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Ideas and Welfare State Reform in Western Europe

edited by

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*Professor of Social Policy,
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Preface

The future of the welfare state is at the centre of European political debate. On the one hand, critics argue that the concept of state responsibility for the welfare of citizens is obsolete. Globalisation makes the traditional ideal of the neo-Keynesian interventionist government, unquestioned authority in its own territory, outdated; high levels of public spending undermine individual responsibility and damage the competitiveness of the economy; people are increasingly reluctant to accept the judgements of experts and officials and keen to pursue their own welfare as they see it.

On the other hand, the welfare state is widely seen as a European invention, a distinctive solution to the problem of balancing economic progress and social justice within a polity. Active state support is seen as an essential ingredient in success in the new knowledge-based economy. The role of government in citizen welfare is being rethought across Europe, and the EU is seeking to take the lead in the co-ordination of new approaches to welfare.

These developments focus attention on the role of ideas in policy making and debate, in policy learning and transfer, in negotiation and in the construction of compromise between political actors, and, more broadly, in attracting the support of the constituencies of voters and citizens on whose endorsement the actors depend. This book examines the role of ideas in welfare state reform in Europe. It seeks to distinguish the respective contribution of ideas and of practical factors – economic change and political realignment – in the new European welfare settlement.

Our work draws on the data gathered by a major EU Framework Five research project: *Welfare Reform and the Management of Societal Change*. We are grateful for the support which made our collaboration possible. The arguments presented here were developed through discussion at a series of conferences in Canterbury, Paris, Madrid, Berlin and Oxford, and via email. We would like particularly to thank the discussants at our Berlin conference: Jochen Clasen, Valerie Fargion, Peter Flora, Peter Hall, Michael Hill, Ellen Immergut, Stephan Lessenich, Jane Lewis, August Oesterle, Claus Offe and Paul Pierson, for their suggestions and encouragement.

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Peter Taylor-Gooby
Kent, December 2004

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