

Population Growth Dilutes Our Nation's Democracy

How about 8,700 seats in the nation's House?

by M. Boyd Wilcox

Twenty-seven years ago, on March 27, 1972, this nation was given the benefit of a thorough and compassionate effort that would greatly assist progress toward long-term security and sustainability. Tragically, the advice offered was ignored, and we are still paying for this avoidance.

What were those words of wisdom?

They said in part that, "no substantial benefits will result from further growth of the nation's population ... we have not found any convincing economic argument for continued population growth ... the health of our country does not depend upon it ... nor does the vitality of business nor the welfare of the average person ... and that the gradual stabilization of our population would contribute significantly to the nation's ability to solve its problems."

This report of the Commission on Population and the American Future was issued by its chairman, John D. Rockefeller III. We are now 27 years and over 60 million people beyond its uttering, and what are we to make of the state of our Union? Have we indeed made progress in solving our most serious problems? What are our most serious problems and how do they relate to overall population pressure?

Environmental and natural resource issues are constantly in the news. Progress made seems to be counterbalanced by reports of additional discoveries, such as endocrine disrupters in water; the loss of farmland and urban sprawl; the continuous, seemingly intractable

M. Boyd Wilcox of Corvallis, Oregon is a citizen who actively campaigns for a national population policy. This op-ed is reprinted with permission from Corvallis Gazette-Times. Wilcox can be reached by e-mail at wilcoxmb@peak.org.

conflicts over saving tiny remnants of ancient forests; and ongoing efforts to prevent the loss of threatened/endangered species. The struggle persists to define a truly sustainable relationship with the natural world.

What about man-made resources; the social-psychological-political glue that holds a nation and society together and allows it to cope? What about our most cherished operational myth, the one of Democracy ... the one we depend upon to assist in solving our most difficult dilemmas?

Alienation from the political process is at an all-time high. Voting in national elections has plummeted from around 80 percent at the turn of the century to less than 50 percent nowadays. A well-written letter to one's representative in Congress elicits a computerized form-letter reply designed for that category of issue, with little personal attachment or acknowledgment of specific questions or ideas expressed by the constituent.

One can e-mail the President only to receive back an auto-responder reply, thanking you for using this wonderful technology and mentioning "this is the only reply you will get regardless of how many messages you send today." Computers talking to computers and, once again, the individual is left with no effective relationship with his/her representative. But can we blame the Members of Congress? What would you do to manage the concerns of and correspondence of 600,000 constituents in your district?

The original ratio was 1-to-30,000. Not only has our nation's population increased over 270 times since the founding of the Republic, but the ratio in each district has increased 20 times. It would take 8,700 members of the U.S. House to restore that original ratio (20 times 435 = 8,700). Can you imagine 8,700 seats in the House? Most people agree that "only" 435 is too many already.

How much more diluted can democracy get? How much more cynical and alienated can citizens become?

Is there any credible argument that more people contribute to a workable democracy? If democracy is not working, what can we count on to solve our problems? How much longer will we ignore the wisdom of the Rockefeller Report? These questions and how we propose to tackle them ought to be a major issue in the year 2000 presidential campaign.

It is time we revisited how our population pressure affects overall quality of life in this country, including an investigation of forces that continue to push our population numbers higher and higher. We should dust off the Rockefeller Report and add to it knowledge gained during the past 27 years.

We need to get on with the business of establishing a national population policy designed to place the nation on a pathway to a stable population, at a level or range deemed sustainable for the long-term future.

Whether we conclude this level to be less than, equal to, or greater than our present population of 270 million must be trusted to a process that can also serve as a model for other nations and bioregions to emulate. What will our future hold if we cannot gain the political will to do this? Will that already-attained size and complexity of our population prevent a consensus from being reached? Is it already too late? How prophetic were the words of 27 years ago?