

Population Pressures in the Pacific Islands

IN 1958, a United Nations report unfolded the prospect of one of the greatest dramas which has faced the human race. It revealed that, of recent years, the percentage rate of increase in world population is over twice that from 1850 to 1950—an increase from 0.8 per cent per year to 1.7 per cent. If present trends continue, the existing world population of about 2,500 million will reach 5,000 million in about 30 years, 6,000 million before the year 2,000, and 13,000 million by 2050.

We may shrug off the problems arising from world population growth because we can do little about them; but we cannot shrug off the population situation in the Pacific Islands because the welfare of Pacific Islanders is the responsibility of New Zealand and other metropolitan governments. Population growth in the Pacific will therefore affect our responsibility as electors. It will affect our pockets as taxpayers and raise issues for us as citizens because of the increased migration of Islanders.

The world population increase of about 1.7 per cent a year is lower than in quite a number of Pacific Islands. For example, the population of Samoa is growing at the rate of about 3 per cent a year, which is among the highest in the world. But, most important is the probability that if measures to improve health, nursing and other social services continue the rate of growth will increase in the near future.

In 1947, the governments of Australia, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, gave effect to their responsibility for the welfare of Island peoples by establishing the South Pacific Commission to help Island peoples and Territorial Administrations. The Commission's area runs from Guam and the U.S. Trust Territories in the north, down through New Guinea, the Solomons and the New Hebrides to New Caledonia, and thence eastward to cover Fiji, the Samoas, Tonga, the Cook Islands, Tahiti and French Oceania.

The population in these islands is probably about 3½ million but this can only be an educated guess because of the difficulty in getting reliable statistics.

But there is little doubt that known and prospective resources are small—even in the great island of New Guinea—in relation to the number of islanders. If population in the islands grows only at the same rate as world population

The text of a talk given from the YC stations recently by PROFESSOR H. BELSHAW

is expected to do, there might well be seven million Pacific Islanders in 30 years.

Here are a few rough indications of increases which would occur in islands close to New Zealand if recent rates were maintained. If, as is quite likely, improved social services further reduce mortality, the population growth would be more rapid—apart from family planning or heavy migration.

In 30 years the population of Fiji would increase from the 1957 figure of 361,000 to 720,000. There would be 31,000 Cook Islanders instead of 17,000. Instead of 60,000 people in Tonga there would be 145,000. In Western Samoa, the population of about 100,000 would grow to 240,000. Apart from large migration to Hawaii, the 20,000 people in American Samoa would increase to 64,000. In these five territories alone, the population would grow from 560,000 to about 1,200,000 in 30 years.

The South Pacific Commission has recognised the overshadowing importance of the population situation by sponsoring studies of population growth and assessments of their effects. Population pressure is also beginning to worry some of the more informed leaders among the island people themselves. These leaders meet periodically at the South Pacific Conference organised by the Commission. At the last conference held in May, 1959, at Rabaul, Mr Semea Sikoori, a Fijian delegate, stated that the acceleration of health measures could result in over-population in some Pacific territories. The answer, he said, lay, of course, in family planning. Coming from a Pacific Islander, this is an unusual and highly significant conclusion.

A writer on New Guinea in a recent *Round Table* puts the central problem in a nutshell. He wrote, "As the mortality rate is now declining with better medical services, an explosive increase in the size of the indigenous population can be expected within the next decade, so that the supply of foodstuffs must be augmented." He then drew attention to the difficulty in increasing food supplies.

We are concerned, of course, with more than food—with maintaining or improving the economic and social welfare of island people. This covers other consumer goods, housing, recreation, transport, education and other public services; but the basic requirement is more food.

Except on atolls, there are few islands in which all the land is cultivated—for example there are relatively large, unfarmed areas in New Caledonia, Fiji, Samoa and the Cook Islands. But most of this land is infertile, while, with few exceptions, Pacific islands are not richly endowed with mineral wealth. The latest report of the New Zealand Department of Island Territories, referring to the Cook Islands, used the phrase, "limited economic potential." It is a phrase which

could be applied very generally. Moreover, in wet tropical areas, plant nutrients are leached rapidly away, especially when forest cover is removed. The traditional reply to this problem is shifting cultivation. An area is cleared, planted for a year or two, and left for the forest to recapture and rejuvenate for cultivation in 10-12 years. But as population grows, the cycle is shortened, there is less time for natural recovery and soil exhaustion and erosion occur. This has already happened in Samoa, and with denser population the problem will become more serious.

