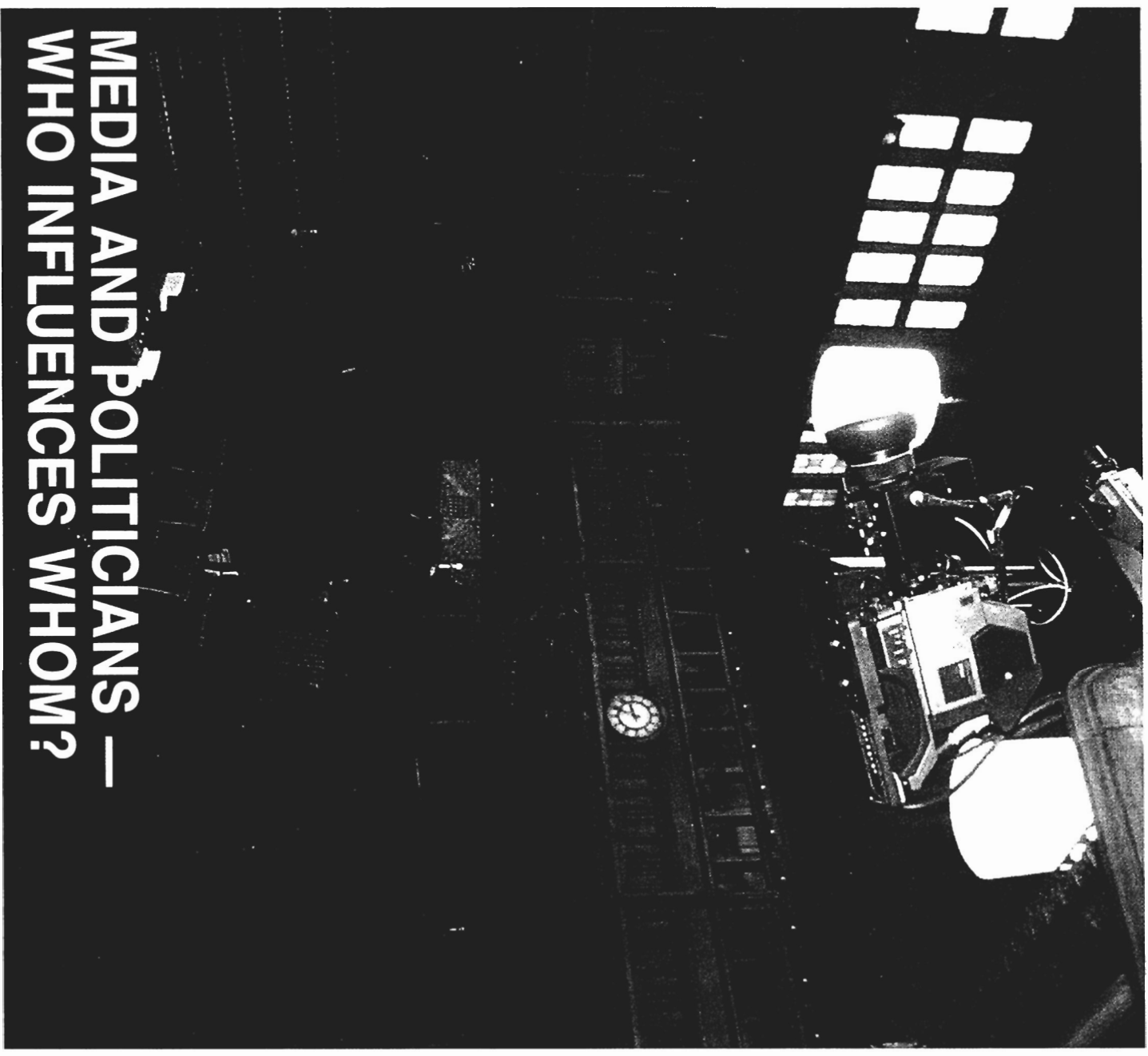


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# CONTEMPORARY RECORD

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The Journal of the Institute of Contemporary British History



**MEDIA AND POLITICIANS —  
WHO INFLUENCES WHOM?**

gentle and obsequious, or orchestrated from Downing Street.

In the run-up to the next election there will be a battle to shape and define the political agenda. In the 1987 Election there were three major parties and it was difficult for the BBC and ITV to locate the 'neutral' middle ground; the middle ground was the location of the Alliance. One consequence was a tendency to follow the (mainly Conservative) popular press agenda. In the next election, with the Alliance gone, news executives in the BBC and ITV may find an easier and more acceptable definition of the middle ground; this may be the ground shared between *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, (on the left) and *The Times* (steering a more moderate Tory course under its new Editor, Simon Jenkins).

