

America Bursting at the Seams

U.S. population expected to exceed one billion

by B. Meredith Burke

There are clubs whose memberships ought not to grow. That of countries with one billion or more population is certainly among them. Even China and India are two too many.

Yet the just-released year 2000 U.S. Census total shows us racing pell-mell to this dubious goal. At 281 million, we have gained nearly 33 million since 1990 — and 81 million since 1970, year of the first Earth Day. Pennsylvania, one of the slowest-growth states, nonetheless gained 400,000 people. This betokens a continued upward trend.

A year ago, the Census Bureau released a new set of population projections to the year 2100. With roughly unchanging immigration and fertility policies, the bureau projected a year 2100 population of 571 million. More generous immigration policies and higher fertility will deliver us to 1.2

B. Meredith Burke, Ph.D., is senior fellow at Negative Population Growth Inc., a Washington-based advocacy group. This op-ed is from the Philadelphia Inquirer, 3 January 2001.

billion.

Most disconcerting is that we have exceeded even the highest projections of a year 2000 level of 275 million.

The world should be dismayed at the census results. Barely eighteen months ago at the July

“With roughly unchanging immigration and fertility policies, the [U.S. Census] Bureau projected a year 2100 population of 571 million.”

1999 U.N. conference on population, 179 nations — including the United States — agreed on a plan to curb world population growth. Leaders of sixty-nine nations (including China but excluding the United States) signed a statement recognizing “the worldwide necessity to achieve population stabilization and for each country to adopt the necessary policies and programs to do so, consistent with its own culture and aspirations.”

What global problems are made easier to resolve by more Americans? Already, with only five

percent of the world population, we contribute twenty-five percent of carbon dioxide emissions, aggravating global warming. University of British Columbia urban planner William Rees and Mathis Wackernagel of Redefining Progress, a think tank on sustainability, describe an “ecological footprint” that measures human impact on nature. It is the land equivalent required to regenerate the renewable resources each person consumes and recycle the waste products produced. Conservatively calculated, the U.S. footprint (the world’s largest) is 24 acres per person, the United Kingdom’s and Germany’s are 11, and China’s is 4. The world average is 5.

Humankind as a whole consumes two-and-a-half times what the world produces; hence the loss of habitat and species. We Americans are a net importer of resources, indicated by an ecological deficit of ten acres per person. The Americans added just since 1990 represent an increased ecological load of 825 million acres; those since 1970 have consumed nearly 2 billion acres.

How far we have diverged from the population stabilization path urged on Congress in 1972 by the Commission on Population Growth

and the American Future! The commission concluded it could identify no benefit to adding to our then-200 million. Neither our environment nor the quality of life cherished by Americans would survive a significant population increase.

To judge from the behavior of our elected officials, our culture and aspirations continue to reflect a “bigger is better” boosterism. Yet a cursory glance at a week’s news reveals how population increase has triggered or exacerbated our problems. Consider its impact on spiraling housing prices, endless

sprawl, traffic congestion, and looming water and power shortages as we drain our aquifers dry and become more vulnerable to hydroelectric power shortfalls in years of low rainfall. Consider the difference had Congress put us on the path to stabilization about thirty years ago.

Americans are demo-graphically unschooled. Few comprehend how quickly numbers mount and how long it takes to slow population growth once a country resolves to do so.

Just as the Congressional Budget Office calculates the

monetary effects of proposed legislation, a parallel office should calculate the demographic costs of proposed legislation. This would force our legislators to link individual legislation with long-term consequences. A “Population Impact Statement” could chart a demographic “thermometer” showing movement from the estimated sustainable ceiling of 150 million.

We are now less than two doubling times from the billion-plus club. How many others are as scared as I am? •