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## article

# The expertise of politicians and their role in epistemic communities

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Existing studies often regard politicians as outside epistemic communities, owing to a lack of policy or technical expertise. In contrast, this article argues that politicians can also be experts, and can play a pivotal role within existing epistemic communities. Specifically, it finds that this expertise is acquired through two distinct, but interrelated, processes. First, politicians who work on an issue for a sustained period and have access to expert knowledge can be recruited to epistemic communities. Second, politicians with a relevant academic or professional background can become allies for such communities. This argument is developed through an analysis of pension reform in Norway. Drawing on interviews with key policy actors, we demonstrate that civil servants in the Ministry of Finance constituted an epistemic community which recruited key politicians through the Pension Commission and benefited from having an economist and ally as Prime Minister.

**key words** expertise • politicians • ideas • epistemic communities • pension reform • Norway

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## Introduction

Most studies of policy learning start from the assumption that politicians enter the learning processes as blank slates. Politicians are viewed as experts on the art of politics – winning debates, wooing voters, promoting issues – but with limited knowledge of the complex and technical issues with which they are often faced. Experts, whether inside the bureaucracy or outside of it, are called on to manage complexity and illuminate technicalities. But what if policymakers, too, are experts? In countries where levels of education are generally high, accounts of political change must allow for the possibility that many politicians are highly educated and/or have

a background in specialised expert networks. In Norway, in the period 2009–2013, 33 per cent of Members of Parliament had completed Masters degrees or similar, and 1 per cent had completed a PhD (Allern et al, 2014). We must assume that their educational background influences how they do their jobs as politicians, yet there is little systematic analysis of this in the literature on policy learning. What is the role of expert politicians in complex policy reforms, and how do they interact with certified expert communities in such processes?

In order to shed light on this issue, we present a case study of one particular reform, namely the Norwegian pension reform. We argue that this is a suitable case because pensions are both technically complex and politically sensitive, thus pension reforms typically demand long-term commitment from both politicians and experts. The Norwegian process was no exception: it went on for almost ten years, and involved all political parties in parliament as well as the social partners. Moreover, the Norwegian reform took place in a period characterised by affluence and “solid state-finances” where external reform pressures were weak. This suggests that reform architects drew on expert knowledge about long-term fiscal stability and demographic trends, and also had the ability to develop pointed arguments to convince defenders of the status quo. Previous accounts have emphasised the role of ideas at different stages in the process (Hagelund and Pedersen, 2015; Ervik and Lindén, 2015; Fugelsnes, 2017; Grødem and Hippe, 2018). These contributions have acknowledged that much work was done behind the scenes in the ministries, but none of them have analysed the relationships between expert civil servants and politicians, nor the unique role which professional economists played as experts and decision makers.

We suggest that the literature on *epistemic communities* (Haas, 1992; Cross, 2013) is useful in shedding light on the potential role of expert actors and their ideas, as well as their paths to influence. The role of politicians in this literature is ambiguous and, it can be argued, underdeveloped. We suggest, first, that politicians can be recruited to epistemic communities on certain conditions. In this, we draw on Marier (2008b), who argues that politicians who work together over time, and who have the opportunity to specialise in a field as well as having access to expert knowledge, can constitute an epistemic community of their own. Marier’s (2008b) example is that politicians who served on the Swedish pension committees between 1984 and 2003 – a small, and remarkably stable group of MPs – developed all the features of an epistemic community. Our argument differs from his in that we present a story in which the epistemic community was already established, but where politicians were ‘recruited’. Second, we emphasise that some politicians are experts by virtue of their background and education. Many ambitious students are engaged in politics, many aspiring politicians pursue higher education. In some cases, elements of chance determine who pursue academic careers, and who are elected into politics. Politicians who enter government offices in their early 40s may find themselves reunited with old friends from university, who now serve as top bureaucrats. We will refer to such politicians as academic politicians, to separate them from expert politicians who gain their expertise through their political work in dedicated fields. Such academic politicians may be rare, but we will show that one of the key players in the Norwegian pension reform was an example. He was an influential politician with a Master’s degree in economics, and he had an instrumental role in steering the process through the different phases.

In what follows, we first outline the political and fiscal conditions in Norway in the early 2000s. We also elaborate on the concept of epistemic communities, and on related concepts about the role of ideas in policymaking. We then introduce our

data and methods, before presenting the Norwegian pension reform. We analyse two phases: the appointment of the Pension Commission and the Pension Commission's working period (2001–2004), and the political processes from the Commission to the final Parliamentary settlement on the new system in 2007 (2004–2007). Since 2007 ended the parliamentary discussion on the content of reform, we end our story there. The Bill on the new pension system was not passed until 2009, but the work after 2007 was limited to smaller adjustments and is therefore not dealt with here. Also, we will not analyse the processes on occupational pensions and how these were adapted to the new system (see [Grødem and Hippe, 2018](#); and [Pedersen et al, 2018](#)).

