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Sarah Hollmann  
*Stetson University*

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## **“Tribal Trenches”: A Qualitative Critique of Consociational Design in Northern Ireland**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

This paper is an excerpt of my senior thesis developed at Stetson University under the direction of Dr. David Hill and Dr. Eugene Huskey. Thank you to both, along with my family, the Stetson University Research Experience Grant, the Stetson Honors Program, and my respondents for guiding, funding, or participating in this project.

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# “Tribal Trenches”: A Qualitative Critique of Consociational Design in Northern Ireland

**Sarah Hollmann**

*Stetson University*

## **ABSTRACT**

How does consociational power sharing impact ethnic divisions in Northern Ireland? Though those in the consociationalist school would claim that the lack of active political violence in Northern Ireland is a powerful argument in favor of consociationalism; I argue that active violence has been replaced by increasing political polarization and ethno-national tensions. Using data gathered from twenty-four semi-structured interviews in Northern Ireland, this project critiques the hypothesis that ethnic divisions lose their salience after the implementation of consociational power-sharing agreements after ethno-nationalist conflict. Despite the growing literature on the long-term effects of consociationalism, scholars have largely focused on quantitative methods, overlooking qualitative approaches. By presenting an ethnographically based critique of consociationalism, I hope to approach this gap in the literature. This research was generously funded by both the Stetson University Research Experience Grant and by the Stetson Honors Program.

## **KEYWORDS**

Northern Ireland, consociationalism, ethnic tribune parties, Northern Irish Assembly

## INTRODUCTION

The Belfast Agreement was a political fudge because it didn't actually address the issue of the land. It said that if people sign up to work together politically, then all will be reasonably well, we can look forward to progress, whatever that means. And yes, the violence largely disappeared, the economy has staggered along, but as we have seen, when pressure comes politically, then tribes revert to their identity (Reverend Thomas, July 25, 2017).

I think that now, more than ever we're seeing a real brazen attempt by both parties to play constitutional issues and others to get people into more tribal trenches (Nichola Mallon, July 17, 2017).

While the guns have been quiet for almost twenty years in Northern Ireland, the sectarian division that spurred the Troubles lives on. During the height of the Troubles, this division was expressed through violence. Now, ethno-national actors have moved from the bomb to the ballot box. As exemplified in the two quotes above, sectarian political division has become the status quo. Through the consociational design of the Northern Irish executive, identity has been codified in the constitution and political process (Taylor, 2006). Consociationalism, or ethnic power sharing, has designated ethno-national identity as a valid political orientation. Political parties act as "ethnic tribunes", focusing on issues of ethnicity rather than issues of cross-community interest (Dixon, 2011; McGlynn et. al, 2014).

How does consociational power sharing impact ethnic divisions in Northern Ireland? Through a qualitative study of twenty-four elite and non-elite interviews conducted between June and July 2017, I posit that consociationalism has in fact exacerbated tensions. Rather than a silver bullet for ethno-nationalist tensions, consociational design has institutionalized ethnic identity, empowered ethnic tribune parties, and led to an institutional neglect of the "other".

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Theoretical Basis of Consociationalism*

Consociational democracies are a form of power sharing in divided societies first engineered in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, popularized by Arend Lijphart in the 1960s (Saurugger, 2014). Distinct from majoritarian democracies, consociational democracies share the four following traits: grand coalitions of elites, mutual veto, proportionality, and segmental autonomy (Sircar, 2006).

Despite the face-value common sense of consociational design, it is not without its critics. The tenets of segmental autonomy and grand coalitions of elites are particularly critiqued by Paul Dixon. He writes: "The objection to consociationalism, then, is not so much its four prescriptions but consociationalism's theoretical framework – primordialist, segregationist, elitist – in which these prescriptions are to be interpreted" (2011, p. 312). These three objections, that consociationalism is primordial, segregated, and elite, form the crux upon which objections to consociationalism exist.

