In 1944 the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) published an Interim Report on the Declining Birth Rate. Dr J.H.L. Cumpston, the Director-General of Health, was in charge of the investigation into the declining birth rate and responsible for the publication of the report. As part of the preparation of the report, invitations were issued in newspapers and on the radio, inviting mothers to write to Dr Cumpston to explain why they had ‘deliberately resolved not to have children, or to limit their families’. Cumpston reported that 1,400 responses were received.\textsuperscript{1} Some women expressed gratitude for the opportunity to air their views. Others expressed anger and frustration with their various situations. Regardless of the tone of the responses, it is clear from the published extracts that women believed the government was responsible to varying degrees for the declining birth rate and that it was within the government’s power to provide the means and conditions under which women could have larger families. Further, it is clear that many believed that, in this regard, the government had let them down. But was the report compiled by Dr Cumpston an accurate reflection of the thoughts of Australian women and, in addition, were women justified in their expectations of the Australian government?\textsuperscript{2}

Neville Hicks has shown how the evidence of the Royal Commission on the Declining Birth Rate held in 1903-4 was carefully controlled by Sir Charles Mackellar to support a predetermined conclusion.\textsuperscript{2} I propose that the second official investigation into the matter was also controlled, and suggest that once again a specific conclusion was sought. The 1903-4 Royal Commission was particularly concerned with the increasing use of birth control and the perceived selfishness and immorality of women who used it. Despite official concern regarding the birth rate, the proportion of childless women continued to remain high, at around 20 per cent for those who reached marriageable and child-bearing age in the inter-war period, although this rate began to decline by the mid-1930s.\textsuperscript{3} By 1944 the use of birth control was seen as a

\textsuperscript{1} I would like to thank Professor Pat Jalland and Emeritus Professor F.B. Smith of the ANU for their assistance with this paper.

\textsuperscript{2} Neville Hicks, \textit{This Sin and Scandal: Australia’s Population Debate 1881-1911}, ANU Press, Canberra, 1978, particularly chapters 1 and 2.

symptom of greater societal ills, and the NHMRC, in its Interim Report, sought ways to address the social, medical and economic problems which led to its use. It was suggested in many of the letters published in the Interim Report that government assistance for mothers was inadequate, particularly when compared with the government’s expressions of desire for an increase in the population.

The question of authenticity in relation to the report of women’s opinions compiled by Dr Cumpston is an important one. In various recent histories of women this report has been used as primary evidence. In her selection of the letters, Bettina Cass, while allowing for Cumpston’s editorial intervention, has cited ‘the testimonies of these women’ as ‘the only clear and unequivocal statement of the class and gender-based inequalities’ impacting on the birth rate. In her article on the changing emphasis of femininity during the Second World War, Marilyn Lake has referred to a selection of letters from the NHMRC report which support her findings. While the articles place different emphases on extracts from the report, there is an implied assumption that the material was authentic. It is necessary, therefore, to carefully evaluate the degree to which the extracts as presented can be taken as genuine letters from women. In the first half of this paper I raise some concerns about the manipulation of the contents of the letters to ensure a particular conclusion. In the second half I examine two welfare measures, the maternity allowance and the repatriation scheme, in light of women’s expectations as they were presented in the report.

* * *

It was expected in the years between the wars that a second Royal Commission on the Declining Birth Rate would be held, and women from organisations such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the United Association of Women, and the Victorian Association of Social Workers wrote to the NHMRC offering suggestions for consideration. Others, such as the matron of the Presbyterian Babies’ Home, wrote offering their services to assist with the investigation. But instead of a Royal Commission, the NHMRC appointed sub-committees of experts to compile reports on various aspects of the decline in the birth rate, specifically Education and the Birth Rate, Housing and the Birth Rate, a report by the Government Statistician, and a report on the medical aspects of childbirth. In addition, a report on the Population Problem in Relation to the Personal Needs of Mothers was requested from Dame Enid Lyons and

---

6 A1928, Department of Health, Correspondence Files, 1925-1949, National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA), Canberra
Lady Phyllis Cilento. Evidence from organisations or individuals outside the various sub-committees was not sought, except via the invitation by the NHMRC to Australian women to write of their reasons for limiting their families.

