

THE NORWEGIAN STUDY ON POWER AND DEMOCRACY, ENGLISH SUMMARY

By a Parliamentary resolution of December 1997 a group of researchers were commissioned to compile a report on Power and Democracy in Norway. Headed by Øyvind Østerud, the group included Fredrik Engelstad, Siri Meyer, Per Selle and Hege Skjeie. The findings of the group were presented in the form of an Official Report to the Government (NOU 2003:19), August 2003. In its findings the group was divided in one majority (Østerud, Selle and Engelstad) and two separate opinions (Meyer and Skjeie).

The NOU 2003:19 was given a wide dissemination through an official hearing process covering a vast number of organisations and bodies invited to give their comments and reactions within June 2004. Following this process the government will present a white paper to the Parliament by spring 2005.

The following is the English translation of a leaflet published by the Norwegian Study on Power and Democracy presenting the main findings of the group's majority.

Main conclusions of the Norwegian Study on Power and Democracy

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Compiled by Steinar Haugsvær

Translated by Carol B. Eckmann

The Norwegian Study on Power and Democracy has resulted in a large number of different publications, as well as a book, *Makten og demokratiet* (Norwegian language only, published by Gyldendal Akademisk) and a final report (Norwegian Official Reports 2003:19, in Norwegian only). These documents comprise the main arguments and conclusions drawn after five years of comprehensive study.

This presentation provides a very brief overview of the conclusions of the study as set out in final book and report. The information included here is in no way intended to be exhaustive. It should further more be noted that it does not include the conclusions presented in the two separate opinions.

A nation state under pressure

The nation state has provided the framework for three modern political projects: the constitutional state, democracy and the welfare state. The judicial system has grown increasingly transnational, but is enforced at the national level. The welfare state is maintained in wealthy countries such as Norway but is gradually being adapted to a new set of conditions. Democracy as a form of governance has not become supranational, and its infrastructure is crumbling instead of being re-shaped. One of the main ideas underlying the conclusions of the study is that there have been profound changes in the foundation for rule by popular consent.

A crumbling infrastructure and dwindling political participation

The most critical change in power relations in Norway is that democracy – fundamentally understood as representative democracy, a formal decision-making system employing election by a majority and directly-elected bodies – is in decline. The political purchasing power of the voter ballot has been diminished.

In Norway, in contrast to many other countries, the state-friendly political forces have generally been found on the left, broadly defined. Since the end of the 19th century, the power of the state has largely been rooted in the people, supported by broad-based popular movements and mass political parties up to and including the political position gained by the Labour Party in the wake of WWII. This depiction of the political landscape has become outdated in a very short period of time.

Popular reform movements and parties mobilising mass participation are showing signs of a strong downward trend, while institutions such as the state church are faltering in their efforts to cope with an increasingly multi-religious society. The concept of the comprehensive school is no longer unifying. The Norwegian state has become a petroleum state with extensive ownership interests in the commercial sector and substantial allocation to reserves. This forms the new foundation for a wide-ranging supply policy to the population, while the original foundation for redistribution and common national measures – broad-based, popular mobilisation – has deteriorated. The utilisation of abundant shared resources such as fisheries and hydropower is becoming privatised and concentrated into few hands, while agriculture is being pushed back by international trade regimes. Economic inequality is on the rise,

particularly in terms of investment income and private industry executives with salary levels and bonus schemes that are tailored to a more internationalised trade and industrial sector.

Political parties and organisations no longer serve as the channel for broad-based, long-term mobilisation. The political parties have undergone a transformation from mass parties into parties based on networks. It is possible to obtain political power independent of victory at the polls. Norwegian minority parliamentarianism implies that there is no immediate connection between electoral result and a position in the government. Thus, the power of the people in the chain of governance, from election to position to decision, has been weakened. The political alternatives become unclear, as do the ramifications of choosing between them. In a general survey of the people conducted during the study, three of four interviewees were wholly or partly in agreement with the statement that the political parties were not interested in the views of the people, while four out of five agreed wholly or partly that elected representatives to the *Storting* give little consideration to the views of the common people. These figures indicate that the system of representation is facing a crisis in that it no longer has the confidence of the voters.

State capitalism without a strategy

As a petroleum state, Norway is blessed with natural advantages. Oil wealth has made it easier to sustain both its commitment to participation in the international arena and its national welfare schemes. Easy access to natural resources has also diminished the need to develop industrial policy strategy and other forms of active adaptation measures. Norwegian state capitalism is characterised by the state as a passive owner with no goal-oriented strategy regarding the globalisation of trade and industry.

The system of state governance has been recast in the direction of market principles and formal liberalisation on the one hand, and new monitoring and auditing institutions on the other. The uniform, market-oriented governing ideology has not led to a more cohesive, coordinated system of government. The Norwegian state is a fragmented state.

The markets have expanded. The stock exchange has increased trading by ten times in the past decade. Stockbrokers, finance analysts and financial investors have assumed a more crucial role. Companies have grown through takeovers and mergers. The result of more market is not greater dispersal of power, but a stronger element of oligopoly: a growing number of branches are being dominated by three or four major corporations or chains. Although market competition has increased, the power over economic development has become more concentrated.

