

First Impressions on the 1981 Census in Scotland

The past decade was a tumultuous period in Scotland with the discovery of North Sea oil, the rise (and decline) of Scottish Nationalism and the inexorable movement into the deepest economic recession in the post-war period. A number of insights into the pattern of economic and social changes throughout this period is provided by the 'Preliminary Report on the 1981 Census of Population in Scotland'. While complete analysis must await the full details of the Census, some tentative conclusions can be drawn.

The fall in Scotland's population of 112,000 (2%) since 1971 goes against the trend of population growth in the rest of the UK. This fall is attributable to net emigration of 170,000 as the natural increase (excess of births over deaths) numbers 58.6 thousand. This loss is at first surprising given that on a number of economic measures the gap between Scotland and the rest of the UK narrowed and that for much of the decade an increased self-confidence emerged about Scotland's future prospects. Historically, however, the migration figure is, along with that for 1961, the lowest since 1901 and represents a substantial reduction from the figure of -326.5 thousand recorded in 1971. Whether this reduction in emigration can be maintained through the present economic climate is rather doubtful and it is likely that the tendency for Scotland to lose her most skilled workers will increase. The consequences of this are many but most importantly will inhibit the ability of the economy to generate any form of recovery.

A more detailed examination of the information shows two principal elements of population change. The first are the increases resulting from oil-related developments in certain localities, while the second is a decline in the population of the cities coupled with growth in suburban areas.

The former change is entirely expected given the scale and importance of oil-related developments with the major increases occurring in Shetland (54%), Gordon (38%) and Ross and Cromarty (35%). These significant changes generate problems and not just in their immediate impact on housing and social infrastructure. In particular, consideration must be given as to how these people will be employed as oil-related employment tails off and in some instances moves into decline. Indeed, this problem has already manifested itself in Shetland with the completion of the Sullom Voe terminal. Such problems are compounded by the fact that many of these communities are still small in an absolute sense and geographically isolated. Local and central government and individuals within communities will have to show considerable imagination and determination if the population gains of the past decade are to be consolidated.

A movement out of the cities has occurred in each of the four main urban centres in Scotland. While a wide range of factors are at work it does appear to be the case that people now prefer a suburban lifestyle and are willing to commute to their work within the cities and on peripheral estates. This trend has been strengthened in Clydeside by the policies encouraging firms to locate in the New Towns surrounding Glasgow and the inability both politically and financially to fully come to grips with urban renewal programmes. The consequences of this movement out of the cities are serious and some difficult decisions will have to be made.

The most fundamental point is whether this movement should be left to market forces or whether it should be positively encouraged or discouraged? Whatever choice is made will have serious implications on local administrations and particularly upon the allocation of their expenditure between city and suburban districts. The population decline of the cities clearly erodes their tax base and thereby the facilities and infrastructure that can be provided. However, those living in suburban areas still use many of these facilities and without some changes in fiscal arrangements the ability of city administrators to maintain current urban infrastructure will be extremely difficult. This would be compounded if the cities return to the all purpose status they are aiming for. Even greater changes in finance will have to be developed should it be decided to reverse the population movement out of the cities. In Glasgow, the GEAR project has had some success but has proved an extremely expensive operation. While none of the other Scottish cities have inner-city problems on this scale it would nevertheless require a high level of funding to reverse their decline.

The early results of the Census suggest that a number of problems and difficulties are arising due to population movements. Consequently, those concerned with development and implementing economic and social policies within Scotland will need to direct their attention to these issues. There will be no easy answers and indeed it may even prove difficult to ask the correct questions. The full value of the Census lies in its ability to stimulate these questions and its capacity to provide the information necessary to answer them.

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