

**Postponement of Childbearing in Europe.  
Statistics Austria 1 – 3 December 2005**

**David Coleman –Discussant’s comments 3 December**

In posing as a discussant I find myself in a state of high embarrassment. I seem to be hoist with my own petard. My general view is that the role of ‘discussant’ should at all times be abolished, given that too many discussants devote their time to opinionated time-wasting windbagery, in which they hijack 20 minutes in order not to discuss the distinguished contributions, which have gone before them, but to ventilate their own private prejudices on various irrelevant topics at excessive length. So either I embarrass myself by being right or I embarrass myself by being wrong.

What I had in mind to do was to make one or two elementary linking comments, insofar these very diverse papers can be connected at all, devote a short time to comments on each one of them (including Dirk van de Kaa’s from last night, lest that that very interesting paper be forgotten), and lastly to make some additional comments on other topics.

One of the most striking aspects of what we have heard this morning and last night was how extraordinarily unimportant postponement appeared to be in policy considerations. Peter McDonald talked about the desirable consequences in relation to timing of some of the proposals he was making. But he dismissed the notion that policies could be targeted specifically on timing as opposed to effects on timing, which arose from policies devoted to other ends. Paul Demeny thought it was generally rather unimportant in today’s demographic structures, and Dirk thought the whole project was a waste of time anyway. What this morning’s session says about the previous two days devoted to ‘postponement’ I have to leave to you, but not, it seems, very much.

It was good to see that a lot of issues were vigorously controversial and non-consensual. It is a shame, perhaps, that Paul Demeny and Dirk van de Kaa were not in the same session, as opposed to being safely separated by a complete evening and night. It was also interesting to see how much politics came into it, in a way, inevitably when talking about policy. Some of the speakers had great ambitions for political change. Dirk van de Kaa was very keen that there should be irrevocable changes in society, which would lead to some kind of final end point of development, making sure that his second demographic transition was well and truly accomplished beyond the possibility of argument. To some extent, Peter McDonald came to a rather similar conclusion from a different starting point, taking the view that there had to be a complete regime change; a once-for-all radical change in society. All that greatly expands what some of us might think are the rather more modest aims of normal government.

One way of briefly summarize these five papers dealing with family policy is to paraphrase Dirk van de Kaa as saying “don’t even think of doing it”, Paul Demeny as “do it radically”, according to Jan Hoem, “Swedes can do it without even trying”, according to Peter McDonald, “you got to do it now and I’m going to tell you how to do it” while

Gerda would say, “well, maybe you can do it, it depends a little bit on context”. Dirk’s reviews, as always, impresses one with a characteristically deeply erudite and thoughtful *tour d’horizon*, which introduced many ideas that I would never have thought of. Some points, inevitably, of disagreement, especially on the idea of ‘temporarily new’; that family policy will be a transient concern. I do not believe for a moment that governments will be allowed to forget about family policy. There will be societies where, if the birthrate remains low, the consequences are really going to become apparent even to the most recalcitrant electorates and even to the most dumb and self-serving politicians. Something would have to be done. Dirk spoke of the preservation of the integrity of the state as one of the two functions of the state. I would suggest, perhaps following Paul Demeny, that the integrity of the state is very seriously compromised by ultra-low fertility, particularly of the southern European kind, partly because the future of the state itself is actually imperilled. That point was made earlier in the meeting by a Finnish participant. I thought she was dead right. How could she possibly be wrong? It is logical to be worried about declining birthrates, if you are a small country. And there is another separate dimension to the integrity of the state presented by ultra-low birthrates in southern Europe. That is, if an attempt is made to if you try to keep the population size or workforce constant by immigration, than the state disappears in its original form by another means anyway.

‘Government control’ was a further very interesting political point. Dirk’s vision of government control, as being very much (a) desirable and (b) currently eroded in what he calls the “newly disordered society” was at variance with the views of others who see no particular difficulty for governments to get their policies through. It was perhaps slightly surprising to hear the view that somehow it was peculiar and undesirable to have electorates doing what the government was telling them not to do, or possibly electorates not doing what the EU told them to do, for example in rejecting the EU constitution. It seems to me this is rather normal in democracy; if it happens then it suggests that democracy is working rather well. Perhaps one can get too accustomed to living in a society where political change is stifled by cosy ineffectual consensus governments that last for 20 or 30 years. Then, of course, one is surprised when real democracy rears its head.

