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### **From Welfare State to Ecostate**

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#### **Introduction**

Over the course of the twentieth century the provision of welfare services became an essential focus for government activity in the advanced industrial countries. Since the 1950s the notion of the "welfare state" has been invoked commonly to describe a state which -- while continuing to preside over a market-mediated and private property-based economic system -- accepts significant responsibility for ensuring the delivery of social services to its population. The emergence of specialized structures of environmental governance is a more recent phenomenon. But the growing salience of environmental problems has led some analysts to speculate about the possible genesis of an "ecological state" -- a state which places ecological considerations at the core of its activity.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this chapter is to consider the extent to which twentieth century experiences with the welfare state shed light on the potential and the limits of such an ecological state.

### **Setting up the discussion**

The idea of the “welfare state” assumes many guises in contemporary political argument.<sup>2</sup> For the comparison undertaken here it is convenient to adopt a broad definition, associating the expression with significant state involvement in the regulation and supply of welfare services within the framework of an essentially “free enterprise” economy. In this context welfare-oriented intervention constitutes -- and is acknowledged to constitute legitimately -- an essential sphere of action for the public power. The welfare state describes a set of arrangements which emerged during the twentieth century and which, despite recent retrenchment and reform, continues to exist in one form or another in all developed industrial societies. It refers to governmental programmes dealing with pensions, unemployment insurance, health care, family benefits, and so on; to the bureaucracies managing such interventions; and to the politico-ideological justification of these practices. Such an understanding differs from three other common usages of the expression -- the identification of the “welfare state” with: a) the state structure as a whole, or with the entire fabric of the existing socio-economic formation (in other words, invoking the term as a proxy for capitalist state or contemporary capitalism); b) a specific set of economic and social policies applied in the developed countries between the 1950s and 1970s (sometimes referred to as the “Keynesian welfare state”); and c) the particularly comprehensive welfare variant found in countries such as Sweden and Norway, which is often taken as the most complete expression of the welfare state ideal (“the social democratic welfare state”). As employed in this essay the welfare state is less totalistic than suggested in the first of these usages, for it embraces only those elements of the politico-administrative order functionally implicated in welfare provision. But it is more temporally and geographically inclusive than implied by the other two usages, for it continues to be applicable to conditions across the developed world.

With respect to the “ecological state” the understanding is similarly broad. The term is associated with a significant governmental focus on managing environmental burdens. It describes arrangements that may be taking shape in the developed countries today, where ecologically-oriented intervention comes to constitute -- and is generally acknowledged to constitute legitimately -- an essential responsibility of the public power. It denotes government programmes dedicated to controlling environmental impacts and adjusting patterns of socio/ecological interaction to avoid ecological risks and enhance ecological values, to the institutions charged with such activity, and to the politico-ideological legitimation of such practice. In the conventional idiom, an ecological state would be one committed to “sustainable development,”<sup>3</sup> to securing a social development trajectory which remained within the frontiers of “environmental sustainability.” As defined in this way, the ecological state implies something more than “traditional environmental policy” -- which emerged in developed countries from the late 1960s, and was largely understood as a post hoc adjunct of “normal” economic and administrative activity. It is predicated on a recognition that environmental systems are critical to long term social welfare, and that their protection and enhancement require conscious and continuous adjustment by the public power. And yet an ecological state does not necessarily imply a thoroughgoing “eco-centric” political orientation, which posits as an overriding political goal the defense of natural systems and environmental values for their own sake.<sup>4</sup> Since the notion of an ecological state is somewhat novel, it is worth considering it a little further at this point. First, some understanding of limits is implicit in the idea of an ecological state. Ensuring that environmental impacts do not breach such limits, and so undermine the foundations for human economic and social well being, would be an essential objective of an ecological state. Yet this does not exhaust its potential remit. Society and nature interact on many levels, and the state can (and in fact already does) act to realise a variety of ecologically related ends. In other words, the institutions of an ecological state could secure

environment-related benefits -- enhancing human welfare and/or the welfare of other species and ecosystems -- *above and beyond* that minimum needed to avoid socio-ecological catastrophe. Indeed, because of the complexity of the normative judgements involved in assessing social welfare it is impossible in practice entirely to separate these “crisis avoidance” and “welfare enhancing” dimensions.<sup>5</sup>

To assume such a role an ecological state would require the capacity to:

- monitor the state of the environment, map patterns of socio-ecological interaction, and anticipate future developments;
- take decisions relating to the assessment of risk, the definition of preferred environmental outcomes, the reconciliation of environmental objectives with other individual and societal goals, and the distribution of social costs;
- deploy effective steering strategies and policy instruments; and
- finance and legitimate its activities.

Moreover, since ecological and political boundaries do not coincide, and many potentially acute environmental problems concern the global commons, an ecological state also would need to:

- act in both the domestic and the international realms.

From the way “welfare state” and “ecological state” have been defined here it should be clear that neither expression is taken to exhaust the essential characteristics of a state to which they are applied. A state dubbed a “welfare state” might also be described as a “democratic state,” “a regulatory state,” a “developmental state,” and so on -- depending on its actual features and the perspective from which it was being assessed. The same is true of an ecological state: its “being” (so to speak) would not be summed up in its “ecologicality;” nor could all its features be deduced from its ecological character.

