

Northern Ireland: post-conflict education model?

by Paul Nolan

Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement of 1998 called for "initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education" but progress has been painfully slow. Only 5% of the total school population are in integrated schools (those bringing together students and staff from both the Protestant and Catholic traditions). Only 1.4% of the adult population has experienced integrated schooling.

Under the terms of the Agreement, Northern Ireland has a unique form of governance – consociationalism. Formulated by the Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphard, it seeks to promote democracy in segmented societies by power-sharing, a Grand Coalition of all political parties with no form of parliamentary opposition. Consociationalism has excluded the

significant numbers of residents of Northern Ireland who choose not to designate themselves as Catholic or Protestant. By empowering ethnic entrepreneurs and promoting homogenisation of identity, it has led to a shrinking of the political centre. Since 1997 the combined vote of the extreme parties, Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party, has

risen from 29.7% to 52.6%. This same model of consociational government is now being imposed elsewhere – most notably in Iraq – and the same consequences are becoming apparent.

Northern Ireland's post-conflict drift to entrenched extremes shows the need to heed the warning of the political theorist, Giovanni Sartori: "If you reward divisions and divisiveness ... you increase and eventually heighten divisions and divisiveness."

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