IN PRAISE OF THE WELFARE-STATE
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In times of economic difficulty, conservatives attack the welfare state with the argument that the efforts of the community should be directed toward only its weakest members---the very poor. As reasonable as this approach might seem, it is fundamentally unsound. For the resulting social programs, based typically on means tests, encourage taxpayers to think in terms of us and them. We---the middle class---have to pay the state, but get nothing in return.

The ground is thus prepared for the disintegration of social solidarity, which in turn encourages tax revolts. The fact is that it is not the weight of the tax burden that causes such revolts but rather the feeling among taxpayers that they do not get anything for their money. People who derive some benefit from a welfare system are its greatest supporters and will pay taxes without feeling exploited.

An efficient and stable welfare state must be based on universal social programs, such as health insurance, pensions, and child-support allowances----programs extended to all citizens. Official poverty lines or means tests would not be used to define the poor (which would eliminate the need for bureaucratic controls). At the same time, people in difficult financial circumstances would not have to put up with the degrading classification of the poor. And, because the poor would have the same rights as others to social services, they would enjoy services of a much higher standard----services that would be acceptable to the rich. Moreover, universal programs would help eliminate the poverty trap, in which the poor are discouraged from increasing their earnings since to do so, decreases their benefits.

The point I am trying to make is that the weak members of society are best protected not by being given special treatment but by being included in programs that extend to all members of society.

Opponents of the welfare state say that a large public sector leads to inefficiency and slow economic growth. There are no data to support such assertions. It is impossible to establish any connection between a large public sector and low economic growth. Many countries are, of course, struggling with budget deficits. And it goes without saying that the expansion of social programs depends upon general economic development. But we in Sweden have come to the conclusion that the problem is not that the public sector is too large but that the industrial sector is too small, and that industry is not operating at full capacity.

In our efforts to improve society we must always keep in mind the invariables of human life. I am speaking of those few great challenges that are the same for all of us, everywhere: to grow up and be educated for our roles as adults; to find friends; to find a place to live and turn it into a home; to raise a family; to cope with illness and any other
misfortunes that may beset us; to make a decent living and prepare for the inevitable frailty of old age; to live as free citizens equal to the other members of society; and to take a share of responsibility for the common good.

All of our material and technological advances have done nothing to change these life projects. We may deal with them, practically speaking, in different ways, but they remain the same.

When we discuss the kind of society we want to create, we must remember that the purpose of society is not to realize any particular idea. Our goal should not be to manifest the greatness of a nation or state, nor to champion the interests of any one group or class. Society should not be built to conform to any blueprint of utopia. Rather, society and its institutions should serve people here and now, and help them to realize their life projects—in short, to live their lives.