

WELFARE STATE

THE TERM “welfare state” in English is of recent origin. First used during the Second World War, it passed into general currency only after 1945. There had been intermittent discussion, however, some of it sophisticated, about the contribution the state should make to the social welfare of all its citizens from the eighteenth century onwards. “It is the duty of a government to do whatever is conducive to the welfare of the governed,” the political economist Nassau Senior, one of the main architects of the new English Poor Law of 1834, argued in his Oxford lectures of 1847-48. In the meantime, Richard Oastler, a tory-radical critic both of early factory industrialism and of political economy, had advocated in his journal, *The Fleet Papers*, in 1842 the creation of what he called the “social state.” This state would seek “to secure the prosperity and happiness of every class of society”: it would be particularly concerned, also, with “the protection of the poor and needy, because they require the shelter of the constitution and the laws more than any other classes.”

Oastler was a traditionalist, and his conception of the “social state” was different from that of Senior, who believed in a market economy and in the substitution of contract for status in the pattern of social relations. Yet both men rejected the idea of the property-protecting “night-watchman state” caricatured by Ferdinand Lassalle in Germany (where the authority of the state was far greater than in Britain). They both recognized that it was no longer possible to provide adequate welfare services to support individuals through the family, the Church, the guild or private “charity.” They were both aware of the fact that the rise of factory industry had posed new problems which demanded urgent solutions. In particular, they identified, though in contrasting styles, social contingencies associated with industrialization, particularly unemployment.

Sickness, old age, and death entail hardships in any society: poverty was in no sense a postindustrial phenomenon. Yet the massing of large numbers of people in factories and in cities changed the language and content of social and political analysis. As the nineteenth century went by and, after struggles, new groups of the population had secured the right to vote, politics became more directly concerned with what to do with newly acquired political power. The demand for the provision by the state of particular social services—a piecemeal process explicable in terms of cumulative administrative processes and political pressures—was accompanied by the articulation of comprehensive theories of the state which rested on arguments for positive state intervention. Thus, John Ruskin, defying the fashionable economic orthodoxy of the day, urged that the state should ensure that all its citizens received a living wage and were guaranteed full employment in the name of social justice. Thus, T. H. Green, arguing that “citizenship makes the moral man,” urged the case for “positive liberalism,” and Arnold Toynbee (1852-83), historian of early industrialization, demanded in a popular lecture of 1882 that “where the people are unable to provide a thing for themselves, and that thing is of *primary social importance*, then... the state should interfere and provide it for them.”

These were minority views, even then not always free from ambiguity. Throughout the nineteenth century there were four curbs on effective state action in Britain, for long the most industrialized society. First, political economists, even when they refused to talk in slogan terms of laissez-faire, were skeptical about the interference of the state with the operations of the market: at most, they pressed for an abandonment of social laissez-faire while accepting

the need for economic laissez-faire and international free trade. Second, belief in the importance of individual self-help or mutual self-help through voluntary organizations (including the friendly society and the trade union) held back any effective talk of “reliance” on the state: people were expected to fend for themselves through savings and insurance. Action on the part of the state was deemed to be both expensive and debilitating. Third, the receipt of help from the state or from local authorities carried with it a stigma. People who accepted “relief” were not thought of as full citizens. The Poor Law of 1834 was based on this assumption: it was never abandoned even when the operations of the 1834 Act were refined and mollified. Fourth, the apparatus of the state was viewed with suspicion not only by businessmen but by workingmen: they identified it with unpopular social institutions and coercive action, and judged it not in terms of purposes which it might fulfil but in terms of restraints which it imposed. Instead of looking to the state, they looked rather to the trade union and instead of seeking direct political action (or, except when deemed absolutely necessary, resort to the law), they preferred to work voluntarily through collective bargaining. There was, indeed, surprisingly little political talk of the state as such. As Matthew Arnold put it in 1861, “we have not the notion, so familiar on the Continent and to antiquity, of the state—the nation in its collective and corporate character, entrusted with stringent powers for the general advantage and controlling individual wills in the name of an interest wider than that of individuals.”

