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From Description to Prescription: Politics of Recognition, Consociational Theory and the Conflict in Northern Ireland

Within academic discourses on Northern Ireland the politics of recognition and particularly the theory of consociational democracy has made a profound impact. First introduced by the Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart in a *World Politics* article from 1969, it has since increased in importance, both as an authoritative explanatory framework for the institutional design inherent in political agreements and as a desirable approach to manage, balance and potentially dissolve politico-cultural antagonisms in Northern Ireland.

However, the terms ‘consociationalism’ or ‘consociational democracy’ are wholly absent from political discourses: they are never used in any of the governmental and constitutional documents between 1969 and 2006. As such, juxtaposing academic literature with official policy documents makes for an interesting intertextual site of conflict interpretation and the dis/connections between these discourses in approaching diversity.

Through an analysis of three seminal works which categorises theoretical interpretations of the conflict (Lijphart: *The Northern Ireland Problem: cases, theories and solutions* (1975); Whyte: *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (1990); McGarry and O’Leary *Explaining Northern Ireland* (1995)), the

paper will trace the historical development of intellectual understandings of the conflict as well as the propelling of consociational theory to its current prominent position within the academy.

Structuring these interpretations alongside evolving constitutional policy, the paper will argue that although consociationalism has developed as an indeterminate research design, the inherent logic of managing diversity on the basis of equality as opposed to integration eventually converged in authoritative academic and political discourses.