Fewer than twenty of the original 1,400 letters remain, together with a dozen or so letters from women’s organisations that address the same topic and demand action or offer suggestions for possible solutions. There does not appear to be any pattern to the survival of these few letters; some were quoted in the report, some were not. As a group, they cover a wide range of reasons, complaints and suggestions regarding family limitation, and the tone of writing varies from reasonable or resigned to angry and bitter. The letters containing a return address are from both city and country areas, and from all states except Queensland and Tasmania. Five of the writers claimed to have two children and one had three. Of these, four announced their intention to maintain a limit on family size. Two of the writers were childless but wanted children. Only four of the letters were anonymous, suggesting that a large proportion of women were willing to identify themselves and their views. One of the anonymous letters was signed ‘MIMP (Young mother of three)’ and another ‘Mother of two bonny sons’. The writers blamed the declining birth rate on a wide range of reasons including a lack of housing, the pain of childbirth, divorce and desertion, inadequate government allowances, and failure of the government to provide treatment for sterility. The majority of the letters reveal an implicit or explicit belief that government action was required to address their problems. Some phrased their argument in the form of a bargain: ‘I’d have more babies, but not till I was given a decent home and decent living wage.’ Others were more adamant: ‘I have three sons, and will do all in my power to see their wives have no family to struggle with, as I had to’.

According to Dr Cumpston, there were four main reasons why women chose to limit their families. These were (1) no home, (2) no help, (3) no security – national or economic, and (4) no hope for any change for the better in any of these things.’ He claimed that ‘it is impossible to dismiss this subject with the comment that all these difficulties arise from the [second world] war’. He indicated that the Depression was also a contributing factor, and expressed concern that the conditions of the war would have ‘delayed effects over many years’ implying, therefore, that the problems being addressed by the Council had arisen over an extended period which dated from about the time of the First World War. The concern, then, was to avoid a repetition of the social and economic problems which arose after the First World War. The various ‘annexures’ of the Interim Report, including the compilation of letters from women, recommended extensive measures be taken by the government to ameliorate the difficulties encountered by mothers, and thereby encourage women to have larger

---

7 ibid., Section 2.
8 NHMRC Report, pp. 70, 71.
families.

But can the report compiled by Dr Cumpston be accepted at face value as an expression of the thoughts of Australian mothers regarding the birth rate? Bettina Cass notes that Cumpston selected and edited the extracts of letters presented in the report, and that he was therefore in a position to impose his own priorities and values. The report was ultimately pro-natalist, ‘tempered by a keen awareness of the economic needs of families with children, the shortfall between needs and income, and the hardships suffered mainly by women’. Cumpston designed the various categories into which he placed the selected quotations, but only gave vague indications about the proportion of writers who mentioned particular reasons. For example, he claimed that ‘quite an appreciable number of writers’ gave absence of husbands on war service as a reason, that ‘many hundreds of letters’ cited the Depression as a cause, and that ‘an unexpectedly large number’ admitted to abortions, but there is no real indication of how many letters constitute these vague quantities. It is therefore difficult to determine the relative proportions or the importance of the various explanations or complaints made by the women.

