

Towards a Proactionary Welfare State

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A slightly abridged version of the following piece appears on pages 127-130 of [*Making Progressive Politics Work: A Handbook of Ideas*](#), published by the [Policy Network](#), a centre-left think-tank headed by Peter Mandelson, a leading architect of ‘New Labour’ in the UK. The book was presented at [a conference in Amsterdam on 24-25 April 2014](#), hosted by the Dutch Labour Party that also included representatives of the similarly minded Washington-based [Center for American Progress](#). It addresses issues triggered initially by [David Budtz Pedersen’s considerations on ‘welfare state 2.0’](#) and which are pursued in more detail in my forthcoming [The Proactionary Imperative: A Foundation for Transhumanism](#) (co-authored with Veronika Lipinska).

The welfare state has an image problem for which its defenders bear the lion’s share of the blame. It all started when the philosopher John Rawls argued that the welfare state is the form of government best equipped to meet the demands of justice. So far so good. Unfortunately, his case was based on the intuition that if people do not know their exact place in society, they would wish their own fate not to be too bad — even if that means placing limits on how well they and others might turn out.

While it is easy to sympathise with this sentiment, in the end it means that our understanding of uncertainty is driven by fear rather than hope. Thus, the welfare state is seen by both its defenders and its detractors, as mainly designed to protect people from threats rather than promote them to seize opportunities. Consider the significance of the ‘precautionary principle’ in European Union law, especially in matters relating to health and the environment.

The precautionary principle is the Hippocratic oath writ large: *In policy matters, above all, do no harm*. It regularly functions as a brake on the pace of innovation, as in the controversy surrounding ‘genetically modified organisms’. To be sure, the principle has not been adopted categorically and its adoption has not always proven bad. Nevertheless, precaution operates as a default position in the drafting of legislation, trading illegitimately on the idea that any state — or even a superstate like the European Union — is empowered to uphold a fixed ideal of material well-being across great expanses of space and time.

This is not to say that states should not be concerned with future generations. On the contrary, they should develop policies that enable denizens of the future to live most effectively in the world that we will have bequeathed them. But our policies should focus less on maintaining today’s standards indefinitely than on ensuring that tomorrow’s citizens can take full advantage of the distinct sphere of freedom that is afforded by the conditions and resources they are likely to inherit — their ‘room to manoeuvre’ (*Spielraum*), so to speak.

This means that the default setting for any future welfare state legislation should be the exact opposite of the precautionary principle, the *proactionary principle*. The philosopher Max More introduced this principle in 2004 in response to the interim report of George W. Bush’s Bioethics Council, which had called for science and technology to lower its ambitions to enhance the human condition. (The report notoriously recommended the suspension of US federal funding for stem cell research.) In contrast, More argued that what raises *Homo sapiens* above other creatures is our capacity for calculated risk-taking, which has enabled our species over a relatively short period to dominate the planet.

The proactionary principle envisages humanity as a seasoned gambler, who continues to raise the stakes but loses affordably and with an eye to clues about the best strategy for future wagers. A proactionary welfare state prepares people to inhabit this self-conception of our species.

At the moment, only self-described ‘entrepreneurs’ are licensed to be openly proactionary — and then only with respect to explicit wealth creation. Such people are understood to be uniquely predisposed (perhaps due to prior wealth?) to flourish in an environment of ‘creative destruction’. However, a proactionary welfare state would democratise – and thereby demystify — the entrepreneurial attitude. But how to instil this attitude in the next generation? Modern Western intellectual history teaches three general lessons with clear policy import:

1. Altruism is Ultimately the Result if not the Intention

Any truly successful innovation (almost by definition) benefits others more than the original innovator and investors. Few entrepreneurs ever anticipate the radical changes they make to the world, which effectively sow the seeds for their rivals and successors. A proactionary welfare state enables people to take on board the debt they ‘always already’ owe to their precursors, so as to behave as worthy of this gift. Thus, contrary to the precautionary principle, the lesson to learn from the risky and often outright violent experiments of our ancestors is *not* that those risks should be minimised in the future. Comparable levels of risk-taking *should* be encouraged, but with improved mechanisms for monitoring and publicising consequences, as well as for providing adequate compensation, if not restitution, for those violated in the process. Progress may thus be measured by how freely and knowledgeably people accept greater levels of risk.

2. Value Preferences Adapt to Changing Circumstances

In the history of science and technology, innovation’s opponents were often strictly correct but their objections were side-lined as a new generation was born adaptive to the new world. An obvious case in point is the automobile’s replacement of the horse as the primary mode of personal transport in the early 20th century. Yes, the air became polluted and people became isolated from nature, but the worst aspects of these

problems were handled through catalytic converters and tighter pollution laws. Otherwise, people implicitly accepted that the automobile's relative ease of maintenance and mobility trumped all the equine virtues combined and provided a new value foundation in which speed and convenience are paramount, spurring still further innovation. In the context of the current global climate crisis, the Hartwell Paper of 2010 exemplifies this sensibility.

3. The Value of Life is not Reducible to Living It

This is the largest and most difficult lesson because it calls on people to consider everything they value as negotiable, including their own lives. A proactionary welfare state would remove the taboo that locates the value of life primarily in the body of one's birth. The legacy of decisions taken in one's life would play a larger role, as risk-takers are rewarded in ways that keep their spirit alive even if their material existence undergoes radical transformation. Implied here is a more liberal and transparent culture of compensation for damages, preferably in economic terms. In this context the classic welfare state's idea of a 'social safety net' would need to be reconceptualised. Proactionaries want to live in a world where people are not protected from the worst consequences of their actions but are recognised for having done as much as they could with the resources available to them.

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