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Concluding Remarks: Responses to Critiques of Consociational Theory

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All of the authors of this volume have addressed, one way or another, explicitly or implicitly, the critiques that have been raised against consociational theory. In this concluding chapter, I want to deal with the critiques of consociational theory in a somewhat more systematic way. I establish a list of the main critiques that have been articulated against consociational theory since its creation in the 1960s. I then discuss to what extent I find the individual critiques justified and how they help to improve consociational theory. I will also make some remarks concerning the application of consociational theory in political praxis. Generally speaking, I conclude that consociational theory has many merits but that it needs to be improved in some crucial aspects.

(1) The first controversy concerns the question to what extent consociationalism is democratic at all (Schendelen 1984). Do ordinary citizens not have too little say if the elites work so closely together? Is consociationalism not really an elite cartel? Are the relations among the elites not so cozy and secretive that they are tempted to look primarily to their own self-interest to the detriment of the interests of ordinary citizens? How can citizens hold the ruling elites accountable if they cannot replace them with a set of elites in opposition? I agree with the critics that there is a danger in consociational countries that the relationship of the elites can be too cozy, that they mutually protect their respective fiefdoms. In the German language, the term 'Fitz' (felt) captures well this aspect of a close-knit elite cartel. Austria is perhaps the clearest case of a country where an elite cartel emerged over the years between the two partners in the grand coalition, the Social Democrats and the People's Party. It was mainly because of the perception among the citizens that such an elite cartel existed that Jörg Haider's Freedom Party was able to dramatically increase its voter support and ultimately break up the cartel. Many Austrians were fed up with being governed by an elite cartel and wished for more fresh air of competition in their government. However, consociationalism does not necessarily mean a closed elite cartel. It is certainly true that, in its initial formulation, consociationalism meant the making of deals among the elites behind closed doors. But, in a modern form, consociationalism can very well

be made compatible with a spirited public discourse about the political differences in a grand coalition. If the participants in a grand coalition are willing to respect each other's opinions, a widely open public discourse may very well occur. Thus, the citizens may learn where the various partners in a grand coalition stand on specific issues. If, furthermore, a referendum is combined with a grand coalition, the danger of undue elitism can be reduced. By having a strongly developed referendum, a competitive element is added to consociationalism. The role of opposition is taken up not by an opposition party as in the Westminster model but directly by the citizens. Citizens can inform themselves about the various policy alternatives discussed in the grand coalition and then make a final decision on key issues on the political agenda. In recent years, Switzerland has taken some steps towards giving the public an insight into the disagreements that occur in the Federal Council. Occasionally a Federal councillor makes public his or her disagreement with other councillors. This opening up has been criticized in many quarters of Swiss politics with the argument that it makes governing by the Federal Council more difficult. This may very well be so but the bigger danger is that cozy governing behind closed doors leads to the perception and also the reality that the citizens have no real say and that they are governed by a close-knit elite cartel. There is indeed criticism in this direction in Switzerland, although less so than there was in Austria at the end of its grand coalition. To confront such criticism, one can either change to a competitive Westminster model or make the consociational model more open to public scrutiny. In my view, consociationalism can be modernized so that it becomes less elitist and allows citizens more insight and more input into the political process.

(2) Consociational theory assumes that the elites are more reasonable and more moderate than the masses. Therefore, the dangers of cultural heterogeneity can best be met if the major decisions are left to the elites, and the masses remain relatively passive. The elites have to protect the masses against the outbreak of their hostile passions. This line of reasoning has also led to great controversies. Why should one assume that the elites are more reasonable and more moderate in inter-cultural relations? Critics raised the question whether the elites have not, to the contrary, a greater interest than the masses that inter-cultural relations remain hostile because such hostility increases the chances of the elites to keep control over their respective cultural groups (Obler et al. 1977). The Vlaams Blok in Belgium is an example of a deviation from the initial assumption of consociational theory in the sense that its leaders enflame Flemish nationalism in pursuit of their political self-interest, since without Flemish nationalism there would be no Vlaams Blok. If we look outside the countries covered in this volume, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Northern Ireland are also cases where key leaders are far from exercising a moderating

influence on the masses but help to enflame inter-cultural hostility. Nelson Mandela in South Africa, on the other hand, was a strongly moderating influence on the masses when he came out of prison. The case of Mandela makes us aware how crucial leaders can be and how difficult it is to incorporate great leaders into consociational theory. If Mandela had died in prison, would someone else have stepped into his place? Perhaps, but it is likely that no one else would have had the same charisma to influence the masses in the same way. The general point is that consociational scholars should not *a priori* assume that elites are more reasonable and moderate than the general public with regard to inter-cultural relations, but that this is an empirical question that needs to be carefully investigated in each case. Special attention should be paid to the middle level of activists, who are sometimes the most hostile towards other cultures.

