
This book has a great title and cover photo and contains useful detail and observations on Congress post 9/11 and is likely to be of some interest to congressional scholars, as well as more broadly to scholars of legislative studies. Sparked by personal experiences as a congressional aide during 9/11 (indeed the preface and acknowledgements and closing comments are candidly confessional) it adopts a quasi-anthropological approach inspired by Polsby. Data come from both observations and interviews of a range of people who work within the congressional complex.

The book is an easy read even though it suffers structurally as it tries awkwardly to appeal to both the broader public market as well as the academic market. In turn, it veers erratically from the personal to the descriptive to the theoretical and the data and experiences of the writer mean that the focus is more on the administrative than the legislative side of things. Ultimately, the title of the book is too much to live up to, but there are a few absolute nuggets in this book that anybody interested in legislatures would do well to glean. I have certainly got a few ideas of my own from this book.

Strengths include a historical appreciation of the context of changes. Chapter 2 for example, illustrates a number of threats over the years to the Capitol followed by subsequent changes to security arrangements. While 9/11 arguably altered working and visiting arrangements the most, 9/11 is patently but one of many past (and likely future) incidents, all having effects on the operation of Congress. That said, much is made of power accretion by the security services and the consequent loss of democratic openness, and yet the historical events suggest that security peaks and troughs exist, which raises the question of whether security arrangements only ever increase or whether there has been ebbing as well as flowing over time. The biggest strengths of the book include a raft of quite detailed comments from those working in Congress. Arguably the most interesting section of the book is on committee reorganisation post 9/11 and the associated tensions within Congress over revised committee briefs and overlapping responsibilities this caused. Interestingly, such changes have had repercussions for the capacity to deal with new emergencies such as Hurricane Katrina. They have also meant that oversight of the executive has been diminished as, without clear
jurisdiction, action by committee chairs becomes constrained. This is magnified under unified control of government. While the highlight chapter is arguably the committee chapter, this is relatively short and under-developed. That said, one gem from this is the nice example of trustee versus delegate representation in action as one of the committees responsible for the allocation of Homeland Security grants to states was under-representative of politicians from states deemed high security risks.

Weaknesses include the structure and subject focuses of the text. The theoretical set-up at the outset (for example, the five theoretical frames of the historical approach, the institutional approach, the new institutional approach, the systems approach and the organisational approach) as well as the stress of Goodsell’s three lenses (expressive, behavioural and societal) all suggest that much is to come. However, the subsequent re-connections to this set-up are implicit and lost in much heavy description of what has gone on in Congress post 9/11. Too much time is spent on security arrangements and the buildings and what has happened to them in terms of public access and redevelopment. Here we get a myriad of information including that the smell tourists bring into Congress should be ameliorated by the provision of a new visitor centre that reduces the queue time outdoors in hot summers. Personally, I would have preferred a ‘functions of Congress’ lens to the project. While we do get aspects of this, most notably in terms of representation and oversight, the oversight section is too brief and many other functions are omitted.

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Party Discipline and Parliamentary Politics is a first book by Christopher Kam that does exactly what it promises in its title, providing a comprehensive account of party discipline in parliamentary systems. This is very much a problem du jour as scholars move beyond first-generation formal models of party competition that treat parties as unitary actors, to models of inter-party competition that take account of intra-party politics. Until recently, for example, single party majority governments were seen as in some sense trivial cases for systematic accounts of government formation – ‘win’ the election, form a government, what more is there to say? But this is of course to ignore the fact that single party majority governments are themselves coalitions of agents whose interests may diverge quite radically.
Key aspects of the politics of single party governments take place inside the governing party, since keeping the party-coalition together and avoiding damaging party splits is a necessary condition for being able to hold on to power. Moving beyond single party governments to party competition more generally, the unitary actor assumption that has proved so useful in motivating so many formal models has clearly passed its sell-by date, while the scholarly community has yet to coordinate on how best to move beyond this.

Given the demand for a substantively plausible yet theoretically rigorous account of intraparty politics, this book has all the hallmarks of future success and influence. It takes a number of things that people have been saying rather casually for some time about intraparty politics in Westminster style political systems, formalises these and melds them into a coherent model of party discipline. The premises will be widely accepted and the core argument is simple and straightforward, therefore easy for others to comprehend and to deploy themselves. In many ways the book is a rigorous compilation and modelling of received wisdoms on an important topic and this is precisely its main virtue. Many scholars will intuitively buy the substance of the argument and be grateful to Kam for pulling the threads together and then setting everything out in such a systematic way – a reason why this book could well become a citation magnet.

