

# A review of Max Weber's "ideal type of bureaucracy" in Norwegian local public administration. Is it still alive but in disguise?

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**Abstract.** The article looks for legacies of Max Weber's one hundred year old concept "ideal type of bureaucracy". It reviews some research done by students of organizational development projects in Norwegian local public administration during the last three decades. Plus, it includes an evaluation of two laws about public administration conducted by the author. It seeks to identify ideas that resemble those that Weber categorized in his concept. New Public Management (NPM), and other modern types of governance have been dominant features of organizational development projects in public administration in Norway, as in most other European countries. A presupposition was that it would be hard to find legacies of Max Weber's ideal type among such projects. There are several reasons to this presupposition. Many modern public administration reforms have focused on overcoming the red-tape of old-fashioned bureaucracy with its strict forms. However, it turns out that legacies of Weber's ideal type is present, but they are seldom credited him. One of the hallmarks of his ideal type is that decisions are according to laws and rules, and the article recommends that this influence on local public administration organization should be revitalized.

**Key words:** ideal type of bureaucracy, local public administration, Norway

## Introduction

The wave of organizational reforms called New Public Management (NPM) swept over many countries from the late 1980's. In the late 1990s a new reform wave known as post-NPM

emerged, which is seen as a response to the problems that NPM faced in delivering coordinated services, however, NPM remains relatively important (Christensen, 2018, p. 390). Studies have described postmodern public administration as “the negation of Weber’s bureaucracy”, and the influence of law on public administration has been reduced (Olsen, 2010, p. 183).

The purpose of this article is to study whether ideas from Max Weber’s classical studies of bureaucracy are still alive and manifests itself in how Norwegian local governments are organised today. His studies from the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century describe an abstract mode of bureaucracy as the ideal type of organization. This type was meant as a conceptual yardstick that could be used to compare real life organisations. One might think that new ideas and forms of organizing public administration have substituted his ideas long ago.

[A comparison of Max Weber’s ideal type of bureaucracy in Norwegian local public administration](#)

[A brief description of Weber’s “ideal type of bureaucracy”](#)

Max Weber argued that the market economy that was expanding in his time needed improved calculations through bookkeeping and accounting, it needed binding contracts and predictability from public administration. The latter have certain conceptual hallmarks, according to what Weber identified in his studies: Decisions according to laws and rules; an administrative staff with permanent tenure and fixed salary (independent of other income); specialised working tasks; authority based upon a formal, not-inherited, position; written decisions documented in archives (i.e.: transparency in public affairs. My comment). The purpose of these hallmarks was that the bureaucracy should be able to prepare cases, to implement decisions in an effective way, and that personal motives should not interfere in the proceedings(Østerud, 2014, p. 69).

[Ideas and forms of organization in modern local public administration in Norway](#)

A book about organization theory as academic discipline in Norway refers to Max Weber among a total of 496 persons in its register of persons (Nylehn, 2008, pp. 424-433). When I inspected the

18 entrances in the text that mentioned Weber, I found no connections to local public administration. The entrances dealt solely with Weber's influence on organization theory in the relevant academic disciplines sociology, political science, psychology, management studies and business studies at Norwegian higher education institutions.

For example, during the first phase of political science as academic discipline was manifested in Norway, at Institute of political science at University of Oslo in the early 1950's, Weber's theories of bureaucracy and authority were at the core of the discipline (Nylehn, 2008, p. 254). At that time, the Norwegian academics in the field of organisation theory regarded sociology in its USA version as dogmatic in its division of politics and public administration. One said "This (i.e. division. My addition) is not fruitful because it is exactly the connection between the two (i.e.:politics and administration, my addition again) that was of interest" Nylehn (2008, p. 292).

Leading students of local public administration in Norway, like Baldersheim and Offerdal, have studied the division between politics and administration, because it was often connected to management challenges (Nylehn, 2008, p. 293).

NPM's focus on the importance of management has several expressions. To name a few examples: When the Norwegian law that regulates local governments was changed in 1994, it declared that the chief administrative officer (rådmannen or administrasjonssjefen) is the supreme leader of all administrative staff and municipal services. This declaration has the purpose of hindering politicians to interfere with how the administrative staff implemented political decisions. Over the years, the importance of management has been strengthened through introduction of fixed-term contracts, and salaries for various municipal leaders have been connected to results. Power has been delegated from political bodies to administrative levels (Baldersheim, 2005, pp. 35, 36). The focus of management in reorganisation processes have underlined that the role of politicians is to concentrate on principles and long-term strategies for the development of the municipality, while the role of the administration is to implement the

decisions made by the politicians, and to find the measures to realize the strategies (Offerdal, 2005, p. 256).