The issue of anonymity raises several questions. Some women would have felt encouraged to write knowing that they could speak openly without being identified or penalised for their opinions or experiences. The women who admitted to having had abortions, despite the illegal nature of the operation at the time, are an example of this. Cumpston also acknowledged the significant proportion of women who willingly provided their names and addresses, presumably as proof that they were genuine, although once again he is vague about the exact number. But anonymity also protected writers who were not genuine. It is impossible to estimate how many such writers there were, and how much bias their views introduced into the report. The problem of authentic authorship is further highlighted by the inclusion in the report of a lengthy extract, allegedly from a mother of eleven children, the main contents of which were derived word for word, with occasional editing, from a pamphlet by A.E. Mander, *Alarming Australia*. There is little information about Mander, but he wrote several ‘free-thinking books’ in the 1920s-30s, and was a tutor on ‘social questions’ at the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) and Sydney University. While several of the letter writers had complained that their desire to have more children was

---

10 Dr Cumpston does mention in the introduction to the report that an attempt was made to quantify responses, but that it was impossible as many women gave more than one reason. See NHMRC Report, p. 71.
11 ibid., pp. 74, 79, 90.
12 ibid., p. 90.
13 ibid., p. 71.
thwarted by personal or financial constraints, the extract from Mander’s pamphlet contained the most strongly worded pro-natalist sentiments of the report. It urged Australia as a nation to value parenthood, and in particular motherhood, as ‘a “national service”’; in other words, make motherhood an occupation (though it must always be much else besides that), and further ‘as long as children are born of women, the normal occupation of women must remain the bearing and bringing up of children. That is inescapable’. The extract appeared in the general introduction of the report, where it set the tone for what followed. Grouped with other extracts which favoured motherhood, the sentiments stand out in comparison with some writers who claimed, somewhat less passionately, that the desire for children was instinctive. In contrast to these views, many women were escaping what Mander termed their ‘normal occupation’ by limiting their families or remaining childless, prompting such actions as the investigation by the NHMRC.

It cannot be determined whether the extract from *Alarming Australia* was deliberately included by Cumpston, who disguised the source by including the words ‘I happen to be a mother of eleven children myself...’. Alternatively, the passage may have been received in good faith in the guise of a letter from a mother, possibly even from Mander himself. It is also possible that the letter may have been written by a genuine mother of eleven who, unable to express her thoughts in her own words, chose to quote Mander, whose pamphlets were readily available from newsagents (a second edition of *Alarming Australia* had also been released in 1943). Whatever the reason, the inclusion of Mander’s words calls into question the report’s validity as an expression of the thoughts of Australian women.

Cumpston’s editing of the letters also introduces a bias which is difficult to determine in light of the lack of original letters for comparison. The number and length of quotations in any given section of the report appears to have depended on whether or not they supported the overall argument of the Interim Report, which was that better facilities, services and financial inducements were required to encourage a higher birth rate and to protect mothers and babies. The letters quoted in Cumpston’s report appear to be carefully selected to support this theme. In the category ‘Eugenic Reasons’ no letters were quoted – it is difficult to imagine that stories of family limitation for fear of inherited mental disorders would encourage an increase in the birth rate. On the other hand, the various effects of war were broken down into several categories, some of which overlapped, such as ‘Absence from Husbands who were on Service’ and ‘Anxiety of Women Whose Husbands are on Service’, the first of which had several extracts ranging from one line to an entire column, the second consisting of one short

---

16 *NHMRC Report*, p. 72.
17 *ibid.*, p. 73.
The ‘Absence from Husbands’ section openly included a quotation from a letter in which the writer claimed to be a man away on service. Although his letter was presumably included because his opinion coincided with others, it adds further weight to the possibility that some of the letters were not from women, and also reveals that Cumpston was amenable to including such letters.

Cumpston’s editorial flexibility enabled him to include evidence which was not within the scope of the report but which supported its aims, such as calls for better funding and facilities for women in order to encourage an increased birth rate. Many of the women whose letters were included in the report expressed a desire to have children. The strongest of these desires appear in quotations from letters by women who were involuntarily sterile. Cumpston included extracts from their letters, despite admitting that ‘these cases ... are not related to the present inquiry into the reasons for deliberate limitation of families’. Not only were they included, but they formed the first category of extracts after the general introduction. Their importance to the report is not only in their clear statements of desire for motherhood, but also in the call for specialised clinics and better treatment of women’s conditions. Another consideration suggested by these letters is that the problem of sterility had not been systematically addressed up to that date. Through the invitation to women limiting their families, these writers had found an official body to which they could express their concerns, even though the invitation was not specifically extended to them.

