

CON-SOCIATIONALISM: ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

The champions of consociationalism claim that its theory of conflict management has met with widespread success and should be exported across the world. They claim that the only choice in ‘plural’ or ‘ethnically divided’ societies is between consociationalism (which is indistinguishable from power-sharing) and British-style majoritarian government. This article argues that definition of consociationalism is highly ambiguous and this allows it to be interpreted as all things to all people and conceals the conservatism of consociationalism – its elitism, segregationism and lack of concern for justice and equality. A full or maximal definition of consociationalism is offered which draws out the full implications of the consociational model. It is argued that not only does consociationalism fail to provide an accurate description of conflict but, following from this, its prescriptions are inappropriate, normatively objectionable and likely to exacerbate conflict rather than help to manage it.

INTRODUCTION

Consociationalism is a popular theory in academic circles for the resolution of conflict.¹ The Dutch political scientist, Arend Lijphart is the guru of consociationalism and his book *Democracy in Plural Societies* (1977) is the seminal exposition. The theory both describes the nature of conflict across the world and then prescriptions for resolution. Consociationalists have claimed success in 31 countries as diverse as the Soviet Union, Switzerland, the Lebanon and Sri Lanka. In recent years they have claimed South Africa and Northern Ireland as successful cases of consociationalism which provide models for the export of consociationalism across the globe. According to Lijphart, all forms of power-sharing are consociational so the choice for ‘plural’ or ‘ethnically divided’ societies is either consociationalism or British style majoritarianism.

The problem with consociationalism is that it is so ambiguous that it can be portrayed as all things to all people, winning both the sympathy of the left-wing *New Left Review* and the right-wing, apartheid regime in South Africa. It will be argued that the veneer of consociationalism’s scientific, behaviouralist jargon lies a conservative approach to conflict resolution. A full or maximalist definition of consociationalism reveals the theory’s elitism, segregationism and lack of concern for justice and equality. It is argued that not only does consociationalism fail to provide an accurate description of conflict but, following from this, its prescriptions are inappropriate, normatively objectionable and likely to exacerbate conflict rather than help to manage it. In Northern Ireland, for example, consociationalists have claimed that the Good Friday Agreement 1998 is consociational and therefore should be implemented in

accordance with the theory of consociationalism. This threatens to entrench antagonistic identities, promote segregation and therefore exacerbate the conflict.²

CONSOCIATIONALISM: THEORY AND PRESCRIPTIONS

The interpretation of Lijphart's consociationalism presented here draws mainly on his *Democracy in Plural Societies* (1977) but it is complicated by subsequent, ad hoc developments in the model. In *The Politics of Accommodation* 1968 the Dutch political scientist, Arend Lijphart, argued that the experience of the Netherlands 1917-67 provides a model for conflict resolution in other 'plural' societies. He argues that there were 4 social segments or pillars of Dutch society, Catholic, Protestant, Socialist and Liberal that consisted of relatively self-contained, autonomous societies. Each had its' own political parties, trade unions, schools and media with little social interaction across the pillars. Consociationalism aims to reproduce this model in 'plural societies' by recognising and strengthening these pillars, making them more segregated and self-contained, in order to turn them into 'constructive elements of a stable democracy'.³ Group identities are seen as primordial and antagonistic. Autonomy, or segregation, prevents contact and therefore conflict between groups and keeps the people passive and deferential.⁴ (Lijphart 1977 p.170, p.227). This allows political elites, free from the influence of their extreme constituents, to negotiate an agreed settlement over the heads of the people. Consociationalism assumes that the elites are moderate and competent and therefore directs its prescriptions at this benevolent class – it is a 'top-down' approach to conflict resolution. Consociationalism's views on the extremism of the people translates into a pessimistic view that only a limited form of

democracy is possible in a plural society. The goal is not the *resolution* of conflict but stability and *management* or *regulation*.

Consociationalism assumes that the engineering of ideological or cultural change is not possible and therefore that the political elites of the different pillars should share power and create the institutional structures to control the people and thereby manage conflict. The pillars are explicitly recognised and reinforced in order to manage conflict in an agreed or consensual way. Consociationalism defines itself against the British *adversarial* and *majoritarian* model of democracy which promotes conflict rather than consensus among political elites. There are four institutional features of consociationalism that are prescribed wherever conflict is found:

1. *Grand Coalition* – this is the ‘primary instrument’ of consociationalism (with the 3 others ‘secondary instruments’) or more recently one of the two ‘primary characteristics’. The political leaders of all significant elements should be included in a grand, consensual or coalescent coalition that settles disputes between the pillars.⁵

2. *Proportional Representation* – This ensures that all significant sections of society are represented by the political elites who negotiate on their behalf. There should also be proportionality in the distribution of government resources – ‘proportionality as the principal standard of political representation, civil service appointments, and allocation of public funds’⁶ – between the pillars. The consociational approach favours the closed List

system of electoral proportional representation which tends to maximise the power of elites.