In Germany the position was different. The word “state” was generally used, and was endowed with a sense of authority. Moreover, the extension of the administrative apparatus of the state long preceded the advent of industrialism. At the same time, belief in the autonomous market economy was far less strong, and an influential group of historically minded political economists argued fervently that national economy (*Volkswirtschaft*) had to be converted into state economy (*Staatswirtschaft*) with “welfare” as the objective. Bismarck did not go anywhere near as far as many of the “socialists of the Chair,” academic protagonists of a state dedicated to welfare, but through laws passed in 1882, 1884, and 1889 he introduced compulsory national insurance against sickness, accidents, old age, and invalidity. “The state,” it was laid down in his first unsuccessful bill of 1881, “is not merely a necessary but a beneficent institution.” In the last years of his life Bismarck also contemplated insurance against unemployment and talked with assurance about “the right to work.” His objectives were, of course, mixed. He wished to provide an alternative to laissez-faire liberalism, but he also wished to sap the strength of the rising socialist movement. The national state was to become an instrument of welfare within the limits set by the capitalist system and the traditional framework of the social order: in return the masses, he believed, would be attached through greater patriotism to the state. He conceived of social insurance, indeed, as a form of political insurance, and the kind of society in which he put his trust was as hierarchical as that extolled by Oastler.

Other continental countries introduced insurance schemes without necessarily accepting Bismarck’s calculations, and in Australia and New Zealand there were politicians who believed in what the French called “socialism without doctrines” and went much further than any Europeans did in urging in the name of equal citizenship that “the more the state does for the citizen, the more it fulfills its purpose... the functions of the state shall be extended as much as possible.... True democracy consists in the extension of state activity” (from a speech by New Zealand politician, W. Pember Reeves, 1895). The New Zealand Old Age Pensions Act of 1898 was the first to be passed in a British dominion. Though it has been described as a “social palliative,” it marked the all-important beginning of a noncontributory pensions system.

When in the early twentieth century the British Liberal party carried a series of social service measures which have been noted in retrospect as landmarks on the way to the welfare state, it had both German and “colonial” experience in mind. At the same time, the driving force behind three new welfare measures—the feeding of school children, the school medical service, and old age pensions—had indigenous motivation. By contrast, unemployment and health insurance, in particular, were strongly influenced by Germany, with Winston Churchill, then President of the Board of Trade, writing to H. Asquith in 1908 that “the Minister who will apply to this country the successful experiences of Germany in Social Organisation may or may not be supported at the polls, but he will at least have left a memorial which time will not deface of his administration.” The self-helping activities of working-class movements were no longer thought to be adequate either by a growing number of socialists anxious to exert political influence to eliminate “poverty in the midst of plenty” or by trade-union groups like the miners and the agricultural laborers who, for various reasons, could not secure their union objectives (for example, a shortening of the length of the working day or a minimum wage) simply through the machinery of collective bargaining. The charitable efforts of philanthropists, it was increasingly recognized even by philanthropists themselves, could not alleviate all the social problems of an increasingly complex industrial society. In this recognition the publication of social statistics played a big part: well-documented poverty surveys by Charles Booth, Seebohm Rowntree, and others revealed the continuing extent of poverty in British cities after a century of economic growth and relative affluence. Once their statistics had been published, wrote the Fabian socialist Beatrice Webb, “the net effect was to give an entirely fresh impetus to the general adoption of the policy of securing to every individual, as the basis of his life and work, a prescribed national minimum of the requisites for efficient parenthood and citizenship” (*My Apprenticeship* [1926], p. 239).

Beatrice Webb was prominent in the campaign which accompanied and followed the meetings of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws (1905–09) to substitute new welfare policies for the Poor Law of 1834, policies which would remove the stigma attaching to the receipt of public money. She claimed that the introduction of these policies would not only mark a new stage in the history of citizenship but would constitute a return to older theories of the relationship between the individual and the community. “The whole theory of the mutual obligation between the individual and the state, which I find myself working out in my poor law scheme, is taken straight out of the nobler aspect of the mediaeval manor. It will come as a new idea to the present generation—it is really a very old one that has been thrust out of sight in order to attain some measure of equality in political rights. There are some who wish to attain to a socialist state by the assertion of economic equality—they desire to force the property-owners to yield to the non-property owners. I prefer to have the forward movement based on the obligation of each individual to serve” (*Our Partnership*, London [1948], p. 385). Political affinities have often been traced between the Fabian socialists and the Benthamites who played such a big part in initiating and implementing the Poor Law of 1834: it is interesting to note that in this statement Beatrice Webb was echoing rather the kind of arguments used by Oastler, though in a very different kind of language.

