

Review of Women in the South African Parliament: From Resistance to Government by Hannah E. Britton, (University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2005)

This modest book describes the gendered transformation of the South African parliament during the transition from apartheid in the 1990s. The author interviewed dozens of women parliamentarians, and many shared their concerns and expectations of their new roles. The focus of the book is not on individual experiences, but rather how the new female parliamentarians reshaped Parliament, and how the exigencies of political life in Parliament in turn reshaped the parliamentarians.

The book begins with a lengthy chapter on women in the South African liberation struggle against apartheid. The author does a nice job of exploring the paradoxes of liberation struggle within a patriarchal organization and society. There is a nice introduction to South African women's organizations and their evolution over time. My one quibble, and unfortunately an important one for teachers thinking of assigning the book, is that there is no clear time-line presented in this introductory chapter for the transition from apartheid. So while several pages explain clearly how the Boers came into being, and follow their travails in the 1800s, there is nothing similar helping the reader understand the political transition. F.W. de Klerk, for example, does not appear anywhere in the book. Britton seems to have taken for granted that everyone would know how and why the transition happened.

Chapter 2 addresses the role of the Women's National Coalition (WNC) in the context of the transition, and its roots in earlier women's organizations. Britton does a creditable job demonstrating how the WNC may have been responsible for what became perhaps the most gender-progressive constitution in the world, and for the most well-known gender quota by a major political party, the 30% quota of the African National Congress. There is no doubt also that these achievements were major departures from the experience of previous African liberation struggles, where women were cast out from national politics after power was attained. An opportunity is wasted in this chapter, however, to give a thorough explanation of the role and controversy of Winnie Mandela as a narrative touchpoint for exploring the issues during the transition. Instead, only two oblique paragraphs are devoted to the subject (p. 47). Was she not a woman in Parliament with a public record that might be of interest in a discussion of women's issues? The omission draws attention to a more general problem with the book: when it comes to political conflict Britton strives for generalization at the expense of the particular and day-to-day battles of politics. There is no *journalism* (in the good sense) in the book, and that, it seems to this reviewer, is a missed opportunity. It is as if Britton were worried about offending particular persons. The surely unintended consequence is that all of the excitement and drama of the transition has been stripped from the narrative.

Chapter 3 addresses women's integration into Parliament. Britton examines, in this and subsequent chapters, the critical mass hypothesis that legislation and policy will increasingly favor women if women parliamentarians or policy makers cross a threshold. The hypothesis posits a disjuncture, somewhere around 30%. Britton adds nicely to this literature through her extensive interviews with women parliamentarians by asking how effective women can be when the parliament is profoundly gendered in such a way as to

greatly reduce their effectiveness. She traces, with her interviews, the many obstacles of extra workload, male resistance, party policy, double workdays where childcare is expected in the evening, etc.

Chapter 4 is a valuable and interesting classification of women parliamentarians into various socio-economic backgrounds, tracing their shared attitudes and abilities. Britton demonstrates with clear prose the nice point that women parliamentarians in transitions like the South African transition may have widely different backgrounds. The point made here, and then in the Chapter 7 on the second generation, is that non-professional women have a very difficult time indeed. The party and state then would seem to have an obligation to create and maintain the training structures needed to ensure non-professional women can thrive in parliament. Just as South Africa was a pioneer in generating formal representation, so too is there an opportunity for ensuring broad rather than elite representation.

Suffused in the substantive chapters of the book is a major theme: what have women accomplished in the political sphere in South Africa? Britton is not entirely laudatory (p. 85): "Gaining formal political representation for women may be seen as the most significant accomplishment of the women's movement in South Africa to date." But has that representation secured gains for ordinary women? Britton uses the words "effective" and "success" a lot in the book. Has representation been effective? Has it been successful? Consider page 142, where there are, on the single page, ten separate instances where statements about "effects/effectiveness" or "success" are made. Some of the statements are Britton's own position; some are her reports or quotes from other authors. Yet, none of the statements is actually founded on a carefully established metric and then consideration of outcomes. Instead, the statements are generalities, almost platitudes, and are not critically examined.

In presenting the legislative accomplishments of female parliamentarians and the possibilities that South Africa has institutionalized state feminism, Britton stumbles. Without a metric of effectiveness or success, though, too often the discussion ends up being of the sort: "It did this and this was good, but it also did that and that was bad." The reader has no way to judge what Britton's position is overall. Consider, for example, the discussion of the Commission on Gender Equality. Brief mention is made (p. 119) of the Commission's search and seizure power. An evaluation is promised in the following chapter. There, in Chapter 6, it turns out that only two short paragraphs are devoted to CGE activities, and one paragraph to challenges to the organization. There is no discussion of the search and seizure provisions that were discussed in the earlier chapter. The discussion of the other elements on the National Gender Machinery is likewise elliptical, so that the reader will find himself or herself searching the web for newspaper articles that describe more fully what the gender organizations actually did.

Moreover, there is little material presented in the book on the actual debates on women's issues and interventions by women on those issues in Parliament. In fact, there seems to be only one quote in the whole book from a floor speech by a woman in parliament (p. 53). This despite the apparent careful work by Britton to go through the entire parliamentary record (p. 165-6). While there are occasional summaries of debates, it would have been valuable, and is a missed opportunity, not to have more content-

analysis (either quantitative or textual) of pertinent debates. More attention is devoted in the book to the censorship and pornography issue, even though Britton quite rightly notes that this was an elite issue of little concern to the ordinary working woman in South Africa. Bread and butter issues are, however, largely absent from the book. No mention is made of the South African pension, of schooling policy, and there is only a passing nod to land ownership issues.

All in all, this is a commendable introduction to gender issues confronting women parliamentarians in South Africa. One hopes the author will go on to produce more work on gender policy, and also to continue to track and report on the experiences of women parliamentarians in South Africa. Chapters of the book will be useful for classes in political science on the experience of women in politics, and more broadly of researchers examining the links between women's representation in government and gender policy.

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