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Holland and Northern Ireland

The Dutch system: consociational democracy

The term 'consociational democracy' was coined by Arend Lijphart in The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherland, published in 1968. In it he tried to explain what he saw as a central paradox in Dutch twentieth century history - how a nation which was so much divided by class and religion could have such a stable democratic system.

Dutch society had been divided into four main closed groups based on religion and class, known as pillars (zuilen), since the nineteenth century. The two religious zuilen were Catholic and Calvinist; liberals and socialists comprised the two secular zuilen. There was strong hostility between all four. In 1917, their deep disputes over education, suffrage and socio-economic policy deepened the divisions to crisis point and threatened anarchy. From this crisis emerged the politics of accommodation, or consociational democracy.

In essence this amounted to a coalition between the leaders of the main zuilen, which lasted fifty years. This was not simply a 'minimum-winning coalition', but a 'grand-coalition' between most of the leading parties whether or not such a coalition was needed to secure a majority. Below the canopy of elite agreement, each pillar was given a high degree of control over its own affairs. Each was serviced by its own trade unions, farmers' and employees' organisations, educational institutions from nursery school to university, hospitals, voluntary and youth organisations, charities, newspapers and later radio and television. At its peak this produced a highly segmented society. In particular the power of the churches increased. There was a growth of sectarian organisations towards a point where they controlled separate comprehensive religious and social frameworks, especially in rural areas. Apart from church and school based activities the system provided the churches with substantial powers of patronage, and powerful reasons for maintaining pillarisation. In the period up to the second world war, and immediately after it, the role of both Protestant and Catholic clergy was conservative and crucial. They were in the position of employing and dismissing teachers and workers in a number of industries; as members of an intellectual elite they acted as matchmakers and as arbitrators in commercial dealing; they 'had their say' (van Poppel, 369) on books and plays available in libraries, and on which films, and even news broadcasts, might be screened; they dealt directly, as representatives of their pillars, with governments and boards. They used this power to preserve the pillars, actively opposing mixed-religious marriages, and to preserve conservative moral and social norms, opposing contraception and enforcing censorship, especially in the rural south.

The distinctiveness of the groups was actually encouraged, as long as their leaders were able to work together at the level of government.

As Lijphart put it, 'it is important to understand that consociational democracy enhances the democratic stability of a plural society, not by making it less plural, but by making it more plural' (Lijphart 1984, 11). The blocs became 'distinctly separate subcultural communities, each with its own political and social institutions' (Lijphart 1968, 58). Funds were allocated between the blocs on strictly proportional lines. Proportionality also applied to such matters as the composition of the civil service, local administration, and the allocation of network time on the state-owned radio and television stations. When disagreements occurred they were resolved by what Lijphart called 'accommodation' between the leaders, or 'the settlement of divisive issues and conflicts, where only a minimum consensus exists' (Lijphart 1968, 103). The resulting agreements often involved persuasion and compromise rather than majority votes. A small example was the institution of a football pool in Holland in the early 1960s. There was a great majority for the idea, but it was fundamentally opposed on religious grounds by one of the grand-coalition partners, the Lutheran ARP. Although there was no need to do so on the basis of counting heads, considerable changes were made in the bill (restrictions on sums gambled etc.) to make it more acceptable to the ARP. This was known as the principle of 'concurrent majority' whereby all decisions required the agreement of all the blocs. As Crawford put it, 'it was effectively government by a cartel of political leaders where all parties worked in relative harmony with one another in order to avoid political isolation' (Crawford, 301).

So the four blocs were like pillars, each standing independently, but each supporting the overarching central state structures. They continued to produce stability until the 1960s.