3. *Mutual Veto* – A veto is given to minorities with regard to vital rights and autonomy.
4. *Autonomy* – This aims to maximise each pillar's self-government by delegating power to the elites of that pillar. Autonomy can be achieved by promoting territorial autonomy through a system of federalism or devolution, or else it can be achieved through institutional autonomy with separate education, health and social institutions for each pillar.

There are also seven favourable conditions (although these have since changed) which are not necessary or sufficient for the establishment of a consociational settlement.

1. *A multiple balance of power* – where there are several pillars, rather than just two, in opposition to each other the management of conflict is more likely.
2. *Small rather than large countries* – smaller countries facilitate closer relationships between elites which consociationalism wants to promote to manage conflict.
3. *Multiparty systems* – multiple parties, but not too many, should represent the different pillars. The preference is for communal parties rather than for parties that draw support across the pillars.⁷

4. *Homogenous, isolated pillars not internally divided and scattered –*
 segregation reduces contact and therefore the opportunities for conflict between the people of different pillars. The political unity of the pillar stifles debate and therefore, along with segregation, creates deference to the political elites.

5. *Over-arching loyalties –* if there are identities to which all pillars can give allegiance this can help to reduce conflict.

6. *Tradition of elite accommodation –* if there is a history of elite accommodation this enhances the prospects for future elite deals.

7. *Cross-cutting cleavages –* these are social divisions which groups become conscious of and willing to act on those divisions. These unite elements in different pillars, creating non-homogenous coalitions on various issues. The theory is that this reduces the strength of polarisation.

CRITIQUING CONSOCIATIONALISM

There is considerable sympathy for consociationalism within academia and it has influential advocates who have passed the torch down the generations since the theory first emerged in the 1960s. Lijphart is one of the world's most cited political scientists and participates in powerful academic networks.⁸ The success of consociationalism,

as Ian Lustick has argued, is due to ‘the political and rhetorical skills of their leading practitioners and on alliances between those practitioners and political interests outside the scientific arena.’⁹ Consociationalism is a model of conflict management that seeks to enhance the power of political elites so it is not surprising that this model has sympathy amongst some powerful interests.

Initially consociationalism made claims to social scientific objectivity but Lijphart has retreated and attempted to establish it as a normative model.¹⁰ However, its scientific veneer and the model’s chameleon character has served to disguise its ideological conservatism to the point where both the left-wing *New Left Review* (Jan/Feb 1999) and the right-wing, Apartheid regime in South Africa have looked favourably on consociationalism as a model for dealing with conflict. Consociationalism, it will be argued, particularly in its earlier form, shares with conservatism: a pessimistic view of humanity; sympathy for segregation and homogeneity; a scepticism of democracy; support for limited change to preserve the status quo; a hostility to materialist and ideological analysis; a sharp separation of politics and economics and silences on issues of power and justice.

1. Slippery definitions: All things to all people?

Consociationalism is a behaviouralist approach to political science and is supposed to be clear in its’ definitions and meaning.¹¹ However, the definition of consociationalism is vague and slippery and this is both a source of strength in marketing the concept and weakness in terms of analytic rigour. The vagueness of

consociationalism allows its' advocates to argue that a bewildering array of diverse countries, with very different institutional structures, economies, ideologies/cultures, demonstrate the effectiveness of the theory. The definition of consociationalism is so elastic, loose and slippery that it has been stretched to fit almost any case study from the Soviet dictatorship to Dutch democracy.¹² The consociational countries listed by Lijphart varies widely without explanation from 31 countries (and 4 applications) in 1985 to 15 countries in 2002. Lijphart's list of successful consociational countries between 1985 and 2002 is not consistent, some are recent developments but others are missing off the 2002 list that were on the 1985 list.¹³ O'Leary and McGarry are more modest in their claims for consociationalism and name just 5 countries. The problem with consociationalism, they argue (surprisingly), is 'that it has not worked.'¹⁴ Consociationalism's chameleon like quality means it can be reinterpreted and adapted to meet the critique of challengers from a variety of perspectives, left and right, in this way it can be all things to all people.

Consociationalism has been developed over time in a rather ad hoc manner to meet various challenges so trying to pin the model down is like trying to hit a constantly moving target.¹⁵ Consociationalists shift between a *maximalist* and *minimalist* defence of their model. A *maximalist* definition includes defence of all elements of the model,

1. the theory of conflict,
2. 7 favourable conditions and
3. 4 institutional features (see Diagram 1).

