

## PRO-NATALIST POLICIES

by David Wood

FIGURE 1 shows how the world's total population has grown at an accelerating rate since the start of the 19th century. The 'projected growth' beyond 2007 is shown in the shaded section. Notice how expected population growth begins to decelerate from the middle of the 21st century.

This likely slow-down in population growth is projected from the falling birth rates which have been recorded in the more economically developed countries (MEDCs) since the end of the 20th century. When birth rates fall below the replacement rate needed to maintain the population at its present level, the total population starts to fall. ('Replacement rate' is defined as 2.08 babies per women of child-bearing age.) This trend is clearly shown in the demographic transition model (Figure 2).

Governments become concerned when birth rates fall too far. For example, Italy's current population of 56 million is expected to decline to around 41 million by 2050. This fall is likely to create problems, with:

- too few consumers and skilled workers to keep the economy going

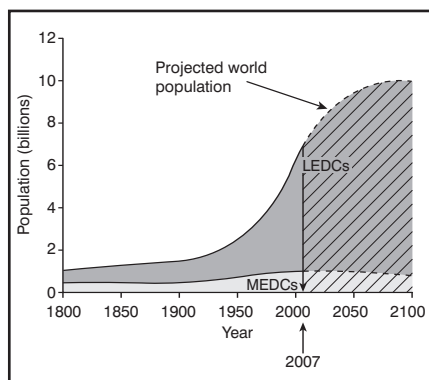


Figure 1: Projected growth in world population to 2100

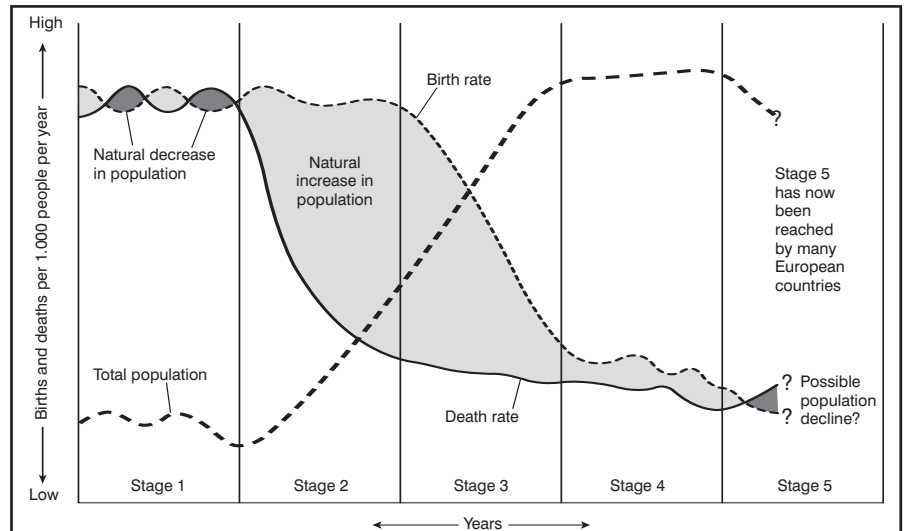


Figure 2: The demographic transition model

- decreasing tax revenues and increasing pension and health care costs as the population ages.

### The likely impact of population decline – does it matter?

You might imagine that a falling birth rate in a crowded country such as Britain will have lots of positive effects, including less road congestion and cheaper house prices. However, the negative impacts are likely to outweigh the positives.

Germany provides a good example. Without an increase in the current birth rate of 8.25 per 1,000 (or increased immigration), the German workforce will fall by 40% over the next 50 years. Since a growing workforce is one of the important factors in generating a country's overall wealth, it is likely that Germany's prosperity may be damaged.

Workers also spend the money they earn, so there will be a knock-on effect on services such as shops, restaurants and other services. Even

if birth rates were to double overnight, it could take at least 20 years for a country such as Germany to turn around the negative impacts of declining population.

Many other European countries face Germany's potential dilemma. Figure 3 shows how death rates are either just equal to (or just marginally greater than) birth rates in at least 15 European countries.

