

Financial Post - December 11, 2009

Fear depopulation, not overpopulation: Canada and most European countries now have birth rates below the 2.1 replacement rate

By Maurice Vellacott

Diane Francis authored a very disturbing and 40-years-outdated column on Tuesday (“The real inconvenient truth: The whole world needs to adopt China’s one-child policy,” Dec. 8). Such rhetoric about overpopulation flies in the face of the depopulation dynamics that are striking fear into many politicians and economists around the world.

But just as disturbing is Ms. Francis’ sanitized view of China’s one-child policy, which she recommends. This policy has been thoroughly documented as being a forced abortion policy, with all the outrageous abuses against women that one might expect from such a policy. China is facing a serious gender imbalance because of its massive slaughter of unborn girls, due to parents’ preference for boys.

If the Chinese hadn’t been limited to only one child, they wouldn’t have felt the need to make this deadly choice. This one-child policy also led to a number of high-profile refugee situations as a few brave women, threatened with the killing of their children, sought to flee China. And some are trying to fight the brutality from within the country. Ms. Francis should do more research before she conjures the image of China’s one-child policy as a worthwhile depopulation strategy.

Furthermore, depopulation — not overpopulation — has already been thoroughly exposed as today’s problem, not a solution. A cross-section of professionals, including economists, demographers and social scientists, have recently produced two documentaries on this problem: Demographic Winter and Demographic Bomb.

Canada and most, if not all, European countries now have birth rates below the replacement rate of 2.1. The documentaries are must-viewing for anyone serious about addressing the challenges of population today. As the producers of Demographic Winter note: “Worldwide, birthrates have declined by more than 50% in the past 30 years (since 1979). There are now 59 nations, with 44% of the world’s population, with below-replacement fertility. Sometime in this century, the world’s population will begin to decline. (The United Nations Population Division says that, worldwide, we could achieve below-replacement fertility by 2030.) At a certain point, the decline will become rapid. We may even reach what demographers call population free fall in our lifetimes. Russia is losing 750,000 people a year. Its population (currently 145 million) is expected to fall by one-third by 2050.”

By 2015, the number of deaths in Europe will have outstripped the number of births. By 2060, the ratio of people of working age to those over age 65 will be two to one. The growth momentum of Europe’s 27 member states will continue to carry it until 2035; after this the population will begin to decline drastically from a predicted 521 million to 506 million by 2060. These conclusions come from a report released last summer by Eurostat, the European Union’s statistical service.

Economists have been lamenting for years a looming crisis with social welfare programs as the proportion of elderly people to workers in many Western countries declines. Nations with social welfare systems also need children to survive. A burgeoning elderly population combined with a shrinking work force will lead to a train wreck for state pension systems.

Ms. Francis pretends that economies can flourish with depopulation. On the contrary, the past century has seen the largest population growth in global history, yet simultaneously, the standard of living has risen and life expectancies have increased across the globe. People typically reduce spending as they age and children move away from home, so as the older age cohort increases relative to a nation's population, the country's economic health can be expected to decline.

An article published in The Globe and Mail in January of this year (Baby Boom best bet to cure China's ills, Jan. 28), presented evidence that even China was in urgent need of population growth: "Population is at the heart of long-term economic expansion," writes China scholar Derek Scissors in a paper for the Heritage Foundation, a U.S. think tank. "China is soon to leave what has been an extended demographic pattern supporting economic growth and enter a very different pattern entailing difficult policy choices."

In summary, I was shocked to read Ms. Francis' advocacy for depopulation, especially drawing on the imagery of China's ruthless one-child forced abortion policy. Hopefully Ms. Francis will have further opportunity to examine this significant topic and explore the current relevant studies.

Maurice Vellacott is a Conservative Member of Parliament for Saskatoon-Wanuskewin.

© 2009 The National Post Company.