The problem of bias in the report is compounded by the fact that Dr Cumpston wrote to Dame Enid Lyons and Lady Phyllis Cilento, asking them on behalf of the Council to prepare a statement on motherhood ‘from the woman’s and mother’s point of view’. Dame Enid, widow of Joseph Lyons and the first woman member of the Commonwealth House of Representatives, had eleven children. Lady Cilento was a general practitioner who published various articles on health issues, including contraception, and was the mother of six children. The request for their report was made on the day following the publication of the invitation to mothers, yet Cumpston claimed to have already received a significant number of letters. In his letter requesting their contribution, he asked Dame Enid and Lady Cilento to place special emphasis on the pleasures to be gained from motherhood, as he found in the letters from mothers that there was too much emphasis on duty:

If I suggest that the principal emphasis be laid upon the pleasure, profit and satisfaction to the mother, this does not exclude an expression of your views upon any other aspect of this subject from the point of view of women such as yourself ... who have had not only

---

18 ibid., pp. 74-5.
19 ibid., p. 74.
20 A1928, 680/32, Section 1, NAA.
personal experience but wide public experience of this subject.  

In response, Lady Cilento wrote ‘I note the emphasis which you require, and will see that the advantages of motherhood are very strongly stressed’.  

Perhaps this emphasis in their report was needed to provide a strong contrast to all of the disgruntled women who had limited their families; here were two well known women, both healthy and happy in their lives for having had large families.

It would appear, then, that Cumpston, if not the NHMRC, was seeking a particular bias throughout the Interim Report, one that emphasised not only women’s willingness but also their desire to have more children, provided their circumstances were sufficiently secure. According to economic theories of the time, an increasing population was necessary for Australia’s economic advancement, particularly to achieve the full employment promised in the ‘new order’ of the post-war years.  

There was also a lingering fear that the wide empty spaces of Australia made it vulnerable to invasion, particularly by its more populous Asian neighbours. Was Dr Cumpston seeking a better deal for mothers from the government by emphasising their promises to have more children under better circumstances?  

In a period of social innovation the NHMRC may have been putting a strong case to gain more funding for better treatment programs to address the long-standing problems of the declining birth rate and high maternal and infant mortality. But the attention directed towards the birth rate reveals a disparity between the government’s desire for the natural increase of the population and women’s desire to control the size of their families. Marilyn Lake has argued that there was an increasing trend after the First World War to define women as wives rather than mothers. Children were coming to be seen as an intrusion on the married relationship, rather than as a natural and unavoidable product of marriage.  

The changes in women’s life plans were part of a larger trend affecting family size which could be dated back to the nineteenth century and which was occurring throughout the industrialised countries of the world.

It is significant that the NHMRC was focusing on what should be done to improve the plight of mothers and infants in a period of high female employment due to Australia’s involvement in the Second World War. The report’s pro-natalist focus was in line with government plans to move women out of the workforce once the war ended. In order for this policy to be successful, the government needed to portray domesticity and child-rearing as an attractive alternative to work outside the home. While the NHMRC was attempting to determine the best ways of improving the health and welfare of mothers, the invitation for letters was also a means of gauging women’s

---

21 ibid.
22 ibid.
reactions to the latest welfare payments. In addition, the report may have been used to
gather ideas for further developments designed to make home life interesting to
women who had tasted independence, some in jobs usually reserved for men and at an
increased rate of pay.\textsuperscript{25}

