

## Transcript TrustTalk interview Margaret Levi

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**Podcast Host:** Welcome, Margaret, to the TrustTalk podcast. Wonderful to have you here.

**Margaret Levi:** Lovely to be here.

**Podcast Host:** Before we get into your research on trust in government, a personal question to start with. In a presentation for Falling Walls, a global hub connecting science, business and society, you talked about the impact the fall of the Berlin Wall had on you in 1989. Russia's invasion of Ukraine feels like the same historical impact on Europe as if a new wall is rising one between Russia and the West and NATO, a wall of mistrust and animosity. Am I exaggerating?

**Margaret Levi:** I'm not sure, but I think you may not be. Certainly it feels like a new Cold War is starting with all kinds of barriers between people being erected, which is only going to lead to even greater mistrust and misinformation among them. People get solidified in their sides, as we know from lots of psychological experiments. When you just give people different colors, they become and they begin to think of the other as seriously the other. Sometimes even an enemy, when you create war and actually create sides, that only intensifies that. We can see that from what we know from the Western press, of course, many of the Russians are deeply in a state of support of Russian actions because of their misbeliefs about who the Ukrainians are.

**Podcast Host:** In your acceptance speech of the Johann Skytte price in Uppsala, Sweden in 2019, you referred to experiences and people who influenced you. One had to do with protests, your mother took you and your sister Alice on civil rights marches in the fifties and the sixties of the last century. The other was your father who gave you the novels "The Lanny Budd" by the writer Upton Sinclair. How did that shape you into what you are now?

**Margaret Levi:** Well, both were instances of being made alert to worlds outside the white, middle class Jewish suburb in which I was being raised and even though we went to public schools, this was the early days of integration and it wasn't until junior high school that I really

was in a diverse community. So what going on protest marches with my mother involved was really the recognition that terrible things were happening to people that were not their fault, that were the effect of government policies or the actions of others. And they had to be protested. We could not let this stand. We could not let this happen. And that became a very deeply held value that I still hold today. In the case of my father, giving me books by a man, a muckraker, a socialist muckraker, Upton Sinclair, telling the history of the relation of the US and of Europe and the rise of Nazi-ism and the kinds of different ways in which people responded to that was, again, a reinforcement that you have to stand up to something that is wrong and that you have to have a complex and nuanced understanding of the world in order to figure out where the right leverage points are to actually make change.

**Podcast Host:** You spend a great deal of your work researching trust in government, investigating the conditions under which people come to believe their governments are legitimate, and the consequences of those beliefs for compliance. What was or is your main drive to focus on this subject?

**Margaret Levi:** A lot of my work really has to do with the ways in which citizens and governments interact with each other. From your earlier question, you can see where some of that motivation came from and the conditions under which citizens and later members of organizations will comply with their leadership's demands and when they will not, when they think they're legitimate and when they think they're not. And so in order to understand compliance or consent, it seemed to me as I began to study the problem, that trust was a crucial piece of that story. Trust and trustworthiness. How trustworthy were the organizations and the leadership who were making the demands? And how much confidence did the citizens have that they were getting what they felt they should and in a way that they felt was appropriate in giving them respect and relatively fair. So that really was what drove it was this underlying deep question about the conditions under which people will cooperate or refuse cooperation with authorities.

**Podcast Host:** The economist Benjamin Ho writes in his book "Why Trust Matters", and I'm quoting him: "We were born to trust, but we were born to trust only a few. Over the centuries, we have developed the instincts and the tools and the institutions to expand our circle of trust

to millions". He argues that this long expansion of trust has been crucial to our growing prosperity and human progress? Would you feel the same way?

**Margaret Levi:** Well, I have a disagreement with the premise, and then I can speak to whether it's crucial to our prosperity. I don't think we've learned more about how to trust people per say. I think what's happened is our institutions have created a setting in which we feel some confidence that we won't be attacked on the street, that people won't steal our property. That's not necessarily trusting the others. It's not distrusting them necessarily, but it's having, I wrote a piece called "Good Defenses Make Good Neighbors", that what institutions do is they provide a setting in which we feel protected. And so we can act as if we trust others with some confidence that they will act as if they trust us. And that process does promote prosperity. It allows people to trade across immense barriers, to engage in all kinds of behaviors with some confidence that we can travel, we can put ourselves, in a sense, in places that would have been at risk centuries ago, but are not at risk now because we feel some confidence about the protections that are around us, whether it be the police or the CDC or our health authorities generally, or whatever it is that gives us some sense of security.

