

# A New Question for Makers of Public Policy

## *What will be the nation's demographic destiny?*

by Richard D. Lamm

*You would be surprised at the number of years it took me to see clearly what some of the problems were which had to be solved ... Looking back, I think it was more difficult to see what the problems were than to solve them. — Charles Darwin*

One of the new questions for 21st Century public policy will be: What is our nation's demographic destiny? The size and makeup of the population (how many and who) will become a controversial issue in most nations. This debate will be about both quality of life and physical limits. Some nations, like the United States, could physically absorb additional millions of people. But increasingly, citizens of this nation — and citizens of most states and regions — are asking: Why do we want additional population growth? What public policy reasons are there to double the population of Colorado? Or California? Or the United States?

These questions were never before articulated, not only because population growth was an unquestioned asset, but also because we thought the matter outside effective human control. However, the debate is changing. A nation's demographic future has shifted from an unalterable given to an alterable variable — from something we blindly inherit to something we can determine. A culture of growth is being challenged. People and nations wonder whether population growth is an asset or liability, a cure or a disease.

The concern about runaway world population is well known. In 1992, the U.S. Academy of Sciences

and the Royal Society of London warned: "If the current predictions of population growth prove accurate and patterns of human activity on the planet remain unchanged, science and technology may not be able to prevent either irreversible degradation of the environment or continued poverty for much of the world." In the same year, the Union of Concerned Scientists issued a "World Scientists Urgent Warning to Humanity" signed by 1,600 of the world's leading scientists, including 102 Nobel Prize winners. It stated that the continuation of destructive human activities "may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated."

These are not ordinary public policy questions. These are life and death questions about the future of Earth. Does it require a "life or death" question before a geographic area considers population a threat and attempts to set limits? Does a nation or a region have to let its demographic situation grow to intolerable limits before it acts?

In one sense, much of human history can be seen as asserting control over factors once thought immutable. Children were a "gift of God" until humankind discovered the fertility cycle. We either lived or died "at God's will" until we discovered the miracles of medicine and public health. We were stuck in the same social class as our parents until our institutions reformed to allow social mobility. Human history is constantly redefining the unacceptable and changing what was thought to be unchangeable.

This is clearly true of population. For most of human history, the question of how many people the world should have was never asked — never thought of. Population growth was an asset, and the more people the more blessed a country

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**Richard D. Lamm**, former governor of Colorado, currently directs the Center for Public Policy and Contemporary Issues at the University of Denver.

considered itself. France and Russia gave medals for large families. Pre-World War II Germany had a variety of pro-natalist policies to encourage bigger families. Mussolini turned off the lights in state-owned housing at 9 p.m. so people would go to bed and conceive new Italians. "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth" had its counterpart in all the world's religions, and public policy followed. The larger a country's population, the stronger the country was thought to be militarily, economically and geopolitically. Towns equated size with success. "Watch Us Grow" was once the literal or symbolic slogan posted outside most cities and towns.

The process of how world population growth went from "God's will" to a factor within human control is a fascinating story. The atavistic feeling of the "bigger the better" is not easily changed. "Policy is formed by preconceptions and by long-implanted biases. When information is relayed to policy makers, they respond in terms of what is already inside their heads and consequently make policy less to fit the facts than to fit the baggage that has accumulated since childhood."

If I could have left anything carved on Colorado's Capitol after 12 years as governor, it would be: "Beware of policies that were successful in the past but are disastrous to the future." The hardest challenge of public policy is to change a policy which has been successful. This clearly applies to the question of population and its related subject.

Immigration patterns will largely dictate the kind of America in which our children and grandchildren will live. We are presently headed, but for immigration, for a stable U.S. population. The average American woman has 2.1 children in her lifetime — a number which would stabilize the U.S. population by the year 2040 at approximately 305 million Americans. Whether we grow to 400 million or 500 million Americans, or even a billion Americans, depends almost entirely on immigration. Today, 24.5 million people — more than one of every 11 people living in the United States — were born in another country. The foreign-born percentage of our population has doubled since 1970.