It is interesting to go back to basics and to reassert the underlying truth of what Paul Demeny said, that all demography is actually Hungarian, starting from John Hajnal and various others. His raising the point, otherwise ignored, that Europe can live with a smaller population, is very welcome. In the context of low fertility, we tend to think all the time of population ageing. But there are two ugly sisters here. The big one is population ageing, the lesser one is population decline. Perhaps she is not ugly at all. Like Paul, I think that some small degree of population decline might well be welcome in some parts of Europe, as long as it came to a stop at the end of the day, was slow and slight and as long as accompanying population ageing could be managed. That is something about which I think we might have talked a little more.

The radical policy relating children to pensions entitlement ‘thinking out of the box’, as he likes to say, is exiting. But it ignores one or two things which I thought had been quite

well established in demography. As Tim Dyson has said, at the end of the day, children work because people have children. People do not have children in order that they may work. That implied, as John Cleland and Chris Wilson pointed out in a paper in 1987, that high fertility was not economically rational in historical Europe and may well not have been true in the traditional third world either, in that people do not have children in order to provide themselves with a private workforce or a private army. Maybe, by the same logic, they cannot be expected to have children to provide for a private nursing home for themselves, especially in 60 or 70 years' time. Peter McDonald dismissed the idea that families or mothers would think 20 years ahead when thinking of long-term benefits arising out of childbearing when their children got older. With this proposal one would have to wait to get a benefit until retirement at age 60 or 70, or perhaps even 75 if retirement age continues to get greater. The notion that a pension promise may survive perfectly preserved through possibly 15 or 20 general elections and changes of government is possibly a bit optimistic.

Jan Hoem's paper on the 'Swedish speed premium' provided a welcome interlude. It demonstrated something that did work: a clear-cut policy with clear-cut consequences, which hardly anyone was moved to dispute. The question is how far this can be made to work in any other context, or is it just for Swedes? It was noteworthy that it was only the Scandinavians in Sweden that were affected by the policy. All the other foreigners, even in Sweden, were not affected by the speed premium. As Gerda Neyer might point out, how far can one take this as an example that could be used by other countries, which might wish to do the same thing? It might be like taking an alternator out of a Toyota and putting it into a Peugeot, hoping it might serve the same function. In fact, the thing might not fit at all or might simply melt the battery. That brings us to Gerda's point. One or two noteworthy elements arise. How interesting it was, once again, to see how anxiously the 'post-materialist' Swedes scamper off after a bit of extra cash. The second point is, of course, while there appears to have been a clear effect on the TFR, we still await a verdict on cohort completed fertility. In Sweden, this seems to have remained at about two children for most of the last two thirds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost irrespective of the fiscal or economic climate.

Peter McDonald's presentation was not particularly interested in the postponement issue directly, even though it pointed to some favourable possible consequences of certain kinds of policies, which were not actually targeted at particular age groups. A characteristically strong and unambiguous message indicated that there was no point in waiting, and that cross-sectional measures were important, because of their effect on the age structure. He agreed with Dirk van de Kaa, on this occasion, in thinking that policies to support childbearing must also support policy goals in other chosen areas in order to be acceptable and to work. In that respect he parts company from Paul Demeny's much more radical and separate, specific fertility policies. What I missed there, however, was any idea of cost effectiveness. Much that was proposed was plausible, carefully crafted in the light of its likely moral, ethical and political acceptability and intelligently plotted out against a whole set of rational criteria. At the end of the day, though, we have only got to know whether these policies, all put together, are really going to have an effect, because you are not going to be able to sell them to politicians unless you can put a cost on them.