The introduction of new social welfare measures during the Second World
War was prompted by the promise of a ‘new order’, the idea that for Australian men to
enlist, they needed a country worth fighting for.\textsuperscript{26} By the time the NHMRC was
reporting on the declining birth rate, various new Commonwealth welfare measures
were already in place, including child endowment (1941) and widows’ pensions (1942),
while the maternity allowance was increased and once more made universal (1943).\textsuperscript{27}
The women who wrote to the NHMRC at Cumpston’s request had therefore had the
benefit of new and increased government allowances for two years, although not for
long enough to determine their effect on the birth rate (the exception to this was
women in NSW, who had been receiving child endowment since 1925 and widows’
pensions since 1927). Despite the rapidity with which these welfare changes were taking
place, women found the measures insufficient to offset the hardships of the war in
which Australia was engaged. As one frustrated mother succinctly put it: ‘Can any sane
person ... believe a mother can [rear] a child on five or ten shilling a week...?’\textsuperscript{28} Also
present in the minds of mothers during the war were the many years of privation which
a significant portion of the working class population had suffered during the
Depression following the First World War. Although F. B. Smith has shown that the
health of the majority of Australia’s population improved during the Depression, the
unemployed during this period received only ad hoc assistance, as there were no
institutions in place to deal with large-scale unemployment.\textsuperscript{29} There is a distinct
bitterness about the period in several of the letters quoted in the report: ‘How do we
know our children won’t be treated as we were in the late depression?’\textsuperscript{30}

* * *

The government had expressed its concern about the declining birth rate and a desire
for increased population in various ways throughout the first half of the twentieth
century. The White Australia Policy meant that immigration was restricted to people

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{25} C. Larmour, ‘Women’s Wages and the WEB’, in A. Curthoys, S. Eade, P. Spearritt (eds), 
\textsuperscript{26} J. Roe, ‘Never Again? 1939-1949’, in J. Roe (ed.), Social Policy in Australia: Some Perspectives 1901-
\textsuperscript{27} ibid., p. 217.
\textsuperscript{28} A1928, 680/32, Section 2, NAA.
\textsuperscript{29} F.B. Smith, ‘Australian Public Health During the Depression of the 1930s’, D. Walker and M.
\textsuperscript{30} NHMRC Report, p. 79.
\end{footnotes}
from a select few countries, preferably Britain. It was therefore important to build up the Anglo-Celtic Australian population, and the white Australian baby became ‘a national asset’. But although the government placed great emphasis on increasing the birth rate, it did very little in the way of policy to encourage this outcome in the interwar period.

The maternity allowance was the first welfare payment directed specifically towards the needs of women as mothers. Introduced in 1912, the Act allowed for the payment of £5 to every (white) mother, married or single, who gave birth to a viable child. Prime Minister Fisher stated that the objective of the allowance was ‘protecting the present citizens of the Commonwealth, and giving to coming citizens a greater assurance that they will receive proper attention at the most critical period in their lives’. The maternity allowance took the form of a direct payment to mothers in order to avoid being challenged constitutionally – health was a state matter and the Commonwealth was not able to intervene directly to improve hospitals and services. At the time of its introduction, the value of the maternity allowance was approximately two weeks’ income of the average male worker a significant amount. It was therefore useful in assisting families on lower incomes to meet the additional expenses associated with childbirth. Evidence shows that many women found the allowance to be of some assistance. In 1914, the Secretary of the Melbourne Ladies’ Benevolent Society reported on various uses of the allowance, including hiring help to look after the household during the period of confinement, or buying a perambulator. But the introduction of the maternity allowance had no effect on the steady decline in the birth rate.

