have babies to claim the Maternity Payment", with some seeming relevance in the additional comment, that "only one hundred 14-year-olds had babies in 2002" (Arndt, cited in Morehead)[9].

Public alarm, however, sounded loudly over the potential creation of yet more welfare-dependent, single, teenage mothers, a less-than-desirable corollary of the new promotion of parenthood. Responding to a spate of anguish-laden newspaper articles following the 2004 budget release, Prime Minister Howard placated community angst over teenage girls who might be tempted to internalise messages meant for their older sisters (Maiden, 2004). Teen motherhood has been, after all, the lowest in Australia since first recorded by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 1921, peaking in 1971 at 55.5 live births per 1,000 females 15-19 (which includes births to mothers under 15 years), down to 16.3 per 1,000 in 2004. But the impact of the new population policy on adolescent women was not so blithely brushed to one side, at least not by Plumpton High School principal Glenn Sergeant, who reacted strongly: "You put $3000 in anybody's hands who's not used to having any money whatsoever … unfortunately it's enough money to induce some teenage girls to have a baby" (cited in Price, 2004)[10]. McDonald (2006) assesses that such "objections have faded with time", but with the Baby Bonus due to increase again to $5000 in 2008, and with the influences of pronatalism rippling through the nation, sociological impact studies are indicated.

Skepticism that such a payment could turn the heads of teenagers or anyone else toward (the contemplation of) parenthood is strong. Asks Heard (2006), "is there any theoretical and/or empirical basis for believing that a one-off payment can induce couples to consider an extra child or children?" Even Federal Treasurer Costello (2006), while taking credit for the Baby Bonus, his "little bit of labour" to help boost the TFR along with his advocacy to "procreate and cherish", at the same time contradicted himself: "nobody would get pregnant for a $4000 payment". Guest (2007) asks, "Do we need a pronatalist policy in Australia? Will the Baby Bonus raise fertility? Is the Baby Bonus a good

[9] In 2005, 374 Australian mothers were under 16, 902 aged 16, 1,947 aged 17, 2,993 aged 18 and 4,528 aged 19, a total of 10,744 or 4.15% of all births (ABS, 2006).

[10] Plumpton High School in Melbourne was one of the few secondary schools in Australia with a young parents' school program in Australia in 2004, a program for which Principal Sergeant received a Queen's Birthday Honour in 2004.

pronatalist policy?", and finds for the negative on each question amid pessimism about the Federal Coalition Government's dogmatic pursuit to increase the TFR. Yet the proposition that such a payment has considerable power, as much symbolic as financial, can be supported.

Firstly, in October 2006, controversy flared over unsubstantiated claims that "children are having children for the sake of the [Baby Bonus] payment" (Grace, 2006). A heated exchange in the press between politicians followed, resulting in a call to "increase scrutiny to stop baby bonus abuse" (Schubert, 2006). Response to this politically-sensitive issue came shortly after when Prime Minister Howard announced changes to the Baby Bonus payment conditions for mothers under 18 years old. His oblique rationale, that the decision was "common sense and [that] most of Australia would understand why we're doing it" (*The Australian*, November 13, 2006), produced another spate of headlines. No empirical evidence was offered, yet a conclusion can be drawn that the lump sum mode of delivery was influential and detrimental enough for some young women that a prime ministerial response to nip criticism and avert the potential of misuse was required. The Baby Bonus has a new, fixed age limit: from July 2007, under 18-year-old mothers receive their payment as 13 fortnightly payments (which was the case for under 16-year-old mothers all along, at the discretion of the Centrelink government case worker).

Secondly, McDonald (2006) cites early data from the Australian experience, that since the introduction of the Baby Bonus payment (and family tax incentives), 'in the first quarter in which births could have been affected by the new payment (June Quarter, 2005), there was an increase of 10 per cent in the number of births compared to the same quarter in the preceding year'. Jackson (2006) challenges such grandiose – and from her calculations, misleading – claims, and 'cautions against complacency that declining fertility has been permanently arrested'. As Couch, Dowsett, Dutertre, Keys, and Pitts (2006) acknowledge, 'few studies can 'prove' links between broad social and contextual factors [although] … there are studies that 'prove' some of the varied steps along the way", the province of sociologists and economists.

The third and most compelling consideration to mitigate the understandable skepticism that one-off payments can lead people into the long term commitment of parenting comes from Milligan (2005) who finds an economic relationship between pronatalist, financial incentives, and birth outcomes. He reviews impact studies of financial enticement on fertility across 28 of the 30 OECD countries providing some form of special social policy for families. Using Quebec as a case study, Milligan (2002, 2005) found a 25 per cent increase in fertility for families entitled to the full benefit. Further, Milligan calculates the cash payment scheme, then the equivalent of $A535 for the first child, (ultimately) $A1070 for the second, and $A8,550 for the third, as responsible for contributing 93,000 additional births to Quebec in the eight years of the scheme's existence. Schemes in other OECD countries, using what Demeny (2004) calls a "familiar armamentarium of pronatalist welfare State measures", include cash payments, mostly weighted as incentive for the all-important, third child, an expensive budget item if such payments are fallible, or even unnecessary, at least for Australia, as Guest (2007) surmises.

Conclusion

Whether or not the Federal Government's package of pronatalist incentives do boost the TFR to a level commensurate with the projected needs of an ageing population, and, indeed, whether or not this is ultimately necessary, some (unintended) consequences are likely, particularly the favourable impression that young(er) motherhood has society's sanction. As McDonald and Kippen (2007) predict, "It may turn out that Australian women begin to have their children at somewhat younger ages than has been the case in the recent past". Cater and Coleman (2006), in their UK study of 'planned' teenage pregnancy, refer to "the seemingly rational and positive decision of choosing the new life-course of parenthood [that] … challenges the stereotypical viewpoint of teenage pregnancy as a solely negative life-choice". Pushing against the stereotype of the teenage, welfare mother, a new interpretation of mutual obligation[11] can be proposed: while the State may be supporting her, she is contributing to raising the TFR on two counts: for the first child who made her into a teenage mother, and for her positioning by merit of her young age to be able to have that third child. A lowering of the average age of first time motherhood in Australia is one possible legacy of utilitarian policy, but the more concerning legacy is the emergence of a cohort of mothers much younger than most would find acceptable.

Marilyn Anderson's current research, The Amber Light Project, is the assessment of effects of pronatalist, national policies on adolescent women in Australia

[11] Australia's Mutual Obligation policy, in place since 1998, requires anyone receiving income support over 18 to meet additional activity test requirements (Centrelink, 2007).

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