### *History of Northern Irish Troubles*

Dating back to exclusionary laws passed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century after the Plantation of

Ulster by British settlers, the Catholic Irish faced discrimination in the north of Ireland. In 1920, the island of Ireland was partitioned into the independent, mainly Catholic/Irish/nationalist south and the two-thirds Protestant/British/loyalist north, a self-governing region within the United Kingdom (Phoenix, 2017). While the Troubles have many causes, the constitutional status of Northern Ireland has been the most important issue for both sides since the partition of 1920. Predominantly Catholic nationalists yearn for a united Ireland, while predominantly Protestant unionists want to maintain the union with the United Kingdom (MacGinty et. al, 2012).

After centuries of brewing conflict, sectarian violence escalated in the 1970s, leading to: “a three–cornered conflict between the British Army and a militarized police force... the Irish Republican Army... and pro–United Kingdom militant groups...” (MacGinty et. al, 2007, p. 4). Ultimately, 3,700 people were killed and 40,000 people were seriously injured by the time of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, a significant number considering the small population of Northern Ireland (Deiana, 2012).

### ***The Assembly and Consociationalism in Northern Ireland***

The history of power sharing in Northern Ireland as a way to alleviate sectarian tensions began with the Sunningdale Agreement of 1974. The agreement, mediated in late 1973, lasted all of six months before internal divisions within the unionist and nationalist communities waylaid the agreement (McDaid, 2016). After Sunningdale and several other unsuccessful attempts at self-government, Northern Ireland agreed upon the Good Friday, or Belfast Agreement (the Agreement) on April 10, 1998. The Agreement was primarily championed by the Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP), the “moderate” nationalist party, and the Ulster Unionist Party, the “moderate” unionist party. Finally, the Agreement was adopted by popular vote in 1998 (MacGinty et. al, 2012).

The Agreement contained three strands. Strand One creating a consociational Assembly and Executive, Strand Two creating North–South institutions cooperating with the Republic of Ireland, and Strand Three creating East–West institutions cooperating with the United Kingdom. Finally in the Agreement, any decision as to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland would rest not with the Assembly, but with the electorate (Northern Irish Assembly).

The Assembly holds 108 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), elected by Single Transferrable Vote proportional representation (Wilford, 2000). Each MLA must designate themselves as “Unionist,” “Nationalist,” or “Other.” These designations are used when special voting is triggered that requires cross-community support, a key tenet of the consociational setup. Within the Executive, parties are allocated ministries proportionally through the d’Hondt method, while the first and second largest party choose the joint First Minister and Deputy First Minister (Murtagh, 2015).

In its brief life, the Assembly has had a tumultuous history. The Assembly has been suspended over failures in devolution from 2002 until 2007, and more recently, from 2017 to the present day (Northern Irish Assembly). The roots of the 2002 failure of devolution and subsequent St. Andrews Agreement lie within the transfer of power from the more-centrist SDLP and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) to Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). After the 2005 election in which both the DUP and Sinn Fein consolidated their majorities, Ian Paisley, the head of the DUP, “announced that they represented the

'burial' of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement on which the peace process is based, and he ruled out a return to a power-sharing assembly" (Sluka, 2009, p. 281).

After this bold statement from Paisley, power sharing was restored in May 2007 (Owen, 2006). Most recently, power sharing has been suspended since January 2017 over the involvement of Arlene Foster, the current DUP First Minister, in the failed Renewable Heating Initiative. As of May, there is no agreement in sight. Sinn Fein is currently demanding that the Irish language be recognized as an official language, which the DUP is not likely to agree on (McDowell, 2017). As Sluka states:

While so-called 'terrorism' and armed conflict have been reduced, part of the cost has been the movement of electoral support away from moderation and towards more militant wings of unionism (the DUP) and nationalism (Sinn Fein)... (2009, p. 297).

The current conflict over cultural and political issues in the context of a constitutional government falls in line with some of the main arguments against consociationalism.

