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Internal Tribal Fragmentation

An Examination of a Normative Model of Democratic Decision-Making

David Wilkins

A recent commentary by Gerald A. Alfred in the spring 1991 edition of the *Northeast Indian Quarterly* dealt with a subject matter which is either ignored or radically exaggerated when it is broached in Indian Country:¹ political fragmentation (or segments or cleavages) and ideological conflict within North American Indian tribes and the ramifications of such internal conflict on tribal identity.

Over the last twenty years we have witnessed a growing number of intratribal conflicts, some of which have resulted in virtual civil war within certain tribes—i.e., 1) Wounded Knee II in 1973, which focused, in part, upon the conflict between Dick Wilson (then Tribal Chairman) and his supporters in and around the town of Pine Ridge, South Dakota, and a large segment of more traditional, treaty-oriented tribal people, supported by many young Oglalas and the American Indian Movement (nearly sixty Lakota were killed within three years after the Wounded Knee event); 2) developments in Dine (Navajo) Country, pitting former chairman Peter MacDonald and his supporters against a large segment of Dine opposition political leaders and a number of Dine citizens frustrated with the MacDonald regime (two Dine were killed in a riot type situation by Dine police in July of 1989); and 3) recent events at Akwesasne, Mohawk Nation, in early May, 1990, where two young Mohawks were killed by other Mohawks.

This paper, after restating Alfred's major points about Mohawk segmentation at Kahnawake, describes and then analyzes a viable alternative democratic decision-making model which has been specifically designed to address the problems of how not only to restore, but also to maintain stability in politically, socially, and culturally fragmented societies. The model is *consociational*² democracy (it is also sometimes

referred to as *power-sharing*, *amicable agreement*, or *consensus decision-making*), and it is this author's contention that this institutional arrangement of consensual decision-making has significant potential to address the increasing level of fragmentation that threatens to engulf (and has already engulfed) some tribal societies. We argue that the premises behind the power sharing model—elite cooperation, consensus decision-making, grand coalitions, etc.—are particularly apropos because they intuitively and historically fit well with the historic traditions of unanimity and accommodation that has characterized indigenous communities for millennia.

Mohawk Fragmentation

The Kahnawake Mohawks, who inhabit territory south of Montreal, Canada, were the focus of Alfred's intensive scrutiny. Alfred's principal goal was to examine "the dynamics of Kahnawake's internal conflict during the 1990 crisis,³ focusing on the ideological differences between the Warrior Longhouse faction and the relatively moderate views of the majority of Kahnawake residents."⁴ In addressing this complex issue, Alfred argued that the Warrior Longhouse segment effectively manipulated a majority of the Kahnawake residents who were already supportive of Mohawk land rights issues in general, political sovereignty, and were allied with their kinsmen at Kanesatake.⁵ He asserted that the Warrior Longhouse exploited the sentiments of the majority of Kahnawake people and turned broad-based tribal support for the larger political and territorial issues into "an active complicity in the protection of Warrior Longhouse financial interests and ideology."⁶

Alfred then made his argument by marshaling his evidence into three groups: 1) data suggesting divisions of interests and philosophy between the Warrior Longhouse and most of the Mohawks residing at Kahnawake; 2) information which suggests that the Warrior Longhouse elites actually "abandoned" the Mohawks during negotiations with the Quebec and Canadian governments—this was particularly troublesome because the non-Indian governments treated the Longhouse leadership as representing the "entire Mohawk Nation," and 3) intelligence gathered from persons and groups which opposed the Warrior

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Longhouse contingent both during and subsequent to the period when the larger Mohawk community supported the "maintenance of barricades and Mohawk territory."⁷

Without explicitly saying it, Alfred's article raised a critical point long acknowledged by "insiders" (tribal and non-tribal participants and residents of various Indian communities) amongst themselves, but often denied by those same persons when queried by "outsiders" (non-resident and non-Indian individuals and entities): that tribal nations are no longer the tightly-knit, cohesive, consensus-oriented, homogeneous societies they once were. Alfred's article is laced with political and sociological terms like "political fractionalization," "cleavages," and "ideological conflicts." These concepts, in reality, are hardly new to tribal societies. Certainly conflicts occasionally erupt and factions are evident in every society. But, as he correctly observed, there has been, probably until recently, a basic unanimity on Mohawk identity. I argue that this held true for most indigenous communities though the

strength and persistence of identity depended on the interaction of several factors: the particular tribe and its relative population size, their kinship systems, their historical relations to various European colonizing powers (particularly on the economic front), their natural resource endowments, their national political culture, and the type of inherent governing institutions in operation.

