

Olaf Tans, Carla Zoethout and Jit Peters (eds). ***National Parliaments and European Democracy: A Bottom-up Approach to European Constitutionalism***. Groningen: European Law Publishing, 2007. Pp. xii + 253. €65, \$108. ISBN: 9076871813.

The role that national parliaments (NPs) should play in the European Union (EU) policy-making process is an increasingly hot topic, primarily due to growing concerns that there is a 'democratic deficit' in the EU. The reality is that NPs exercise very little power over what happens in Brussels – something that may explain the rather limited academic research on the topic. But recent initiatives, such as those found in the proposed but now failed constitutional treaty, suggest that the future could be somewhat brighter. In this very well-written and highly organized volume, an impressive group of scholars tackle this important topic.

Their approach is quite original. Most analyses of NPs in the EU end up recommending changes based on some abstract normative principles of democracy, representation, and institutional theories of government. The editors of this volume instead propose a 'bottom-up' approach: 'this means that the national political systems and cultures of the Member States are considered to be the prime source of inspiration, the main input, to the process of establishing supranational norms' (at 6). How are the Member States trying to involve NPs in EU policy-making? What rights and constraints do they put on their legislative bodies, and on the bases of what principles?

Nine rigorous and highly informative empirical chapters provide insight into as many Member States. While the selection of the countries is not satisfactorily explained (why include, for instance, Belgium, but not France, and Hungary but not Spain?), and while the otherwise impressive and detailed amount of data may be excessive given the objective of the book, these chapters do position the editors in such a way as to draw some interesting conclusions at the end of the

book. The Member States share certain traits: they all adhere to the principles of democracy (that is, they all believe that NPs, as representatives of the people, should participate in EU affairs), to the principle of ministerial responsibility (according to which ministers working on EU policies must ultimately report to the legislative branch), and they all have a political culture in which in practice the executive and the legislative branches are mutually dependent on each other, though ultimately the latter dominates. The comparative exercise appears to have been worthwhile. What should we make, then, of the observed similarities?

In a move that, in a way, undermines the entire exercise, the editors end with the recommendation that we in effect forget about these similarities. Why? Because these similarities would ultimately lead us to suggest that NPs should have more input in the European decision-making process. For a number of reasons (above all 'practical complications'), having NPs give more input is bound to bear little fruit (at 247). The conclusion is thus quite different: that NPs become instigators of national-level dialogues and debates about the EU, in 'firing up domestic discourses on European affairs' (at 247), so that citizens become at once better informed and eager to play a part. This is an interesting suggestion, but one that could have probably been made without the extensive empirical investigations of dynamics in nine countries. But this is a minor problem – both because of the inherent quality and usefulness of each of the empirical chapters and the insights found in the more theoretical chapters at the beginning and end of the book. My conclusion is therefore straightforward: this is a thoroughly enjoyable, informative, and ambitious book that no scholar of NPs in the EU can afford to overlook.

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