

References

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Foreign Flowers: institutional transfer and good governance in the Pacific islands

Peter Larmour, 2005, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 220pp. ISBN 0 8248 29336

What is good governance? Who should determine this matter in a particular country? Is there one ideal model, against which all specific national arrangements can be judged to be either good or poor approximations? Or should we recognise the need for a range of relevant and apposite models? In assessing the appropriateness of certain models, how much weight should be given to the history and culture of each nation? Would this leave us in a relativist vacuum with no firm standards by which to assess the adequacy of institutions?

These are big questions, requiring complex answers. Dr Peter Larmour offers a clear and wide-ranging account of why these have become important issues in the Pacific island nations.

In the first instance, during the period of colonialism, institutional change was largely imposed by force. In more recent decades, changes have been strongly influenced through the direct and indirect impact of foreign aid programs, in which power and coercion are not necessarily absent, and regional relationships/forums. In both periods, external prescriptions for change have been mediated through local leaders and local cultures. In exploring these issues, Larmour alludes to the diverse histories of many countries, and the different fate of

many institutional experiments. He also explores how the various sponsors of reforms have evaluated their successes and failures, noting the perspectives of local leaders and reformers, aid donors, international financial institutions, and their consultants and academic advisers. He is sceptical about recipes for reform, whether from Transparency International or the World Bank.

Foreign Flowers is a sophisticated interdisciplinary work that tackles many aspects of how and why European and American ideas about good governance have been inserted into the theory and practice of institution-building in the Pacific. Larmour uses the term 'transfer' of policies and institutional practices, rather than the value-laden assumptions of 'development' and 'evolution'. He sets out to examine the following questions.

- Where did the (new) institutions come from?
- Why did so many local institutions end up looking like those in the West?
- Why did some transfers take hold and others not?
- What were the effects of transfer?
- What has been the fate of a particular institution, the state?
- What role does culture play in the transfer and in resistance to the transfer? (p.10)

Larmour widely employs empirical examples to illustrate his general themes. Five policy areas provide the main focus of his analysis

- the standardisation of customary land ownership and registration
- constitutionalism and the imposition of the rule of law through the state
- electoral laws and representative democracy
- public sector reform in the name of efficiency and effectiveness, but often

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also promoting market-based solutions and private investment, and

- anti-corruption measures to draw a stronger line between private or traditional loyalties and the public or general interest (p.53).

These examples are analysed in the middle chapters of the book (Chapters 4–6), and illustrate the divergent nature of experience and context among the Pacific island nations. These chapters include some astute observations on the interplay between local circumstances, including post-colonial leadership and culture, and external authorities such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

In the second half of the book, which includes some very substantial concluding chapters, Larmour successfully demonstrates how the diverse experience of the Pacific islands may shed more general light on fundamental social science questions about patterns and explanations in the transfer or transplantation of governance models. Chapter 7 examines circumstances that seem to be associated with the review of old practices and the take-up of new practices, such as crises and commissions of inquiry leading to a range of preferred approaches. But the paths from ideas to implementation are tortuous rather than linear. Existing patterns constrain but do not determine these paths, and 'successful' institutionalisation of new patterns takes time to achieve, taking into account many actors and networks of influence.

Chapter 8 reviews some of the social science models for explaining transfers of ideas and programs. Larmour also takes up the issues of political will and political power. Useful insight is provided into the fundamental dialectic between donors and recipients, which infuses much of the reform process and is partly a struggle for the dominance of specific forms of knowledge (pp.161–2). Chapter 9 summarises the performance or effectiveness of new arrangements, and naturally finds the record extremely uneven.

Overall, this is a closely argued and highly condensed work covering a lot of ground. It will repay careful reading, and is a welcome addition to the social science literature on governance, reform and the Pacific.

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