

Book Reviews

Jean Blondel & Ferdinand Muller-Rommel (eds.): *Cabinets in Western Europe*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988, 262 pp.

In discussions on the 'state of the art' during the 1970s a comment was often made about the surprising lack of research on 'the executive'. The control-room of the state was a black spot (or at least grey) not just in the comparative literature but also in most single country milieus. This, I think, is still a fair comment. Political scientists have in general avoided the most obvious place to look for power, possibly *because* it is so obvious. There is not that much fun in revealing the 'secret' power-holders – in government! Also, the secrecy and closed nature of most cabinet systems does not make them the primary choice for quick, machine-readable data collection.

None of this, however, has deterred Jean Blondel in his effort during the 1980s to put the comparative study of 'political executives' on the agenda. His latest book, edited with Ferdinand Muller-Rommel, is a collection of standardized reports on the cabinet systems of thirteen West European countries. These are written by country specialists in the context of a comparative project on the 'similarities and differences, successes and failures' of cabinet government. The editors have succeeded well in making the authors of the country chapters stick to the same general outline. First they present *the setting* – the historical, institutional and sociopolitical factors moulding the various cabinet systems. Second, they describe the particular *cabinet structure*: seize, the role of the prime minister, cabinet coordination. Third, there is the description of *cabinet life* as shaped by its relations with parliament, bureaucracy, parties and organizations. And, fourth, there is a discussion of *decision-making* in the cabinet, taking all the factors presented in the first parts into account.

This strict organization of the country chapters is both a strength and a weakness. When every author is allotted about 15 pages of text to present the individual characteristics of his or her 'cabinet system', there are limits to the personal analytical twist given to a country chapter. In other words, it is a bit boring to read the book from beginning to end. One will undoubtedly learn a lot about European governments, but in a factual, not an analytical, sense. Giving the authors a little more freedom would certainly have made the reading more lively. This becomes very clear when reading the special issue of *European Journal of Political Research* (no. 2, 1988) – with Blondel as a guest editor – where some of the same authors are given more leeway for their discussions. Renouncing control, however, has serious disadvantages in a project like this. Even though you may be thrilled by individual presentations, you risk losing the comparative bases – which is the explicit rationale for the whole project. In spite of the straitjacket put on the authors, however, there are certainly country chapters well worth reading in their own right. This reviewer found Andeweg on the Netherlands, Muller-Rommel on Germany and Nousiainen on Finland of particular interest.

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Still, it is the uniform nature of the country presentations which is precisely what makes this book valuable. As its format is halfway between that of the data handbook and the – necessarily – idiosyncratic analysis, it is possible to pick up plenty of solid, useful and contextually explained information for everyone in need of data on ‘cabinet systems’. Of course, it is already somewhat marked by the turn of time. French co-habitation is discussed in the present tense, but this is in the nature of things. I deplore, however, that neither Portugal nor Switzerland is included. It would have been useful to have information available on, for example, the Swiss executive branch – even if that is not a parliamentary or ‘cabinet’ system. I can, of course, see the ‘comparative rationale’ for excluding the Swiss, but the inclusion of hybrid systems like the French and the Finnish makes the argument for West European completeness even stronger. I do not, however, hesitate to recommend the book, both as a work of reference and as a descriptive baseline. And we shall no doubt hear more from this project group as they promise ‘real’ comparative analysis of cabinet systems to follow. This, clearly, is much needed.

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Mike Bowker & Phil Williams: *Superpower Detente: A Reappraisal*. London: Sage, 1988, 267 pp.

Since timing is undoubtedly one of the secrets of successful scholarly authorship, one has to congratulate Mike Bowker and Phil Williams on publishing a volume with the title *Superpower Detente: A Reappraisal* at precisely the time when most signs seem to herald the demise of ‘the New Cold War’ and the rise of yet another era of superpower understanding.

The current situation inevitably brings up the question whether and to what extent the experience of the 1970s is any guide in assessing the prospects of superpower relations in the 1990s. Bearing in mind the trivial truth that no two historical settings are identical and that, therefore, all comparisons between allegedly analogous situations must be undertaken with due caution, it seems as if an evaluation of the concept of detente as such and of the particular stage of US–Soviet relations which has become known as *the* era of detente, is definitely called for.

In their well-written and enlightening book of some 270 pages, Bowker and Williams have attempted to provide us with this important re-examination. Thus, *Superpower Detente* is not only intended as a hindsight analysis of a particular stage in the relations between the superpowers, but also purports to convey knowledge of a more general nature. The book should, in the words of the authors, be seen ‘. . . as part of an effort to provide greater insight into the dynamics of the Soviet–American relationship’ (p. 5) and ‘. . . suggests that the detente experience of the 1970s contains a number of lessons and insights which are relevant to the future of the Soviet–American relationship and the way in which it is handled’ (p. 10).

Obviously, conclusions such as these have to be based on a thorough analysis of the historical record, and accordingly the main purpose of the study is to explain why the superpowers came to develop a relationship in the early 1970s which was considerably less antagonistic than before, and why this new relationship eventually went awry. In order to describe the evolution of detente, the authors focus on themes such as the *origins, substance, duration, and demise* of detente, but also a couple of not so obvious sets of questions. Thus, Bowker and Williams address the