## Perspectives

The Norwegian pension reform was initiated in 2001. This was a period when oil revenues had made Norway uniquely affluent, thus there were arguably no short-term fiscal reasons why Norway should initiate a large-scale structural reform of a major social programme at this point in time. Quite the contrary: the reform implied that future pensions will be lower for almost the entire population ([Fredriksen and Stølen, 2015](#)) and, as the 'new politics' hypothesis ([Pierson, 1994](#)) makes clear, retrenchment of popular programmes can be politically costly. While it is not the aim of this article to explain why the reform was initiated, we acknowledge that this is a puzzle.

Inspiration from neighbouring Sweden can be part of the answer. Sweden initiated a pension reform in the late 1980s, and implemented a new, NDC pension in 1994 ([Anderson and Immergut, 2007](#)). In the 1990s, however, the fiscal situation in the two countries were quite different ([Pedersen, 2004](#)). As late as in 1995, a comprehensive governmental review of welfare arrangements in Norway (St Meld nr 35 (1994–1995)) explicitly said that there would be no structural changes to the old age pension system. The new Swedish system was presented in some detail in the report, yet there were no hints that the Norwegian government had intentions of going down the same road. Also, when the Norwegian reform came, it was not a direct imitation of the Swedish – [Pedersen \(2004\)](#) describes it as 'a half-hearted copy of a brutal (Swedish) original'. The Swedish reform was undoubtedly an inspiration, but it is not a reason for reform: Norway does not have to follow wherever Sweden leads, and the fiscal reform pressures were much lower in Norway. Still, the similarities between the two reform processes is worth noting: like in Sweden, the Norwegian reform was a 'behind-the-scenes' process, and it was kept out of election campaigns in three subsequent parliamentary elections (2001, 2005, 2009). Also, the parliament's role in designing the principles of the new system was minimal ([Stoltenberg, 2016](#); [Grødem and Hippe, 2018](#)).

Norway is a multi-party democracy with proportional representation. In 2001, when the reform was initiated, eight parties were represented in Parliament. The country has a tradition for minority governments, even minority coalition governments ([Strøm et al, 2005](#)), who have had to steer their policies through parliament seeking support through shifting majorities. There is a strong tradition for consensus and compromise, and recent increase in the use of parliamentary settlements can be seen as a continuation of this trend ([Grønlie, 2014](#)). A settlement is basically an extended parliamentary process on a white paper, and contributes to binding political consensus in larger reforms. The pension reform was secured through settlements in 2005 and 2007. The 2005 settlement included all parties except the Progress Party and the Socialist Party; in 2007, the Socialist Party joined the majority. Key actors argued that the settlements were necessary given the long-term

commitment and the need for stability in the face of shifting political majorities (Grønlie, 2014: 174). A critical observer would point out that they also allowed for blame avoidance (Pierson, 1994). Nevertheless, this emphasis on consensus may be part of the reason why arguments and ideas have gained so much attention in analyses of the reform process: getting everyone on board required coherent and convincing arguments.

The Labour party has historically had a particularly strong position in Norwegian politics, but has been gradually weakened since the 1980s. There are parallels to Sweden, where Anderson and Immergut (2007: 350) argue that the Social Democrats went along with the pension reform to re-establish itself as the ‘natural party of government’. In Norway, however, the Social Democrats did not just go along with reform, they initiated it (to be discussed later). This happened under the leadership of Jens Stoltenberg, who was committed to macro-economic responsibility and public-sector reform (Stoltenberg, 2016). It can be argued that the Norwegian Labour party, under Stoltenberg, strived to maintain an image as the responsible party of government, that was capable of initiating reforms and decrease public spending when necessary.

The ‘new politics’ hypothesis assumes that large-scale reforms of popular programmes mainly take place in periods of austerity. Overbye (2008) suggests an alternative hypothesis: stable macro-economic conditions and widespread optimism can make path-breaking reform *easier*. His analysis seems relevant to the Norwegian case: it seems plausible that it was easier to introduce a flexible retirement age on actuarially neutral terms in a period when demand for labour was high, and large sections of the population could expect that their labour would still be in demand past the age of 67. This may have reduced opposition to the reform. In the new Norwegian pension system, the winners will be those who are able to postpone retirement, and in good times, anyone can assume that they will be among this group. In Pierson’s (1994) terms, this can be seen as an obfuscation tactic, and one that is most likely to work in affluent times.

In short, by 2001 Norway had a government committed to maintaining financial stability, a neighbouring country that had recently landed an inspiring pension reform, and an economic climate that fostered optimism and provided considerable manoeuvring space. It also has a tradition for broad coalitions around important reforms, which allows for blame avoidance. Still, such structural and political conditions would mean little if there were no actors to seize the moment. We still need to understand the actor constellations that drove the reform, from the conception to the conclusion.

