

**FOREWORD BY PROFESSOR DERMOT MC ALEESE ON THE
OCCASION OF HIS PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

This is a good year to be celebrating the 150th anniversary of our Society! The Irish economy continues to boom and prospects remain bright. At first many were sceptical about the Celtic Tiger (as Morgan Stanley christened it). Was it all skin and no substance? But, as record after record has been broken, the sceptics have been silenced.

The statistics show GNP growth averaging over 8 per cent since 1994. Between 1994 and 1999, real GNP is projected to increase by two-thirds. Growth in numbers employed has reached unprecedented rates, the national finances are regaining health, the balance of payments remains positive, and inflation remains relatively dormant. In a landmark judgement, the Department of Finance recently declared itself “comfortable” with the economy’s performance and the public finances. And to cap all this good news on the economic front, we have the suspension of violence in Northern Ireland.

The performance of the economy in recent years places a question mark over estimates that indicated a potential GNP growth rate of only 4-5 per cent. It will also call for a reappraisal how a 10 per cent unemployment rate can be reconciled with an Irish labour market characterised by increasing scarcity of both skilled and unskilled workers.

Of course, not everybody is benefiting equally from this boom. But the fall in unemployment, the rise in numbers at work, the proliferation of help-wanted signs and foreign accents, the physical transformation of towns and cities all over the country, show that the effects of Ireland’s economic take off have penetrated very deeply into the community.

The contrast between Ireland’s economic prosperity in 1997 and its situation in November 1847 when this Society was founded is hard to imagine. This evening we salute the role of this Society in bringing about the economic transformation. The work of our predecessors has been documented in the elegant and scholarly history of the Society that Professor Mary Daly kindly undertook to author for this special year (Daly 1997).

One lesson from experience and research over the past four decades is that domestic economic policy decisions influence economic performance just as much as exogenous factors such as natural resources, climate, size of country and the health of the world economy. The growth of total factor productivity seems to depend as much on the resources (capital, know-how and skills) an economy can tap into as on the resources it has *in situ*. Well-run countries are geared to make maximum use of the opportunities of utilising foreign technology and capital. As a former president of this Society remarked:

“It is an economic truth that Ireland, if to be self-contained, must remain poor; it can only become wealthy if it is enabled to employ the resources of other lands as well as its own - which it can only do by developing foreign trade.” Oldham (1917, p.5)

The founders of our Society recognised the importance of study and research into the economic and social problems of Ireland; but they also appreciated the need to communicate the findings of this research to policy makers and opinion-formers. Raising the level of debate on economic and social policy was, and remains, the defining mission of our Society. The Society offers a unique forum where policy makers and academics can commingle and where, away from the glare of publicity, they can speak without fear of misrepresentation in a positive and supportive environment. This is what distinguishes The Statistical and Social Inquiry Society’s contribution from that of many other estimable groups and associations in the social sciences currently active in this island.

I would like to thank, and to pay tribute to, all those whose papers and contributions to the Society over the years have helped to deepen our understanding of Irish life. Their work has helped to make our present state of prosperity happen.

It is a particular honour and pleasure to express gratitude to the President of the Royal Irish Academy for your generous support to us over the years. The Academy, as we know, hosted the first meeting of the Society; and it has hosted many meetings since then. I well recall many exciting and controversial meetings in this room in the 1960s and the 1970s. We are touched and honoured by the presence of so many distinguished members of the Royal Irish Academy, several of whom, I am happy to say, are no strangers to our meetings. Your presence, as distinguished scholars in your own right and as representatives of one of Ireland’s most learned and esteemed scholarly institutions, adds lustre to this evening.

The Society is also conscious of the debt we owe to The Economic and Social Research Institute. Number 4, Burlington Road has offered generous hospitality to the Society over many years. Our thanks to former director (and past President) Professor Kieran Kennedy and the present director Professor Brendan Whelan (who we were happy to welcome recently onto our Council) for their continuing support.

References

Daly, Mary, 1997. *The Spirit of Earnest Inquiry: The Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland 1847-1997*, Dublin, Institute of Public Administration.

Oldham, C.H., 1917. “Ireland under Free Trade”, *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, Vol. XIII.