From welfare state to ecostate?

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Over the course of the twentieth century the provision of welfare services became an essential focus for government activity in the advanced industrial countries. Programmes concerned with pensions and health care, unemployment and work accidents, family allowances and disabilities, came to preoccupy politicians and bureaucracies and to absorb a significant proportion of state budgets (Ashford 1986; Thane 1982). Since the 1950s the idea of a ‘welfare state’ has been commonly invoked to describe a state which -- while continuing to preside over a market-mediated and private property-based economic system -- accepts significant responsibility for delivering social services to its population. The emergence of specialised structures of environmental governance is a more recent phenomena (Janicke and Weidner 1997; Hanf and Jansen 1998). But the growing salience of environmental problems at the close of the twentieth century led some analysts to speculate about the possible development of an ‘ecological state’ -- a state which places ecological considerations at the core of its regulatory functions (Dente 1998; Lafferty 2000; Lundqvist 2001).

The purpose of this paper is to juxtapose these two images of the state. More particularly, it will enquire whether experience with the evolution of the welfare state can provide some insight into the potential of an ‘ecological state’. After a discussion of how the expressions ‘welfare state’ and ‘ecological state’ are to be understood, the essay will explore the parallels and contrasts between these two state forms.

1. Setting up the discussion

The idea of the ‘welfare state’ is employed in a variety of ways in contemporary political argument (Pierson 1998). For the sort of comparison to be undertaken here it is convenient to adopt a rather broad definition, which associates the expression with significant state involvement in the regulation and supply of welfare services within the context of an essentially ‘free enterprise’ economy. The welfare state therefore describes a set of arrangements which emerged during the twentieth century and which, despite recent retrenchment and reform, continues to exist in all developed industrial societies. It refers to state involvement with pensions, health care, insurance against accident and unemployment, and so on; to the government programmes, bureaucracies and institutions implicated in these sectors; and to the politico-ideological justification of these practices. This 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 usages (for it continues to be applicable to conditions across the developed world).

With respect to the ‘ecological state’ the understanding invoked here will again be fairly broad. The term is taken to denote a state which takes the management of environmental burdens seriously: that is, a state which has established (and devotes significant resources to) structures and programmes to ensure that human activities do not generate environmental impacts which erode the foundations of economic and social well-being. To use the conventional idiom, an ecological state would be one committed to ‘sustainable development’ (World Commission on
Environment and Development 1987, Lafferty and Langhelle 1999), to securing a social development trajectory which remains within the frontiers of ‘environmental sustainability’. An ecological state would therefore imply something more than ‘traditional environmental policy’ -- the sorts of nature conservation and health-oriented pollution control measures which became familiar in developed countries from the early 1970s. On the other hand, it would not necessarily imply a thorough-going ‘eco-centric’ orientation, which located the defence of environmental values and the preservation of natural ecosystems at the core of a political project.

The basic function of an ecological state would be to ensure that the unfolding pattern of societal development did not undermine the environmental preconditions for future advance. This implies that an ecological state would require:

- mechanisms for monitoring the actual state of the environment, as well as the pressures and stresses to which it is subject;
- mechanisms for anticipating future developments in society and the environment, and assessing potential risks to environmental sustainability;
- mechanisms for taking decisions about acceptable risks, socially imposed limits to protect environmental systems, and the distribution of costs entailed by such action;
- appropriate steering strategies and policy instruments;
- processes and ideas to legitimate these activities.

Since the environments which effect the state extend beyond the territory over which it exercises jurisdiction, each of these would imply some degree of external linkage: thus an ecological state would necessarily act in the international, as well as the domestic, realm.

The activities of an ecological state need not be conceptualised simply in ‘crisis avoidance’ terms. No doubt there are many potential social pathways which avoid environmental unsustainability (which, in the language of the Brundtland Report, are ‘physically sustainable’). So the institutions of the ecological state could be deployed also to orient social development towards the more (rather than the less) desirable of these alternative futures. In fact, because complex normative judgements are involved in declaring a particular pathway ‘unsustainable’ it is impossible to decisively separate these two dimensions (Meadowcroft 1997). It is therefore most straightforward to conceptualise an ecological state as a set of public institutions designed to orient society towards preferred and environmentally-sustainable development trajectories.

