



Department of Politics

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Consociationalism: Exacerbating Ethnic Conflict

It is demonstrably true that consociationalism divides people along ethnic lines and thus exacerbates ethnic conflict. Last week, more than 40 Islamic weekend schools came under fire in the United Kingdom for teaching hate speech to children as young as six. BBC's "Panorama" program reported that the textbooks imported from Saudi Arabia contained anti-Semitic and homophobic literature, including the various ways that a person guilty of sodomy can be put to death. The British Department for Education released the following statement: "'Ofsted [the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills] are doing some work in this area. They'll be reporting to us shortly about how we can ensure that part-time provision is better registered and better inspected in the future."¹ Currently, the government does not regulate weekend and part-time schools. Allowing unregulated education for differing ethnic groups is but one example of the failings of consociationalism as a response to ethnic conflict. In the UK and other liberal democracies, they do not allow ethnically driven messages to fester in schools which could cut against the multiculturalism and tolerance that these countries hope to espouse.

Throughout history, there have been a variety of solutions to handle ethnic conflict. Some methods attempted to end conflict by eliminating differences, from

¹ U.K. Probes Claims Islamic Schools Teaching Anti-Semitism, Extreme Punishments - The Globe and Mail." *Home - The Globe and Mail*. 22 Nov. 2010. Web. 02 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/europe/uk-probes-claims-islamic-schools-teaching-anti-semitism-extreme-punishments/article1808306/>>.

the extremes of genocide to the accepted practice of assimilation and multiculturalism. Yet other methods focused on managing differences, such as through arbitration and mediation, federalism, or consociationalism.² Consociationalism is a form of government attempting to manage ethnic conflict through the concept of power sharing. Developed by Arend Lijphart in the late 1960s, he sought to explain the stability in a few divided European democracies, such as Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands.³ Lijphart argued that fragmented yet stable democracies (known as consociational democracies) came about due to the deliberate joint efforts by elites from each “subculture” to stabilize the system.⁴ Lijphart identified four factors of constitutional consociationalism: a grand coalition of elites, constitutional vetoes for minorities, proportional representation in both elected and appointed offices, and a relatively high measure of cultural autonomy.⁵ However, all four factors were rarely in place at the same time in the same country; even Lijphart admitted that consociationalism had already failed in a number of countries and predicted the path for failure for both Colombia and Lebanon.⁶ Consociationalism currently works best as a post-

² McGarry, John, and Brendan O'Leary. "The Macro-political Regulation of Ethnic Conflict." Introduction. *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation: Case Studies of Protracted Ethnic Conflicts*. London: Routledge, 1993. Pp 1-40

³ Norris, Pippa. "Ethnic Pluralism and Consociational Democracy Revisited." American Political Science Association. Washington DC. 1 Sept. 2005. Pp 3

⁴ Lijphart, Arend. "Consociational Democracy." *World Politics* 21.2 (1969): Pp 213

⁵ Lijphart, Arend. *Democracy in Plural Societies. A Comparative Exploration*. New Haven & London: Yale UP, 1977. Pp 25-52.

⁶ Lijphart, Arend. "Consociational Democracy." *World Politics* 21.2 (1969): Pp 218-219

conflict short-term solution. It does an adequate job of keeping the peace after ethnic warfare. However, as a long-term solution, it is just not sustainable. Although consociationalism could be the best form of government in a utopian multi-ethnic society, in our current reality, oftentimes the elite divides people along ethnic lines and exacerbates ethnic conflict by preventing democratic growth and the formation of a national identity by focusing on what divides people rather than unites them.

Theoretically speaking, a successful consociational democracy has a handful of characteristics and requirements. According to Lijphart, it is absolutely necessary for the “cartel of elites” to have the ability to accommodate the divergent interests and demands of subcultures. To do so, they must transcend ethnic cleavages and join elites of rival subcultures in a commitment to the maintenance of the system. They have to work towards the improvement of cohesion and stability because all elites must understand the perils of political fragmentation.⁷ Furthermore, Lijphart recognized that other factors needed to be in play to keep the elites cooperating with one another. The strongest reason was the existence of external threats to the country. Lijphart noted that consociational governments tended to form and garner strength from periods of international crisis – especially World War One and Two. Even Great Britain formed a coalition government during World War Two. Another factor, which necessitates elite cooperation, is the balance of power among multiple subcultures. Lijphart expressed a lot of disgust for the principle of majority rules;

⁷ *ibid.* Pp 215

he blamed instability in ethnically diverse countries on the desire for domination, usually by the majority, over other ethnic groups. The final factor that Lijphart mentioned is having a relatively low total load on the decision-making apparatus.⁸

