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Temporarily New: On Low Fertility and Prospect of Pro-natal Policies

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Abstract

Concern about the low levels of fertility in Europe appears to be spreading. In political circles voices advocating the design and implementation of pro-natal policies are growing louder. The traditional fear of population decline is re-fuelled in numerous conference papers and at meetings specifically set up to let policymakers meet demographic experts. This paper aims to contribute to the discussion by arguing that just as in the 1930s, and in the early 1970s when fertility first dropped below replacement level, expressed concerns do not necessarily lead to pro-natal policies. After a brief discussion of the *raisons d'être* of governments, and of the purposes and types of population policies, a series of propositions is presented that make it reasonable, at the very least understandable, that democratically elected governments act with great prudence in such matters. Their basic policy goals are not endangered and they are faced with other more serious priorities. Europe's past has mainly yielded lamentable examples, the position of national administrations *vis-à-vis* their population has changed so that fertility is largely beyond governmental control, and it is probably wrong to assume that the common difference between mean desired family size and completed family size is essentially due to the lack of support for families. It is concluded that concern about numbers may be a temporary phenomenon and that in many ways it makes more sense for governments to invest heavily in the children that are being born.

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