

Krister Ståhlberg (ed.): *Parlamenten i Norden*. Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1990, 145 pp.

Erik Damgaard (ed.): *Parlamentarisk forandring i Norden*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1990, 206 pp.

Martti Noponen (ed.): *Suomen kansanedustusjärjestelmä*. Juva-Porvoo: Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, 1989, 483 pp.

It is a well-known and readily understandable fact that empirical work carried out in different fields tends to adapt to the dominant scientific paradigm, the development of which, for its part, is closely bound up with changes in actual political processes. In this regard the study of parliaments seems to have been something of an eternal loser. It was not until the 1960s that the analysis of mass behaviour began to give way to institutional studies of the representative system. Then, with the problems of parliamentary decision-making finally formulated in the frame of the behavioural paradigm, the emphasis in European political science shifted towards the output end of the policy process to evaluate capacities and performances of different kinds of political regimes. The 1980s saw a return to institutional research of the input side, but the prevailing 'managerial' paradigm continued to direct the main attention towards the tasks and functioning of governments and bureaucracies rather than parliaments.

The above conveys perhaps a pointed description of the development, but the fact remains that there is no large-scale, continuous and cumulative research on parliaments.

The three books reviewed here endeavour to ameliorate the situation in the Nordic area. They are very different in terms of both scope and depth of treatment. *Parlamenten i Norden* (Parliaments in the Nordic Countries) contains a series of lectures given in the inaugural seminar of the newly established Institute of Comparative Nordic Politics and Administration at the Åbo Akademi. The integrating theme was the position of Nordic parliaments in the political process. The instruction given to the speakers was to concentrate on 'living politics' rather than abstract model-building and conceptual exercise. The outcome consists of fluent and readable although not very deepgoing articles on parliaments in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, seen specifically in the light of the latest developments. The concluding chapter by Dag Anckar draws the threads together and elaborates some comparative perspectives.

The main motive behind the publication of this collection was probably to give publicity to the new institute. In any case, it soon lost much of its relevance as another and more scientifically oriented collection of articles on Nordic parliaments and parliamentary systems of governments was published during the same year under the editorship of Erik Damgaard. The project originated as a Nordic workshop, whose special focus is reflected in the title of the publication: *Parlamentarisk forandring i Norden* (Parliamentary Change in the Nordic Countries).

For a critical reader, the latter book immediately raises the question: is this a study on parliaments or a study on the parliamentary way of government? A simple answer is that these two cannot be separated from each other; but nevertheless I am inclined to think that in its several meetings the research group failed to define its specific focus. The editor poses the problem on the first few pages in terms of legislative research, but the specialized articles were by necessity forced to take as their point of departure recent changes in party systems and the coalition patterns produced by these changes.

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This has of course been unavoidable because the central theme of the contributions is to react to the old argument about the decline of parliaments; in other words to assess the power and impact of the representative bodies in the light of recent developments. The shared conclusion of the articles is that parliaments are flexible decision-making systems, whose position and role is determined in the interaction triangle party system-government-parliament. In this view the message sent by the editor in his concluding comparisons is encouraging: 'There are no grounds to insist generally upon the "decline" of parliaments in the Nordic countries'. On the contrary, the outlook of Nordic parliamentary systems is quite promising. In Sweden, Denmark and Norway, individual representatives have become more active and parliaments, as institutions, have been revived: the internal level of conflict has been raised and their impact on decision-making has undoubtedly been intensified. On the other side of the coin, the party system has become increasingly fragmented since the 1970s, the government's support base has become narrower – and both have been losing their steering capacity. The extreme case is Denmark, which since 1973 has been ruled solely by minority governments. Even so, Scandinavian countries do not, in Western European terms, represent an alarmingly unstable form of parliamentarism: their consensual tradition contributes to the preservation of an arbitration system in spite of the rising conflict level. In this sense these countries fit well into Kaare Strom's model of 'normal' minority parliamentarism (Strom 1990). None the less, the situation reminds us of the old story of a magpie on the roof: either the bill or the tail glued in the tar.

Finland is a deviant case, where minority governments have been temporary 'stop gap' solutions even after World War II. It is interesting that during the 1980s, despite a continuing process of party fragmentation, Finland has been able to establish the most stable form of majority parliamentarism – measured in terms of the breadth of the government's support and the duration of cabinets – in the Nordic area. During the last decade Finland has in many ways represented a consensual decision-making mode in the extreme. Anckar explains the occurrence of many oversized cabinets by referring to institutional factors, the constitutional arrangement of which makes it exceptionally easy for minority groups in parliament to retard or block new legislation. In Strom's model, this factor encourages parties to refrain from accepting 'governmental responsibility', but in Finland *formateur* parties tend to think that influential groups cannot be left outside. The formation process goes on until a sufficient majority has been secured.