(3) Whereas consociational theory postulates that consociational decision-making has a positive causal effect on the degree of democratic stability, critics argue that causality may very well go the other way in the sense that a high degree of democratic stability is not the consequence but rather the cause of consociational decision-making (Barry 1975). According to this reasoning, consociationalism would merely be an epi-phenomenon in a long causal chain whereby the real explanatory variables would have to be searched for elsewhere, for example, in the economy, the culture and the international system. The historical development of the four classical consociational countries Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland reveals how difficult it is to disentangle the exact causal relations between consociational decision-making and democratic stability. It would be like having to juggle several balls in the air at the same time. As consociational scholars, we hardly ever have the benefit of a quasi-experimental situation where a country changes from a competitive to a consociational pattern while all other factors remain constant, so that we could examine whether a change in the pattern of decision-making has an effect on the level of democratic stability. Let us take, for example, the development of Austria from the 1920s to the 1950s. On the surface, it seems to come close to a quasi-experimental situation in the sense that Austria practiced a competitive pattern in the 1920s whereas it changed to a consociational pattern after World War II. In the 1930s Austria plunged into civil war but in the 1950s it began to enjoy stability. At first sight, it could be assumed that Austria managed to reach a high level of stability thanks to a change to a consociational pattern. But this is merely one possible explanation since many other factors changed too, so that stability in the 1950s can also be explained without reference to consociationalism. For example, economic conditions had improved, religiosity had decreased, social class structures had become less rigid; then there were the traumatic memories of World War II

and the preceding civil war; finally, the international situation changed dramatically when Austria took a position of neutrality. All these factors could be used to account for the increased stability of the country. This line of reasoning indicates how difficult it is to show in a compelling way that the change to consociationalism did in fact contribute to increased stability in Austria. In Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland there is also no easy way to disentangle the various causal factors potentially linked to democratic stability. The Great Pacification accords in the Netherlands in 1917 and the cultural and educational pacts in Belgium in the 1950s come perhaps closest to quasi-experimental situations for a test of the consociational theory. But even in these two cases, there is a lively debate about the causal effects of these events. All this obscurity about the direction of causality, however, should not make us despair as long as we do not aim for overly rigorous tests of consociational theory but have the more limited goal of reaching satisfactory levels of plausibility. Furthermore, some interpretations are always more plausible and more compelling than others, and this volume offers some sophisticated interpretations indeed of the possible causalities between consociational decision-making and democratic stability. Mostly, the authors give good reasons why they have a preference for a particular interpretation, but they also acknowledge that other interpretations have merits. This kind of scholarship should not be seen as a weakness but rather as a strength; as good research on the consociational theme.

(4) A further controversy concerns the concept of cultural heterogeneity. It is criticized that consociational scholars automatically assume that countries with a high level of heterogeneity with regard to language, religion, race and ethnicity are threatened by democratic instability. This assumption neglects, according to these critics, that cultural diversity may or may not lead to hostility among the various cultural groups. Whether such hostility in fact exists is an empirical question that is often not sufficiently addressed by consociational scholars. To make this point, the Swiss language situation is often used as an example, and it is argued that no real problem exists since there was never much animosity among the Swiss language groups. Therefore, there was never a threat to democratic stability that had to be averted by consociational decision-making (Hottinger 1997). Is the experience of the four classical consociational countries really relevant for countries that are so deeply divided culturally, such as Bosnia and Northern Ireland? Or are inter-cultural problems in the four classical consociational countries on a world-scale so minor that no useful lessons can be drawn for countries where there is deep hatred and hostility among subcultures? The answer is that one should not look so much at the current situation of the four classical consociational countries but rather analyse their histories to see how they got to where they

