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ABSTRACT

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This paper looks at the concept of consociational government (or the principle of fully-fledged power sharing) as it has evolved in recent comparative studies of the politics of divided societies. It describes the stages through which this concept moved to the centre of the political agenda in Northern Ireland, based on con`tributions by policy makers, academics, journalists and others. It reviews the difficult history of efforts to translate this principle into practice, noting the challenge posed by strong political cultural resistance to any principle other than the majoritarian, Westminister model. It looks at the stages by which powerful objections to consociation—in particular from unionists—gave way to a more matter-of-fact acceptance of this principle, and considers the factors which lay behind this transition.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

John Coakley is Head of the School of Politics and International Relations at University College Dublin. He is also the founding director of IBIS. He has edited or co-edited: *Changing shades of orange and green: redefining the union and the nation in contemporary Ireland* (UCD Press, 2002); *The territorial management of ethnic conflict* (2nd ed., Frank Cass, 2003); *From political violence to negotiated settlement: the winding path to peace in twentieth century Ireland* (UCD Press, 2004); *Politics in the Republic of Ireland* (4th ed., Routledge, 2004); and *Crossing the Border, New relationships between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland* (Irish Academic Press, 2007).

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INTRODUCTION

Almost 40 years ago, in early 1972, as the system of government of Northern Ireland established by the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 lay in ruins and the pursuit of a replacement system had just begun, the outgoing Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Brian Faulkner, made an observation that was equally unflattering to British policy makers and to the profession of political science. Referring to the new ideas supported by the leaders of the three main British parties, he complained that "for Mr Heath and Mr Wilson and Mr Thorpe, the affairs of Northern Ireland are a matter of political science…for us in Ulster, it is a matter of life and death" (Faulkner, 1978: 161). The implication was that political science and practical politics represented alternative rather than complementary approaches, and Faulkner expressed a clear preference for the latter over the former.

Of all of the new ideas that were to find their way onto the menu of constitutional options for Northern Ireland, few are as distinctive as the institutional device known as consociation—essentially, an elaborate system of power sharing. This device was by no means an invention of political scientists, nor was it political scientists alone who identified its value as a mechanism for resolving conflict in deeply divided societies. But structures of government formation, central to the political process, are an area where political scientists' comparative perspective may have a significant contribution to make.

This paper aims to review the significance of consociational government for the pursuit of a settlement in Northern Ireland. Given the uneven familiarity of the term, the paper begins with a discussion of the concept itself, and of its role in divided societies generally. The second section looks at the stages by which this principle was introduced in Northern Ireland, from its first tentative mention in 1969 to its full-blooded implementation in the triple agreements of the past 12 years. The first of these, the Belfast agreement (1998) endorsed the consociational principle; the second, the St Andrews agreement (2006), essentially a footnote to this, signified the acceptance of the consociational principle by the largest party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which up to that point had nursed a fundamental objection to it; the third, the Hillsborough agreement (2010), a footnote to the footnote, ensured that the consociational principle would extend over all matters of normal domestic policy making, including in particular policing and justice.[1] The third section looks

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[1] The length of the three documents (with the Belfast agreement coming in at about 12,000 words, the St Andrews agreement at 7,000 and the Hillsborough agreement at 3,000) indicates the relative importance of the three.

speculatively at the future prospects of consociational government in Northern Ireland.

It should be emphasised that this paper will focus only on one aspect of the settlement in Northern Ireland, to the exclusion of other important strands, such as the North-South and East-West relationships, and the range of major reforms in the areas of security, rights and economic, social and cultural development that the Belfast agreement brought in. This is not a reflection of the relative importance of these dimensions—merely a focus on a particular aspect of the settlement that has attracted a great deal of recent interest (see McGarry and O'Leary, 2004; Taylor, 2009). Furthermore, the objective of the paper is to analyse the direct political consequences of consociational government—not to explore the complex societal effects of this system, nor the extent to which it reinforces rather than seeking to transcend division.