## REAL EVILS

Media professionals — especially American ones — are inclined to see criticism of the media as blaming the messenger for the bad news. Perhaps Hugo Young should not blame his fellow journalists for the evils of contemporary media.

Certainly some of the less attractive characteristics of our political system are reflected in the British mass media. In the 1980s, bi-polar politics and excessive partisanship were reflected in the press. The partial dismantling of local government has been accompanied by the virtual elimination of a regional element in the national press and an increased gap between the salaries and resources available in the national and regional press.

Among the many messages carried by the press is a message about educational levels. Is a nation whose most popular reading materials are *The Sun* and the *Daily Mirror*, really equipped to face the 1990s decade, let alone the next century?

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# SOLVING NORTHERN IRELAND?

## Brendan O'Leary

*Brendan O'Leary concludes his penetrating analysis of the political options facing Northern Ireland.*

### WHAT TYPE OF DECISION-MAKING?

The key question for Northern Ireland, whichever state it belongs to, and whatever its constitutional nomenclature, is straightforward: how should political and policy-making power be organised across and within the respective communities? There are basically four ideal typical ways in which this question might be answered: arbitration, majority-rule, power-sharing and cantonisation. Each of these types could be permuted in multiple ways, but here I have not the space to expand upon this theme.

### Arbitration

First, an external power might be given the role of arbiter in Northern Ireland, refereeing conflicts and adjudicating disputes in the absence of consensus. This role has been exercised by British governments since 1972. After the Anglo-Irish Agreement it has been exercised in consultation with the Irish government, providing 'direct rule with a green tinge'.<sup>1</sup> In principle, at some future juncture, arbitration might be exercised by both Britain and Ireland in a system of joint authority. More fancifully, arbitration might be exercised by the European Community (direct rule from Brussels) or by the United Nations.

The most fundamental problem with arbitration is that the arbitrated do not regard the most likely arbiters, namely Britain and Ireland, as sufficiently disinterested to be neutral. In particular Irish nationalists, with considerable

justification, regard direct British rule in Ireland as responsible for continuing economic discrimination and regular abuses of human rights by the security forces. Unionists, by contrast, find repulsive the mere idea of institutionalised consultation with the Irish Republic by the British government.

### Majority-rule

Second, political power might be exercised according to majority-rule principles. This fundamental norm of the Westminster model is, however, problematic in ethnically divided societies.<sup>2</sup> Under the Stormont government there was one party rule by the Ulster Unionist Party for over 50 years, and there was no prospect of the nationalist opposition achieving governmental authority. The system of majority-rule devolution provided a perfect milieu for the systematic abuse of political power. Majority rule decision-making procedures attached to unitary, federal or confederal *formulae* would create the same threat, whether Northern Ireland was Irish, British, jointly governed or independent.

In any case the question might well be asked: which majority? Irish nationalists claim that Northern Ireland is illegitimate because its borders were drawn so as to create an artificial majority, and that they are the genuine majority in the island of Ireland; whereas Ulster unionists claim that they are in a majority within Northern Ireland and should be allowed to exercise power commensurate with that status.

British nation-builders, by contrast, argue that the true majority is in the United Kingdom as a whole. They contend that if



'real' British political parties, viz. the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats, were to organise and compete in elections in Northern Ireland then its ethnically-based politics would be transformed.<sup>3</sup> This argument, currently very fashionable amongst the Young Conservatives, rests on three very insecure foundations. First, it presupposes that Northern Irish voters will vote for British political parties in large numbers if they are given the opportunity. The evidence to date is not persuasive. The Conservatives, the solitary British political party to have organised in the province, have lost deposits in both the European Parliamentary election 1989 and the by-election in Upper Bann in May 1990, and have performed adequately in only one very unrepresentative local government election in North Down. Groups seeking to persuade the Labour Party to stand in the province have received derisory votes. Second, the argument rests on the assumption that Northern Irish voters who will vote for British political parties will do so for non-sectarian reasons. However, polling evidence suggests that the Conservatives would appeal most to those in favour of the Union, i.e. Protestants; whereas the Labour Party would appeal most to those in favour of Irish unity, i.e. Catholics, because Labour favours achieving Irish unity by consent.<sup>4</sup> Far from transcending sectarian politics the organisation of the major British political parties in the province would directly embroil them in the national and religious conflicts, just as they were deeply affected by them before 1920. Third, the argument erroneously assumes that the major cause of national, ethnic and religious conflict in Northern Ireland since 1920 has been the absence of British party competition in the province. These electoral integrationist arguments, favouring majority rule in the United Kingdom as a whole, are as wildly idealist about the benefits of the Westminster model as Gaelic romantics are about Irish unification. In the British Isles political romanticism is not an exclusively Irish commodity.

