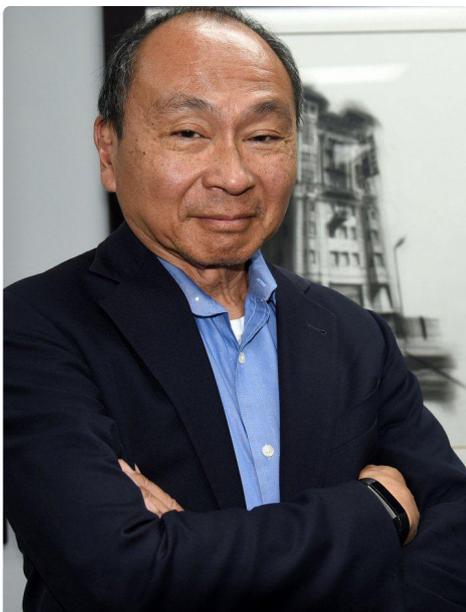


# “Getting to Denmark”

How societies build capable, democratic and law-bound states

Professor Francis Fukuyama



This is one of three publications arising from Prof Fukuyama's talks in South Africa. All are available at [www.cde.org.za](http://www.cde.org.za)

## *Introduction*

*In March 2019, CDE brought internationally renowned scholar, Francis Fukuyama to South Africa for a series of public lectures and more intimate engagements with policy-makers and business leaders. Professor Fukuyama is a Senior Fellow at Stanford University. He is one of the world's most prominent public intellectuals and founder of The American Interest. He has published a dozen influential books on subjects as diverse as biotechnology, trust and the development of the state in modern history. He is most famous for a 1989 article on 'The end of history' and a related 1992 book, The End of History and the Last Man that together helped many intellectuals in the West to frame the implications of the end of the Cold War.*

*This paper is based on Professor Fukuyama's talks to senior officials in the South African Presidency, business leaders and editors*

## Why "Getting to Denmark"?

Professor Fukuyama has a memorable way of referring to the pursuit of a good society. "For people in developing countries", he observed in 2011, "'Denmark' is a mythical place that is known to have good political and economic institutions: it is stable, democratic, peaceful, prosperous, inclusive, and has extremely low levels of political corruption. Everyone would like to figure out how to transform Somalia, Haiti, Nigeria, Iraq or Afghanistan into 'Denmark.'" Getting to Denmark has now become a widely adopted metaphor for the question of how to transform weak and poor states into well-functioning societies.

Fukuyama also uses the notion of "getting to Denmark" to critique the reform agenda of some international development agencies and experts. He believes many of their proposals for developing countries presuppose the existence of the kind of state that Denmark has. For Fukuyama, who acknowledges that until the invasion of Iraq by the US, he was himself insufficiently sensitive to the importance of understanding how states emerge, a development agenda that makes this kind of presupposition about the state is incoherent and is bound to fail. For him, the process of development must help such states emerge from states with very different characteristics if it is to make sense and succeed.

In a two volume history of human societies, *Origins of Political Order* and *Political Order and Political Decay*, Fukuyama has detailed the unlikely journey that led to the emergence of states like Denmark. His work emphasises how hard it will be for others to follow in Denmark's wake. Denmark is a model of an effective, deliberative, open, democratic society that is based on the rule of law. This is what good governance requires. What we need is a roadmap to getting there in societies in which states can have a very different purpose and logic.

For Fukuyama, most states that have existed in history have been essentially patrimonial in character: "a tyranny of cousins" in which the state is used primarily to benefit the ruler, his kin and his allies. This, he argues, is rooted in a set of biological drives that cause human beings to favour those related to us over those who are not. We are altogether too keen to advance the interests of our close relatives, and all too willing to kill and rob those to whom we are not connected by kinship. When states emerged in human societies, they tended to be the instruments of personal or patrimonial power, in which the family and friends of the ruler held sway.

## Three pillars of political order

Fukuyama identifies three elements that, collectively, hold these destructive tendencies in check, and argues that, historically, each has emerged independently. The first is the modern state: a set of centralised, effective institutions that relates impartially towards its citizens, a Weberian bureaucracy. The legitimate use of violence, the collection of taxes, military conscription and territorial control were all embodied in a competent central administration, and the relationship between citizen and state would no longer be based on kinship, friendship or political alliance. He argues that the first civilization to achieve this kind of state was China in the third century BC.

A modern state is not enough to keep citizens safe from personalised power, however. After all, a powerful state makes possible the emergence of stronger rulers, who may revert to favouring their relatives and close associates. There is also a danger that the power of the state under the control of a "bad emperor" could be used in a destructive way. Hence the importance of the second pillar of a Denmark-like political order: the rule of law.

The Rule of Law is the set of rules and institutions that constrain the way states can use their power by insisting on predetermined rules; and the essential principle that all laws will apply equally to rulers and the ruled. Fukuyama distinguishes this from the "rule by law" that exists in countries such as China today: here the state may give effect to its will through statute, but there are no real bars on what the state can do; constitutional democracies, on the other hand, set limits on what kinds of laws states can pass.

The third of Fukuyama's key elements of political order is accountable and responsive government, i.e. government whose power is directed through the will of the people. Taking the examples of the modern bureaucratic states of Japan and Germany, Fukuyama observes that it is quite easy, in the absence of accountability, for a state to become a tyranny, to organise its activities in the interests of a few, or to engage in willful destruction under a bad ruler. Procedural rules are required to make sure the interests of the whole population are respected and reflected in the activities of government, and to make possible the removal of bad leaders. Democratic systems of periodic elections are one of the critical mechanisms for ensuring this.

