

Book Review

Leslie A. Pal and R. Kent Weaver, editors.

The Government Taketh Away: The Politics of Pain in Canada and the United States.

Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003.

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Reaction to the ubiquitous trend toward the market mentality, the almost universal attack on public sector service and program financing, and the consequent pain inflicted on the majority of citizens while the economic over-class prospers, has generally been restricted to polemics from the marginalized political left. Meanwhile, mainstream politicians, bureaucrats and pundits have come to a largely unexamined consensus that “hard choices” must be made, that maintaining (much less expanding) the public sector is no longer possible, and that the eerie forces of globalization make a lower standard of living a prerequisite for remaining competitive in a harsher, more competitive society. Whether driven by right-wing ideologues, reluctantly accepted by liberal pragmatists or rejected in principle but accepted in practice by putative “progressives” who wish to keep their jobs, the fact remains that governments have transferred wealth from the poor, the working and the middle classes to the wealthy under the guise of fiscal responsibility. The false economies of privatization as well as the decline of economic infrastructure, social investment and humane social policy are plain for all to see. The trouble is that few are looking, and no one believes anyone who utters Bill Clinton’s bromide and claims to “feel your pain.”

The consequence has been that, although in Canada for example, independent journalists such as the estimable Linda McQuaig and left-of-centre “think-tanks” including the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives have produced plenty of thoughtful treatises that have shown where we have gone wrong, why we need to change and how the changes can be effected, no one in power pays much attention. Such preaching is mainly heard by the converted. Everyone else either applauds the new barbarism, cringes in their corners hoping not to be noticed in the next round of budget cuts, or retreats into apathy or cynicism under the umbrella belief that there is nothing to be done. Those who are attentive to social pain are mainly victims of what McQuaig has called “the cult of impotence.”

This preceding pessimistic account is, however, not quite as dismal as it seems. True, Marxist screeds have proven ineffectual and the exploited masses seem more concerned with who survives the next “reality TV” humiliations ritual or wins American Idol (or any of the internationally franchised lack-of-talent shows) than their own material welfare. None the less, a bright light can occasionally be seen shining from a source that is not peremptorily dismissed as contrarian, unrealistic or just plain foolish. When such happy events occur, it is important to take note, to give heed, and to make certain that they come to the attention of a larger audience. One such beacon is the book under review. *The Government Taketh Away* is a remarkable volume

that shows how and to what extent two formal democracies, the United States and Canada, deal with what the editors call “a key challenge for any democratic system,” the imposition of losses on its citizens.

Wholly within the tradition of North American pragmatism, utterly without hyperbole, and firmly rooted in the professional analysis of public administration, Leslie A. Pal, Director of the School of Public Policy and Administration at Carleton University in Ottawa and R. Kent Weaver, Professor of Public Policy and Government at Georgetown University and Senior Fellow in Government Studies at the Brookings Institution, have produced an anthology that accomplishes three remarkable things. First, the contributions contained within it are uniformly admirable as scholarship without being cursed with the obscurantist and obsequious lingo that too often renders such tomes either impenetrable or unappealing to the attentive and intelligent public. Second, they provide genuinely informative and compelling explanations of why public policy works (or doesn't work) the way it does. Finally, by giving sufficient detail about selected policy areas to make them intelligible, and then by adding informed reflections and cogent conclusions, they provide citizens, public officials and politicians with the intellectual tools necessary to comprehend problems that may be only apparently insoluble. In fact, their work, rich with empirical hypotheses and devoid of cant and rant, builds on solid research to provide a catalogue of methods that governments may use to expedite the administration of pain. Among the “strategies to facilitate loss imposition” are “manipulating procedures,” “manipulating perceptions,” and “manipulating pay-offs.” This exercise in manipulation methodology, I must hasten to add, is of immense potential value to the manipulators and the manipulated alike!

This book is not only a substantial achievement, but it is particularly meritorious in view of the fact that the book employs a case study method. Elsewhere in this journal, I have grouched about the pointlessness of most such undertakings. They are to the study of public administration and government what celebrity diaries are to the study of history. They may be entertaining and sometimes insightful, but they are mainly gossip and rarely rise to the level of generalizability that would make them useful for application elsewhere, much less furnish information that might lead to scientific or theoretical understanding. This is not a complaint that can fairly be made about *The Government Taketh Away*. Its contributors, without serious exception, operate from a set of firm theoretical principles, employ a consistent inventory of conceptual instruments, and leave the reader with ideas and lessons that can be taken away and used elsewhere.

Principally at stake is an acute comparison of the Westminster parliamentary system of governance as practiced in Canada and the presidential system in use in the United States. Of specific importance is the executive-legislative relationship which, in Canada, sees the executive “embedded” in the legislature and theoretically responsible to it. By contrast, the US variant on democratic governance radically divides the executive from the legislature, resulting in a diffusion of political responsibility. This elementary datum, normally the stuff of high civics classes, has consequences that are too frequently ignored by professional analysts, to say nothing of ordinary citizens. The greater sensitivity to institutional arrangements that this book promotes will lead the reader to a far more astute appreciation of the policy-making process than most would imagine.

The conclusions that are reached do not, of course, support a clear case for either the importance or the irrelevance of institutional differences. Life, especially in politics, is not that simple. Nevertheless, as the editors point out in their concluding chapter, although there appears to be a considerable similarity in “the politics-and frequently the outcomes-on both sides of the Canada-U.S. border,” the institutions of each polity do appear to have an important effect on the ease with which governments can impose losses on its citizens. The capacity of Canadian governments to “taketh away” is stronger. Curiously, the editors only tepidly infer that the “theoretical loss-imposing advantages of the Canadian Westminster type of system appear more modest in practice.” An examination of the twenty-six policy areas covered in the book, however, shows that the Canadian government’s capacity to impose pain was greater in fifteen domains, the US in only four, with seven being roughly even. Traditional belief in the average Canadian’s deference to authority and/or confidence in the efficacy of government would seem to be confirmed.