### Pro-natalist policies

In the past, a minority of national governments have attempted to introduce **pro-natalist policies** in an effort to encourage higher birth rates. However, such policies were often associated with dictatorial governments such as Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy or Stalin's Russia. Such totalitarian governments needed a large population to provide a ready source of cheap factory labour as well as conscripts to feed their military regimes.

Because of this somewhat negative image, many Western democracies

Country	Birth rate (per 1,000 population)							Death rate (per 1,000 population)						
	2006	2005	2004	1990	1985	1980	1975	2006	2005	2004	1990	1985	1980	1975
Austria	8.7	8.8	8.9	11.6	11.6	12.0	12.5	9.8	9.7	9.6	10.6	11.9	12.2	12.8
Belgium	10.4	10.5	10.6	12.6	11.5	12.7	12.2	10.3	10.2	10.2	10.6	11.2	11.6	12.2
Czech Republic	9.0	9.1	9.1	13.4	14.5	16.4	19.6	10.6	10.5	10.5	11.7	11.8	12.1	11.5
France	12.0	12.2	12.3	13.5	13.9	14.8	14.1	9.1	9.1	9.1	9.3	10.1	10.2	10.6
Germany	8.2	8.3	8.4	11.4	9.6	10.0	9.7	10.6	10.6	10.4	11.2	11.5	11.6	12.1
Greece	9.7	9.7	9.7	10.2	11.7	15.4	15.7	10.2	10.2	10.1	9.3	9.4	9.1	8.9
Ireland	14.4	14.5	14.5	15.1	17.6	21.9	21.5	7.8	7.8	7.9	9.1	9.4	9.7	10.6
Italy	8.7	8.9	9.1	9.8	10.1	11.2	14.8	10.4	10.3	10.2	9.4	9.5	9.7	9.9
Netherlands	10.9	11.1	11.4	13.3	12.3	12.8	13.0	8.7	8.7	8.7	8.6	8.5	8.1	8.3
Norway	11.5	11.7	11.9	14.3	12.3	12.5	14.1	9.4	9.4	9.5	10.7	10.7	10.1	9.9
Poland	9.8	9.7	10.6	14.3	18.2	19.5	18.9	9.9	9.8	10.0	10.2	10.3	9.8	8.7
Portugal	10.7	10.8	10.9	11.8	12.8	16.4	19.1	10.5	10.4	10.4	10.4	9.6	9.9	10.4
Romania	10.7	10.7	10.7	13.6	15.8	—	—	11.8	11.7	11.7	10.6	10.9	—	—
Switzerland	9.7	9.8	9.8	12.5	11.6	11.3	12.3	8.5	8.5	8.4	9.5	9.2	9.2	8.7
UK	10.7	10.8	10.9	13.9	13.3	13.5	12.5	10.1	10.2	10.2	11.2	11.8	11.8	11.9

Figure 3: Birth and death rates for some European countries

Sources: UN and US Census Bureau

'The UK government has never actively sought to influence the size or composition of the population,' says Professor Paul Boyle of St Andrews University. 'Official statements adopt the view that decisions about childbearing are for people themselves. Anything else would require a change in government thinking and a public acceptance of active pro-natalism.'

Figure 4: The British government's attitude to pro-natalist policies

Source: *The Scotsman*, 13 October 2004  
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have moved away from policies dealing with such private matters as childbirth (Figure 4). Instead, an increasing number of democratic governments in Europe have been experimenting with 'liberal' pro-natalist policies which seek to 'encourage' rather than 'force' women to have more children.

Examples of this pro-natalist approach include tax advantages or better welfare benefits for women who have more than one child. Family-friendly employment conditions (eg flexible hours, job sharing or affordable child care) are also encouraged by many governments to help women to have more children.