I believe that mass immigration is a policy that has outlived its usefulness. Yet past successes prevent us from fully considering whether it continues to make demographic sense. Our society must look at the long-term domestic impacts of immigration and answer some hard questions. It is not enough to quote some words added to the Statue of Liberty years after its dedication by a New York schoolgirl. We must ask: What kind of interests are being served by large scale immigration?

Do you really want twice as many people in California, or Colorado, or the United States?

Will that make these better places to live? I moved to California in 1957 when it had 10 million people. It was uncrowded, peaceful and relatively crime free. But it soon grew to 20 million, is now 32 million and is expected to have 50 million people by 2010. I have yet to meet a Californian who wants 50 million neighbors. By 2040, the population will be 64 million Californians — almost entirely because of foreign immigration. Some 400,000 Californians have left the state since 1990 because they believe the quality of life has diminished. In whose interest is it to have 50 million or 60 million people in California?

The first U.S. Census in 1790 found 4 million Americans. This means we have had six doublings in our short 200-year history (8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256). Just one more doubling gives us 500 million Americans. Two more doublings gives us more people than presently live in either China or India. To whose benefit?

The United States is no longer an empty continent that can absorb endless pools of labor. We are a society that requires tens of thousands of dollars in capital to create a job. We have large numbers of unemployed and underemployed. It is time to close down the age of mass immigration. It has served us well in the past. It does not make public policy sense for the future.

Twenty-five years ago, a presidential commission spent a lot of time and money looking at the reasons for population growth. The Commission on Population Growth and the American Future reported: "We have looked for,

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***"In the United States,  
immigration is to  
population growth  
what smoking  
is to cancer."***

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and have not found, any continuing economic argument for continued population growth. The health of our country does not depend on it, nor does the vitality of business, nor the welfare of the average person.” Since then, we have added 60 million new Americans.

Today, nations and regions are going through a similar process on other aspects of growth. They are, for the first time, asking questions about their demographic destiny. Fear of crime, gangs, congestion, pollution, foreign immigrants, earthquakes, fires and reduced quality of life are the most frequently cited reasons for leaving California. The Clinton administration’s muddled immigration policy is contributing to the unease. On his recent trip to Mexico and Central America, the President decried illegal immigration but seemed to shrink from any major steps to deport illegals or refugees overstaying their welcome.

Perhaps the most common reason given for additional population growth is that it is good for the economy. At the risk of treating lightly what is a complex subject, it is important to point out that the fastest growing per capita incomes are in countries with the lowest rates of population growth. Conversely the lowest (or negative) rates of per capita income growth are in countries with the highest population growth.

Not all members of a region (or country) experience the same economic impact from a growing population. Large landowners and those involved in real estate benefit disproportionately. But the benefit to the average person is more problematic. Japan, for instance, has set a policy of increasing the per capita wealth of its existing citizens. Its public policy since World War II has been to slow population growth dramatically. The Japanese go to great lengths to eliminate low-skill jobs by automation and try to move the workforce into higher value-added jobs. With 120 million people on an island the size of Montana, they

want a high quality workforce — not an endlessly growing population. The wealth of a country has much more to do with the education level and skills of its population than with the size of the population.

Recognizing that any essay dances lightly across difficult terrain, I would suggest that public policy is changing rapidly on the issue of population and its related issue of immigration. As the Cairo Conference on Population and Development stated: “Population-related goals and policies are integral parts of cultural, economic and social development, the principal aim of which is to improve the quality of life of all people.”

It has been said the hardest challenge to public policy is to change a policy that has been successful. A world that has always promoted population growth is now moving to stabilize that same growth. Both at a world and a regional level, people are thinking the unthinkable, questioning the unquestionable, and reforming the previously unalterable.

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