THE NATURE OF CONSOCIATIONAL GOVERNMENT

The character of consociational government may best be appreciated by considering that which it is not. The concept was developed precisely as a reaction against the dominant models in the political science of the English-speaking world in the 1960s, with its view of political conflict as a form of intense, winner-takes-all competition between two parties or blocs, between which the level of ideological competition is relatively mild. As expressed in the British "Westminster" model, this took the form of strict majority rule, with winning parties or coalitions monopolising political office and railroading their legislative and policy programmes through centralised decision making structures, while altogether ignoring the opposition.

"Consociation" implied a much more consensual process. The term was first used in its modern, political science sense by David Apter to describe one of three models of political change in Africa; he defined it as "a joining together of constituent units which do not lose their identity when merging in some form of union" (Apter, 1961: 24).[2] But two papers presented in 1967 at the Brussels world congress of the International Political Science Association represented a new body of literature that began from a quite different starting points.[3] The first, by Gerhard Lehmbruch, summarised his work, already published in German, on Proporzdemokratie (proportional democracy) in Austria and Switzerland, adding in the further example of Lebanon. These, he argued, were political systems in which

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[2] Apter did not acknowledge an earlier use of the term (or, at least, of its Latin equivalent, *consocatio*) by the German Protestant reformer Johannes Althusius in the early seventeenth century. But for Althusius *consociatio* was a much more general concept, referring to the broad practice of politics: "The subject matter of politics is therefore association (*consociatio*), in which the symbiotes [those who live together] pledge themselves each to the other, by explicit or tacit agreement, to mutual communication of whatever is useful and necessary for the harmonious exercise of social life" (Althusius, 1965: 12).

[3] In addition to the two authors mentioned here, others tackling similar issues at the time included—in order of proximity to the Lehmbruch-Lijphart perspective—Lorwin (1971), Steiner (1971), Nordlinger (1972) and Rabushka and Shepsle (1972); see also Hans Daalder's overviews (1971, 1974).

conflicts were settled by negotiated agreement between all relevant actors, with the majority principle being confined to limited domains, while public offices were distributed among all important groups (Lehmbruch, 1974; 1979). He also used the term Konkordanzdemokratie (concordant democracy) to describe this pattern, taking the view that in Switzerland this was a special variant of consociationalism rather than an ideal example (Lehmbruch, 1993).

The second 1967 paper was that of Arend Lijphart who, like Lehmbruch, recognised the difficulty of accommodating certain smaller European democracies to the classifications of political systems then dominant in English language political science, but who pushed the issue of typology further (Lijphart, 1968). Borrowing from Apter's terminology, he described a new type of democratic system, consociational democracy, defined as a combination of fragmented political culture with coalescent elite behaviour, and represented by Austria, Switzerland, the Benelux countries, Lebanon, Colombia and, until 1967, Uruguay (Lijphart, 1969: 21). This was developed later in an article that became the cornerstone of writing on consociational democracy; in this the term was defined more fully as "government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy" (Lijphart, 1969: 216). It was expanded later into a book-length study covering a wider range of cases (Lijphart, 1977). Lijphart later developed it further himself (1999, 2002, 2004), and several extensive reviews of the concept have appeared over the years (for example, van Schendelen, 1984; Andeweg, 2000).

Four distinctive characteristics of consociational democracy have survived from the beginning as a cornerstone of the theory. Initially, Lijphart (1969: 213) described elite cooperation as expressed most characteristically through a grand coalition cabinet as the defining political criterion of consociation, but the form that such cooperation might take was later specified more exhaustively (Lijphart, 1977: 25-44):

- government by grand coalition: the leaders of all significant segments participate in the governing process, typically by their inclusion in a grand coalition (this can take "diachronic" form, in that not all segments need to be included simultaneously, but none must be excluded permanently; and other devices such as extra-cabinet decision-making structures may have a role to play)
- mutual veto to protect minorities: each segment is given the right to veto any measure that is seen as threatening its vital interests
- proportionality as the principal standard of political representation, civil service appointments and allocation of public funds: this implies proportional allocation of parliamentary seats through the electoral system, of civil service posts through the recruitment process and of public funds through some kind of proportional formula (this may be adjusted to provide for over-representation of minorities, or even of parity representation of all segments)
- high degree of segmental autonomy: in those areas where joint decision making is not needed, each segment is free to formulate and implement policy (territorial

autonomy or federalism would be a characteristic expression of this, but it may also take the form of non-territorial autonomy).