are today. Let us take the religious situation of Switzerland, characterized today by mutual tolerance and harmony between Protestants and Catholics. Anybody who is not familiar with Swiss history would be surprised to learn that Catholics and Protestants fought four civil wars between the 16th and 18th centuries and that there was even a short civil war with strong religious overtones as late as 1847. The lessons for countries such as Bosnia and Northern Ireland must be derived from how Switzerland could move from a situation of religious civil wars to the current peaceful religious situation. The story is that it was crucial in Swiss history that neither of the two religious groups could ever win a decisive victory. As a consequence, mutual arrangements of accommodation had to be found, such as the requirement of unanimity in the Diet. Arrangements that were initially ad hoc were slowly transformed into stable institutional settings, and these settings were filled – in a slow process – with corresponding cultural norms of accommodation. Thus, the story of religious conflicts in Switzerland is very path-dependent. If one side or the other had ever won a decisive military victory, the story would have been very different. For deeply divided countries around the world, the story of religious conflicts in Switzerland must be disappointing since it took centuries, with many setbacks, to arrive at the current situation of religious peace. As the chapters on the Netherlands show, there, too, the politics of accommodation has deep historical roots going back to at least the 16th century. Should we then conclude that a country such as Bosnia should not even try to experiment with the consociational model because it does not offer any solutions in the short term? Not at all. As Lijphart has stated many times in his writings, and again in this volume, the alternatives for deeply divided societies are not between a competitive and a consociational form of democracy but rather between a consociational democracy or no democracy at all. Thus, the only democratic hope for a country such as Bosnia is to begin to establish some consociational institutions, which is what the Dayton accords attempted to do. The main lesson from the classical consociational countries is that consociational institutions will be very fragile at first and that they have to be filled with cultural norms of accommodation to become more stable. All this may take a very long time, and there is not even any guarantee of success because there may be too many historical constraints in the sense of path-dependency to ever achieve a consociational form of government. But these are the limits of political engineering in the field of consociationalism. Perhaps, in the case of Bosnia it was a hopeful sign that in its recent civil war no group could win a decisive victory. Could this bring Bosnia onto the same path as the one Switzerland took after neither of its religious groups could achieve a decisive victory?

(5) With regard to the concept of democratic stability, it is criticized from a normative perspective that the main aspect of democracy is not stability, a concept too much status quo oriented. The critics argue that the absence of stability is not necessarily a bad sign for a vibrant democracy. On the contrary, strikes, street demonstrations, and other unrest, even if illegal and involving clashes with the police, can often bring about much needed changes in society. Some critics even go so far as to claim that the consociational scholars are willing to tolerate structural violence only to maintain law and order in an undemocratic way. By structural violence these critics mean oppression of the masses with such sophisticated means of manipulation that the masses are no longer conscious of how much they are being manipulated and exploited. From this perspective, often Marxist in orientation, consociational scholars only help to stabilize unjust political regimes where revolutionary actions are needed (Ziegler 1976). I agree with the critics that the concept of democratic stability, so central to consociational theory, is problematic or at least misleading. If democratic stability simply means that democracy is maintained, the concept is not problematic. But such a definition is only begging the question what exactly is meant by democracy. If the essence of democracy is defined as stability in the sense of the absence of political protests and political unrest, the concept becomes highly problematic. Political protests and political unrest such as street demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes, occupations of buildings, and similar events may be signs of a vibrant democracy. This is not to say that deaths and serious injuries resulting from such events are a positive sign for any democracy, notwithstanding the revolutionary rhetoric of extremists at the left and the right. All this shows that it is not easy to determine how political protests and unrest fit a good definition of democracy. Perhaps consociational scholars have not always been careful enough when defining democratic stability. Sometimes they used the concept too much in terms of an absence of political protests and unrest. More reflection is needed in this area. Too much tranquility and calm may be harmful for a good democracy. In my view, for the sake of conceptual clarity, the ambiguous concept of democratic *stability* should best be replaced with the concept of democratic *quality*. The real question is *how good* a democracy is. If we put the question in this way, we can arrive at a broad definition of democracy, which should include at least the following elements: civil liberties, citizen participation, competitive elections, absence of severe violence, civility in the political discourse, respect for minorities, equal opportunities. Refocusing the investigation on democratic *quality* would allow consociational theory to be put in a broader philosophical context of democratic theory.¹