Yet the socialists, Fabian or otherwise, were less important in the introduction of new welfare measures than the Liberals, some of whom called themselves “new liberals” and rejected all arguments in favor of laissez-faire. Their theories, well set out, for example, by J. A. Hobson, were reinforced by other sets of statistics besides those collected by Booth and Rowntree. Statistics released in the aftermath of the Boer War concerning ill health and malnutrition

raised fundamental questions about “national efficiency.” So, too, did later figures concerning rural distress. It was for reasons embedded in British history, therefore, that after 1906 a Liberal government with a large majority introduced legislation, much of it controversial, to extend welfare services. The Education (Provision of Meals) Act, 1906, permitting the provision of free meals at school for needy children, was the first of a number of measures which entailed direct intervention on the part of the state in an activity previously falling entirely within a sphere of family responsibility. Old Age Pensions followed in 1908, though the Act was hedged round with qualifications limiting the right to receive pensions. In 1900 trade boards were set up to deal with conditions and wages in sweated industries, where collective bargaining was ineffective, and in 1911, in face of Fabian as well as Conservative criticism, national insurance was introduced. The term “welfare state” was not used, but much of the language of parliamentary and public debate centered on the issue of state provision of welfare. “A new spirit was disclosing itself,” wrote R. B. Haldane, a Liberal minister of the year 1906. “It is not about details that the people care or are stirred. What they seem to desire is that they should seem to have something approaching to equality of chance of life with those among whom they live.... There was earnestness about state intervention to be seen everywhere” (R. B. Haldane, *Autobiography* [1929], p. 213).

The measures initiated largely by Lloyd George and Churchill after 1908, culminating in the insurance acts, represented a major achievement. They were explicitly nonsocialist—they left the profit system intact—but they introduced a greater note of responsibility into social politics and a firmer basis of collective organization. They were pushed even further as a result of the First World War when Lloyd George, in a different capacity, talked of creating “a land fit for heroes,” and a Ministry of Reconstruction turned to new proposals for change. “The public,” a committee of 1918 reported, “not only has its conscience aroused and its heart stirred, but also has its mind open... to an unprecedented degree.” Immediate postwar reforms did not go far to meet the high hopes of the war years, but the Unemployment Insurance Act of 1920, passed with little criticism, greatly increased the numbers of people insured under national schemes, and the Housing Act of 1919 not only required local authorities to survey housing needs but offered government subsidies to help them to provide houses. Referring to this act, the National Housing and Town Planning Council commented that “it has needed the earthquake shock of war to bring the nation to the recognition of the truth... that it is the duty of the community... to take the necessary action, however drastic.”

The process of extending the social services continued in Britain between 1919 and 1939 with public provision of housing constituting the major postwar innovation. Yet there was little doubt in Britain, as in other European countries and in the United States, that large-scale involuntary mass unemployment following the world depression of 1929 constituted a major watershed. Heavy unemployment strained poor law, social service, and above all insurance systems beyond the limit. Insurance benefits, limited to contributions, were stringently restricted, and while there were fierce arguments between socialists and nonsocialists about the imposition of a “means test” on those in receipt of unemployment relief, an Unemployment Board, founded in 1934, was providing a second-line income maintenance service, centrally administered. Keynesian economic policies to eliminate unemployment were rejected by the government in power, but the social consequences of unemployment were studied carefully by advocates of a more active social service policy.

The main theorists of large-scale intervention were to be found not in Britain but in Sweden and in New Zealand, with spokesmen of the New Deal in the United States urging if not the creation of a “welfare state” the extension of “welfare capitalism.” In Sweden, where a social democratic government came into power in the wake of the world depression (in Britain the Labour government went out of power) a series of welfare measures was introduced based on the assumption, as Gunnar Myrdal put it, that the state must achieve certain social goals: a high standard of nutrition, full employment, and social welfare for all its citizens. In New Zealand a Labour government, which took office in 1935, placed in the center of its program proposals which had been set out since 1919: sustenance payments instead of relief work (the right to work was proclaimed); a national health service as free as education; state housing and a statutory minimum wage. The 1938 Social Security Act marked “a radical and far-reaching effort to place the claims of welfare before those of wealth.”