Alfred convincingly argued, however, that "political cleavages in Kahnawake are rooted in the tensions and ambiguities of Mohawk identity in contemporary society."⁸ While observing that there is a "vague" if tenacious understanding of historical traditions and a clear notion that being a "Mohawk" is a distinctive fact separating them from all other peoples, there remain the more important problems of 1) the "absence of an overarching Mohawk identity" which can result in an inability to generate consensus on key policy issues, 2) institutional chaos with various segmented groups constantly vying for popular legitimacy, and 3) the most profound problem—the virtual impotency felt by a majority of the residents in the Mohawk Indian communities.

The practical implications of sovereignty have been made more precarious as a result of the crisis, says Alfred. This is evident in at least three areas: 1) tense relations with neighboring non-Indian communities; 2) a reduction of Mohawk jurisdiction as a direct result of the presence of state and provincial police units in Mohawk territory; and 3) intensified tribal divisions and a serious crisis of tribal governmental rule, especially regarding the question of legitimacy.⁹

I have spent much time reiterating the key arguments and assertions Alfred raised because they are timely and require serious discussion. Rather than simply describing the events at Kahnawake, however, Alfred has boldly attempted to identify and even to suggest a direction the Mohawk community might take as an aid in the tribal "reconciliation process" that, he argues, must take place. First, says Alfred, the Mohawks must educate themselves and come to grips with what he calls "a realistic conception of sovereignty." Unfortunately, the reader is not informed as to what the parameters of this "realistic" sovereignty might be as opposed to say, an "unrealistic" sovereignty. It is his second point, however, that inspired this article. Alfred calls for "a new governing institution competent to redefine Mohawk identity ... this new government must then institute a *system of representation* capable of integrating *diverse interpretations* of the newly-reconstituted conception of Mohawk identity and sovereignty."¹⁰

The call has been placed. More significantly, it is an invitation that has potential ramifications for many other tribal communities as well. However, it is a call for governmental restructuring along lines that may be

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somewhat unfamiliar to many Indigenous peoples because, historically, tribes had face-to-face social structures in which kinship and family predominated, and a personalized political system that was virtually an extension of the joint family.¹¹ Thus, they rarely faced the reality of having to address "diverse interpretations" of tribal identity. The consensus on identity and sovereignty historically manifest in indigenous communities, as Alfred has articulately shown, has been shattered. Alfred identifies numerous examples of similar types of apparently permanent fragmentation throughout Indian Country (e.g., conflict between the Hopi Tribal Council and the Hopi Kikmongwis; Big Mountain Dine and Navajo Tribal Council; Keetowah Cherokees and the Cherokee Nation, the Lumbee Tribe and various splinter groups, some of which have gone so far as to establish separate tribal identities altogether).

Whether this chronic and now firmly entrenched tribal factionalism is an outcome of the inexorable tide of modernization, a direct result of federal policies designed to dissolve tribes, or generated by the internal social and cultural dynamics inherent in various tribes, or some volatile and unpredictable combinations of all three, is beside the point and is beyond the scope of this article anyway. For the purposes of this paper, I am in agreement with Alfred and argue that tribal cleavages, fragmentations, and internal political, economic, cultural, and ideological conflicts are realities that cannot be wished away and must be confronted promptly by the entire community, and not just dedicated leaders. As Fanon said, the people "are equal to the problems which confront them."¹²

Consociationalism (Power-Sharing): A Theoretical Construct

In the global community that tribes participate in, myriad schools of thought, theories, and models are available that purport to describe and explain how democratic stability can be achieved and maintained. I am, of course, making a major assumption here that needs to be studied empirically. I am assuming, for the purposes of this paper, that tribal nations are democracies, in which "democracy" is defined as rule by the people as a whole. Direct democracy—participation by all eligible persons—is rarely practiced today. Most democratic states and many tribal nations (including one of the two competing Mohawk groups) practice "representative democracy" where freely-elected representatives govern on behalf of the population. But exactly what must a polity guarantee to be classed as a democracy? According to Dahl, a reasonably responsible democracy can exist only if the following conditions are met:

- 1) Freedom to form and join organizations;
 - 2) Freedom of expression;
 - 3) The right to vote for eligible citizens;
 - 4) General eligibility for public office;
 - 5) The right of political leaders to compete for support and votes;
 - 6) Availability of alternative sources of information;
 - 7) Free and fair elections; and
 - 8) Institutions for making government policies that depend on votes and other expressions of preference.¹³
- These elements encompass the classic rights of liberty.