The scope of the five items listed above should therefore be adjusted, particularly the second and third -- which would then be understood to refer to assessing possibilities, and to making collective decisions about, preferred and sustainable environmental options (rather than simply to the avoidance of environmentally unsustainable pathways).

In an ecological state environmental governance functions would not be performed entirely by specialised bodies. The idea of ‘integration’ which has featured so prominently in discussion of sustainable development emphasises that due attention must be paid to the environment in all social decision-making (Lafferty and Meadowcroft 2000). On the other hand, specialised agencies and procedures are also necessary. Many of the structures and practices which states have already established to regulate environmental burdens may remain crucial pillars of an ecological state, even if the constitution and reach of such structures and practices is not presently adequate to discharge the functions described above.

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. In other words, it is taken for granted that at the beginning of the twenty-first century states possess dimensions and perform functions which cannot adequately be captured by the category ‘welfare state’. For example, they possess
structures and programmes to manage market interaction, promote financial stability and encourage economic growth, regulate competition, and so on. A parallel assumption is made about a state termed 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. From this it follows that a state might be both a welfare state and an ecological state -- a possibility to which we shall return in due course.

Before developing this comparison it is worth pausing to make explicit three assumptions underlying the approach adopted 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 organisation of welfare and protection of the environment. Clearly, if one was convinced that globalisation and/or localisation had already decisively eroded the action-potential of the state there would be 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 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 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 institutions we know today.

2. Parallels between the ecological state and the welfare state

The suggestion that experience with the welfare state in the twentieth century may tell us something about the potential for an ecological state in the twenty-first century rests on a claim of underlying parallels between the two forms. What are some of these similarities?

First, the welfare state and the ecological state both involve an extension of state authority into new areas of social life, or at least a systematisation and intensification of interventions which had previously been intermittent or diffuse. The attention of politicians is focused on problems which concerned their predecessors only marginally; specialised 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. With respect to the welfare state the story of its development during the first half of the twentieth century and its rapid extension after World War Two has often been told (Ashford 1986, Flora and Heidenheimer 1981). That is not to say that states assumed no responsibility for the relief of destitution before this point. In the United Kingdom the ‘old’ Poor Law dates back to Elizabethan times, and the New Poor Law was introduced in the early nineteenth century. Most European countries long had provisions for relief of acute distress. But these measures were typically focused on the destitute, absorbed a negligible proportion of state expenditure, and entailed some loss of citizen rights (Pierson 1998).

With respect to the genesis of an ecological state, it is clear that there has been a significant extension of the government role in environmental management during the last three decades of the twentieth century. Early examples of regulation we would now classify as ‘environmental’ go back a long way. There were ordinances against the emission of noxious fumes and fouling waterways, and policies to protect strategic resources and conserve some species and habitats (Andersen and Liefferink 1997; Lester 1995). But such measures were local or exceptional, and formed a very small component of the overall profile of government activity.
It was during the late 1960s and early 1970s that institutions of modern environmental governance began to be established in OECD states, with the enactment of more comprehensive laws on air and water pollution, endangered species legislation, environmental impact procedures, and the creation of central advisory bodies, environment agencies and ministries (Hanf and Jansen 1998). Over the past three decades there has been a substantial extension of the reach of environmental policy, as new problems have been identified and connections with other policy sectors have become apparent. Today, states devote more attention and resources to environment-related issues than ever before. It remains an open question when (and perhaps whether) this will lead to the emergence of arrangements that might reasonably be dubbed an ecological-state. But if so, the state will be obliged to assume further responsibilities. Of course, an ecological state may make substantial use of voluntary and/or market based policy instruments, but such approaches still imply a significant extension of the range of issues with which government is concerned -- for some agency must decide how to manipulate markets and steer voluntary processes so that strategic objectives are attained. Thus both the welfare and ecological states require a practical redefinition of the role of the public power.