In the United States the position was more complex. There had always been Americans who had urged the need for state action in welfare matters. Thus, the institutional economist Richard T. Ely had argued in the late nineteenth century that the state was “an educational and ethical agency whose positive aim is an indispensable condition of human progress” and that “the doctrine of *laissez faire* is unsafe in politics and unsound in morals and... suggests an inadequate explanation of the relations between the state and the citizens.” More than 1500 labor laws were passed by different American states in the decade after 1887. Yet American society had been shaped more by market forces than any other society in the world, and there were far more critics of state interference than there were supporters, both in periods of affluence and in periods of recession. There were over thirteen million unemployed when F. D. Roosevelt became President in 1933 and one of the objects of his New Deal was to widen the concept of social justice in the course of dealing with economic emergency. The policies of the New Deal were derived from many different sources, but they all entailed increasing state intervention. No comprehensive national structure of social security was introduced, but steps were taken to raise low incomes (through the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938), to offer aid to the disabled (through the important Social Security Act of 1935), and to reduce unemployment. Roosevelt’s policies, eclectic in character, have been hailed as landmarks in the history of the welfare idea and in the evolution of empirical collectivism. They certainly generated enough bitter opposition to account for the fact that when the term “welfare state” began to be used after 1945 it was almost always used in the United States in a pejorative sense, even after a number of new welfare provisions had been introduced both in individual states and by the federal government. Yet it is certainly difficult to call the United States of the 1930’s a “welfare state.” At best it was a society where a series of improvisations reduced the extent to which the market dictated the living conditions of individuals and families and where social and political gospels were publicly expressed.

What was true of the United States was true, indeed, of most countries in 1939, with the possible exception of New Zealand and of the Soviet Union where there was no problem of relating a network of state social services to a market-based and privately owned industrial system. Russian social services were regulated rather in terms of the assessed exigencies of “socialist development,” and there was no theory of welfare outside the framework of Marxist-Leninist analysis. In Britain, too, it was clear in 1939 that the network of social services which had been created during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not constitute a system. The services were financed separately, covered only limited sections of the population, and were restricted in duration and scope. They had certainly not proved adequate to deal with the brute facts of poverty and malnutrition, social insecurity and mass unemployment.

The great turning point came during the Second World War which was sufficiently protracted in length and extensive in its influence on the lives of the masses of the population everywhere to promote talk of a “better world” when the war ended. There was no shortage of such talk in the occupied countries and even in Nazi Germany itself, and in Britain, where the powers of the state were greatly extended after 1939, the belief was widely held that, in the words of an official paper on social security policy published in 1944, “in a matter so fundamental, it is right for all citizens to stand in together, without exclusion based on differences of status, function or wealth.” The argument was not just that administrative processes affecting the operation of the social services would be simplified if structures were “comprehensive” or “universal,” but that through universal services, “concrete expression would be given to the solidarity and unity of the nation.” What had been achieved in war could be achieved in peace “in the fight against individual want and mischance.”

In such statements, as in the writings of Sir William Beveridge who did much to propound and to publicize this philosophy, there was a significant shift from the idea of a social service state, improvising and extending welfare networks for people in misfortune, to that of a “welfare state” providing a basic minimum for everybody. There were other shifts too. As Richard Titmuss, the historian of British social policy during the war has remarked, “it was increasingly regarded as a proper function or even obligation of government to ward off distress and strain not only among the poor but among all classes of society. And because the area of responsibility had so perceptibly widened, it was no longer thought sufficient to provide through various branches of social assistance a standard of service hitherto considered appropriate for those in receipt of poor assistance” (*Problems of Social Policy* [1950], p. 506). In other words, the standards of provision on the part of the state were expected to rise. “The deep desire of men to free themselves from the fear of want,” a desire identified in the deliberations of the International Labour Organisation Conference at Philadelphia in 1944, was a foundation of policy, but welfare policy would be expected to fulfill further aspirations also.

