

## Book Reviews

### BUREAUCRACY UNDER ATTACK

Ezra Suleiman: *Dismantling Democratic States*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003. Pp. xii, 327. \$ 9.50.)

Bureaucracy today, as Ezra Suleiman points out in his latest book, is frequently the scapegoat for the sins of government leadership. Ronald Reagan's mantra that "government is not the solution to the problem, government is the problem" (p. 63) is not a piece of partisan politics. Al Gore also claimed that "there is no way to re-establish confidence in government and confidence in ourselves as a free nation unless we can dramatically change the way the federal government works" (p. 309). In *Dismantling Democratic States* Suleiman does an extremely good job of exposing the danger to democracy posed by such anti-statist, downsizing rhetoric. Suleiman is an advocate of an independent professional bureaucracy with a Weberian "impersonal" authority, considering it to be a necessary ingredient of even the most advanced democracies. Such an apparatus is needed for the state to remain a guardian of order, of security, of social harmony, and a source for engendering trust. Today bureaucracy is under attack, principally from the movement known as "New Public Management" (NPM), which seeks to dismantle bureaucracy, but also from the increasing politicization of the remaining bureaucracy. It is Suleiman's task to show that the putative justification for NPM is absent, that the effect that such a program is having and will have on civic community is disastrous, and that the greatest threat to the authority of government and the health of democracy is the trend toward turning bureaucracy into an instrument of the governing political party of the day.

Supporters of NPM see bureaucracy as essentially in conflict with democracy. They seek to privatize the public sector, to make government an enterprise that provides services to citizens who purchase those services. An independent professional bureaucracy only gets in the way of such an enterprise. Hence they seek to eliminate it by way of downsizing public service in absolute terms, contracting out services whenever possible, advocating competition between agencies performing the same function, and devolving authority to the street level. To justify this they appeal to widespread public distrust of and dissatisfaction with government bureaucracy. But the empirical evidence does not support this conclusion. As Suleiman shows, the evidence is that people have more confidence in the federal government than they do in,

for example, labor unions, large corporations, the press, or the legal system (p. 86). The truth of the matter is that people in the United States are supportive of extensive governmental responsibilities and the professional bureaucracy that is required to deliver on them. Their criticism is better understood as directed at government leadership itself. While it is true that in the United States adoption of downsizing NPM reforms has followed distrust and dissatisfaction with government, there is no causal link between the two. As Suleiman's comparative analysis reveals, countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands have initiated this kind of change in their bureaucracy without the requisite distrust on the part of their citizenry. Meanwhile countries such as Italy, Japan, France, and Germany have experienced citizens' distrust and dissatisfaction with government without the resulting dismantling of state bureaucracy. The conclusion is that "the U.S. is the only state where the extensive adoption of NPM reforms follows a strong growth in distrust of government" (p. 65).

What does such possibly un-called-for NPM reform amount to? It amounts to a form of societal *hara-kiri*, according to Suleiman. In the citizen-as-customer model of participatory democracy, the citizen is merely a purchaser of services. Little is expected from her or him, and she or he has no commitments or responsibilities to fellow-citizens. There is no public good to be promoted. The result is the beginning of the end of civic community. At various strategic points in this book Suleiman appeals to Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon and Schuster, 2000) to paint a grim picture of the societal ills that lie in wait if NPM is fully implemented. There is some irony here. Proponents of NPM take *Bowling Alone* as evidence of growing disconnectedness among Americans. This is something that they seek to curb by way of administrative reform. But the effect of NPM is to increase the social atomization that Putnam decries. Suleiman does not, however, merely prophesy the demise of civic community should the citizenry be reduced to customers. He argues that the demise of civic community contributes to the overall weakening of democracy. Full-time, not part-time, democracy requires meaningful participation by the citizenry. Here he invokes Ronald Dworkin, who, writing on "The Curse of American Politics," says that "to achieve that sense of national partnership in self-government it is not enough for a community to treat citizens only as if they were shareholders in a company. It must design institutions, practices, and conventions that allow them to be more engaged in public life" (p. 307). Suleiman concurs with Dworkin, and may be said to second Lionel Jospin: "Yes to a market economy, not to a market society" (p. 173).

The second way in which bureaucracy is being attacked is that it is being politicized. The decline in prestige of the civil service, the gradual disappearance of the career bureaucrat, is practically a worldwide phenomenon, and has been noted. What is not so well known is that the vacuum is being filled with party loyalists for the duration of each government. Elected leaders no longer think of the federal government as an independent resource, an institution that preserves continuity between governments and that grows policy. They no longer seek to preserve the division between politics and the federal bureaucracy that traditionally helped to give stability and authority to democracy. Instead we have seen the rise of cronyism on an alarming scale. In the United States in particular, at least since Richard Nixon, and by way of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 under Jimmy Carter, the number of political appointments made by the president has steadily increased, with the result that now "it is estimated that the president has approximately three thousand political appointments to

make when coming into office. Indeed, the placing of party loyalists is one of the most important functions of the cumbersome transition process." (p. 217). The gradual deterioration of the nonpartisan bureaucracy into a politicized instrument is the darkest lesson of this book.

What, then, is to be done? About this Suleiman has very little to say. The simple preservation of bureaucracy against the advances of NPM will not work, since bureaucracy is increasingly politicized. The de-politicization of bureaucracy is also required, in order for it to recover its former authority and its power for serving the public. What is needed is the kind of separation of government and civil service that was enshrined in the Hatch Act of 1939 in the United States, and that was upheld by Clement Atlee in 1945 when he became leader of Britain's first postwar Labour government and refused to purge any of the bureaucracy accustomed to serving conservative governments. But how is this to be achieved? In *Bowling Alone* Putnam proposed an agenda to revitalize civic community that included increased involvement of Americans in politics, and advocated decentralizing government authority as far as possible. What is needed just as much is the increased support of Americans for their bureaucratic institutions, combined with increased vigilance against further encroachments on the impartiality of those institutions by politicians.

—James Edwin Mahon