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Weber vs Wairua
towards a more humane bureaucracy in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Abstract

The essential elements of modern bureaucracy were identified by the German social scientist Max Weber (1864–1920) and remain central today to any understanding of how modern governmental systems work. At the core of Weber's understanding was the insight that bureaucracies are profoundly impersonal, even dehumanised, organisations, which is a key element in their ability to carry out complex, large-scale tasks. However, this dehumanised character is also one of bureaucracy's biggest weaknesses, since it inhibits the organisation's ability to relate to people in ways that are in tune with lived social experiences. This article argues that in Aotearoa New Zealand it should be possible to draw upon knowledge from te ao Māori, and especially the idea of wairua, to help fulfil aspirations for an improved public service, one that is more effective and humane for all New Zealanders. However, to do so will require a much greater appreciation of such knowledge than has so far been the case.

Keywords bureaucracy, wairua, Māori, Max Weber, spirituality, public service

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The proposed Public Service Act is intended, *inter alia*, to establish the behavioural and cultural foundations for a unified public service, ensure strong and capable leadership of the system, strengthen the Māori/Crown relationship and better meet the needs and aspirations of Māori, and ultimately deliver improved outcomes and services for all New Zealanders (State Services Commission, 2019). In this article, we suggest that these laudable aspirations could be facilitated in significant part by instilling in government agencies an understanding of the Māori idea of wairua, in pursuit of a more humane and effective bureaucracy, for the benefit of all people, Māori and non-Māori. This would sit well with the desire expressed by the state services commissioner, Peter Hughes, to weave the 'spirit of service' throughout the public service and for public servants to work with 'humility and compassion', and with a 'total focus on the client, citizen or customer' (School of Government, 2019). This is also timely, as it may reasonably be asked how effectively social service components of a 'Wellbeing Budget' can be effectively implemented by bureaucracies in which employees are regarded as 'human resources' rather than

as people (and citizens are often spoken of as customers, clients or cases).

The authentic embodiment of wairua within the public service would nevertheless be a challenging task, given the essential nature of modern Western bureaucracy, which is the characteristic form of all large complex organisations.

Bureaucracy

The main elements of modern bureaucracy (rule by the office) as identified by the German polymath Max Weber (1864–1920) continue to characterise contemporary governmental systems, in Aotearoa New Zealand as elsewhere. Weber did not use the term 'bureaucracy' as a negative epithet, in the way that the word has come to be commonly employed. Literally, as 'rule by the office', bureaucracies are profoundly impersonal systems of administration, consisting of hierarchy, an intense division of labour, calculable technical knowledge, the exercise of 'legal-rational' authority applied without fear or favour (*sine ira et studio*), codified written rules and regulations, and formal records. Weber argued that bureaucracy 'develops the more perfectly [it] is dehumanised, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation' (Weber, 1974, pp.215–6). This, according to Weber, is its 'special virtue', the elimination of both hatred and love. In Weber's 'pure' bureaucracy officials are not only 'faceless' but 'soulless' (Hummel, 2008, p.9).

Bureaucracy is not a pure abstraction, however, but is everywhere composed of real human beings with emotions, opinions, capacities, prejudices, commitments and responsibilities. Some readily become bureaucratised, even sociopathic, while others are repelled by the experience of working in bureaucracies and quickly get out. A third group – probably a minority – comprises people who are willing to work in public bureaucracies but at the same time do not allow themselves, in their thinking or in their actions, to become overly bureaucratised. In understanding the bureaucratic context in which they work, these people seek to generate and use discretion that will enhance their organisation's effectiveness and achieve the best possible outcomes for the people it is intended to serve. Bureaucracy thus endures as the characteristic form of modern administration, attempting through its own internal logic to successfully pursue complex, large-scale tasks which would otherwise remain beyond collective or individual human reach.

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None of this is to deny that generally public servants try to work around, if not overcome, the many bureaucratic constraints that impede their ability to deal with people in ways that are more caring, just, humane and effective. But, paradoxically, they can do so despite the bureaucratic ecosystem within which they have to work, rather than because of it. And in the delivery of social services and benefits, citizens often have to depend on the work of intermediaries and advisers.

Universally, the bureaucratic imperative of systemic control tends to displace the quest to fulfil humane organisational purpose. Bureaucracies' supplicants are real people transformed into administrative 'cases'. And cases are dealt with 'objectively'; that is, as official objects, according to the rules. While the impersonal and objective application of rules and regulations is generally desirable, it can also give rise to inflexibility and perverse outcomes. So-called 'goal displacement', in which means become ends in themselves, is a common bureaucratic phenomenon (Basil Fawlty could run his hotel more easily and efficiently if people chose not to stay in it).