Among western industrialized states, however, there are impressive differences between various democratic countries. There are, in fact, two distinctive models of

democracy: the majoritarian or Westminster model (described above) and the consociational, consensus, or power-sharing model (to be described below). The essence of the majoritarian model, practiced most effectively in Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and other countries, is, of course, majority rule. This system of governance holds that majorities should govern and that minorities should oppose.¹⁴

The essence of the consociational (power-sharing) model is that its "rules and institutions aim at broad participation in government and broad agreement on

making behavior of the political elites can positively affect the level of violence among such groups.¹⁸

In addition, Lijphart and Lehmbruch have argued that consociational democracy usually has the following characteristics. First, there must exist a level of equilibrium between the various segments or subcultures of society, and this equilibrium must be reflected in the governing institutions which should contain representatives from all of the subcultures, or tribal fragments. Such an encompassing coalition is correctly referred to as a grand coalition.¹⁹

In a fragmented society, if the various subcultures

Finally, consociational decision-making is based on the belief that the separate subcultures should retain a great deal of autonomy in regulating their own affairs.

the policies that the government should pursue."¹⁵ This model emphasizes consensus rather than opposition, it includes rather than excludes, and it seeks to maximize the size of the ruling majority "instead of being satisfied with a bare majority."¹⁶

In the remainder of this essay I discuss in detail the consociational model and suggest that it provides an alternative perspective of the political decision-making process which might be adapted and tailored to address the variegated political needs of segmented tribes. I suggest this normative model, not as a definitive solution to the fragmented Mohawk situation, or for any other similarly situated tribe, but merely as a discussion piece, nothing more, nothing less.

Preconditions for Implementation of Consociationalism

Lijphart's theory of power-sharing suggests that in countries (tribal communities in this case) "that are subculturally strongly segmented, consociational decision-making is more likely to lead to peaceful relations among the subcultures than is competitive decision-making."¹⁷ At the heart of the theory lies the notion that the decision-

are similar in size and strength, they will be more "inclined to cooperate than they would be in a society where one subculture is dominant."²⁰ For Lijphart, Switzerland and Belgium are the best, but not perfect, illustrations of equilibrium.

A second feature of power-sharing is a veto power that can be exercised by each subculture on matters of vital importance to their interests.²¹ This characteristic should sound familiar and hold great appeal for North American indigenous peoples. If Catholics, for example, are a minority in a particular country, parliamentary rules would require that changes in abortion laws could not be enacted without the consent of the Catholic minority.²² This veto power, in effect, represents a guarantee of rights for cultural, religious, or linguistic segments. Third, apportionment of public or tribal offices and the distribution of funds among the subcultures is guided by the principle of proportionality.

Finally, consociational decision-making is based on the belief that the separate subcultures should retain a great deal of autonomy in regulating their own affairs.²³ This recognition of autonomy may take the form of federalism; but autonomy may be extended even if cultural cleavages overlap geographically.

Lijphart and others in the field further posit that there are certain variables that may make the establishment of a consociational democracy more or less likely. First, none of the subcultures or segments should have a hegemonic position over the others, either numerically or economically. Second, the segments should be clearly differentiated and ideally they should be roughly of equal size. This, it is argued, will facilitate negotiations among the segmented leaders. Third, ideally there should be a small number of segments. Lijphart asserts that the optimal number is between three and five. Fourth, each subculture should have preeminent leaders who are internally respected and can speak for the interest of their subcultures.

Fifth, that there is some level of overarching loyalty across all subcultures to the larger society (reservation, reserve, dependent community in our case) as a whole. Alfred, as we indicated earlier, suggested, somewhat dogmatically we think, that there was no longer an overarching Mohawk "identity." But he did note that there was a persistent, if amorphous, sense of Iroquoian historical tradition, and an even stronger sense of awareness of the difference between being Mohawk and being non-Mohawk.