#### The dismantling of the pillars from the 1960s

Since then Dutch politics have undergone a process which has been described as depillarisation or defreezing. There is considerable debate about the reasons for Holland abandoning a system which had produced stability for such a long time, but some of the contributing factors are indisputable: the great post-war growth in non-pillarised organisations, especially the central bureaucracy and the mass media; the increase in interaction between members of the different blocs; a growing rebellion against elite control. The main reason however was the decline of mass support for the religious pillars, thus eroding the very basis of Dutch politics. This decline, especially in the Catholic bloc was greatest during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The annual number of priests ordained declined from 227 in 1966 to 26 in 1972, resignations from the priesthood rose from 74 to 243 between 1966 to 1970; attendance at Sunday mass fell from 73% in 1964 to 40% in 1977; more ominously for the political system, the percentage of votes for the Catholic party, the KVP, fell from 31.9% in 1963 to 17.7% in 1972 (these statistics are condensed from van Poppel, 1985 and Thurlings, 1971). These dramatic changes had been accelerated by the severe split between liberal and traditional Catholicism, which, according to Thurlings, 'meant nothing less than a status revolution within the church whereby the administrative elite, whose role was the

maintenance of discipline, saw their leadership threatened by the elite of theologians and other intellectuals, whose role was ... a critical study of their own Catholic culture' (Thurlings, 1971,132). Similar divisions also affected the Protestant churches.

So neither of the religious pillars could any longer rely upon their previous support. The most dramatic reaction to this was a fusion in 1977 of the Catholic party (KVP) and the two Protestant parties (ARP and CHU) into the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), in an attempt to stem the tide of their electoral losses during the 1970s. In the secular pillars too a split within the Labour party led to the formation of a New Left party D'66, specifically committed to more democratic party practices and opposed to the compromises of consociationalism. Even more remarkably, in light of their traditional rivalry, the Catholic and socialist trade unions announced their amalgamation into the FNV in 1976, 'increasingly sceptical of the need for pillarised unionism' (Bryant, 70). In less contentious areas, like youth organisations, amalgamations were also completed between different blocs; for example, the Protestant and Catholic boy scout movements fused after decline in membership for the sectarian movements.

So depillarisation was marked by greater levels of cross-cutting between Holland's different blocs. Catholics and Protestant cooperation had led to the formation of a single Christian political party and an amalgamation between voluntary organisations; Catholics had amalgamated with socialists in a common trade union, but Protestants stayed out; more Protestants and Catholics began to send their children to public schools at the same time as more liberals and socialists began to send their children to religious schools. So the changes did not arise simply from a rise in secularism. Today many people belong to more than one group. So the last twenty years have seen the dismantling of the comprehensive group allegiances which had covered almost all activities since the 1910s, and the creation of a series of fragmented cross-cutting alliances between different social, political and economic elements in each bloc. The guarantee of political loyalty for the pillars, upon which the system had depended, has gone.

What remains of the pillars in 1987? The most dramatic decline has been in the religious pillars, especially the Catholic one. In the last decade central structures which were specifically Catholic, including its political party, labour movement, managers' organisation and hospital system, have all ceased to exist. Liberal Protestants too have become involved in a series of amalgamations with other blocs, although more conservative Calvinists still retain their separate institutions.

Nevertheless the concrete from which the pillars had been constructed was sturdy, and had been strengthened by time, and resisted demolition. The system has been slow to reflect social changes, and had institutionalised power in a remarkably permanent manner. Despite the decline in church allegiances, for example, the churches still retain substantial control over schooling. There have been examples

of liberal Catholics joining the liberal or socialist pillars as the only means of wrenching control of a local school from more conservative church control. On the other hand, the point is that it is possible for such changes to take place. The depillarisation process has been accomplished without threat to national consensus.

#### How applicable is it to Northern Ireland?

Some factors in Northern Ireland appear to make it conducive to the consociational approach: the population is small; it has distinct lines of cleavage between the main protagonists; and there is a perceived external threat which might induce internal cohesion, but in practice did not.

On the other hand there are at least three substantive obstacles to its introduction: the continuing lack of willingness among the leaders to join in a grand-coalition government; the fact that the communities are neither sufficiently discrete (given a high level of shared services, activities and agencies), nor united (with severe splits in both main groups); and the persistent violence which has been obstructing all innovation.

