
Pragmatists v. Dogmatists : the Failure of the 1st Power-Sharing Experience

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Résumé

This paper argues that the reason for the downfall of the first power-sharing Executive, and failure of subsequent attempts to agree on a form of power-sharing in the 1970s, was the result of conflicting attitudes towards devolved government among Northern Ireland's politicians. Nationalist and unionist identities were (and are) not monolithic, and this paper offers insights into the nuances within both blocs during the most violent and polarised period of the Northern Ireland conflict. The traditional ideological division between nationalists and unionists was not the primary barrier to creating and sustaining cross-community political institutions during that decade, as stressed in accounts of this period premised on consociational theory. Neither was it inaction on the part of the British government, also a common trope in the consociational literature, which prevented the success of a power-sharing administration.

Instead, it was the split between the pragmatists from both communities, prepared to compromise their core principles and accept power-sharing devolution within a United Kingdom framework, and the dogmatists (both nationalists and unionists) who refused to contemplate any compromise to their core position that prevented the emergence of a consensual political settlement emerging during the 1970s. The dominance of the dogmatists ensured no power-sharing institutions could be agreed or imposed.

Drawing from archival sources and contemporary political party literature, the paper challenges recent scholarship concerning this period which has claimed that responsibility for the collapse of the first power-sharing administration lay with the British government. In so doing, it highlights some explanatory constraints of accounts of this period which focus solely on traditional ethnic or sectarian identity cleavages to explain the failure of power-sharing and the subsequent political impasse in Northern Ireland.

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