### ***Criticisms of Consociationalism in Northern Ireland***

In 1975, after the failed consociational Sunningdale Agreement, Lijphart himself discounted consociationalism as a viable option for Northern Ireland. He stated that Northern Ireland lacks three factors "conducive to consociational democracy": a balance of ethnic power, norms of grand coalitions, and national solidarity (p. 100-1). He held that view until 1995, when the IRA ceasefire and consequent Good Friday Agreement proved a victory for consociationalists (Dixon, 2011). Criticisms of the consociational setup of Northern Ireland abound, but the most relevant include the essentialist nature of consociationalism, the prevalence of ethnic tribune parties, and institutional neglect of the "Others."

Perhaps the most interesting critique of consociationalism involves the essentialist assumptions that consociational scholars make. Following structural identity theory, one's identity is "socially constructed and changes over the life course" (White, 2010, p. 342). Furthermore, "'ethnic groups' are defined by the context in which they find themselves... Ethnic identity can be crafted from within a group as a response to a changing political environment or the frustrations of the modern industrial state" (Denny and Walter, 2014, p. 200). While ethnic identity does not lose salience immediately following a conflict, neither does it remain fossilized throughout one's life.

While the goal of consociationalism is that such identities would eventually lose their salience, the means by which that would occur are unspecified. It is important to acknowledge that Sinn Fein and the DUP have moderated their positions by embracing modern electoral politics, however they still function as ethnic tribune parties (Whiting, 2016; Mitchell et. al, 2009). According to McGlynn et. al, ethnic tribune parties act by "rallying supporters to their badge on the basis that only they can maximize the benefits for 'their' community" (2014, p. 275). As Evans and Tonge write in 2013, "electors and parties across the two ethnic pillars concur on economic and social priorities, such as jobs and housing, but select 'Green' (Catholic-Irish-Nationalist) or 'Orange' (Protestant-Unionist-British) parties" (p. 364). Though such tribune parties had begun during the Troubles, the institutionalization of such parties through consociationalism has amplified their legitimacy.

While the construction of the Northern Irish Executive grants the same powers to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, whether the First Minister is designated as Nationalist or Unionist still matters deeply. In the 2010 General Election, Sinn Féin's vote share outpaced the SDLP by 9%. That year, 61% of the electorate responded that Sinn Féin "has been the most effective voice for nationalists in Northern Ireland" (McGlynn et. al, 2014, p. 282).

It is not necessarily the difference in policy between the "moderate" and "extreme" parties that determines vote choice, but rather, the perception that the "extreme" parties are the heavyweight defenders of their community. In 2009, Mitchell et. al found: "three times as many respondents perceived Sinn Féin rather than the SDLP to be the most effective party in representing the interests of nationalists (p. 411). Among unionists, they found similar phenomena (Mitchell, 2009). Voters elect these "extremes" as the voice for their community due to the perception that they are the most effective.

While "moderate" parties such as SDLP and UUP are left behind by ethnic tribune voting, non-sectarian parties such as the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI) are also left behind by the consociational setup of the Assembly. As of 2015, 43% of the electorate identified as neither unionist nor nationalist, yet unionist and nationalist political parties represent 90% of the vote (Murtagh, 2015, p. 545). In the 2016 election, Alliance maintained their eight seats, but lost support in every constituency (Bertoldi, 2016). This phenomenon is largely attributed to the culture of politicized ethnicity; even if a person doesn't actively identify with an ethnic group, they will still vote for the party that most closely represents their ethnicity (Murtagh, 2015). While the electorate is an issue for the cross-ethnic parties, the institutional design of the Assembly proves an insurmountable obstacle. The process of cross-community vote and mutual veto mean that the designation of "other" holds little to no significance. In 2001, three APNI members were re-designated as Unionist rather than Other in order to shore up the Unionist majority for a cross-community vote (Taylor, 2006). Ian O'Flynn states: "By effectively discounting the votes of the 'others' on certain important issues, the agreement privileges national over individual identities" (Taylor, 2006, p. 217). One APNI member said that trying to legislate as a cross-ethnic party was akin to being in the "middle of a tribal dog fight" (Murtagh, 2015, p. 559). By not providing an institutional method for cross-ethnic parties to thrive, consociational design falls short in its aim to decrease the salience of ethnic tribune parties. The problem with consociationalism is not in its use as a tool of conflict management, but rather in its long-term use. Intended to be a transitional tool, the failure in consociationalism lies in its inability to articulate a means to ameliorate ethnic divisions.