Another important aspect of the local government law of 1994 can be connected to NPM; “Rational and effective public administration” became the most important words (Offerdal, 2005, p. 255) (along with democracy, which is a word not connected to NPM).

One has gradually changed the use of direct control through rules and routines to more use of indirect control, for example by fixed goals and results; by licences of certain municipal services through international quality standards like ISO9001, ISO9002 etc.; by competitive tendering; and by benchmarking (Baldersheim, 2005, pp. 37, 38, 39).

NPM’s focus on inhabitants and citizens as customers is expressed in various forms in Norwegian local public administration. For example through Citizen Charter, procedures for complaints on municipal services, boards of users of certain municipal services, and of surveys about the users’ experiences and evaluations of such services (Baldersheim, 2005, p. 41).

The Association of Norwegian municipalities, an interest organisation where all 427 municipalities are members, advocates rules for «good democratic governance” (KS 2014) through measures that mirrors both NPM and Weber. I shall summarize the rules. (Whether they mirror Weber and/or NPM is indicated in the parentheses according to my judgement).

- Transparency (Weber);
- public debate (NPM);
- written procedures (Weber);
- responsibility through written procedures that clearly describe the roles between the political bodies (Weber);
- a clear division between the political bodies and the local administration (Weber and NPM); having channels for citizen participation (NPM); delegation of authority and clear lines of command (Weber);

- inclusion of the non-majority political parties in real political discussions

(Authorities], 2014, p. 7).

I have interviewed two leading Norwegian scholars of local government, Harald Baldersheim and Signy Irene Vabo, about the status of Max Weber today. Balderheim gives a general comment: "Max weber lives as an analytical inspiration for bachelor students of political science and as a ghost for ignorant consultants of organizational development projects (H. Baldersheim, personal communication, at a seminar hosted by Institute of political science, University of Oslo, 30 April 2019)(My translation). Vabo comments on a specific element of Weber's arguments: "Webers' argument of keeping a sharp division between politics and public administration lives as an ideal but not in praxis" (S. I. Vabo, personal communication at a seminar hosted by Institute of political science, University of Oslo, 30 April 2019) (my translation).

These scholars agree that Max Weber's ideas are still alive, but organizational consultants do not appreciate them. Baldersheim adds that a leading idea today is "collaborative government" (H. Baldersheim, same personal communication as above). Collaborative government, sometimes labelled "seamless government" (Estevez, 2010), or "whole-of-government", "holistic government", "Post-New Public Management" (Christensen, 2014, p. 165) are other expressions of similar content often seen in the literature. They represent an idea that runs contrary to Weber's idea of division of politics and administration. It expresses, among other things, the idea that a sharp division between politics and administration is a hindrance to effective communication between those public agencies who meet the citizens, their interest organizations, and private enterprises on the one side and the political bodies on the other.

A master degree study by Mangset (Clemet, 2019, p. 223) interviewed top-level bureaucrats in the Ministries of finance, and of culture in Norway, France, and Great Britain. When they were asked to describe what they looked upon as characteristics of a good top-bureaucrat, their answers underlined something "antibureaucratic and entrepreneurial" (my translation). They (the top bureaucrats) described themselves as devoted to results and solutions. However, when

they described an ordinary day in office, they gave another picture. Then, the classic bureaucratic type was seen; they talked about routine, procedures, predictability, and little room for independent assessments. The study concluded that the top bureaucrats in their daily work embraced “bureaucratic virtues” (2019, p. 223). It can be argued that bureaucratic virtues expresses ideas in line with Weber, and that the study’s conclusion contradict what Baldersheim and Vabo state; that Weber’s ideas are still alive in theory but not in praxis.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that there is a contradiction here. For example, as the author (Clemet) of that reference argues, a minister with good management abilities is able to take care of the bureaucratic virtues while at the same time motivating the top-bureaucrats to be entrepreneurial when it is necessary (2019, p. 223). This argument has extra value because Clemet herself has own experience of being a minister in a Norwegian government.

Also, one should notice that the interviews are from top-bureaucrats at the central government level. It may well be that Baldersheim’s and Vabo’s comments above fit more to the situation at the local public administration level in Norway. This interpretation gives meaning because Baldersheim and Vabo have been and still are renowned students of local public administration.

While Weber’s idea that politics and public administration should be divided, empirical studies have taught us that an intrinsic propensity of public administration makes it impossible to implement a sharp division to politics. The reason is that public administration is the place where politics is prepared for political decisions, and it is the buckle between political decisions and public service.