I think that Peter was occasionally saying that it was possible to rearrange finances relating to the family in such a way as to get a fiscally neutral improvement in incentives. Maybe his wizardry as unofficial Secretary of State of the Family in Australia can actually bring off that coup. I suspect that anything, which is really effective, would have to have some substantial cost attached to it. If so it is necessary to know what the benefit is likely to be. At the moment I don't think we can do it except in very specific policies like the one Jan Hoemd. Peter did not address very specifically how to get out of Wolfgang Lutz's low fertility trap, described yesterday. It is all very well talking about adding 0.2, 0.3 to total fertility, when it is already 0.6 or 0.7 or 0.8 above the magic 1.5 which Peter thought was a crucial dividing line. But if total fertility is down on 1.1 or 1.2, something much more radical is called for. Perhaps that's when one sends for Paul Demeny rather than Peter McDonald.

I was profoundly impressed with the subtlety of Gerda Neyer's contribution, which made explicit and clear what many of us perhaps only vaguely thought before. Her paper emphasised that the context is extraordinarily important, that the current politics, unemployment, labour-market structure, welfare-state arrangements in each country are all going to have existing effects upon incentives and disincentives towards the family and have all to be kept in mind simultaneously when trying to make intelligent analyses and policy prescriptions. The maps that she used to bring together much of these data were extraordinarily instructive. I had not seen such maps before. Her paper illustrated clearly the need to take action but showed that we are still short of doing it and, perhaps, that it is almost impossible to do it. Previous valiant attempts, like those of Anne Gauthier, to do multinational, multivariate evaluations of family policy produced, to my mind, disappointingly modest results and conclusions. Gerda Meyer's paper made it clear, that unless we can be really thorough in taking almost anything into consideration, we are bound to miss certain very important variables, which are not available for some countries: housing policy, education policy, or something of that kind. Their absence will diminish the effect. In a multinational comparison, one needs all variables for all countries. That is one of the roots of the problems. I am surprised, though, that in her presentation we did not hear a lot about gender equity; one of the number 1 issues here. Putting that into policy is extraordinarily difficult. If it is difficult to take a specific policy out of one country and pull it into another one, it is surely enormously more difficult to try to bring about a transformation of culture, to turn old men into new men, to make men behave more like women just as women are now behaving more like men, to take the values and attitudes of dish-washing, nappy-changing Scandinavian husbands and persuade the inhabitants of Palermo they should behave in the same sort of way, never mind those of Tokyo and Kyoto. That, I am quite sure, is one of the really fundamental problems, one which we have not actually discussed much.

Although a number of the speakers dismiss the idea, I thought that other mechanisms mentioned by some are still of interest. For example Wolfgang Lutz and his colleagues have been seeing if populations with lower population densities do tend to have higher fertility, once every other obvious variable is out of the way. If that is the case, then when European populations do decline ( if they are allowed to decline; if migration is not called up to stop the decline) and unless the circumstances are too catastrophic, then it may

well be that fertility will eventually recover. Hardly an instant solution, but possibly an attractive one: the notion that population would stabilise, with a stable population structure, at a lower density, than is the case at the present time.

I was sorry not to hear anything about the new French policy, of which our newspapers were full a couple of months ago. This linked benefits to income in such a way that it did what Peter and others thought would be unethical, that is to say benefit richer mothers. In the French case, I think the target was more educated mothers. Does that work?

It is clearly no longer true that 'pronatalism' is a forbidden word. It has come out of the cupboard; as shown in Peter McDonald's paper, in the form of the EU green paper, which sails quite closely to the concept of pronatalism, and also to some respect to the views of politicians in the UK. One of our most intellectually distinguished politicians, a man of impeccably moderate views, is Mr. David Willetts. Willetts is often in the press because of his elevated IQ compared to most of his colleagues. He is quite specifically pronatalist in the most acceptable kind of way.

The importance of higher education on fertility is extraordinarily interesting. We have heard evidence from higher fertility among better-educated women, not just in Sweden but also, I think, in Germany, in Poland and even in Russia. If it is the case that the higher-education participation rate in Italy is now going to go up to 54% in each cohort, and if this relationship holds (and I find it difficult that it could hold) then I suppose if so many go to university, then the birthrate would go up almost automatically.

Finally, we still have not got to the question how to define postponement, about what Laurent Toulemon was disputing right at the beginning of the meeting. We still have not defined postponement, instead we have decided to put it off until the next meeting.