So what is the core argument? Essentially it is driven by the fact that party discipline is crucial to party leaders in parliamentary systems, especially the leaders of government parties who want to stay in power, and most especially party leaders in Westminster-style systems who want to stay Prime Minister. In contrast, rank-and-file legislators face a trade-off, which is at its sharpest in party systems with single member district electoral systems though it exists everywhere to some degree. On the one hand they want to get re-elected and governments do unpopular things. They therefore have incentives to dissent from the party line. On the other hand they want to get promoted. They therefore have an incentive to be loyal to the party leader, who has their promotion prospects in his/her hands. Kam’s core intellectual project in this book is to formalise these trade-offs, elaborate key comparative statics of the resulting model, generate substantively important empirical implications from these comparative statics, and evaluate these using empirical data from four Westminster-style party systems – Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand.

Does it work? It does. The book’s focus is on substance and empirics, with the formal model ostentatiously corralled in an appendix. The result is a book with a plausible theory, stated verbally, about an important topic that interests many people, with formal backup for those who seek it. This is evaluated using persuasive empirical work involving substantial and sophisticated analysis of data from four different political settings, albeit all of them in the
Westminster mould. Despite the ostensible focus on Westminster-style party systems, it is no big stretch to extend many of the intuitions derived from this work to parliamentary systems more generally. Putting all of this together, this book is a must-read for anyone with an interest in intra-party politics.

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The Parliament of Australia documents its activities, procedures, and history remarkably well. A prime example is the Senate’s biographical dictionary of its members, now published by the University of New South Wales Press in association with the Department of the Senate. The third volume, published in August 2010, covers the period 1962-1983. The first two volumes cover the periods 1901-1929 and 1929-1962, respectively; Volume 4, covering the period through to 2002, is now in preparation. The senators and Senate clerks who are the subjects of each volume are those whose parliamentary service ended during the period that each covers. Volume 3 contains 108 entries, each focusing largely on its subject’s parliamentary career, but discussing other aspects of his or her life as well. Ann Millar founded the biographical dictionary project, was the sole editor of the first two volumes, and, collaborating with co-editor Geoffrey Browne, saw this third volume through to its last stages before retiring in 2008.

This reference book encompasses notable events, including the struggle between Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser, former prime ministers and two of the chief protagonists in the most contentious episode in Australia’s political and constitutional history. It also includes entries on notable senators such as Lionel Murphy, a senator and, later, High Court judge whose name is associated with the development of the Senate’s committee system; John Gorton, the only senator to become prime minister; Neville Bonner, the first Aboriginal senator; and the growing number of female senators. The history of two pivotal decades of Australian history is illuminated by the lives of these senators, as well as their less well-known colleagues, including senators named Martyr and Cant.

This volume also covers the period during which the Senate emerged as a body of increasing and continuing influence in the Australian political system. The members of both houses of
Parliament were elected in ways that usually gave governments large Senate majorities until 1948 when the electoral law was amended to provide for the senators from each state to be elected by proportional representation. As a result, a shift began to take place during the 1960s and 1970s in the relations between the two houses, as governments discovered that they could no longer rely on having majority support in the Senate as well as the House of Representatives. In fact, the book ends at the beginning of a period, continuing today, in which governments regularly face non-government majorities in the Senate. The result is a political dynamic that is more subtle and complex than is otherwise found in parliaments that look back to the UK for their antecedents.

The Biographical Dictionary is only one of the ways in which Australia’s Senate opens itself to analysis and better understanding by a public audience. Its Papers on Parliament are collections of essays published once or more each year, many of which are elaborations on public lectures that the Senate sponsors regularly. In addition to its procedural manual, Odgers’ Australian Senate Practice, and an annotated history of its standing orders, the Senate also publishes non-technical summaries of its operations and procedures, as well as annual compendia on its business and the work of its committees. More information can be found at www.aph.gov.au/Senate/pubs/index.htm, which also includes a link to the proceedings of the constitutional conferences and conventions of the 1890s.

STANLEY BACH
Washington DC


Some volumes are long in the gestation, but then the right moment comes along for publication. For some time now, Philip Norton has been planning an overarching volume on constitutional change, but the hundredth anniversary of the Parliament Act 1911 has provided a convenient peg on which to hang his latest offering.