**Podcast Host:** It has been a little while since your article, "A State of Trust", appeared in the book "Trust in Governance". And you wrote about institutional trustworthiness, as you just mentioned and that's not actually the institution or the government that's being trusted or is acting in a trustworthy manner, but rather, when citizens and clients say they trust an institution, they are declaring a belief that on average agents will prove to be trustworthy. So what makes people to trust an institution?

**Margaret Levi:** Well, there are several features of an institution that make it and its agents trustworthy. One is that in most cases there is some kind of social contract or set of expectations that exist between the citizens, clients, members and the organization institution leadership that for their compliance, sometimes that involves taxes, sometimes that involves military service, sometimes it just involves obedience to the law. In exchange for compliance, that certain services and certain protections will be provided by the authorities, by government or whoever. That's condition one, that the contract, implicit contract will be upheld. Condition two is that it will be upheld relatively fairly according to the norms of the day. If I go into to an office and you go into the same office, I won't be treated differently because I'm a woman than

you would be treated as a man. And if we are treated differently on the basis of some descriptive characteristic that has nothing to do with the qualities that are in principle involved, then that will make the one of us and sometimes both of us less confident in the institution or its agents. The third piece is that the institutional arrangements are structured so that people are held accountable. The agents are held accountable to play according to the rules of the game that have been established in terms of fairness and delivery, but also that citizens who free ride who don't comply, will be caught and punished so that I don't feel like I'm being run over. Someone is taking advantage of me as a result of their not playing by the rules. They're not paying taxes, they're not going into military service, they're not obeying the rules of the road. And I am.

**Podcast Host:** In an interview published in Business Insider, you say the most important thing is stepping up to the plate and showing that the government can and will act to help people and that it can and will deliver. I guess the most delicate part is the delivery. Do governments deliver what they promise? That seems to go wrong many times.

**Margaret Levi:** Well, it does go wrong many times, and it goes wrong for very different kinds of reasons, as we're seeing today in the United States and other countries, which are highly polarized around the COVID epidemic. Sometimes it goes wrong because government really doesn't deliver. It's corrupt or it breaks its promises or it runs out of money or it becomes very authoritarian in a democracy, it's discriminatory. All of those things can, make delivery by government non-existent or lower than it should be. But it also can fail because of citizen misperceptions or misunderstandings of what government is doing. So communication plays a bigger role than I had possibly thought before here. And COVID has been an awful thing to happen to all of us, but a miraculous gift to social scientists because of all the data it has provided about compliance and consent and when people will obey the rules and what government does. So we're learning even more about the conditions under which government and its agents prove itself to be and its agents prove itself to be trustworthy and when they don't. And one of the things we've learned that is really important is that different groups need different messages. They need to be told things about why they should have confidence in a policy or practice in ways that suit their cultures, their predispositions. And we've also recognized, as we've known for a long time, that there are certain groups of people that no matter what you do, they so distrust government or so hate a particular set of leaders that you

cannot get them to consent, let alone comply. So there's always going to be a small percentage of strong resisters, but what we've really learned is that group of people who are trying to figure out what to do in situations that are new and different and where new expectations are being demanded of them by government, that some of them can be persuaded to go along with government policies if the messaging and the communication is correct, and if various kinds of communication deserts are addressed and information is actually provided in a trustworthy fashion by people that those communities have confidence in.

**Podcast Host:** You just mentioned the COVID pandemic. From an OECD survey, it appears that only 51% of citizens trusted their government in 2020. More recently, the COVID pandemic has left a notable scar on people's trust in government. You talked about the cause of distrust, but how come that after the COVID pandemic, there used to be an increase in people's mistrust in government?

