

The Birth Control Movement in England



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JOHN BALE, SONS & DANIELSSON, LTD.,
83-91, GREAT TITCHFIELD STREET, W. 1.

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“I think, dearest Uncle, you cannot *really* wish me to be the ‘mamma d’une nombreuse famille,’ for I think you will see the great inconvenience a *large* family would be to us all, and particularly to the country, independent of the hardship and inconvenience to myself. Men never think, at least seldom I think, what a hard task it is for us women to go through this very often.”—*Queen Victoria to the King of the Belgians, January 15, 1841.*

“In our midst are women held in the bonds of slave-marriage, upon whom unregulated maternity inflicts its intolerable burden of excessive breeding, with its drain upon maternal vitality, and leading to the birth of defectives and degenerates and to a persistent lowering of the racial physique.”—*Dr. Alice Drysdale Vickery.*

“If our ‘pastors and masters’ would but accept control of conception as a necessary feature of our present-day civilization, and still more, cease from feebly excusing it on so-called medical grounds, and, on the other hand, unite in bringing before the public the importance of adequate parenthood, constructive guidance would take the place of futile controversy.”—*Lord Dawson of Penn.*

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FOREWORD.

THE information contained in this pamphlet has been put together by Mary Breed and myself in order to have available a short, cheap and accurate account of the birth control movement in England up to the present time. Population problems, and especially those affected by the practice of birth control, are steadily increasing in public interest, and especially to inquirers from other countries will this pamphlet be useful.

Into this slight sketch only so much history has been introduced as will enable the reader to understand the main events which have contributed to the present position.

It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that the present demand endorsed by all serious birth control workers is that :—

The Ministry of Health and Public Health Authorities should recognize the desirability of making available information on methods of birth control at their welfare centres to married people who ask for it.

Great care has been taken to make this summary complete, and we shall welcome comments and corrections. These should be sent to me at The Birth Control Movement Information Centre, Parliament Mansions, Westminster, S.W.1.

EDITH HOW-MARTYN.

November, 1929.

THE BIRTH CONTROL MOVEMENT IN ENGLAND.

MANY daring thinkers in different countries and in different ages have dreamed of social conditions and arrangements in which the numbers of the population and the quality of the individuals have been brought within human control. Limitation of lives and numbers by death before old age, by disease, famine, war and brutal conditions have always revolted reformers and dreamers. Their imaginations from Plato onwards were busy peopling the world with a happier, healthier race. Inexorable economic conditions and human passions have made progress in this direction extremely slow. The invention of reliable contraceptive methods aroused fresh hopes and efforts. In France, after the revolution, the birth-rate diminished rapidly as a result of conscious control among large sections of the population. Holland had a later experience of birth control, and there were sporadic efforts in the United States.

ENGLISH ORIGIN.

The real modern birth control movement has developed more continuously and made more scientific advances in England than in any other country. The first serious spokesman of the new ideas to attract public attention was the Rev. Thomas Malthus who, by the publication of his "Essay on the Principle of Population" in 1798, began a controversy which is not yet out of date. As a

remedy against the ills which, in his view, unrestricted families brought in their train, he advocated late marriage. The radical reformer, Francis Place, whose life of hardship and intimate knowledge of the conditions of the workers made him ready to respond to the ideas of Malthus, rejected the remedy of late marriage on the grounds that it would lead to an increase of immorality. Instead he boldly advocated the adoption of "such precautionary means as would, without being injurious to health and destructive of female delicacy, prevent conception." Place himself was married at nineteen and became the father of fifteen children, of whom five died in infancy. He almost certainly was among the first to publish practical leaflets on birth control and to distribute them among working-class people. In view of the allegation so frequently made that birth control propaganda is intended to undermine public morality, it is interesting to note that the avowed object of this early propaganda was "to enable young men and women to remain chaste by making it possible for them to marry early."

Malthus and Place were followed by other less well-known pioneers, but public attention waned until suddenly rekindled by the Bradlaugh-Besant trial in 1877, since when the birth control movement has steadily progressed.

THE FIGHT FOR FREE DISCUSSION.

Books and pamphlets on the control of conception were freely circulating right up to and during the trial, but they did not reach the masses, and the principle of birth control did not begin to gain public acceptance

until Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant openly championed its cause.