Of the two main requirements - elite cooperation and strong segmentation at the mass level - the first is the more important. It has been pointed out that in places like New Brunswick, for example, there is considerable cross-cutting between the segments engaged in conflict, so that there are different alliances between different groups on different issues. Nevertheless New Brunswick functions as a successful political entity. Aunger argues that, in the absence of such cross-cutting at the mass level, strong elite dominance, including secret negotiation, can be a substitute for it. In other words, even if the masses do not cooperate by restricting their contacts to their fellow group members, shrewd and dominant leaders can still preserve stability.

#### Discussion

Four elements of consociation have possible implications for Northern Ireland. Each will be outlined and discussed.

##### 1. Consociation is an appropriate means of dealing with deep divisions in plural societies

The proposition here is that there has been a marked increase in ethnic conflict throughout the world. This has been caused by 'horizontalization', that is, groups within states becoming less self-contained and separate - as a result of increased central bureaucratisation, religious decline, uneven industrial growth and decline, as well as nation-specific factors; consequently they are more likely to come into contact and competition. In such circumstances mutual isolation (pillarisation) may help create stability. By dividing the activities of the groups in conflict, and ensuring that resources are divided between the groups according to

their numbers, it encourages confidence and respect.

One refinement to this argument is that it has been more successful in societies divided by socio-religious conflicts than in those divided by ethnic conflicts. Among the reasons why it is inappropriate to ethnic conflicts are: the high levels of violence and acts of gross indecency which often accompany them; the risk of expulsion by the group of any leader who suggests compromise; the fact that in ethnic, as opposed to religious, conflicts the issue may not be how the country is to be run, but whether it should be a country at all.

The Lebanese experiment in consociation failed for these reasons. On the other hand the Belgian conflict is ethnic as well as religious, and consociationalism has had some successes there; and, given Holland's current constitutional stability, it is easy to forget that when it was introduced in 1917 the state was in real danger of fragmentation.

On balance it would appear that the presence of ethnic conflict imposes more obstacles to consociation than other less fundamental splits. If this is so, the introduction of consociationalism to Northern Ireland faces major difficulties if the conflict here is regarded as between two cultural groups with mutually incompatible constitutional aims; but, if one regards Northern Ireland's fundamental problem as a conflict about equality of opportunity and uneven distribution of resources between two socio-religious groups, it may be more amenable to consociational innovation. The question which remains is: what course of action is appropriate if both propositions are true?

## 2. Consociation requires both cooperation between leaders and high levels of segmentation between Protestants and Catholics

The logic of the consociationalists is that segmentation between conflicting groups should be encouraged. The leaders of the segments would then be in positions to negotiate over-arching agreements, and more likely to deliver them. Applied to Northern Ireland, recent increases in demographic segregation over the last two decades should greatly facilitate the emergence of segmented groups.

Nevertheless a number of important obstacles remain:

- a. What leaders would represent the groups? Both sides are deeply divided internally. A consociational system needs clear-cut leadership. In the struggle for segmental control violence between Protestants and Catholics may diminish, but divisions within each group may increase. In this struggle the most extreme elements would be in the strongest position to enforce conformity through intimidation.
- b. The absence of consensus about the state creates a second problem. It becomes impossible for the leaders to co-operate in dividing the cake, if republicans are talking about an all-Ireland cake, and loyalists about a Northern Irish one.
- c. How many segments should be recognised? As already mentioned,

both nationalist and unionist communities are internally divided, and there is a middle segment comprising those who, from conviction or necessity, are neither nationalist nor unionist. This may suggest the need for five segments - loyalist, unionist, centre, nationalist and republican. However such boundary-making may consolidate divisions which are fluid and not set, especially if the segments gain substantial control over resources. Further, in such a small population, five segments would produce expensive duplication of services, and it may be more sensible to work with three.

d. In such a solution would the groups working in the middle ground be able to survive? It might be argued that the existence of this middle ground, however small, is a major explanation of Northern Ireland's comparatively low level of violence.

e. Given the persistence of violence in Northern Ireland, problems of policing would be enormous, even if it were segmented.

The failure of political leaders to show interest in the grand-coalition approach, even though it has meant exclusion from power and the control of resources, is an absolute barrier to the introduction of a system of consociation. Even if that were achieved, their ability to deliver mass support remains a secondary obstacle. The apparent support for power-sharing at popular level needs testing in practice, but the consociational approach cannot be introduced in Northern Ireland while political leaders in Northern Ireland are refusing to speak to either the government or each other.