Second, both state forms constitute a political response to a perceived failure of markets and voluntary action to address societal problems. Government is drawn into the new domain because problems are judged to have been inadequately addressed by other social institutions. In the case of the welfare state the persistence of acute privation and of great disparities of income despite decades of economic growth, the difficulty which even the most prudent of the working population has in setting aside resources for support during old age, the existence of involuntary mass unemployment attendant upon the trade cycle and industrial restructuring, the potentially catastrophic impact on an ordinary family of accident or illness, and the need to provide children from all backgrounds with a good start to life, were among the considerations invoked to justify increasing state involvement in social services. While it was assumed that most families would satisfy most of their needs most of the time, the welfare state provided a safety net, a national minimum, a collective insurance fund, and supplementary citizenship benefits. It served as a distributional complement to market and voluntary mechanisms: redistributing between 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 systematically impose negative environmental externalities on other actors, the over exploitation of (potentially renewable) common pool resources, and above all the concern that grave harm might be done to environments necessary to human welfare serve to 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 (Daly 1991). 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 chose some patterns of goods over others (Jacobs 1999). Moreover, there is also 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.

Third, programmes associated with each type of state alter patterns of ‘normal’ economic interaction and must operate within significant economic and political constraints. By mandating certain courses of action and by absorbing and re-directing social income the state can alter the patterns of choice confronting individuals and firms, modify the operation of markets and the character of property rights, and have a substantial impact upon the
pace and direction of economic development. With respect to the welfare state, the provision of monetary benefits, direct involvement in productive sectors such as health care, and the expansion of public sector expenditure and employment, 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.

In each case the argument is that intervention produces a more desirable pattern of social and economic development (and indeed in some circumstances enhanced economic performance and competitiveness); but it is clear that the development pattern that results is different to that which would have prevailed without intervention. 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.

The welfare and ecological states are initially reforming creations, whose actions disturb the status quo. Precisely because they are reformist institutions both are continuously restrained by established relationships and political realities. The fiscal foundations of the state must not be undermined, programmes must be adjusted to new circumstances, and a sympathetic political coalition must be maintained. In short, intervention to rectify identifiable problems must not seriously disrupt the ongoing functioning of the economic and political systems.

Forth, and setting this in a very broad historical perspective, both ‘states’ represent a continuing adjustment of governmental activity in response to long term processes of economic, social and political development. In the case of welfare this relates to themes such as industrialisation, urbanisation, 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 growth rates, 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 political struggle. Thus welfare issues emerged into the politics of late nineteenth century states in much the same way as environment issues became a focus of political controversy a century later.

Fifth, the welfare and ecological states each have complex 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 defence 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 ‘continued economic prosperity’ (the environment provides a foundation for economic activity); ‘enhancing human health and welfare’ (the environment contributes to our well-being in many ways); ‘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 the case of both states different strands of normative argument are deployed at different times, to support different programmes, and to win over different constituencies. It is, after all, a hallmark of a successful political reform that it can be advocated 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 state forms can be constructed.

3. Elements of contrast or ambiguity

If there are parallels between the welfare state and a hypothesised ecological state, are there not also dimensions on which the two apparently diverge? A number of issues might be cited here.

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. The modern working class, a group dependent upon wage labour for survival, which came to make up the majority of the population in industrialised countries, had a direct, material, and easily intelligible interest in the establishment of welfare programmes. Coming together as a broad and well organised movement, trade unions educated and disciplined their members and mobilised a struggle not just for higher wages but also for social reform. Social democratic parties (or more loosely parties of the left), converted workers votes into political leverage, which was brought to bear to create and then to extend the institutions of the welfare state.

In contrast, no class, movement, or political party could be said to stand in the same sort of relationship to the ecological state. True, there are today environmental movements and green parties; but these draw more diffuse support from various strata, and their claims are not directly rooted in the immediate material interests of a group which constitutes the bulk of the population. In the absence of such a social foundation some would suggest that the development of an ecological state must appear unlikely. Indeed, it could be argued that the very forces which were most significant in building support for the welfare state might constitute an obstacle to the creation of an ecological state -- for workers, trade unions, and social democrats might be expected to be suspicious of any project which could threaten material living standards, jobs, and economic growth. Data on green party support could be introduced to substantiate such a claim, in as much as it shows that these parties draw their support from middle class and more educated voters.