Lijphart's discussion of the defining characteristics of consociation has been criticised for treating class, ethnicity, religion and language as "objective" factors, or, in effect, for reifying them, and for going to the extent "of using and devising indexes and angles of cross-cutting social cleavages in different societies" (Brass, 1991: 338-9). But more sustained criticism has come from the opposite direction: it has also been criticised on the grounds that it is lacking in conceptual clarity (for example, Halpern, 1986), and that it does not lend itself to empirical measurement (Steiner, 1981: 340-45; van Schendelen, 1984: 34-35; Lustick, 1997: 98-100). From the perspective of the analysis of ethnic conflict and its resolution, it is possible to respond to the first of these criticisms simply by pointing out that measurement does not imply reification; the criteria used are typically indicators of underlying, invisible characteristics, and should clearly be regarded as such. As to the second set of objections, although efforts to operationalise indicators of consociation and to "measure" them have rarely been made, these are possible.

It could be argued that the definition of "consociation" proposed above implies two, not four, defining criteria. The first is that the principle for the allocation of political and administrative positions and resources is proportional rather than competitive (or, in extreme cases, monopolistic). Thus, Lijphart's third criterion (proportionality as the principal standard of political representation) could be seen as absorbing his first one (government by grand coalition), which it logically implies. The second is that the basis of decision making is consensual rather than majoritarian (or, in extreme cases, hegemonic). This corresponds with Lijphart's second criterion (mutual group veto). Lijphart's fourth criterion (segmental autonomy) may be dropped, as belonging to a different order of conflict resolution strategies from the one defined here: it is based on the notion of division of power (between different levels of government) rather than of sharing of power (at the same level of government).

An obvious starting point in exploring the utility of the concept is the set of cases originally proposed by Lijphart. This included four core European countries: Switzerland, Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands. Lijphart (1977) left open the option of including Luxembourg, but ignored it on grounds of insufficient information. Outside Europe, he considered the cases of Lebanon, Malaysia, Cyprus and, as a more marginal contender, Nigeria. Although he dismissed the case of Colombia on the grounds that this was not a plural society (Lijphart, 1977: 33), this has elsewhere been taken as "a highly successful case of consociationalism" (Dix, 1980: 303). Authors have considered also the cases of Surinam, Netherlands Antilles, Israel, South Africa, Canada, Northern Ireland, India and the European Union, as well as a number of less plausible examples, with predictably mixed verdicts as to the applicability of the consociational model (for a listing, see Lijphart, 1985: 84).

There are, as discussed above, two dimensions to the consociational approach. First, the society in question must be "divided"; second, a rather specific constitutional formula (proportionality in allocation of public sector posts and resources, and consensus in collective decision making) must be in use. Let us consider these characteristics in turn.

First, the question of what constitutes a "divided" society is far from clear. As discussed above, Lijphart had in mind a form of social segmentation in a context where a major political cleavage reflects a profound underlying division, with class and religion as its most characteristic ingredients. In other words, it refers to circumstances where distinct subcultures with clearly defined boundaries coexist within the same state. But how are these subcultures to be measured? They have been compared to the zuilen in Dutch society, and to the Lager in Austria. But although these terms are evocative (the notion of a zuil, a pillar or column, is potent in suggesting parallel structures which do not touch), operationalising them is far from easy. Since Lijphart relied on Lorwin's definition of a related concept—one which indeed comes close to the classical description of verzuiling or "pillarisation"—it is appropriate to consider it further here:

> a political system is one of segmented pluralism when its cleavages have produced competing networks of schools, communications media, interest groups, leisure time associations, and political parties along segmented lines, of both religious and antireligious nature (Lorwin, 1971: 142).