The authoritative studies on pension reform in Europe (Bonoli, 2000; Schludi, 2005; Immergut et al, 2007; Marier, 2008a; Natali, 2017) typically pay little attention to the role of ideas. Indeed, Immergut et al (2007: 17) explicitly note that ‘we did not find any overall impact of “ideas” or “learning” per se’. The authors acknowledge that national policymakers ‘were influenced by’ international bodies and developments in other countries in the same region, yet they still sought solutions from their own country’s history. Several qualitative single-nation studies, on the other hand, emphasise the role of ideas and expert communities (Marier, 2008b; Maher, 2017; Bridgen and Meyer, 2018).

In order to illuminate the role played by civil servants, and their interaction with key politicians, we draw on the notion of epistemic communities (Haas, 1992). Epistemic communities are made up of knowledge-based experts, and are defined by four criteria (Haas, 1992: 3): they share (1) similar normative and principled values,

(2) similar causal beliefs, (3) similar tools to validate or refute causal claims, and (4) they agree on the tools or practices utilised to prescribe policy solutions. In other words, such communities share problem definitions and have a joint understanding of how problems can and should be solved. This sets them out from other groups, such as professions, interest groups, legislators and bureaucratic agencies. Members of the same profession may share causal beliefs, but not normative values. Bureaucratic bodies work to preserve their missions, while epistemic communities apply their causal knowledge to policy enterprises subject to their normative objectives (Haas, 1992: 19).

While professions are not epistemic communities, subgroups of professions can be. This goes for, for instance, Keynesian or neoliberal economists, who share normative beliefs as well as causal beliefs and political tools (Haas, 1992: 19). Correspondingly, members of epistemic communities may use bureaucratic leverage through obtaining key personnel slots within bureaucracies (Haas 1992: 20). Christensen (2017) has argued that this is precisely what happened in the Norwegian Ministry of Finance in the 1970s, when neoliberal economists were able to replace the dominant Keynesians. Blyth (2001) tells a similar story about Sweden. Politicians can be part of epistemic communities, we suggest, if they are experts in their field and share the community's causal beliefs and normative objectives. Elected politicians have a very different role to experts who influence policy processes through their expert knowledge, but in given circumstances – for instance in large reform processes which speak to both their programmatic and political knowledge (Marier, 2008b) – politicians can flourish as epistemic community members.

The literature on how economists influence politics share many perspectives with the literature on epistemic communities, but tends to emphasise the institutional positions of economists. Much has been written about how economist paradigms are disseminated across national contexts (for example, Hall, 1989; Blyth, 2002) and about how economists gain political influence (Fourcade, 2009; Hirschman and Berman, 2014; Christensen, 2017). Economists are found in top positions in many important public organisations, and their influence is also institutionalised through national banks, Ministries of Finance, and international organisations like the International Monetary Fund and the OECD. In the Nordic countries, economists also play important roles in employee and employer organisations. Confederations on both sides employ 'chief economists', supported by expert departments that play key roles in wage negotiations and when formulating the organisations' politics.

Both Hirschman and Berman (2014: 801) and Christensen (2017) argue that economists are more likely to be influential when conditions are uncertain, and when issues can be defined as technical. The same argument is made for epistemic communities. In a literature review, Cross (2013) highlights uncertainty and the technical nature of issues as conditions under which epistemic communities exert influence. The argument is the same: when issues are complex and technical, politicians turn to experts. Through their institutional position, economists – perhaps more often than other professions – have access to decision-makers' ears. Such access is highlighted as crucial in the literature on epistemic communities (for an overview, see Cross, 2013). Also, this literature points out that an epistemic community is most likely to be influential when rival communities are weak.

Epistemic communities are typically consulted early in political processes, when uncertainty is high and options unclear (Cross, 2013; Dunlop, 2017: 229). Later in the process, their influence tends to fade. The period immediately after the epistemic

community has presented its analyses is therefore a vulnerable one – this is where it is decided what impact expert knowledge will actually have on political decisions. The literature suggests two stylised outcomes after an epistemic community has communicated its results: one is that new ideas are institutionalised, to become part of a cognitive infrastructure (Hirschman and Berman, 2014) or even constitute a cognitive lock (Blyth, 2001). This would imply the ultimate success for any epistemic community. Alternatively, the epistemic community's analyses provide a new battleground. In Dunlop's words (2017: 216), 'the very lessons created by epistemic communities to reduce uncertainty may also increase the ability and confidence of decision-makers and stakeholders to create alternative and rival knowledge'. This is what she calls the irony of epistemic learning.

We shall suggest that the question of whether an expert network ends in 'cognitive locking' or in struggles to present alternative knowledge will depend on the politicians moving the process forward, highlighting in particular the role of what we have called expert and academic politicians.