'Citizens expect to be treated as citizens, but the job instructs functionaries to treat them as objects on which to perform work' (Hummel, 2008, p.24). It is always better that bureaucrats relate to the citizens they serve in ways that are fair, respectful and sensitive, rather than arbitrary, abusive, uncaring or tactless. But despite their best intentions, the bureaucrat's desire to act compassionately is usually heavily constrained, and can seldom be encouraged to reach beyond the imperatives of managerial control. Therefore, many bureaucrats too readily become agents of the organisation, subjugating their own personal values and ethical codes in favour of those embedded in the organisation's collective culture and belief system. In fact, constitutional conventions like the doctrine of ministerial responsibility require them to do so. This control imperative is especially apparent in military and quasi-military organisations, but can also be found in social service organisations, where unofficial judgements are made and sustained about the 'worthiness' or otherwise of different groups of citizens, and officials are actively encouraged not to engage emotionally with their 'clients'.

Tikanga Weber and tikanga Māori

'Comparatist' academics have sought to identify how governmental systems reflect the cultural and historical 'traditions' found in different countries and jurisdictions (e.g., Painter and Peters, 2010), but the Weberian essence is a pervasive feature. Moreover, little if any of this work of governmental anthropology has focused on the *sui generic* form of public bureaucracy found in New Zealand, a Western colonised country with a unitary political system and a treaty that promised a special relationship between the colonising governors and the indigenous people of Aotearoa, the Māori. Since the signing of te Tiriti o Waitangi in 1840, this has been a most uneasy relationship, to say the least, marked by dramatic events such

as the New Zealand Wars in the 1860s, later land confiscation, and cases of direct state oppression.

The tensions have also been apparent in day-to-day government administration. Whereas, for example, Māori have a strongly oral rather than a written tradition, Weberian bureaucracy is characterised by a system of written communication, documentation and record-keeping. Whereas bureaucracy is based on the exercise of legal-rational authority (written and knowable rules applied without fear or favour, the rule of law), Māori have exercised what Weber called 'traditional authority' – that is, the customs of chiefly and iwi authority. Whereas authority in modern bureaucracies is impersonal, inherent in the office rather than the person holding the office, chiefly authority inheres largely in the person of the ariki. In Aotearoa New Zealand it is the Western model that dominates, in a political power imbalance reflected in the socio-economic inequalities that have for so long endured between Māori and Pākehā.

The country's 'revolutionary' state sector reforms of the 1980s and early 90s, at the forefront of the international New Public Management crusade, were often accompanied by rhetorical flourishes which promised an 'end to bureaucracy'. A rule-driven, hidebound governmental system was to be replaced by one which gave governmental bureaucrats the freedom and flexibility to achieve desirable public policy outcomes, in a 'business-like' manner, while at the same time being held more rigorously accountable for the ways in which they exercised this energising discretion. Yet the need for managerial accountability soon displaced the new 'freedoms' that managers exercised (Norman, 2003). So, while New Zealand's governmental bureaucracy is certainly different from what it was 30–40 years ago, it is still haunted by Weber's ghost (Gregory, 2007).

Nor is it obvious that, especially in the delivery of social services, New Zealand's government bureaucracies are more fair, just, equitable, humane and caring than they were before the reforms. Some might argue that they are significantly less so, especially given greater pressures that they have had to grapple with in areas such as housing, child poverty, social welfare and income maintenance, and criminal justice, not to mention education and (mental) health, and the government's obligations under te Tiriti o Waitangi. The proposed state sector reforms promise to tackle these problems more effectively by unifying the public service, normalising a more cohesive and collaborative approach among agencies to cross-cutting issues, and supporting the Crown to fulfil its responsibilities under te Tiriti o Waitangi. However, bureaucracy is an immensely powerful instrument for organisational socialisation and indoctrination and so these proposals may not be sufficient to exorcise Weber's spectre.

Being Māori does not mean being invulnerable to bureaucratisation either. Consider, for example, the experience of the permanent head of the former Department of Māori Affairs, Ihakara (Kara) Puketapu, who in the late 1970s led, with Iri (now Dame Iritana) Tāwhiwhirangi, the Tu Tangata strategy, which included a new approach – 'kōkiri' – requiring Māori officers from his department to go out into Māori communities to talk kanohi ki te kanohi with Māori people to determine together how best the interests of Māori could be served (Puketapu, 1982a, 1982b). Under this new philosophy of administration the department was no longer to be seen as a social welfare agency, delivering from on high (that is, bureaucratically) what it or the government believed Māori people should receive. Nevertheless, Puketapu found that the Tu Tangata approach had to overcome entrenched bureaucratic ways, and that his department needed 'to move the very spirit and soul of the client community in a way never before perceived'; 'The Department … was very much structured in pyramid fashion, and with the habit of looking inward to itself as a first priority instead of adopting a more outward stance' (Puketapu, 1982b, pp.4, 22).