This maximalist definition of consociationalism should be the ideal type against which the model should be judged. The prescriptions of consociationalism follow logically from its' theory or diagnosis of the nature of conflict. If the diagnosis of

conflict is wrong then the prescriptions should be discarded in case they make the patient worse. Furthermore, the way in which the prescriptions are interpreted depends on the diagnosis of the patient. For example, an integrationist might accept segregation as a regrettable, hopefully short-term measure pending the creation of a more integrated society. Consociationalists could welcome the spread of segregation in the medium to longer term because this creates the conditions of social apartheid that are necessary for limiting contact between the pillars and consolidating them.

The advantage to consociationalists of using a maximalist version of their theory is that it can be interpreted in a variety of ways to deflect criticism. So, on the one hand, consociationalism favours social apartheid, yet some interpretations of consociationalism argue that cross-cutting cleavages – which imply contact across pillars – is conducive or necessary for the success of consociationalism (Lustick). The disadvantage of using a maximalist definition of consociationalism is that it restricts their ability to claim supporting case studies that a more minimalist definition allows them to do. If a maximalist definition of consociationalism fails to accurately describe a particular conflict then consociationalists can slide down the scale towards a more minimalist definition. There is a dispute among consociationalists as to whether the favourable *conditions* are seen as

1. *sufficient and necessary conditions* for the establishment and maintenance of consociationalism and can be engineered by political actors

2. or those, such as Lijphart, who consider the favourable conditions to be nothing more than '*helpful circumstances*' enhancing the probability that

consociationalism will be established and maintained – although no evidence is provided to show this.¹⁶

There is also a problem that the number and nature of the favourable conditions have been changed by Lijphart over time from 6 in 1968 to 8 in 1969, 9 in 1977, 8 in 1985, 9 in 2002.¹⁷

If the favourable conditions are merely helpful circumstances and not sufficient or necessary for conflict resolution then the definition of consociationalism can shrink further towards a more minimalist definition. Consociationalism, it is then emphasised, is prescriptive and not descriptive. If the favourable conditions appear to be absent but a conflict appears to be moving towards a more peaceful state then the four institutional prescriptions take centre stage. But an agreement may only bear resemblance to some of the four institutional prescriptions in which case the consociationalist retreats to arguing that the presence of the two ‘primary characteristics’ is sufficient to define a consociational agreement. The definition of consociationalism can be reduced further by claiming that the presence of the ‘primary instrument’, grand coalition, is sufficient on its own to justify the consociational label. However, grand coalition is consensual, where representatives of the different groups are not competitive but coalescent and *agree* on policy (not the case in Northern Ireland). Lijphart has also claimed that one party rule – by the Indian or African National Congress – counts as consociationalism because a grand coalition is embodied within one party.¹⁸

The definition of consociationalism can be further reduced by cutting in half the primary instrument of grand coalition. Dispensing with the need for agreement among the leaders, Lijphart has argued that the essential characteristic of a grand coalition is participation by leaders of all significant segments.¹⁹ But participation does not necessarily mean agreement and ‘Elite cooperation is the primary distinguishing feature of consociational democracy...’,²⁰

The minimalist definition of consociationalism has been taken one step further. Lijphart has claimed - since 1985 and the publication of his book *Power-sharing in South Africa* - that the concept of power-sharing is interchangeable with consociationalism and therefore all power-sharing is consociational. Consociationalists may hope that by claiming the popularly used term ‘power-sharing’ they can claim that all supporters of power-sharing are consociationalists and that the choice in plural societies is between consociationalism and majoritarianism. This is an attempt to close down debate and rules out the possibility that someone could be in favour of power-sharing but opposed to the consociational (elitist, anti-democratic, segregationist) variant of power-sharing and the theory of conflict that informs it. For example, some advocate the civil society approach and support power-sharing because it is designed to integrate rather than segregate society.²¹ Power-sharing is best thought of as a general term which describes the wide array of constitutional mechanisms, conventions or devices which are designed to ensure that all significant ‘communal’ groups are given a share of power in a ‘divided society’. To include all power-sharing arrangements under the term consociational does not do justice to the range of institutional and other devices that are available and deployed in many different combinations to manage or resolve conflict.