The importance of this trial has been variously estimated by writers who have assumed that knowledge of birth control was unknown before this date, but the trial gave an enormous impetus to birth control. The year 1877 marks the beginning of a distinct fall in the birth-rate both in this and in many other countries, and the publicity given to the Knowlton pamphlet at the trial is the only really satisfactory explanation of the fact.

The Knowlton pamphlet, giving practical information on methods of family limitation, had been circulating in England some forty years, and its circulation was never challenged until a Bristol publisher put up for sale some copies, to which he added some pictures alleged to be obscene, whereupon he was prosecuted and convicted. Following this the publisher of the freethought paper, *The National Reformer*, was also summoned for publishing the book and pleaded guilty. This called into question the freedom of publication of the book itself, apart from the obscenity of the pictures which had figured in the Bristol prosecution, and Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant decided to fight the issue. They accordingly published the book, giving notice to the police authorities that they had done so, and intended to sell it at a certain place at a certain time. They were summoned, and the charge against them clearly involved the right to publish birth control information. They were accused of devising "to vitiate and corrupt the morals of youth," and of inciting persons "to indecent, obscene, unnatural and immoral purposes," and of bringing them "to a state of wickedness, lewdness

and debauchery." The judge's summing-up was distinctly favourable, but the jury brought a verdict of "guilty," which on appeal was quashed on technical grounds. As soon as the right to publish the book was safely established, it was withdrawn from circulation, and Mrs. Besant substituted for it her own "Law of Population." But during the trial the "Fruits of Philosophy" sold like wildfire, and it has been estimated that within three and a half years following the trial, 185,000 copies of the Bradlaugh-Besant edition were sold, not to mention other reprints. Apart from establishing the right to freedom of discussion of birth control, the trial constituted splendid propaganda for the movement.

In the following year Mr. Edward Truelove, a friend and associate of Bradlaugh, was made to suffer for his advocacy of birth control, and was prosecuted for selling Owen's "Moral Physiology," a book which had been circulating for forty-five years. He was convicted and condemned to four months' imprisonment and a fine of £50. Following so soon on the Bradlaugh-Besant trial, this prosecution aroused public interest still further, a great deal of indignation was felt at the sentence, and massed meetings of protest were held all over the country.

THE MALTHUSIAN LEAGUE.

One of the most useful results of the trial was the formation of the Malthusian League in July, 1877, its objects being "to agitate for the abolition of all penalties on the public discussion of the population question," and "to spread among the people by all practicable means a knowledge of the law of population, of its consequences

and of its bearing upon human conduct and morals." At the first meeting a council of twenty was elected with Dr. C. R. Drysdale as president, and Mrs. Besant as secretary. The formation of the League really marks the beginning of organized birth control propaganda.

The early days of the Malthusian League were difficult. Popular prejudice against the new doctrine had to be lived down, and that to the first members meant facing insulting suggestions of obscene motives. In 1891 Mrs. Besant, finding neo-Malthusianism incompatible with 'theosophy, resigned from the League, and the loss of her magnetic personality and brilliant oratorical gifts was a serious one. Charles Bradlaugh died the same year. The League continued under the presidency of Dr. C. R. Drysdale who, with his wife, Dr. Alice Vickery, had given valuable evidence at the Bradlaugh-Besant trial, and whose brother, Dr. George Drysdale, had published "The Elements of Social Science," and had been the means of interesting Mr. Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant in the subject through his writings in *The National Reformer*. On the death in 1907 of Dr. C. R. Drysdale, Dr. Alice Vickery became president, and when she resigned their son, Dr. C. V. Drysdale, took her place. In July, 1927, the Jubilee Dinner of the Malthusian League was held, with Dr. J. M. Keynes in the chair. The chief speakers were Dr. Annie Besant, Mr. H. G. Wells and Dr. C. V. Drysdale, while a letter was read from Dr. Alice Drysdale Vickery. The history of the birth control movement presents an unusual example of family devotion to a cause. To the quiet and persevering work of the Drysdale family is due in large measure the tolerant attitude of public opinion towards the question to-day. There have been prosecu-

tions, among others of Mr. J. R. Holmes, Mr. and Mrs. Aldred, but these have not interfered with the steady education of public opinion.

POPULAR PROPAGANDA.

