

Pragmatic Liberalism

by B. Meredith Burke

As we enter the year 2000 I can turn my attention to national politics. I hereby declare my availability for the job of U.S. president. If nominated, I will run. If elected, I will serve.

What other alternative does a demographic realist and feminist have?

Since 1966 I have focused on three professional goals: to achieve a long-term national population policy, to increase support for programs fostering global ecological sustainability, and to assure all women have knowledge of and access to the range of family planning services, including abortion.

No party has emitted a whisper about how it proposes to avert an ecologically disastrous population of 1 billion Americans by the year 2115. No politician has acknowledged that Third World nations can achieve a higher standard of living only if the U.S. drastically scales back its own resource consumption.

No party has displayed willingness to go to the mat to preserve the reproductive rights of women.

Our population has exceeded the ecologically sustainable ceiling of 150 million ever since 1950. In 1972 the President's Commission on Population Growth and America urged Congress to adopt a national policy to stem population growth. The commission noted continued population growth would destroy not just our environment but the lifestyle Americans cherished.

We can enjoy small, compact cities, single-family homes, and uncrowded and accessible wilderness and farmlands only with a population base well below the one Congress instead delivered us to.

The day of demographic reckoning is long overdue. Under present policies and given our 65-year doubling time, equal to that of India's, our current 270 million-plus population will reach 500 million by the year 2050. A true

leader would ask us to gird ourselves for the vital but painful policies re-attaining a sustainable population will entail. Craven political "leaders" instead endorse "managing growth," not stopping it.

They could learn from medical science. An optimal size, not unchecked growth, is a healthy organism's goal. Pathology, be it gigantism or cancer, results from unchecked growth. Physicians don't talk of "accommodating" growth; they seek and remove the underlying causes. Patients tolerate treatment side effects because they endorse the goal of stopping malignant growth.

Population growth is now the foe of both land and lifestyle. University of Colorado physicist A1 Bartlett has rightly compared "smart growth" to a first-class ticket on the Titanic.

A1 Gore, who claims environmentalist credentials, has been mute on U.S. population growth implications.

When a young New Hampshire woman working at an herbalist store asked candidate Bill Bradley how he could keep touting economic growth given our finite resource endowment, Bradley initially did not even understand her question. A *New York Times* reporter first placed the woman into the category of "hostile questioner." Then, after Bradley gave a temporizing response, the reporter asked her if she had a preference among the candidates. Reaching the same conclusion as I, she replied she would prefer to vote for herself.

Meanwhile, at his last press conference of the century, President Clinton explained his efforts to gain a World Trade Organization accord with China. Saying it was in both our economic and strategic interest, he opted for a constructive rather than a confrontational relationship with China. This was especially so over "the next several decades, as China's economy grows to match the size of its population."

Regardless of one's stance on U.S./China relations, one should understand that China's economy cannot emulate that of today's United States. John Ryan, research director of Seattle's Northwest Environment Watch, points out that if the entire world (China equaling about 25 percent) had the auto usage of North America, global petroleum consumption would quadruple and

B. Meredith Burke, Ph.D., a demographer who has worked here and abroad, is Population Policy Advisor to the Ecology Center of Southern California.

emissions of heat-trapping carbon dioxide would double “even as climatologists agree that we need to cut back globally by 60 percent or more to save our climate.” Petroleum reserve experts such as L.F. Ivanhoe of the Colorado School of Mines and Richard Duncan of the Institute on Energy and Man foresee a peaking of world oil production by 2010, then a permanent decline.

Our politicians understandably, but reprehensibly, wish to avoid asking how North Americans can curtail their resource use by redefining the good life and re-engineering society to achieve it without insupportable resource demands.

Ironically, as political parties sidestep patently federal responsibilities, they have intruded into the most personal of all realms, that of sex and childbearing. The good ol’ boys of both major parties plus the Reform Party treat control of women’s bodies as a negotiable.

Consider the insulting ease with which Reform Party powers abandoned its plank favoring legal abortion when Pat Buchanan, a legal abortion foe, asserted his suitability as the party’s nominee. Consider Rep. Chris Smith blackmailing the administration by tying approval of U.N. funding to strictures on reproductive health care funding — and the administration’s caving in on this.