## Data and methods

Our analysis relies on qualitative interviews with informants who were central in the pension reform process. Informants were identified through a snowballing method: we started by interviewing trade union officials whom we knew had been involved, and these pointed us to other key players who in turn identified others. We interviewed key bureaucrats in the Ministry of Social Affairs, Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) officials and staff (including former leaders Gerd-Liv Valla and Roar Flåthen),<sup>1</sup> key politicians (including former Prime Ministers Jens Stoltenberg and Kjell Magne Bondevik, former Minister of Social Affairs Bjarne Håkon Hansen, former Ministers of Finance Sigbjørn Johnsen and Karl Eirik Schjøtt-Pedersen), as well as central players in unions outside LO, and in the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO). We also talked to a few independent experts. All in all, we carried out 14 interviews with 18 informants between November 2015 and September 2016. The shortest interview lasted for 45 minutes, the longest almost two hours. Only one of the respondents who was asked to participate did not respond to the invitation.

All the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Inspired by the process tracing method (Falleti, 2016; Trampusch and Palier, 2016), we made it a key aim of the interviews to pinpoint the process in as much detail as possible: who talked to whom when, under what circumstances and institutional conditions, promoting which interests and so on. Both authors of this article participated in almost all interviews, and when that was not possible, we made contact shortly afterwards to discuss the new information. Most of our informants had been close to some parts of the process while absent or excluded from other parts of it, thus their narratives only partly overlapped. An important part of the analysis was thus the ongoing dialogue between us, where we aimed to establish an overview of the process, weighing the input from different informants against each other – and also discussing what we needed to clarify in subsequent interviews with new informants. By the end of the data collection, we were confident that we had a good overview of both meeting places, actors, and the interests which the actors sought to promote in different settings. In the analytical phase, we went back and forth between our memories of



the interviews, our interpretations and the interview transcripts, in a hermeneutic manner that deepened and clarified our understanding of the process.

We have also collected all relevant policy documents, mainly the successive committee reports (NOUs) from the 1990s and 2000s, the respective White Papers, and Bills to establish as precisely as possible a timeline of what actually happened. The formal timeline was supplemented, where relevant, with material from the large text database A-tekst, which is a searchable archive of all articles in Norwegian newspapers throughout the period covered here.

## The pension reform in Norway

Given the lack of previous political reform debates and initiatives, the Pension Commission (NOU, 2004:1) produced a far more radical reform proposal than most observers had expected. Only five years after the commission presented its report, the main elements of the new system were legislated in 2009, and the new system took full effect from 1 January 2011. The crucial changes in the state pension system were:

- A strong link between life-long earnings and pensions. Pension accrual starts from the first *kroner* earned, and all years count equally. Pension accrual is 18.1 per cent of annual pensionable incomes up to a ceiling of 7.1 times the National Insurance's base amount (approximately 1.5 times average full-time income). Prior to the reform, full pension accrual was reached after 40 years and benefits were calculated based on the best 20 income years.
- Retirement age is fully flexible between 62–75 years on actuarially neutral terms, leaving behind the former fixed pensioning age at 67 years.
- One can also work and claim pension at the same time, abolishing the former notion of a certain retirement age where people withdrew from employment.
- Pensions are reduced in proportion to observed increase in longevity, hence transferring the risk of changes in longevity from the state to the pensioners.
- Pension payments are indexed with the development of wages minus 0.75 percentage points, removing the previous wage adjustment guarantee on running pensions.

The pre-2011 system aimed at securing a given proportion of life-time earnings in old age. The new system has no such ambitions, but provides each with an individual notional 'pension savings account' (NDC-system, similar to Sweden and Italy). When a person retires, her/his annual pension is determined by the size of this account (pension wealth) and the number of years expected to live past retirement (the longevity adjustment). The replacement rates that can realistically be achieved in the new system are modest, even after relatively long working careers. Full-time workers will in most cases have less than 50 per cent of lifetime incomes from the state system. This has opened up an increased room for occupational pension (Pedersen et al, 2018).

## The birth of pension reform: the Pension Commission

The Pension Commission was formally appointed on 30 March 2001, about a year after Jens Stoltenberg's first government took office. Stoltenberg had a strong CV as a politician, which included a period as Minister of Finance (1996–1997), and he had

a Master's degree in economics from the University of Oslo. He was an academic as well as a politician. When taking office, he appointed Karl Eirik Schjødt-Pedersen, one of his closest aides, as Minister of Finance. Against this background, the links between the PM office and the Ministry of Finance in the 2000–2001 government are described in our interviews as very close: 'There were no doors... [the civil servants] went back and forth, it was seamless', one informant, who worked in the Ministry of Finance at time, described.

