

The State and I

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Let me start by stating what this article is *not* about. It is *not an academic investigation* into the features of the Nordic model of a state called the *welfare state*; and it is *not an attempt to compare* the welfare state model with other state forms that have developed over time, and in particular in the decades following World War II. Both these perspectives could have been relevant, but others have written with much greater wisdom than I am capable of. My perspective will be a much more personal one, and, therefore, much more anecdotal than academic.

I will first of all share with the reader my personal attempt to understand the relationship between the roles of some of the state institutions that matter to people, and the democratic culture which must underpin these institutions. And secondly, I will share some of the fundamental and in some cases rather dramatic changes that both the state institutions and our democracy have been confronted and challenged with in recent decades, challenges that I believe my own as well as my children's generations will continue to struggle with.

Time can be illustrated in many ways. In my case it will be appropriate to mention the founding of the United Nations on 24 October 1945, with 51 states signing the charter. Today the UN can count 193 states as members, and together they make up what we call the *international community*. A global community which together has to find ways to meet the many serious and dangerous challenges that the world was not aware of, when the UN was founded. All of this has unfolded more or less in my lifetime. This is my framework.

My parents were young students during World War II. They fell in love right after the war, and married a few years later, at the end of the 1940s. I was born soon after. Both my parents were the first in their families to get a longer and higher education, both of them as teachers. By virtue of their own efforts and the support of the many different institutions of the state that were developed in the post-war era, they became members of a large and fast growing middle class that was a beneficiary of the Danish *welfare state*.

Some will call this state a *vision* which is still being implemented; others consider it to be an *ideology* of social democratic or socialist origin. In any case, globally it is certainly seen as a construction particular to the Nordic countries, hailed and celebrated by some, hated and criticized by others. Recently it has been mentioned in debates taking place in the US among the candidates competing to be the presidential candidate for the Democratic Party in 2016—by some seen as an ideal to be pursued, because it protects the poor and ensures some degree of equality among the citizens; by others as a socialist or even communist authoritarian state to be resisted, because it does not allow the free play of the market forces to the extent that the American dream requires.

I never saw my state in this antagonistic perspective, probably because I grew up as it unfolded from being a dream by visionary (particularly social democratic) politicians and labour unions to in fact being able to deliver on its promises. My father was the son of a small farmer, not a rich landholder; and he could only afford for one of his two sons to study. My mother was the daughter of a railway official, and she was also the only of two sisters who got the chance to study.

When I started going to school in the 1950s, Denmark had just introduced a new approach to education, which emphasised the role of education in our democracy, including the right of all to an education. We were two brothers, and we both had the *right* of getting the education our energy and abilities deserved. The state invested heavily in new school buildings and the training of teachers.

For a small country without many natural resources (this was before oil was discovered in the North Sea), education was a must. We needed to be smart to produce for export markets—and to get the money required for welfare: education, health, roads, trains, waste management, and much more. We also needed education for all people to have access to information, and thus be full members of our representative democracy.

I first learned about the relationship between the free education and health we were all entitled to in the welfare state, and the payment of taxes, when we would visit my grandparents at the farm in the early 1960s. After dinner, the men would withdraw to the ‘smoking room’ to play cards and smoke cigars, and the children would manage the exchange of coins of grandfather, fathers, and uncles, after the card games were won or lost.

Often the discussion (I only later fully understood) would be about *why taxes to the state should be higher or lower*. My grandfather was a member of the Liberal Party,

and although he genuinely believed in equality among men (not women and men I think), he also believed in the freedom of the market forces. My father did not really trust those forces, and although he would not trust the bureaucrats of the state fully, he believed in strong shoulders paying more and weak shoulders paying less.

Overhearing the adults talking in the cigar room was probably my first lesson in what I consider to be one of the most fundamental *contracts* between the *citizen and the state* in a democracy: *paying taxes!* Closely linked to this monetary exchange was the *accountability* of the politicians and the authorities towards the citizens, allowing all of us to see in a transparent manner what *our money* is being spent on; and giving us the opportunity to choose others to represent us at the next election.

By the way, in the early 1960s, women were not allowed in the cigar room at my grandfather's farm, and women smoking cigars and playing cards were not seen as attractive female qualities. As I remember it, women would have their own discussions about children and housework in the living room, although my own mother was a strong believer in equal rights for men and women, even to the extent that she would be willing to embarrass my father—he was also a believer, but not in such a dramatic manner as my mother.

I never went to kindergarten myself, but was taken care of by a private nanny, when both my parents went to work. It was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s that kindergartens became the norm rather than the exception, very much due to the emancipation of women. The labour market required women to be part of the labour force, and the state had to invest in this as well, to ensure that the welfare state could continue to grow in scope as well as quality.

