NILQ 60(3): 381-2

Book review

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Consociational Theory: McGarry and O'Leary and the Northern Ireland conflict, Rupert Taylor (ed.) (London: Routledge 2009), 400pp., £80

The murders of two soldiers and a police officer in Northern Ireland this past March 2009 drew international attention. Fears flared that the region's decade-old peace agreement, and the power-sharing government that institutionalised it, might be under threat. Importantly, Robinson and McGuinness, the (fraternal) twinned First Minister and Deputy First Minister, spoke in unison, denouncing the attacks and the citizenry of Northern Ireland appeared united against the prospect of returning to "troubled" times. This flashpoint, however, gives cause to think about the past, present and future of Northern Ireland's conflict and governance — was the power-sharing government instrumental to the end (and has it ended?) of sectarian violence? Is a government that houses such different views of Northern Ireland's future sustainable and can it serve the public well? What does and should the future hold for Northern Ireland's government in order to preserve peace and promote prosperity?

These questions are addressed in the recently published *Consociational Theory: McGarry and O'Leary and the Northern Ireland conflict*, edited by Rupert Taylor. Taylor assembles a symposium-style discussion on consociationalism, an applied political theory that advocates a specific form of power-sharing that promises democratically to resolve entrenched ethnic division and political conflict. The book focuses specifically on Northern Ireland's government, born of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (the "Agreement"), and is framed around an argument by John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, leading proponents of consociationalism. McGarry and O'Leary outline their defence of the consociational Agreement and are met with 16 responses, ranging from wholly supportive to extremely critical, by notable authors from fields including political science, law, international relations and sociology. McGarry and O'Leary then have the final word, responding to each of the commentaries in turn.

The format of the book works well. It is apparent that a few of the authors have been in long intractable "discussions" over the benefits and failings of consociationalism and that

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their positions are entrenched and the debate growing weary. Much of the writing, however, imparts a sense of genuine interest and fresh perspective which keeps the volume relevant and energetic. Though dense, the tone of the essays, and particularly the replies and sur-replies, is often lively and the multitude of voices compelling.

McGarry and O'Leary's argument first categorises and dismisses their integrationist critics. Integrationists prefer fluid identities and mixing of segregated groups, whereas consociationalists see identities as more rigid and thus requiring accommodation. McGarry and O'Leary continue by looking at consociational theory and the Agreement, noting in particular the ways in which the Agreement differs from classic/theoretical consociational design. Finally, the primary areas of critique of consociationalism in general and the Agreement in particular are discussed – relating to stability, fairness and democracy. McGarry and O'Leary conclude that consociationalism was necessary to bring Northern Ireland out of conflict, and should remain integral to its governance until it "decays organically".

The responses to McGarry and O'Leary are at their best when they focus on evaluating in concrete terms the current operation of the consociational government (for example, Farry, chapter 7) and on emphasising the need (and opportunity) to begin to move beyond conflict management to conflict transformation (see O'Flynn, chapter 14, and Taylor, chapter 17). The discussions bring to light the ways in which the Northern Ireland settlement makes important use of transnational arrangements and implements a unique quasi-constitutional arrangement.

With respect to the need for consociationalism and the benefits that it has brought to date, McGarry and O'Leary emerge from the "friendly' and 'not so friendly' fire" largely unscathed. None of the contributors successfully challenge their assertion that consociationalism, in the form in which it was introduced in Northern Ireland, was the best way to move the region out of violence and sectarianism to a period of peace and communication across sectarian lines. Though some argue (see, for example, Wilson, chapter 11, and Taylor, chapter 17) that life has been worse for the general public since and as a result of the Agreement, they are not convincing. The essays as a whole make clear the significant strides that Northern Ireland has made over the past 10 years.

This progress was evident in March 2009. The leading political parties, despite their vast differences, are clearly committed to working within the system and promoting stability. Lasting peace is obviously of fundamental importance, but, for Northern Ireland to prosper and to move towards becoming a more dynamic and egalitarian society, it is insufficient. A number of the book's chapters demonstrate the key weakness of McGarry and O'Leary's argument – its vision for the future. Consociationalism may have been useful to bring Northern Ireland to where it is now, but where should it go from here? And how will it get there?

Steiner (chapter 9) and Morison (chapter 15) are among those who discuss the need for greater citizen involvement and deliberation in Northern Ireland's governance. McGarry and O'Leary dismiss this suggestion abruptly, but should pay closer attention. Consociationalism operates thanks to, but then remains overly focused on, the political elite. The result is a government that is stable, but prone to gridlock. Attention needs to turn to the public at large, who are learning to live together. The leadership must be in more active dialogue with its citizens in order to chart a common path for the future.

Taylor's *Consociational Theory* is an important contribution to the extensive literature on consociationalism, as well as on Northern Ireland's conflict and settlement – it is highly recommended.