

Radical Heads in the Sand?

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The subject list for the Radical Statistics journal has sixteen subject headings – but does not include ‘population’. In this respect the Radical Statistics group seems to be typical of governmental and societal expressions of interest. Population statistics not a popular subject.

At first sight this neglect is puzzling. Population statistics are plentiful and generally of high quality. They are supported by the largest single statistical exercises – national censuses of population – that are carried out in the UK and in most other countries. They are also supported by vital statistics – some of the highest quality statistics produced in the UK and in most other countries. Statistics of births, deaths and marriages are of exceptional quality because they are usually based on records made in accordance with well established procedures involving participation of individuals involved with the event.

But population statistics are discussed less than other statistics because of the close relationship to controversial political matters. For many discussion of population statistics implies that birth control should be a topic for government policy. Discussion of population statistics is also avoided because it is difficult avoid noting the size of different ethnic groups and associated birth rates. It is also difficult to discuss population statistics without getting into migration questions – an area where even the production of statistics is a matter of controversy.

One of the consequences of lack of discussion is a lack of any explicit policy on levels of population – as highlighted at a meeting at the RSS in April addressed by activists of the Optimum Population Trust (OPT). Rosamund McDougall of OPT’s Advisory Council described the current situation, with world population growing at 78 millions per year, as akin to clinging to the side of a cliff. After a sketch history of world population growth Dr Martin Desvaux of OPT pointed to the growth of world’s ecological footprint that makes population growth unsustainable. David Coleman, Professor of Demography at Oxford University, expressed

scepticism of the value of the ecological footprint concept and drew attention to the wide variation in the growth of population in different countries and wide variation in expectations for the future.

An article in *Radical Statistics* 91 discussed the scope of 'radical demography' in some detail. The article acknowledged that professional demography's concerns include estimation of population change, but did not say anything about discussion or analysis of population levels. It seems that the concerns of the OPT do not belong radical statistics? Are some radical heads in the sand?

You can read most of the papers given at the OPT meeting on the files area of the Jiscmail website of the RSS official statistics committee at:

<http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=OFFICIAL-STATISTICS&X=&Y>

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