A new lack of transparency

Local government has lost much of its autonomy through a combination of rights-based legislation, directives from the central government and budgetary restrictions. This has resulted in power without responsibility and responsibility without power. A lack of clear governance at many levels makes it difficult to determine who is responsible for decision-making and where decisions have originated.

The municipalities are left with authority over purely local matters and the administrative responsibility for implementing government policy. Both rights-based legislation and tasks imposed by the central government are intended to ensure inhabitants a greater degree of equity regardless of where they live; in practice, however, new forms of inequality emerge

when budget limitations make it impossible to satisfy everyone's rights at the same time and to the same degree.

Representative democracy as a decision-making system is based on the assumptions that, first, voters know who is responsible for making which political decisions, and second, that a dissatisfied majority can remove those responsible by voting them out. When governance becomes a complex blend of decision-making authority at the European, state and local levels, both of these prerequisites end up being weakened.

“Branding” Norway

In the course of a few decades, the characteristics of the nation state as traditionally defined have been completely refashioned. Political institutions, national economies and courts have become transnationalised – they transcend national boundaries at both the European and the global level. The welfare system has remained national, but is under pressure to adapt to a new political and economic framework.

National democracy faces radically new challenges when judicial review, economic growth and environmental protection are to be maintained at the transnational level. In general, globalisation and Europeanisation imply that the power of the popularly elected authority in the individual country is diminished to the benefit of supranational bodies externally, and executive powers, government administration and strong market actors internally. States may choose different strategies for adapting to these new conditions – passively or actively.

The most obvious manifestation of an active adaptation strategy is the process of “branding” Norway internationally – its commitment to international action in the spheres of development cooperation, environmental issues, conflict resolution and peace. While this strategy represents an idealistic “decency regime”, it is also politically motivated in the context of the Norwegian authorities' interest in establishing and drawing attention to themselves as a channel of contact. Power-politically, it conveys a new form of national corporatism in which large-scale organisations, research circles and government powers each assume a position vis-à-vis a national project.

The judicialisation of politics

Judicialisation implies that courts and other judicial institutions are being accorded greater power at the expense of elected authorities, and that the distinction between making and applying legislation will grow less visible.

The EEA Agreement greatly reins in the legislative powers of the Norwegian authorities. Norway is obligated to comply with EU regulations and directives in a number of key areas of society. The Norwegian authorities find themselves constantly encountering legislative barriers in new spheres. Human rights conventions have been incorporated into Norwegian national law, and the result is that, in practice, the international courts have become the highest authority for interpreting provisions and principles that are being given increasingly wider applications.

Judicial categories have become more central in the battles waged over political interests, and at the same time, the legal arena has become more strongly politicised. As a result of market orientation, liberalisation and privatisation, areas that were previously under public governance are being transferred to market actors. New controlling and auditing institutions monitor the overall playing rules laid down by the political authorities either nationally or

internationally. Expert bodies such as the central banks are given greater autonomy in shaping measures that are to be shielded from current, publicly elected influence. The political institutions have retreated.

A new class society

Class divisions are less obvious but have not been eradicated in Norwegian society. Material conditions are by and large more equitable than a few decades ago, but new class divisions based on ethnicity appear to be emerging.

A large proportion of the immigrant population does not participate in the Norwegian political system, and is gradually coming to represent a new underclass within the low-income worker group or outside the labour market. Given existing regulations and practice, the immigrant population will probably increase at an accelerating pace, and there is little to indicate that the correspondence between ethnicity and class division will be less appreciable.

Minorities in Norway comprise a hierarchy in which the Sámi people, recognised as an indigenous people, have the strongest rights, while the immigrant groups are divided into ethnic groups, which offers a poor foundation for coordinated class-based solidarity. This distinguishes the new class society from the old. An ethnically fragmented underclass, with the constant addition of new groups from outside, will have difficulty consolidating itself into a labour movement.

A gender equity subject to forfeit

Gender equity belongs to the realm of good intentions, but it is a principle that is often forced to yield in the face of other principles. The Norwegian authorities have set high targets for gender equity, but gender-based discrimination, violence towards women and inequality on the labour market remain widespread. Women's participation in politics and working life has been drastically expanded, but the distribution of women vs. men in leadership positions is still extremely disproportionate. The highest echelons of many areas of society remain almost completely male dominated.

The key rhetoric of the Norwegian gender equality debate is the argument that we are "en route". When findings regarding women's lack of participation in various aspects of society are presented, they are often accompanied by comments maintaining that "we have achieved much and much remains to be done." The gender debate is characterised by harmonisation strategies in which everyone seeks to agree on common efforts towards a common goal.

An elitist network

The Norwegian elites comprise broad groups characterised by similar lines of thinking and action, but consist nonetheless of three to four distinct main groups: economic, political, ideological and civil service elites.