Yet this contrast between the welfare and ecological states might not be so stark as it first appears. The link between the working class, trade unions, social democracy and the welfare state is more problematic that usually assumed. Some analysts dispute that pressure from below was the decisive element in the genesis of 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. So perhaps the role of workers, trade unions and social democrats has been exaggerated. Still, one can overplay 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.
Yet if the working class did not really behave as a ‘collective actor’ in relation to the creation of the welfare state, is the absence of a parallel social force really so problematic for the ecological state? It depends where the difficulty is thought to lie -- the dynamism of the activists, the size of the organised constituency, the material character of the impacts, the immediacy of the problems, and so on. To date environmental movements and green parties have done an impressive job of moving issues onto the public agenda; specific groups experience the effects of particular problems, but the entire population is potentially effected by some environmental burdens; these impacts are material (not just ‘post-material’), effecting standards of living, health and welfare, and there are also 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.

Above all what this suggests is the importance of ideas in mobilising support and crafting particular proposals for social reform. For 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 crafting of arguments and policy options to mobilise support and engineer reform (Ashford 1986; Mishra 1990).

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. Sustainable development certainly requires a change in the ‘quality’ of growth. Given a finite biosphere, material throughput -- resource consumption and waste deposition -- cannot grow for ever. But there are no a priori limits to ‘development’ (i.e.: an improvement in human welfare), or even earth-bound economic growth -- if one is talking about the growth of monetary aggregates such as profits or GNP. What sustainable development requires is a decoupling of economic performance from material impacts, so that output and welfare can rise even though resource inputs and waste levels fall. In principle this should be possible, in practice it will be difficult to achieve.

So at this 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, sustainable development does imply that certain forms of growth are to be rejected: growth that is purchased at a cost of continued environmental degradation. And this puts the underlying difference in focus. The institutions of the welfare state are largely indifferent to the character of national economic growth (so long as it occurs), but for the ecological state the quality of this growth is an essential concern. Of course, governments have always had ideas about what sorts of development is desirable, and for various reasons they intervene to promote favoured sectors (such as traditional enterprises, heavy industry, infrastructure projects, and most recently telecommunications, information and bio-technologies). But this has not been of direct concern to the institutions of the welfare state.

To put this differently: the welfare state has some impact 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 patterns of production is essentially indirect (demand and labour market effects). On the other hand, the ecological state must be concerned explicitly with patterns of consumption and production. It is not that it would
seek to control these processes in detail, but rather that it would guide patterns of activity within the frontiers of sustainability. One of the greatest challenges for the ecological state is to determine an appropriate portfolio of policy instruments to accomplish this effectively, while leaving the state, groups and individuals 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. Social programmes were established at the national level (or, as in federal systems, were at least under a degree of central supervision). There was much cross national policy transfer; international agreements were structured to avoid poisoning domestic welfare initiatives; and there was a even 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. The environmental problems most obviously linked to sustainable development, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, require an internationally co-ordinated response. Moreover, North / South issues are central to meeting the global environmental challenge in a way they were not to a nationally-oriented welfare regime.

There is certainly an essential difference here, for the basic aims of an ecological state could only be secured through joint action with other states -- action to protect the global environment and prevent the import of unmanageable environmental burdens. 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. The ‘internationalisation’ of policy areas changes the dynamic of debate and decision-making, and although it enables collective action it also restrict national freedom of manoeuvre. Over time, international environmental governance institutions may play an increasingly ascendant role in managing global issues such a 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. It is worth keeping in mind also that the increasing density of international economic and political interchange is now having consequences for the welfare state. Although welfare programmes developed on national lines, by the end of the twentieth century policy-makers were increasingly assessing domestic welfare programmes in light of international developments.