Birth control propaganda was greatly helped by the saner views of sex questions created by such writers as Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis, Patrick Geddes, and J. Arthur Thomson. The returns of the Registrar-General, however, showed that one effect had been to produce a differential birth-rate. The more comfortable classes were limiting their families, while those less well able to support children were still having large families. This led the Malthusian League to initiate open-air campaigns and to issue in 1913 a practical leaflet. Great care was taken to ensure, as far as it was possible, that the leaflets were only sent to married persons, and it was clearly stated that the information was not intended to encourage but to stop promiscuity and prostitution by enabling people to marry at an early age, even if they could not afford to have children. Moreover, the leaflet contained a grave caution against the dangers of attempting abortion, and a warning against abortifacients, or "female pills" sold under the guise of birth control devices. By 1917 over 12,000 copies of the leaflet had been distributed free of charge, and more than 104,000 have been sent out up to the present time. The leaflet is still being issued in an altered and revised form.

In 1887 Dr. H. A. Allbutt published at a popular price the "Wife's Handbook," in which information on methods of contraception was given together with other medical advice. The publication of such information

was considered a breach of professional conduct by the medical opinion of the time, and Dr. Allbutt paid for his bold action by being struck off the register of the General Medical Council. His appeal to the law courts failed. About the same time as Dr. Allbutt's book appeared "True Morality," a treatise on the theory and practice of birth control, by Mr. J. R. Holmes. Mr. Holmes had previously issued a practical pamphlet, and set up a business of supplying the articles mentioned in his book, and has been continuing the work ever since, that is, for over forty years. Shops, some reputable and others merely eager to exploit the situation commercially, sold contraceptive appliances. Through these means the ordinary demand was met, but it was chiefly a middle-class demand.

BIRTH CONTROL CLINICS.

Advocates of birth control had been conscious for some time of the many objections to these methods of obtaining information. As early as 1878 Dr. Aletta Jacobs, Holland's first woman doctor, began the idea of giving free consultations to poor women. About thirty years later, in England, Dr. Alice Vickery, in conjunction with Miss Anna Martin, founded in South-East London what was in effect a private clinic where information and appliances could be obtained. In 1915 Margaret Sanger, the best known leader of the birth control movement in America, came to England. As she herself was contemplating opening a birth control clinic in America, her visit turned the attention of birth controllers to similar action in this country. She was warmly received in England, and the exchange of views

gave an impetus to work on both sides of the Atlantic, which was increased by subsequent visits. The slogan "birth control," first coined by her in 1913, came to be adopted in England as expressing the purpose and aim of the movement better than the older term, "neo-malthusianism." In the following year Margaret Sanger opened a birth control clinic in New York, for which she was arrested and subsequently served thirty days' imprisonment.

Shortly afterwards the movement in England found a new leader in Dr. Marie Stopes. Her first book, "Married Love," published in 1918, very quickly caught public attention. This was followed by other books, by large meetings, by the issue of the *Birth Control News*, and in March, 1921, by the establishment of a Mothers' Clinic, where birth control advice and information could be obtained by poor women. It is interesting to note that Dr. Stopes invited those who had benefited by its help to hand on knowledge of its existence to others, and help to create a public opinion which would force the Ministry of Health to include a similar service in the ante-natal and welfare centres already supported by the Government in every district. Dr. Marie Stopes succeeded in making fresh multitudes of people think and talk about birth control, and was the first to use the phrase "*constructive birth control*." In emphasizing the value of a harmonious sex life to married couples, the right of women to happy motherhood, and the right of children to be wanted and loved, Dr. Stopes gave a new aspect to the birth control movement which proved more popular than the exposition of the doctrines of Malthus.

In September of the same year, 1921, the Malthusian

League, which had long been considering the step, opened a Maternity and Child Welfare Centre in Walworth. This centre, intended as an example, was conducted on the lines of the ordinary State-aided maternity centres, but in addition gave birth control information. Every patient was, and still is, seen by a doctor. Unfortunately, receiving no grants of public money, it had later to restrict its activities to birth control work alone. In 1923 the centre passed under the control of the Society for the Provision of Birth Control Clinics. As all their clinics are supported by voluntary contributions, it is remarkable that in the five years of the Society's existence twelve clinics have been established, three in London, seven in England, and two in Scotland. A useful practical pamphlet, "On the Management of a Birth Control Clinic," has been issued by Evelyn Fuller, the Hon. Secretary of the Society. The Walworth Centre has served as a school for the training of doctors and nurses in contraceptive technique. There are besides other clinics managed by private people, and some on a purely commercial basis.