Through these three arguments, critics of consociationalism argue that it amounts to voluntary segregation (Dixon, 2011; Taylor, 2006). Through separate control of ministries and community control of cultural issues, what consociationalists call "segmental autonomy" (Sircar, 2006, p. 13), in fact works as de facto segregation. Rupert Taylor offers one of the more scathing rebuttals of consociationalism when he questions: "If notions of 'separate but equal' could not be intellectually upheld through any appeal to reason or developed through any accepted principles of social organization in the American South or in apartheid South Africa, why should it be any different for Northern Ireland?" (2006, p. 219).

### ***Defenses of Consociationalism in Northern Ireland***

While consociationalism has certainly been heavily critiqued, it has also been heavily defended. The core of this defense hinges on the lack of widespread sectarian violence and the moderation of Sinn Fein and the DUP. In Bosnia, another state in which a consociational agreement led to a ceasefire, Stroschein states: “Despite much criticism of the consociational structures established by the 1995 Dayton Agreement, the state has not collapsed again into violence after nearly 20 years” (2014, p. 112). In this argument, consociationalism is defined not by the presence of democratic norms, a functioning legislature, cross-ethnic voting, or any of the other lofty goals that consociational scholars claim, but merely by the absence of violence. This speaks to the use of consociationalism as a conflict management tool rather than a true tool for conflict resolution.

While consociationalism may not designate a method to facilitate ethnic reconciliation, it points to the presence of ethnic cooperation as one of its defenses. Using the involvement of Sinn Fein and the DUP in the Assembly, consociational scholars cite the moderation of these once-unconstrained parties as a testimony to the efficiency of consociationalism. In this way, the bare minimum standard of peacekeeping is hailed as a victory of consociational design. This is not to belittle the enormity of the Agreement; to wage peace after almost forty years of waging war is no small feat. Rather, this is to say that twenty years after the cessation of violence, the political process has replaced the Armalite as the weapon of choice for ethnic actors.

### ***Consociationalism in Comparative Perspective***

Consociational thought has permeated the world of peacemaking, proposed as a “pragmatic” option for divided states. Consociational power sharing is actively utilized in Belgium, Burundi, Malaysia, Northern Ireland, South Tyrol, and Switzerland, and has heavily influenced the post-conflict constitutions of Bosnia, Cyprus, Fiji, Kenya, Lebanon, Macedonia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Zimbabwe (McCulloch, 2014).

Of the above consociational nations, Bosnia-Herzegovina is perhaps the most compared to Northern Ireland. Both are European states in the early stages of recovering from an ethno-national conflict, and finalized consociational peace treaties with invested states as guarantors: Northern Ireland with the UK and Republic of Ireland, and Bosnia-Herzegovina with Serbia and Croatia. The contrast emerges in both the severity of the wars and the number of constituent groups involved. While Northern Ireland was a low-level armed conflict, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina escalated to the point that many scholars consider it to be genocide. In addition, Northern Ireland has two main constituent groups: Unionists and Nationalists. Bosnia-Herzegovina contains three: Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks (Sircar, 2006). Despite these differences, the similarities are pronounced. Many of the consociational structures that draw ire in Northern Ireland are equally contentious within the constitutional design of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The marginalization of the “others”, ethnic tribune parties, and continued political unrest attract criticisms from scholars (Stroschein, 2014).

### **METHODOLOGY**

The data for this paper comes from twenty-four semi-structured interviews conducted between June and July of 2017. The audiotaped interviews lasted between ten and

sixty minutes, and were conducted in the location of the participant's choosing. Interviews were conducted in participant's offices, coffee shops, and even the Member's Café at Stormont Parliament Building. Data were then imported into Quirkos, a qualitative data software package, where they were coded by theme and relevancy. All participants were guaranteed confidentiality with the exception of four elected officials, who kindly waived their right to confidentiality.