Implementation of NPM ideas at local public administration in Norway has been going on since the mid 1980’s (before the label NPM was introduced), and a long series of studies have been conducted with the purpose of describing the changes that have been introduced in organization and leadership, and the results have been analysed in terms of results. The analyses have been many-faceted, some with regard to efficiency and productivity gains, some with regard to management styles, some with regard to local democracy values, and even with regard to other

results and aspects of NPM. The next sections give a picture of NPM reforms in local public administration in Norway.

Academic literature seems to agree that NPM contains three main blocs, each with their own theoretical arguments: A belief in management through delegation of authority to administrative leaders, introduction of more instruments of indirect control than of direct control, and increased focus on direct influence for citizens and inhabitants (Baldersheim, 2005, p. 29). A chapter in that book describes how far NPM ideas have been implemented in the Nordic countries (Øgård, 2005). The sections below are excerpts from that chapter regarding Norway.

The act regulating local democracy and local public administration was changed in the mid-1990s. Among the changes that were done was a paragraph declaring that the head administrative officer (rådmannen or administrasjonssjefen) should be the top leader of the administration.

Another change that focused on management was introduced in several municipalities through contracts that limited the time in office for a whole section of administrative leaders, so called fixed-term contracts.

In addition to the descriptions given above from other academics, I shall describe two other acts, which are of relevance to the matter. An act that regulates public administration (“Act relating to procedure in cases concerning the public administration.” Forvaltningsloven) was confirmed by the parliament (Stortinget) in 1967. It regulates the conduct of central and local public administration in quite the same manner that Weber described in his ideal type of bureaucracy.

For example, section 6 deals with impartiality. Some of the items read:

A public official shall be disqualified from preparing the basis for a decision or from making any decision in an administrative case

- a) if he himself is a party to the case; b) if he is related by blood or by marriage to a party in direct line of ascent or descent, or collaterally as close as a sibling; c) if he is or has been married or is engaged to a party, or is the foster parent or foster child of a party; d) if he is

the guardian or agent of a party to the case or has been the guardian or agent of a party after the case began; (...) He is similarly disqualified if there are any other special circumstances which are apt to impair confidence in his impartiality; due regard shall inter alia be paid to whether the decision in the case may entail any special advantage, loss or inconvenience for him personally or for anyone with whom he has a close personal association. ("Act relating to procedure in cases concerning the public administration. [Forvaltningsloven]," 1967).

This quote mirrors Weber's ideal that personal motives should not interfere with the bureaucrats' behaviour in office.

The other law that matters is the Act relating to public access to documents in the public administration [Freedom of Information Act] was confirmed by the parliament in 1970. It gives the inhabitants of Norway access to official public documents. An item in Section 2 of the act reads: "The case documents of the public administration are public insofar as no exception is made by or pursuant to statute." This quote mirrors Weber's ideal that decisions should be in written forms and documented in archives.

These acts have been changed several times later, but the purpose is the same after around 50 years: To protect public administration from influence from inappropriate pressure, and to keep public administration transparent.

Many local public agencies have been outsourced during the last two decades of NPM inspired reorganisation processes, especially in the sectors of recycling (handling of garbage etc.), management of public property, kindergarten, nursing homes and home-help services for elderly and handicapped persons. One implication of this is that the two acts just mentioned do not encompass such agencies in many cases because they are treated as private agencies in many respects. This underlines Olsen's statement referred in the introduction (2010, p. 183), that the influence of law on public administration has been reduced.

## Conclusion

Leading academics of local public administration in Norway say that Max Weber's ideas still inspire bachelor students of political science, but organisational consultants ignore them.

Weber's arguments for the necessity of efficiency in bureaucracy are clearly present in the way the Association of Norwegian municipalities advocate "good democratic governance".

Acts regulating the role and behaviour of local public administrators are clearly in accordance with Weber's arguments for the necessity of public administrators having permanent tenure and having no income or influence from outside the bureaucracy. The same acts (and others not mentioned here) prescribe that decisions shall be in written forms and archived, which clearly mirror Weber's argument for transparency.

Modern reorganisation projects have outsourced local public agencies and thus excluded them from being treated like public agencies, especially regarding transparency. However, the efficiency argument, which was central by Weber, has increased focus.

I have found legacies of Max Weber's one hundred year old concept ideal type of bureaucracy, but they are seldom referred to as belonging to him. Moreover, today's focusing on efficiency, an idea prized by Weber, has led to outsourcing and competitive tendering of local public services. However, two other hallmarks of his ideal type – that decisions are according to laws and rules; and of having administrators with permanent tenure and fixed salary - should be revitalized.

This is a review of local government research in Norway based upon a discretionary focus of legacies of Max Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy. It shall eventually be expanded into a broader empirical study.

Act relating to procedure in cases concerning the public administration. [Forvaltningsloven], (1967).

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