Consociationalism can be regarded as, at minimum, the realistic perspective, representing the necessary conditions to secure peace-agreements and negotiated settlements among all parties.⁹ Sometimes it is the only system that will cause sectarian violence to cease (or at least slow), especially in countries in political transitions from authoritarian to democratic governments. Lebanon became a consociational democracy following the 1943 National Pact, which divided power between the major religious communities: Shia, Sunni, and Maronite.¹⁰ However, the Christian majority dwindled while the Muslim population grew, which upset demographic balances. Add to that the external encroachment from Palestinian refugees, Israel, and Syria, all factors began to affect societal balances and concerns, thus consociationalism fell apart and Lebanon descended into a bloody, fifteen-year civil war. Even today, although there is a negative peace (the absence of all violence) functioning in Lebanon under another shaky consociational democracy, the cleavages between ethnic groups are deep, dramatic, and extremely mistrustful. When the results of the UN investigation into the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri are

⁸ *ibid.* Pp 217-218

⁹ Lijphart, Arend. "Constitutional Design for Divided Societies." *Journal of Democracy* 15.2 (2004) Pp 96-109

¹⁰ Norris, Pippa. "Ethnic Pluralism and Consociational Democracy Revisited." *American Political Science Association*. Washington DC. 1 Sept. 2005. Pp 8

publicized, most commentators believe Lebanon will devolve into an ethnic civil war once again, with the Sunni and Christian communities retaliating against Syrian-backed Hezbollah and Shia Muslims for Hariri's death. Iraq in 2005 is an example of the necessity of consociational democracy as a short-term solution. The history of mistrust and violence between the Sunni and Shia in Iraq would have resulted in immediate governmental failure if one party dominated the other through a majoritarian system.¹¹ However, even power sharing has not stopped the violence between the ethno-religious groups in Iraq; the cleavages remain strong and bitter. The international community needs to watch Iraq, possibly in the continued military presence of peacemakers, to make sure the country does not follow the same path into bloody chaos as Lebanon.

Even though consociational democracy as a full system of government has seen many more failures than successes, states still use partial characteristics of consociationalism, especially proportional representation in governments. Israel is an example of the flaws within consociationalism without being an actually consociational democracy. Israel uses a party-list proportional parliamentary system, where members of the Knesset are elected via votes for party. Israel has a strong multi-party system with a low vote threshold, allowing smaller parties to participate in the political process as they are needed to form coalitions. This is both a strength and weakness of proportional representation; smaller parties are involved in the government but sometimes are given a disproportionate amount of power because they are necessary to hold the

¹¹ Norris, Pippa. "Ethnic Pluralism and Consociational Democracy Revisited." American Political Science Association. Washington DC. 1 Sept. 2005. Pp 5

government together (highlighting a flaw in the veto power). Sometimes those smaller parties put the issues of their ethno-religious subculture ahead of the best interest of the nation and the state. Israel also allows various ethnic groups to have a degree of self-governance within its borders. For instance, marriage is through the religious leaders of the three main religions rather than through the state, which discriminates against non-Orthodox and intermarriages. Different ethnic groups are able to create and maintain their own school systems with little guidance from the state, which creates unequal education in terms of funding and knowledge. All Jewish citizens of Israel are drafted into the military at the age of eighteen, but other ethnic and religious minorities have the right to refuse to serve, exacerbating the lack of community identity for all citizens of Israel. Currently, Israel is a politically stable democracy where one ethnicity dominates the others, despite the coalition governments, proportional representation, and the cultural and religious autonomy of ethno-religious groups. Yet, according to Ian Lustick: "it is perfectly reasonable to presume that, in some deeply divided societies, the effective subordination of a segment or segments by a superordinate segment may be preferable to the chaos and disorder that might accompany the failure of consociationalism."¹²

What makes a nation stable? Is it merely political stability, as espoused by political scientists such as Lijphart? According to Lijphart, if a nation has political stability, it will lead to cultural stability through power sharing, cultural autonomy, and deep divisions that will keep ethnic groups from competing.

¹² Lustick, Ian. "Stability in Deeply Divided Societies: Consociationalism vs Control." *World Politics* 31.3 (1979): Pp 13

However, as seen in the often bloody and violent collapse of some consociational democracies (Lebanon, Cyprus, Yugoslavia) or the coup d'état of others (The Gambia, Fiji) or even the outbursts of violence following elections (Kenya, Sudan)¹³, politics alone cannot circumvent ethnic instability. There needs to be movements towards multiculturalism or assimilation in the quest to establish a new and unique national identity. As John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary contend, one group cannot force the assimilation into an already existing identity as an attempt to create a new nation state. It is the role of the political elites to prevent "ethnic communities from developing full scale and exclusive national consciousness" by downplaying the state's national identity or to "develop an artificial and transcendent national identity, which may prove very difficult."¹⁴ What they fail to mention, however, is that elites will sometimes work towards their continued power and self-interests rather than a better government and society.

