

## Consociationalism Explained – Northern Ireland Assembly.

### KEY:

N: Narrator

N: The 1998 Belfast, or Good Friday, Agreement, established a power-sharing Assembly based on the main principles of consociational theory.

The Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart developed consociational theory in the 1960s. This theory focuses on how to stabilise communities that are divided along ethnic or religious lines and develop democracy through power-sharing institutions. For this to happen, Lijphart suggests four main ingredients: Grand coalition, proportionality, mutual veto, and segmented autonomy.

Executive power-sharing is at the heart of this consociational arrangement. The Executive Committee is made up of Unionist and Nationalist Ministers. After an election, the largest party chooses the First Minister, and the largest party from the other community, either Nationalist or Unionist, chooses the Deputy First Minister. Both have equal powers, and make joint decisions.

The Single Transferable Vote (STV) system of proportional representation is used to elect MLAs. The D'Hondt formula is used to allocate Ministers to the Executive, and Chairs and Deputy Chairs to the Committees. Membership of Committees is proportional to party strength in the Assembly. The D'Hondt system also influences speaking rights in the Chamber and the selection of Private Members' motions. Elected representatives are required to designate themselves Nationalist or Unionist, or 'Other'.

Cross-community voting procedures ensure protection of minorities. Certain Assembly decisions require cross-community support. For example, election of the Speaker and Deputy Speakers, budget allocations, and Petitions of Concern. Each community has some distinct measure of autonomy, particularly in cultural issues, for example, when developing Ulster Scots and the Irish language.

This consociational style of democracy is the subject of much debate. While many believe that consociationalism entrenches division, others argue that, over time, this power-sharing model will reduce division and increase stability.