A few years later, in 1988, the report (*Puao-Te-Ata-Tu*) of a ministerial advisory committee on a Māori perspective for the Department of Social Welfare found that 'New Zealand still has a long way to go before we can say we are successfully grappling with the implications of our multi-racial society', and observed,

> 'There is no doubt that the young people who come to the attention of the Police and the Department of Social Welfare invariably bring with them histories of substandard housing, health deficiencies, abysmal education records, and an inability to break out of the ranks of the unemployed' (Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Māori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare, 1988, pp.7–8).

Yet the concept of 'institutional racism' is a reification: when all is said and done, institutions are not racist; the people who comprise them are.

The report also argued that

> 'The most insidious and destructive form of racism … is institutional racism', which is 'the outcome of monocultural institutions which simply ignore and freeze out the cultures of those who do not belong to the majority. … Participation by minorities is conditional on their subjugating their own values and systems to those of "the system" of the power culture' (Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Māori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare, 1988., p.19).

Yet the concept of 'institutional racism' is a reification: when all is said and done, institutions are not racist; the people who comprise them are. And so-called

'unconscious bias' can too easily be accepted as a euphemism for deep-seated racial prejudice.

So, while we in New Zealand may prefer to believe that our governmental bureaucracies are colour-blind, dealing fairly and equitably with all people regardless of their differing ethnicities, cultures and backgrounds, *Puao-Te-Ata-Tu* suggested otherwise. How much has changed since? Little, if anything, as suggested by the arguments presented in He Waka Roimata, the first report of the government's independent criminal justice advisory group (Safe and Effective Justice Advisory Group, 2019), and by the recent comments of the children's commissioner, Judge Andrew Becroft, who has argued that 'The enduring legacy of colonisation together with systemic racism is a pretty lethal cocktail, and it's evident throughout all government departments in New Zealand' (Duff, 2019).

It is clear that government administration in Aotearoa has not been much enriched or even influenced by tikanga Māori, despite the efforts of many Māori officials over the years to make a difference by drawing upon their whakapapa and cultural values to enrich and often counter the bureaucratic context in which they carry out their work.

A wairua perspective

Wairua – commonly associated with spirit and spirituality – is an integral part of the Māori worldview, which holds that all things are interconnected and interdependent (Marsden, 2003). Although wairua is a significant aspect of te ao Māori and features in the public service, albeit to a limited extent, it has no operational definition. But nor do concepts such as love and wisdom. As Bruce (2000) has remarked, once one has experienced these things, there is no longer a need to explain what they are. Today it can be safely said that while there exists bountiful technical knowledge in public policymaking, wisdom is in much shorter supply.

Wairua/spirituality is important to a lot of New Zealanders, with a recent survey suggesting that many feel that spirituality is extremely or very important to their overall wellbeing and mental health (McCrindle Research, 2018). Over half of the survey participants also considered that Māori culture and understanding of spirituality has influenced New Zealanders' commonly held values and beliefs.[1]

This conception of wairua contrasts with tikanga Weber and the New Public Management reforms, yet resonates with the increasing emphasis in public administration since the mid-1990s on public value, service, stewardship and citizenship.

While wairua is difficult to comprehend or define, it can be known through the senses, and through people's experiences and practices and the meanings they ascribe to these. In this regard, Māori knowledgeable in wairua point to it being a phenomenon that permeates everyone and everything, has qualities similar to the source of all creation, seeks wholeness and balance, is an empowering, relational and connecting force, and is essential to life and wellbeing.

This conception of wairua contrasts with tikanga Weber and the New Public Management reforms, yet resonates with the increasing emphasis in public administration since the mid-1990s on public value, service, stewardship and citizenship. This growing momentum in public administration is described by Pyun and Gamassou as 'making a state not only economic, efficient and effective, *but also more human, sustainable and social*' (Pyun and Gamassou, 2018, p.246, emphasis added). It also aligns with some of the research on public sector motivation and job satisfaction, which suggests a movement away from economic self-interest towards intrinsic motivators such as making a difference, and that those who choose to work in the public service tend to be more spiritually inclined than those who do not (see, for example, Houston and Cartwright, 2007). A growing body of research also suggests that a more spiritually oriented workplace (namely, one that meets employees' spiritual needs and/or incorporates spiritual-like practices) can make a positive difference to employee job satisfaction, performance and the services they provide (see, for example, Carvajal, 2014; Lee, Lovelace and Manz, 2013). These findings are consistent with studies that have found an association between spiritual-like values (such as integrity, honesty and humility) and leadership that enhances organisational commitment, productivity and growth (Fernando, 2011).