CONSOCIATIONALISM
MAXIMALIST DEFINITION

Theory of conflict

- Pessimism
- Primordial
- Segregation/autonomy
- Anti-democratic
- Elitist

Prescriptions

7 favourable conditions

- 4 institutional features
 - i. Grand coalition
 - ii. Proportional representation
 - iii. Mutual veto
 - iv. Autonomy

2 '*primary characteristics*'

- Grand Coalition
- Group Autonomy

1 primary instrument

Grand coalition: agreement/consensual +
 participation

½ primary instrument

Grand coalition: participation

Power-sharing

CONSOCIATIONALISM
MINIMALIST DEFINITION

Silences: Ideological, class, security and external dimension

Diagram 1. The elasticity of consociationalism and beyond

The elastic way in which consociationalism is defined means that it is difficult to test the model or find cases which would falsify the theory.²² The ambiguity of consociationalism allows its supporters to reinterpret their model as all things to all people choosing elements of the model most likely to be well received by the particular audience. The consociationalist can always make an argument that there are sufficient or insufficient conditions for consociationalism and that a particular regime is or is not consociational. Lijphart has defined consociationalism in opposition to the British majoritarian, adversarial political system, yet his definition is so slippery that even the British case – against which consociationalism is defined – could be included as consociational.²³ Comparativists such as Donald Horowitz have drawn attention to the problems of consociationalists shifting the goalposts while Ian Lustick finds that there has been so much conceptual stretching as to make the whole enterprise meaningless.²⁴

Area or country specialists tend to argue that the consociational model does not describe conflict or its management in their particular territory but consociationalists use the ambiguity of their model to side-step criticism.²⁵ For example, on South Africa Lijphart claims the 1994 constitution is ‘almost perfectly’ consociational and even claims the 1996 constitution.²⁶ Consociationalists cannot agree among themselves on definitions, McGarry does not seem to think that the South African constitution is any longer consociational and therefore disapproves.²⁷ A number of area specialists on South Africa have rejected the arguments for both constitutions. Thomas Koelble and Andrew Reynolds reject Lijphart’s claims for the interim constitution, ‘It does not contain provisions for segmental autonomy, nor do minorities have a veto. Although there is power-sharing in the executive and PR,

these two criteria do not fully satisfy the definition of a consociational system. The best that can be said for the interim constitution, contrary also to Lijphart's more recent claims, is that the constitution is a consensual arrangement.²⁸ In attempting to claim an apparently successful case, Lijphart stretches consociationalism again. He argues that South Africa is consociational ‘because [‘black’] power in the political system may be counterbalanced by [‘white’] power in the economic system.²⁹

2. Universal application?

The claim for the universal applicability of consociationalism’s descriptions is bold. The original model for consociationalism is the Netherlands in the post-war period even though the Netherlands is not usually considered to be an ‘ethnically divided’ country. This begs the question why should consociationalism be applied to countries that are riven by ‘ethnic divisions’?

The slipperiness of consociationalism means that in its’ minimalist guise it can be a ‘one size fits all’ solution to conflict management across the globe regardless of the context. This simplicity no doubt makes it attractive to political elites looking for easy ‘solutions’ and for prescriptions that enhance their power over their people. Where international military intervention is contemplated in a conflict situation then a pessimistic view of conflict management can exculpate the intervening power from responsibility for worsening a situation. For example, the popular, pessimistic or fatalistic view of Northern Ireland as a conflict between ‘mad Paddies’ shifts blame from British political or security policy for exacerbating the situation.

The consociational assumption that in all societies the people are always more extreme or deferential than the political elites is simplistic. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that while elites may sometimes have a positive effect in managing conflict they can also play a malign role too. During the genocide in Rwanda, conflict in India and during the break-up of Yugoslavia there is evidence of the role played by elites in stirring up and manipulating conflict.³⁰ This is not to fall into the trap of those who advocate the ‘civil society’ approach to conflict resolution and argue that the political elites are always malign and the people who are a benign influence.³¹ As Kavanagh has argued, ‘It is difficult to arrive at any ‘laws’ of political science, that is, statements that are valid for all times and circumstances.’³²

Consociationalism focuses on the agency of politicians playing down the importance of economics/class and ideology/culture in empowering or constraining the ability of those politicians favouring a ‘balanced settlement’. This agency-orientation ignores the structural factors constraining and enabling the political elites to effect conflict or how these elites might change these structural constraints.³³ Consociationalists don’t believe that political elites can change ideological/cultural constraints and argue that class/economic issues are not particularly important in resolving conflict. The list of 7 ‘favourable conditions’ suggests that some cultures are more conducive to consociational prescriptions but Lijphart does not favour social engineering to create these ‘helpful circumstances’. The description of conflict is institution/constitution focused because societal variables cannot be remoulded and the attempt to do so may aggravate conflict.³⁴ Consociationalists place their hopes in voluntarism, even though, as Horowitz points out, there is a lack of incentives for elites to compromise or

moderate their behaviour.³⁵ This has lead to the paradox of consociationalists giving advice to political elites who are deemed powerless to effect change and therefore they fall back on repartition and joint authority.³⁶