This offers a clear set of indicators, and suggests an exceptionally clear example: Northern Ireland (though Lorwin strangely expressed the unsubstantiated view that Northern Ireland "has not created a system of segmented pluralism out of its fierce religious loyalties and hostilities; Lorwin, 1971: 144, n.4). Here, there have for long been two segments, each with its own network of elementary and secondary schools, newspapers, social organisations and sports structures, and each supporting its own party or set of parties. But when we consider the classic consociational cases, our first dilemma is that even the number of segments is unclear. In Austria, for example, the existence of Catholic and Socialist segments was undoubted; but was there also a third, "German national" one? In the Netherlands, similarly, it is clear that there have for long been separate Catholic, Protestant and secular segments; but is the last of these in reality two, i.e. are there separate Socialist and Liberal segments? The scholarly consensus in the Austrian case is on two segments, and in the Dutch case on four; but the very fact that the issue may be raised illustrates the difficulty in measuring extent of division—and reflects the difficulty in finding objective quantitative evidence to support qualitative assessments.

From the perspective of ethnic conflict resolution, the issue simplifies itself greatly. Consociation can make a contribution to ethnic conflict resolution only where ethnic conflict exists. There is thus a case for considering the non-European cases

mentioned above; but the four core European cases are problematic. Austria and the Netherlands are clearly not ethnically divided societies (or at least not in the sense to which consociational practices in these countries have been a response). The cases of Switzerland and Belgium are rather different. In both, to the extent that traditional religious and class cleavages formed the building blocks for consociational arrangements they lack an ethnic dimension. Switzerland's language divisions form an alternative, but not necessarily plausible, arena for the exploration of consociational practices with an ethnic dimension; but it is really only Belgium that fits this category as the language cleavage has replaced the traditional Catholic – liberal – socialist trichotomy and consociational practices have received striking institutional form. Although consociational government based on religious divisions broke down in Lebanon in 1975 to be followed by a long and bloody civil war, it is worthy of note that efforts to restore civil government following the Taif agreement of 1989 were based on a repackaging of the consociational formula. Although the consociational constitution of Cyprus lasted only for three years (1960-63), and that its suspension led ultimately to civil disorder and partition, the Annan plan for the reunification of the island (2003) provided for consociational institutions at the centre. Similarly, though not a sovereign entity, Northern Ireland during its periods of devolved government (1974, and episodically since 1998) constitutes another such model (McGarry and O'Leary, 1996; O'Leary, 1999; Taylor, 2009).
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CONSOCIATIONAL GOVERNMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

In the pursuit of a settlement since the suspension of the old Stormont institutions in 1972, the notion of power sharing in any new Northern Irish government has been a key ingredient from the outset (McEvoy, 2006). This was later reinforced by the notion of proportionality in public sector employment and resource allocation. By the end of the century, the notion of mutual veto had also been incorporated, resulting in the classic consociational mix.[4]

It is easy to forget that the idea of power sharing in Northern Ireland was first placed on the political agenda well before the original majority rule institutions collapsed in 1972. As Brian Walker (2010) has recently pointed out, Guardian deputy editor John Cole, with a long track record as a journalist in Belfast, first proposed the idea in an editorial in 1969, arguing that the deeply divided nature of Northern Irish society rendered inappropriate the pure majority rule model. In 1971, the eminent Queen's University political scientist John Whyte recommended adoption of the Swiss system of proportional representation of parties in government, pointing out that a four-party government there functioned well, though representing sharply different political perspectives, and that "a coalition including Mr Paisley, Mr Faulkner, Mr Vivian Simpson and Mr Hume would hardly be more divergent" (Whyte, 1971: [11]; this referred to the Protestant Unionist Party, the UUP, the Northern Ireland Labour Party and the SDLP).

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[4] This section draws heavily on Coakley, 2009.

In 1972, the SDLP took this idea up, though presenting it as an interim stage on the path to Irish unity. The party proposed the formation of a Swiss-type executive, whose members would be elected from a new assembly by means of proportional representation; it would then select its own chief executive, who would assign portfolios subject to the approval of British and Irish government representatives, or "commissioners"; and its four-year term could be cut short only by a qualified majority vote supported by 75% of the assembly (SDLP, 1972). The Alliance Party later made a similar but more modest proposal, suggesting in the Constitutional Convention of 1975 that a set of committee chairs—an embryonic executive—be selected by proportional representation (Constitutional Convention, 1975: art. 85). At an academic level, Lijphart (1975) also became involved in the debate.

