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Sommario/riassunto	While social welfare programs, often inspired by international organizations, are spreading throughout the world, the more far-reaching notion of governmental responsibility for the basic well-being of all members of a political society is not, although it remains a feature of Europe and the former British Commonwealth. The welfare state in the European sense is not simply an administrative arrangement of various measures of social protection but a political project embedded in distinct cultural traditions. Offering the first accessible account in English of the historical development of the E