### Power-Sharing

However, political relationships in Northern Ireland might be organised according to a third principle, power-sharing. Known as *consociationalism* to political scientists, power-sharing is characteristic of democratic and stable societies which are nonetheless deeply divided by ethnic or religious cleavages.<sup>5</sup> Consociational democracies usually have four key features. First, a grand coalition government incorporates the political parties representing the main segments of the divided society. Second, proportionality rules throughout the public sector: the

proportional representation of each segment in key political institutions (the electoral system, executive, legislature, judiciary, and the bureaucracy) is matched by the proportional allocation of public expenditure to each segment. Third, segmental autonomy norms permit each group self-government over those matters of most profound concern to them: for example, each group may be proportionally and equally funded to support and run its own educational system. Finally, consociational systems entrench the right of constitutional veto for minorities.

In effect successive British governments since 1972 have been trying to promote a consociational solution to Northern Ireland's problems, seeking to persuade its constitutional political parties to share political power in a devolved government. Under Article 4 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement both the British and Irish governments have been committed to this solution since 1985, and Mr Brooke has been actively seeking to implement it in recent months.

Consociational solutions, which together with many others I believe to be the most desirable for divided societies like Northern Ireland, failed to work before 1985 for clear reasons — although British governments took a long time to learn them. First, consociational solutions cannot work easily or effectively where the rival segments are fundamentally divided over their national as opposed to their ethnic or religious identities. Nationality conflicts appear to have an irreducibly zero-sum

character, a view which is mightily reinforced by murderous paramilitaries who aim to make everybody believe the proposition that 'one nation = one state'. Second, the majority of constitutional unionists rejected institutionalised power-sharing as non-British, and argued that they could not be expected to share power with people who wanted Northern Ireland to belong to a foreign country. Third, the majority of constitutional nationalists rejected any consociational proposals if they were not accompanied by an institutionalised Irish dimension. Fourth, political leaders of nationalist and unionist parties who were personally prepared to compromise fundamentally on the outlines of a consociational settlement rapidly found themselves isolated within their parties and within their ethnic communities.

Finally, since both the nationalist and unionist communities were internally divided into 'ultras' and 'moderates' the latter were insufficiently free to negotiate a consociational settlement. The SDLP had to look over its shoulder at Sinn Fein and the IRA, whereas the Official Unionists had to watch out on their extremist flank for fear of being outmanoeuvred by the Democratic Unionists and loyalist paramilitary organisations.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement was meant to break this stalemate. By entrenching an Irish dimension it was intended to weaken Sinn Fein, strengthen the SDLP and make them more disposed towards a consociational settlement. The Agreement has weakened Sinn Fein, but not as much as was hoped, and the SDLP have not shown themselves to be as keen to negotiate on devolution as the British government surmised.<sup>6</sup> The SDLP's spokespersons have emphasised that the party has 'no ideological commitment to devolution', even if it is to be based on power-sharing. Moreover SDLP leader John Hume has consistently argued that only when unionists have 'sorted out' their relationships with the rest of the people of Ireland can a general consociational accommodation between nationalists and unionists be reached.<sup>7</sup> Since 1986 Hume seems to have been canvassing pan-Irish solutions to the conflict rather than advocating an internal settlement. Meanwhile the IRA has continued to create mayhem, supported by Sinn Fein, and to disrupt whatever limited prospects exist for political negotiations.

By entrenching an Irish dimension the Agreement was also intended to encourage unionists to negotiate a consociational settlement since Article 4 cleverly provided that where nationalists and unionists agreed to share power the role of the Inter-governmental Conference would become less important. However, unionists were nearly unanimous in entirely rejecting the Agreement, and campaigned vigorously for

its abolition throughout 1986–7. Enthusiasts for power-sharing within their ranks remained isolated, whilst the majority insisted that they would only negotiate with nationalists if the Agreement was removed, or at least suspended. Seasoned observers believe that the strategic aim of key unionist leaders remains that of destroying the Agreement rather than negotiating a consociational settlement with an Irish dimension. These unionist leaders remain hopeful that one of a number of scenarios (a change of British policy, a hung parliament at Westminster, or a catastrophic deterioration in Anglo-Irish relations) will accomplish the objective of breaking the Agreement. James Moynereaux, the leader of the Official Unionists, is known to be hostile to devolution in principle (and to favour Northern Ireland's complete integration into the United Kingdom, which is why his current involvement in talks with Mr Brooke has provoked scepticism amongst journalists and analysts of Irish politics.