Before proceeding, it is worth pausing to make explicit four assumptions which underpin the argument developed here. The first is that states still matter, that they remain the critical foci

of political power in the modern world. In particular, it is accepted that for the foreseeable future states will continue to play a pivotal role in both the organization of welfare and protection of the environment. Clearly, if one is convinced that globalization and/or localization has already decisively eroded the action-potential of the state, there is little point in pursuing the comparison mooted here. The second assumption is that through the agency of the state it is possible to make significant headway in managing environmental burdens. In other words, the state-in-and-of itself is not understood to be “the problem,” but potentially part of the solution. Again, if one accepted (with many radical ecologists) that the abolition of states and the modern state-system was a pre-condition to addressing the environmental challenge then there would be little to learn from the comparison discussed in this essay. The third assumption is that it is possible for an ecological state to emerge (much like the welfare state before it) though a process of incremental reform, without necessitating the sudden and radical overthrow of the existing political and economic order. Thus the sort of ecological state considered here is one that remains enmeshed with the dominant political and economic institutions we know today. Finally, it is accepted that some movement towards the creation of ecological states has in fact taken place in developed countries over the past fifteen years. The continued accretion of state responsibility in the environmental domain and the significant shift from the mid-1980s in the prevailing environmental governance paradigm are taken as indications of this development. Certainly initiatives to integrate the environment with core state concerns taken in some of the smaller European countries that served as ‘environmental pioneers’ in the 1990s – such as Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands – point in this direction.<sup>6</sup>

### **Parallels between the ecological state and the welfare state**

There are a number of underlying similarities between the welfare and ecological states.

Both formations:

- *involve an extension of state authority to new areas of social life*, or at least a systematization and intensification of pre-existing interventions. Politicians become preoccupied with problems which concerned their predecessors only marginally; specialized agencies are established to administer new programmes; the state bureaucracy grows to perform additional functions; and the expenditure of public funds rises in the new domain. The story of the development of the welfare state during the first half of the twentieth century and its rapid extension after World War Two has often been told.<sup>7</sup> With respect to the genesis of an ecological state, clearly there has been a remarkable extension of the government role in environmental management during the last three decades of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>
- *constitute a response to a perceived failure of markets and voluntary action*. Government is drawn into the new domain because problems are judged not to have been addressed adequately by other social institutions. The welfare state has been understood to provide a safety net, a national minimum, a collective insurance fund, and supplementary citizenship benefits. It serves as a distributional complement to market and voluntary mechanisms: redistributing among individuals at different points in their lives; between the healthy and the infirm; between the employed and unemployed; between families with and without dependent children; and between the more and the less affluent.

In the case of the ecological state, the propensity of economic agents to impose negative environmental externalities on other actors, the over exploitation of (potentially renewable) common pool resources, and the concern that grave harm might be done to environments necessary to human welfare, justify an increasingly active environmental management function. In other words, it is accepted that markets and voluntary efforts cannot secure long term ecological viability in the absence of active “steering” by the state. To some extent this

can be understood as an issue of appropriate scale, of restricting environmental impacts within the assimilative capacities of natural systems.<sup>9</sup> But there are also issues of collective social choice: all social and collective goods are not compatible, and in an ecological state political mechanisms are used to choose some patterns of goods over others.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, there is a redistributive dimension here -- redistributing impacts among those who generate and experience the effects of pollution, among those in different regions, occupations, and income strata, and across generations.

- *alter patterns of “normal” economic interaction, but operate within significant economic and political constraints.* By mandating certain courses of action and by absorbing and re-directing social income, the state alters patterns of choice confronting individuals and firms, modifies the operation of markets and the character of property rights, and has a substantial impact upon the pace and direction of economic development. With respect to the welfare state, the provision of monetary benefits, the expansion of public sector expenditure and employment, and the direct management of certain economic sectors (for example, health care) potentially impact on wage levels, the labour supply, conditions of employment, collective bargaining, individual and corporate tax rates, company profitability, international competitiveness, foreign investment, and the state budgetary position. With respect to the ecological state, pollution abatement standards, planning restrictions and nature conservation initiatives, alter the costs faced by businesses and consumers. Taxes and subsidies encourage or discourage consumption of specific resources, energy or materials efficiencies, and the selection of specific technological paths. Again, there are consequences for the viability of specific enterprises, processes and sectors, and potential obstacles to inward investment or international competitiveness.

The resultant development trajectory differs from that which otherwise would have prevailed. A direct consequence of these impacts on “normal” economic interaction is that

established entitlements are disturbed and opposition inevitably erupts from actors who feel their interests are prejudiced by reform. Once programmes are established, however, they can create powerful new interests (within the bureaucracy and society more generally) which defend the new initiatives but may render subsequent reform difficult.