Participants for this study were recruited through cultural, historical, religious, and political organizations. Participants ranged from church volunteers to Mike Nesbitt, the former leader of the UUP (Interviews, Appendix). While interviews were largely conversational, a semi-structured interview guide was constructed to direct the flow of discussion and keep the conversation centered on identity and consociational design. Questions included: "Do you believe that the importance of sectarian divide has diminished over your lifetime?"; "What do you think caused the shift from the UUP and SDLP in favor of the DUP and Sinn Fein?"; and "In your opinion, why are people voting on 'orange and green' issues instead of 'bread and butter' issues?" (Interview Guide, Appendix).

Instead of focusing on either the unionist or nationalist community, this paper focuses on a cross-community, national study. This is a unique decision, as most qualitative surveys of Northern Ireland choose to focus on one community in a confined geographical space as a pragmatic decision (Zenker, 2006; Panzer, 2015; McAuley and Tonge, 2008). In contrast, respondents ranged the religious spectrum from Protestant to Catholic to Pagan, the geographical spectrum from Derry to Belfast to North Down, and the political spectrum from avowed loyalist to dissident republican. While this approach did limit my depth of community immersion, it made up for it in breadth. By analyzing viewpoints of those across the religious, social, and political spectrum, this paper is able to execute a more comprehensive critique of consociationalism.

While the breadth of my study is one of its strengths, it is also one of its weaknesses. I was able to speak to four current or former MLAs: two Alliance, one SDLP, and one UUP. I was not, however, able to arrange an interview with any DUP or Sinn Fein officials. As this paper specifically critiques Sinn Fein and the DUP, interviews with party leaders would have greatly aided my analysis. However, the interviews with party officials in smaller parties, other elites, and supporters of Sinn Fein and DUP were still wide-ranging enough to be confident in the results.

## **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

Through my interviews, I analyze the ways in which consociational power sharing has affected the political and social dimensions of post-Troubles Northern Ireland. In particular, this paper will delve into the institutionalization of ethnic identity, prevalence of ethnic tribune parties, and institutional neglect of the other inherent in consociationalism.

### ***Institutionalization of Ethnic Identity***

My findings on the impact of consociationalism on ethnicity fell in line with the existing literature critiquing consociationalism (Dixon, 2011; Denny and Walter, 2014). Dr. Stephen Farry, the Deputy Leader of the Alliance Party and MLA for North Down, stated:

You have this paradox now, that the Good Friday Agreement and the peace

process has actually hardened identity... Basically the Agreement has essentially institutionalized sectarianism. It treated identity in 1998 as a fixed point rather than something that was fluid and could change. It assumed that there would be a permanent Protestant-Unionist identity and a permanent Catholic-Nationalist identity, and that the two would have to coexist. And therefore, they built in the structures that would have to give voice to them, but didn't really recognize any other kind of voice ... Sometimes it's easier for peacemakers to freeze conflict and manage it rather than to try to transform it. The freezing can then become really frozen (Dr. Stephen Farry).

Farry falls in line with the literature on the essentialist nature of consociationalism when he states that consociationalism "freezes ethnic conflict." The essentialist nature of consociationalism makes it impossible to move past the conflict. Likewise, "Reverend Thomas" echoes:

No matter what you make of power sharing, it entrenched sectarianism, it entrenched division. You have to nominate yourself as either being unionist, nationalist, or other. You have to define yourself...("Reverend Thomas").

By requiring one to define oneself as unionist or nationalist in perpetuity by default causes ethnic divisions to replicate. By not providing a viable alternative to the unionist/nationalist dichotomy, the Agreement ensures that the division will remain salient, and erase those who do not identify within that dichotomy. Errol, a civilian police administrator, states:

Well, Northern Ireland, we're special. I am perceived to be from a Protestant background. The fact that I myself can best be described as agnostic with Pagan leanings is irrelevant. I am a Prod. The organization I work for classifies me as being from a Protestant background, because you're either Prod or you're Catholic. That I'm a Pagan doesn't wash. That I'm an atheist doesn't wash... (Errol).