It is not surprising, therefore, that public services worldwide, including New Zealand's, are turning towards more holistic, people-centred and value-based approaches in the hope of addressing complex policy issues and other key challenges facing governments today. These approaches resonate with a more humanistic and ecological form of spirituality, which has grown primarily from the field of psychology, particularly Maslow's (1943) needs hierarchy (of which self-actualisation is the highest) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological models of human development.

This diverse body of literature suggests that an authentic understanding and embodiment of wairua within the public sector becomes even more important when meeting people's needs and for changing behaviour. It also highlights the significant limitations of a Weberian bureaucracy. Since Weber's day, public bureaucracies, as essential instruments of the welfare state, have been increasingly called upon to carry out functions that were intended to change people's behaviour – to stay healthy, to not

hurt others, to act in a way that enhances others' wellbeing, for example. All this is much more complicated and demanding than producing physical objects, whether they be motor vehicles, toothpaste or baked beans (Gregory, 1995).

New possibilities

The butterfly is often used as a symbol of transformation. When it emerges from its cocoon it is completely transformed from what it formerly was, a caterpillar. On the other hand, a snake changes its skin from time to time but its core structure remains intact; despite its new skin, it is still a snake. This analogy helps to clarify what the true essence of transformation is – it is substantive and fundamental change.

This article contends that insights from te ao Māori, especially the idea of wairua, can support a 'transformational' state sector agenda and contribute to the development of a more substantively, rather than cosmetically, humane New Zealand public bureaucracy. Puketapu also believed that wairua could play a significant role in transforming the public service and considered that 'Our bureaucratic training is often a liability' (Puketapu, 1982a, p.55). He hoped to persuade public officials 'that more exciting possibilities will occur for them if they spend time recognising their own personal wairua and those of other people'. Puketapu argued that 'Without an ability to work in tune with the soul of the community client, the most effective ideology for an organisation can be missed' (Puketapu, 1982b, pp.6–7).

A study of 'wairua in the public sector context' is currently underway (by one of the authors) as part of the doctoral programme at Victoria University of Wellington's School of Government. Initial interviews have been conducted with eight experts and practitioners of wairua or spirituality to help gain a better understanding of wairua in New Zealand's public sector. Without exception, participants declared that wairua could enhance state sector efficacy, primarily by bringing people to the centre of all administrative matters, improving connections and relationships among people, enhancing performance, productivity and outcomes, and creating systems that support people to make choices that have ethical and moral integrity. For now, we briefly summarise how te ao Māori, and wairua in particular, could inform the 'spirit of service' that is sought by the architects of the forthcoming public service legislation.

First, the idea of connection is central to any understanding of wairua. Speaking at the 2018 New Zealand Cutting Edge conference – 'Its all about connection' – Tāmati Kruger observed that the worst kind of poverty and the cruellest thing for the human soul is being in a state of kahupō or spiritual blindness – a person having no identity, place and/or community to which they belong or feel connected to. Brené Brown defines connection as 'the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship'.[2] In other words, people working in the system as well as the citizens they serve would feel heard, respected, valued, empowered and motivated, rather than – as is too often the case – unheard, devalued and diminished. Therefore, people-related skills and training must be seen to be just as vital as technical skills and experience. Such skills are arguably even more important in the modern age of bureaucracy, where communication between people (even those sitting in close proximity to one another) is more often than not mediated by computer screens. Moreover, governmental administration is invariably split, often arbitrarily, among a plethora of bureaucratic entities, frequently resulting in 'siloisation' and administrative disconnectedness. In New Zealand, 'managing for outcomes' became a catchcry during the 2000s for attempts, only partially successful, to establish an integrated public service (for example, see Lips, O'Neill and Eppel, 2011).

Second, to help achieve the first aspiration the state bureaucracy needs leaders and managers who can bring out the best in people, who are capable of identifying the unique potential, skills and attributes that each individual has and can help them unleash these. To do this, state sector leaders and managers would need to be creative, authentic, intuitive, empathetic, consistently fair and able to empower and inspire others to be the same. This, in itself, would go some way to addressing recent concerns about workplace bullying and other toxic behaviour in New Zealand public service departments (Devlin and Hunt, 2019). Furthermore, the kindness, empathy, compassion and aroha that Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern showed in response to the horrific attack on Muslims in Christchurch also demonstrated that, at least in exceptional circumstances, the emotions felt by its citizens can indeed be humanely expressed through the official channels of the modern state.