Sixth, that if the country or tribal community is under pressure (international or national), and if this external pressure is perceived similarly by all subcultures, chances are that power-sharing stands a better chance of being implemented. Seventh, the country (tribe) should have some tradition of accommodation and compromise. Eighth, the overall level of socio-economic problems (unemployment, inflation, etc.) should not be overwhelming. And finally, Lijphart maintains that the relative size of the country is an important variable. He asserts that "it is a striking characteristic of all successful consociations that they are relatively small countries." But he also argues, we think without adequate evidence, that very small countries (those with less than a million inhabitants), are disadvantaged because "the supply of political talent may be very limited."²⁴ This set of variables is flexible, and I suggest that tribes examine their respective histories to see how relevant and applicable each one is to their community.²⁵

A principle goal of any good theory is its ability to explain some aspect of the real world. Lijphart constructed his theory, in part, to explain the relative stability and perceived low level of violence in several small and plural European democracies; e.g., Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. Power-sharing, however, is more than an explanatory theory for Lijphart; it is also both a normative and prescriptive model that he would like to transport to other plural communities, particularly those in the Third World (or Fourth World, in this case) that are experiencing unstable political conditions.

While a number of scholars have applauded Lijphart's commitment to offering an alternative form of government to politically troubled societies, they have also made serious and well grounded criticisms of his theory.²⁶

Furthermore, there are major differences between tribes and western-industrialized states in terms of their histories, cultures, political institutions, and developmental trajectories. Historically, indigenous communities did not employ a competitive form of decision-making. Thus it is possible that if power-sharing were ever implemented on a tribal scale and if it were successful in ameliorating cultural, political, and ideological problems (including that major irritant of tribal communities, biological or blood-quantum fragments), tribes would not need to introduce competitive elements. Once power was being shared proportionately among the various segments of the community, historical patterns of traditional decision-making would reemerge, but in a form capable of addressing the issues and complexities of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Conclusion

Consociational or power-sharing theorists recognize that some countries are so deeply fragmented (e.g., Lebanon, Northern Ireland, several of the former Russian Republics) that there is no hope for power-sharing to work. In such cases, the result is often civil war among the various cultural, ideological, religious, or linguistic subcultures and sometimes the establishment of a hegemonic dictatorship by one of the subcultures.²⁷ In every one of these cases, the politically dominant regime is confronted by opponents that it cannot eliminate by coercion, but neither are the challengers in a position to unseat the regime by force.²⁸

By contrast, in cases concerning North American Indigenous communities where, although the fragmentation may be severe, as it apparently is at Kahnawake and in many other tribal communities, the divisions are not, typically, so historically entrenched or asymmetrical as to preclude some degree of bargaining between the various tribal factions. The consociational model, by its emphasis on consensus, bargaining, proportionality, segmental or subcultural autonomy, overarching loyalties, and vibrant leadership, bears a striking resemblance to the traditional consensual decision-making that historically operated in Indigenous societies. Ultimately, however, each tribe will define or redefine itself in terms of the values, language, traditions, kinship patterns, and local consciousness of the preceding generations.

I believe this institutional arrangement, based on the idea of powersharing, can serve as one viable construct that merits discussion. It would enable competing tribal

fragments to link up to allow each segment some autonomy and therefore some control through participation in the tribe's larger decision-making processes. Hence, I restate my original argument that this particular decision-making arrangement would meet one of the two key points identified by Alfred. "This new government," Alfred asserted, "must then institute a *system of representation capable of integrating-diverse interpretations* of the newly-reconstituted conception of Mohawk identity and sovereignty.... "if they [Mohawks] fail to respond with an appropriate *reconciliation process*, things will no doubt go from bad to worse ... again."²⁹

However, before any progress can be made on steps to preclude such violent eruptions the leaders of the various tribal segments must first agree that there is a compelling need for "bargaining about bargaining."

The most compelling argument of consociational democratic theorists that asserts the necessity of bargaining and accommodation through powersharing institutions and "summit diplomacy," rests upon the "contention that the cleavages that these procedures are meant to bridge and regulate are so deep and intense that the absence of such arrangements would result, at worst, in civil war."³⁰ Eruptive events like those briefly described in the beginning of this paper at Wounded Knee II, Dine, and Akwesasne, graphically illustrate what can happen when certain tribal segments reach a point where they perceive that their interests are not being accorded the legitimacy or respect they are entitled to.