Fourth, since the two states are primarily 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 though programmes such as unemployment and disability allowances. Taxation, income transfers and service provision lie at the heart of the welfare state, although this is now 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 states require the development of appropriate forms of social planning. For welfare policy this relates service provision to economic policy and 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 seems to bear a more direct relationship to democracy than does its ecological cousin. Historians of the welfare state emphasise that its emergence parallels the move towards universal suffrage. As the franchise expands, politics and politicians are 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, 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 hypothesised that democratic states were being driven towards administrative overload and budgetary crisis as politicians outbid one another with promises of ever more extravagant benefits (O’Connor 1973; Offe 1984). Here not just the genesis, but also the subsequent crisis, of the welfare state was tied to the realities of democratic politics. Arguments about the middle class character of much modern social expenditure also link with democracy -- for at a time of relative individual prosperity and state fiscal retrenchment, the in-work majority is unwilling to see universal programme that benefit it curtailed, while the programmes targeted at vulnerable minorities (the unemployed, single mothers, and so on) are gradually rolled back (Pierson 1988).

Yet the link between welfare programmes and democracy is more subtle than sometimes presented. In some contexts welfare measures were introduced as part of a strategy to delay democratisation (consider Bismarck’s welfare programme). And the interest shown by many non-democratic developing states in establishing modern welfare systems suggests that the issue is at least as much related to the functional requirements of an industrialising market economy than a direct consequence of democratisation. Moreover, with respect to fiscal overload, democratic polities proved more flexible than many expected, and the New Right established that voters could be mobilised to support rationalising welfare provision.

Existing democratic frameworks provide an opportunity for the articulation of diverse perspectives and the critique of established practices. The importance of this for environmental outcomes is demonstrated by the comparatively poor environmental record of non-democratic states. Means/ends arguments which have been invoked in discussion of democracy and environment (Saward 1993) appear equally relevant (or irrelevant) to the welfare case: after all promoting welfare is as much about ‘ends’ as promoting environmental protection. It is true that reference is sometimes made to ‘neglected constituencies’ -- future generations, those outside the polity, and non-human nature -- disadvantaged by environmental burdens (Dobson 1996). But the significance of this is unclear. Welfare policy also has inter-generational dimensions, although these are not always explicitly acknowledged. Environmental loadings may be imposed on foreigners, but the fact that the ecostate (if it is to fulfil its mission) must deal with burdens imported from outside its frontiers, and must co-operate with other states to protect the global ecosphere, imposes a (very rough) symmetry. Clearly the interests, intrinsic value or rights of non-human nature are not recognised by welfare states. But, as noted at the outset, they will not necessarily lie at the centre of the pre-occupations of an ecological state either. On the other hand, non-self-interested and non-instrumental arguments have played an important role in the electoral politics of welfare: voters have supported policies from which they would not expect to gain, and justified benefits on the basis of the intrinsic worth of recipients. Both state forms must
be sustained by normative argument, and voters must be brought beyond their immediate or selfish concerns to endorse the social vision they entail. This is a fundamental and ongoing challenge for all democratic politics. Democratic institutions leave open the possibility of mistaken or unjust decisions, and politicians, administrators and voters can always throw prudence and ethical conduct to the winds.

4. Lessons from the evolution of the welfare state?

The above discussion should have gone some way towards convincing the reader that there are intriguing parallels between the welfare and ecological states. If we accept this, then it is possible to enquire whether experience with the welfare state may provide some 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 (Pierson 1998). 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 (Switzerland, before 1900; Germany in 1900; Sweden, the UK and Ireland in 1905; and Denmark in 1908). 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.

The table reproduced below (from Pierson 1998) suggests that the period 1880 and 1914 marks the decisive phase in the initial genesis of the welfare state. 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. 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. At different points in time different programmes absorbed the attention of politicians (Ashford 1986). For example, industrial accident insurance and old age pensions were among the first programmes adopted in most countries (Pierson 1998). 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.
The striking parallels in welfare policy innovation across developed states appear to result both from the operation of similar pressures (policy makers faced similar sets of problems), and deliberate imitation where schemes tried out in pioneer states served as inspiration for later implementers. And of course activists, parties and electors also learned from the experience in other countries; so pioneering programmes served to generate domestic pressure in other states for similar reforms to be instituted.