However, it is very clear that both the British and the Irish governments remain firmly committed to the Agreement, as they declared in their Official Review of the Agreement in May 1989 — which ‘carved the Agreement in stone’ as one Dublin official put it to me. Only a broader agreement which unionists negotiate and accept could produce change in London and Dublin on the text of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Therefore, short of a miracle Mr Brooke’s current talks to establish a devolutionary consociational settlement cannot succeed for one simple reason. In order to get rid of the agreement unionists must offer nationalists a new agreement which transcends the previous one, a new agreement in which the Irish dimension is at least as significant as the present one, as well as offering nationalists a power-sharing devolutionary settlement within Northern Ireland. If they are prepared to do that, and offer it as the united package of both the principal unionist parties, then Mr Brooke will easily win the Nobel peace prize nomination in 1991, and along with many others I will have to eat hats throughout the next year.

The constitutional parties in Northern Ireland, and the British and Irish governing parties, are best seen as engaged in a complex war of manoeuvre in which each agent’s prime objective is to ensure that they are not held responsible for the breakdown of talks about talks. Therefore consociational solutions, while eminently desirable, seem destined to fall on stony ground in Northern Ireland for the foreseeable future.

There are several ways in which the British and Irish governments might react if they recognise this increasingly palpable fact. They may simply opt to engage in crisis-management. Alternatively they may

agree to play a long-term strategy, reforming Northern Ireland’s discriminatory economy and its administration of justice to win the political confidence of nationalists, isolating the IRA and Sinn Féin, whilst simultaneously gently coaxing unionists in from the cold. The logic of this strategy would be to accomplish all of the institutional features of consociationalism except grand coalition government — which would have to await until a later date. In other words the two governments would aim to ensure proportional representation in non-elected political institutions (including, eventually, the police), segmental autonomy, and a bill of rights guaranteeing equality of citizenship and entrenching some minority rights.<sup>8</sup>

The British and Irish governments might also take the more risky and drastic step of threatening a major new initiative, such as moving towards joint authority or repartition, in order to increase the pressure on unionists and nationalists to arrive at a consociational settlement. Arend Lijphart, the pioneer of the theory of consociationalism, argues that partition is the most stable and least undesirable solution when consociationalism fails, and that threatening partition might sometimes bring the relevant actors to the negotiating table. In the concluding chapter of our forthcoming book, *The Future of Northern Ireland*, John McGarry and I sketch a similar argument for Northern Ireland.

### Cantonisation

However, there is one final way in which political power might be distributed in Northern Ireland which permits repartitionist, majority-rule and consociational logic in a distinctive synthesis which is worthy of consideration.<sup>9</sup> Northern Ireland could be cantonised, in a manner similar to the Swiss mode of government, that is to say political power could be extensively devolved to new and very small political units, averaging about 20,000 people, although Swiss cantons are much larger. Such political units could be designed either to achieve a very local form of consociationalism, grand coalition government of Catholics and Protestants, in certain areas; or, given the scale of residential segregation in other areas, to create religiously and ethnically homogeneous units where majority rule would be practically coterminous with the self-government of all the relevant community. Where intra-national conflict is high then the partitioning of units to create homogeneity would be the operating administrative principle; and where such conflict was low local consociationalism might be encouraged through the design of balanced ‘mixed’ cantons.

This strategy would decompose Northern Ireland into islands of nationalist, unionist, and consociational cantons, simultaneously combining majority rule, partitionist and consociational principles. Some areas with high political violence would have to remain under direct rule, and a province-wide anti-terrorist force would obviously still be required. However, under a schema of ‘rolling cantonsation’, so to speak, policing and judicial powers could be gradually devolved to those areas where the population expressed a wish to exercise such powers, and where the British and Irish governments judged that the experiment had some prospects of success.