Consociational democracy, with its elite led ethnic groups, entrenches ethnic divisions. Lijphart even admitted as such, stating that: "distinct lines of cleavage appear to be conducive to consociational democracy and political stability."¹⁵ However, Lijphart saw such divisions as positive; that such deep rifts remove the necessity of contact between opposing ethnic groups. Lijphart also gave the elites a lot more credit than they probably deserve. It is an error to

¹³ *ibid.* Pp 7, 11

¹⁴ McGarry, John, and Brendan O'Leary. "The Macro-political Regulation of Ethnic Conflict." Introduction. *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation: Case Studies of Protracted Ethnic Conflicts*. London: Routledge, 1993. Pp 36

¹⁵ *ibid.* Pp 219

argue for a type of government that requires great leadership from all its elites and players. By doing so, one ignores the many flaws in human nature, such as the quest for power. Commonly, as Donald L. Horowitz points out: "ethnicity offers political leaders the promise of secure support."¹⁶ One thing necessary for consociational democracies to work is for the elites to be able to cooperate within the framework of consociationalism, oftentimes accommodating opposing ethnic groups, while maintaining widespread support from and cohesion with their subcultures. Horowitz also observes, "that leaders may use populist rhetoric to exploit, and thereby heighten, social tensions, ethnic hatred, and the politics of fear."¹⁷ The elites face competition from counter-elites if they appear to be acting too compliant with rival ethnic interests, so even if they work within the framework of consociational collaboration, it is more beneficial to exacerbate ethnic tensions. It is a self-perpetuating cycle: for consociational democracies to work, they need elites to accommodate each other; for the elites to have the power to do so, they need the cleavages to remain strong or become stronger; and the strong cleavages require a consociational democracy to maintain stability.

One of the more troublesome problems with consociational democracies is how they keep people divided instead of forging a new national identity.

Lijphart and other proponents of consociationalism believe in the longevity of power sharing to enforce negative peace. Different ethnic groups are given

¹⁶ Horowitz, Donald L. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley: University of California, 1985. Pp 295

¹⁷ Norris, Pippa. "Ethnic Pluralism and Consociational Democracy Revisited." American Political Science Association. Washington DC. 1 Sept. 2005. Pp 9

autonomy over their education, religious practices and even sometimes over their language and local governments. Such separations may keep ethnic violence at bay, but they rarely establish an atmosphere for the creation of positive peace (working towards something new and better). Without steps to form a new national identity, the quiet put into place by consociational democracy will not last. The United States is an example as to how a strong national identity can keep the peace, even in the face of a variety of ethnic groups. Following the attempted secession of the South and the resulting Civil War, the United States has built an adaptable identity that is able to adjust with time. It is expected, when one immigrates to the United States, that while an individual or group may maintain an ethnic identity, their first and foremost identity should be “American”. From young ages, Americans say a Pledge of Allegiance to the US flag. The education system requires students to learn about American history. Jointly shared and celebrated national holidays such as Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, and Independence Day help foster the American national identity as do songs of American pride, honor, and respect. Political parties change positions and adapt to new situations to represent the issues of a growing population of people; from religious to social to immigration rights and protections, the US adapts. Americans choose one political party and have the freedom to switch political parties as their personal identities transform with time. Americans can openly change religions (or have none at all), have diverse relationships, even intermarry into different ethnic groups and cultures; Americans accelerate assimilation and multiculturalism every day in their daily lives.

Consociational democracy is an obvious choice for transitional democracies with a history of violent ethnic conflict. It is as if a teacher has to break up a fight between school children – each child is placed into a separate corner and told that if they cannot play nicely, they cannot play at all. As Lijphart states: “Consociationalism can be regarded as, at minimum, the realistic perspective, representing the necessary conditions to secure peace-agreements and negotiated settlements among all parties.”¹⁸ It makes logical sense that there will be a negative peace if those embroiled in the conflict are forced apart. But how can deep-seated hatreds abate with time if there is no long-term strategy to confront such sentiments head on? Especially when the people tasked with representing the best interests of subcultures oftentimes benefit from creating deeper divisions and preventing growth? Consociationalism is therefore a theory to be handled with care. It can succeed in optimal settings with visionary leadership, but that in itself remains rare. It is important to remember that for every Nelson Mandela in South Africa, attempting to unite South Africans in a common national identity, there is an Omar al Bashir in Sudan, sponsoring ethnic violence for political gain, even in the face of consociational agreements. Unfortunately, political leaders tend to emulate qualities analogous to Bashir rather than Mandela. It should not come as a surprise that, over fifty years since the creation of the National Pact in Lebanon, an influential Druze politician would assert: “It seems that, well, we cannot govern ourselves by ourselves. Lebanon

¹⁸ Lijphart, Arend. "Constitutional Design for Divided Societies." *Journal of Democracy* 15.2 (2004): Pp 96-109

is not a nation. It's a bunch of tribes."¹⁹ If consociational democracy continues to be the short-term method for conflict resolution, it needs to be adapted to facilitate the cultivation of national identities or it will continue to fail.

¹⁹ Zacharia, Janine. "Syria's Renewed Influence Raises Alarms in US, Israel." *Washington Post*. 4 Dec. 2010. Web. 5 Dec. 2010.
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/03/AR2010120306725.html>>