Quite apart from the public political debate, though, it is to be assumed that British government thinking was evolving along similar lines. The United Kingdom's own imperial history had generated a wealth of experience in managing other divided societies, and colonial withdrawal had often been followed by the installation of power-sharing arrangements, as in Malaysia (1957) and especially Cyprus (1960). Indeed, it has been remarked that when the British outlined their thinking on the matter in a green paper (policy discussion document) in 1972, this represented their thinking "over a great many years" (Bloomfield, 2007: 39). The green paper suggested that there were four main approaches to "broadly-based" government:

- "entrenched government", by which the inclusion of specific minority elements would be constitutionally required;
- "proportional representation government", by which the political composition of the government would reflect that of the assembly;
- "bloc government", by which the party or parties representing the majority would be required to coalesce with the party or parties commanding "a majority of the minority"; and
- "weighted majority government", under which the government, whatever its composition, would require support from a qualified majority (UK, 1972: 27-28).

In the event, the British government pushed for a vaguer but still effective system of power sharing. Giving legal expression to the allocation of ministerial posts between "communities" when these entities are not legally defined poses certain difficulties. Thus, the new Northern Ireland Constitution Act (1973) retained the constitutional fiction of royal executive power by providing in article 8.3 that "the chief executive member and the heads of the Northern Ireland departments shall be appointed by the Secretary of State on behalf of Her Majesty". The acceptability of a potential government was left to the discretion of the Secretary of State: an executive would be appointed only if it appeared to him that it would be of a type which "having regard to the support it commands in the Assembly and to the electorate on which that support is based, is likely to be widely accepted throughout the community" (Art. 2.1). A government white paper published shortly before the act was passed offered a more explicit statement of intention: "the Executive itself

can no longer be solely based upon any single party, if that party draws its support and its elected representation virtually entirely from only one section of a divided community" (UK, 1973: 13), meaning, in effect, that there would have to be appropriate nationalist participation in the executive.

The move to a more explicit form of proportionality in government was heralded in a paper sent to the Northern Ireland Office in 1980 by two academics from Queen's University Belfast, Sydney Elliott and Jack Smith (Coakley, 2009: 137). As later developed, this showed how the d'Hondt system might be used to select a 10-member executive, and committee chairs. Using the 1982 Assembly election results, it showed that the Ulster Unionists would be entitled to four executive seats, the DUP to three, the SDLP to two and the Alliance Party to one. Since the paper further proposed that parties be allowed to select responsibilities (including chief executive and deputy chief executive) in the order in which the d'Hondt formula suggested, this would have meant that the two most senior posts would have gone to unionists. This formula was taken up, in a widely publicised initiative, by a group close to the paramilitary Ulster Defence Association (Ulster Political Research Group, 1987). But this initiative did not appeal to mainstream unionists; both the DUP and the UUP leaders distanced themselves from it (Cochrane, 2001: 217). For them, the principles embodied in the 1975 report of the Constitutional Convention continued to hold sway, at least in public: any Northern Ireland executive should be formed by the leader of the largest party, following Westminster practice.[5]

Notwithstanding the public stance of the two unionist leaders, an important task force made up of the deputy leaders of the two parties and the UUP general secretary proposed a more inclusive approach. Although only an abridged version of its report was published (McCusker, Robinson and Millar, 1987), this showed a disposition to contemplate painful compromise, including power sharing with the SDLP. But a confidential document produced as part of this deliberative process and leaked some years later showed that consideration had been given to a network of committee chairs (again, an embryonic government) selected by parties in accordance with the d'Hondt formula (Unionist Working Group, 1991).[6] A more ambitious blueprint was proposed by a group of associates of the British Labour Party. This resembled the SDLP's (1972) original plan, but was more explicit in its endorsement of conventional proportional representation formulas as a basis for selecting an executive. The group concluded that the Sainte-Laguë formula was preferable to the d'Hondt one in selecting an executive, precisely because it would be more likely to gain the support of smaller parties, which would otherwise be excluded, especially in a small executive (O'Leary et al, 1993: 139-44).[7] Ironically,

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[5] A broad anti-power sharing coalition, the United Ulster Unionist Council (which included the UUP, the breakaway Vanguard Unionist Party and the DUP) had an overall majority in the Convention.
[6] This approach had been anticipated less explicitly in an earlier UUP document, which had in effect proposed office sharing among committee chairs in a form of administrative devolution (Ulster Unionist Party, 1984).
[7] The Sainte-Laguë and d'Hondt formulas have in common the fact that each aims to allocate seats in a mathematically proportionate way, but they differ in the manner in which they deal with fractional remainders,

in the light of more recent developments, the smaller parties at the time included not just the Alliance Party, but also the DUP and Sinn Féin.

