

A BOOK O' PAIRTS

Grant Jordan

The preface to Andrew McPherson and Charles D. Raab *Governing Education: A Sociology of Policy Since 1945* (Edinburgh, EUP, 1988), opens with a quotation from Bruce Millan which claims that Government Ministers feel powerless; they indicate their preferences but policy nonetheless means consultation and such change as is effected cannot just be achieved by administrative or Ministerial fiat. Millan says, 'I sometimes wished that I could just make up my mind about something and say that that would be the end of it...'

McPherson and Raab establish this is the point of interest in studying politics in a sophisticated and mature democracy. We have the machinery that allows elected dictatorship but that is not our practice.

Some might argue that the ground rules have changed as this book took its stately passage from field work to print. Would Michael Forsyth give the same impression? However the onus is still on those who believe that we have transformed our practices to make their case. Politicians and analysts have always believed that a consensus existed just long enough ago for past controversies to become covered in the syrup of nostalgia.

This book will be subject to very different reviews – not only through the inevitably varied views of those doing the reviewing but because the book is addressing different constituencies. The teaching profession will clearly be interested in explanations of the derivation of policies over buildings, examinations, career structure and the like. There is clearly a rather different thrust to the book in terms of the sociology of educational administration. There is a political science aspect of understanding how things happen. Before the inevitable quibbles and reservations are rehearsed it is worth establishing that this is a serious contribution to these various literatures.

The doubt remains however as to whether the parts have not been allowed to multiply in a somewhat self indulgent manner. That this is a long book (555 pages) can be construed negatively as well as positively. Length can represent lack of control rather than thoroughness. A problem with these different clienteles for this work is that some sentences (and pages) are written in a style that may be valuable in establishing the authors credibility for a particular readership but will simply glaze the eyes, if not

shut them, of the reader who simply wants to discover who exercised power, over what. For example the authors suggest, 'In these ways, therefore the myth was institutionally biased and constituted a third dimension of power in the sense identified by Lukes.' (p477)

In attempting to be a work for all markets the book spreads itself too thinly even at this length. For example, it uses as one of its dimensions of analysis partnership versus centralisation. It is not really clear how this scale is to be measured. Rod Rhodes' account of the power dependence approach is surely worth more than a mention in the footnotes and a passing nod on page 197.

The authors make the point that it is possible that power has moved from society to government and from the educational professionals and officials to officials acting as agents of government. This point seems to be about the decline of the 'professional bureaucratic complex' in the face of a repoliticising of education. This seems a hypothesis worth exploring but the authors surely lead us astray when they suggest that such an argument has affinity with corporatist theory. Instead of discussing their evidence they start reviewing and attempting to apply the theory of others – principally Philippe Schmitter.

The Big Names of Theory

They suggest later that corporatism was a means of the government absorbing leaders of producer groups into the decision process in stable and long lasting relations in which demands could be bargained and conflict contained. The authors thus saw corporatism as being not much more than consultation,

'...governments that seek predictability may incorporate the leaders of interest groups in decision-making procedures, and thereby drift towards corporatism.'(p22)

They describe the difference between pluralism and corporatism as depending on the degree of conflict between the groups and Government – with corporatism holding that there is collaboration between groups and government in policy formulation and implementation. (p473). This ignores too much literature on Government/group relations that not only preceded Schmitter's corporatism but was specifically rejected by Schmitter. The authors quote Grant's suggestion that corporatism is a possibility of arriving at *effective* bargains but this is not a sensitive enough criterion. It cannot be the case that effective bargains = corporatism and failed = pluralism. (p473) They cite Colin Crouch's warning that individual pieces of behaviour should only with great care be labelled as corporatist. Crouch was emphasising that corporatism is a system of organising society and if there is no system we are not left with partial corporatism but non

corporatism.

One can see why the authors would want to relate their particular fragment of the social picture to wider theories but unfortunately pluralism and corporatism have not been constructed as clearly specified and easily applied theories. It is tempting to see them as alternatives but unwise. Pluralism and corporatism are discussed at various points in the book but nonetheless the sum of the various passages is still too thin for the specialist. We seem to be introduced to the big names of theory to prove that the authors have done their homework, rather than to carry that debate much further.