**Margaret Levi:** Survey statistics are only part of the story and often it depends a lot and the questions have gotten better, but it depends a lot on how the questions are asked. So any particular survey I look really carefully because often they are misread by people answering them. Do I trust that particular leader? Do I trust that particular president or prime minister? There's lots of reasons to have mistrust of some of our leadership in the last couple of years. That doesn't mean there's really an underlying distrust of government. So I tend to look at behaviors and looking at behaviors as well as the surveys and putting them together in qualitative evidence, there's certainly a lot of confusion about government, as I said, about government messaging and communication, which is leading to, I think, the sense of what we're calling distrust or mistrust. And COVID has not gone away totally, so it hasn't been a problem that has been solved. So you could say that government hasn't quite delivered on its promise. On the other hand, I am not seeing, except again among a certain set and relatively small set of publics, we are not seeing total resistance to government, we're seeing more confusion. So I think mistrust is the right word, perhaps, it's more it's not total distrust, it's not I'm going to walk away from the government. It's like, help me figure out what to do here. And you're not being sufficiently confident in your delivery of messages or your provision of services here. And so we're going to be doubtful and skeptical, which is a healthy thing in a democracy at least, until you deliver to us.

**Podcast Host:** You just mentioned the behavior. In your academic career, you did a lot of research in behavioral sciences. In 2013, you wrote with John Ahlquist your book, "In the Interest of Others". What does it take for someone to act in the interest of others?

**Margaret Levi:** Well, first of all, all of my work is behavioural science. As a political scientist, behavioral science for me includes all the social sciences, not just psychology, which is what some people seem to think. And I run the Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences, and it's political science, economics, psychology, sociology, philosophy, history and lots of other people who are thinking along these lines. In terms of in the interest of others, again, it's institutional arrangements that do a lot of the work in that particular book "In The Interest of Others", John Ahlquist and I looked at a set of unions which are mini governments, if you will, that they're all democracies in the US and Australia. They're in the transportation sector, the ones we studied, and all of them have a mechanism for electing leaders, for voting on contracts, for doing a variety of things that are important to a democratic organization, but then they organize themselves quite differently. Some are basically what are called business unions, you pay the leadership and you're not really engaged, politically in any way, with the organization, you vote occasionally, but nothing more is expected of you. And the leadership delivers tells you if you have to strike or whatever, you pay your dues and they get you better contracts, in principle. And the kind of unions that evoke and in the kind of governance arrangements generally that evoke the interest of others, and I should tell you what the interest of others means here, the interest of others means a willingness to engage in costly actions. In the case of unions that could lose your job, some pay could put you in jail, certainly takes time off from work. Engage in costly actions that are in the interest of often distant others, people you will not possibly ever meet. You don't know them now, and who you are not expecting reciprocal action from. You are doing this because you think that something is really wrong here and you have to stand up and act. The theme that we began with in talking about what I learned from my parents. And so what evokes that, so we have the same kind of people in these unions, but we have very different governance arrangements. And unions are organizations that people join because they're interested in economic goals, they are economic organizations, they are about your self-interest, your narrow self-interest, your wages, hours, working conditions, right, and yet some of these unions are able to evoke from people this willingness to act in the interest of others. And those arrangements really are just more democratic and more democratic in several ways. They're more participatory, they vote

on more things, the membership is involved in a much wider way, there's a different kind of socialization process which teaches people about the world and about others who are suffering, often an emphasis, at least in these unions at this time, on class and across class coalition. So other peasants, other working-class people who are suffering deserve help because you could be in that situation and you don't know who could help you. But equally important, and this comes back to our discussion of Covid, it requires conversation, debate and challenge about the facts in the world. So that, for example, one of the cases that we looked at was Australian Longshore Workers, dock workers, wharfies, as they're called in Australia, having their break, their stop-work meeting during lunch, and the leadership came to them and said, see those ships over there? They're going to Indonesia, they're Dutch ships and they are taking armaments to fight the Indonesian peasants who are fighting for independence of Indonesia in their own independence, and the members who weren't particularly aware of what was going on in the world then began to have a big debate. What do you know about this? How do you know about this? Is this true? If it's true, we're going to act, but let's make sure it's true. And they evoked they got information, they questioned each other, they challenged each other until they were ready to act, until they more or less agreed on the facts of the case. And they voted. I mean, this was not an independent action, they had to agree to engage in this action. So that's a set of governance arrangements that evokes a sense of ownership of the organization and participation in it, and evokes a sense of justice and a willingness to act on behalf of injustice, if you believe that that is actually happening and that belief has to be confirmed.