In our interviews, we invited informants to reflect upon the debates that took place within the Labour party and LO prior to the commissions' appointment. Which considerations led them to establish the Pension Commission, and how did they placate the opposition? To our surprise, our Labour and LO informants remembered very little. All these informants were central in one of these organisations at the time, yet none of them could remember discussions of pension before 2001 or even before 2004. Similarly, the informants in the NHO had no recollection of the processes that led to the Pension Commission. Thinking back to 2000, none of our informants could remember controversy surrounding the pension commission within the party organisation. Several informants however 'assumed' that the initiative came from the Ministry of Finance, possibly in connection with the Prime Minister's office. Karl Eirik Schjøtt-Pedersen eventually confirmed this. He said: 'It was the Ministry of Finance's initiative.... Those kinds of reforms, that are not welfare reforms but macroeconomic reforms, they typically come from above.... This was an effort that the Ministry of Finance, supported by the Prime Minister's Office, started.'<sup>2</sup>

The Ministry of Finance, then, is identified as the first mover in this process. The Ministry, or at least key civil servants within it, can be seen as a national node of an international epistemic community (Christensen, 2017). This was a community of experts, mainly economists, that pushed for a particular type of pension reform. Internationally, they promoted their ideas through the OECD (Antolin and Suyker, 2001) EU bodies (European Roundtable of Industrialists, 2000) and the World Bank (1994). It is not surprising, therefore, that the Ministry of Finance might want a pension reform, but why in 2001? Why not in connection with the 1995 White Paper, or some time in the distant future when the need for fiscal control would seem more acute?

In order to understand the 2001 Pension Commission, we must look to events in the 1990s. By 2001, the Ministry of Finance was deeply frustrated with the way pensions developed. The social partners negotiated an early retirement scheme in 1988, and expanded this successively during the 1990s. The scheme was known as 'AvtaleFestet Pensjon' (AFP) (literally Negotiated Pensions). When AFP was last expanded in 1998, it lowered the pensioning age for those covered to 62. The state partially funded the scheme, and had also taken on administration of it, but the development of the scheme was in the hands of the social partners. The state tried to hit the brake on the successive lowering of the pensionable age several times, mainly because increasing early retirement jarred with the overall 'activation' approach that dominated social policy, thus the lowering of the age limits from 1992 were done with limited or no state subsidies to the scheme (Hippe et al, 2007). This limited public expenses on the programme, but did not hinder the de facto lowering of the pensionable age for those covered.

Two committees, both made up of state bureaucrats, the social partners and independent experts, were set up in the 1990s to discuss early retirement. The first of



these (NOU 1994:14) failed to reach consensus around any substantive conclusions, and the second (NOU 1998:19) fell apart when the trade unions withdrew from it only weeks before it was due to report. The trade unions accused the majority of the committee of contemplating a structural reform, 'clearly inspired by Sweden' (NOU 1998:19, 6). They argued that this went beyond the mandate, and in any case, they would not discuss such reform.

After 1998, then, it was clear that it would not be possible to get the trade unions to scale down the early retirement scheme, let alone to discuss a larger pension reform. The two committees had only deepened the frustrations of the epistemic community in the Ministries. As one of our informants said: '[the 1990s committees] pointed to quite fundamental issues regarding the future of the existing system. And then they were very difficult to follow up on. I suppose that was when some of us realized that we now were facing something bigger.'<sup>3</sup>

The financial sustainability of the existing system was one aspect of this 'something bigger' which our informant hinted at. Increasingly sophisticated projections showed that over time, pension commitments would exceed the revenues from North Sea oil (see [Ervik and Lindén, 2015](#)). A committee had highlighted this as the main challenge for the pension system as early as in 1984 (NOU 1984:10), and successive long-term programmes by governments of various colours had repeated it since then. Several informants pointed to these projections as an important part of the background for the Pension Commission:

We started to get better data, and then the Swedes had already seen this development in longevity and started to act upon it.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, it became fashionable to do those long-term prognoses. [The Ministry of Finance] thought it was jolly good fun to run those predictions, of course.<sup>5</sup>

The arguments, then, were clear, but the trade unions were seen as blocking the road forward. If the Ministry of Finance wanted a pension reform, it would have to find a way to circumvent the unions, something that could not possibly be done without political support. An opportunity to do this presented itself when Jens Stoltenberg, the economist and former Minister of Finance, took over as Prime Minister. He was the Ministry's ally, and having him as Prime Minister gave the Ministry of Finance momentum and an opportunity to break the deadlock on the pension issue.

The Pension Commission was unusual among Norwegian public committees in that it was dominated by representatives nominated by the parties in Parliament, while the social partners were excluded. All the parties in the Parliament were however represented, and their representatives were far more likely to have their backgrounds in macroeconomics and fiscal politics than in social policy. The commission's chair was a former Minister of Finance. Several members were MPs who served on the Parliament's Standing Committee on Financial and Economic Affairs. The representative from the Centre party and the Conservative party had both at some point been under-secretaries of state (*statssekretær*) in the Ministry of Finance. In addition, four members of the Commission were appointed on the basis of their expertise. Of the four independent experts, three were economists. One of them formally represented the Labour and Welfare Administration, but had worked

as an underdirector in the Ministry of Finance until June 2001. Another expert was Asbjørn Rødseth: a professor in Economics at the University of Oslo and a strong voice in the Commission (Fugelsnes, 2017: 78). Rødseth borrowed an office in the Ministry of Finance for about six months while the committee worked, where he presumably maintained close cooperation with the Ministry's civil servants.

