



FACTMAKER

James Prior's rolling devolution plan hit a brick wall at Stormont

# Convivial yes, 'consociational' no

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C O'Leary, S Elliott & R A Wilford  
The Northern Ireland Assembly 1982-86:  
a constitutional experiment

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THE SECOND NORTHERN Ireland Assembly was the fourth elected institution created to establish devolution since 1920, the third elected assembly set up to facilitate an internal power-sharing settlement since 1972 and so far the first experiment in 'rolling devolution'. But it had other dubious numerical distinctions too.

The elections to the Assembly were the first to be contested by the latest version of Sinn Féin and the first which the SDLP fought on an abstentionist platform. And it was the first to be boycotted at some stage by four of the five main parties with elected candidates. On the other hand it was also the first in which ministers were held nominally accountable for the government of Northern Ireland and in which committees seriously deliberated and researched major items of policy and their implementation.

The Assembly's birth, life and death, the subject of this judicious and impartial coroner's report, did not receive media attention on the scale of its predecessors for three simple reasons. Its failure was widely predicted before it began, its meagre administrative successes contributed nothing towards solving the conflict and its dissolution was inevitable in the wake of unionist reaction to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. With such a *curriculum vitae* many may ask: why bother devoting a book to it?

There are many reasons why this book is a valuable contribution both to our historical knowledge and to analysis of contemporary politics. First, it helps explain why voluntary power-sharing—the favoured policy of successive British governments from 1972 to 1985—has proved so elusive, and why the Assembly failed to rectify the difficulties with the Sunningdale experiment. James Prior thought the Executive had failed because it was based upon both power-sharing and an 'Irish dimension'. His reasoning was clear: remove the Irish dimension, devise a scheme for rolling devolution and perhaps this time voluntary power-sharing would elicit unionist co-operation.

But the SDLP, faced with the rise of Sinn Féin, could not accept Prior's gambit—even had it wanted to—because its nationalist flank was under electoral assault. Meanwhile, the Official Unionists fought the Assembly elections on an integrationalist platform while the DUP stood for majority rule. Given that they massively outpollled Alliance, this made the prospect of agreed devolution even more remote. For the DUP and most of the OUP both power-sharing and an Irish dimension were non-negotiable; for the SDLP both were preconditions of negotiations taking place.

Second, through examining the conflicts within

the Assembly and its committees, this book makes visible and clarifies the many divisions and factions within the unionist camps. It is a study of unionists at work and at prayer. The key to the failure to achieve agreed devolution lay in the divisions within the OUP, the wishful thinking within its integrationalist segment and the malign consequences of the competition for hegemony between the two main unionist parties. The reader will, however, be pleasantly surprised by the evident political talent, intellectual resources and sense of humour—traits with which the unionist tradition is, unfairly, not usually associated. (Perhaps these traits are only visible when unionists are working with each other in the same institution or on the same committee?) But the parties' internal divisions, and the stubborn refusal of most unionists to accommodate the nationalist minority, spelled the death-warrant for the Assembly. They painted themselves into the corner which made the Anglo-Irish Agreement both feasible and desirable.

The authors deserve much credit for a well-organised, clear and thoroughly researched text. It is based on the proceedings of the Assembly, as well as interviews with the key political actors in the three main participating parties and the speaker, Jim Killedder (the sole representative of the Ulster Popular Unionist party). It contains a mine of basic information on electoral behaviour and committee attendance and merits a wide readership, as well as a place in every reputable library.

Its one defect is its insularity. First, the authors apparently did not interview British politicians and administrators, the SDLP or Sinn Féin. Their views might have been predictable but they would have balanced the quotations from unionist spokespersons. Prior and Lord Gowrie would surely have been worth probing. The authors would doubtless respond that the book is about the Assembly and that they chose not to talk to those who were not part of it—but then it is more than a mere description of the Assembly itself.

Second, although they mention 'consociationalism'—the academic term for power-sharing in divided societies—they do not explain or elaborate it. The theory of 'consociational democracy', pioneered by the Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart, explains why power-sharing is desirable—though difficult if not impossible to achieve—in societies like Northern Ireland. Developing this subject, very pertinent to the failure of the Assembly, would have broadened the horizons of the book for its Northern Irish readers and attracted the political science community beyond Queen's and the University of Ulster. ●

## We still have Northern Ireland?

**FROM A Northern Ireland perspective, the surprising thing about Peter Hennessy's Whitehall (Secker & Warburg, £20.95) is how little the province figures in the book. Brian McCuller writes:**

Fewer than a dozen references appear in the comprehensive index, many only to short paragraphs. But one very revealing quote—from a former Northern Ireland Office permanent secretary, Sir Frank Cooper, in 1980—is a clue to the lack of emphasis on the issue.

"Certainly in the early part of... the troubled, successive cabinets paid a great deal of attention to Northern Ireland, but I think it then got into the 'too difficult' category. What happens in the British cabinet system of government is that people try over a period of time to deal with a particular issue. Then it gets too difficult. You're not going to have a solution. So they put it to use an old cliché, 'on the long finger'... The wholehearted, the 600,000-strong central government bureaucracy, does not, it appears, pay as much attention to being governed Northern Ireland as the people would like to believe."