Third, as the welfare state developed very different (national) patterns of welfare provision emerged. If one wants to claim that some form of welfare state exists in all developed polities, then it is also clear that patterns of entitlement and the way programmes actually operate differ enormously from country to country. 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 (Pierson 199).

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 counties arrayed between them. More sophisticated approaches include Esping-Andersen’s well-know typology that classifies welfare regimes according to the extent that they are ‘market supporting’ or ‘market-usurping’ (Esping-Andersen 1990). This scheme suggests welfare states can be divided 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 recognise social rights but maintain traditional hierarchy; and ‘social democratic’ welfare states (Sweden and Norway) which ‘de-commodify’ much of social life (emphasising equality, citizenship, and high quality state provision).

What is important for our purposes here is less to follow through the details of these classificatory schemes (and many others have been suggested), but more to recognise the significance of the broad differences that exist among developed countries (and even among jurisdictions and programmes within individual countries). Certainly such differences matter to the life chances of the claimants ‘on the ground’: (say for a teenage mother in London or Stockholm, or an unemployed patient 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. Some programmes are universal, some are means tested, and they are funded in various ways, with varying degrees of generosity. This is in part a reflection the welfare state’s growth as an accretion of distinct initiatives directed towards different objectives and constituencies. It is also a reflection of the political compromises that were required to introduce new initiatives and adjust existing programmes (Ashford 1986). Over time, a complex but only semi-coherent patchwork of programmes and agencies has emerged. Thus 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 theorists who reflected on the growth 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 which see the welfare state as a functional response industrialisation and/or modernisation and/or capitalism one the one hand, and those which see it as a fundamentally contradictory development on the other (Pierson
Social democratic attitudes typify the first camp, while new right, Marxist and neo-Marxist commentators are representative of 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. The creation of welfare states 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 appears relative rather than absolute (Mishra 1990). On the other hand, the fears of the immanent dismantling of the welfare state also proved to be exaggerated. Instead there was a period of reorganisation 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 a historical trajectory analogous to that traced by the welfare state, we could expect:

- 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, we now have had three decades of innovation in the field of environmental governance. In terms of the welfare state, three decades represented much of the initial generative phase (1880-1914) during which welfare institutions were established in the industrialised world. Half a century of development of the ecostate would bring us to 2020, a period that roughly coincides with the forward horizon of many first generation strategic plans for the environment and sustainable development, with the middle of the third accounting period for the Kyoto Protocol of the Climate Change Convention, and with the hypothetical date for a Rio +30 review. This also marks the initial time frame presented in current IPCC 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 this represents a time scale over which significant economic and technological developments are possible. One could envisage substantial alterations to current production and consumption patterns, and changes to national and international governance structures. According to some analysts, by this point the transition away from the carbon economy could be well underway.

In some respects the initial environmental innovations of the 1970s spread more rapidly than did the earliest welfare measures of the 1880s. Presumably this is in part related to differences of historical conjuncture: by the later part of the twentieth century the rhythm of international interchange (among governments, but also among civil societies) had increased, and the reflex to turn towards the state to resolve emerging problems was well entrenched. On the other hand, the greater complexity and uncertainty associated with sustainability suggest that the full range of programmes and structures of an ecological state may take longer to emerge.

- Periods of innovation and periods of relative stagnation or consolidation in ecostate development may alternate, and changes at the centre 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 emphasise 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 (Weal 1992; Glasbergen 1996).
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 (Meadowcroft 1999a; Baker, Kousis, Richardson and Young
1997).
A flurry of legislative and administrative initiatives occurred in the late 1980s and 1990s, and
these are still feeding through in terms of implementation and expenditure. Further rounds of
institutional development will be required over the next decade to address climate change
issues that are already fixed on the political agenda, and this will imply policy 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. Environmental problems related to water management, land-use, transport,
agriculture, fisheries, biotechnology and biodiversity, are also likely to come to the fore in
developed countries over the next fifteen years. Again, additional reforms to the
environmental administration, a rise in the overall size of the environmental bureaucracy and
an increase in the proportion of state budgets allocated to environmental issues can be
expected.
Over the past three decades environmental issues have risen and fallen in the public
consciousness, and one can anticipate periods during which the attention of political leaders
will be absorbed by other issues. Yet long term development pressures mean that
environmental problems will keep re-appearing on the political agenda. And the periodic
eruption of crises in specific domains (farming, fisheries, conservation, and so on) provides
an opportunity to break open closed policy communities, redefine problems, and implement
new phases of institutional reform.