McPherson and Raab say (p474), 'Perhaps after Brunton the Department was still trying to perfect and extend a corporatist strategy..'. But were civil servants not in fact trying to do something less grand? They were trying to fit in as many pieces of the puzzle as they could while minimising conflict.

The terms of that academic debate have changed substantially in the past couple of years and their theoretical discussion seems beached by a tide that has turned. The book proves that really there is not much future in studying empirical events with a toolkit of *either* pluralism *or* corporatism (or even with a couple of varieties of these.) It is a pity that the book tries to do so before concluding on page 482 that it is not 'on'. And why do they need to invent the term 'coordinated pluralism' rather than discuss the concept of sub-governments and corporate pluralism that predominate in the non-corporatist literature on interest groups? Everything Phillippe Schmitter has said has not been wrong and he warned somewhere of the dangers of creating a Tower of Babel of the social sciences.

From a perspective of 1988 the analysis cries out for discussion in terms of 'networks' – and seems to demand an exploration of the term policy community. The academic fashion for corporatism is as dated as bell bottom trousers.

The Interviews – the Big Names in Education

If the book is not most favourably judged in terms of theoretical innovation it does much better in terms of research methodology. What McPherson and Raab have done is to open up – in a self conscious manner – a research approach that attempts to exploit 13 on-the-record interviews with key policy making individuals (and 12 unattributable interviews). The book is therefore studded with verbatim extracts. Some will think that the authors have been given too much of the raw material and too little interpretation. It is in all honesty difficult to maintain enthusiasm for the 'colour of their socks' detail of someone else's case study. But we should respect that McPherson and Raab were pursuing a method of using oral

history. It is pointless to gather the fine print and subsume it in sweeping generalisations.

This method worked for them because they were lucky enough to break into the network of relevant individuals (and skilled enough to establish their credibility when working within that network.) However it is a method and not the method.

In using such interview material there is the danger, well recognised by the authors, of a discrepancy between actions and recollections. Even where the respondent has no intention to mislead, memory is, as McPherson and Raab admit, mortal. There is a more subtle danger in using interviews in that the more successfully one penetrates the world of the policy makers, the easier it is to accept their world view and the more seduced one becomes by their explanations. There is thus a social dynamic in using interviews that makes the researcher less free than his colleague working as an archive rat. We need to note the special feature of these interviews was that the authors transcribed the whole interviews and secured an agreed text with the subjects. These transcripts ranged from 40 to 320 pages. The authors were then free to make their own use of the material.

One respects the creation of a new on-the-record data source that others can use, but it is likely that in the future new questions will suggest themselves – questions on which the McPherson-Raab interviews will be mute. Moreover it is not clear that the argument of this book would have been materially affected had the authors not, more conventionally, done their interviews and then cleared the relevant passages. Certainly the authors would have been spared much effort; spared of that effort they could have extended their pool. They may have encouraged less unanimity in their sources if they had sessions with the gloves and the tape recorders off. The attributable interview has great advantages but it may restrict rather than encourage frankness. The Hecló and Wildavsky precedent of 'off the record' comments in *The Private Government of Public Money* is surely positive.

Reservations aside, the interview-based material gave some important data. The material from Bruce Millan and others on the Scottish Office position in the PESC negotiations filled a hole and was a nice Scottish supplement to our general knowledge about the operation of PESC.

Again the material is particularly interesting on the role of Parliament. Rodger (p169) pointed out that it was only those members of the Opposition briefed by the EIS or by their local Directors of Education, that could make much of a contribution. Even more stage managed was when the Opposition asked the civil servants for headings for their speeches and even before the speech was made the civil servants could provide their

Ministers with a reply. Rodger was equally scathing about the interventions by MPs through Question Time where the questions were only loosely connected to the live issues that the teachers and authorities were discussing, 'He wasn't really asking the guts and substance of the thing at all.' The only thing that stops us including Parliament as one of the dignified elements of the Constitution is the fact that it is often not...

The degree of methodological introspection with which the authors approached their on-the-record interviews was both a strength and a weakness. It is important for researchers to consider the implications of their approaches, but life is difficult for empirical researchers with a highly developed sense of the lack of objective human reality. The authors agonised,

'...the nature of reality is itself contested, not only between historians and social theorists, but also between theorists of different persuasions. At the heart of these debates lie fundamental disagreements over which persons and events should figure in an explanation, and how they should be described. Thus data may arbitrate theory, but they may also be created by theory, insofar as theory finds a particular significance in events and redescribes them accordingly.'

