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## Lord Dawson's Bill.

THE debate on the motion of Lord Dawson for the second reading of the Bill, which he moved on the 13th February, to restrict the sale, display and advertisement of contraceptives, produced in the House of Lords quite a number of interesting speeches, which together with a critical examination of them by Dr. Marie Stopes, are published in the March number of *The Birth Control News*. The Bill passed the second reading by a large majority and was referred to a Committee of the Whole House.

It may be remembered that the law in relation to birth control varies widely in the Western countries. In Great Britain contraception is legalised, due probably to the realisation of the widespread practice of methods for spacing births or avoiding children and also to the recognition of the change in public opinion and withdrawal of opposition by the Church and the medical profession. In 1930 the Ministry of Health in its Memorandum 153 M. C. W. authorised local Public Health Authorities and private agencies to establish clinics for the dissemination of free Birth Control information to married women; in Russia and Mexico, the governments are actively interested in the propagation of contraceptive methods among all married people. Since 1920 France, alarmed at the shrinkage in her population, has set her face against birth control literature; Ireland and America have banned all practical information concerning contraception. Many of the smaller European states and also Australia and Canada prohibit the sale of contraceptive literature and apparatus; but in South Africa, Germany, India, China and Japan there are already birth control clinics and advisory centres.

In his otherwise lucid exposition of the doctrine of birth control, Lord Dawson of Penn has made some remarks which may be used against the very cause he so warmly espouses. The *ex cathedra* observation that "birth control is here to stay and is part and parcel of social fabric" is not likely to be accepted wholeheartedly by the Anglican Church in spite of the famous resolutions passed at the 1930 Lambeth Conference of Bishops, and is relentlessly opposed by the Roman Catholic Divines. It is true that every speaker in the House of Lords has testified to the fact that there is a rapid



spread of contraceptive practice in the country with its attendant evils; but all the same there must be a very large section of the community who still prefer to restrict the size of the family by exercising prudence and abstinence in conformity with the dictates of moral and religious conscience. If, however, present-day youth in the mass have decided on limitation of pregnancy and its determination by choice, we are disposed to think that their resolution cannot all be the outcome of the conviction that economic grounds and family reasons constitute the foundation of their families. On the other hand, the Lords Spiritual have depicted a dreadful picture of the abuses of contraceptives and the total effect of their speeches must be disquieting to all who have faith in the moral foundation of society and the authority of the Church. The object of the Bill is to protect and defend the young people from being prematurely introduced to contraceptive knowledge, for nothing can be more disturbing to the welfare of the society than sexual precocity in youth. If the blatant advertisement of birth control devices and the erection of automatic machines in the open thoroughfare could be prevented by legislature, the author of the Bill hopes that the innocence of youth will be sufficiently safeguarded. Any careful observer must have noticed that these are not the only baneful influences to which the young people are exposed, whose morals are often also corrupted by obtrusive advertisements of aphrodisiacs and abortifacients, unworthy films and sensational catch-penny novels. The Bill strives to remove only a couple of factors from an extensive environment whose influence in precociously exciting the morbid curiosity of children is as subtle as it is dangerous. The educational and domestic authority for fortifying the mind of youth in the principles of morality is frustrated by what youth sees and hears everywhere; and exposure of contraceptives to public gaze is not more damaging to the interests of public morality than are the other hostile influences.