The Commission had an advisory board consisting of representatives for the social partners, the finance industry, and organisations for old age pensioners and people with disabilities. This board was present only in seven out of the Commission's 33 meetings (NOU 2004:1, 39). The social partners were thus successfully marginalised. Part of the reason why they accepted having such a weak role was probably that they did not expect the Commission to make much difference. In 2001, nobody expected the political parties to reach consensus.

The Ministry of Finance dominated the Commission's secretariat: five out of the nine members came from the Ministry. Of the remaining four, three came from the Ministry of Social Affairs<sup>6</sup> and one from the Ministry of Labour and Administration. The Head of the secretariat was one of the few economists who worked in the Ministry of Social Affairs at the time, and he moved to the Ministry of Finance for the duration of the commission's work and led the secretariat from there (Fugelsnes, 2017: 75). Through the secretariat, the Commission had regular access to the expert network, a key condition for helping politicians become experts (Marier, 2008b).

The selection of candidates to the Commission indicates that the commission had a dual aim: it should work out a blueprint for a new pension system that fitted dominant economic theory, and it should anchor this new blueprint in their parties and thus lay the groundwork for a future consensus in the Parliament. A commission dominated by independent experts could have filled the former role, but not the latter. By staffing the committee with members who understood public finance, but who did not have strong preconceptions about pensions, the Ministry of Finance could assume that the committee would be open to its mentoring. This mentoring was offered through two main channels: the secretariat, and the welcoming of a key commission member into the Ministry of Finance's offices. It seems likely that when a commission is made up of non-experts, while the secretariat consists of members of the epistemic community with considerable technical expertise, secretariats potentially have considerable influence (Christensen and Holst, 2017: 827). This is particularly true when the issue at hand is seen as technical and complex. These forms of influence mirror the literature on epistemic communities: their influence is strongest when the issue at hand is technical, and they are in a position to mentor policymakers.

Cross (2013) identifies access to top decision-makers and weakness of competing networks as keys to any epistemic community's success. When Jens Stoltenberg took office, the Ministry of Finance got one of their own in the Prime Minister's chair. He appointed his closest aide as Minister of Finance, while his Minister of Social Affairs lacked experience from policies at the national level, and had a weaker voice in this government. This set the stage for a temporary takeover of pension politics by the Ministry of Finance. Our interviews reveal that civil servants in the Ministry of Social Affairs were frustrated to see the Ministry of Finance grabbing the initiative in old-age pension politics, and they suggested that a stronger Minister would not have accepted this intervention. 'The overriding responsibility [for pensions] lies

with us, doesn't it. So it was a very strange situation', one civil servant said with reference to 2001.

## From policy to politics: from Commission report to reform

The Pension Commission reported in February 2004 (NOU 2004:1). All parties in the commission, except the representatives from the (left-wing) Socialist Party and the (right-wing) Progress Party, supported the Commission's proposal. Even so, the proposal was heavily criticised, not least by the trade unions.

Labour had suffered a crushing defeat in the 2001 election and were out of the governmental offices. In the period 2001–2005, the government was a minority centre-right coalition led by Kjell Magne Bondevik. Bondevik was committed to creating broad support for the reform proposal. In the interview we did with him, he emphasised that pension systems must be sustainable and predictable, and thus that it was imperative to seek consensus. Against this background, he saw the need for a broad parliamentary settlement. That all parties had been represented in the Commission was no guarantee that they would support the reform. The Socialist Party, for instance, criticised their member of the Commission for having gone too far, and announced that they would vote down even the parts of the proposal that she had supported (Fugelsnes, 2017: 88). Similarly, the Labour party had been influential in the Commission, but also in this party there was a vocal opposition – not least among the trade unionists.

The processes that started after February 2004 were complex. Time was of the essence: there was a Parliamentary election coming up in September 2005, and all proponents of the reform wanted to keep the complex pension issue out of the election campaign. That meant some consensus had to be found before the summer of 2005. If that was to happen, three conditions had to be fulfilled: first, a White Paper had to be written that maintained the main components of the Commission's proposal, but was vague enough to allow for process and compromise. Second, all parties in Parliament had to settle their own stances on pension, and third, the social partners had to be conciliated. For the Labour party, the largest party in parliament, the second and third aims were intertwined: Labour could not promote a pension policy with which the LO vehemently disagreed.