However, before any progress can be made on steps to preclude such violent eruptions, the leaders of the various tribal segments must first agree that there is a compelling need for "bargaining about bargaining." Only after each of the various parties or fragments have consented to bargaining as a means of conflict settlement can it be expected that consociational devices

such as grand coalitions will lead to power sharing and consensual politics.

A most pressing question, however, is what will encourage rival tribal elites to reach such an agreement? Du Toit argues, and many tribal historical traditions suggest, that the "conditions which contribute to such an assessment, and which motivate contending elites to power sharing and consensual governing, lie in those factors which create, maintain, and increase mutual dependence amongst themselves."³¹ Fear of civil war, internal schism, group domination, and anarchy are certainly solid reasons supporting tribal efforts at power sharing. There are, however, positive reasons driving this alternative model of politics as well. And it is this positive rationale that should be most attractive to tribal elites and communities because it reminds indigenous peoples of their relational patterns to one another and the other life forces inhabiting their territories. In short, "power sharing among societal groups can be justified because of the mutual dependence of these groups upon each other and because of their lack of alternative sources of scarce values. Power sharing is necessary not only because antagonistic groups see each other as potential enemies, but also because they are in fact each other's only potential allies."³²

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NOTES

1. By Indian Country I mean 1) officially recognized reservation lands; 2) dependent Indian communities (e.g., the various Pueblos, Oklahoma tribal communities, except Osage); and 3) Indian allotments which are held in trust by the United States (62 St. 757, as amended, 63 St. 94, cited in Deloria and Lytle, 1983: 75).
2. The term is derived from Johannes Althusius's concept of "consociation" in his *Politica Methodica Digesta* (1603), reprinted with an introduction by Carl Joachim Friedrich (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1932) as cited in Steiner, 1986: 201.
3. The so-called "Oka crisis" that exacerbated the internal conflict centered, at first, on the attempts by Quebec's provincial government and the town of Oka's efforts to expand a golf course into Mohawk burial grounds at Kanesatake and the resultant resistance by both Kanesatake Mohawks and their allies and kinsmen from Kahnawake. The Kanesatake group asserted both legal and cultural sovereign rights over the disputed territory. See Alfred's opening pages for additional details about the events precipitating and exacerbating the conflict.
4. Alfred, 1991: 24.
5. Alfred states that there are two primary groups—the *moderns* (advocates of representative democracy) and the *traditionalists* (advocates of Haudenosaunee beliefs or the Longhouse)—at Kahnawake. The *moderns* are divided into two

segments: 1) Those desiring a massive overhaul of the elected system as it is currently constituted under the Canadian Indian Act; and 2) Those who prefer to keep the system intact. The *traditionalists* are also divided into two subgroups: 1) Those favoring the generally conservative Six Nation's Confederacy Chiefs; and 2) Those whom Alfred labels the "breakaway militants" of the largest Longhouse at Kahnawake.

6. Alfred 24.

7. Alfred

8. Alfred

9. Alfred: 29.

10. Alfred: 30.

11. Macridis and Brown, 1990: 357-58.

12. Fanon, 1991: 193.

13. Dahl, 1971: 3.

14. Lijphart, 1984: 21.

15. Lijphart, 1984: 5.

16. Lijphart, 1984: 23.

17. Steiner, 1980: 4.

18. Lijphart, 1977: 53.

19. Steiner, 1986: 202.

20. Lijphart, 1984: 21-22.

21. Dogan & Pelassy, 1990: 99.

22. Steiner, 1986: 202.

23. Kieve, 1981: 315.

24. Lijphart, 1985: 123.

25. Steiner, 1986: 204.

26. See, for example, van Schendelen, 1984; Daalder, 1984; Stevenson, 1983; Kieve, 1981; Steiner and Dorff, 1980; Steiner, 1981; and Steiner, 1987. In sum, Lijphart's conceptual framework has been challenged on several fronts: the scientific quality of the model's validity and verifiability; Lijphart's definitions of key concepts such as "pluralism," "democracy," and "democratic," have been challenged; and finally scholars have agreed that there is simply not enough empirical data to prove or disprove the theory.

27. Steiner, 1986: 205.

28. Du Toit, 1987: 423.

29. Alfred, 1991: 30.

30. Kieve, 1981: 332.

31. Du Toit, 1987: 423.

32. Du Toit, 1987: 426.

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