If under the particular circumstances of this age, a married couple were by mutual consent to resort to birth control methods,—a course of action approved by Lord Dawson—it is maintained that the Church and society should not interfere with the personal predilections of people in a matter of such vital necessity for the health and happiness of the family and the improvement of children. There is hardly any happening even in the

best ordered homes of people, the knowledge of which can be kept sufficiently confidential for a long time and the greater the secrecy with which anything is guarded, the more irresistible is the curiosity of youth to explore, investigate and discover everything about the matter in its own time and in its own way. Once the knowledge of the existence of contraceptive goods is gained by children, they will most naturally proceed to try them: and all knowledge is communicable. The diffusion of such knowledge gained first hand in the very premises of their home must tend to destroy the innocence and value of childhood which the bill purports to protect. Moreover, as the Bishop of St. Albans has pointed out, if for economic and social reasons married people are to be permitted to impose limitation on the size of their family, there must be a still larger number of men and women who on economic grounds cannot at all marry. The problem of such people is at once delicate and difficult. Lord Dawson has given it as his solemn medical opinion,—though many will disagree,—that abstention is impossible and hurtful to health and that it must eventually lead to irregularities and perversions which may be criminal offences. If this is so the case of people who remain single after the marriageable age has been left behind, must constitute a serious problem fraught with sinister consequences to the welfare of the individuals concerned and the society to which they belong. If self-control, however valuable as a stabilizing element of human character, is deleterious to health, and the medical profession has provided the people with the means of avoiding responsibility for the biological consequences of their actions, unmarried people will have a strong incentive to resort to birth control methods. If the purpose of contraceptive philosophy is to exalt the gratification of the fundamental appetite on easy terms and without regard to the primary obligations with which Nature has invested it, will not marriage as a voluntary human institution for the propagation of the race tend gradually to become obsolete, with the possibility that the government may have to take it over as a branch of civil administration?

Almost all advocates of birth control start on the assumption that women have a natural aversion to child bearing, and even in cases where no pathological conditions are indicated, they point out that frequent pregnancy



must inevitably undermine the physical health and domestic happiness of the individual. Lord Dawson in describing the large families of the early forties of last century, such as the Gladstones and the Lyttletons, makes no reference to the injurious effects which a numerous family is reported to produce. It seems to us that if a mother suffers after moderate child bearing, ordinarily it must be due to want of sufficient food, clothing, accommodation and medical advice; and provided that all these things are procurable by every person in a requisite measure, so as to preserve his and her health on a reasonably high standard, can it be proved that moderate child bearing in such circumstances, produces the grave consequences which the birth control methods seek to prevent? According to Lord Ponsonby, what the majority of people require is suitable work, adequate wages, a cheap and sufficient supply of wholesome food and clothing, decent housing accommodation and free medical advice. It is one of the strange ironies of the present age that decent men and women are unable to obtain the reasonable comforts of life which their capacity to serve the body politic ought to procure. Lord Ponsonby further pointed out that when he was Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Transport, he was able to gather figures which showed that among the income-tax paying classes there was a greater increase in the purchase of cars than in the production of babies,—a fact which proves the growing tendency on the part of the professional classes and the rich to evade the responsibilities of tending and educating children and to spend all the available time and money in procuring personal enjoyments. It is doubtful whether birth control methods lend themselves to be used as correctives of the evils produced by a faulty social and economic system.

To our mind birth control methods only touch the fringe of the population problem, though their advocates claim that they produce happier homes, healthier motherhood and a better race of children endowed with a finer character. Lord Dawson has pointed out that this social ideal has permeated the skilled and semi-skilled working classes who have adopted the contraceptive practices so that a decline in the birth rate of 14.4 per cent. has occurred in Great Britain in the ten years between 1923 and 1933. The so-called "circumstances of the age" seem to be only synonymous with

unequal distribution of wealth, unemployment consequent on mass production and defective mechanism of marketing the produce and slums produced by factory labour. Are these disfigurements to be permitted to extinguish the nobler and heroic virtues which distinguished the older generation of men and women who, with fortitude, resource and self-sacrifice, reared a large number of children amid the picturesqueness of family love, loyalty, devotion and discipline? Perhaps a readjustment of the existing social system may secure for the people better homes, more money and greater means of enjoying the amenities of life than the practice of birth control methods can hope to place at their disposal. Is there not enough room in the British Empire for establishing and developing more colonies where the excess population can be properly placed to bring up their numerous children as self-respecting citizens without exposing them to the evils of the widespread use of contraceptives which is reported by the Lords Spiritual to be common among unmarried persons?