Operating as they do within the framework of established economic and political relationships, both states face significant constraints: above all, sympathetic political coalitions must be maintained, and the fiscal foundations of the state must not be undermined. In short, intervention to rectify identifiable (welfare- or ecologically-linked) problems must not disrupt the ongoing functioning of the economic and political systems.

- *represent a continuing adjustment of governmental activity to long term processes of economic, social and political development.* In the case of welfare this relates to themes such as industrialization, urbanization, and a changing class structure, and to shifts in family, fertility and life expectancy. In the case of the environment it relates to evolving patterns of production and consumption, shifting land use and settlement practices, rising population levels, and scientific and technological advance. In a sense, both realms of state activity emerge through a process of experimentation as political systems try to adjust to manage new problems related to the continued technological, economic and social transformation of the modern world. Of course, the problems the welfare and ecological states are intended to address are not just “given,” but are defined by social actors in the course of social interaction and political struggle.
- *have complex and contested normative associations.* In the case of the welfare state arguments have classically revolved around issues of “justice” (the entitlement of specific groups or the whole citizenry to certain levels of benefit and/or to a social obligation to eradicate poverty); “equality” (that extreme differences of wealth and income are undesirable); “expediency” (that the state is a convenient vehicle for providing collective



benefits); “efficiency” (that the nation needs a fit population for defense and/or industrial competitiveness); “stability” (the fear of social unrest or working class revolt), and “citizenship” (that in a free political union all are entitled to social rights). With respect to the ecological state these concepts can also be applied. Thus “justice” and “equality,” for example, can be related to future generations, the distribution of environment-related burdens among rich and poor, and the treatment of non-human nature. More typically, arguments are related to “enhancing human health and welfare” (the environment contributes to our well-being in many ways); “maintaining economic prosperity” (the environment provides a foundation for economic activity); “prudence,” “precaution,” “uncertainty” and “avoidance of serious risk” (care now could avoid unpleasant consequences in the future); and the inherent worth of the non-human natural world.

In both cases different strands of argument are deployed at different times, to support different programmes, and to win over different constituencies. After all, it is a hallmark of a successful political reform that it can be endorsed by varied groups for varied reasons. On the other hand, different mixes of these normative elements can be used to justify *alternative* approaches to welfare provision or environmental protection: they constitute a basis on which contrasting interpretations of each of these states can be constructed.

### **Elements of contrast or ambiguity**

While there are parallels between the welfare state and ecological states, there are also apparent divergences.

First, with respect to the genesis of the welfare state much is usually made *of the role of the working class, the trade union movement, and social democratic parties*. In contrast, no class, movement, or political party could be said to stand in precisely the same relationship to the ecological state. Environmental movements and green parties draw diffuse support from

varied strata, and their claims are not obviously rooted in the immediate material interests of the bulk of the population. Some would suggest this makes the genesis of an ecological state unlikely. Indeed, it could be argued that the forces which were most significant in building the welfare state represent an obstacle to the ecological state -- for workers, trade unions, and social democrats can be suspicious of any project which threatens material living standards, jobs, and economic growth. Data on green parties, which shows they draw their support disproportionately from educated voters, could be introduced to substantiate such a claim.

Yet the link between the working class, trade unions, social democracy and the welfare state is more problematic than often assumed. Some analysts dispute that pressure from below was the decisive element in the birth of the welfare state; in some contexts trade unions are known to have opposed the introduction of state-sponsored welfare programmes (fearing a weakening bond with their members or co-optation by the state); and in many countries the most significant reforms were actually introduced by governments of the right. Still, one can overlay this argument: for even if benevolent technocrats, opportunist politicians or crafty conservatives actually introduced the programmes, working class and reforming activism propelled welfare issues on to the public agenda, and the desire to win votes, diffuse protest and undercut electoral rivals all clearly played some role.

But is the absence of a parallel social force so problematic for the ecological state? To date environmental movements and green parties have done an impressive job of moving issues on to the public agenda; specific groups experience the effects of particular problems, but the entire population is potentially affected by some environmental burdens; these impacts are material (not just “post-material”), affecting standards of living, health and welfare; there are economic sectors that now have an economic interest in societal greening; and, while some environmental issues will only bite in the long term, many are already apparent.

This emphasizes the importance of ideas in mobilizing support and crafting particular proposals for social reform. After all, the story of the emergence of the welfare state is not one of the blind operation of social or economic forces, but of the (contested) social definition of problems and the design of arguments and policy options to mobilize support and engineer reform.<sup>11</sup>

Second, the welfare state has always been seen as *a complement to a growing economy*. Programmes such as unemployment insurance were designed to mitigate impacts of an economic downturn, but it was accepted that vigorous economic growth was necessary to provide jobs for those able to work as well as resources to fund state programmes. Even neo-conservative governments of the 1980s, which declined to specify full employment as a policy goal, considered growth essential. But would an ecological state not have an entirely different attitude towards growth? If the expanding scale of economic activity generates environmental degradation, would an ecological state not try to slow down the hectic pace, placing ecological well being above economic gain?