So when I had my first child in the mid-1970s, she of course attended kindergarten. I considered this to be natural, as a right given to me as a citizen of the state. Although I was young and still not making a lot of money, and, therefore, not paying a lot of taxes, I knew instinctively that seen over my entire lifetime, I would be paying my part to the functioning of the state I was a member of.

Going to school and attending kindergarten are two examples of how I have grown up with my state. Free access to health is another feature that I could have accounted for in personal detail; with my father dying young from leukemia, and spending years in hospital without my mother having to pay from her limited income; or my brother having a daughter with a brain disease, which has also required years of

hospital treatment, without ruining the family financially.

Yes, I have indeed benefitted from the resources of the state in many ways. I feel we have established a very personal relationship. I also believe that I have contributed in more ways than one to our relationship, not only through my payment of taxes, but also through my participation in both national and local elections, and my volunteer contributions to the local communities I have lived in.

Looking back, it is easy to see the dramatic changes Denmark has undertaken since I was born. We often state that *things today are much more global and, therefore, more complicated*, and therefore the manner in which the state behaves by definition has to change. We also point to specific examples. One example is the transnational nature of production and trade, allowing companies larger than most nation states to ‘manipulate’ with their status and avoid paying taxes to the state in *my* country. Another example could be the elusive and transnational nature of international terrorism, which requires different states to cooperate more closely in monitoring these forces than many are comfortable with.

While these lines are being written, news about an agreement among all 193 members states of the UN at the climate change negotiations in Paris are being celebrated on global news media. Not a good and strong enough deal probably. Certainly not a deal with any legally binding mechanisms as many of us would have preferred. But for the first time since the world started discussing this shared global threat at the Environment Conference in Stockholm in 1972, and later at the Rio Conference in 1992 (where I was active as a representative of the Danish civil society), the world has agreed in writing that we cannot manage this challenge without confronting it together.

The nation state we all live in is by itself too weak to deal with global threats like climate change, terrorism, tax evasion, and failed states creating large movements of refugees. Whatever the Danish welfare state can afford to do, it will be like throwing a handful of sand into a river thundering down through the gorges of the mountains. *We need others* in an effectively coordinated effort to manage the global challenges and threats that affect each nation state.

While this has in a sense been accepted by political leaders ever since the signing of the UN Charter in 1945, it may not be fully understood or accepted by all of us. We hesitate to hand over sovereignty to non-national institutions above us, and this is

probably a healthy position to depart from. As argued above, I have a very personal tax-based contract with my own state, and I can hold my elected representatives directly responsible and accountable.

Is this possible when we move some parts of the national sovereignty to the EU bureaucracy in Brussels? Is it possible with the Security Council of the UN in New York? Probably not. As I have tried to highlight through this personal story about my own personal (and emotional) relationship with my own state, this is a large step away from what we are used to, what we can understand based on our own daily experiences, and what we feel comfortable with at a very personal level.

But this is a step we need to take. My grandfather spent most of his life in a state that did not have the strong welfare dimension. My parents had their first child when the foundation of the welfare state was built. I had my first child when the vision of a welfare state had become reality, and my children will spend a major part of their lives in a welfare state that needs to adopt to global challenges that were never discussed when I was a child.

There are all kinds of technicalities involved in calibrating a new relationship between the national state and the need for a global 'state-like' authority as convener, arbiter, and decision-maker. However, I believe that what will be most important and unfortunately also most difficult to deliver is the *political leadership* required to explain to citizens what is happening. We need leaders who can lead in the global village of 2015, which is very different from the global village of 1945.

Leadership in its old-fashioned sense, with leaders being able to explain, direct and comfort the people, is required precisely because this is a democratic challenge, not just a technical exercise. Moving decisions from the national to the regional and global levels, while at the same time making decisions transparent and accountable as we are used to at the national level, is a democratic challenge of extraordinary proportions.

For citizens in small nations like Denmark and Bhutan, the challenge can be seen as monumental, and certainly frightening, to most of us. We can all agree that terrorism, climate change, cross-border tax speculation, and waves of refugees crossing borders, are issues that no single state can manage on its own. But precisely because they are of such horrific proportions, many will instinctively seek refuge in the local and national; seeking safety by looking inward, when the opposite is what is necessary.

A few weeks ago a majority of Danes voted 'no' in a referendum about transferring sovereignty in certain areas to the European Union. It was not a huge 'no', but it was clear enough with 53 percent voting against what the old traditional political elite had recommended. Which is precisely the issue that our democracy now needs to find a solution to: how to bring the caretakers of the state into dialogue with the citizens of our democracy, so that we can find solutions together, even though we may have some disagreements.

Certainly not an easy challenge; but the challenge is there right in front of us, right now, whether we like it or not.