Needless to say this cantonsation idea is fraught with potential difficulties, notably the difficulties in drawing and policing appropriate units of government, winning consent for them, and the ever-present threat that cantonsation, especially of policing and judicial powers, might be used by paramilitary organisations to seize control of parts of Northern Ireland, and treat them as ‘liberated zones’. However, advocating cantonsation is at least as realistic as pressing for a consociational settlement, pushing traditional unionist or nationalist positions, or commending joint authority. Cantonsation is also more gradualist in its implications than drastic repartition because it permits both governments freedom to reverse the experiment. For these reasons it deserves to be debated more widely — although this remark should not be construed as an uncritical endorsement of the merits of cantonsation.

### CONCLUSION

This very brief resume of some of the solutions canvassed for Northern Ireland’s macro-constitutional problems has been neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. For fuller arguments John Whyte’s *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford, Clarendon) and the collected and diverse essays in McGarry and O’Leary’s edited collection, *The Future of Northern Ireland* should prove of value. Moreover, this note has paid little attention to the minefields of complexity in public policy affecting security, justice and employment in Northern Ireland. Nonetheless if it persuades readers that there are more solutions to Northern Ireland problems than they thought, and that some of those solutions are worthy of greater furrowing of the brow, it will have achieved its central purpose.

If there is no solution then there is no problem! is a well-known managerial maxim. Would you happily apply it to Northern Ireland? This question is plainly rhetorical. If you have been persuaded that it is false to say that ‘there is no solution

to the Northern Ireland question. I congratulate you on having advanced beyond one of the thought-stopping clichés which dominate commentary on Northern Ireland.

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- 7 See Frank Millar's interviews with John Hume in the *Irish Times*, January 1989.
- 8 This logic is one possible way of reading the practical policy advocated by the British Labour Party, as articulated in its document 'Towards a United Ireland' (1988).
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# YES,

# INTERVIEWER!

## Changing Art of the Political Interview

David Walter and John Forsyth

*Recent clashes between politicians and media interviewers, and accusations of alleged bias against certain broadcasters, have again highlighted the sensitivity of the political interview. This article puits on the record an important radio programme analysing the political interview's postwar history.*

THE television or radio studio has challenged both Parliament and the public meeting as a focus of political life for successive generations of the electorate. In both the hustings and the House of Commons, even since the arrival of the TV cameras, the politician is — or hopes to be — in control, choosing the subject and largely setting the tone.

For most of the electorate the only opportunity they will have to hear a politician's views and grasp of his or her subject tested comes through the intervention of an interviewer. In June 1989 BBC Radio 4's *Talking Politicians*<sup>1</sup> focused on the evolution of the art of the political interviewer and the art of answering — or not answering — his questions. Over the years the broadcasters have pushed the frontiers back against the politicians. Over the last decade or more politicians have organised themselves to push the frontiers back again.

When Clement Attlee flew home from the United States, he faced what passed in the 1950s as a grilling in front of the television cameras:

INTERVIEWER Good morning Mr Attlee. We hope you've had a good journey.

ATTLEE Yes, excellent.

INTERVIEWER Can you, now you're back, having cut short your lecture tour, tell us something of how you view the election prospects?

ATTLEE Oh, we shall go in and have a good fight. A very good chance of winning, we shall go in confidently, we always do.

INTERVIEWER And on what will Labour take its stand?

ATTLEE Well, that we'll be announcing shortly

INTERVIEWER What are your immediate plans, Mr Attlee?

ATTLEE My immediate plan is to go down to a committee and decide on just that thing, as soon as I can get away from here.

INTERVIEWER Anything else you'd care to say about the coming election?

ATTLEE No.

Politicians can't get away with it like that any more — interviewers that deferential, subjects that condescending. It wasn't long after that interview with Clement Attlee that radio and television journalists decided to take the tributes off their heads and the plums out of their mouths, and make the questions a great deal tougher. The development was spurred on by the start of Independent Television News in September 1955 as a rival to the BBC. The Corporation soon found itself competing with ITN's much more robust attitude to politicians. Robin Day was in the vanguard of the revolution — first for ITN — then for the BBC:

DAY There was no controversy in broadcasting at all, and therefore when one started and asked the visiting minister at the airport any question other than 'Are you tired after your long trip?' it was seen to be a ruthless, probing question. It wasn't only me, there were others working on the new *Panorama* at that time, and my colleagues in ITN, notably George Ffitch and others, we were convinced that the right way to question politicians was to ask the relevant questions courteously and persistently, and in a carefully prepared way

Performance on the media as a test of political prowess had become very important by the early 1960s. Before