Not necessarily. Certainly there is a need for change in the “*quality*” of growth.<sup>12</sup> Given a finite biosphere, material throughput -- resource consumption and waste deposition -- cannot grow for ever. But there are no *a priori* limits to “development,” if this term is associated with human progress in the broadest sense (including moral advance as well as material prosperity), or even to earth-bound economic growth -- if one is talking about the growth of monetary aggregates such as profits or GNP. What is required is a *decoupling* of economic performance from *material* impacts, so that social welfare could rise, even though resource inputs and waste levels fall. Of course, the notion of “decoupling” is not straightforward, and must be considered in relation to thorny issues relating to population, technology, consumption, and distribution.

Nevertheless, at the simple level the contrast between the welfare state as growth-dependent and the ecostate as growth-adverse does not hold up. On the other hand, certain forms

of growth are to be rejected. And this puts the underlying difference in focus. The institutions of the welfare state have been largely indifferent to the character of national economic growth (so long as it occurs); but for the ecological state the character of this growth is an essential concern. Of course, governments have always had ideas about what sort of economic development is desirable, and they intervene to promote favored sectors (traditionally heavy industry, defense production and infrastructure projects, and more recently telecommunications, computing and bio-tech). But this has not been of direct concern to the institutions of the welfare state.

The welfare state does have some effect on patterns of consumption -- by redistributing income (different recipients spend in different ways), and by provision and rationing of services (health care, for example) -- but its impact on production is essentially indirect (demand and labour market effects). On the other hand, the ecological state must be concerned explicitly with *keeping patterns of consumption and production within ecological limits*. Indeed, one of its greatest challenges is to determine an appropriate portfolio of policy instruments to accomplish this while leaving individuals, groups, and the state (in its other incarnations) the freedom and resources to pursue other ends.

Third, as it emerged over the course of the twentieth century the welfare state was essentially *a national creation*. There was cross national policy transfer; international agreements were structured to avoid poisoning domestic welfare initiatives; and there was even a modest “internationalist” component to welfare regimes -- a sort of spill over of social programmes into the domain of development assistance. But (*pax* the European Union), welfare policy has remained primarily in the national arena. In contrast, a nationally-oriented ecostate seems almost a contradiction in terms. Many environmental problems require an internationally co-ordinated response (consider climate change). Moreover, North/South issues are central to meeting the global environmental challenge in a way they were not to a nationally-oriented welfare regime.

The difference here is essential, for the aims of an ecological state could only be secured through joint action with other states -- action to protect the global environment, to reduce environmental burdens imposed by developed states so that nations of the South have environmental room to develop, and to assist development efforts in the South. Thus the ecological state needs to act on two fronts (internal and external) and to co-ordinate domestic and foreign policy initiatives to an extent unknown by the essentially nationally-focused welfare state of the twentieth century.

This “internationalization” of policy changes the dynamic of debate and decision-making, and although it enables collective action it also restricts national freedom of manoeuvre. Over time, international environmental governance institutions may play an increasingly ascendant role in managing global issues such as climate change. Yet for the foreseeable future states (and quasi-states like the EU) remain the key (although not the only) actors in the international arena: they mediate between the international and domestic realms; they determine and enforce policy within their national territories; and they make and carry through (or fail to carry through) commitments made at the international level. Of course, the increasing density of international interchange also has consequences for welfare regimes, and policy-makers are now continuously assessing domestic welfare programmes in light of international developments.

Fourth, since the two states are concerned with different sorts of problem, the *forms of intervention* they entail are likely to be different. The welfare state operates by absorbing income from individuals and businesses, and spending on transfer payments and the direct provision of benefits (health care, social housing, and so on). In most countries the majority of citizens are consumers of welfare services, and (whether they are conscious of it or not) have regular contact with the welfare state, especially through the pension, health and family allowance systems; while a minority experience more systematic (and intrusive) contact through programmes such as unemployment and disability allowances. Taxation, income transfers and

service provision lie at the heart of the welfare state, although this is accompanied by a dense framework of legislation and administrative rules, and increasingly complex delivery mechanisms. In contrast, environmental policy relies on a mixed portfolio of regulations and prohibitions, normative injunction, taxes and subsidies, and negotiated agreements. Only a small proportion of state expenditure relates to environmental governance, although this is growing. For the most part instruments are targeted at producers rather than consumers, although fuel taxes and public education campaigns are obvious exceptions here.

Interestingly, both require appropriate forms of social planning. For welfare policy this relates service provision to economic policy and to the evolution of demographic, labour market and social circumstances. For environmental policy it relates management strategies to economic conditions and the evolution of environmental burdens and natural systems. In each case the linking of such planning processes to the state budget cycle is crucial.