To feed any considerable increase in numbers, would require settled cultivation, composting, the use of fertilisers, and a renovation in agricultural techniques. There is some possibility of developing fish resources, but in many tropical islands, the picture of reefs teeming with fish is another illusion. It would be necessary to restock and control reef fishing, establish fresh water fisheries and develop deep sea fishing. And again, all this would need new techniques and capital for boats and gear.

Water is another limiting factor in many islands. Plenteous rain soaks into the coral or volcanic rocks so that to get more water you have to spend money and use labour on reservoirs, rain collection systems, pipes and so on.

The moral is that, apart from substantial improvements in technology and heavy capital expenditure in relation to income, national resources impose a limit on food supply. In many islands, probably the great majority, this would make it most difficult, if not impossible, to provide adequate food for double the present populations. In a few territories, mining may alleviate the situation, but does not affect the general picture. Tourism may make a contribution and so may the development of local industries and commercial fisheries. But it would be dangerous wishful thinking to suppose that industrialisation on any scale could provide the answer.

I have painted a gloomy picture, not because I practise the gloomy science of economics, but because the picture is gloomy and because it is urgently necessary for the government responsible to recognise population growth as the dominant factor and direct policy accordingly.

Let me summarise a few of the effects. Here I shall be bluntly brief:

First, where there are different peoples, as in Fiji, the dangers of racial tension will be increased. Secondly, because contacts with developed countries have increased aspirations for betterment—not only for more social services, but also for more consumer goods—the failure to obtain these because of population pressure is likely to lead to social and political unrest. The main exports are agricultural—products such as copra, bananas, cocoa and oranges and tomatoes. Transport difficulties from widely scattered islands and market restrictions—as may apply for example

to Fijian bananas—already present formidable difficulties in developing exports. But if more land must be diverted to food production, there will be less to export and obtain exchange with, for the consumer goods the people want. To get more food, more people will have to go without many consumer goods they want. Thirdly, there will be increased needs for capital for production, schools, hospitals, local transport and so on and expenditure for social services—hence greater demands on New Zealand and other metropolitan taxpayers. Subsidies and grants from New Zealand to the Cook Islands have risen from £100,000 to £391,000 over the years, and revenue from the territory has increased from £86,000 to £444,000. The New Zealand taxpayer contributes alone £23 per head of island population. These amounts may be expected to grow. Constitutionally, the Cook Islands are a part of New Zealand and our responsibility cannot be evaded.

Fourthly, there will be more Islanders wanting to come to New Zealand. What are the implications for policy? I repeat that we cannot evade the responsibility to continue such financial and other assistance as is needed to help island people help themselves in improving their welfare. I will not enter into the religious controversy, or to whether family planning is morally to be condemned; but I have no hesitation in saying that we should first scientifically assess the population situation and the economic and other effects in the territories for which we are responsible, then educate the people as to the effect of population growth, and give them information about family planning. We should leave the moral judgment to them and not presume to make it for them.

Finally, we should have a more positive public policy to assist Cook Island and other Island immigrants to adjust to the New Zealand conditions. Private agencies are doing a splendid job in helping island immigrants, but we need to think out the problem afresh and assess future prospects and possibilities. The numbers are not large. In 1957 there were about 6,400 Polynesian islanders in New Zealand, but if they increase in numbers, the problem of absorption will grow and we should prepare ourselves for it in our own interests as well as those of the Islanders.



HOW LONG TILL WE STARVE?

IN the time it takes Big Ben to chime the hour, 15 people are added to the world's population—one every second. At that rate, in 40 years there will be twice as many people on the earth as there are now. With half the present population hungry most of the time, how can twice that number be fed properly? In *How Long Till We Starve?* to be heard from YA and YZ stations at 9.15 p.m. on Thursday, October 29, this problem is considered by a group of experts. They discuss not only the possibilities of breaking in more land for food growing or producing more from the land in use, but also a redistribution of food or population, and ways in which more food might be won from the sea—or made in the laboratory. *How Long Till We Starve?* was written by Bruce Broadhead, and those who contribute include Professor L. W. McCaskill, Dr L. J. Wild, Dr Daniel E. Brady, Professor H. R. Rodwell, Dr H. B. Lowe, Professor L. R. Richardson, Professor V. J. Chapman, Dr R. Truscot and Dr G. A. Currie, who sums up.