In stating that his identities "don't wash" with public perception, Errol points out the essentialism present within consociationalism. He is not allowed to embrace his self-identities, as consociationalism only allows for the dual structure of nationalism or unionism, Protestantism or Catholicism. Will Glendinning, a former Alliance MLA, states:

The Good Friday Agreement has been extremely good at providing a structure for us to deal with, at a governmental level, the divided structure of our society. It was also necessary for us to cement the peace, in terms of reducing the level of violence. What it didn't do was deal with the identity issues: dealing with the past, parades, flags, and paramilitaries, which are the issues that are now there (William Glendinning).

In this way, it is not necessarily the structure of the Agreement, but it's shortsightedness. While the Agreement ended the war, it did not necessarily end the conflict. The Agree-

ment, while essential to end the violence, did not contain the long-term structures that would ameliorate ethnic tensions, and has in fact amplified tensions through the institutionalization of identity inherent to the consociational structures underpinning the Agreement.

### ***Ethnic Tribune Parties***

In addition to the institutionalization of ethnicity, my findings reflect how the consociational structures of the Agreement have empowered ethnic tribune parties. Nichola Mallon, the deputy leader of the SDLP and MLA for North Belfast, states:

I think that more than ever we're seeing a real brazen attempt by both parties to play constitutional issues and others to get people into more tribal trenches. I think that what we have seen is that the center ground, in this past Westminster election in particular, was badly impacted upon (Nichola Mallon).

In using the phrase “tribal trenches”, Mallon is hearkening back to both the primordialism underlying consociational design and the ways in which ethnic tribune parties are quick to use that to their advantage.

Since the Agreement in 1998, the DUP has moved from 20 to 28 seats in 2017 (Whyte, 2002; BBC). Sinn Fein has advanced from 18 to 27 seats (Whyte, 2002; BBC). Meanwhile, the UUP and SDLP have declined by 18 and 12 seats, respectively. Dr. Farry explains the move towards tribune parties by stating:

To an extent, both DUP and Sinn Fein have moved to the center. They're not where they were 25 years ago... To some extent they've taken over the SDLP and UUP's territory, but you also have the electorate seeing them as being the stronger voice in each community. So it's what [scholars] talk about when they write about ethnic tribune parties on either side of the divide who are there to broker outcomes in a transactional process rather than create some sort of a notion of a shared, coherent, cohesive government. They're there to represent their different blocs. So if your politics is going to be divided into blocs, you're as well having the stronger voice in your bloc, so you'll be able to stand up to the equal but opposite voice in the other community (Stephen Farry).

Not only does Dr. Farry reference the literature on ethnic tribune parties; he also talks about the “notion of a shared, coherent, cohesive government.” The perceived impossibility of cooperation amongst tribune parties is closely associated with the institutionalization of ethnicity under the Agreement.

By designating candidates as “unionist”, “nationalist”, or “other”, the choreographers of the Agreement were all but guaranteeing that the existing ethnic divisions would give rise to tribune parties (Mitchell et. al, 2009). While the violence has ended, the ethnic divisions remain salient through the consociational design of the Assembly. While the political process includes all relevant parties in the conflict, fear is still a significant component of modern electoral politics in Northern Ireland. As Reverend Thomas states:

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So why do you vote for these people? You vote for them because they're making you fearful that the world will end if the other lot gets in... Neither the SDLP nor the UUP were able and still are not able to articulate why people should vote for them, and not the other party. The policy differentials between say, the SDLP and Sinn Fein, in practice, are minimal. So, as the DUP and Sinn Fein have said, 'we are the heavyweight operators in our communities,' why would anyone vote for someone who A, can't dislodge them, and B, really has no credible alternative to offer the electorate? ("Reverend Thomas").

Likewise, Mike Nesbitt echoes this idea of block voting, stating:

As I see it, you basically now have unionists who don't even necessarily like the DUP voting DUP because they are fearful of Sinn Fein becoming the First Minister; they always want a Sinn Fein Deputy First Minister, even though it's an equal office... So it seems to me that people vote DUP or Sinn Fein not because they think these are the two parties that can come together and make a big impact on how we deal with our crisis in the National Health Service, or will deliver a better education system for our children, or actually deliver anything except cancel each other out. So there's a realization that them'uns on the other side are gonna have a big block called the DUP or Sinn Fein, therefore we have to make sure us'uns have a big block to cancel them (Mike Nesbitt).