Consociationalism is a model of conflict management developed by political scientists that wishes away politics. The agency-oriented approach of consociationalism cannot capture the inter-action between political elites, their followers and the people during a peace process or show how politicians are constrained and deploy political skills to bring these audiences to an agreement. Is it realistic to imagine that you could completely insulate political elites from the influence of the people? Brian Barry commented, ‘... I do think that someone who does not read the small print may go away with the impression that, in order to turn a conflict-ridden democracy into a harmonious one, all that is required is an effort of will by political leaders. Insufficient attention may be paid to the fact that, if the country is a democracy, the leaders can continue to be leaders only so long as they have followers.’³⁷

3. A pessimistic view of the people and segregation

The consociational model is built on a very pessimistic and static view of people in ‘divided societies.’³⁸ Since ethnicity cannot be changed, consociationalists work with these unalterable realities, entrench them and attempt to build an elite settlement based upon these communal pillars. Consociationalists have retreated from their primordialism and by 1998 Lijphart was arguing that ethnic divisions are ‘frequent[ly] fluid’, elsewhere he has claimed that consociationalism is compatible with social

constructionism.³⁹ If ‘identities’ are socially constructed this opens up the possibility that they can be reconstructed through social engineering in a more benign way. Other consociationalists are closer to early Lijphart, McGarry stresses the difficulty of changing identity and argues that there is little anyone can do to engineer less antagonistic ideological/cultural identities since these are seen as ‘difficult’ to change, ‘particularly in violently polarized societies.’⁴⁰ For consociationalists, it is ‘substantive institutional recognition of national minorities’ that brings out ‘the benign characteristics of rival identities and to marginalize chauvinists more effectively than unwanted inclusion projects’, ‘... There may, sadly, be something in the North American folk wisdom that white liberals are those whites who do not live near blacks.’⁴¹ The belief of some consociationalists that identity is fixed and difficult to mould or transcend is indicated by their repeated references to the ‘identity’ of their intellectual adversaries. These consociationalists appear to believe that in their particular ivory tower they have escaped their own ‘identity’ and can survey the world with impartiality.

Those who intend to manage conflict must therefore work around these antagonistic identities rather than engage in futile or dangerous attempts to change or challenge them. Contact between the people of different blocs is potentially dangerous and therefore to be avoided because it reinforces rather than breaks down prejudices. Segregation or ‘social apartheid’ avoids contact and therefore the potential for conflict, for this reason repartition finds favour with consociationalists as a fall-back option. For consociationalists, good fences make good neighbours.⁴² The ‘pessimistic realism’ of the consociational approach leads them to believe conflict can only be managed or regulated rather than resolved. Consociationalists do not seek to

restructure or transform, what some would argue are, the deeper causes of conflict but are so pessimistic that they are content to put the lid on a conflict and stabilise the situation.

The transition of consociationalists from a primordial to cultural explanation of ethnicity parallels a shift in New Right discourse on race from a racism based on biological difference to cultural difference. The New Right adopted the language of ethnic diversity and actively promoted the preservation of purportedly separate cultures, which gave rise to concerns that racism had been modernised and made more respectable. Consociationalism echoes this arguing that well-intentioned, multiculturalist social policies are highly counterproductive, the ‘liabilities of liberalism.’⁴³ In particular, the assumption that contact leads to conflict and cultural homogeneity and segregation is more conducive to conflict management can be used to legitimate and encourage policies such as ‘ethnic cleansing’ which destroy integrated communities. Bhiku Parekh has argued,

‘... [c]ultural diversity is also an important constituent and condition of human freedom. Unless human beings are able to step out of their culture, they remain imprisoned within it and tend to absolutize it, imagining it to be the only natural or self-evident way to understand and organise human life. And they cannot step out of their culture unless they have access to others.’⁴⁴

A key danger of consociationalism is that it can be used by fascists, racists, ethnic cleansers and their more ‘respectable’ apologists to give legitimacy to their policies of ethnic cleansing, homogeneity, forced emigration and segregation. The fact that the

apartheid regime attempted to legitimise apartheid by claiming that it was a form of consociationalism should give advocates of that model pause for thought.

Critics have attacked the primordial and essentialist assumptions of consociationalism. For social constructionists ‘ethnicity’ is not a permanent, unchanging identity but constructed and fluid, one of a number of identities – such as class, race and gender – that is constantly being remade. The monolithic view of consociationalism does not draw attention to conflict within ‘identities’ and groups. This is not to deny the influence of ‘identities’ but social constructionism does focus attention on the processes and mechanisms through which such identities are created, recreated and become powerful. The prospect then arises that these antagonistic identities might then be remade in a more benign manner. Social constructionists argue that consociationalists, by treating ‘ethnicity’ as primordial, and prescribing institutions that underpin these identities, are part of the process of reification, recreating and entrenching these identities. Even the word ‘identity’ by suggesting permanence does not draw attention to the processes by which these are constructed and their flexible, fluctuating, multiple and fragmented nature. The term ‘identity’ is in danger of re-creating a groupist view of the world and failing to convey the processes through which communal identities are created.⁴⁵ Consociationalism’s emphasis on the persistence of ethnicity does not equip it well to explain change in either ‘identity’ or the intensity of conflict.