- **very different 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 (Lundqvist 1980, Enloe 1975;
  Downing and Hanf 1983). Although recent work suggests that there is considerable cross
  national policy diffusion, and a certain amount of convergence in terms of structures and
  instruments of environmental governance (Janicke and Weidner 1997), the varied
  institutional, political and ideational contexts of national polities and the differences of
  economic structure and ecological character among nations imply that divergent approaches
  are certain to continue.
  Important dimensions of variation are likely to include:
  - the overall balance between public or private initiatives in making and implementing
    sustainable development policy;
  - the preferred mix of policy instruments -- the balance among 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 making and implementing collective decisions about environmental futures above and beyond the minimum requirements of physical sustainability;
- the approach to handling 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 functions are distributed to various administrative bodies, functions overlap but there are also gaps in coverage, and programmes often operate at cross-purposes. Attempts to harmonise initiatives and to introduce more integrated approaches (integrated pollution control, one-stop permitting, drawing up 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 ecostate will transcend such a disjointed and fragmented structure is likely to prove illusory (Meadowcroft 1999b). Almost any dimension of social and economic development can potentially effect 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 (Dryzek 1987). 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 an enhanced opportunities for social learning.

Whatever the precise character of mature ecostates, they will not correspond fully with the normative ambitions of reformers. Different sorts of environmental problems are likely to be managed more or less effectively, and the ethical imperatives associated with sustainable development and the defence of environmental values will only approximately be embodied in their practices.

- **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 continued 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 these difficulties (Dryzek 1997; Benton and Short 1999). The development of an ecostate will not preclude the continuation of these controversies. Technological, economic and social development will raise a stream of questions about what environments are to be transformed or preserved, about attitudes towards nature and towards humans as part of (or as standing apart from) nature. Whether the structures that are being set up 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 trap intended to preserve an inequitable or environmentally corrupt system from collapse. 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, towards a scientifically managed planetary ecosphere, or on a human journey of moving 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. Agencies, programmes, policy objectives, and policy instruments which seemed to be working fine for years can always be called into question. We tend to think about the shift away from the carbon economy, the stabilisation of population levels, and the transition towards the sustainable management of potentially renewable resources as the essential steps in movement towards sustainable development. But even in a world where the atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gasses had been stabilised, one could imagine many and varied threats to environmental integrity. For example, we are now only at the beginning of a biological revolution that will make possible the deliberate modification of all life forms, including the human genome. What the longer term consequences of this development will be for humans or for the other species with which we share the planet only time will tell.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that interesting parallels can be drawn between the development of the welfare state during the twentieth century and the ecological state which may today be beginning to take shape in the developed countries. 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 emphasised 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.

One issue which it has not proved possible to explore here, but which surely deserves attention, is the inter-linkage between welfare and environmental institutions -- that is to say, the possible synergy, friction and overlap between the welfare and ecological states. At the outset it was noted that it would be possible for a state to be both a welfare state and an ecological state. Indeed, to the extent that the ecological state is assumed to emerge from current institutions (and baring any immanent disintegration of the welfare state in the developed countries), it is clear that a state that became an ecostate would also necessarily already be a welfare state. But what sorts of programmes or structural innovations would facilitate the reconciliation of the two forms? Are there points of friction which would need to be explicitly addressed? Some analysts have already made suggestions along these lines. There is, for example, the proposal that a minimum income could strengthen the ethical (but also the financial) foundation of the modern welfare state, while also discouraging consumerist and productivist cultures which lead to environmental destruction (Achterberg 1999). However one assesses this particular proposal, the issue of the ethical links, but also the practical policy and organisational connections, between the welfare and ecological functions of the state deserve further consideration.
Introduction of social insurance in selected OECD countries

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Taken from Pierson 1998.
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