



Holding the Center: In Defense of Political Trimming: 0

Eugene Goodheart

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Politicians and pundits often scorn polarization and compromise—the intransigence of the former and the feebleness of the latter—without suggesting an alternative way. Polarization, when opposing forces are equal or close to equal in strength, leads to stalemate. Compromise threatens to betray one's conviction about what is essential. Ideally, a leader must combine conviction about what ought to be done with an open-minded awareness of unintended consequences.

The social sciences are or should be based, largely, on the premise that people are historical and social beings. Holding the Center follows this tradition, while focusing on the "trimming" aspect. In nautical terms, trimming indicates an adjustment of one's vessel to accommodate one's environment. In politics, it is to find common ground between extremes, not for the sake of compromise, but because reason does not have a single location on the political spectrum.

The twelve chapters in this book are brought together by Goodheart's argument that the Whig trimming tradition is the heart and soul of politics in the West, and that both democracy and democratic culture depend upon the trimming tradition's advocacy of toleration. What is needed now, he notes, is a transformation in our political culture in which humility and the admission of error enter the list of political virtues. Non-parliamentary democracy with its separation of powers depends for its proper functioning on compromise, especially in a time like ours of crisis and divided government.

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