Yet the maternity allowance was a valuable payment to many women, as evinced by their efforts to ensure its continuation in times of economic difficulty. In 1931, at the height of the Depression, cuts to welfare payments were made under the Premiers’ Plan. Women voiced their disapproval of the ‘two-fold sacrifice the mothers are expected to accept’ a 20 per cent reduction in the allowance and the introduction of a means test. The implementation of cuts to welfare payments by the Scullin Labor government, in line with the Premiers’ Plan, led to a loss of faith in the party, and brought home the lesson that those dependent on welfare were vulnerable. A protest from the Adelaide branch of the Women’s Non-Party Association stated the

34 Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, No. 6, 1913, p. 1139.
36 A461, B344/1/12, part 1, NAA.
to make any further reduction in [the maternity allowance] would be to cause hardship on those least able to bear it, and bring more people to apply for public relief. So that what would be saved with one hand would have to be spent with the other, and much suffering would be caused with very little, if any, monetary benefit to the community.  

Those letters which mention the maternity allowance that were quoted in Dr Cumpston’s report, pointed out that the amount was inadequate in light of the increasing costs involved with childbearing, and also alluded to the exploitation of the allowance by members of the medical profession. The requirement under the Maternity Allowance Act for a doctor’s or midwife’s certificate to be lodged with the claim probably contributed to the increased expectation of medical attendance at birth. In 1912, at the introduction of the allowance, approximately 63 per cent of births were attended by a doctor; by 1922 this had risen to 76 per cent. But according to Dr E. Barrett, who attended the All Australian Women’s Conference on the Maternity Allowance in Melbourne in 1923, this increase in medical attendance was not accompanied by a significant reduction in maternal and infant mortality rates. Moreover, fees for medical attendance had increased disproportionately. A survey of midwifery nurses’ charges in Sydney in 1914 revealed that many nurses had increased their fees by as much as 40 per cent following the introduction of the allowance. One mother complained to Cumpston in 1944 that ‘doctors [had] raised their fees from £5 5s to £8 8s’ since the increase in the maternity allowance in 1943. In contrast, the monetary value of the maternity allowance had not increased from the time of its introduction until the period of new social welfare activity during the Second World War. By the start of the Second World War its real value had fallen from the equivalent of two weeks’ pay to one week’s pay for the average male worker.  

Other alarming effects were also attributed to the maternity allowance. The Royal Commission on Health of 1926 found that ‘a large number of small private maternity homes [had] sprung into existence’. These homes were often unregulated and

38 A461, B344/1/12, part 1, NAA.
39 NHMRC Report, p. 85.
42 NHMRC Report, p. 85.
had unsatisfactory standards of practice.\footnote{Royal Commission on Health, p.33; Janet McCalman, \textit{Sex and Suffering: Women's Health and a Women's Hospital}, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p. 165.} In 1944, a reliable source in Western Australia informed Prime Minister Curtin that doctors with little or no midwifery experience were taking on maternity cases for financial gain. Curtin sought advice about the possible regulation of fees, but was informed that such a move ‘present[ed] many difficulties’.\footnote{A1928, 680/32, Section 2, NAA.} It would appear that, by the time the NHMRC was investigating the declining birth rate, those who benefited from the maternity allowance were not mothers, but members of the medical profession and entrepreneurial midwives.

Another significant type of welfare introduced early in the twentieth century which affected women of child-bearing age was the repatriation scheme, which showed that the government was capable of large-scale ongoing welfare commitments.\footnote{S. Garton, \textit{The Cost of War: Australians Return}, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, pp. 83-4.} As well as pensions for incapacitated servicemen and their dependants, repatriation included vocational training, land settlement schemes, and medical and rehabilitation treatment for returned servicemen. With repatriation, the government had established the precedent of payment in return for service to the country. But a particular class of women – war widows – was created through the repatriation legislation of the First World War. While civilian widows were required to struggle on without government assistance, war widows were entitled to a pension under the ‘repat’ if their husbands’ deaths were from causes directly related to the war. There was also provision for widowed mothers to receive pensions if their unmarried sons were providing support before death from war causes. The children of war casualties were also generously supported by repatriation allowances, at a time when there was no child endowment for children of civilians.\footnote{Commonwealth Year Book, No. 12, 1918, p. 1028.} In comparison, Commonwealth child endowment was introduced in 1941, and the Commonwealth widow’s pension in 1942. The payment of pensions and allowances to war widows set them apart by compensating them for their losses while not recognising the losses of other women. The war widow’s pension was also a form of recognition that these women had married or raised the right sort of men – the heroes of Gallipoli. Their special status was further emphasised in the Depression, when no reductions were made in their pension payments under the \textit{Financial Emergency Act} of 1931.\footnote{ibid., No. 29, 1936, p. 351.} All other welfare payments were reduced, the majority by 20 per cent, while the old age pension was reduced by 12.5 per cent.\footnote{S. Garton, \textit{Out of Luck: Poor Australians and Social Welfare 1788-1988}, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1990, p. 126.}