In the processes that now unfolded, the potential of the academic politician becomes apparent. Jens Stoltenberg was no longer Prime Minister, but he was the leader of the Labour party and hence leader of the opposition in Parliament. He was committed to moving the reform forward, and the epistemic community in the ministries recognised that he would need to have a key role. He was therefore granted access to ministerial resources, in a way that is highly unusual during a period of opposition. In his own words: '[the Minister of Social Affairs] allowed me to go to [civil servant]. And I sat in his office, and literally had lessons, he walked me through the ideas and concepts.'<sup>7</sup>

The civil servant who gave lessons to Stoltenberg was one of two authors of the forthcoming White Paper, and had also been central in the Pension Commission's secretariat. Even when he was out of government, Stoltenberg was thus kept 'in the loop': it was crucial that he not only supported the basic tenets of the reform, but that he understood all the technicalities. He brought these insights with him as he subsequently negotiated on two fronts: with the centre-right government, and with

the opposition in the Labour party and in LO. These processes appear in the interviews to some extent intertwined, in a way that seems to emphasise how committed all parties were to creating consensus.

This hectic activity culminated in December 2004, when the Labour party settled its own stance on pensions, and the Bondevik government presented a White Paper to the Parliament (St Meld nr 12 (2004–2005)). Both maintained the core ideas of the Pension Commission. Within this new framework, there was however debate on the distribution profile of the new system. The Labour party committed to a more redistributive model than the Pension Commission had, and the White Paper presented no less than four models with different distribution profiles without committing to either. Also, the White Paper postponed the thorny issue of occupational pensions, and maintained that these were to be negotiated at a later stage. This was a victory for the trade unions.

The LO executive supported Labour's post-2004 pension policy (Grødem and Hippe, 2018). LO however hosted a large and vocal opposition, which ground its swords in the run-up to the LO Congress in May 2005. The Congress is LO's main political assembly, held every four years. If the Congress voted the reform down, it would be impossible for the Labour party to support it in parliament. Stoltenberg, now in his role as the Labour leader, addressed the Congress and emphasised the need for unity in the labour movement in the light of the upcoming election. Stoltenberg promised that he would listen to LO's concerns, should he become Prime Minister again, and he stressed that the Labour party was committed to a future pension system with a clear redistributive profile. Nevertheless, as Stoltenberg realised that increased redistribution in the state system alone would not appease LO, he promised to improve and safeguard both a new AFP scheme and the occupational pensions system for public sector employees. At the Congress, the LO leadership's proposal won the vote, albeit against a large minority. With LO on board, the Labour party could support the settlement in Parliament, which then passed in late May 2005.

The 2005 election brought Stoltenberg back to the Prime Minister's office as head of a coalition government. This government set out to settle the details of the pension reform that the May 2005 settlement left open, most importantly relating to the distribution profile. Institutionally, responsibility in this period moved from the Ministry of Finance to the Ministry of Social Affairs. Pensions was about to become social policy again – but the Ministry of Social Affairs was changing. As put by one civil servant:

[When the Pension Commission was appointed] this ministry did not have sufficient skill to take on the task. It was a lot about economics, and this ministry was mainly staffed by legal scholars. So it became my job to build a group of economists and work with the legal scholars.... And then, eventually, we could take over responsibility.<sup>8</sup>

The reform process moved, but the economists moved with it.

The proceedings in the Ministry of Social Affairs led to the second parliamentary settlement in 2007, which settled the main principles of the reform. Unusually, LO executives were fully invited into this process (Grødem and Hippe, 2018). The community that worked intensively behind the scenes between 2005 and 2007 thus consisted of politicians, civil servants and LO officials. This helped anchoring

the reform in LO, as LO's leadership became convinced of the merits of the new system. Like members of the Pension Commission before them, they were in effect recruited to the epistemic community. Also central were Ministry bureaucrats who either were economists by training, or were steeped in economic thinking through their close involvement with the Pension Commission. This helped the reform through that vulnerable period when the expert community had presented its analysis, and other actors could have moved in to create alternative and rival knowledge (compare, [Dunlop, 2017](#)). This was avoided, in part, by inviting the adversaries into the subsequent process. LO's chief economist was won over in this way. As put by one of the central Labour politicians: 'And [the chief LO economist] was particularly sceptical [in the beginning]. But over time, he became one of the best allies in the reform.'

## Discussion

Our interest in this article has been with the role of politicians in epistemic communities. In the 1992 article where the concept of epistemic communities is launched ([Haas, 1992: 18](#)), 'legislators' appear as about as far from epistemic communities as one can get: they share neither causal nor principled beliefs, neither knowledge base nor interests. [Cross \(2013\)](#), in her efforts to rethink epistemic communities, discusses how and when epistemic communities influence government, but does not consider whether politicians can constitute, or be part of, epistemic communities.