Both Nesbitt and Reverend Thomas articulate the core of ethnic tribune parties: that they are ethnic actors that "lie beyond the formal political sphere, within the informal structures of ethnic politics" (Murtagh, 2015, p. 545). Within these informal structures, fear and the realities of tribune politics weigh heavily on the electorate, overshadowing "bread and butter" policy. As Bishop John states:

Even moderate nationalists will say, 'to be on the safe side, let's vote for Sinn Fein.' And a moderate unionist will say, 'to counter that, I'll vote for the DUP' (Bishop John).

In an example of the back-and-forth inherent to consociational design, William, a DUP voter in Derry/Londonderry states:

Even though I voted DUP, it doesn't mean I agree with all of their policies. People would say that's wrong, but I think that's what you do here, you vote for the strength, and hopefully they'll represent the unionist people... (William).

In reluctantly voting for DUP for "strength", William exemplifies the core of ethnic tribunes; to consolidate control through ethnic, rather than policy-based appeals. Ethnic tri-

bune parties are not about changing the status quo of government; they are about control. Unionists seek to maintain their control, while nationalists seek to gain control. As Glendinning states:

The last Westminster election shows that we're heading towards polarization and a benign apartheid because the vote... showed people voting for a party not necessarily because they believed that party, but because that party is the one they see will stand up to the other. So there's still a lot of defining yourself by who you're not (Will Glendinning).

In the term “benign apartheid,” Glendinning joins the ranks of critics of consociationalism in maintaining that consociational design separates and reifies rather than accommodates. Rachel, a young woman in Derry/Londonderry, states:

In areas that is majority Protestant, they don't want Sinn Fein getting in, in areas that is Roman Catholic, they don't want DUP getting in, so it's tactical voting. That's what is happening in Northern Ireland, and that's the way it has been and the way it seems to be for years to come. That's just what people have gotten used to over the years. Even the people who go out and vote for Alliance or UUP, they go out and vote for those parties, but they know nothing will be done. And it just seems in Northern Ireland that no matter who you vote for, it's just going to be the same, there's not going to be changes (Rachel).

Rachel's statement highlights not only the transactional nature of ethnic tribune parties, but also the hopelessness of the consociational system. Though consociationalism is an adequate post-conflict bandage, it will lead to consequences such as ethnic tribune parties if left unchecked and unaltered.

### ***Institutional Neglect of the “Other”***

Murtagh writes: “In the landscape of ‘ethnic politics’ in which parties mirror the divisions in society and vie for votes only within ‘their own’ ethnonational group... parties that attempt to straddle the divide inhabit a perilous position” (2015, p. 545). According to recent electoral returns, that sentence rings particularly true for the Alliance. While ethnic identification is down, with only 57% of the electorate identifying as either unionist or nationalist, traditionally unionist or nationalist political parties still garner 90% of the vote (Murtagh, 2015, p. 545). Bishop John reconciles this disconnect succinctly, stating:

With the demographics in Northern Ireland right now, it's almost fifty-fifty, so the small parties get squeezed out in elections. It's kind of like an arm wrestle between the two parties, and there's no such thing as a three-person arm wrestling match (Bishop John).

In short, even if one does not actively identify with an ethnic tribune party, one will still vote for the identity that most closely resembles their heritage. Reverend Thomas delves

more deeply into the issue, stating:

This is where Alliance is floundering, because, and I used to be an Alliance voter, and I can't think of a single issue where their party position is not reflected in either Sinn Fein or DUP to some extent... no matter what you are or aren't in favor of, at the end of the day you are presented with an identity choice, not a choice about moral differentials, it's an identity choice ("Reverend Thomas").

By once again referencing the lack of meaningful policy differentials, Reverend Thomas reiterates the importance of ethnicity in vote choice.