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Third, a wairua-imbued bureaucracy would mean having fewer rules but more trust. As Wilkins points out, 'excellent companies have very few rules. That enables them to focus on what matters. They simplify their business to make sure *what they do works for their team and their clients*' (Wilkins, 2019, p.18, emphasis added). Instead of hard and fast rules, principles would be promoted to enable people to use their discretionary authority

to do the right thing in each situation, thereby enhancing mutual trust and reducing the likelihood of poor outcomes due to inflexible and/or outdated rules.

Fourth, rather than making presumptions from on high about what is good for others, public servants would first seek to understand the people they are serving and those people's realities. Policies and programmes would not be created in isolation from the citizens whom they are intended to affect, but would involve them in some meaningful way.

Finally, a state system with an authentic wairua orientation would mean that every situation or matter would take into account both a wairua and a more technical-specific perspective. Consideration of both perspectives and of the whole person could enhance the outcomes for those involved, as has been demonstrated by a model of care in the mental health sector, Tātaihono. The combination of a cultural therapist collaborating with a clinical psychiatrist has helped to identify the full range of issues that individuals present with, as well as effective means to advance their health and well being. As Sir Mason Durie notes,

> The model of care that emerges from Tātaihono draws on two quite different worldviews – science and indigenous knowledge. Although the two are based on seemingly divergent philosophies, when applied together the divergence can be replaced by a synergy that dwarfs the scope of either acting alone. (Niania, Bush and Epston, 2017, p.viii)

However, to achieve this sort of synergy requires, at the very least, respect for different worldviews and perspectives.

Conclusion

In the early years of the 19th century Te Aupōuri rangatira wāhine Meri Ngaroto uttered the words that have come to form one of the most well-known whakatauākī[3] in Aotearoa New Zealand. She did so, using her own mana, to save the lives of a group of manuhiri at her marae. In that whakatauākī she reminded her people that each individual is connected to their tupuna, as well as to generations yet to be born (see Quince, 2019). This whakatauākī therefore, speaks of the importance of wairua, of understanding the interconnectedness of all people and things in this world and beyond it. Using the analogy of the harakeke (flax plant), this whakatauākī also reaffirms the importance of nurturing the emerging emphasis in public administration on values, people and service – that which resonates with wairua.

This growing momentum towards a more humanised bureaucracy suggests that it is timely to take up a truly transformational state sector programme, one that could be enhanced by a te ao Māori and wairua perspective. Letting go of the current Western-dominated approach and moving towards such a substantive system change requires courage, trust and the willingness to enter into a period of uncertainty, similar to a caterpillar when it enters its cocoon. The hope is that, like the caterpillar, once that period of darkness passes, it will emerge as something much greater than its former self.

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There is little reason to expect, however, that the essential elements of tikanga Weber will become obsolete any time soon, as Puketapu also found. Nevertheless, New Zealand's governmental bureaucracy is not large by international standards, and has a demonstrated willingness to want to do better, in a country that is sea-bound with a relatively small population. So a bureaucratic system genuinely imbued with wairua, rather than it being a cosmetic façade, should be attainable. It would then be possible to rephrase Weber's 'special virtue': 'Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly it humanises, the more it accommodates in its official business all purely personal and emotional elements which may escape calculation but which facilitate good judgement and humane responses.'

It could be realised if there were a much greater openness to a new philosophical basis that authentically embraces a Māori worldview. Those who deny that this is either possible or desirable may ask themselves why they wish to perpetuate a Weberian zeitgeist that clearly does not work for large numbers of New Zealanders, both Māori and non-Māori.

1 This was especially true for the younger participants, with 73% of Generation Z compared to 53% of baby boomers reporting that Māori culture and understanding of spirituality have influenced New Zealand values and beliefs.

2 https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/417390-i-define-connection-as-the-energy-that-exists-between-people.

3 Hutia te rito o te harakeke, Kei whea te kōmako e kō? Kō mai ki ahau; He aha te mea nui o te Ao? Māku e kō atu, he tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata.

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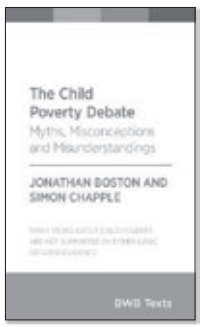

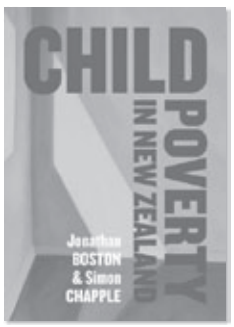

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