It was perhaps in relation to unemployment, however, the social scourge of the 1930’s, that the war produced the greatest transformation of attitudes. The virtual disappearance of unemployment in war conditions suggested that it could be kept to a very low figure in peacetime. Sir William Beveridge, who had written his first study of unemployment as early as 1909, argued in his influential *Full Employment in a Free Society* (1945), which was strongly influenced by Keynes, that “it must be a function of the state... to protect its citizens against mass unemployment, as definitely as it is now the function of the state to defend the citizens against attack from abroad and against robbery and violence at home” (p. 25). The doctrine received less general assent in the United States, although it was strongly supported by a number of economists, including Alvin H. Hansen, and in 1946 an important Employment Act laid down that it was “the continuing policy and responsibility of the Federal Government to use all practicable means... to promote maximum employment, production and purchasing power [and] to co-ordinate and utilize all its plans, functions and resources for the purpose of creating and maintaining, in a manner calculated to foster and promote free competitive enterprise and the general welfare, conditions under which there will be afforded useful employment opportunities, including self-employment, for those able, willing and seeking to work.”

Soon after the Employment Act was passed, the term “welfare state” began to be used on both sides of the Atlantic. It was the program of the British Labour government, brought into power at the general election of 1945, which, in particular, focussed international attention on welfare policies and stimulated both its critics and its supporters to sum up its objective as the creation of a “welfare state.” In this connection, the National Health Act of 1947 was of

central importance. “Homes, health, education and social security, these are your birthright,” exclaimed Aneurin Bevan, its architect. The act provided a universal and comprehensive health service “without any insurance qualifications of any sort”: “it is available,” Bevan pointed out, “to the whole population, and not only is it available to the whole population freely, but it is intended, through the health service to generalise the best health advice and treatment.” The Act was more strongly attacked in the United States, where there was no state-provided “medicare,” than in Britain, and it did much to stimulate debate on the merits and pitfalls of a “welfare state.”

Meanwhile, historians and sociologists as well as socialists and anti-socialists were connecting the policies of the British Labour government between 1945 and 1950 with earlier landmarks in the history of the social services and looking for “origins” and strands of continuity and “development.” Different metaphors were employed. Hitherto, T. H. Marshall wrote in 1949—concerning himself less with the increased powers of the state than with the changing fabric of citizenship—social service policy had always been thought of as a remedial policy dealing with the basement of society and ignoring its upper floors. Now the purpose was being extended. “It has begun to re-model the whole building,” and it might even end by “converting a skyscraper into a bungalow” or at least into a “bungalow surmounted by an architecturally insignificant turret.” The “welfare state,” to use a different metaphor, was seeking to provide a fence to ensure that people do not fall over a cliff, whereas the older social-service state provided an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff to carry away for treatment all those who fell.

Between 1947 and 1960 the term “welfare state” reached its peak currency. Two new developments took place. First, the term began to be used everywhere, even in relation to the policies of nonindustrialized societies like India. It was very fashionable in newly independent countries which were formerly part of the British Commonwealth, and where the British Colonial Office after 1945 had emphasized the need for framing comprehensive welfare programs. The International Labour Organisation spotlighted its universal implications. In an ILO report of 1950, for example, it was stated that “the transformation of social insurance is accompanied by the absorption of co-ordination of social assistance, and there begins to emerge a new organisation for social security, which we can only describe as a service for the citizenry at large. This new organisation now concerns society as a whole, though it is primarily directed to the welfare of the workers and their families. It tends, therefore, to become a part of national government, and social security policy accordingly becomes co-ordinated closely with national policy for raising the standard of welfare and, in particular, for promoting the vitality of the population.”

Second, most “advanced” countries introduced substantial welfare legislation. Scandinavia led the way both in ideas and in scope of provision, but countries like France and Germany, which had inherited very different patterns of provision, developed new systems, particularly of social security, which by 1960 provided more generous benefits in real terms than those offered in Britain. The British “welfare state” survived the fall of the Labour government in 1951, but it was before that fall that the costs of providing certain services under the national health scheme forced the government—with Bevan resigning in protest—to impose new direct charges. Britain ceased to lead the way in welfare legislation after 1951, although nothing was done to dismantle existing structures, and in a period of increasing prosperity there was no danger of the problems of the 1930’s repeating themselves in a new version of economic and social crisis. In all countries unemployment, the main catalyst of prewar discontent, was kept well below its prewar figures.