Fifth, *the welfare state appears to have a more direct link with democratization* than does its ecological cousin. Historians of the welfare state emphasize that its emergence shadowed the transition to universal suffrage. As the franchise expanded, politics and politicians were obliged to address concerns of new voters and, to the extent that the economic security of the population was uncertain, the politics of welfare came to the fore. Ideas of “citizenship” explicitly link democracy to welfare: rights of political participation and social benefits are correlated with duties to use the vote responsibly, to be self-supporting if possible, and to contribute to the welfare of the community. But there are other types of linkage. Writing in the 1970s and 1980s, theorists of the fiscal crisis of the state hypothesized that democratic states were being driven towards administrative overload and budgetary crisis as politicians outbid each other with promises of ever more extravagant social benefits.<sup>13</sup> Here not just the genesis, but also the subsequent crisis, of the welfare state was tied to the realities of democratic politics. Claims about the “middle class” character of much social expenditure also tie in with democracy

-- for at a time of relative individual prosperity and state fiscal retrenchment, the in-work majority is unwilling to see universal programmes from which it benefits curtailed, while the programmes targeted at vulnerable minorities (the unemployed, single parents, and so on) are gradually rolled back.<sup>14</sup>

Yet the link between welfare and democracy is more subtle than sometimes presented. In some contexts welfare measures were introduced as part of a strategy to delay democratization (consider Bismarck's welfare programme). And the interest shown by some non-democratic developing states in establishing welfare systems suggests the issue is also related to the functional requirements of an industrializing market economy. Moreover, with respect to fiscal overload, democratic polities proved more flexible than many expected, and the parties of the right established that voters could be mobilized to support a rationalization of welfare provision.

Nevertheless, in historical terms democracy appears more intimately linked with the politics of welfare than with the politics of environmental protection. Or at least this initially held true in the older established democracies. Among countries which have undergone a recent democratic transition (states in east and central Europe, for example) the environmental movement was sometimes a crucial component of the anti-authoritarian coalition, and the transition to democracy led to rapid innovation and institutionalization in the environmental field. The comparatively poor environmental record of non-democratic states suggests an underlying link between democracy and environmental protection. Democratic frameworks provide an opportunity for the organization of affected interests, the critique of established practices and the articulation of alternative perspectives.<sup>15</sup> The press, opposition movements and environmental campaigners can bring problems into the open, mobilize public opinion against abuses, and hold political and economic leaders to account. Indeed, in developed states the environmental critique, and the continued reform of institutions of environmental governance, have been associated with calls for (and some progress toward) the further democratization of

societal decision making.<sup>16</sup> The extension of rights to environmental information, increased public consultation and participation in environmental affairs, greater openness by regulatory bodies and a relative opening of formerly closed policy networks, are examples of such movement.

### **Lessons from the evolution of the welfare state?**

If we accept that there are intriguing parallels, then it is possible to enquire whether experience with the welfare state may provide further clues about the emergence of an ecological state. In this respect six characteristics of the welfare state appear particularly suggestive.

First, the welfare state developed over a comparatively long period. Although we tend to think of modern welfare institutions as a product of the second half of the twentieth century, the foundations for the welfare state were set in place in most developed countries before the First World War. By 1914 some form of industrial accident compensation was already operative in fifteen of seventeen developed countries, health insurance and old age pensions had been introduced in eleven, and unemployment compensation in five.<sup>17</sup> By 1939 industrial accident compensation schemes existed in all seventeen developed countries, health insurance was working in thirteen, and old age pensions and unemployment insurance programmes had been adopted in sixteen. State social expenditure exceeded 3% of GNP in six countries by 1910. All seventeen states had passed the 3% mark by 1926, and all but Finland and Italy were spending more than 5% of GNP on social programmes by 1939.

As the century progressed welfare programmes were extended, and across the OECD social expenditure continued to rise as a proportion of GNP until the mid-1980s. Of course, political debate about the advisability of government taking a more active role in the provision of social benefits was underway through much of the nineteenth century. Thus, in the broadest sense, the evolution of the welfare state has already spanned more than a century. If we date the



first innovations from the 1880s, and the widespread consolidation of “mature” systems from the 1930s or perhaps the 1950s, then the establishment of the welfare state appears to have taken between 50 and 80 years.

Second, during the evolution of welfare states, periods of rapid growth or innovation alternated with phases of consolidation or stagnation. The development of the welfare state was not smooth, but uneven and episodic. Periods of legislative activity were followed by phases of administrative consolidation during which bureaucracies and expenditure rose in response to decisions taken earlier. Commitments were initially made to one segment of the population and then gradually extended to wider strata.<sup>18</sup> Population growth and ageing, the extension of entitlements from specified trades to the entire working population, and the eventual linking of benefits to inflation or average earnings meant that expenditure on pensions increased dramatically over the decades following their initial introduction. Issues such as maternity benefits, family allowances and day care were generally much later innovations. The exact timing of the various phases differed from country to country.