## What does all this mean for South Africa?

Fukuyama's conclusion is that a desirable political order, if it is to be sustainable, must be supported by all three of these pillars. It requires a modern state built around institutions that treat all citizens equally, and this state has to be powerful in order to enforce order, protect borders and provide public goods. At the same time, the state needs to be constrained, both by the application of the rule of law and by democratic accountability to all of those whom it governs.

Each element of political order is hard to achieve and difficult to sustain on its own. But getting one or two elements right, however well, will not suffice. Democracy on its own is no guarantee of a benevolent state bound by the rule of law. Without a strong state, economic and social progress is hard to sustain. Social mobilisation that might encourage accountability can result in political instability where the state and the rule of law are not strong.

Creating a strong state – as the United States discovered in post-war Iraq – is tremendously difficult. Yet sustaining a strong state over long periods, as China has done, is not enough: it will likely result in the violation of human rights, and perhaps even tyranny, in the absence of the rule of law and democratic accountability.

Fukuyama's conclusion is that it is a great struggle to develop these key institutions and to maintain a balance between them. He also cautions that human societies have an innate tendency to decay – to revert to forms of "neo-patrimonialism" in which rival groups fight for ascendancy.

While his reminder of the dangers of slipping back from democracy or allowing the rule of law to fade is pessimistic, his key insight – and the greatest shift in his thinking since he wrote about "the end of history" – is more optimistic. The modern state is complex and exceptionally hard to build, but we do not need to build it in its entirety before we begin to develop. As Fukuyama observed, "if it were the case that you couldn't have growth until you had a good government, no country would ever have gotten anywhere".

Countries like Denmark that today combine a highly capable state, the rule of law, and democratic accountability were once weak, authoritarian, and riddled with corruption. It is therefore not the case that South Africa cannot have economic growth and development unless it first establishes a fully capable, democratic state and effective implementation of the rule of law where everyone is equal before the law. Indeed it is economic growth that enables expansion and quality improvement in government – the two must evolve together. If a Denmark-like state was required for countries to get to Denmark, not even Denmark would have achieved it.

## The primacy of politics

Perhaps Fukuyama's most powerful point is that the evolution of the state is always a political process, and one that succeeds only if a coalition of reformers is able to impose its agenda on the state. This is by no means guaranteed, as the prevalence of bad states throughout history amply testifies. To illustrate this point, Prof Fukuyama has often referred to the experience of the United States in the 19th century in his writing. This was a time, he argues, when a weak state and quasi-democracy were transformed, not by the application of recipes for good governance or by some kind of historically inevitable process, but through sustained, and ultimately successful, political struggle by reformers.

In this regard, Prof Fukuyama was often asked during his visit to South Africa about whether he thought it was possible to address the many weaknesses of the South African state. It is worth quoting in full his response to one version of this question, asked by a senior public servant who wanted advice on how to reform the education system in the face of resistance from teacher unions:

"I can answer your question by telling you a story, which is the story of the United States in the 19th century."

"In the 1820s the US lifted its property qualification, and opened up the vote to all white males. All of a sudden, in the 1828 presidential election, millions of new voters could take part."

"They elected a man named Andrew Jackson, who was a populist – really the first American populist. He said, 'I won, and therefore I should pick who runs the American government.' Second, he claimed, any ordinary American can run the American government: you don't need training or education or anything else."

"This ushered in a 100-year period known in American history as the Spoils System or the Patronage System. Virtually every Federal official, from a cabinet minister all the way down to the local postmaster, was there because some politician was using that position for a political patronage appointment."

"How did the US get out of that situation? It escaped through a political process. By the 1880s, more people were educated, and a lot of them began to realise that this highly corrupt form of government wasn't good for them. Some in the business community woke up to the damage being done by corruption and poor government. A civil society movement started to grow."

"So, first of all, the reformers needed a reform plan. That was the Pendleton Act [Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883]. The Act created a civil service commission, and required a merit based examination for getting into the civil service and for being promoted."

"When the Pendleton Act was first introduced, almost nobody in Congress was in favour of it ... all these vested interests were giving out patronage, and they had no reason to take away that ability from themselves. It took the assassination of a president, James Garfield, in 1886 to shake loose the system. Garfield had been shot by a man who was very angry about being denied a patronage post, creating a huge scandal. And so, Congress was embarrassed into voting for the Pendleton Act."

"Even after the Act was voted in, there was a rear guard resistance to merit based civil servants instead of political appointees. It took another 40 years before the American Civil Service was put on a merit-based footing. "

"The creation of an impersonal state took all of these things: a reform plan; leadership; civil society; and a big coalition that included business. And then it still took 40 years of hard work to get it to work."

"So, how do you deal with teachers unions in South Africa? Well, there's no easy way of doing that. But eventually some politician is going to get up and say, 'Look, parents, you're getting lousy education from our public schools. There are more of you than there are teachers in this country.' And then that politician is going to figure out how to organise parents, and how to get them to the polls so that they can vote for a measure that will reduce the power of unions and provide more accountability in the system. That's the way it's ultimately done. It took 40 years in the US. It needed leadership. There's no silver bullet that gets you there. It's just plain politics."

Fukuyama argues that one of the lessons to draw from this is that a strong and non-patrimonial state is built in part through the battle of ideas. For this battle to be engaged, it also requires the growth of a professional middle class, and the mobilisation of civil society demanding an end to corruption. Obviously, it requires national political leaders who drive an agenda of state modernisation in the face of inevitable resistance, but their task is much harder if there are no social forces demanding change. Indeed, in the absence of those demands, it is hard to see why reformist leaders would be reliably reformist at all. Reform is, therefore, possible. Indeed, in the right circumstances, it is probably inevitable. But those circumstances have to be created through political mobilization and action.



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