

Andrew Armitage, *Comparing the Policy of Aboriginal Assimilation: Australia, Canada and New Zealand*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1995, 289 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), 24.95 (paper).

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Andrew Armitage has produced another original and thorough social policy study. At the time of publication he was Director of the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria. In this book he employs his analytical rigour for a comparative study of ethnocidal, assimilationist and post-assimilationist initiatives in the child welfare policies of the Anglo-Commonwealth dominions: Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

Armitage's book models good comparative policy analysis by providing context and perspective to assist the understanding of differences and similarities and their relevance to the reader's context. Armitage is a scholar who takes comparison seriously; his method and rationales are explicit. His disciplined historical-analytical framework is very helpful to the reader, who is enabled to discern and comprehend the reason for the similarities and differences between policy regimes, and to identify their unique characteristics.

Armitage avoids the facile approach sometimes evident in comparative studies where the basis for comparison is largely implicit, or where casual and acontextual comparisons are thrown in by way of examples without sufficient recognition of the need for contextual specificity and recognition of historical contingencies surrounding the example. Such specificity requires an interdisciplinary knowledge of all countries being compared. Perhaps not surprisingly, few analytically rigorous comparative social policy studies embracing all three Anglo-Commonwealth dominions have recently been conducted.

Research of the kind presented in this book is therefore seldom attempted and enormously hard to do well, in my experience. Problems of cost and time add further complexity. The simple task of keeping track of recent policy changes and shifts in political nuance requires a sustained intimacy with more than one place at a time. Despite the information superhighway, there really is no substitute for being there or having been there over a sustained period to assimilate the peculiarities of the place. Armitage's three country comparison — Australia and Canada and (contrasting?) New Zealand is grounded in extensive fieldwork, well chosen local expert guides and readers and carefully selected thematic categories. The result is a very commendable evenness of treatment of all three countries.

Armitage alerts readers to the specific differences and similarities to which they ought to be attuned. For example, he highlights the fact that Australia and Canada, for reasons of size and their federal political-judicial institutional arrangements, are apparently natural subjects for comparativists. New

Zealand, on the other hand, complicates comparison by being a unitary and highly centralised state.

Canada and New Zealand have, at least rhetorically, a treaty-based relationship between the Crown and indigenous first nation peoples. In Australia the notorious *terra nullius* (land of no one) doctrine has until very recently rationalised the absence of any treaty basis for settler/indigenous first nation peoples relations. The Australian Commonwealth [federal] Government only assumed conjoint responsibility with the states, which had hitherto enjoyed exclusive jurisdiction, for Aboriginal affairs from 1967 onwards. Prior to that the constitution explicitly excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from the jurisdiction of the federal government and from being counted in the census for computing population for federal parliamentary constituencies. Indeed, it has taken the Mabo court decision in 1992 to recognize the existence of Native Title and implicitly therefore to acknowledge the *terra nullius* doctrine for what it was, a convenient legal fiction justifying dispossession and ethnocide. By contrast, New Zealand Maori acquired citizenship from 1840 under the Treaty of Waitangi and four parliamentary seats from 1867 were reserved for them.

In contrast to the Canadian arrangement in the form of Indian Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) and the array of eclectic self-government arrangements, and the New Zealand arrangement based on the Ministry of Maori Development and an eclectic assembly of Maori service providers, Australia dissolved the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in the early 1990s. Governance of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services was then devolved to a Commission elected by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander constituencies in the name of self-management.

Child welfare is a central government function in New Zealand whereas it falls under state jurisdiction in Australia and provincial jurisdiction in Canada, with the federal governments having a merely facilitating role. In all three countries indigenous first nation peoples have been very active in their quest to regain control of child welfare provision, with varying degrees of material success though with universal rhetorical support from governments. Armitage's approach effectively highlights the enormous diversity of policies and programmes which evolved in all three jurisdictions, which were nevertheless unified in their assimilationist mission.

Unlike in Australia and Canada, assimilationist child welfare policies in New Zealand have never gone as far as the forced removal of children from their families and their compulsory sequestration for re-socialisation in settler church or state institutions. In all three countries, however, English was imposed on generations of indigenous first nation children as the sole medium of school instruction.

The book is intelligently structured, based on chapters which compare and contrast across countries — the Introduction', chapter 8 on "Similarities

and Differences” and a drawing together of themes in a concluding synthesis (chapter 9 entitled “Understanding the Policy of Aboriginal Assimilation”). The core of the book is based on six chapters which present a country-by-country analysis. Each country is addressed first by a chapter outlining the general structure of policy and programmes for managing and controlling and assimilating indigenous first nation peoples from the outset of settlement and second by a chapter describing and analysing the specific dimensions of child welfare policies affecting indigenous first nation peoples in that country. Armitage’s strategy to cope with the phenomenon of an enormous diversity of policy and programmes is to identify specific jurisdictions and distinctive stakeholders and programmes, almost a case study method.

Overall the book’s scheme for organising and presenting the complex subject matter is very well done. I would have no hesitation in encouraging readers in social policy, law, politics, sociology and anthropology to orient themselves through Armitage’s general chapters on each country, to the macro-level institutional form and historical evolution of general policy. The rationale for his appropriate and well analysed selections of theme and focus in the specific chapters on child welfare policy is inevitably less explicit.

Readers may suffer some disappointment created by the gap between the 1995 publication date and the time of the apparent completion of the actual studies. To judge from the references and policies analysed, the focus of his studies substantively ended in the late eighties and very early nineties. It is actually a tribute to the depth of Armitage’s understanding of each country that this *de facto* cut-off point is frustrating, since one’s confidence in his analysis is such that one wishes for his critique of more recent developments.

There are at least three basic reasons why this is a book which should be read by scholars in social policy, law, politics, sociology and anthropology:

1. as a way into the assimilationist and embryonic post-assimilationist policies of the Anglo-Commonwealth dominions
2. for a substantive and insight ful overview of child welfare policies
3. for a model of comparative social policy analysis

Furthermore, the book is very easy to read and contains a unique bibliography. What more could one ask?