What if Rep. Smith had demanded a repeal of the 14th Amendment?

Would not the entire country have denounced this attempt to reinstate slavery? Clearly, it is acceptable to partially enslave women in a way that enslavement by race no longer is.

Until politicians find using reproductive autonomy as a “trading chip” morally repugnant, women will not be totally free.

So I declare my candidacy — of the as-yet-unformed “Sustainability Party.” I endorse pragmatic liberalism, a philosophy that recognizes hard choices are unavoidable in a world with limits. My platform exalts ecological survival and reproductive responsibility, and I propose a congressionally binding national referendum among all registered voters to determine support for a rational population policy.

I possess singular qualifications. Via the Internet I can already muster thousands of supporters. My dozens of newspaper columns on population, environment, abortion rights, and immigration are posted on countless Web sites. I am past chairperson of the National Women’s Political Caucus of San Diego, and a veteran of one Renaissance Institute Weekend. A Ph.D. demographer and specialist on Japanese female labor force patterns, I have consulted in Africa and the Caribbean. As a specialist on health policy and bioethics, I co-authored a book on sociological and ethical aspects of prenatal testing. For the past year I co-hosted a cable TV program in Santa Barbara, “Environmentally Yours.”

In a lighter vein, I bake chocolate chip cookies famous around the world. And, although I don’t play the saxophone, I did once study singing at the Stanford Jazz Workshop.

Though I am not kidding about wanting to run for president, I do see that my lack of 100 million dollars makes this unlikely.

Therefore, I keep seeking a candidate who will endorse ecological pragmatism, nonnegotiable reproductive rights, and environmental survival.

So far I have not found him. •

The Liberal Case for Immigration Reform

[On August 15, 1996, Dr. Burke wrote a “manifesto” as a founding document for a group to be called “Liberals for Immigration Reform.”]

WHEREAS we believe that those governing a society have primary obligations to the electorate to safeguard the environment and the health of current residents and to pass along a self-sustaining and healthy environment to our descendants; and

WHEREAS, two governmental commissions in 1972 and 1996 have recommended in strongest terms a population stabilization policy for the United States, acknowledging the implications for immigration policy; and

WHEREAS, signs of an overstressed environment are clearly evident in depleted fisheries, unhealthy air quality, paved-over farmland permanently removed from crop-growing for all generations to come, congested, still-growing urban populations swollen beyond those endorsed by Americans in repeated polls, and a level of resource consumption that is draining the globe as well as our country; and

WHEREAS, the legislators of the Democratic Party and the boards of several progressive environmental protection organizations, traditionally the defenders of the environment and civic well-being, have consistently rejected calls by Party and organization members

for demographic and environmental accountability for their actions in the area of immigration, now and for the foreseeable future the primary source (and by the year 2030, the sole source, counting in the descendants of post-1970 newcomers) of all this country's population increase; and

WHEREAS, numerous scholars have now confirmed what members of our minority and poor communities have personally experienced, that the employment, housing, schools, and life chances of our most disadvantaged citizens have been adversely affected by the large influx of newcomers,

WE HEREBY band together to strengthen the voice of liberals calling for environmentally rational population and immigration policies and immigration reform.

WE CALL FOR:

- the promulgation of a national population goal consistent with ecological limits *and* the city size and wilderness access endorsed by the majority of Americans.
- a legal requirement that all federal policies dealing with the sources of population growth — childbearing and immigration — must be consistent with the accepted goals.
- a legal requirement that all federal actions/policies must consider the resulting regional effects (environmental and demographic) and must refrain from adding to the burden disproportionately assumed by regions experiencing the bulk of recent population growth, environmental deterioration, and the loss of irreplaceable wetlands and other ecologically essential natural habitats.
- a legal requirement for an agricultural policy favoring family farms and the retention of a land-based rural population; and withholding public subsidies, including reduced water rates, from large agricultural corporations.
- a national referendum if necessary on support for U.S. funding of international family planning efforts to reduce the demographic pressures fueling high levels of immigration.