Often these policies are described as being 'gender friendly' rather than

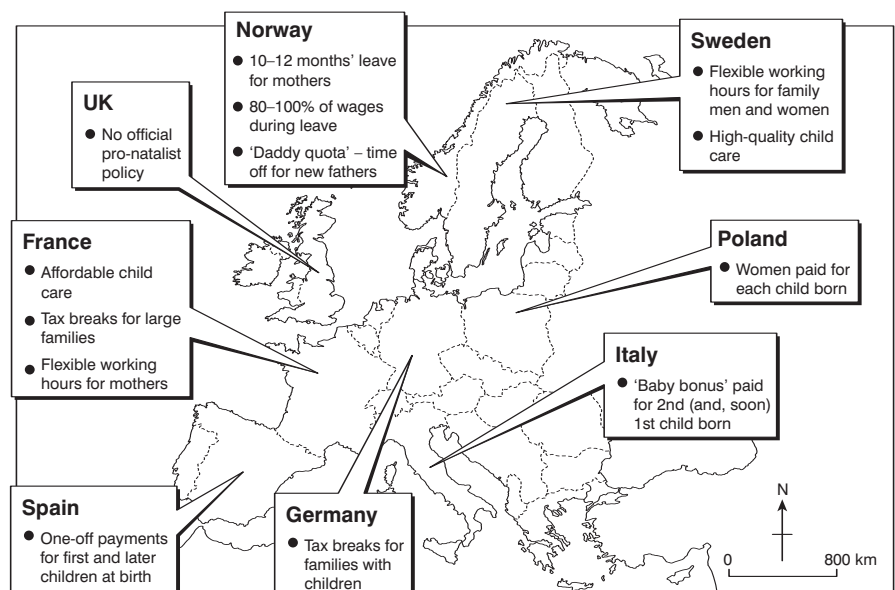


Figure 5: Some examples of pro-natalist policies in Europe

'pro-natalist'. In other words, they are linked to issues of 'gender equality' (or equal rights for men and women) by policy makers.

While increased immigration might also solve many of the issues arising from falling birth rates, most European governments have avoided an issue that is viewed by many as extremely controversial and politically sensitive. One regional exception is Scotland where the country's First Minister, Jack McConnell, has publicly suggested that a positive immigration policy should be introduced to solve Scotland's skills shortages.

The following case studies outline some examples of European pro-natalist policies (see Figure 5).

## Case Studies

### Italy

Until the 1970s, families of up to five children were common in Italy. However, the birth rate is now 1.3 per 1,000 and is the second lowest in Western Europe. Italy's population is also quickly ageing. While just over 20% of Italians are currently over 65, this number is likely to double by 2050.

The government introduced a pro-natalist policy in 2003 called the 'baby bonus'. Couples having a second child received a 'bonus' of about £600. However, after two years take-up was extremely low. As a consequence, discussions are now taking place to introduce an additional bonus for firstborn children. Meantime, the retirement age has been raised to 57 for both men and women. By 2008, this will be raised to 60 with workers only being able to retire if they have completed at least 40 years of pension contributions.

## France

France has the highest registered birth rate in Western Europe after Ireland. The average French woman currently has at least two children. This is partly because France was one of the first countries in Europe to introduce child-friendly policies at the end of the 20th century.

Examples of long-standing pro-natalist policies in France include:

- cheap, income-linked state child care
- generous tax breaks for larger families
- making it legally easier for women to continue in work while caring for their families (eg flexible hours, time off for family matters).

Currently, France's population is meeting its replacement level. The present figure of 61.7 million people should reach 64 million by 2050. However, 25% of this increase will be due to immigration with only 75% due to child births.