**Podcast Host:** Well, if you talk about belief, in fact, we're living in hard and challenging times, right, because the first victim of any conflict like we see now in Ukraine is the truth. So what does that tell you? About the believing in truth, in facts.

**Margaret Levi:** Well, this is one of the harder problems that has it's gotten worse, possibly, with social media and the ways in which we create private channels of information or much more limited channels of information. There no longer authoritative voices giving us the news as there were in the United States and other places in the 1950s and 1960s. But if you think back through history, there's always been a big information problem, big information problem, with people believing their own facts and their own world views. The introduction of the printing press helped both to alleviate that problem and to create that problem, because then you could create an information base for publics. And we've just had different versions of that all along

through history. Part of the crucial issue about creating trustworthy institutions now is really confronting how communication is made and how you create communications that are, in fact credible. But they can be credible and wrong. And that's really the hard problem right now, because we have people in the United States who are like the QAnon people who are convinced of their truth, or some of the Russians who are convinced of their truth. We can disagree over some bits of fact, for sure, I mean, there's always grey area, but this is really a truth that isn't the truth. So how do we combat that and how do we ensure that it doesn't spread beyond those people who are conspiratorial or who are so convinced of this reality that there's nothing you can do to shake it? I don't have an answer to that. I think that's a big challenge confronting all of us. I just wrote an autobiographical essay called "The Power of Beliefs". As I've gone through my work over the last nearly 50 years, I realized how important beliefs are in ways that I have only begun to explore.

**Podcast Host:** That's a very nice way of putting it. It also brings me to my final question. I can say that I think with honesty is that you are now entering the last part of your career, but if I were to ask you, what would you tell your younger colleagues, your students that are in political science, what is the big challenge that you would like them to solve?

**Margaret Levi:** Well, I've already outlined one of them. One of them is to understand the sources of beliefs and the levers for change of beliefs when they are definitely problematic. And there are a lot of people working on that. Today, we are giving at the center that I run, we're giving an important prize called the SAGE CASBS Prize to a social scientist who has made a big difference both in her work, but also in affecting public policy, and that's Jennifer Richeson, who is a psychologist and is really thinking hard about the sources of beliefs about different cultures and why white supremacist beliefs might come into play at some point, why some people think whites are superior, why people of color develop the beliefs that they develop about the world, and what are the levers of change of that so that people can actually cooperate with each other and work together. So I think social psychologists have developed amazing tools, I was talking last night to Claude Steele, another social psychologist who is dealing with the same problem is actually come to the conclusion that trust is possibly the key variable here and how do you build trust among people and that will help to change the ways in which they perceive each other and believe about each other and believe things about the world. So I think there are people really beginning to think about these questions. There are a

whole bunch of political scientists who are using the COVID data or other data, are investigating sources of beliefs as well as how to change them. So I do think that is possibly the biggest challenge. The other one, of course, as a political scientist, is I think democracy is under serious threat and it's been under threat before, it may well survive, as my colleague Dan Treisman suggests, but we need to understand more about what kinds of institutional arrangements we need for this day and age, as opposed to ones that were originally created in the 19th century, 18th century, and have had incremental changes as opposed to really a rethink to serve our populations today. So that's another big question. And then I think the third big question and this really gets back to beliefs in part, but it also is a question of mobilization and how you get people to act in the interest of others has to do with climate change. It is an existential crisis, and yet we cannot get our policymakers and much of the public to act in a way that it is an existential crisis. And that has to do with beliefs, but it also has to do with a set of institutional arrangements that reinforce the narrowest of self-interest. So I'm not going to suffer too much from climate change, so I'm not going to do much. I worry about my individual family. I'm not worrying intergenerationally. I'm not worrying about people across the world who are already suffering or across the country who are already suffering from climate change. So I think the importance of scaling what John and I found in the Interest of Others for both the purposes of democracy and for the purposes of climate change and even part of that story that we told was about how a set of arrangements can transform beliefs about your efficacy in the world and about what the world is really like. So I would love to see some of those ideas scaled or corrected and then scaled. I think that's a big challenge to social scientists in the future.

**Podcast Host:** Margaret, thank you very much for your contribution for TrustTalk. I wish you a good health and a lot of success in your further career.

**Margaret Levi:** Thank you very much. Very nice to meet you Severin.

**Podcast Host:** Same here