



Northern Ireland
Assembly



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Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Parity of Esteem Simon Lee

In this seminar, while steering clear of particular contentious matters currently facing the courts or politicians in Northern Ireland, I trace the history of the concept of 'parity of esteem', point to 'parity of esteem' having a vigorous life elsewhere and suggest ways in which reflecting on what it does and does not mean might be of interest.

A Brief History of Parity of Esteem

1940s Secondary Education

'Parity of esteem' was used in the Norwood Report of 1943 to describe how different kinds of secondary education ought to be treated. This influenced the legislation in Westminster and Stormont later in the 1940s:

'Accordingly we would advocate that there should be three types of education, which we think of as the secondary Grammar, the secondary Technical, the secondary Modern, that each type should have such parity as amenities and conditions can bestow; **parity of esteem** in our view cannot be conferred by administrative decree nor by equality of cost per pupil; it can only be won by the school itself.'

1950s Political Satire

In the 1950s, political satire was already attacking this and related notions. Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy* was published in 1958. Its full title was *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033: An Essay on Education and Equality*. He was attacking as illusory the concept of merit although calls for a meritocracy have forgotten or inverted the point intended by the person who coined the term. L P Hartley's *Facial Justice*, published in 1959 begins,

'In the not very distant future, after the Third World War, Justice had made great strides. Legal Justice, Economic Justice, Social Justice, and many other forms of justice, of which we do not

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even know the names, had been attained; but there still remained spheres of human relationship and activity in which Justice did not reign.'

1960s Education

In the 1960s, the manifest failure of parity of esteem in secondary education led to pressure for comprehensive education. Anthony Crosland, the architect of the change, had made the point in his 1956 book *The Future of Socialism* that, 'It is curious that socialists, so often blind to the question of the public schools, should fail to see that 'parity of esteem' within the State sector, combined with a continuation of independent schools outside, will actually increase the *disparity* of esteem within the system as a whole.' But by the time he became Secretary of State for Education in 1964, he had decided to make a start and so issued a call to local authorities to create comprehensive schools in Circular 10/65, intending (we are told in a biography by Susan Crosland) to destroy every grammar school.

1970s Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention

In 1975, the Rt Hon David Bleakley of the Northern Ireland Labour Party introduced the concept of 'parity of esteem' into Northern Ireland's political discourse during the Constitutional Convention:

'The NILP recognises the need to look beyond the frontiers of Northern Ireland and to develop good relations with neighbours. But it stresses the need for realism; there is a price to be paid for North/South cooperation. In particular, the Irish Republic must not lay claim to the territory of the North and must acknowledge the right of the Ulster people to determine their own destiny. Equally, the North would recognise the value of cooperation, between equals, with the South. Such parity of esteem is essential for progress, but once it is established Irish people should find no difficulty in working out agreed forms of contact, beneficial to both parts of the island ...'

1980s Parity of Esteem in Higher Education

All the way through the 1980s, polytechnics campaigned to be acknowledged as universities. Curiously, it was the same Anthony Crosland, in the same year as he paved the way for comprehensive schools, who had seemed to entrench the binary system (which he called a dual system) and saying that there would be no new universities for ten years (a policy swiftly reversed). The merger of the Ulster Polytechnic and the New University of Ulster in 1984 paved the way for polytechnics to become universities across the Irish Sea. The tone was set by Lord Longford on 10 May 1979 in the House of Lords, one week after Margret Thatcher had come to power. Although her government initially resisted this proposal, by the end of her premiership in 1990, she had changed minds and the Conservative government under John Major forced the change through, against the wishes of many university leaders, in the 1992 Higher and Further Education Act. Lord Longford put the case like this:

'First, the polytechnics are a vital though much under-estimated element in our education system. Secondly, they have been disgracefully starved hitherto of adequate resources. Thirdly, they will never get fair play or achieve parity of esteem until the distinction is eliminated between them and the existing universities. The so-called binary system may have seemed a good idea at the time—I have an idea that I helped to defend it myself about 24 years ago in this House—but by now it has served its purpose. The binary system has had it.'

1990s Opsahl process through to the Good Friday Agreement

As parity of esteem for polytechnics was approaching, the concept of parity of esteem was revived by Initiative '92's Opsahl process of listening to diverse voices in civil society. Sir Patrick Mayhew invoked

it, in Coleraine and in Westminster, and it featured in the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The Opsahl Commission recommended

‘a government based on the principle that each community has an equal voice in making and executing the laws or a veto on their execution, and equally shares administrative authority’ and that ‘Parity of esteem between the two communities should not only be an ideal. It ought to be given legal approval, promoted and protected, in various ways which could be considered.’

The footnotes are interesting on the origin of these ideas, eg re the former ‘This proposal did not come directly from any single submission. However, its inspiration was the strong emphasis on the need for absolute parity of esteem between the two communities in Northern Ireland in a number of submissions; for example, the Corrymeela Community ...’ and four named individuals. (footnote 2, p123, Ch 10, Conclusions & Recommendations, Andy Pollak {ed} *A Citizens’ Inquiry: The Opsahl report on Northern Ireland*, Lilliput Press, 1993).

