

**The Royal Society of Edinburgh**  
**RSE @ Inverness Outreach Programme**

***Scotland's Parliament: 2030***

***Rt Hon Ken Macintosh MSP***

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Report: Kate Kennedy

*In this Lecture, the Scottish Parliament's Presiding Officer, the Rt Hon Ken Macintosh MSP, reflected on 20 years of Devolution and looked ahead at the changing political landscape, his ambitions for parliamentary reform, and the trends that will shape our future.*

The Presiding Officer commenced by stating that in this talk he would be expressing his own views on how the Scottish Parliament has evolved and developed over the last 18 years; particularly examining the theme that the people of Scotland have shaped the institution, its practices and procedures, and that it is vital that they continue to do so. Scotland's Futures Forum, chaired by the Presiding Officer, is the Scottish Parliament's think-tank, run on a non-party-political basis, to consider the long-term challenges Scotland faces. One of their current programmes, Scotland 2030, is an exploration of Scotland's culture and society and its aspirations for 2030 and beyond.

The outcomes in three of the most recent votes (Labour leadership, American Presidential and Brexit) have, to one extent or another, been symptomatic or reflective of the same political phenomena – populism, frustration and anger with the current political establishment. However, economic and social trends which are already apparent in today's society are likely to continue to dominate the political choices and decisions we have to make in 2030.

Setting the scene to get the audience thinking what life in Inverness might be like in 2030, the Presiding Officer described the city in the 1960s and highlighted some of the recent changes. Then, it was a town with a population of approximately 30,000 people; today, including greater Inverness, this has doubled to more than 60,000. Indeed, it is the fastest growing city in Scotland.

In some ways, Inverness' story is a proxy for the whole planet. Humans are increasingly becoming urban dwellers and this has major implications for how we live our lives; from the effect that has on our sleep patterns to our stress levels; from the number of people employed in agriculture to the pollution we generate; from our awareness of the seasons to our willingness to follow the natural cycles of life. Furthermore, recent studies confirm that we are living longer, healthier lives, resulting in an ageing population. Scottish society in 2030 is expected to have fewer children and more and more older people, living for much longer. Other economic analyses also suggest that today's children might be worse off than their parents, struggling to buy a home and living economically precarious lives. That throws up all sorts of new questions. For example, simply in terms of where we live, do we want patterns of home ownership to change once more; are we happy for our ever-increasing numbers to live in towns?

These are just some of the new political choices we will be required to face up to. Deciding policy and funding levels for our public services is at the heart of much of our parliamentary decision making, so demographic change may require us to revisit many, if not all, of these areas. How many people do we want to go to college and university and how will we pay for them? How do we cope with growing demand and rising expectations within our NHS? The free bus pass and free personal

care were defining choices for the Scottish Parliament in its early years, but these were policies introduced during a time of rising prosperity. In 2030, will we be able to respond so generously to the pressures on social care?

Environmental issues are another concern that can be difficult to tackle politically. Current environmental forecasts suggest that Scotland in the future is likely to get warmer and wetter. So how will we respond politically; how will we contribute to protecting our environment? Potential suggestions include getting rid of diesel cars, but Parliament has set ambitious carbon reduction targets on the one hand and struggled to meet them on the other. Building more bridges and creating a dual carriageway on the A9 is electorally popular, but is it environmentally so? The Presiding Officer commented that he thinks that “most of us find it easier to talk about climate change in the abstract than to alter our own comfortable habits”.

Wealth inequality is another issue facing Scotland’s Parliament. Calculations show that just eight billionaires own the same wealth as the 3.6 billion people who form the poorest half of the world’s population. What is perhaps even more worrying is that looking into the future, the figures demonstrate fewer and fewer people accumulating more and more of the world’s wealth, whilst billions remain in poverty. Most in the post-war generation and since are used to the idea and, indeed, the expectation of rising prosperity. Sustaining economic growth is still a key priority of government policy in nearly every modern industrialised country. But not only has the crash of 2007/2008 shattered confidence in the liberal economic orthodoxy, some too are questioning whether increasing our GDP is a desirable aim, or whether it is in reality quite destructive, as we eat up our natural resources.

Who shares or benefits from our economy is a very political problem and one that is only likely to move higher up the political agenda as we head towards 2030. Growing numbers now form part of what is called the ‘economic precariat’, people on low wages and in insecure employment. At Holyrood, new powers on tax and social security benefits have been devolved and, for the first time since the Parliament was established in 1999, there is a current, ongoing and serious debate about how they will be used. There has been talk recently of introducing a universal basic income, a policy which may or may not tackle poverty, but inequality is as much about wealth as it is about income.

