

PART II—CONCLUSIONS

I. NATURAL INCREASE

A. BIRTH-RATE

The purpose of any study of population development is to provide an indication of the trends at the present time. It is obvious that State policy in various fields must take account of population movements. Developments which would be justifiable with a rapidly increasing population would, other things being equal, be unwise if population were rapidly decreasing. It therefore becomes important, in view of the trends operating at the present time, to examine the population potential of New Zealand.

It has been shown previously that the birth-rate in 1880 was 40·78 per 1,000 of the population. This fell very rapidly until 1935, when it was 16·17 per 1,000. Since that date the general trend has been upwards, so that by 1945, when the birth-rate was 23·22 per 1,000, it was higher than at any time since 1921. The position in the early months of 1946 suggests that this higher birth-rate is being maintained. The question naturally arises as to whether this upward trend will continue or whether, as following the last war, it will tend to fall. After the last war, with the return of the troops, the birth-rate increased for a time, but within two years the previous falling tendency re-asserted itself. There is little doubt that the figures during the depression, which were between 16 and 17 per 1,000, were abnormally low. This was probably due to the prevailing economic insecurity of the period, and, therefore, the return of some degree of economic security did materially affect the birth-rate. The figures continued their upward trend in general during the war. There is little doubt that a sense of economic security has a definite effect on the birth-rate. No investigations have been made as to the possible effects of the provisions of the Social Security Act against sickness and unemployment. It is also too early to assess the probable effects of the family allowances in so far as these particular policies have promoted a sense of economic security and have assisted in raising the general standard of living. There is little doubt that they have removed one of the disincentives to the production of children. Leaving out of account for the moment the effects of family allowances, however, we are of opinion that the recent increases in the birth-rate are probably abnormally high. The long-term downward trend of the birth-rate, which has been in operation for many years not only in New Zealand, but in other countries with a western civilization, will probably re-assert itself, although the very low figures of the depression years will probably not be reached. On page 12 of this report we gave some figures of the net reproduction rate in New Zealand. It was there pointed out that potential population depends to a very large extent on the number of females born at any period. It was shown that when the net reproduction rate was lower than 1, population was not reproducing itself. With the birth-rate as low as it was in 1936 and 1937, the rate was just below 1, and, if this tendency had continued, in the course of a generation or so the aggregate size of the population would have tended to fall. Since 1938 the rate has been greater than 1, reaching a maximum of 1·274 in 1941. It would appear that, if we assume that the rate in 1936 is lower than normal and the rate in recent years, particularly 1945, is higher than normal, we would probably be justified in stating that in general the net reproduction rate will tend to be in the immediate future somewhat over 1, meaning that the population will gradually rise. It would be unwise to draw any sweeping deductions regarding the future from the present relatively favourable position. Our immediate pre-war position, however, though affording no grounds for complacency, compares quite well with the position in most European countries, including Great Britain, where they are faced with a population decline in the not too distant future. The present birth-rate, although higher than for many years previously, affords no grounds for satisfaction. A very close check should be kept in the years immediately ahead in order to attempt to isolate the effects of the family allowances on the size of families in the Dominion.