
Peter Larmour’s book asks intriguing questions about governance in the Pacific island states: how have institutions been developed (before and after independence); where have they come from; and what impact have they had on the functioning of the state? Most governing institutions in the region have been borrowed, transplanted, or imposed by colonial rule. Almost all have been based on Western models, typically those of the colonizing power. Here, this has usually meant from the United Kingdom, directly or indirectly. Although Larmour refers to many Pacific island states, the key case studies usually come from the larger Melanesian states (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu), hence, minimal attention is given to either French territories or (former) American territories, limiting the scope for some comparisons.

The early chapters emphasize that institutional transfer is a persistent issue in the Pacific, reflected in early ideas such as cargo cults (and also cricket). But whereas cargo cults and cricket syncretized local and distant values, many states took on board wholly alien constitutions and even land tenure systems that proved to be quite inappropriate for local circumstances. Larmour points out that such inappropriate institutions play some part in the more recent emergence of “weak states” in the region (and even perhaps “failed states” in the cases of Nauru and the Solomon Islands). However, he gives surprisingly little space to any account of the economies of the island states, although it is evident that small, remote, multi-island states with few resources are substantially compromised in their efforts to achieve development, however defined, irrespective of the adequacy of their institutions or their governance. Larmour never mentions the words scale, size, or poverty.

The core of the book is an analysis of some 40 cases of institutional transfer, many centered on land issues, going back to Tonga’s absorption of foreign institutions in the mid-nineteenth century—giving it a unique land tenure system—and ending with contemporary attempts to induce island states to regulate often illegal offshore finance centers. The five central themes are land registration, constitutionalism, representative democracy, public sector reform, and anti-corruption. Larmour examines the factors that determined whether or not transfer took place, such as timing, social conditions, and sympathy with local values.

The key conclusions are as complex as the Pacific region. Transfers were direct and indirect, coercive, mimetic, and normative. They rarely took note of earlier failures as new waves of politicians, bureaucrats, consultants, and alien institutions passed by. Much rhetoric on the part of both locals and outsiders was directed to supposedly utopian pasts when corruption was absent. Even more fundamentally, in many cases, states were essentially established during the last great global wave of decolonization just as Western governments and international organiza-
tions were turning against the state in favor of the private sector. Global institutions, in distant metropolitan capitals, tended to embrace a “one size fits all” mentality that fell on limited and stony ground. Structures such as constitutions, land registration, and electoral democracy survived but without any local ideology to support them, while elements of a parallel state, best expressed through the various Councils of Chiefs, an intriguing invention of colonial and postcolonial times, added complexity to the practice of governance.

While Larmour treads confidently through a wealth of information and comparative studies—and indeed he has been a participant in several institutional transfers in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu—at times, this approach poses a disadvantage. Even Pacific “experts” will be challenged by the unfamiliar fragmentations and juxtapositions, and the book will be challenging for those with little familiarity with this island realm. A map, and some hint of comparative population sizes, areas, and economies would have been invaluable, particularly in a region where some small states are entirely dependent on aid and remittances and others have a different future as producers of minerals and agricultural goods, or as tourist destinations. It is a shame too that there is no room for any mention of Keith Hart’s seminal 1974 piece “A Model of Development to Avoid” that, on the eve of Papua New Guinean independence, warned against the kinds of transfers that had already produced negative impacts in Africa and most of which later came to characterize the Pacific.

Equally remarkable is the fact that ethnicity takes a backseat in much of the book, although it has played at least a partial role in two of the greatest recent contemporary constitutional challenges: the struggle for independence in Bougainville and the devastating civil disturbances in Solomon Islands. Secessionism, federalism, and decentralization are crucial issues in several contexts and reflect some of the most important transpositions of all: the role of colonial mapping pens in outlining the sometimes idiosyncratic borders of what are now modern nations. The limited social cohesion that this often entailed, especially as most states achieved independence without the kind of struggle that might have contributed to notions of national unity, has been critical in the success, or often otherwise, of other imposed institutions. Curiously too, there is little on capitalism and Christianity—surely the most successful transplants—however superficial, both may be at particular times and in particular places, or on education, another key to successful institutional transfer.

Larmour, therefore, gets us part of the way, and does it extremely well, creating the authoritative account of institutional transfer. His work will be a valuable text for governance courses as it clearly explains the flaws in the transfer from rich world to poor world of more recent global institutions of public regulation, law, and governmental accountability, as organizations embedded in alien cultures and contexts make little head-
A more comprehensive understanding of the roots of the problems of institutional transfer, and thus of failed states, requires a deeper analysis of both economics and culture—where cultures are both socially and geographically complex—and thus of the manner in which globalization has enveloped small island states. This is a very valuable stepping-stone on the route.

JOHN CONNELL, University of Sydney


The editors of this timely and provocative volume want to get a message across: those environmentalists that have written off the state as a vehicle for turning the Earth back on a sustainable course should reconsider their view. Admittedly, states differ in terms of ecological potential, but they do share a common feature that places them above other alternatives. Only states can, at once, legitimately represent the people within their territory and legitimately enter into agreements committing them to implement treaties negotiated within the international community to meet the global ecological challenge.

The volume is built around two themes. The first part focuses on the domestic ecological performance and capacity of states. The chapter by James Meadowcroft points to the lessons from the modern social welfare state. One should expect also the ecological state to be moving in fits and adaptations, and perhaps never be fully greened from within. Chapters on how to characterize the “green” state, and what lessons can be drawn from the comparative history of environmental politics over the last few decades are valuable complements to this guarded view of states’ domestic ecological capacity. Furthermore, the chapters on how the United Kingdom and the United States have dealt with environmental issues within a framework of economic liberalism show how policies and practices of developed states run the risk of becoming “ecologically contradictory.”

The second part deals with states and their role in transnational ecological governance. The possibilities of greening the state from without are assessed from different angles. Robyn Eckersley asks what happens when states emerge more and more as inclusionary implementers of common ecological “goods” and less as exclusionary sovereignties. John Vogler points to how international cooperation diffuses norms about good behavior and may raise ecological performance among states. Ken Conca asserts that transnationalization is already happening through hybrid forms of large-scale, transboundary ecosystem management. But where do such forms leave the ecological citizen seeking transparency and accountability? Tim Hayward discusses what would happen to the EU policy of “harmonization”—down from the top and up from the bottom in terms of ecological performance—if EU citizens were to have