Contrasting levels of prosperity and environmental and population change – these are just some of the big trends already shaping the world we live in and which will give us new political questions to resolve in the Scottish Parliament a decade hence. But can changing the way we live our daily lives also have an impact? The Presiding Officer pointed out some behavioural changes that have occurred over the last few decades which have had an impact on society as a whole. Today, more than 50% of our retail transactions and purchases are made by ‘plastic’ rather than cash, changing our banking processes. Our increasing tendency to shop online means that our public spaces are changing – not only do we have fewer banks and fewer churches, but fewer pubs too. According to the UK’s Campaign for Real Ale, nearly 30,000 pubs have closed their doors since the 1970s. Families are now less likely to sit down together at dinner time and our food choices have changed to become more ‘global’ than in the recent past. However, while our diet is generally causing us to be healthier, with better teeth, we now have a new problem of rising obesity.

New technologies have also had a major impact on society. However, these technologies are disruptive, leading to more delivery traffic on the roads, less high street shopping and issues surrounding conversation and social interaction skills. Our changing lifestyles also have potential ethical consequences. These are not just religious issues or matters of faith, these are cultural changes which have a bearing on our common identity, our shared cultural heritage and our sense of belonging. And they clearly also potentially affect or shape our moral choices too. Perhaps even more pertinently, the newspapers and broadcast media on whom we have relied for political information in the past have also long been regulated – but not so the new internet companies. Yet many of these organisations are part and parcel of how elections are won and lost. We live in

particularly politically unpredictable times, a time of anxiety where democracy itself might seem to be under threat.

If there is already concern at the ways technology will increasingly change the way we behave and interact with each other in 2030, and if we expect our changing demography and environment to increasingly challenge us as well, we need to also ask ourselves, how are these trends going to affect our Scottish Parliament over the next decade and can it cope?

Scottish politics has certainly not been without change itself. In 1979, the Referendum was narrowly in favour of Devolution, but did not reach the required threshold of more than 40% of the population. The Presiding Officer commented that “people will have their own take on the economic, social and political developments of the following decades, such as the miners’ strike and the collapse of heavy industry, but I would argue that for many in the UK, and particularly here in Scotland, they compounded what some felt was a sense of remoteness from Westminster”. Civic support for Devolution grew through the ‘80s and ‘90s and focused on a new way of doing politics – a whole new democratic approach. In 1997, the outcome of the next Devolution Referendum resulted in the formation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 and, with this, a feeling of elation and optimism in Scotland.

From the outset, the new Scottish Parliament was shaped by the principles drawn up by the Consultative Steering Group and by the participation of civic Scotland. It was to be participative as well as representative; it would be open and accessible; all meetings were to be held in public; and it would be family friendly. Access would not just be limited to representation through your elected MSP, but with direct participation too, in the form of innovations such as a petitions committee. The ideals to which the people of Scotland aspired for their Members of Parliament – wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity – were engraved in the Parliamentary Mace to remind all of their obligations in public office.

The achievements and landmarks of the early years of the Parliament were ground-breaking, with radical legislation on land reform and the abolition of Poidings and Warrant Sales. Perhaps the area which had the biggest impact was the large-scale investment in the NHS and other public services. Furthermore, a focus on and a commitment to public engagement ushered in a new era of openness. The Scottish Parliament set a new benchmark for access to Ministers and decision makers. It was shaped and driven by the sense of a new relationship between parliamentarians and the people they represented. Scotland gained a new national self-confidence, but there was also an almost immediate backlash. The Parliament’s decision to abolish Section 28, alongside the ever-increasing costs of building the Parliament premises, caused the pendulum of political popularity to swing the other way and elation turned to despondency, optimism to cynicism.

The Presiding Officer identified some factors, other than political, which led to this increased feeling of despondency. The Consultative Steering Group and constitutional convention was right to have been aspirational and to have raised expectations, but the vision of civic Scotland still had to play out in the reality of electoral politics. Some may have wanted a new type of politics and the new Parliament was designed to encourage cross-party working, but the electorate still predominately voted, and continues to do so, along party lines. There was an expectation that the new proportional voting system would reflect a broader range of political opinion than the predominately two-party system of the House of Commons. There were indeed more parties, but the list system meant that those political parties could demand ever greater loyalty from their candidates. Furthermore, it was hoped that the new devolved Parliament would be less partisan, that constituency MSPs would look after local residents while list MSPs might specialise in certain policy areas and the two would collaborate. In practice, they were often as likely to compete.

Participative democracy was probably always going to be the hardest of the CSG principles to put into practice. Other than direct elections, how *do* you share power with the people? Another early

casualty was the proposal to co-opt unelected outsiders on to parliamentary committees. The problems with such an approach were immediately obvious: who appointed these individuals; what were the criteria; how could they vote on Committees when they were not elected themselves?