Third, as the welfare state developed very different (national) patterns of welfare provision emerged. There are universal and targeted programmes; programmes financed by dedicated contributions or from general taxation; benefits fixed at a minimal level or at a higher standard; flat rate and earnings related benefits; and there is variation in the extent (or indeed the direction) of redistribution.<sup>19</sup> The simplest classification of welfare regimes might array them on a “generous versus stingy” or a “left versus right” continuum -- related to the relative size of social expenditure, the scope of programmes, and the degree of redistribution from rich to poor. On such scales the United States would stand at one extreme, Sweden and Norway at the other, with other countries arrayed between them. More sophisticated approaches include Esping-Andersen’s well-known typology dividing welfare regimes according to the extent that they are “market supporting” or “market-usurping.”<sup>20</sup> This scheme suggests welfare states can be classed

into three basic forms: “liberal welfare” states (as in the United States or the UK) dominated by market logic (which encourage private provision and provide low benefit levels); “conservative” welfare states (as in France and Germany) which recognize social rights but maintain traditional hierarchy; and “social democratic” welfare states (Sweden and Norway) which “de-commodify” much of social life (emphasizing equality, citizenship, and high quality state provision).

What is important for our purposes here is less the detail of these classificatory schemes (and many others have been suggested), but more a recognition that broad differences exist among developed countries (and even among jurisdictions and programmes within individual countries). Certainly such differences matter to the life chances of claimants “on the ground:” (say for a teenage mother in London or Stockholm, or an unemployed office worker with heart trouble in Miami or Montreal).

Fourth, actually existing welfare states are composed of a patchwork of partially overlapping and sometimes contradictory laws, administrative rules and programmes. There are gaps and inconsistencies, and different groups of claimants are often treated in different ways. This is a reflection of the welfare state’s growth as an accretion of distinct initiatives directed towards different objectives and constituencies. It is also a product of the political compromises that were required to introduce new initiatives and adjust existing programmes.<sup>21</sup> Over time, a complex but only semi-coherent patchwork of programmes and agencies emerged. As an historical product the welfare state is only a very rough approximation of the normative models proposed by social reformers who campaigned to introduce benefits and by theorists who reflected on the nature of the welfare state.

Fifth, more than a century after the introduction of welfare programmes contrasting theories about the character and historical development of welfare states remain. One recent analyst has suggested a basic distinction between approaches that see the welfare state as a functional response to industrialization and/or modernization and/or capitalism on the one hand,

and those that see it as a fundamentally contradictory development, on the other (Pierson 1998). Social democratic attitudes typify the first camp, while new right, Marxist and neo-Marxist commentators represent the second. Such differences feed into varied perspectives on the future of the welfare state -- whether it has undermined the conditions for its own existence or failed to adapt to changing circumstances, whether it should be maintained or dismantled, reformed or transcended. Novel perspectives (feminism, environmentalism, new social movements) offer additional interpretations. Thus closure is elusive, and even when there is some agreement about how welfare structures actually operate, there is no agreement on the meaning of this activity.

Sixth, welfare states are only relatively stable and continue to be subject to reform, readjustment and retrenchment. Their creation cannot be understood as a once-and-for-all process, like constructing a bridge -- which once built requires only periodic maintenance, at least until the day comes to pull it down. Although there was a brief period in the 1960s when some observers concluded that welfare states were approaching a mature and settled configuration, the economic turmoil of the 1970s and the budget deficits and economic restructuring of the 1980s soon made a mockery of this complacent assumption. The stability of welfare programmes is relative rather than absolute.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, fears of the immanent dismantling of the welfare state also proved exaggerated. Instead there is a period of protracted reorganization that continued from the 1980s through to the present day.

What do these observations suggest for the possible evolution of the ecological state? If it follows an historical trajectory analogous to that traced by the welfare state, we could expect that:

- *the emergence of the programmes and structures of the ecological state will be spread over a comparatively long time frame*, at least half a century and probably more. Taking 1970 as the starting point, now we have had three decades of innovation in environmental governance.

Half a century of development would bring us to 2020, a period that coincides with the

forward horizon of many first generation strategic plans for the environment and with the approximate date for a Rio +30 review. This also marks the initial time frame presented in current Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change adjustment scenarios, and a point (according to current estimates) by which conventional oil and gas production would have peaked. Eighty years on from the 1970s would bring us to mid-century. To anticipate political change this far into the future is virtually impossible, but it represents a time scale over which significant economic and technological developments are possible. In some respects the initial environmental innovations of the 1970s spread more rapidly than did the earliest welfare measures of the 1880s. Presumably this relates to differences of historical conjuncture: by the later part of the twentieth century the rhythm of international interchange had increased, and the reflex to turn towards the state to resolve emerging problems was well entrenched.

- *periods of innovation and periods of relative stagnation or consolidation in ecostate development will alternate*, and changes in rhetoric may take time to feed through to operations on the ground. After the initial burst of legislative activity in the early 1970s governments gained experience operating regulatory agencies and attempting to manage discrete environmental burdens. A growing appreciation of the complexity and inter-related character of environmental problems led first to a proliferation of administrative rules and programmes, and later to shifts in the environmental management paradigm. Increasingly this came to emphasize the need for continued attention across government, an integration of environment and economy in social decision-making, the international co-ordination of policy, and recourse to a broader range of policy instruments.<sup>23</sup> The idea of sustainable development was linked to a more long term and integrated vision of managing environmental burdens, and to a greater appreciation of connections between the

environment, on one hand, and development, distributive justice, democracy and participation, on the other.<sup>24</sup>

The flurry of legislative and administrative initiatives in the late 1980s and 1990s are still feeding through in terms of implementation and expenditure. Further rounds of institutional development will be required to address climate change issues that are already fixed on the political agenda, and this will imply adjustment in other sectoral domains. Issues of cross-sectoral policy co-ordination, long term planning, and the monitoring of environmental loadings and policy impacts, have not been resolved by the initiatives governments have undertaken so far, and further periods of innovation are to be expected.