Recently Dr. Marie Stopes has initiated the idea of Birth Control Caravans, in charge of a midwife, to take the advantages of birth control knowledge to districts out of the reach of a birth control clinic. Two caravans are now at work, and the burning of one by a fanatical opponent in 1928 but served as an impetus to the provision of a second. An interesting beginning of a marriage education centre, including, of course, information on birth control, has been made by Mrs. Janet Chance.

In spite of all this activity only the fringe of the practical need is touched, and the poorest parents are left, except in the favoured places where birth control

clinics are established, without help and are freely exploited by quacks.

THE MEDICAL PROFESSION.

Unquestionably birth control information is given best under medical supervision, and an ever-increasing number of doctors are recognizing this and are prepared to give advice. In 1922, Dr. Killick Millard, well known as a medical officer of health, in addition to his general advocacy of birth control, undertook an inquiry to ascertain by means of a questionnaire what the prevailing opinion of the medical profession was. The results of the inquiry showed that although there was still a conflict of opinion, the great majority believed that certain contraceptives could be used with safety. The medical committee appointed by the National Council of Public Morals in 1927 stated that:—

“ We are of opinion that no impediment should be placed in the way of those married couples who desire information as to contraceptives when this is needed for medical reasons or because of child bearing or poverty.”

At the same time the study of contraceptive technique is not yet a recognized part of the curriculum of the medical schools, and it quite frequently happens, especially outside London, that private doctors will refuse advice, not because they necessarily consider birth control harmful, but because they simply do not know how to advise. Dr. Cove Smith, speaking at a reception given by the British Medical Association in February, 1929, drew attention to the fact that there was little

constructive teaching on birth control carried on in the medical schools of the metropolis. "Birth control," he said, "is a subject in which the teaching in London is microscopic. Every one of us, sooner or later, is asked to give some advice on it. Whether we believe in the dissemination of such knowledge or not, surely the medical student ought to have an opportunity of obtaining his knowledge elsewhere than from the sentimental books of lay authors. I do feel that some teaching should be inserted in the medical curriculum." All birth controllers heartily endorse Dr. Cove Smith's plea for the study and technique of birth control to be included in the training of medical students. The fact must be faced, however, that apart from this question of the lack of training in contraceptive technique, there are still doctors who, for one reason or another, though generally not solely on medical grounds, object to birth control, and refuse this information even in cases where it is desperately needed.

For the women who cannot afford private doctors, undoubtedly the best way of obtaining advice is through the medical officers of the public health authorities at their welfare centres. At these centres birth control would be regarded as a branch of preventive medicine, as an aid to maternal health, and in time might drive out the abortionist and help to lower the present disgraceful maternal mortality rate. The Ministry of Health is much concerned at the loss through childbirth of about 3,000 women each year in England and Wales. Their interest is shown by the recent issue of special reports dealing with maternal mortality and by the appointment of special committees, notably one on the training and employment of midwives. A propaganda

committee, the Maternal Mortality Committee, holds influential conferences twice yearly, which have done much to enlighten public opinion. But improvement in the maternity services will not alone reduce maternal mortality. The Committee on the Training of Midwives acknowledge in their report that "in spite of all the efforts that have been made during the past decade to lessen the death-rate among women in childbirth, the position is now little better than it was twenty years ago."

One factor which certainly influences the maternal death-rate is the prevalence of abortion. It is impossible to get accurate statistics of the incidence of abortion, but its magnitude is hardly realized by the general public. Figures obtained at the birth control clinics indicate that there are few mothers of large families who have not at some time attempted abortion. At the Fifth English Speaking Conference on Maternity and Infant Welfare held recently, Dr. Comyns Berkeley, the senior obstetric surgeon at Middlesex Hospital, said:—

"The importance of abortion as a cause of morbidity cannot be exaggerated, more especially when there is every reason to believe that criminal abortion is on the increase in this country, as it certainly is in other European States. It is undoubtedly true that if statistics were available for this country, we should find that criminal abortion, those self-induced being included under this category, is responsible for most of the cases of morbidity following abortion, the reasons being not far to seek."

If birth control information were made available to

working-class mothers, the main cause of the prevailing high rate of abortion would be removed, and maternal health would be greatly improved in consequence.

RESEARCH.