As Norton explains in an elegant introduction, the United Kingdom lacks a codified constitution. There is no formal mechanism for amending its procedures. Parliament therefore has been entrusted with that task. This edited collection carefully selects six Acts of Parliament ‘which have proved critical in producing a shift in the relationship at the heart of the constitution’ (p.3).
Norton argues convincingly that until 1997, the pattern of constitutional change had been one of continuity and evolution, with a few dramatic moments along the way. The constitution was almost apolitical, only to be altered in response to problems as they arose: reactive, not pro-active. That cosy consensus was upset by New Labour. It is no accident therefore that half of the acts explored here – Scotland Act 1998, Human Rights Act 1998 and House of Lords Act 1999 – are drawn from the New Labour period. Rather like London buses, we had no signs of constitutional change, and then three appeared in a row. While Norton claims that Labour had ‘no intellectually-coherent approach to constitutional change’ (p. 14), he is far too polite to say that the result was a total mess: ‘New pieces of the constitutional jigsaw have been brought into play. What remains missing is the box lid.’ (p. 18). A Pandora’s box, it seems.

One of this volume’s strongest suits is its capacity to draw out several revealing patterns about the nature of constitutional change. At least two of the contributors bring out the fact that the British Parliament has adapted well to changes imposed on it from outside, either as a result of the European Communities Act 1972 or the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into British law in 1998. In both cases, parliamentary select committees have evolved to oversee these developments.

Many of the acts succeeded because they were constructed as short bills, the best example being the European Communities Act 1972, lovingly retold by Norton. Most acts, however, were hotly contested. The major exception both in terms of its sheer size and its non-contentious nature was the Representation of the People Act 1918, ably recounted by Robert Blackburn in what is by far the best chapter in this book. We learn that, apart from a tussle between the Commons and the Lords over votes for women and the alternative vote, its passage was characterised by a spirit of compromise, borne out of the ‘search for common ground engendered by the [1914-1918] war’ (p. 50).

Apart from an irritating house style that under-uses capital letters, and an embarrassing typo by Blackburn claiming New Labour’s landslide occurred in 1977 rather than 1997 (footnote 79, p.51), I was impressed by the quality of the scholarship in all six chapters. In an era where academia is almost becoming suffocated by overly long books, it is a refreshing change to come across a pleasingly slender volume which nevertheless delivers on content. Sometimes, less is more.

MARK STUART

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Are legislatures in control of budget processes or is fiscal control by legislatures a myth? Joachim Wehner addresses this and related questions in his new book on the role of the legislature in the budget decision-making process. The book’s recent publication is very timely, given the need for many governments to implement sharp reductions in expenditure and/or increases in taxes, moves which may be rejected or amended by legislatures.

It is perhaps surprising that, until now, little has been written on the role of the legislature in terms of budget formulation other than on the two polar cases of countries where there is very strong legislative input into the budget process (the United States) and those were fiscal control is largely a myth (the United Kingdom). Wehner’s book fills this void, by presenting both a rigorous, large-scale statistical study of the role of the legislature in budget formulation and two in-depth country case studies.

Wehner presents a comparative framework with which to analyse cross-national data regarding legislative institutional design for ex-ante budget scrutiny. His ‘index of legislative budget institutions’ is an intriguing construct that enables cross-national comparison and ranking of legislatures in terms of influence and control over the budget. Usefully, the index differentiates between formal powers (such as budget amendment powers and what happens in the event that the legislature does not approve the budget (‘reversion’), and organisational aspects (such as the amount of time that the legislature has to review the budget and the research capacity of parliament to analyse the budget independently). He finds that legislatures in the United States, Hungary, Sweden and Switzerland have considerable influence over the budget while the ‘Westminster’ legislatures (Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand plus Ireland) have little. The case studies of Sweden and South Africa are of particular interest because they present examples, with varying success, of legislatures regaining control of the budget.

Wehner’s additional analyses confirm earlier studies which suggested that greater legislative involvement in budget formulation generally leads to larger deficits. The case study on Sweden is of interest, as it offers a model of ‘top down budgeting’, that suggests that fiscal control can co-exist with greater legislative involvement in the budget, through a two-step process, whereby the legislature first sets an overall fiscal ceiling without consideration of
individual line items, and thereafter, having established a ‘hard ceiling’, can increase expenditures in one area only by reducing expenditures elsewhere.

In short, this book offers insights into the role of the legislature in the budget process which will be of interest to scholars and practitioners alike. The shortcoming of the book, if there is one, is that it leaves the reader wanting more. Wehner could have been more free thinking, especially in the concluding chapter, where he notes that the fiscal cost of legislative activism may be an acceptable side effect of democracy but does not explore this interesting trade-off any further. Similarly, while he makes passing reference to ex-post control and the role of legislative audit (Public Accounts) committees, he does not develop these issues. Wehner has, nonetheless, written a book that is both rigorous in its analytical approach and useful to those involved in legislative strengthening and fiscal design.

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