However, not all depends on this. Additional explanatory factors must be sought from the forced foreign policy consensus of the post-war period, the endeavour of political elites to bridge the gaps in terms of pragmatic politics, the substantial lowering of the level of conflicts in society, as well as the peculiar position of a large agrarian party between right and left, preventing the formation of blocs according to the Swedish pattern. At the moment Finland has a unique form of three-party system, in which any two of the three dominant groups – Conservatives, Agrarians and Social Democrats – are able to form a coalition and to broaden their support base by incorporating willing small parties into the government front.

The most interesting sections of the articles, in my judgement, deal not with the development of parliaments but with the development of parliamentarism, seen from the angle of coalition formation and cabinet capacity. Assessment of the role of parliaments is a difficult thing as long as there is no agreement as to what kind of actor it is and how it fits into the parliamentary intersection triangle referred to above. Cabinet government is an institutional steering and control system, whose interrelationships can be shaped by means of the concepts of principal and agent.

But who in fact is the representative principal that has received the mandate from the people, and who are the agents? We still have no viable empirical theory of the parliamentary system of government.

Parlamentarisk forandring i Norden is a very useful work and also suitable as a textbook. It will soon be published in English as well, making it accessible to interested readers outside the Scandinavian area.

The thick volume edited by Martti Noponen (The Finnish Legislative System) is an ambitious effort of three researchers to bring together all the relevant knowledge – both old and new – about the Finnish parliament. The book is the final outcome of a project financed by the Social Science Research Council, but the project's documentary and interview data have been amply complemented by foreign comparative literature, parliamentary documents and earlier research reports. This has made it possible to cover the whole period of the unicameral parliament (1907–88) and to examine the institution in a developmental perspective. The attitudinal analysis, for instance, greatly benefits from the fact that all members of parliament had been interviewed once before, 15 years earlier.

The aim of the undertaking has been a broad general survey that would be suitable as a textbook as well as a handbook dealing with different sides of the Finnish legislative system. This aim dictated the approach of the study, which for the most part is descriptive, without specific theoretical emphases. It must be said that this kind of a combined research report, textbook and handbook is quite problematic, presenting as it does a mixture of new data, compiled data and basic factual information. The text is cumbersome and makes heavy reading, and the profile of the project itself becomes obscured.

As indicated by the title of the book, the broad organizing principle of the project is systems theory. The analysis of parliaments is seen to consist of three levels: individual level (representatives), group level (party factions) and collective level (parliament as a whole). The most important restriction is that on the basis of their vested research interests, the members of the team – Noponen, Matti Oksanen and Weijo Pitkänen – approach the functioning of parliament primarily at the individual level. There are only casual links with the group level, and no links at all with the collective level as far as first-hand research data are concerned. The examination of one legislative case and the communication behaviour of individual representatives does not change this conclusion. The importance of parliament as a political institution is handled in a separate chapter, but this remains by necessity a general discussion. As was remarked above, in order to go beyond this the analysis would have to be taken at a higher actor level, where the legislature is conceived of as a part in a more extensive system of parliamentary government.

So the main part of the book – both in terms of volume and weightiness of the content – deals with the background, perceptions and activities of individual representatives. These chapters witness the experience and competence of the research team. The first section contains a conscientious mapping of parliamentary careers from early political socialization up to the termination point. (The average parliamentary career in Finland is relatively brief, two electoral periods or roughly eight years). The second section deals with the participation of representatives in legislative work – their activity and styles of behaviour – and the third with subjective role conceptions as revealed in the interviews.

The climax of the analysis comprises a theme that is rather uncommon in this kind of research: a projective test, penetrating into the personality structure of 43 representatives and aiming to illuminate the formation of the world-views among political elites and their attitudes towards power-wielding. In this section the results

of a laborious analysis remain rather loose, without linkages with actual behaviour even at the individual level.

Martti Noponen started to specialize in parliamentary research in the 1950s, the other two members of the team somewhat later. They have assembled the fruits of their work in an elegant volume, which is not just a passing novelty but which will have a well-established importance in Finnish political research.

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REFERENCE

Strom, K. 1990. *Minority Government and Majority Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.