

Book Reviews

International Rivers: The Politics of Cooperation, by David G. LeMarquand. Vancouver: Westwater Research Centre, University of British Columbia, 1977. Pp. 138.

There are at least three important reasons for welcoming this tightly written book. First, it directs attention to the important subject — the extent to which the riparian states which share so many of the world's more than 200 international river basins have had difficulty in agreeing upon the joint use of their shared water resource. Its primary objective, indeed, is to identify the considerations which appear to facilitate and those which appear to frustrate the negotiation of effective agreements for the development and use of such rivers. And its candidly recognized assumption is that much more co-operative river development than we have had to date will be for the general advantage of all mankind.

A second reason for welcoming Mr. LeMarquand's study is that it hammers home a lesson which, in our enthusiasm for analytic effort, we are often inclined to forget. The making of public policy, and especially public policy that transcends national boundaries, is labyrinthine. Methodologically, furthermore, this book is valuable in that its author has done what political scientists so often enjoin on us but all too infrequently attempt themselves. In this case the author has first developed a sophisticated analytic framework for examining the incentives to co-operate or not co-operate in the development of international rivers, and then has applied it to a number of issues which have emerged in four watersheds. His case studies examine, in turn, the Colorado River salt pollution problem, the Columbia River Treaty, the Skagit River-Ross Dam controversy, and various international agreements which bear on the pollution of the Rhine. The end result of this effort is that he has been able to cut horizontally through four complex approaches to both agreement and stalemate, and to generate some very useful insights concerning a distinctive category of decisions.

Overall, Mr. LeMarquand's theme is that understanding the incentives to co-operate in river development, to act independently, or not to act at all, requires an appreciation of the environment of decision in its broadest sense. Clearly, the hydrologic characteristics of a river and the physical location of states within its basin are relevant considerations. These have a direct bearing on the nature of the economic incentives or disincentives to co-operate, which incentives may involve quasi-public good like benefits, more often common pool resources, sometimes real opportunities to heighten system benefits, and often substantial difficulties in their allocation. Mr. LeMarquand's categorizations here (in chapter 2) are especially helpful. But he goes on to insist that international river development involves a host of foreign policy considerations such as questions of international law, sovereignty, reciprocity, and, most importantly, image building as well as the linkage of such questions with other bilateral issues. And, he points out, it involves as well an extensive range of domestic political considerations, the roles of executive and bureaucratic actors, and the varied styles of external behaviour associated with exercises in distributive, redistributive and regulatory politics. Identifying the admittedly variable significance of these considerations lies at the heart of his analytic perspective.

His case studies are well handled — even though in a few cases the process of condensation (each is dealt with, on average, in twenty-five pages) has led to some ambiguities. In his treatment of the Columbia Treaty, for instance, the author probably overdoes the weight which Canada's national government gave to General McNaughton's proposed diversion of the Columbia into the Fraser River (p. 58); the storage sites which the United States did not exploit in the Eisenhower years were not on the mainstream of that river (p. 55); British Columbia's approach to the Libby project is oversimplified (pp. 61, 71); and B.C. really did not use the sale of the downstream power benefit in the Columbia to finance part of the Peace River's development (p. 75). Similarly, it may well be that a compensation agreement of the type he refers to will provide the most acceptable solution to the Skagit impasse (p. 91), but the question remains debatable. These, however, are minor quibbles.

Mr. LeMarquand's fundamental conclusion is that such international river agreements as have emerged to date have not led to a maximization of economic benefits stemming from co-operative action, or necessarily to an equitable division of those created. Rather trade-offs from optimal system solutions have emerged, and seem to have been inevitable (p. 74).

Hence he insists that the analysis designed to lead to proposed co-operative action in future should go well beyond the consideration of efficiency in purely economic terms. He believes that by providing technical assistance, e.g., helping to generate intra-watershed consensus, and by sponsoring some types of payment, the UN and similar agencies can facilitate the generation of international river agreements, especially in the less developed world. He also suggests that states which become party to international river agreements should move to implement them within a specified and not too extended period, or find them automatically open for renegotiation. Experience with the Columbia and Skagit agreements seems to underscore the wisdom of this recommendation.

On the other hand, his conclusion that such agreements might wisely provide for "fixed periodic renegotiation" as a "release mechanism" accommodating to changing circumstances over time (p. 134), while attractive, will surely require further investigation. It stems in large part from the interesting conclusion that agreements leading to co-operative intra-basin effort need not result in improved inter-state relations. The difficulty with Mr. LeMarquand's suggestion here is that so often a major incentive for reaching agreement in the first place stems from the fact that such agreements (with all their problems) are often, to use a classic phrase, "uncertainty absorbing contracts." As such, they often are accepted in the face of alternatives which are less attractive at the time, but which may at least involve reasonably precise and identifiable benefits and costs. The "renegotiation down the road" option may well introduce a new degree of uncertainty into the original calculus which has the effect of making agreement in the first instance more rather than less difficult to obtain.

This, however, is to speculate only about what we may learn from future research and experience. Mr. LeMarquand draws attention to the fact that his case studies deal largely with developed nations and need to be supplemented. It is to be hoped that they are, for his analytic framework is the end-product of much clear thinking on his part, and that of his associate, Professor Irving Fox.

His framework, indeed, must be classified as a genuine contribution to the body of water resource development literature which, it is not unreasonable to claim, over a generation has served to heighten both our understanding of the policy-making process and our capacity to refine it.