Consociationalism explicitly builds on communal identities and risks entrenching and strengthening the antagonistic dimension of those identities rather than challenging and softening them. ‘Plural societies’ are made more ‘plural’: ‘consociational

democracy results in the division of society into more homogenous and self-contained elements.⁴⁶ If consociationalism's assumption that culture/identity is the essential source of conflict is widely accepted – and consociationalists are quick to claim influence on policy-makers – then acting on this assumption can create a situation in which tensions are exacerbated and conflict resolution is made more difficult.

Consociationalists are full of advice on strengthening the pillars, increasing autonomy and segregation but have little to say about dismantling them and the reintegration of society.⁴⁷ There is no reason why the strengthening of communal identities alongside the prescription of communal autonomy or segregation should not lead to greater prejudice, 'extremism' and pressure towards complete separation. There is no simple equation between contact and conflict and it is probably the type of contact and the context in which contact takes places that is important. It may be in some contexts that segregation is a regrettable but useful short-term measure to control conflict while at other times it is likely to entrench antagonism. A simplistic equation between contact and conflict is too crude to do justice to the complexity of conflict situations.

Consociationalists tend to ignore the normative problems thrown up by their empirical observations. Hay has argued that positivists have tended to ignore the ethical responsibilities of social and political analysis:

‘... hiding behind the comforting rhetoric of science, objectivity, neutrality and truth. Quite simply, if one refuses to acknowledge the normative content of social and political analysis then the question of ethical responsibility does not arise, save except of the ethical imperative to seek out and reveal ‘the truth’.’⁴⁸

Critics would argue that theory and observation are interdependent and therefore ‘recognise that normative questions are important and not always easy to separate from empirical questions.’⁴⁹

4. Elitism: no power to the people

Consociationalism’s pessimistic view of the people leads to a pessimistic view of democracy. If democracy means rule of the people then consociationalists tend to be opposed to all but the most limited form of democracy, because the people are extremists and if their views are faithfully reflected by their political representatives then the management of conflict will not be possible. It is the benevolent political elites who will manage conflict because they are insulated from the people’s demands and have the ability to lead a deferential public where they will. The elites must maximise their insulation from activist and popular influences and prejudices because it is ‘the independent actions of political elites, often taken in opposition to their followers’ demands, rather than societal variables, best account for conflict regulation successes and failures in democratic regimes.’⁵⁰ In ‘divided societies’ the choice is between a very limited, consociational form of democracy and no democracy at all.⁵¹ Consociationalism requires: the restriction rather than the spread of participation; the full control by the parties of the recruitment of candidates for elections; the insulation of elites from their constituents (thereby promoting non-representative if not antagonistic behaviour) and secrecy.⁵² Consociationalism is the politics of smoke filled rooms, political elites taking decisions free from public

scrutiny and, because of grand coalition, without the benefit of a strong opposition to properly hold government to account.

The segregation or autonomy of the different pillars of society from each other reduces the opportunities for contact and therefore conflict between the different groups. This creates a passive and deferential attitude amongst the people and allows the elites, who are more moderate than the people, of each pillar to resolve disputes between the pillars without the constraint of having to sell their deals to the public.⁵³ Segregation limits the opportunity for contact between people of different pillars and limits ‘the chances of ever-present potential antagonisms to erupt into actual hostility.’⁵⁴ The principal problem faced by political elites is not the people but their political activists, who are assumed to be non-deferential, active and less accommodating than their leaders. Lijphart’s consociational disciples, McGarry and O’Leary, disagree that the people are deferential and in the case of Northern Ireland they argue that the political elites are constrained by their voters. Even the institutions of civil society tend to follow their members rather than lead them on constitutional issues.⁵⁵

5. A narrow focus: institutions/constitutions not economics/class or ideology/culture

Consociationalism is a heavily institutional form of conflict regulation which emphasises the role of political elites in conflict management rather than societal variables and it is hostile to theories which consider economic/class or

cultural/ideological factors important in managing or resolving conflict.⁵⁶ In 1975 Lijphart argued that ‘emphasis on economic differences may actually worsen the political situation.’⁵⁷ By 1985 he was arguing that an important favourable condition for consociationalism was rough, socio-economic equality between the pillars.