Although community leaders form sub-groups with various attitudes and beliefs, there is no longer any alternative elite formed through the Labour Movement. Labour Party leaders are often included in the same flow of elitist circulation as politicians from other parties, moving between politics, corporate management, and information and lobbying activities. Such elitist circulation has increased alongside the introduction of liberalisation and market orientation into public works.

Norway's model for its international commitment policy – national corporatism – is characterised by extensive elitist circulation between politics, bureaucracy, research and non-governmental organisations. Power is exercised by individuals. Elitist circulation and a network of decision-makers represent an institutionalisation of personal power, with enhanced opportunity for mutual services.

In trade and industry, we find close networks of ties between individuals as well as institutions. Companies are linked through ownership relations and overlapping board memberships, which leads to an underlying concentration of power in the commercial sector.

The edited public sphere

An edited public sphere entails that other actors must adapt to a journalistic form and utilise distinctive media features when seeking influence. The diminished ability of the parties to mobilise the masses around alternative, long-term programmes has been accelerated by developments in the media.

The mass media has become more politically independent. It no longer serves as the mouthpiece of parties and political institutions. A close, mutual dependency exists between journalists and politicians, but the media now convey less about the party programmes and the connection between the political alternatives as viewed by the parties. The media has, however, assumed a pivotal role in crowning and dethroning political and other leaders.

A new barometer-based democracy

A vast system of services and measures have been developed to constantly monitor and measure the population as voters, viewers, listeners and clients. This includes political and other opinions polls, popularity barometers, consumer surveys and interactive contact with the public in connection with media debates and entertainment programmes. This can be described as a barometer-based democracy.

The barometer-based democracy has its counterpart in the elitist-oriented criticism of popular opinion as unstable, contradictory, short-sighted and intolerant. This was the core of the aristocracy's critique of mass democracy before universal suffrage and the introduction of the party system, and it has now reappeared as a means of criticising populism in the wake of the parties' loss of their hold on the masses.

A colonial language hierarchy

Increasingly, Norway's linguistic situation is coming to resemble the state of affairs in earlier colonial areas. Rule by popular consent and a democratic discussion are based on a shared linguistic foundation. The colonial language hierarchy is the key to changes in power relations both within Norway, and in the relationship between Norway and international society.

The Norwegian language is vulnerable in a globalised world in which Anglo-American is overwhelmingly dominant. Use of Norwegian is declining in business, advertising, research and popular culture, while the English that is replacing it comprises a simpler form of communication that possesses far weaker cultural and historical resonance than is the case in countries where English has long been the primary language.

The Sámi language, and other national minority languages as well, were repressed through a former Norwegianisation policy. Today, however, the Sámi language, is undergoing revitalisation with the help of educational institutions and through mass media presentations

in Northern Sámi. Nonetheless, all minority languages in Norway are under pressure. In regard to the immigrant population, it is difficult to find the right balance between support for native language training, on the one hand, and, on the other, schooling in Norwegian as the basis for participation, integration, and the ability to gain a position in Norwegian society. All minority languages are caught in the dichotomy between linguistic identity versus the role of the majority language as a door-opener in mainstream society.

From popular movements to “here-and-now-organisation”

All of the links in the parliamentary chain of governance have been weakened. The electoral channel has been narrowed, while other channels for participation and influence have expanded.

Overall political interest has not declined during the past 30 years, but it is for the most part being channelled through single-issue action groups and other forms of participation than party politics and broad-based membership organisations. The new organisation form is the here-and-now-organisation – help for self-help groups, residents’ associations, neighbourhood action groups, grief groups, next-of-kin groups, associations for people with different kinds of disabilities and single-issue lobby groups.

The “corporative channel” through organisational participation, councils and committees has provided an alternative to elected bodies as a means of influence. Organised interests in trade and industry and working life are still strong, and crucial decisions are still being taken in corporative cooperation bodies in which the state power, too, lays down the framework or participates actively. Nonetheless, the range of the corporative bodies has been substantially reduced.

Organisations and other interest groups have built up a more professional information and communication framework with a view to conducting lobbying activities towards decision-makers and through the mass media. Corporatism has been reduced, not strengthened during recent decades.

Exerting influence through direct actions, lobbying activity and market choices provides correctives to politicians and producers. At the same time, the ability and resources needed to be heard through these channels of influence are unevenly distributed. Such channels require communicative skills, organisational power, contact networks and purchasing power.

Supplementary democracy

Democracy builds not only on power through popularly elected bodies, but also on rights and guarantees of rights for individuals and groups, on various forms of participation outside of voting, parties and political popular movements, on the ability to exert influence as users, consumers and active members of pressure groups. These various forms of supplementary democracy – rights-based democracy, direct action democracy, participant democracy, consumer democracy, lobbyist democracy, or that which has been referred to barometer-based democracy – have supplemented representative democracy as a formal decision-making system, but they cannot replace it.

Democracy is challenged when the conditions for and latitude for exercising rule by popular consent are diminished. When the substance of democracy is transferred from democracy as a formal decision-making structure to various forms of supplementary democracy, the

crumbling of the democratic infrastructure is hidden, and the line separating democratic and non-democratic institutions becomes difficult to distinguish.