Much of the thinking behind unionist preference for an executive with modest powers illustrates one of the central planks in consociational theory: the notion that power-sharing institutions can function with less difficulty if the burden of decision making is modest. For this reason, not only did unionists see a committee system (where committee chairs would exercise a quasi-ministerial role) as a way of getting around formal power sharing; it also proved possible for a certain measure of office sharing to develop at local level. Of Northern Ireland's 26 district councils, four were sharing power (if circulation of ceremonial posts and division of committee chairs merits this description) as early as 1973, a number that had increased to 16 by 1993. Allowing for the fact that some councils had moved towards office sharing but then reverted to the traditional system, by the mid-1990s there were only six councils which had never innovated in this way (McKay and Irwin, 1995: 6, 38). By 1998, 12 councils, now significantly including that of Belfast, had office-sharing arrangements (Knox and Carmichael, 1998: 391-2). But this system, imperfect in its capacity to reflect local political divisions closely at administrative level, was able to enjoy this modest success largely through its informal and voluntary nature, and by removing the more contentious political issues from the floor of the council chamber, which, in any case, was intended to deal with mundane issues rather than with grand constitutional questions. It was also characterised in many cases by a tendency for the local majority to ensure the selection of minority office holders who were not necessarily fully representative of their own communities (Farrington, 2006: 85-119)—a feature sometimes welcomed by conflict resolution engineers, but one which risks provoking alienation within the excluded minority group.

The way was thus paved for the incorporation of fully-fledged power sharing arrangements in the Belfast agreement, with apparently minimal resistance to the introduction of the d'Hondt formula as a mechanism for cabinet seat allocation in proportion to Assembly strength. This principle was extended also to the selection of chairs of committees. In selecting committee chairs or ministers by proportional representation, use of an automatic formula had one big advantage over election. It enabled participants in the process, especially on the unionist side, to go along with unpalatable outcomes (such as inclusion of Sinn Féin) without formally endorsing them by vote, being allowed instead to blame the formula (see Godson, 2004: 339-40).

It is worth drawing attention to the separate arrangements for the selection of First Minister and Deputy First Minister. Under the Belfast agreement are supernumerary in the allocation of ministries. In principle, filling these posts raises the same kinds of issue as filling ministerial positions (giving a further advantage to the larger parties in either bloc). The arrangements have passed through three stages, raising

with the former tending to be more favourable than the latter towards smaller parties or groups; see Coakley, 2009: 140-41.

interesting issues regarding the formulas used and their implications. First, the Belfast agreement provided that these offices be filled collectively by vote of the Assembly, using the "parallel consent" formula: in addition to an overall majority, the candidates would have to be supported by a majority of both unionist and nationalist MLAs. This would have the effect of ensuring that the two people elected would be acceptable to both communities, but it also raised the risk of costly paralysis.[8]

This matter was resolved in the Saint Andrews agreement of October 2006. This replaced the provision for election by an automatic formula: the largest party in the largest designation would nominate the First Minister, and the largest party in the second largest designation would nominate the Deputy First Minister. This would mean, in effect, that for the foreseeable future the largest unionist party would hold the main post, while the largest nationalist one would hold the deputy position.

There was, however, an important third stage in the evolution of these provisions. In a remarkable development—which went largely unnoticed and unreported—a fundamental alteration was made while the agreement was being given legislative effect in Westminster.[9] A new provision was introduced to the effect that the party with the right to nominate the First Minister would be the largest party in the Assembly regardless of designation, with the Deputy First Minister to be named by the largest party in the other designation. This raised the very real prospect of Sinn Féin occupying this position. In 2007, for instance, had the DUP and UUP Assembly parties been the same size (27 each, rather than 36 and 18 respectively), Sinn Féin (with 28 seats) would have been entitled to nominate the First Minister. But even had no change taken place on the unionist side, if a major collapse in SDLP support had given an extra nine seats to Sinn Féin the outcome would have been the same—an outcome that would have been highly destabilising, and that might have jeopardised the implementation of the agreement.