While consociationalists have wanted to claim the primordial or ‘difficult to change’ nature of identity in their explanations of conflict and as a justification for their prescriptions McGarry and O’Leary have suggested that, for example, materialism does have an effect on identity.⁵⁸ But if materialism has an effect on identity then this leaves open the possibility that those attempting to manage conflict could engineer the material (and other) conditions that would be more favourable to the resolution of conflict. Overall, consociationalists appear to be sceptical of materialism. Echoing Lijphart, they argue that economic initiatives ‘at best will fall short of what is required to resolve the conflict, and at worst they may even deflect attention and energy from the crucial political measures necessary to change the logic of the cruel game in which the participants are presently trapped.’⁵⁹ The elevation of socio-economic equality between the pillars to a favourable condition suggests some kind of a shift away from Lijphart’s early scepticism on materialism. He argues that, in the case of South Africa, this unfavourable condition ‘can be improved by deliberate political action, including the preferential treatment for the disadvantaged segments’ (although this clashes with his view of favourable conditions as helpful circumstances and scepticism of social engineering).⁶⁰ In elevating rough socio-economic equality between the pillars Lijphart probably has in mind the gross inequalities of apartheid South African than that of capitalist democracies and inequalities between communal groups rather than within them.⁶¹

Consociationalists are also sceptical of interventions to challenge the causes of conflict at the ideological/cultural level. This is because they argue that these interventions have little prospect of working and often promote contact in an attempt to reform antagonistic identities. Consociationalists argue first, that such contact between pillars increases antagonism and conflict and second, that such interventions are hopeless because identities are not malleable. According to this view integrated education, residential integration, encounter groups, initiatives for cultural understanding and non-sectarian parties are all distractions or, by promoting contact and therefore antagonism, may even endanger the important work of elite negotiation. Opinion polls are used as an accurate reflection of public opinion but the question of what shapes public opinion (including the role of political elites and the media) in the reproduction of antagonistic identities is not tackled.

The problem with the narrow institutional/constitutional focus of consociationalism is that it is too abstract a model and does not give sufficient weight to the social and political context in which constitutions are grounded. David Howarth's critique of the limits of constitutionalism is pertinent to consociationalism.

‘ ... These pertain to the formalistic and abstract character of much constitutional theorizing, and the downplaying of the social and political context in which the rules of the political game are established and function.

As a number of theorists suggest, constitutional dispensations do not ground political processes; rather, legal orders and the state presuppose a concept of the political which constitutional settlements endeavour to contain and

channel. Thus, the narrow constitutionalist focus tends to exclude an analysis of the deeper political conflicts which constitution-making seeks to domesticate and codify. This is not to argue, as some Marxists have suggested, that constitutional questions can simply be dismissed, especially in cases of major political reconfiguration such as South Africa; it is, however, to place the constitutional issue in the right perspective, which is after a consideration of the underlying social struggles, and the discursive forms which make democratisation possible.⁶²

6. Silences: power, violence and justice

Consociationalism is as revealing for what it leaves out of its theory and prescriptions as for what it includes. There is little mention by Lijphart of the role of violence deployed either by the state or other armed groups for exacerbating and escalating conflict. The goal is the absence of violence and the achievement of justice and the equitable distribution of power are not considered important in achieving this limited aim.⁶³ It is not surprising that consociational theory is favoured by conservatives who do not want to change the structures of power in society and political elites because it concentrates power in their hands. Consociationalists are intent on managing conflict not attempting to deal with what some would argue are the underlying power disparities as reflected in the different economic, ideological and military resources at the disposal of the various parties to a conflict. The failure to consider the importance of power relations within a particular society can result in consociationalism becoming a disguised form of control. Different groups may be included in a grand

coalition, giving the regime an appearance of inclusivity and legitimacy, but concealing the fact that effective power lies with one particular group, the situation in Malaysia may be a case in point. On the other hand, it is possible for a system that looks majoritarian to operate in a consensual way.⁶⁴

The case of South Africa illustrates the conservative, normative bias of consociationalism which fails to address questions of power and justice. The apartheid regime in the 1980s was interested by the segregationist orientation of consociationalism which could be used to give legitimacy to their apartheid policy of segregation between ‘Whites’, ‘Coloureds’, ‘Indians’ and ‘Blacks’. Consociationalists are not particularly concerned by economic and class inequalities or the brutality and violence of the apartheid period. Although Lijphart shifted his position to favour rough socio-economic equality between pillars (although not within them) this was too much for other consociationalists who opposed ‘a forced redistribution of wealth.’⁶⁵ Their prescription for South Africa was a consociational settlement that would have given ‘White’ South Africans a disproportionate influence in a reformed South African political system. A small minority of ‘Whites’ would have been given a veto over government policies that were expected to adversely effect its’ key interests. ‘White’ dominance of the economy would have been supplemented by a disproportionate influence in the political system too. This would appear to heap an undemocratic political system on top of an unjust economic system both organised to the advantage of a small ‘White’ minority.

