

TIMES COLONIST

Canada's sagging fertility rate could spark a debate

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Byline: Pauline Tam
Column: Pauline Tam
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Daughters of the Revolution: Would you have another baby if the government paid you \$8,000? The women of Quebec famously did.

Between 1988 and 1997, enough mothers took advantage of a baby bonus designed to prevent the erosion of French Canada that an estimated 93,000 new babies were born. At the program's height, the province paid a total of \$500 for the first child, \$1,000 for the second and \$8,000 for the third.

It was a kind of reverse primogeniture designed to reverse a dismal fertility rate -- Canada's lowest at the time. But guess who chose to do their duty? According to Kevin Milligan, a University of British Columbia economist who studied the program's impact, it wasn't poor families who chose to have more babies; it was the rich ones.

No doubt this delighted the nationalist intelligentsia. Posh, well-bred babies grow up to be posh, well-educated Quebecers who contribute to society and safeguard the values of the Quebec nation. Or so the thinking goes.

Milligan told me that in France, which has long had policies that encourage large families, a new benefit is being considered that targets the well-heeled. Evidently, the government is worried that highly educated career women aren't having enough babies.

"In France, the undercurrent of that proposal is that those are the types of children they want to have -- from highly educated families, not from the less educated families," said Milligan. "There is an undercurrent of old-fashioned eugenics."

These examples show how fraught with gender, class and racial politics the issue of fertility rates can become when the intensely private matter of child-bearing spills into the public sphere.

For people with a liberal sensibility, the mere suggestion that they ought to have more children conjures a return to the days when women were expected to marry young, stay home and look after the babies. It doesn't help that the argument for a baby boom is being put forward by those who typically believe government should make as few decisions for Canadians as possible.

With these tensions in mind, the [Canadian Policy Research Networks](#) is embarking on an ambitious study of the nation's sagging birth rate -- and its implications for an aging population.

Because the topic is so loaded, few people outside academia have discussed it. But the Ottawa-based thinktank has a reputation for sober-minded research that's taken seriously in policy circles.

The study, which starts this fall, comes as an age-quake is about to transform this country. In the next 50 years, the populations of the world's richest countries are expected to become smaller and older as a result of low fertility and increased longevity.

The fear is that without enough working-age people to support the massive wave of retirees, the social safety net that we take for granted will collapse. Taxes will soar and living standards will decline. Immigration might stem skills shortages, but it won't reduce the number of elderly we have to support.

The prospect makes policy-makers glance nervously at the nation's birth rate. At the moment, Canadian women are having an average of 1.5 children each. For the population to support itself, 100 women need to have 210 children -- a replacement rate of 2.1. Curiously, studies show that Canadian women are open to having more babies than they actually have. "So why are they not having more?"

Because there are a whole bunch of obstacles in front of them," says Judi Varga-Toth, the researcher leading project. "In Canada, women will not have children, or they will wait very late, because they have to get their careers established, pay off their student debt, and, hopefully, have some kind of benefits. This country does not value women for having career and a family at the same time."

Varga-Toth, herself a mother of two, has no preconceived notions about what her study will uncover. But existing academic literature tells her that countries with a range of family policies -- from generous parental leave, ready part-time work, universal childcare and baby bonuses -- can boost fertility rates. Sweden, Denmark, Finland and France are examples. Having abandoned its costly baby-bonus program, Quebec has introduced a generous parental-benefits program and groundbreaking \$7-a-day child-care program.

As part of the study, Varga-Toth plans to invite ordinary Canadians to voice their thoughts. If the public suggests this country needs a baby boom, Varga-Toth's team is prepared to come up with policy options for governments to consider. The debate will be worth following.

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