The term “welfare state” itself lost its initial force during the 1960’s, when “welfare” issues were redefined, particularly in the United States. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 launched a “war on poverty,” but the difficulties of dealing adequately (locally or federally) with poverty, in a society where the problem was inextricably entangled with ethnic questions, explicitly directed attention to the “values” underlying the approach to all welfare issues. They also led to a more searching examination of the basic economic and social structures which most, though not all, of the sociologists and historians of the “welfare state” had disposed of far too easily. New slogans emerged, and it became plain that the circumstances which had led to the coinage of a lively new term after the end of the Second World War had radically altered.

Given the difficulties of carrying over into historical analysis a term used in recent if not in current politics, it is possible nonetheless to identify descriptively what a “welfare state” seeks to do. It is a state in which organized power is deliberately used (through politics and administration) in an effort to modify the play of market forces in at least three directions: first, by guaranteeing individuals and families a minimum income irrespective of their work or their property; second, by narrowing the extent of insecurity by enabling individuals and families to meet certain “social contingencies” (for example, sickness, old age, and unemployment) which could lead otherwise to individual or family crises; and third, by ensuring that all individuals as citizens without distinction of status or class are offered the best services available in relation to a certain agreed, if never finally fixed, range of social services.

Such a definition points to some of the historical considerations which must always be emphasized. First, the concept of “market forces” sets the problems of the “welfare state” within the context of the age of modern political economy. In societies without market economics, the problem of “welfare” raises quite separate issues. Second, the concept of “social contingencies, is strongly influenced by the experience of industrialism. Third, the idea of using organized power (through politics and administration) to determine particular patterns of welfare services rather than relying on other agencies must be set within particular chronological frameworks. It was only with the advent of or the threat of democratic politics and with the introduction of administrations which included or employed experts that power could be deployed in this manner. Fourth, the range of agreed social services must be a shifting range, with both economic and political factors influencing the scope and scale of constituent items. Fifth, the idea of offering not “minima” but “optima,” at least in relation to some specified services, represented the major historical shift, from “the social service state” to the “welfare state.” Sixth, the definition leaves out motives and values. For some advocates of a “welfare state,” like Archbishop William Temple, one of the first people to use the phrase in 1941, the “welfare state” rested on a moral ideal. For others it crystallized as a set of expedients. For others it emerged as the product of inexorable political pressures over a long period of time.

It follows from this historical account that the term “welfare state” even in its heyday has usually been used vaguely rather than precisely, and that it has been employed more frequently in political debate, often as a slogan, than in social and economic analysis. Most usually, it has been identified through contrast rather than through explicit definition—through contrast with a “laissez-faire” state or more recently with a “power state” or a “warfare state,” and little attention has been devoted to the different social and political structures or institutions in the different societies to which the label has been attached.

Socialist critics of the concept, like Richard M. Titmuss, have talked of going “be- yond” the welfare state, drawing attention not only to its limits (in terms of redistribution of incomes and the implementation of economic planning) but also to the uneven efforts of its operations (for example, in satisfying the middle-class demand for health and edu- cation more completely than the working-class need for health and education). They have agreed, indeed, that the term hinders rather than assists an under- standing of “what is actually being done in different societies.” From a nonsocialist vantage point, Jacob Viner claimed in 1962 that “the welfare state is at best a hastily improvised system having characteristics stretching all the way through the range from near- statism to near-anarchy. It is an unplanned response to a host of historical forces and of political pressures which has not yet acquired and may never acquire, an internally coherent and logically formulated philos- ophy. It is undergoing constant change, and its move- ments forward, backwards and sideways, are not guided by any clear and widely accepted consensus as it knows where it is going or where it should go from here” (p. 226). Since 1962 the most interesting studies of the term have concentrated on persisting patterns of stratification, and on differences of values within the same society. The “consensus” of the wartime years helped to generate the dream, and the reality of the “welfare state” has itself passed into history.

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