Sir Patrick Mayhew had welcomed the Report in Parliament in 1993,

‘The Opsahl commission was established to encourage a public debate. It undertook the unique and valuable task of canvassing the views of a wide range of people and organisations in Northern Ireland’

and was still invoking the concept of parity of esteem in the marching season of 1996

‘We have to encourage parity of esteem and a balancing of the perfectly proper hopes, aspirations and fears of one side of the community against those of its counterparts. That is what we try to do.’ (11 June 1996)

In 1998, under the Good Friday Agreement, the two governments,

‘1 (v) affirm that whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, the power of the sovereign government with jurisdiction there shall be exercised with rigorous impartiality on behalf of all the people in the diversity of their identities and traditions and shall be founded on the principles of full respect for, and equality of, civil, political, social and cultural rights, of freedom from discrimination for all citizens, and of parity of esteem and of just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos, and aspirations of both communities;’

1990s Languages in South Africa

While this policy was developing, parity of esteem featured in the South African Constitution of 1996 respecting languages.

s6. Languages

1. The official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.
2. Recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages...
4. The national government and provincial governments, by legislative and other measures, must regulate and monitor their use of official languages. Without detracting from the provisions

of subsection (2), all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably.

A NHS for the 21st Century

In this century, however, the concept of parity of esteem has been criticised or neglected in Northern Ireland, more than it has been invoked. Martin Dowling, for example, has written of a ‘parity of contempt’ (*Traditional Music and Irish Society: Historical Perspectives*, 2014). Yet parity of esteem is alive and well and living in the NHS, where everyone seems to agree that it was enshrined in legislation by the Coalition Government in the Health & Social Care Act 2012 even though the term itself is not in the text of the legislation. On 19 March 2014, for example, David Cameron replying to Ed Miliband, said,

‘In terms of whether mental health should have parity of esteem with other forms of health care, yes it should, and we have legislated to make that the case.’

He meant that the Health & Social Care Act 2012 requires parity of esteem. David Cameron’s Coalition government was particularly proud of this although (a) it came about through opposition amendments opposed by the government and (b) the phrase is not there explicitly. The expression is used in the NHS Constitution and Mandates but the Act simply begins:

“1 Secretary of State’s duty to promote comprehensive health service

(1)The Secretary of State must continue the promotion in England of a comprehensive health service designed to secure improvement—

(a)in the physical and mental health of the people of England, and

(b)in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of physical and mental illness.

Still, this combination of it being implicit in the legal texts and explicit in policy documents and wider discourse has brought great energy and impetus to mental health services and well-being.

Identities in the 21st Century

Implicitly, parity of esteem seems to underlie the reasoning of the German High Court last week in its case on gender. Imagine substituting political aspiration for gender in this press release by the Court (or indeed in Lord Longford’s three reasons for wanting parity of esteem in higher education):

‘... The assignment of gender is of paramount importance for individual identity; it usually plays a key role both for a person’s self-conception and for the way this person is perceived by others... Current civil status law interferes with this right. It requires a gender entry, but does not allow the complainant, who permanently identifies as neither male nor female, an entry corresponding to this gender identity. Even if this person chose the option “no entry”, it would not reflect that the complainant does not see themselves as a genderless person, but rather perceives themselves as having a gender beyond male or female.’

<https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/EN/2017/bvg17-095.html>

A Future for Parity of Esteem?

Some will conclude that Parity of Esteem has a brief, or non-existent future. Others might like a policy brief on the possibilities afforded by sustained reflection on Parity of Esteem, including definitions. While it is beyond the scope of this brief presentation to answer all questions, some observations might encourage debate and further work. So why has Parity of Esteem lost impetus here? There are at least four broad answers.

First, not everybody agreed with it in the first place and it is still controversial as a concept. Sometimes it is said to be meaningless, sometimes it is a particular meaning to which someone objects.

Second, there are now so many detailed rules on equality and non-discrimination that it might be thought to be unnecessary.

Third, it might be that there is uncertainty or discontent about who is meant to show the esteem: is it a matter for the two governments only or also for politicians and others with public responsibility here or indeed for all of us?

Fourth, it might be that the tension comes in that not only 'the two main communities' but others might wish to be shown such esteem.

If it is to be revived, what are the conditions in which Parity of Esteem thrives?

First, it is not just about a resolution of a complex dilemma by an imposed outcome but rather is about the process of getting to a policy decision, involving listening to why others feel under-valued by the status quo or alternative proposals. The energy in the NHS around mental health is a good model for this and it is no coincidence, on this view, that parity of esteem has been most prayed in aid by processes of dialogue such as the Opsahl hearings or the political talks which led to the Good Friday Agreement or successive series of these KESS seminars.

Second, it is not enough for it to be used when we think someone else is not living up to it, if we are not reflecting on how we live out the idea, for instance by taking action ourselves, where we can, such as in the commendable broadening of the compass of KESS seminars. We are coming up to the 75th anniversary of the Norwood Report and we are now much more conscious of not blaming the victims of unjust treatment but with those warnings, it might be worthwhile considering the Norwood Report's warning and asking how can we cultivate an attitude in which we genuinely esteem other traditions and genuinely attract esteem from those who disagree with us:

'parity of esteem in our view cannot be conferred by administrative decree nor by equality of cost per pupil; it can only be won by the school itself'.