At most of the recognized birth control clinics records are carefully kept, and are now serving as a basis for research, not only into methods, but on other sociological, psychological and sexual problems connected with birth control. Dr. Marie Stopes, by keeping case sheets with records of many data, was able to publish an interesting report in 1925 of the first 5,000 cases dealt with at the Mothers' Clinic. Three years previously she had founded a medical committee with very distinguished doctors and physiologists.

An interesting recent development in the field of research was the formation in 1927 of a Birth Control Investigation Committee of doctors and eminent scientists, under the chairmanship of Sir Humphry Rolleston, to promote the scientific investigation of birth control. The members of this committee do not commit themselves to any expression of opinion as to the desirability of birth control, but they realize that the practice is widespread and the scientific problems which it raises can no longer be ignored. Again and again supporters have exclaimed, what the movement wants is "more scientific effort directed to discovering a simple and effective method." By inviting the co-operation of medical men and women throughout the world, who have a certain status in the medical profession, and a detached and critical attitude towards the methods of

birth control now in use, the committee hope to collect data which will form the basis for an informed and enlightened attitude towards the subject. They have already issued two reports on the experience of doctors in contraceptive practice in Austria, Denmark, Germany, the United States, Spain, Sweden and in this country. Mr. and Mrs. Himes of the Social Science Research Council, U.S.A., visited this country in 1927 and made a study of the records of some clinics, and have since published several articles as a result of their research.

It is beyond the scope of this pamphlet to describe the research which has been done on problems of population in a more general sense, but special mention may be made of the commission set up by the National Council of Public Morals in 1913, under the chairmanship of Bishop Boyd Carpenter, to inquire into the extent and character of the decline in the birth-rate, the alleged causes of the decline and its effects on home life and national life from the economic and spiritual aspects. The first report, containing some very significant data, was published in 1916. The following year the commission was reconstituted under the chairmanship of the Bishop of Birmingham, and issued a second report in 1920. Reference has already been made to the findings of the medical committee set up by the commission. The scientific aspects of population are being studied by the British Committee of the International Union for the Scientific Investigation of Population Problems. This Society was constituted in 1928, under the title of the "British Population Society," and aims at acting as a focus for the activities of all who are interested in different aspects of the population problem.

LITERATURE AND THE PRESS.

Many books, far too numerous to mention, have been published giving practical advice on contraception, both by medical and lay authors. Mention should be made of the books by Dr. Marie Stopes, especially the treatise on Contraception, which, although not written by a medical author, is the only authoritative work on the subject. The views of doctors on the medical aspects of the question have been expressed in several books, the most notable symposium of opinions being the report of the Medical Committee of the National Council of Public Morals.

The attitude of the general press in this country is on the whole tolerant towards birth control, though the question does not yet arouse sufficient public interest to find its way into the papers to any great extent. The recent action of the *Daily News* in publishing diverse views on the subject is all the more welcome, and the columns of the *Woman's Leader* have for years been open to serious discussion of birth control.

At the same time the attitude of the Press leaves much to be desired. The gap is partially filled by the special papers devoted solely to birth control. The oldest of these is the *New Generation* published monthly and founded by the Malthusian League in 1878, and known as *The Malthusian* until 1922. The policy of the paper is based on the Malthusian view of population, but advocates birth control in preference to Malthus' remedy of late marriage. Their doctrine is summarized in the advocacy of "early marriage and small families." Dr. Marie Stopes edits and publishes, on behalf of the Constructive Birth Control League, the *Birth Control*

News, founded in 1922, which sets out to advocate "joyous and deliberate motherhood, a sure light in our racial darkness." The *Birth Control Review*, founded in 1917 by Margaret Sanger and edited by her until 1929, became the monthly journal of the American Birth Control League, and has a circulation in England among workers for birth control. The *Review* has maintained a world outlook in the progress and sociological consequences of birth control.

THE EUGENICS SOCIETY.

Although the question of eugenics is a separate and distinct issue from that of birth control, a practical eugenic policy presupposes the rational control of the family. Accordingly the Eugenics Society, which was founded in 1908, has always welcomed the advance of contraceptive methods as a potential means of controlling the quality of future generations, and has recorded its desire that public officials should not be prohibited from imparting contraceptive information to the very poor. But, in accordance with its fundamental principles of promoting social progress by improving the inherent qualities of the race, the Society deplors the differential aspect of the fall in the birth-rate, and considers that larger families should be encouraged among the skilled classes.