- *contrasting national approaches to environmental governance will coexist.* Pioneering studies of comparative environmental policy in the 1970s already indicated that there were significant divergences in national styles of regulation.<sup>25</sup> Although recent work suggests that there is substantial cross national policy diffusion, and a certain convergence in structures and instruments of environmental governance,<sup>26</sup> the varied institutional, political and ideational contexts of national polities and the differences of economic structure and ecological character imply that divergent approaches are certain to continue.

Important dimensions of variation in the contours of the ecostate in different countries are likely to include:

- the balance between public or private initiatives in making and implementing policy;
- the preferred basket of policy instruments -- the mix of regulation, normative injunction, negotiation, and financial incentives across different policy sectors;
- the trade-offs between central and regional or local decision-making (especially important in federal states);
- the extent to which the state is involved in collective decisions about environmental futures above and beyond the minimum requirements of crisis avoidance;

- the approach to the distributional consequences of environmental policy;
  - the linkages between national and international decision-making
  - the extent to which concern for the well-being of non-human natural entities informs policy.
- *eco-states will encompass an array of only partially integrated initiatives.* Environmental governance regimes already display this feature: management is distributed among various administrative bodies, functions overlap but there are also gaps in coverage, and programmes often operate at cross-purposes. Attempts to harmonize initiatives and to introduce more integrated approaches (integrated pollution control, one-stop permitting, environmental codes, more comprehensive planning, and so on) have had some success, but they also add additional layers of complexity. And as new problems are identified, and new actors become involved (at local, regional, national and international levels), the fragmented character of environmental governance has continued to re-assert itself. The idea that the ecological state will transcend such a disjointed and fragmented structure is likely to prove illusory.<sup>27</sup> Almost any dimension of social and economic development can potentially affect the environment. Environmental impacts are manifest at all scales, evolve over time, and shift with changes in human activity. Moreover, our understanding of ecological processes is necessarily limited.<sup>28</sup> In such a context, the fragmented character of the governmental response is more or less inevitable; indeed overlap and friction between programmes can provide protective redundancies and enhanced opportunities for social learning.
  - *rival accounts of the development, functions, justification and future of the ecostate will persist.* Since the emergence of modern environmental discourse in the 1960s there has been continuing controversy over the definition of environmental problems, and the assessment of the extent to which contemporary institutions will have to be transformed to deal with such difficulties.<sup>29</sup> The development of an ecological state will not preclude such controversies.

Technological, economic and social development will raise a stream of questions about what environments are to be transformed or preserved, about humans as part of (or as standing apart from) nature. Whether the programmes and structures that are being established are capable of resolving environmental challenges, and whether the solutions on offer are actually desirable, will remain open questions. At any given point some are likely to hail the emergent institutions of the ecological state as the epitome of rational problem-solving, while others portray them as a reformist deception intended to preserve an inequitable or environmentally corrupt system. While some will argue that the new structures and practices have more or less cracked the problem, others will see them as just a first step -- towards a steady state economy, or towards a scientifically managed planetary ecosphere, or on the human journey out into the solar system and beyond.

- *the ecological state will prove to be only relatively stable.* We should anticipate that, like the welfare state, the ecological state will not achieve a permanent configuration. New understandings of the consequences of environmental loadings imposed by earlier activity; pressures from ongoing processes or from the unintended consequences of remedial initiatives; the changing rhythm and direction of technological and societal change; and shifts in the perception of risk, the understanding of human welfare, or the valuation of natural entities, will all alter problem definition and the priorities of publics and governments. Even in a world where atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gasses had been stabilized, one could imagine many and varied threats to environmental integrity. For example, we stand today at the threshold of a biological revolution that will make possible the deliberate modification of all life forms, including the human genome. Only time will tell the consequences of this for humans, and for the other species with which we share the planet.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that interesting parallels can be drawn between the development of the welfare state during the twentieth century and the ecological state which today may be taking shape in the developed countries.<sup>30</sup> It has suggested that by reflecting on the practical experience of welfare states we may gain a useful historical perspective from which to contemplate the potential of an ecological state. Obviously there are major differences between the normative underpinnings and functional requirements of the two projects, as well as between the historical periods during which they took form. Yet it has been argued that they have much in common. Above all, the discussion has emphasized that the emergence of an ecological state may be a more protracted and messy affair, with the result more patchy and unstable, than is sometimes assumed in discussions of environmental futures. In other words, the far from perfect welfare states of today are likely to herald the far from perfect ecological states of the future.