## Norway

As you can see from Figure 5, Norway is fairly typical of those countries in Western Europe experiencing low birth rates below the population replacement rate of 2.08 children per family. However, Norwegian governments have a long record of 'family-friendly' (or 'gender-equality') policies. For example, paid leave for employees having a baby began as far back as 1956. The present system of 10–12 months' paid leave for a mother (at 80–100% of wage or salary) was

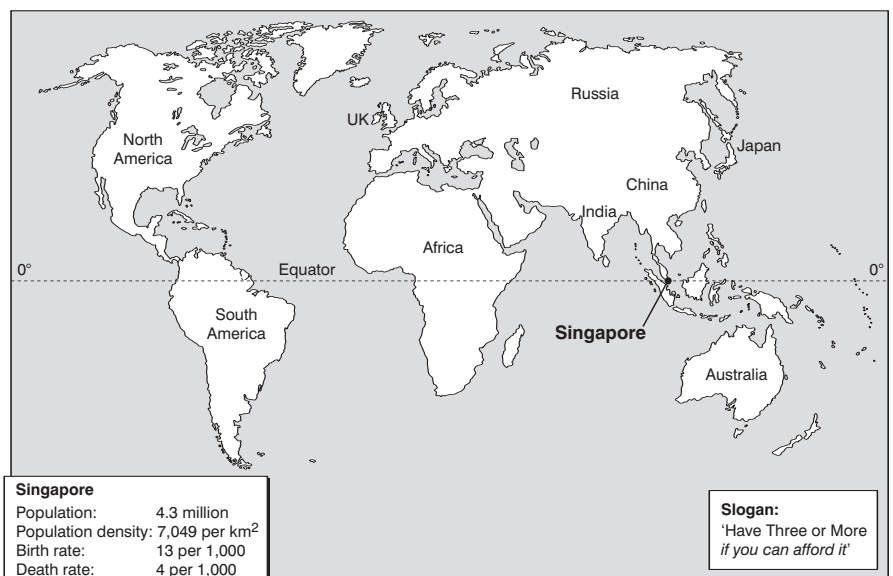


Figure 6: Singapore and its population

introduced in 1993. New mothers have a choice about this but must take at least six weeks' paid leave by law.

As a consequence, 5 out of 6 women aged between 30 and 39 remain in employment in Norway. Fathers have not been forgotten in Norwegian gender policy. When a new baby is born, men are encouraged to take off as much time as possible. This has been called the 'daddy quota' by Norwegians!

## Pro-natalist policies outside Europe

Outside Europe, fewer countries are experiencing birth rates which are exceeded by death rates. Where birth rates are declining such as in the USA, population levels are often compensated by a steady stream of younger immigrants of working age.

Japan and South Korea, on the other hand, are two notable exceptions. Both countries are likely to suffer a large decline in the coming decades unless birth rates increase or immigration is encouraged. The situation is so serious in Japan that it has been estimated the country would need 10 million immigrants every year for the next 50 years just to maintain the current working age to retirement age ratio!

Without such an increase, the working age in Japan may have to be raised to 77! The current birth rate is only 1.34. Meanwhile, the Japanese government tries to encourage larger families and even some businesses have become involved. For example, the Daihatsu car company teamed up with the city of Ikeda to offer residents £1,400 plus the free use of a car for a year to have a fourth child!

South Korea, on the other hand, is actively recruiting around 150,000 workers a year from other parts of South-east Asia.

## The case of Singapore

Singapore (Figure 6) is a tiny city state which originally had an anti-natalist policy to reduce the birth rate. However, the government became concerned when the birth rate fell below the population replacement level in the late 1970s. It was even more concerned that female university graduates appeared to be having fewer children.

## The future

As many countries improve their living standards, falling birth rates may become the norm and pro-natalist policies will become essential. The alternative – increased immigration from abroad – raises many controversial issues for both the donor and receiving countries.

# Activities

- 1 (a) Which group of countries is currently experiencing declining birth rates?
- (b) Study Figure 1. At what point does world population growth appear to slow down?
- (c) What is meant by the term 'replacement rate'?
- (d) List two problems a declining birth rate may bring to a country.

2 Work in groups for this activity.

- (a) Suggest two positive impacts that a declining population might bring.
- (b) By how much is Germany's workforce expected to fall if the current low birth rates continue?
- (c) List 10 other European countries that are currently experiencing birth rates below population replacement level.