3. If consociational democracy along the Dutch lines is impossible, could it be encouraged as a transitional phase towards normal relationships?

The proposition here is that, if a consociational approach seems impossible, it might be more acceptable to introduce it as an interim experimental measure, to be reviewed after a limited time. The Dutch experience lasted for fifty years and, according to its supporters, is now being dismantled because it has achieved its purpose. Although its eventual depillarisation was not intended in 1917, a strictly limited experiment might attract party leaders, and provide an opportunity to see how it works in practice.

This approach may offer the worst features of both the existing system and consociationalism. Many of the arguments against the principle and practice of consociationalism also apply to a transitional approach. In addition, once they are established, segmented institutions are notoriously difficult to dismantle, as Holland is currently finding. So the concept of phased innovation may be more attractive in theory than practice.

So this short-term modification of the previous proposal also seems an unlikely proposition at the moment.

4. Even if consociational democracy is impossible in Northern Ireland, elements of it may have relevance

The proposition here is that, although discussions about consociationalism to other societies tend to regard it as a comprehensive package, no two examples of it in practice are identical. Holland is much more segmented than Austria, for example, and the proportion of population represented in the grand-coalition parties varies widely from Lebanon, Belgium and Switzerland. Yet all are regarded as consociational democracies. The question is, to what extent is it possible for a plural society like Northern Ireland to select appropriate elements of consociationalism without buying the entire package?

It could indeed be argued that elements of consociationalism already operate in Northern Ireland. A number of services and activities are already segmented - schools and some voluntary organisation, for example, and housing in some parts of the province; voting patterns too are strongly fixed - even the support for the centre parties has been relatively steady. On the other hand many services which are segmented in Holland - hospitals, trade unions, television and radio - are integrated in Northern Ireland. Given this mixed pattern, what would further moves towards consociationalism actually entail?

In essence it could only mean further progress towards the conditions necessary for 'the politics of accommodation' - that is, attracting leaders towards a grand-coalition, and further sharpening the cleavages between the segments. It is difficult to see any move which would be likely to increase the possibility of the former. The power-sharing executive demonstrated some of the difficulties, and the fact that the British government has been willing to trade devolved government for power-sharing since then, with no success, further emphasises them. However it is possible that the Unionists' antipathy to the Anglo-Irish agreement may eventually force them to swallow power-sharing as the only alternative to 'Dublin rule'. The policy implication is how the mouthful might be made more palatable.

There is more scope for policy initiative on the second condition, the further segmentation of groups within Northern Ireland, allowing each of them more power over its own resources. First the problem of the middle ground must be tackled. Is it possible to move towards a more segmented society while preserving the rights of those who occupy the moderate ground? This could be attempted by regarding it as a third segment. One immediate example demonstrates some of the implications.

There are already two main and largely exclusive school systems in Northern Ireland, and the emergence of the integrated sector over the last five years might be regarded as providing for a third pillar; a policy move towards consociation, then, would imply much greater support for the new schools, actually encouraging them by more speedy admission to full funding.

Other more controversial policies would follow:

the encouragement of greater housing segregation, especially in larger urban centres;

the broader aim of encouraging demographic movement of populations within Northern Ireland, so that the Catholic and Protestant (and unaligned) enclaves become larger and more self-contained. It may be remembered that Lijphart advocated a serious consideration of repartition;

the introduction of separate social welfare provision for the two (or three) communities - already a de facto arrangement in some areas;

The direct transfer of employment incentives into the hands of the communities, on the basis of proportionality. This would have the benefit of answering criticisms about catholic disadvantage, but would certainly face furious opposition from many quarters.

It is not the purpose of this paper to advocate these initiatives. Indeed some of them seem naive, and others dangerous in the long term. But perhaps the time is long overdue to face up to more radical approaches to a problem which has proven intractable for so long.

If the Dutch and Belgian examples show anything, it is the cliché that none of the options are easy.

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