In Defense of Pluralism

The work of early pluralist thinkers, from Arthur Bentley to Robert Dahl, inspired much optimism about democracy. They argued that democracy was functioning well, despite disagreements arising among the diversity of interests represented in policy-making processes. Yet it is unlikely that anyone paying attention to news coverage today would share such optimism. The media portrays current policy-making processes as intractably polarized, devoid of any opportunity to move forward and adopt essential policy changes. This book aims to revive our long-lost sense of optimism about policy-making and democracy. Through original research into biotechnology policy-making in North America and Europe, Éric Montpetit shows that the depiction of policy-making offered by early pluralist thinkers is not so far off the present reality. Today’s policy decision-making process – complete with disagreement among the participants – is consistent with what might be expected in a pluralist society, in sharp contrast with the negative image projected by the media.

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The Cambridge Studies in Comparative Public Policy series was established to promote and disseminate comparative research in public policy. The objective of the series is to advance the understanding of public policies through the publication of the results of comparative research into the nature, dynamics, and contexts of major policy challenges and responses to them. Works in the series will draw critical insights that enhance policy learning and are generalizable beyond specific policy contexts, sectors, and time periods. Such works will also compare the development and application of public policy theory across institutional and cultural settings and examine how policy ideas, institutions, and practices shape policies and their outcomes. Manuscripts comparing public policies in two or more cases as well as theoretically informed critical case studies which test more general theories are encouraged. Studies comparing policy development over time are also welcomed.

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In Defense of Pluralism

Policy Disagreement and Its Media Coverage

ÉRIC MONTPETIT
Université de Montréal
To Gisèle, Jean-Claude, and Martin
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Acknowledgments

As my mother has repeatedly told me, I have a “spirit of contradiction.” It was therefore probably no surprise to her to learn that I was writing a book about disagreement. Ever since I became interested in politics, my parents, my brother, and I have had many political disagreements that were never left un-debated. In fact, our dinner table has seen its fair share of heated arguments. Interestingly, our debates rarely centered around electoral politics – for reasons that I still don’t understand, my father was never willing to reveal who he was voting for. However, he and my mother never hesitated to express policy preferences, with which I often disagreed. And my brother was not always on my side! While often quite animated, these dinner debates were never unpleasant, and they taught me to believe that disagreement serves a useful purpose. They forced me to think carefully about my own policy positions, and about the way that I present these positions to others. Occasionally, they made me change my mind. In a sense, our dinner table was a small pluralist society and it undoubtedly inspired me. For this reason, this book is dedicated to my parents and brother.

This book is the result of more than ten years of policy research in North America and in Europe. Over the years, several people have had significant influence on my work and thinking. The first person I would like to thank is my good old friend Christian Rouillard. I spent many hours discussing politics with Christian in my formative years, and despite our ontological and epistemological differences, these discussions remain engraved in my mind. In my early work, I was an ardent defender of the corporatist arrangements that are so common in European countries. As most defenders of this model of governance, I took for granted that consensus was better than disagreement. Christian convinced me that there are good reasons to worry about consensus, while disagreement might simply be the sign of a healthy democracy. This perspective has certainly informed this book and I owe it to Christian.
I am also indebted to Charles Blattberg who introduced me to the work of Bernard Crick. Crick’s ideas deepened my thinking about disagreement and motivated me to write this book. Charles was also the first to read a draft of the manuscript and provide detailed comments. Although I have not implemented all of his numerous suggestions, his comments forced me to rethink several sections, helping me make the book better. James Ian Gow also read the entire manuscript and provided good suggestions, and his comments reassured me about the soundness of some of the book’s arguments. Many thanks to both of them.

I would also like to thank Christine Rothmayr, Erick Lachapelle, Francis Garon, André Blais, Frank Baumgartner, Patrik Marier, David Aubin, Martial Foucault, and Will Coleman who gave me useful advice while I wrote the book. Christine not only offered advice, she also provided essential psychological support during our coffee breaks! I had the chance to work with excellent students and research assistants over the years. I want to thank Jean-Philippe Gauvin, Matthieu Mondou, Catherine Pelletier, Rukmini Canape-Brunet, Alison Smith, Elisa Carolina, Alexandre Harvey, and Pascal Doray-Demers, whose professionalism and various skills benefitted the research behind this book. Ellen Warkentin read through the manuscript several times, providing excellent suggestions to improve the book’s readability while forcing me to be as precise as possible in my thinking. I wrote most of this book while I was department chair. The department staff knew about my book project and always respected the periods that I had set aside to write. Jocelyne Sauvé and Marie-Andrée Lavertu not only respected these periods, they efficiently guarded my door against intrusion. Thank you for your support.

Sections of the book were presented to various academic audiences that asked tough questions and offered useful suggestions. I would like to thank Michael Atkinson for giving me the opportunity to present some of the work behind this book at the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan. David Aubin offered me a similar opportunity at the Université Catholique de Louvain, and Frédéric Varone at the University of Geneva. Katherine Boothe and Peter Graefe welcomed me at McMaster University, my alma mater, for a talk on disagreement and policy-making. At the invitation of Frédéric Bouchard, I gave a similar talk at the Centre...
Acknowledgments

interuniversitaire de recherche sur la science et la technologie (CIRST) and received excellent comments from Jean-Pierre Beaud and François Claveau. In the fall of 2014, at the invitation of Jean-Gabriel Contamin, I was a visiting scholar at the Centre d’études et de recherches administratives, politiques et sociales (CERAPS) at the Université de Lille 2. Jean-Gabriel gave me the opportunity to present this book to the members of the CERAPS and, with Guillaume Courty, raised excellent and challenging questions. Sincere thanks to all of these people.

Most of the research behind this book was funded through grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The SSHRC helps Canadian social scientists conduct some of the best research in the world, and I am extremely fortunate to have received grants from this organization throughout my career. Over the past ten years, I also benefited from grants from the Fonds québécois de recherche sur la société et la culture (FQRSC), Génome Québec, and Génome Canada, which were a much-appreciated source of support throughout my research.

I receive great encouragement at home from my wife, Geneviève Bouchard, and my daughter, Chloé Bouchard-Montpetit, as I take on demanding projects such as writing books. More importantly, they make my life joyful and I can never be grateful enough that they are there for me.