



**'The Transformation of Scotland, 1980 - 2005'**

Prof Tom Devine, Glucksman Professor of Irish and Scottish Studies, University of Aberdeen

**Overview:**

In this lecture, Prof Devine argued that over the past twenty five years Scotland has undergone a remarkable series of changes in economy, society and culture. While they are similar in scope and scale to those of the Industrial Revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they have largely been unnoticed or ignored. Prof Devine asked the questions 'how did we arrive here?' and 'how does this view sit with the more usual view of Scotland as a downtrodden underperforming underdog?'

**Key ideas:**

- Change over the past twenty five years in Scotland, and its roots
- History – particularly the earlier roots of recent changes
- Economy – especially shifts in employment structure and its consequences
- Society – especially shifts in social structure over the past twenty five years
- Scots identity, and the shift from dual to predominantly Scottish identity
- Public discourse and the absence of comment about recent change in Scotland

**Summary:**

The lecture had three main parts. The first set out the extent of the change in economy and society, the second touched on the absence of this change from the public discourse and the third looked at the differential impacts of the changes.

Extent of the Change

Prof Devine argued that while change is an ever present phenomenon, the scale of the changes experienced in Scotland over the past twenty five years amounts to a significant transformation not only in its pace, but also its structure. He maintained that these changes have their roots in the economic and social change of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century and highlighted three important economic phenomena.

Firstly, early 19<sup>th</sup> century Scotland experienced rapid and unprecedented urbanisation and industrialisation, especially in the field of heavy engineering and manufacture, intimately related to Scotland's role as lieutenant of the British Empire. However, the Scottish economy experienced no second industrial revolution. This meant that its infrastructure remained heavy-industry-related and not suited to the opportunities taken up by others in the 1950s and 60s in the profitable fields of light engineering, science, electronics, etc.

Secondly, Prof Devine explained how the experiences of WWI and WWII had a profound impact. For example, as the Clyde was the arsenal of these wars, heavy engineering industries were maintained and intensified beyond their natural life.

Thirdly, the decline of heavy engineering competition from Japan and Germany in the 1970s allowed this sector to continue as a major economic activity in Scotland. Although historically heavy engineering was predominantly low waged, Devine described a significant amount of nostalgia around its demise and argued that this experience of low pay helps to explain the extent to which Scotland embraced the communal responsibilities of the welfare state in the 1940s and 50s.

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The absence of extensive structural change in the Scottish economy, until the 1970s, contributed to conditions which have seen a transformation in the period since. Heavy engineering has all but disappeared and the new range of occupations has resulted in significant social mobility. Accompanying this has been the unfortunate demise of the old unskilled and semi-skilled occupations of the past.

These economic changes have been accompanied by significant changes in social formation, to the extent that family structure has radically altered, parents are having fewer children and having them later, and the population is in decline. Average wages in 2005 are three times the level of the 1950s, two thirds of houses are now owner occupied, there has been an explosion in car ownership, and women form a higher than ever proportion of the workforce.

In concert with these changes Prof Devine argued that the Scottish dual identity (both Scottish and British) began to fade. This sense of dual identity had been sustained, but not simply determined by, a range of connections to England over the previous few hundred years. Scotland's military traditions, its role as the lieutenant of an empire, the huge loss of men in front line action in two world wars, the shared experience of the civilian populations of WWII, the welfare state and the relationship of this small nation to a larger one, provide examples of this.

The experience of democratic deficit during the Thatcher years beginning in the late 1970's eroded this sense of union, and found its fruition in the devolution settlement and the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. Scottish-ness emerged as a primary identity during the 1980's but remained balanced by the existing shared British culture and family connections, inertia of existing arrangements and common external concerns.

### Absence of this change from the public discourse

Over the past 25 years then, a significant renewal has occurred. The changes in economy and society are significant when compared to precedents and many of the changes are positive. Over the period, Scottish increases in GDP (gross domestic product) were only marginally behind those of the UK, which leads the way in a European context. Scotland has now achieved many aspects of the kinds of transformation which our forebears sought. Prof Devine illustrated this by describing levels of affluence that are greater than ever before, more choice, and the existence of a devolved parliament. Yet, he argued, the public discourse has largely ignored this transformation. Why?

### Differential Impact of the Change

Prof Devine explained that the scale of change has excluded many people. Only two areas in Scotland enjoy less than 40% state support in their economies. One quarter of all households are workless. Over a quarter of Scotland's children live in workless households and these households are bearing the brunt of change as old industries and their occupations collapse.

Thus, while there has been economic transformation, we seem to have a more divided Scotland with greater relative deprivation and less cohesive community structures, suggesting that the changes have been geographically and socially diverse with both gains and losses.

Recent work also suggests that while GDP has increased, this seems not to have increased subjective levels of happiness and well being, suggesting an important role

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for non-economic factors in our quality of life and the need to revisit our aspirations as a society.

In conclusion Prof Devine argued that there has been significant structural change in Scotland over the last 25 years and this can be shown clearly in data on occupational structure, economic growth and social change. However, the transformation has been largely ignored, perhaps because our preoccupations have been with other dimensions of life “rather than with bread alone”.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.