Consociationalism has little to say about the unequal structures of power in South Africa or justice for those who suffered from the brutalities of the apartheid era. Such

gross inequalities, it could be argued, are likely to be perceived by the overwhelming majority of the population as unjust and lead to instability and conflict rather than successful management of the conflict. South Africa continues to have its problems but key among these are the inequalities of power (including material inequalities) and the injustices that have been committed against so many people about which consociationalism is largely silent. The bias of consociationalism is towards containing conflict rather than reaching a ‘just settlement’ which requires a transformation of South Africa.

The conservative bias of consociationalism is partly due to the crude behaviouralist approach that Lijphart’s *Democracy in Plural Societies* is steeped in that has its’ philosophical roots in positivism. Criticisms of positivism apply equally to consociationalism⁶⁶ and key among these criticisms is its notion of a social ‘science’ that is rational, impartial or dispassionate allow the observer to make objective judgements. For example, Lijphart cites ‘experts’, while McGarry describes Horowitz as ‘a prominent impartial intellectual’ and O’Leary argues: ‘External observers agreed’ in a way suggesting all external observers had reached a consensus.⁶⁷ Critics argue that theory and experiment are not separable, rather theory affects both the facts we focus on and how we interpret them. All theories are partial and partisan despite any pretensions they have to universality.⁶⁸ Sanders argues that ‘modern or post-behaviouralists’ ‘now accept the relativist view that what is observed is in part a consequence of the theoretical position that the analyst adopts in the first place.’⁶⁹ Positivism concentrates on observable phenomenon in particular elections and institutional structures rather than any other dimensions of power – ideology, economics and class. It oversimplifies the world because it accepts no separation of

appearance and reality and has not come to terms with ‘the inherent complexity of political reality.’⁷⁰ The assumption of regularity makes it difficult for behaviouralism to explain political change, for example the peace processes in South Africa or Northern Ireland. Behaviouralists are unequivocally committed to the principle of falsification and consociationalism’s definitional slipperiness means that it is difficult to falsify.

Consociational theory does bear comparison to the academic literature on political development during the 1960s and 1970s which was fearful that democratic reform, once initiated, would prove irresistible so they set about devising policies ‘to contain and control the upsurge of participation which they thought was inevitable.’ There was a similar concentration on enhancing governmental and elite authority and insulating politics from the influence of the people to the point that these exponents of political development retreat from any commitment to democracy.⁷¹ Many behaviouralist interpretations ‘ended up as elitist statements of democracy, pointing to the usefulness of apathy and low political participation...’⁷² Lijphart was alarmed by the new wave of democratisation in the 1970s because it would encourage ‘ethnic’ demands.⁷³

CONCLUSION

Consociationalism is a crude behaviouralist approach to conflict management that has its’ philosophical roots in positivism. The ambiguity and elastic definition of consociationalism – with its’ minimalist and maximalist variants – allows its

advocates to present the model as all things to all people. This ‘flexibility’ has been a secret of consociationalism’s marketing success but it is at the expense of analytic clarity and value. Increasingly consociationalism’s scientific pretensions have been abandoned and it is promoted as a normative model. The scientific jargon and the ambiguity of definition, however, have concealed the models’ conservative bias. An interpretation of consociationalism has been provided here to expose the implications of the model’s approach to conflict management. In particular the danger of its’ elitism, antipathy to democracy, consolidation of communal identities, segregationism and silences on issues of justice have been emphasised. It is not just the prescriptions themselves but the theory behind consociationalism’s prescriptions that make them consociational. This is why consociationalism should be defined in a maximal way and the full implications of the theory judged.

Consociationalists have a very simplistic conception of politics. Lijphart assumes a deferential population that will not interfere with the negotiations and consensus of benign elites. Conflict and antagonism is to be replaced by the rule of elites through rationalism, impartiality and consensus over the heads of the people.

Consociationalism denies the inevitability and legitimacy of conflict within a democratic society and the role of politics in attempting to manage that conflict into non-antagonistic forms. As a consequence of its’ crude understanding of politics it insists on the implementation of its prescriptions and is unrealistic and insensitive to politics as the art of the possible. Consociationalism is too crude in its descriptions and prescriptions to do justice to the complexity of conflict situations. Following its prescriptions could well exacerbate rather than ameliorate conflict. Furthermore,

consociationalism is not the progressive approach to conflict resolution that some of its advocates have claimed.

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