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Éric Montpetit
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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.

ÉRIC MONTPETIT is a professor in the Department of Political Science at the Université de Montréal.

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Université de Montréal

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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 defendant of the corporatist arrangements that are so common in European countries. As most defendants 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.

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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.

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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.

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