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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Bruno Dente, "Towards Sustainability: Instruments and Institutions for the Ecological State", paper presented at the Fifth Workshop of the EU Concerted Action "The ecological state -- towards a new generation of environmental policies and institutions", Florence, 1988; William Lafferty, "Democracy and Ecological Rationality", in Guy Lachapelle and John Trent (eds.), *Globalization: Governance and Identity* (Montreal: Universite de Montreal, 2000), 39-65; Lennart Lundqvist, "A Green Fist in a Velvet Glove: the Ecological State and Sustainable Development", *Environmental Values* 10 (2001): 455-472.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Pierson, *Beyond the Welfare State: the New Political Economy of Welfare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); William Lafferty and Oluf Langhelle (eds.), *Towards Sustainable Development: On the Goals of Development and the Conditions of Sustainability* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Robyn Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory* (State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> James Meadowcroft, "Planning, Democracy and the Challenge of Sustainable Development", *International Political Science Review* 18 (1997): 167-190.

<sup>6</sup> For developments in these countries see Michael Andersen, and Duncan Liefferink (eds.), *European Environmental Policy: the Pioneers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997). For a sophisticated assessment of the extent to which Swedish environmental policy respects ecological principles see Lennart Lundqvist, *Straddling the Fence. Sweden and Ecological Governance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Ashford, *The Emergence of the Welfare States* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1986); Peter Flora and Arnold Heidenheimer (eds.), *The Development of Welfare States in Europe and*

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*America* (London: Transaction Books, 1981); P. Thane, *Foundations of the Welfare State* (Longman: London, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Hanf and Alf-Inge Jansen (eds.), *Governance and Environment in Western Europe: Politics, Policy and Administration* (Harlow: Longman, 1998); William Lafferty and James Meadowcroft (eds.), *Implementing Sustainable Development: Strategies and Initiatives in High Consumption Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Herman Daly, "Elements of Environmental Macroeconomics" in Robert Costanza (ed.), *Ecological Economics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, pp. 32-46).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Jacobs, "Sustainability and Markets: on the Neo-classical Model of Environmental Economics" in Michael Kenny and James Meadowcroft (eds.), *Planning Sustainability* (London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 78-100).

<sup>11</sup> Ashford, *The Emergence of the Welfare States*; and Ramesh Mishra, *The Welfare State in Capitalist Society* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*.

<sup>13</sup> James O'Connor, *The Fiscal Crisis of the State*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1973); Claus Offe, *Contradictions of the Welfare State* (London: Hutchinson Education, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> Pierson, *Beyond the Welfare State*.

<sup>15</sup> William Lafferty and James Meadowcroft (eds.), *Democracy and the Environment: Problems and Prospects* (Edward Elgar, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Robert Paehlke, "Democracy, Bureaucracy and Environmentalism", *Environmental Ethics* 10 (1988): 291-308.

<sup>17</sup> Pierson, *Beyond the Welfare State*. The countries are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

<sup>18</sup> Ashford, *The Emergence of the Welfare States*.

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- <sup>19</sup> Pierson, *Beyond the Welfare State*.
- <sup>20</sup> Gosta Esping-Andersen, *Three World of Welfare Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).
- <sup>21</sup> Ashford, *The Emergence of the Welfare States*.
- <sup>22</sup> Mishra, *The Welfare State*.
- <sup>23</sup> Albert Weale, *The New Politics of Pollution*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Pieter Glasbergen, "Learning to Manage the Environment", in W. Lafferty and J. Meadowcroft (eds.), *Democracy and the Environment: Problems and Prospects* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996); and Jan van Tatenhove, Bas Arts and Pieter Leroy, *Political Modernisation and the Environment* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2000).
- <sup>24</sup> James Meadowcroft, "The Politics of Sustainable Development: Emergent Arenas and Challenges for Political Science", *International Political Science Review* 20 (1999): 219-237; Susan Baker, Maria Kousis, Dick Richardson and Stephen Young (eds.), *The Politics of Sustainable Development: Theory, Policy and Practice within the European Union* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- <sup>25</sup> Lennart. Lundqvist, *The Hare and the Tortoise: Clean Air Policies in the United States and Sweden* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980); Cynthia Enloe, *The Politics of Pollution in Comparative Perspective* (New York: David McKay, 1975); and Peter Downing and Kenneth Hanf, *International Comparisons in Implementing Pollution Laws* (Dordrecht: Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1983).
- <sup>26</sup> Martin Janicke and Helmut Weidner (eds.), *National Environmental Policies: a Comparative Study of Capacity Building* (Berlin: Springer, 1997).
- <sup>27</sup> James Meadowcroft, "Planning for Sustainable Development: What can be Learned from the Critics?", in M. Kenny and J. Meadowcroft (eds.), *Planning Sustainability* (London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 12-38).
- <sup>28</sup> John Dryzek, *Rational Ecology: Environment and Political Economy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

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<sup>29</sup> John Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Lisa Benton and John Rennie-Short, *Environmental Discourse and Practice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Space has precluded me from examining here the inter-linkage *between* welfare and environmental institutions. Ecological states are emerging today in countries that already possess welfare states, and this raises the question of possible tensions and affinities between the two forms.