In addition to the barriers within the electorate, cross-community parties face institutionalized barriers as well. If the Alliance were to garner enough votes to claim either the First Minister or Deputy First Minister spots, nation-wide chaos would ensue. As Dr. Stephen Farry answers:

SKH: Out of curiosity, what would happen if Alliance were to take one of the First Minister spots?

Stephen Farry: Anarchy, absolute anarchy. Technically, we could claim one of the posts, but whichever community was bumped out, that would cause tensions. But that's part of the problem with the setup; it assumed that unionists and nationalists would exist in perpetuity. They never really thought that far ahead... How would the structures cope with that?...

In this quote, it becomes obvious that the three main issues facing consociationalism in Northern Ireland: institutionalization of identity, ethnic tribune parties, and neglect of cross-ethnic parties, do not exist in isolation. Instead, these factors interact and build off of one another in a vicious cycle.

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

While the combat in Northern Ireland is over, the conflict lives on via political means. Consociational power sharing has prevented a return to violence, but at the cost of an effective government. As of May 2018, there has been no sign that the Assembly would reconvene after a more than yearlong impasse. One SDLP lawmaker went so far as to tell the *New York Times*: "I don't mean to be dramatic or anything, but I do think the Good Friday Agreement is effectively dead," (Kingsley, 2017). Under consociationalism, Northern Ireland has been embattled by the institutionalization of ethnicity, ethnic tribune parties, and neglect of the other.

This is a turning point for Northern Ireland. With the ghosts of the Troubles and the looming specter of a solidified border from Brexit, the peace cemented through the Good Friday Agreement will either sink or swim. Let us only hope that the region will not return to the violence that marked it twenty years ago.

My research uncovered a number of further questions. How has Brexit affected identity? How would a single-community study have affected my findings? How would my findings be affected if I had been able to interview a party official of Sinn Fein or the

DUP? These questions would be interesting additions to the literature.

Through the institutions created in the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland has gone from a nation mired in war to a nation mired in cultural conflict. While conflict of the cultural variety is preferable to the armed variety, the mere absence of violence is not a high enough bar for transitional societies. By applying principles of conflict management as opposed to principles of conflict transformation, long-lasting reconciliation is overlooked in favor of post-conflict stagnation. The shortsighted consociational framework of the Good Friday Agreement has led to institutionalized ethnicity, tribune parties, and neglect of cross-ethnic parties, none of which are conducive to the peaceful and cohesive society that Northern Ireland hopes to become.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview Guide

- Tell me about your life growing up. What do you remember about Northern Ireland at the time?
- Where is your family from?
- Where did you grow up?
- How do you remember the 1970s–1990s? What was going on around you?
- Do you identify with a faith tradition? Which one?
- Do you identify as Irish, British, European, Northern Irish or something else, and why?
- Do you believe that the importance of the sectarian divide has diminished over your lifetime?
- Why do you think that people are voting on orange and green issues instead of bread and butter issues?
- What do you think caused the shift from the UUP and SDLP in favor of the DUP and Sinn Féin?

### Interviews

#### Derry/Londonderry

- “Elizabeth”, June 19, 2017
- “Jimmy”, June 19, 2017
- “Susie”, June 19, 2017

- “Donal”, June 20, 2017
- “Brandon,” June 20, 2017
- “Seamus”, June 21, 2017
- “Steven,” June 21, 2017
- “Billy,” June 21, 2017
- “Ross”, July 7, 2017
- “William”, July 7, 2017
- “James”, July 8, 2017
- “Jack”, July 8, 2017
- “Bishop Joseph”, July 24, 2017

Belfast

- “Errol”, June 29, 2017
- Mike Nesbitt, July 14, 2017 \*
- “Bill”, July 15, 2017
- “Rachel,” July 15, 2017
- “Bob,” July 15, 2017
- Nichola Mallon, July 17, 2017 \*
- “Andrew,” July 21, 2017
- “Reverend Thomas,” July 25, 2017
- “Bishop John”, July 25, 2017
- Will Glendenning, July 26, 2017 \*

Bangor

- Dr. Stephen Farry, July 19, 2017 \*

\* Political figures: signed non-confidentiality clause