Dear Fisher

Here are some random remarks on family allowances in answer to yours which may or may not be worth reading.

I see a flaw in one of my arguments about family allowances which I should like to point out myself, though you have probably seen it all along. My intention ran as follows:— All who are quite economically reckless would have families as large as possible. There has, I believe, been an enormous decrease in the number of large families, though I have no figures by me to prove this to be so. Therefore enormous numbers might have more children than they do have, and one, therefore, thus proved not to be economically quite reckless. But here, I think, are two points which I did not consider. (1) To have as many children as possible does not imply having a large family. (2) My argument implies that it is only the economic motive which lessens the size of the family, whilst there really are other motives. The economically reckless wife who has become pregnant may wish to avoid parenthood in regard merely to the troubles of childbirth, and the same may be true of a ten cent before pregnancy. The spread of knowledge in recent years amongst the poor, largely through greater facilities for travel, ability to read, advertisement, has probably spread more widely a knowledge of the methods of abortion and birth...
control; and this has been a cause of a fall in
the birth rate even among the economically
reckless. This consideration makes my argument
sound for less. The recent proofs of the uncertainty
of certain birth control methods may have
tended to obscure the probability that even very
imperfect methods may have had material
effects in lowering the birth rate. In short I do
good not see how we can get a statistical clue
to the numbers of those quite uninfluenced
by economic motives, and can only say that
my experience makes me believe it to be very
small.

If I have grasped one of your arguments
rightly, it runs somewhat as follows. Being out
of work causes such a mental strain on
a worker as to lessen his attention to
all other
matters, including the size of his family in
the future. If this be so, family allowances, by
lessening this dread, will increase the effect
of prudential motives amongst the poor, and
be eugenic in their effects. It should be
noted that unemployment and accident
insurance and old age pensions must have a
similar effect, all tending to a rule involving
some transfer of rich to poor.
Here is a broad consideration which I want to suggest. Even if we take the most hopeful view of the relative effects on the fertility of the upper and lower halves of our race, my belief is that without pressure of some sort, tending to promote infertility, being applied to considerable members of the lower half, it will be impossible to prevent gradual racial decay through the increasing natural infertility of the upper half. To suggest such pressure may at the moment be inadvisable—except by some irresponsible extremist guard. But we should certainly not close the door to such pressure in the future. And if we now press on with regard to family allowance as hard as we can, even if some harm is done by their introduction where racially undernourished, we shall be moving into a position from which a further advance can be made with good results.

In all such campaigns we must pay some regard to expediency. Now I do believe that the arguments in favour of family allowance which are based on questions of immediate fertility are those which are most easily grasped, and they may, therefore, settle the question of success or failure. We should, therefore, press such arguments as forcibly as our conscience permit.
The foregoing remark applies to the more public propaganda, and not to the more scientific discussion.

I am still of the opinion that it would be wise to consider, as it were amongst ourselves, what amendments to a widespread compulsory system of family allowances would make it less dysgenic. Should they be limited to 3 or 4 children? I think you would say 'no', but I am not sure myself. Or should they diminish with increasing size of family? There will be a tendency for the same kind of rule to be applied all round, and family allowances, as so far as applicable to big families, and anyhow have little effect in the upper half, simply because such big families are few in number. I am sure I am puzzled by these problems, which require calm thought. On the one hand should families of one or two, which do not preserve the race, have any encouragement in the upper half?

In your July 22 you said that no one believes, and there is no reason to believe, that the diff. b. v. has come about through children being a greater economic burden on the prosperous than on the poor; and that remark struck me much. But you must remember that there are
other reasons for the act, besides those based on economic motives. There are the absence of juvenile labour and the expenditure on education amongst the wealthier classes, the earlier age of marriage of the labourer, and the expensive habits of bachelors. These are, I believe, comparatively unimportant; but they point to an argument to be faced.

Again you are more confident than I am that the majority of the Council understand the question when they framed the Outline of Policy. I fear the majority were thinking of more obvious considerations.

I may write to later concerning the statistics I spoke of.

Yours sincerely.

J. Darwin.

No answer expected.