As the Parliament has begun to mature, and now as we look forward to 2030, the picture of the Scottish Parliament is one of an institution with a radical desire to engage with the citizens of Scotland, determined to be true to its founding principles and to offer a modern, forward-looking democracy, but sometime struggling to do so within the confines of electoral politics. An example of this is gender politics. The inequality of female representation has long been a clear Westminster failing, but in establishing Devolution, this was seen as a political issue, rather than a parliamentary one and it was left to the political parties to address. In the early days, the Scottish Parliament was seen as an international leader on this issue, with an overall gender balance of 37% women to men. Many thought the battle was won and the political glass ceiling was finally shattered, but in the elections that followed there was no progress and, in fact, the ratio would have worsened considerably had it not been for accidental results. At the most recent elections, both SNP and Labour introduced measures to tackle the gender imbalance amongst candidates and it made an immediate difference. What will be even more interesting will be to see whether that has an impact on the diversity of our Parliament as we head towards 2030.

Thus, the new approach of the Scottish Parliament, and some of the new procedures put in place, has been incredibly successful, but weaknesses remain. What is key for the Presiding Officer is that, even today, none of its earlier vision or hope has been lost – simply temporarily obscured. With this in mind, he set up the independent Commission on Parliamentary Reform. “Not because I thought the Parliament was ‘broken’ – far from it, I am steadfast in my belief that the Parliament’s founding principles are as relevant and central to how the Parliament works today as ever. But, we were in need of a fresh look at how well we do our business and how best we can represent, reflect, and respond to, the needs of citizens today and in the years to come”. This Commission has identified and proposed action on most, if not all, of these very issues. It has made a series of recommendations which will help reassert the identity of the Scottish Parliament over this session and well into the future.

Initial implementations include changes to First Minister’s Questions and the introduction of Urgent Questions to make our business more transparent, and to allow for more spontaneity and immediacy. The Commission has called on MSPs to restore the status and role of the committees as the engine room of the Parliament – with conveners elected by the members rather than appointed by the political parties; it has pushed for more effective use of Chamber time and better legislative scrutiny; and it has urged a rebalancing of the role of MSPs as independently-minded Parliamentarians and not just as obedient members of political parties. Above all, it has reminded those who work at Holyrood of the need to engage with people and communities across the whole of Scotland. To lead and set the political course, yes, but to listen too.

The Presiding Officer stated that the interaction between the public and the politicians is the relationship he most values and, simultaneously, most worries about. Social media is very democratic. It is open to all, it can be used by people to avoid the opinions and editorialising of print journalism. However, on social media, there is a level of aggression that is very difficult to comprehend. If we want our politics to be less tribal and more respectful, then we need to find ways of calling this behaviour out when we see it in these forms. And we need to look at the ways we use that media to receive our political information. In 2030, people will be even less likely to access politics through traditional newspapers or broadcast outlets and more likely to do so through the, as yet, unregulated new media. We should embrace this, whilst being alert to the dangers which could also develop.

Change is coming, and the Presiding Officer suggests that Scotland should look forward with optimism to 2030. The next generation, the ones who will sit in Parliament in 2030 are, on average, better educated – more than twice as likely to go to college or university than those who left school

in the 1970s; they are more likely to be better behaved and be more tolerant than those who have gone before. They are, in short, Generation Responsible. At a time when some see democracy itself under threat, where the promise of Arab Spring has so far failed to materialise, where many are losing faith in their political representatives, the Scottish Parliament has taken root. Where the deliberate spreading of misinformation is commonplace, we all need to know that Scottish Parliamentary briefings value accuracy and truthfulness. When people are shouting at each other across the internet or across the political divide, we need a civilised and respected forum where ideas can be debated and people listened to. The Scottish Parliament has a crucial role to play in maintaining trust in our representative institutions.

The Presiding Officer concluded by summarising how he had tried to outline some of the big challenges Scotland faces in the future, demographic, environmental and political, whilst pointing out that lives are largely changing for the better. “We might have some regrets about what we’re losing and some anxieties about where we’re headed, but if we hold on to our values – if we remember what really matters, the way we treat each other, the care and compassion we show those around us – I am confident we can shape our political future for the better.

“We need to make sure the new technology does not undermine Parliament but opens it up, making us more open and accessible than ever. We need to make Holyrood even more reflective of the diverse and equal Scotland most of us would like to see. We need to challenge the intemperate, the unreasonable and the tribal, whether in the twitter-sphere or on the floor of the Chamber. And we need to continue to be *your* Parliament. The people of Scotland can have confidence in an institution that you continue to shape and that together we can restore our shared sense of optimism and hope for the future”.

A Vote of Thanks was offered by Sir Andrew Cubie FRSE.