have no responsibility for unemployment, low incomes and the misery of high mortality rates, the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS and crime. It is thus strange to read that Beris Gwynne, the Executive Director of The Foundation for Development Cooperation (who presumably organised the writing of the book and the conferences on which it was based), hoped in her foreword that ‘this publication will contribute to broader and better understanding of the issues facing our South Pacific neighbours, adding impetus to recent positive developments in the region’. The Foundation, as well as the author, appears to be living in a Panglossian world where the continuing reality of impoverished lives in the South Pacific does not exist.

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References


Westminster Legacies: democracy and responsible government in Asia and the Pacific


This new collection of essays examines the process of policy transfer associated with the spread of Westminster-derived forms of parliamentary government in the Asia Pacific region. The book promises much during this time of growing demand for analysis and advice about preferred forms of democratisation. Is there a ‘Westminster path’ to democratisation and, if so, what political, social or cultural preconditions can reinforce success? There are no easy or simplistic answers: there is no one overpowering norm and no single form of a ‘Westminster system’. Indeed, one great virtue of this collection is to show ‘Westminster’ under modification from a wide range of non-British political cultures: Islam in Malaysia; military rule in Pakistan; ‘customary’ rule in Papua New Guinea and Fiji; monarchy in Nepal; single party statism in Singapore; biculturalism in New Zealand; and (perhaps surprisingly) federalism in Australia. Across this diversity of regime types, one element of classic ‘Westminster’ seems common and possibly fundamental: sharing of executive power between leaders of a ruling political party and a subordinate career bureaucracy.

The terms ‘Westminster model’ and ‘Westminster system’ are surprisingly resilient in social science, despite many attempts to debunk these terms as persistently misleading. Former ANU political scientist Robert Parker was one of many policy analysts who subjected the ‘Westminster model’ to rigorous examination, warning that many if not most Westminster-derived systems of parliamentary government depart
in quite fundamental ways from the original Westminster system found in Britain. The editors here do not argue against the merits of this criticism and they are alive to the complex variety of governmental forms and practices that traditionally get jumbled together under the umbrella of ‘Westminster’. But the editors retain the ‘Westminster’ term because this is indeed a preferred organisational term favoured by the political class in so many of Britain’s former colonial jurisdictions. Those who rule in many former British territories see themselves, however mistakenly, as maintaining ‘Westminster systems’. Few if any of these national political systems are identical to the British political system: either as it once was or as it now is.

But the political class is on to something important. The editors frame ‘Westminster’ in terms of loose family resemblances rather than tightly shared identities or political profiles. They provide a very useful three page chart (p4–6) summarising ‘the Westminster model’, with the core beliefs so treasured by ruling politicians listed according to three structural dimensions of government: the constitutional system; the place of political parties; and the composition of executive government. This chart includes supplementary or ‘outlier’ beliefs reflecting the critical external perspective of academic analysts like Arendt Lijphart, restricting ‘Westminster’ to those pure and simple norms of majoritarian democracy, undiluted by any traces of that better system associated with consensual democracy. The editors are rightly cautious of many social science frameworks which try too hard to ‘objectify and reify a distinct and coherent model against which countries can be measured or scaled’ (p245). Better to be open to the empirical evidence than to lock on to neat abstractions.

For research purposes, the editors propose a fresh model of Westminster that includes the following five components: cabinet government based on collective ministerial responsibility to parliament; individual ministerial responsibility to parliament; a constitutional non-partisan bureaucracy; a parliamentary opposition recognised as the alternative government; and a fusion rather than a formal separation of executive and legislative institutions. British nineteenth century commentator Walter Bagehot emerges as an originator of this model, which is clearly at odds with much contemporary practice, even in British government which shares with many other ‘Westminster’ systems the subordination of cabinet to the power and prestige of the prime minister (p245). The research task then becomes investigating to what extent each or all these five components features in the political life of the countries under review. Those countries fall into two categories, reflecting the editors’ core distinction between ‘Westminster transplanted’ and ‘Westminster implanted’. Australia and New Zealand are examples of the transplanted variety, where early generations of a colonising settler society simply imposed what it took to be Westminster practices on the colony. The ‘Westminster implanted’ category illustrates more of a blended arrangement between a departing ruling power and surviving local cultures. Many countries fall into this category, which the editors sub-divide into three sub-categories: India, Malaysia, Singapore; Pakistan and Nepal; and Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific islands.

What are the country findings? Each chapter is distinctive. Readers face a feast of country chapters written by readable experts: Stern on India’s contribution to ‘Westminster’; Ashmed on the ‘continuing mirage’ of ‘Westminster’ in Pakistan; Weller and Sharma on the ‘stuff of dreams dashed’ in Nepal; Johnson and Milner on the Malaysia experience; Rodan on the smokes
and mirrors of ‘Westminster’ in Singapore; Rhodes on the discourse of ‘Westminster’ in Australia; Wanna on New Zealand’s journey from ‘archetypal transplant to maverick outlier’; Okole on Papua New Guinea’s overlay of democracy on Melanesian cultures; Palmer on Fiji’s challenge to many ‘Westminster’ hopes; and Larmour on the vitality of difference in the Pacific islands.

Each case is a fascinating exception to any facile general rule. But I note that one of the primary findings is that ‘Westminster’ models are favoured and espoused more energetically by bureaucrats than by politicians (p253–4). In many ways, the core concept derives from constitutional lawyers administering government, reflecting the views of government law advisers on the institutional norms of parliamentary government. Politicians then adopt the view of their legal advisors, including quite traditional views about the role of government ministers in accepting parliamentary responsibility for the errors and mistakes of their anonymous public servants. This serious book shows that, in many respects, the ‘Westminster system’ is a funny way to run a government.

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