In 1927 the Society formed a joint conference group, with delegates from the voluntary birth control clinics, for the exchange of experience and the discussion of problems arising in the movement. The discussion of technique by medical representatives of all the clinics undoubtedly stimulated the demand for further scientific

research, which is now being energetically pursued in certain directions. Further, the importance was recognized of obtaining statistical data on a number of points which were generally realized to be of social and eugenic importance. This conference group is still pursuing its work.

The Society is definitely supporting the growing demand for voluntary sterilization of the mentally defective and the restored insane when leaving institutions, and has prepared a Bill which would make it possible for the necessary expense to be incurred at the charge of the State or the relevant authority.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS.

Birth controllers are dealing with a human discovery which has no connection with national boundaries. The Malthusian League took the initiative in promoting international conferences, and thus laying the foundations of an international neo-Malthusian League. The "Fédération Universelle pour la Régénération Humaine" was founded in Paris in August 1900, on the occasion of the International Conference of members of the Malthusian Leagues of Holland, Germany, France and Great Britain, under the presidency of the late Dr. C. R. Drysdale. Further conferences followed at Liège 1905, the Hague 1910, Dresden 1911, and after the war in London 1922. The international conference in New York in 1925 was organized by Margaret Sanger, as was the World Population Conference, Geneva 1927.

The international movement is hampered by the post-war opposition to birth control of the Roman Catholic countries. All propaganda for birth control is now illegal in France, Italy and the Irish Free State.

LEGAL POSITION.

Unlike these countries, there is no legal restraint on the teaching of methods of birth control in England. Subject to the ordinary law of common decency, anyone is at liberty to give information or instruction in birth control, to open birth control clinics, or to publish or sell books or pamphlets giving practical instruction. In July, 1922, the Home Secretary stated in the House of Commons that it could not be assumed that a court would hold a book obscene merely because it dealt with the prevention of conception.

There is, however, a certain element of danger in this absolute legal freedom, for the information given may be unscientific, unreliable, even dangerous to health, but no action can be taken against it if the conditions of common decency are observed. On the other hand, there is no clear definition of obscenity in English law, and any police court magistrate may order a book to be destroyed if the mode of presentation is not in accordance with his personal idea of decency.

In practice there has arisen one restraint on this freedom to teach birth control. Whereas any doctor or nurse acting in any other capacity is absolutely free to give birth control advice if asked for it, the doctors and nurses attending the State-supported Maternity and Infant Welfare Centres are prohibited from giving such advice. This prohibition has not been created by law, but by a departmental regulation of the Ministry of Health. It could be removed by a change in the regulations of that body, but successive Governments have taken the point of view that a change should only be made in response to an expression of opinion in Parlia-

ment, which makes the question a political one. Strenuous efforts are being made to secure the removal of this one restraint on the freedom to teach birth control, for, trivial as it may seem to the casual observer, in practice it means that the majority of working-class mothers who are not insured are not able to obtain reliable birth control information in a satisfactory way.

ATTITUDE OF THE GOVERNMENT.

It is difficult to understand the attitude of successive Governments in persistently refusing to sanction a change in the policy of the Ministry of Health. The late Government, however, made it clear that there is no objection to birth control, but only to such advice being given in the centres which receive Government aid. In 1926 a motion in the House of Commons to bring in a Bill permitting local authorities to incur expenditure in giving birth control information to married women was defeated. However, in the same year, the House of Lords, on the motion of Lord Buckmaster, passed a resolution :—

“That His Majesty’s Government be requested to withdraw all instructions given to, or conditions imposed on, welfare committees for the purpose of causing such committees to withhold from married women in their district information when sought by such women as to the best means of limiting their families.”

When local health authorities ask permission to give birth control advice, they receive a stock letter from the Ministry of Health as follows :—

- (1) "The Maternity and Child Welfare Centres should deal only with the expectant or nursing mother and infant and not with the married or unmarried woman contemplating the application of contraceptive methods."
- (2) "It is not the function of an ante-natal centre to give advice in regard to birth control, and exceptional cases where the avoidance of pregnancy seems desirable on medical grounds should be referred for particular advice to a private practitioner or hospital."