ASSESSING CONSOCIATIONAL GOVERNMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

If we are to generalise about the history of consociational government in Northern Ireland, we may see a pattern of gradual consolidation of the principle, and its growing acceptance by party leaders and supporters alike. Initially attractive—for obvious reasons—mainly to the nationalist side, it was strongly resisted by unionists. Brendan O'Leary's description of the Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985 as

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[8] For example, a majority within either designation could bloc the whole process. Aside from theoretical examples, this is precisely what happened in November 2001, when David Trimble failed initially to secure re-election (following his earlier resignation) due to defections; he was able to obtain a majority of designated unionists only after one member of the Women's Coalition and three members of the Alliance Party redesignated themselves "unionist".

[9] Former First Minister Lord Trimble alleged in the House of Lords that this change was introduced at the last minute at the behest of the DUP and Sinn Féin, but his amendment proposing that the change be dropped was defeated, the government spokesman arguing (not necessarily accurately) that without this there could never be a nationalist First Minister; *House of Lords Hansard*, vol. 687, cols 386-398, 22 Nov. 2006.

"coercive consociationalism" can give rise to a misunderstanding about the nature of that agreement, which contained no consociational elements (but a promise of these, should Northern Irish parties wish to undermine the 1985 agreement by settling on devolved government). But O'Leary's explanation of the expression shows his interpretation of the agreement as instrumental: it sought to create "conditions for power sharing to work" (O'Leary, 1989: 580). The evidence of the late 1980s and of the run-up to the Belfast agreement indeed suggests that this form of pressure was successful in persuading unionists of the need to accept power sharing. Furthermore, the agreement stimulated further efforts in the direction of rectifying imbalances in socio-economic relations between the two communities, introducing implicit recognition of the principle of proportionality in the public sector, and, indeed, in large private sector bodies.

If we stand back from the period since 1973 and look at efforts to implement power sharing in Northern Ireland, we may seen in principle, ignoring hybrid models and external participants, that there were several options and suboptions for ministerial selection in accordance with the power-sharing principle.

- First, it could be based on the principle of subjective external monitoring: an executive would be acceptable provided it was so judged by an appointed person or agency, such as the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland or, more radically, a British-Irish institution (such as the later British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference). The initiative for this design might lie either with the parties, in a form of "voluntary coalition", with the external agency itself, or with some other organ, such as the speaker of the Assembly.
- Second, it could be based on a fixed quota system. This might aim for approximate proportionality, as in Switzerland until 2003; on parity, as in Belgium since 1970; or on minority over-representation, as in post-independence Cyprus, 1960-63.[10]
- Third, it could be based on proportional representation of political interests in the Assembly. This could be based on election by single transferable vote, or on a mathematical formula, such as the d'Hondt or Sainte-Laguë one.

There were difficulties with each of these approaches. The problem with the first was that it calls for continuing intervention from London (and possibly also from Dublin) of a kind that Northern Ireland politicians would be likely to find unacceptable. The problem with the second is its rigidity: it is insensitive to

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[10] The Swiss *Zauberformel* ("magic formula") allocated the three largest parties two ministries each, and the fourth largest party one, over the period 1959-2003. Because of the stability of Swiss voting behaviour, this reflected perfectly the allocation of ministries in proportion to parliamentary seats according to the d'Hondt formula until 1995 and according to the Sainte-Laguë formula until 1999 (computed from Switzerland, 2008). This meant that the Christian Democrats were allowed to retain two seats until 2003, though they had lost their proportional entitlement to a second seat before that point. The Belgian constitution was amended in 1970 to provide for parity in the cabinet in the number of French- and Dutch-speaking ministers, with the prime minister as supernumerary. The Cypriot constitution of 1960, when Turks accounted for 18% of the population, provided for a Turkish Vice President alongside a Greek President, and three Turkish government ministers out of a cabinet of 10.

demographic change and electoral evolution. Furthermore, since it institutionalises divisions, it risks deepening them. This is a problem also with the third approach, which, however, is more flexible and more responsive to the flow of electoral preferences. To generalise, Northern Ireland moved from the first approach, in the 1970s, to the third, in the 1990s, bypassing the second.