(6) With regard to the concept of consociational decision-making, there is criticism that countries are often misclassified (Bogaards 2000). Here again, Switzerland is often quoted as a prime example. It is argued that the referendum is a classical majoritarian device and that its frequent use in Switzerland means that the country is misclassified as one practicing consociational decision-making. With regard to Switzerland, it is further argued that the representation of all major political parties in the executive Federal Council cannot be considered a consociational device because the individual parties have the freedom to go into opposition on a case to case basis for specific issues, and indeed this happens frequently. Similar questions are raised about the classification of other countries as consociational. It is, for example, pointed out that the Netherlands has certainly often had oversized coalitions but never grand coalitions with the participation of all major parties. I agree that it is a problem for consociational theory that there is so much controversy about whether many countries can be classified as consociational or not. For example, some classify the Netherlands of today as very consociational, whereas others classify it as no longer consociational at all. One problem is that a high level of cultural fragmentation has often been made part of the definition of consociationalism. According to this definition, the Netherlands is certainly no longer consociational since the country has become relatively homogeneous culturally. But as the corresponding chapters in this volume show, the Netherlands of today still practices a high level of consociational decision-making. In my view, the solution to this conceptual ambiguity is to treat as separate variables the level of cultural fragmentation and the level of consociational decision-making. If we proceed in this way, the classification of the Netherlands is much less of a mystery. In former times, it had a high level of both cultural fragmentation and consociational decision-making; today it has a low level of cultural fragmentation but still a high level of consociational decision-making. A further problem is that the classification of the level of consociational decision-making is too much based on the formal institutional rules and not enough on how these rules are actually applied in practice. In Belgium, there is the formal rule that Flemish and French speakers must be represented in equal numbers in the cabinet. This should not be taken as the sole indicator of consociational decision-making in the cabinet. How much spirit of accommodation there is in the deliberations of the cabinet should also be taken into consideration. This is obviously much more difficult to measure. But consociational decision-making as a theoretical concept involves also the practice of decision-making so that consociational scholars cannot avoid the task of investigating how decisions are actually made. A special problem is how to deal with the referendum as an indicator for the presence or absence of consociationalism. As I have shown under point (1) above, the referendum is often a competitive device with a majority winning

over a minority. But if a number of referenda are held over time on the same issue, the effect may sometimes be quite consociational in the sense that groups that lose initially, may win in later referenda. A proposal that is defeated first time around, is often made more moderate and wins in later referenda. The general point from this discussion regarding the classification of the level of consociational decision-making is that more attention should be paid to the reliability and validity of the measures of the level of consociational decision-making.

(7) Consociational decision-making is also criticized on the ground that it is too cumbersome and too time consuming so that consociational countries are not able to react quickly enough in crisis situations (Germann 1975). Furthermore, it is said that the political outcomes are not innovative enough in a fast changing world of globalization. Consociationalism is also criticized for being economically inefficient since subsidies are distributed in a wasteful way so that all groups are satisfied. Tough decisions with regard to budget cuts are avoided in the interest of not upsetting any group. It is true that consociational decision-making is very time consuming because all points of view have to be considered. The competitive model with one party in power and another in opposition can make quicker decisions. But when the opposition party comes to power, it may reverse many decisions of the previous government so that there is certainly movement, but sometimes simply back and forth, as many examples from Great Britain illustrate. With consociational decision-making, change is much slower because all concerned groups have a say, and it is difficult to change any policy in an abrupt way from one day to the next. But once a change has been implemented, it has a high degree of legitimacy and cannot easily be turned back. The Netherlands is a case in point. Whether one agrees with the innovations or not, one must acknowledge that consociational decision-making has led – in a slow but steady process – to quite dramatic innovations, for example, with regard to euthanasia, which was technically still illegal for a long time, but tolerated with very complex rules in place. It was only after a long period of experience with this grey area arrangement that the legality of euthanasia was established, but again within carefully drawn limits. Economically, too, the Netherlands has been quite a success story with many innovative programmes, and, as the respective chapters argue, this success is at least partly linked to consociationalism. Contrary to what critics of consociationalism argue, the Netherlands has been able to make large cuts in its welfare programmes. This was probably more easily done than under a competitive model since all key actors have been able to share the political costs of the cuts. According to the respective chapters, Austria and Switzerland, too, are economically quite successful, although Belgium is less so, especially with regard to its public finances. Ultimately, the

question will be whether in the long run the consociational or the competitive model will be economically more sustainable in keeping the resources of a country intact. It seems to me that currently the US and the Netherlands are at opposite poles, with the US becoming more and more competitive in its political system, while the Netherlands sticks to many consociational elements. The verdict is still out and will be out for many years to come. The relevant judgment will be made by our grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

