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Congress and the Environment, edited by Richard Cooley and Geoffrey Wandesforde-Smith

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BOOK REVIEWS

Congress and the Environment

Edited By

RICHARD COOLEY and GEOFFREY WANDESFORDE-SMITH

Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1970

Pp. 227, \$8.95

The verdict of the editors and the predominant sentiment of the authors in *Congress and the Environment* is that Congress cannot cope with the deterioration of the world around us. The judgment derives from a series of case studies of the legislative histories and content of a number of environmental bills handled by recent sessions of Congress. Whether the issue was preservation of the north cascades or redwoods, the abatement of noise or water pollution, highway beautification, or a range of others studied by an interdisciplinary seminar at the University of Washington and included in the book, the incremental adjustments of policy made by the national legislature were held to fall short of what is necessary.

In tracing congressional actions on specific environmental problems, the book identifies a number of hurdles to policy innovation, among which are: the excessive localism of congressmen, especially members of the House; the fragmentation of the congressional attack upon problems which accompanies the parcelling out of a subject to a number of committees; the dominant position which the seniority system gives to some entrenched and insensitive congressional leaders; the hegemonies which exist between cooperating congressional committees and administrative agencies and serve parochial, economic, and bureaucratic interests at odds with more general environmental concerns; the lack of technical expertise of congressmen and their staffs.

Only by setting its own house in order, it is argued, can Congress adequately respond to the requirements of the environment. In their conclusion, the editors, Richard Cooley and Geoffrey Wandesforde-Smith, prescribe fundamental institutional reforms. It is suggested that congressional responsibility in the area of environmental quality be focused in a smaller number of committees which can deal with the whole issue of setting national goals and priorities in relation to the needs of the environment. It is further suggested that Congress reorganize the executive branch to give one agency the specific, sole, full-time responsibility of assessing the rate of change in the environment.

Congress and the Environment would have been a better book had the viewpoint of the congressmen been expressed as clearly as that of the environmentalist. The collection of case studies suffers from the lack of a political model of the policy-making process which would orient the actions of individual political actors on individual bills into a general pattern of politics in environmental decision-making. Any politician calculates his action within a policy-making structure which determines his risks and rewards and frames his options. He must concern himself with his ability to influence and with the effects of actions and events upon his future opportunities to exercise power. He is a finely tuned instrument for measuring political rationality which is the process of balancing support generated for a proposal against the opposition aroused by it. Without questioning the urgency which the authors and especially the editors express about the environmental crisis, it is still possible to wonder whether the rational actions they desire would seem at all rational to the Congressional politicians they criticize.

To effectively change the sort of environmental policy being made means to change the calculation of political rationality in environmental politics. Lynton K. Caldwell observes in his epilogue to the book that American society harbors a number of values dysfunctional to effective environmental policy and there are discontinuities in the social structure which are detrimental to real policy commitment to ecological principles. These are the forces to which congressmen have been responsive in their actions. Perhaps change is occurring. There is much evidence to suggest it is. However, it is questionable whether tampering with institutional machinery would have much effect.

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