In addition, as power sharing at executive level was matched by proportionate distribution of committee chairs and supplemented by provisions for a more even distribution of public resources between the communities, one of the two defining criteria for consociation came close to its classical expression. The second criterion, possession of a veto by each community on legislation or public policy affecting its vital interests, also found full expression in the Belfast agreement, with the requirement of at least 40% support within each communal bloc in the case of communally sensitive matters.

What of the future of the consociational formula? Public opinion data, though not always crystal clear in their implications, suggest a supportive public climate for continuance of the current arrangements. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it seems that the most enthusiastic supporters of the system are to be found at the political extremes, in Sinn Féin and the DUP. Right in the centre, the Alliance Party has always had reservations over the "sectarian carve-up" that consociation necessarily implies; the UUP has been reconsidering the current arrangements; and even the SDLP may now be less enthusiastic than it once was. Aside from these reservations within particular parties, there are two broad types of development that threaten the stability of the settlement: differences on public policy, and electoral instability.

Public policy differences between the unionist and nationalist parties have been well rehearsed. The most fundamental, provisionally resolved by the Hillsborough agreement of 2010, related to the devolution of responsibility for justice and policing, a project close to the hearts of Sinn Féin members, but one on which the DUP had serious reservations. Policy on academic selection at secondary school level (and in particular the "eleven plus" examination) is another example. In these cases, an outside observer could be forgiven for failing to predict what positions would be adopted by communal parties: it is not immediately obvious that the specific proposals that have been so divisive are clearly in the interest of one community rather than the other. Rather than being reassuring, though, this suggests that the two sides have profound reservations about the whole system of power sharing in the devolved institutions, so that each is capable of adopting an unpredictable but entrenched position in an area where it feels it can fly the communal flag. Disputes over such issues as the Irish language are, by contrast, easier to understand, since there is a long-established divergence of opinion between the communities on these.

There is another potential time bomb ticking in Northern Ireland's devolved institutions. Unionists were prepared to accept a 50-50 division of ministerial posts in the first executive formed after the 1998 Assembly election, and did better subsequently (with a 60-40 balance on the executive in their favour). But problems within the DUP and the rise of a challenging party, the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) raise another prospect. If we project the results of the 2009 election in Northern Ireland to the European Parliament onto the next Assembly election, due by 2011, an interesting pattern emerges. The three-way division in unionism would reinstate nationalist-unionist parity on the executive, reducing the DUP to two seats from its current four. But it would also give the post of First Minister to Sinn Féin. Whether unionists could live with this outcome is debatable, and raises serious questions about the viability of the institutions in the immediate future.

CONCLUSION

The new constitutional arrangements in Northern Ireland were forced to engage in a long battle against the tyranny of the Westminster model. Strangely, the Irish nationalist tradition has been strongly attracted to this model, which would reject consociation as "un-British". This deep vein in Irish political culture has apparently seen no contradiction between violently rejecting British influence in Ireland, on the one hand, and accepting—sometimes, unquestioningly—the superiority of British cultural and political norms over all others, on the other.

However, consociation was too obviously in the interest of the northern minority for nationalist parties to be able to resist its appeal. Conversely, consociation was manifestly not in the interests of the northern majority, at least in the short term, making it easy to understand why unionists insisted for so long on the Westminster principle of majority rule. It is here that Brendan O'Leary's concept of "coercive consociationalism" offers a valuable interpretative tool: by giving unionists a strong incentive to accept consociation as an instrument to overthrow the hated institutions of Anglo-Irish cooperation put in place in 1985, the Anglo-Irish agreement of that year provided a crucial stimulus for a fundamental reorientation within the unionist community, one which brought both sides in Northern Ireland closer together in negotiating a settlement. The consociational roots of this settlement flowed from the imperative of finding a stable solution to the conflict; but they also owed much to the varied and halting history of consociational government in Europe and elsewhere.

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