We argue that this is an omission, and that the Norwegian pension reform process illustrates that politicians can be, or become, members of epistemic communities. This happens in two distinctly different ways. First, politicians or groups of politicians can be recruited to epistemic communities through their political positions and activities. In some cases, groups of politicians can even form epistemic communities of their own. This can happen relatively independently of the politicians' academic backgrounds, and is more likely to happen when politicians have the opportunity to work on an issue over time and have access to expert knowledge, and when groups of politicians work together over time in reasonably stable groups. This mirrors what [Marier \(2008b\)](#) has described for the Swedish case, where the 'group of five' puzzled over pension issues for almost two decades and eventually developed all the characteristics of an epistemic community. Unlike [Marier \(2008b\)](#), we suggest that the politicians in the Norwegian Commission was not an epistemic community in its own right. Rather, they were recruits to the epistemic community that already dominated the Ministry of Finance. We cannot conclude that this was a premeditated recruitment process, but if it was, it was well executed: The Ministry filled the Commission with members who were used to thinking about politics in economic or fiscal terms, and mentored it through its dominance of the Secretariat (see [Christensen and Holst, 2017](#)). We therefore see more agency in the bureaucracy than [Marier \(2008b\)](#) does, and less independent action by groups of expert politicians. Nevertheless, we share his conclusions about the potential influence of politicians as epistemic communities once established. Through the expertise the Commission members built over time, they were in a unique position to influence their colleagues in the party groups in the Parliament.

Second, we argue that elite politicians can be valuable allies for epistemic communities by virtue of their academic background and education. In our study,

the economist Jens Stoltenberg is the key example of such a figure. Practically all our informants highlighted his role in this process. One former Minister, for instance, urged us: 'you have to talk to Jens. Your project cannot be taken seriously if you don't. This [the pension reform] was his personal endeavour.' As an academic politician, he was capable of playing various roles in different stages of the process. The interviews indicate that the Pension Commission itself was not his brainchild: the initiative came from the civil servants in the Ministry of Finance. They however considered Stoltenberg, the economist and former Minister of Finance, as a solid ally, and Stoltenberg as Prime Minister listened to their concerns. After the Commission reported, he made sure he fully understood the proposal by seeking tutorials from a civil servant, then applied this knowledge in debates with other expert as well as in addresses to the general public. As a politician, he understood how important pensions were to the trade unions and were able to win support at the 2005 LO Congress; as an economist, he could counter any argument the LO economists or others brought up.

The role of expert and academic politicians will be particularly important in that vulnerable phase when the experts have presented their evidence and analyses, and rival expert communities make their voices heard. With one or more academic politicians on board, the odds of creating a cognitive lock increases. This is because, first, academic politicians who have been involved with the expert network underway and fully understood their conclusions, will be relatively immune to rival interpretations. In this, they differ fundamentally from the easily diverted politicians in [Dunlop's \(2017\)](#) analysis, and indeed from the general picture of politicians in the literature on epistemic communities. They are not swayed by various experts, they *are* experts. Second, when such politicians are in power, they can design the process and decide who is involved and who is excluded. They have considerable potential to marginalise rival networks, and thus minimise rivals' influence over other politicians. Also, they are much better positioned than the expert communities to develop a rhetoric to present proposals to a larger, non-expert audience. In short, all experts can get involved in epistemic communities and develop knowledge-based recommendations, and all politicians can orchestrate political processes and promote new policies to the public, but only the academic politician can do both.

A third point regards the role of professional knowledge, which in our case refers to economic theory. Economists are found in key roles in institutions, both nationally and internationally. In Norway, they play key roles in many civil society institutions, not least in trade unions and employers' confederations. It seems likely that professional knowledge played a role when the trade unions eventually accepted the principles of the reform. We have shown how the LO Chief economist was won over during the process. There were others like him, who worked with fellow economists in the Ministries, and came to a joint understanding over time. The ease with which the reform architects – including Stoltenberg – communicated with other economists probably helped marginalise the opposition to reform. The economists included shared a knowledge base and some basic principles, and on this basis, the sheer force of the reform process and the consensus in Parliament allowed for unity on the core principles of the new pension system.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We focus on the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions because it is the largest union, and because it has strong ties to the Labour party. Moreover, it was the only trade union involved in this early phase.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Eirik Schjøtt-Pedersen, former Minister of Finance, interviewed 22 January 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Civil servant A, interviewed December 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Director in the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise, interviewed November 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Economist in the Trade Union Confederation, interviewed November 2015.

<sup>6</sup> This Ministry has held different names over time: the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs (1997–2002), the Ministry of Social Affairs (2002–2004), the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2004–2005), the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion (2006–2010), the Ministry of Labour (2010–2014), the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2014–). For the sake of communication, we consistently refer to it here as the Ministry of Social Affairs.

<sup>7</sup> Jens Stoltenberg, former Prime Minister, interviewed April 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Civil servant B, interviewed February 2016.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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