The prevalence of these evils is admitted by Lord Dawson and their increase is attributed to extravagant displays of contraceptives, the construction of automatic machines and shameful appeals to the young and old alike to purchase, and profit by, chemical preparations. The evils bitterly alluded to by the Lords Spiritual is traceable in no small measure to the attitude of the Church and society towards fallen women and their illegitimate offspring. To repress is to excite curiosity; to forbid is to stimulate action; this law of contraries is an essential ingredient of the human mind. Religion and society by steeping sex in shame ran it underground, and will both produce a constructive and feasible scheme for overcoming the biological consequences of fornication without absolute continence. Our attitude to the sex problem must change and the Church must develop a finer code of morality more practicable and convincing than the old one, which is no longer adequate and thus fails to check the evils of illicit intimacy. For the danger of these evils is intensified by the sophisticated food of civilised man, precociously stimulating the fundamental instincts, and by the fact that these instincts are fostered by the greater freedom of action now enjoyed by the members of both sexes and by the deeper and subtler influences of environment.



A more significant population problem than the quantity of mankind, is the quality of individual members. In order that a nation may become prosperous, happy, efficient and peace-loving, a sound contribution to general intelligence and moral stability has to be made by all the grades and classes of society. The mere limitation of the family which may perhaps secure for the children a better average of education and a more decent start in life, does not ensure that all the children born under the contraceptive auspices will possess the best qualities. It is doubtful whether even the creation of a Ministry of Marriages, such as Charles Whibley cynically suggests, assisted by a Secretariat of bright-eyed young Mendelians, could, by selective breeding, produce and fix the desirable type of individuals, for "men and women are not peas" and they must have their own personal inclinations which are beyond the range of experimental marriages. Heredity is a supremely fruitful field but its mechanism still baffles human ingenuity. The very essence of strength and beauty of humankind is individuality, which is divergence and the ambition to fix the type, even were it possible, must be undesirable. Neither birth control methods nor all the tender faith in the efficacy of legislature will suffice to improve mankind; we shall have to rely on education, public opinion and the precepts of religion for its betterment, however true it may be, that the son profits little by the intellectual and moral acquisitions of the father and has to begin it all over again from the very commencement.

If we really want our people to flourish then we should give every one an equal chance to succeed in life: and, knowing that the people who, possessing the highest inborn intelligence and moral energy, are the ones who are actually contributing most to the welfare of the community, we have to encourage them to have as many children as

they healthily can in the hope that being born of a good stock in a good environment, they may repeat or improve on the worthiness of their parents. It may perhaps be necessary to discourage the people who are decidedly inferior to have numerous children. The indiscriminate and extensive employment of contraceptive technique by the professional and richer classes alone and the inability of the less favoured community to procure birth control advice and appliances must produce results whose consequences to the nation will be obviously unsatisfactory. If any bill on the subject of birth control is needed, legislative sanction should be obtained to prohibit the sale of contraceptives to the well-to-do classes and to place the appliances within the easy reach of others whose contributions to the prosperity of the people must in the nature of things be somewhat lower. Many of the social abuses now attending the propaganda of birth control knowledge and free sale of contraceptives, which the Lords Spirituals have painted in lurid colours, may be removed by restricting their purchase at specified hours during day time in a few licensed shops and on the production of a certificate from a competent medical authority that the purchaser is married and that the goods are intended exclusively for his personal use. The birth control movement is in the nature of a physiological and psychological experiment, regarding the results of which there is not a unanimous and authoritative body of opinion; and it is neither safe nor wise to permit it to gamble with life without sufficient safeguards. Nevertheless the question of birth control and the law of abortion must, as pointed out by Justice McCardie, be investigated free from prejudice whether theological or otherwise; and if the problems were to be treated like other scientific problems, perhaps their implications might lose many of their horrors.