

It's not either or, it's both

On June 10, six eminent speakers addressed an enthusiastic audience in London's St Pancras Church to debate what, if anything, should be done about rising population. Is population growth out of control? Is it sustainable? Should we continue to focus on consumption rather than population?

The consensus was that it's not a question of either consumption or population; it's both.

Chaired by BBC Radio 4's Geoff Watts, the debate opened with introductory statements from each of the speakers. UCL's John Guillebaud spoke passionately about the dangers of continued population growth, whilst journalist Fred Pearce was more sceptical about the prospect of population rising indefinitely, suggesting there is some danger of population decline.

Roger Martin from the Optimum Population Trust made that point that population cannot be expected to control itself automatically, whilst Aubrey Manning (presenter of the BBC's Earth Story) suggested that if the world were run by biologists instead of economists, we would understand that no species can go on multiplying indefinitely.

Savina Geerinckx, Overseas Development Director for Street Child Africa, spoke passionately and in very personal terms about the impact that population growth is having today in sub-Saharan Africa, with displaced families having little choice but to move to cities where they are easy prey for those who would exploit them. The Reverend Jeremy Caddick (Dean of Emmanuel College Cambridge) then rounded things off with a philosophical view of morality and justice and the need for greater collective responsibility, even daring to say the "control" word, despite other speakers' determination to avoid it.

Sara Parkin, Founder Director of Forum for the Future, was one of a number of notable people in the well-informed audience. She took the opportunity to talk about the launch of Forum For The Future's new report on population growth "Growing pains: population and sustainability in the UK" which can be downloaded from their website at:

http://www.forumforthefuture.org/files/population_web.pdf

Proceedings were spiced up somewhat by Brendan O'Neill who made it very clear that he disagreed with everything everyone else had said. A few days later he wrote a biting article for his website Spiked Online, describing the debate attendees as "Champagne Malthusians" basking in a luxurious venue and quaffing luxury beer. What he didn't mention was that the debate was organised by penniless artists to raise money for street children in Ghana. Still, we hope he enjoyed his free ticket. It's worth checking out the LobbyWatch website to see what they say about Spiked.

Given the reputation population has for being an explosively controversial subject to be avoided at all cost, what was a little surprising was the almost unanimous consensus in the room. Almost all agreed that population certainly is an issue, and felt concerned about the absence of sensible debate and the lack of political will to do anything. If, as the speakers suggested, addressing the problem is a matter of improving people's human rights through access to healthcare and education, it's difficult to see why politicians and opinion formers struggle so hard to avoid the subject.

And by the way, we raised enough money to take 10 children off the streets of Ghana, offering them a year's apprenticeship, food and shelter helping them to begin the process of building their own future.