While the number of women receiving war pensions does not seem large, proportionately these women were quite significant. In 1918 there were 6,822 war
widows and 5,068 widowed mothers receiving war pensions for deceased sons. By 1919 these numbers had increased to 9,009 and 6,836 respectively. In 1932, at the height of the Depression, 7,790 women were receiving war widows’ pensions. Naturally, the numbers increased dramatically during the Second World War, to 13,667 in 1943, and 15,736 in 1944. In the first year of payment of Commonwealth widows’ pensions there were 38,402 recipients, and the following year there were 42,212. A comparison shows that war widows constituted approximately one-quarter of the total number of widows receiving pensions in the period 1942-44. In addition, war widows consistently received higher pension rates. In 1943, when Class A civilian widows were receiving £3 per fortnight, war widows were receiving between £5 and £6.16.0 per fortnight, and substantially more if they were supporting children. The distinctions between widows continued well after the Second World War. A government survey in 1961 revealed that war widows at that time were receiving, on average, twice the income of civilian widows.

On the other hand, the only Commonwealth welfare payment which specifically targeted the needs of women was allowed to dwindle during the inter-war period. The scope of the war and subsequent repatriation frequently led women to conceptualise childbirth and child rearing in terms of service to the nation, inverting the conceptualisation of the First World War (and particularly Gallipoli) as the birth of the Australian nation. In light of the benefits accruing to war veterans and their dependants, some cited the war service of relatives in their arguments for preferential treatment. The husband of an Australian woman of Syrian descent, in querying the government’s refusal of payment of the maternity allowance, gave details of his wife’s cousins who had fought for Australia in the First World War. A mother writing to Cumpston of the government’s refusal to continue paying child endowment for her youngest son referred to ‘his two brothers in Blue fighting doing their bit’ (original emphasis). While enlisted men and women were receiving benefits, women on the home front were struggling to raise children in the face of increasing difficulties and privation. It is little wonder, then, that Cumpston complained of an excessive reference to duty in women’s attitudes towards bearing children.

* * *
Although official concern over the declining birth rate dated back to the late nineteenth century, the federal government did not introduce family-oriented welfare payments for civilians until the Second World War. The introduction of these welfare measures coincided with the need to offer men a country worth fighting for, and the realisation that those women who had had a taste of well-paid employment would need some incentives to return to the domestic sphere after the war. It would appear, therefore, that at the time of the Interim Report women had some justification for feeling dissatisfied with the disparity between the government’s stated desire for an increased birth rate and the inadequate measures of support only lately introduced. The extracts from letters as quoted in the annexure to the Interim Report expressed this dissatisfaction, and also indicated the willingness of women to have children if provided with adequate support and better conditions for raising families. In this regard the extracts clearly supported the recommendations of the Interim Report. But as editor of the letters, Dr Cumpston was in a position to manipulate their contents to this end. While he was selective about the content, he does not appear to have been so mindful of the source of the material. The annexure remains an interesting historical source, but one which should be regarded as a partial representation of women’s thoughts on family limitation, having been carefully edited to give support to policy recommendations on an issue of concern to the government of the time.