But even when working women need advice on medical grounds as to methods of birth control, because pregnancy would actually be dangerous, the sources of help to which the Ministry of Health bids them turn are in fact not available to them. Married working-class women (unless they are themselves "employed persons") are not within the scope of the National Health Insurance Act, they have no panel doctor and frequently they cannot afford a private doctor. Hospitals are too busy with their present tasks to undertake the duty. Birth control clinics are too few in number to relieve the situation, and are avoided because of the inevitable publicity attending an institution which gives only this kind of help. Several local authorities have at different times passed resolutions that the ban should be removed. There is also no doubt that many of the medical officers of health would welcome a change, for they feel that their work is hampered by their inability to give advice, even in cases where it is greatly needed. Practical evidence of sympathy is shown by the action of the Shoreditch Borough Council, on the recommendation of its medical

officer of health, in arranging for a section on birth control in its Health Exhibition held in 1929.

ORGANIZED SUPPORT.

The demand that birth control information should be made available at the welfare centres of the public health authorities has been endorsed by several large bodies of organized women representing all classes and shades of political opinion. Organized Labour women have been fighting persistently for this right for several years. When the Labour Government came into power in 1924 it was hoped that the needs of working women would receive attention, and these regulations would be altered. At the Labour Women's Conference of that year a resolution was passed that the Ministry of Health should permit public health authorities to provide birth control information for those who desire it, and the resolution was repeated at the Birmingham Conference of 1925 and at Huddersfield in 1927. As a result of the expression of opinion among Labour women, and in view of the successful police court proceedings against the Aldred's edition of Margaret Sanger's "Family Limitation," the Workers' Birth Control Group was formed in 1924, to secure for working women the same possibility of obtaining advice on birth control as richer women enjoy. The Worker's Birth Control Group carries on its propaganda work entirely inside the Labour, Socialist and Co-operative movements. It repudiates any suggestion that the working classes are less fit to breed children than other classes, but bases its appeal solely on the grounds that all women, rich or poor, have an equal right to this knowledge. It regards birth control simply

as a matter of public health for which the Government is responsible.

Another large group of working women who have voiced the same demand is the Women's Co-operative Guild, who passed a similar resolution at their Plymouth Conference in 1927. This is the more significant in that the Women's Co-operative Guild is a non-Party organization, and only allows on its agenda such questions as affect the welfare of all women, irrespective of Party.

The Women's National Liberal Federation, at their Conference at Blackpool in 1927, also adopted a resolution that the information should be available to those who ask for it at the centres controlled by the Ministry of Health, "by these means enabling the poorest members of the community to obtain the information to which the wealthier classes have access."

The Council of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, the largest and oldest feminist organization, endorsed the demand in March, 1925, and has done a good deal of active work in holding meetings, arranging deputations, and drawing the attention of Members of Parliament to the question. At a recent Conference of the National Council of Women at Manchester, Mrs. J. L. Stocks, chairman of the Manchester, Salford and District Mothers' Clinic, representing the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, moved a resolution:—

"That this annual meeting calls upon the Ministry of Health and upon local authorities to allow information with respect to methods of birth control to be given by medical officers at maternity and child welfare clinics in receipt

of Government grants in cases in which a mother asks for such information, or in which, in the opinion of the medical officer, the health of the parents renders it desirable."

The debate which followed clearly indicated that this moderate demand has the support of most thinking women. The resolution was passed without amendment by a very large majority, the main opposition coming from Roman Catholic bodies.

It should be noted that all these different women's organizations have not expressed their approval of birth control as such, but have simply put forward the point of view that all women have a right to the knowledge if they desire it. The question is not between birth control and no birth control. The point at issue is whether the information available shall be scientific and part and parcel of the advice asked for by mothers, of doctors who know them and their circumstances, or whether it shall continue to be commercialized, frequently extremely harmful and leading to an ever-increasing amount of abortion. There is still much confusion of thought, and no clear distinction is made between birth control and abortion. Abortifacients are freely sold under the guise of contraceptive devices.

OPPOSITION.