3 Copy out the statement below and then refer to the examples of European pro-natalist policies and fill in the blanks.

Until the 1970s, families of up to \_\_\_ children were common in Italy. However, the birth rate is now below replacement level at \_\_\_ per 1,000. One consequence is that the percentage of the population aged over 65 is likely to \_\_\_ by 2050. In 2003, the Italian government introduced a pro-natalist policy called the \_\_\_\_\_. This has not been successful, however, and people

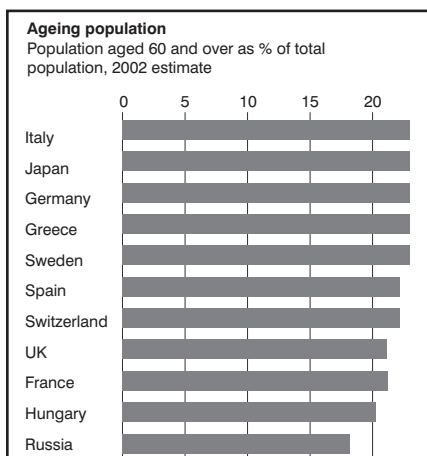


Figure 7: Pattern of ageing in selected countries

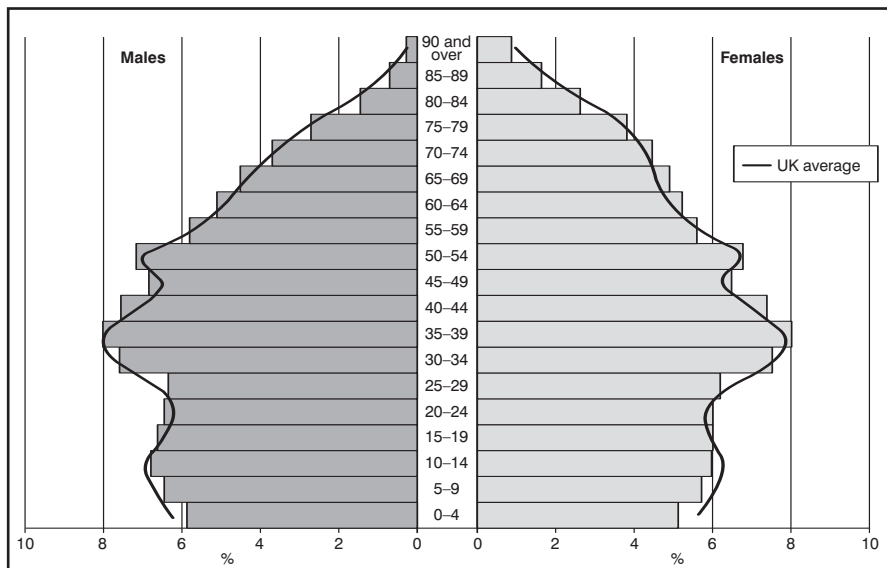


Figure 8: Population pyramid for Scotland

Source: UK Census 2001

are having to work longer to age \_\_\_\_, which is still generous by European standards.

France's pro-natalist policies have been more successful. As well as affordable child care, there are \_\_\_\_\_ for larger families and \_\_\_\_\_ hours and time off for women who continue to work after giving birth.

4 Study Figure 3. Construct an appropriate graph which compares birth rates and death rates for the countries shown.

5 Study Figure 7.

- (a) Describe the pattern of ageing population in the 11 countries shown.
- (b) Suggest how the government of *one* of these countries might offset the effects of its ageing population by borrowing ideas from current pro-natalist policies operating elsewhere.

6 Study Figure 8.

- (a) Describe Scotland's population structure as shown by the 2001 census.
- (b) Scotland's First Minister, Jack McConnell, has proposed population increase by immigration as a means of overcoming the negative economic impact of Scotland's declining birth rate. Write a short report discussing the possible positive and negative

impacts of a pro-immigration policy on a future Scotland.

7 Split into discussion groups. Use the evidence from this unit to list the arguments for and against pro-natalist policies. Groups should then feedback during a class debriefing session.

8 Log on to [www.womensnews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2253](http://www.womensnews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2253). Use the data in the website to write an evaluation of attitudes in Germany to women, careers and childbirth.