The four areas in which the US seemed to have a more robust record in the administration of pain were in Public Pension Reform (1977-1983), Increasing Payroll Taxes (1977-1983), Nuclear Waste Siting and Entrenching Abortion Rights, the latter presumably being an imposition of “symbolic pain” on those who support the “right to life.” This is one interpretation with which I must quibble. The basis for chapter author Raymond Tatalovich’s judgement in the last instance boils down to the fact that the US has a Supreme Court decision (*Roe v. Wade*), upon which to rely. Canada, in the alternative, has had no abortion law whatsoever since Dr. Henry Morgentaler’s 1988 victory on criminal charges before the Supreme Court of Canada effectively eliminated federal abortion law. The Canadian government’s “choice” to do nothing following Morgentaler’s win is strangely seen as evidence of an inability to impose “pain.” It is, I think, more likely a decision to accept the status quo without unnecessarily alienating anti-abortionists by passing a truly “symbolic” abortion rights law. As matters stand, the pro-choice position in Canada is much safer than in the US, which could easily reverse *Roe v. Wade* if President George W. Bush, or a like-minded successor were to add socially conservative justices to the Supreme Court. This anomaly, however, is not representative of the entire selection and interpretation of policies in the book.

Of almost equal importance to the comparison between parliamentary and presidential forms of government is an empirical assessment of the ways in which losses are absorbed by the public. The case studies explore geographically diffuse (e.g., health care cut-backs, pension retrenchment), geographically concentrated (e.g., hazardous waste dump siting, elimination of agricultural subsidies), business-oriented (e.g., financial services deregulation, tobacco control) and “symbolic” losses (e.g., abortion rights, gun control). The authors speak knowledgeably about the degree to which institutional factors and “confounding factors” (e.g., policy legacies, emulation, globalization, social structure and political culture) affect outcomes. Apart from the perhaps unfortunate use of the word “symbolic” to refer to important “moral” issues such as gay rights, the case studies are well researched and deftly presented accounts of US and Canadian experience.

The eight major policy fields that are detailed are: cutting old-age pensions, controlling health care for the aged, telecommunications deregulation, tobacco control, closing military bases, siting nuclear waste, gun control, and abortion. It is tempting but usually improper to bicker with editors about their selection of particular sub-topics. It is akin to criticizing the book they didn't write. None the less, at least from a Canadian perspective, three critical issues are absent: education, Medicare, and urban development. As well, though possibly premature, it would have been intriguing to have inquired into public safety and civil liberties in the context of current concerns about terrorism.

Likewise, there are reasons to dispute the variables contained under confounding factors such as social cleavages. Due recognition is given to Canada's concerns with language and regionalism. There is also an allusion to social class (Canada, it is noted, has twice the percentage of unionized workers as the US in its labour force). There is, as well, mention of the increasing impact of aboriginal peoples on public life. In the US, however, Pal and Weaver insist that "region is a much weaker force ... and language hardly ever figures as an issue in political life." Tell that to Governor Arnie! Even "race-sometimes muted, sometimes unstated" is said merely to "cast a shadow over many aspects of politics." This, I think is a quaintly sanguine impression of the political divisions in the United States. In terms of social values, I believe some other things have been missed. The divisiveness of even the term "multiculturalism" is important in the United States, as is the effect of religion. Indeed, if *Fire and Ice*, Michael Adams' recent addition to the expanding shelf of pop sociology, is to be believed, religion in the United States dramatically influences its political life and differs substantially from religion as it is practiced in Canada. Such concerns, however, are peripheral to the editors' stated task. They are merely mildly irksome and not very serious as a basis for criticism.

Far more important is the redirection of policy studies that Pal and Weaver invite. About fifty years ago, C. Wright Mills wrote *The Power Elite*. About forty years ago, Henry S. Kariel wrote *The Decline of American Pluralism*. About thirty years ago, Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz wrote *Power and Poverty: Theory and Practice*. These are representative of a short list of iconic volumes that shook up a complacent and self-satisfied academy. They demonstrated that the easy give-and-take of pluralist democracy was not as equitable as was imagined, that the friendly allocation and reallocation of values among competing interests was not as fair as was commonly thought. Every decision was shown to be decisively against someone, not all losers rose to fight another day, and many on the margins were not even considered important enough to be the subject of any decision at all. *The Government Taketh Away* is not that kind of book. Its intentions are not radical. Its aims are descriptive and explanatory, not hortatory. It engages in no advocacy for those who endure the pain or may one day be energized to struggle against it. Yet, it turns attention starkly to the idea that there pain does truly exist, that it is intentionally caused by those entrusted to make "tough decisions", and that it must be factored into any serious attempt to comprehend public life.

In doing this, it does much, for it opens up the field to those on the sidelines. While it does not seek to give a voice to those who are neglected, punished or rendered poorer, sicker, more hopeless, and more hostile by a political system that is more interested in pain reaction management than pain ameliorating or elimination, it does frankly acknowledge the existence of a darker side to public life. That side-inhabited by the poor, the ill, the distressed and the alienated-has been trivialized, demonized and criminalized by governments playing the politics of pain. It will be for others to deal constructively with the pathology of public life. Bringing the issue to the surface is a good way to start.

About the Author

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