The only serious opposition to birth control comes from the Roman Catholic clergy who, not content with preaching to their own people that any form of birth control other than that advocated by themselves, i.e., abstention in marriage from sexual intercourse, is immoral, refuse to allow others liberty of conscience in

the matter. They have actively opposed the opening of clinics, and have instructed the faithful to vote against candidates for Parliament who support the demand that birth control information should be available at the welfare centres, and have, in general, done all that they could to hamper the movement. In 1926 a society, the League of National Life, was formed, mainly under Roman Catholic auspices, to combat the theory and practice of birth control. In contrast to this is the sympathetic attitude of many friends in the Established Church and the Free Churches, notably the Very Rev. W. R. Inge, Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral. At the Church Congress in Birmingham, in 1921, Lord Dawson of Penn urged the Church of England to approach this subject in the light of modern knowledge and the needs of a new world. He declared that "It is no more unnatural to control conception by artificial means than to control childbirth by artificial means."

The opposition to the giving of birth control information by public health authorities is entitled to expect reasonable safeguards, but in a democratic country ruled by the will of the majority public money has frequently to be expended in ways not approved by minority groups. In such cases the religious and other views of the minority are respected as far as possible by leaving a loophole for the conscientious objector.

RECENT PARLIAMENTARY PROPAGANDA.

It was stated in the House of Commons in May, 1928, and repeated in October, 1929, that the policy of the Ministry of Health will be maintained until the House determines it shall be changed.

The opportunity of the 1929 General Election campaign was utilized to bring before the candidates for Parliament the wisdom and justice of the demand for equality of knowledge. Candidates were invited to express their views on the question :—

“ If elected, will you support legislative and administrative measures to permit the giving of information on methods of birth control by the medical officers at maternity and child welfare centres in receipt of Government grants ? ”

The question had been approved by representatives of the chief supporters of birth control, and was modified in various ways according to the views of the local organizations.

With the co-operation of the different societies interested and the help of individual sympathisers, over 580 parliamentary constituencies were reached. The replies received from candidates included 375 who became Members of Parliament. Of those members who replied ninety-five are definitely opposed, while about eighty-five will not pledge support until the terms of the proposal are before the House. The rest gave unequivocal support.

The present Prime Minister, Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, has expressed his view that the question is not one for Party decision, but should be left to a free vote of the House of Commons. It is hoped and expected that time will be found by the present Government to give facilities desired for the House to express its opinion on the rights of poor parents to have equal access to birth control knowledge with rich parents.

THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH and BIRTH CONTROL

Responding to a widespread and responsible demand, the Ministry of Health issued in July, 1930, Memorandum 153 M.C.W.

Public Health Authorities are now able to give Birth Control Advice.

The Memorandum states :—

1. The Minister of Health is authorised to state that the Government have had under consideration the question of the use of institutions which are controlled by Local Authorities for the purpose of giving advice to women on contraceptive methods.

2. So far as Maternity and Child Welfare Centres (including Ante-Natal Centres) are concerned, these Centres can properly deal only with expectant mothers, nursing mothers, and young children, and it is the view of the Government that it is not the function of the Centres to give advice in regard to birth control and that their use for such purpose would be likely to damage the proper work of the Centres. At the same time the Government consider that, in cases where there are *medical grounds* for giving advice on contraceptive methods to married women in attendance at the Centres, it may be given, but that such advice should be limited to *cases where further pregnancy would be detrimental to health*, and should be given at a separate session and under conditions such as will not disturb the normal and primary work of the Centre. The Minister will accordingly be unable to sanction any proposal for the use of these Centres for giving birth control advice in other cases.

3. The Government are advised that Local Authorities have no general power to establish birth control clinics as such, but that under the Notification of Births (Extension) Act, 1915, which enables Local Authorities to exercise the powers of the Public Health Acts for the purpose of the care of expectant mothers and nursing mothers, it may properly be held that birth control clinics can be provided for these limited classes of women. Having regard to the acute division of public opinion on the subject of birth control, the Government have decided that no Departmental sanction which may be necessary to the establishment of such clinics for expectant and nursing mothers shall be given except on condition that contraceptive advice will be given only in *cases where further pregnancy would be detrimental to health*.

“Everybody is coming to realize that there can be no greater immorality than the compulsion upon women to bear children that are not wanted, in circumstances that are a disgrace.”—*Mrs. Philip Snowden.*

“We cannot throw on the Deity the responsibility for bringing unwanted children into the world, and leaving them to the State to clothe, feed, and support by outdoor relief.

“The morality of birth control depends on the motive. The good citizen wants to do his best for his children and for his country. If he has reason to think that his children are not likely to be healthy in mind or body, or if it is plain that there is no longer room for large families in the class of the nation to which he belongs, it is his duty to act in accordance with that knowledge.”—*Dean Inge.*