Worse, they go on '...the view that 'reality' is constituted by an ideographic complexity is itself a conjecture.' (p9)

Apart from the obscurity of these passages – and even with a dictionary in hand I cannot understand whether they meant ideographic or idiographic as both seem equally irrelevant – there is the sense that some academic snobbery is slipping out – against what are seen as the crude mechanical efforts of empirical discovery.

The authors may be right in saying that (p499) there is a disputed nature of reality. The fact that there are different 'truths' to be told by different participants is a point that can be made without the hand wringing.

Their arguments brought to mind one of W J M Mackenzie's throw away comments, 'Empirical politics is no longer an intellectual slum: perhaps some philosophers would care to visit us?' (See *Explorations in Government*, 1975, p206)

Mackenzie is a strangely neglected figure in these chapters. We have few enough major thinkers in the fields of administration and policy making that we can afford to ignore them because they published in the wrong decade. Later is not necessarily better. Mackenzie would have been particularly useful for McPherson and Raab because he cheerfully admits to being part of the great and the good – though he seemed to use his entree

taling down information to be used in evidence against his colleagues. He was of the generation of McPherson and Raab's subjects and was steeped in the Scottish academic tradition. To look at the first few pages of his Introduction to the above work we find that his first paragraph claims that the study of politics involves the myths of power as well as legitimate authority and of rational human collaboration. A couple of pages later he is discussing *The Democratic Intellect*. He describes his attendance at Edinburgh Academy, '...lying in the heart of the Scottish bourgeoisie'. The self sufficiency of the Scottish educational system is confirmed when Mackenzie was telephoned to be told that as a seventeen year old he had won a scholarship to Balliol. As everyone seemed to think it 'a good thing', he had to mask the ignorant question, 'What was Balliol, please?'

It is praise to say that the mixture of reflection and detail, personalities and theories in *Governing Education* would please Mackenzie who avoided setting up different approaches as competitors. The book was very much his kind of party. He should have been invited.

The Myth of the Lad of Pairts

One of the key chapters discusses 'The Kirriemuir Career'. This sets out to discuss the 'Scottish Myth'. Presumably the term myth implies some untruth. In the Preface we are told that a particular, selective, and demonstrably incomplete picture of Scotland and its education system was represented as the empirical reality. (pxxi) This one assumes was the myth. It is not clear to this hopelessly biased product of Forfar Academy where the myth lies. It may be true that the sort of community school of Forfar and Kirrie's own Webster's Seminary is not in a statistical sense 'normal'. But their value to the educational policy makers could have been considerable in giving a standard of what a good school looked like. They could have provided a target. The authors on nearly their final page say that myths can celebrate values. In this sense the myth can be accurate even if the classroom experience of every pupil does not accord with it. One suspects that the authors have for so long accepted in their own minds that there was a myth here, that they presented their thesis in too cryptic form and have failed to cater for the reader who does not share their particular 'assumptive world'.

In the conclusion the authors deal with high level generalisations about authority, representation, legitimacy and the like. This is one kind of answer to the question, 'What was it really like?' but the novelty of the material was the horses' mouth detail about what people did and the conclusion was perhaps thin on these less abstract matters.

This is then a book that suffers by the standards it set for itself. It cannot quite deliver in all the areas in which it attempts to contribute. But it will be part of the dialogue in all these areas and perhaps the notion that

books can resolve arguments is naive. The best thing about the book is the quiet manner in which the book explores the undramatic politics of policy making through the creation of authority structures that in time look as if they are 'givens'. It shows how networks can operate by subconsciously selecting participants with particular values. It shows that civil servants can be more important to decisions than manifestoes and party posturing. Too often the assumption appears to be that there is a contest between democracy and the sort of politics of consultation among civil servants and interested parties. But to reduce that input of expertise and to reject the views of the affected is hardly to enhance the operation of a practical democracy. The book shows that our understanding of a democratic society is enhanced by on the record interviews from the main participants. They are no friends of democracy those who attempt to protect us from the facts of our democratic life. The Scottish Office deserve credit for their tolerant non-intervention.

Grant Jordan, Department of Politics and International Relations,
University of Aberdeen.