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**CONSOCIATIONALISM AND BRENDAN O’LEARY**

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Last week QUB was graced by the return of Professor Brendan O’Leary now of Pennsylvania University. He was giving a lecture entitled “Remarkably Successful Power-Sharing in Northern Ireland: Reflections on Excessive Ingratitude, Especially Among the Astonished.”

This self-regarding title was probably justified as having started off an adviser to Labour’s shadow Secretary of State Kevin McNamara, he is widely credited as the academic who created our current power-sharing arrangement. Known as Consociationalism, it basically differs from the earlier power-sharing model by dividing the spoils of government proportionately between the big parties.

Each get a due number of ministries under the D’Hondt system (the brainchild of Pat Bradley, the then Chief Electoral Officer) while decisions requiring agreement at the centre are then negotiated, but only in crisis. These are the difficult decisions as it is relatively easy to spend money or allocate resources in each ministry. O’Leary felt if decisions are parked there is no great downside as government continues, for the most part, on its parallel lines. The system leads however to impasse and to nothing ever changing – not unlike the previous Unionist era from 1920 to1970!

And a concentration on arguing the conflict through the past in ever more complexity and without possibility of agreement leading to parades, flags crises etc. This is the flaw in the architecture than can bring it down.

This lecture was not just an exercise in self-congratulation, as O’Leary ably pointed out how effective post-1998 Stormont had been in its, admittedly, small number of fully-functioning years. He instanced a somewhat dubious comparison with Scotland, saying each devolved assembly had passed a similar amount of legislation.

He also noted how the boot was often on the other foot with the police now having a crisis of acceptability in Protestant areas; British support having weakened (although not in the key financial area) and Unionist ‘hegemony’ ending forever.

This all rather denied the view of an equally famous political scientist from the 1960s, Richard Rose, who famously said, “The problem of Northern Ireland is there is no solution.” Nonetheless the death rate had plummeted to an all-time low which O’Leary was pleased to say was another plus point of the new arrangements. (I did point out that the level of killing depended more on paramilitaries choosing not to murder.)

The Professor reserved a final criticism of the ‘others,’ the centre parties and the reconciliation community, who had not achieved such items as the Bill of Rights and were needlessly promoting integrated integration when a consociational system needed strong, separate schooling.