(8) Consociational theory is also under attack for not being rigorous enough (Andeweg 2000). It is criticized for its ad hoc character. Instead of stating clearly its assumptions and the deduced hypotheses, the theory is said to operate like a fishing expedition in the sense that it takes its hypotheses in a haphazard manner wherever it finds them. The preconditions and consequences of consociational decision-making are said to be discussed in a loose way and to vary in number and exact nature from one consociational scholar to another and often within the writings of one and the same scholar (Bogaards 2000). Given this loose nature of the theory, critics claim that it is not testable according to rigorous standards. How can consociational scholars defend themselves against the critique that their hypotheses are ad hoc and unsystematic, as they are not embedded in a rigorous theoretical framework with explicitly stated assumptions? I think that the answer must be that scholarship must be characterized by a plurality of approaches and that an eclectic inductive approach has its place too. In addition, it must be stressed that rigorous axiomatic-deductive approaches have their inductive elements. Where else would their axioms come from? When, for example, rational choice theorists start their work from the axiom that political actors are individual utility maximizers, this axiom must have come from somewhere. In the same way, the axiom of Marxism that the economic infrastructure determines the non-economic superstructure has not fallen from heaven. As Lowi (1992) has argued, we should take what we as political scientists do as a dependent variable and try to explain why we do what we do. From this perspective, it may be argued that the axiom of individual utility maximization fits the individualistic competitive American culture well, which would explain why working with this axiom is much more popular with American than with European political scientists (Steiner 1990). The Marxist axiom of economic determinism fitted the social environment well, in which Karl Marx spent his life. The general point is that every scholarly enterprise is somehow embedded in the culture of the respective scholars. For many consociational scholars, the impetus for their work was a puzzle in their native countries, namely why high levels of democratic quality could be maintained despite fair amounts of cultural diversity. They looked in an eclectic way for explanatory variables wherever it looked promising. In the history of the consociational school, the

development and testing of a systematic set of hypotheses was perhaps less important than throwing light on the working of specific countries. This curiosity for the puzzles of individual countries is also visible in this volume. The hope is, of course, that the insight into the various countries leads to an accumulation of systematic theoretical knowledge at the cross-national level. Such knowledge, however, does not always have to be put into formal models. I do not deny that formal models have many advantages, but it is also advantageous to put one's knowledge into sentences and paragraphs, and perhaps even into the more literary form of an essay. Verbal rather than mathematical formulations are sometimes more helpful to express fine nuances, and in the analysis of consociational decision-making one does indeed have to deal with many nuances. To what extent a particular decision process is consociational can often be expressed better with words than with numbers. There is also a normative issue to be addressed here. If we apply consociational theory to a country like Bosnia, we should approach this task with deep feelings for the sufferings that occurred in this country and may still occur in the future. From this perspective it is highly inappropriate to take such a country as just another interesting case to test a general theory. It is more appropriate to focus on the country itself and to use existing theoretical knowledge to understand its problems. If we can draw lessons from such a country for our general theories, this is all the better. But as human beings we should always be sensitive to the sufferings of the countries that we study.

(9) Finally, consociational scholars are occasionally attacked for their consulting activities. They are criticized for having become political advocates of the consociational pattern of decision-making and thus to have unduly entered the political arena as actors themselves (Lustick 1997). Have consociational scholars indeed become undue advocates of the pattern of consociational decision-making with their consulting activities? Now that the Cold War has ended, the biggest challenge of the world may very well be to keep relations among different cultural groups relatively peacefully. From Rwanda to Bosnia to Afghanistan, we know only too well what atrocities can arise from inter-cultural conflicts. Should political scientists only observe such dreadful events and not try to have a positive influence? In my understanding, political scientists have always had some influence even if they are not conscious of it. Just in teaching and writing, they influence how their listeners and readers think about the world. When rational choice theorists, for example, teach and write about their findings, they are bound to have an influence on their students who may see the world increasingly through the lenses of individual utility maximization, as empirical research has demonstrated (Frank et al. 1997). When these students later become journalists, bureaucrats and politicians, or even just as citizens, this influence

may have an impact on their behaviour with regard to political matters. The point is that as political scientists we are never purely objective, outside observers but always have some influence on the world. A first step would be to reflect on this influence, something that is not always done to a sufficient degree in the profession. For consociational scholars this means that they should make explicit to themselves and to the outside world from what normative perspective they make their policy recommendations when they engage in consulting activities. For example, what relative importance do they attach to the values of non-violence and social justice if the two are in conflict? What is also needed on the part of consociational scholars engaged in consulting activities is a certain humility in the sense that they spell out the shortcomings of their research and acknowledge and that the recommendations of others have merits too. If these conditions are fulfilled, there is nothing wrong with political scientists going to Bosnia, Rwanda and Afghanistan to offer advice. On the contrary, through such activities they contribute to a high level of public discourse about the problems of this world. Such discourse is particularly warranted for the future of the European Union, which suffers under a democratic deficit. As Schmidt shows in his chapter, consociationalism, which is already practiced to some extent, may offer some help with this problem. But as this volume shows, consociational theory must be greatly improved and refined to be of any help in the future of European integration. This brings us back to the title of the publication: 'Consociationalism and Corporatism in Western Europe. Still the Politics of Accommodation?' Perhaps once again accommodation has an important role to play in Western European politics at the level of the European Union.

Notes

1. See the website of a project where we attempt to do exactly this: www.ipw.unibe.ch/discourse

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