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What did the New Public Management do to the Public? The Los Angeles Fires Incident

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Abstract

While public services were provided by the state to meet the general needs of citizens, New Public Management (NPM) transformed the way public services were delivered through privatization. The private sector's provision of public services, such as water, a fundamental human right, created various problems in ensuring that these services were delivered equally and fairly to citizens. The United States (U.S.), a country characterized by strong marketization practices, exemplified the problems caused by NPM implementations in the Los Angeles (LA) fires at the beginning of 2025. Two fundamental administrative problems contributed to the failure to control these fires: the fire department's inability to access sufficient water, and the state's residents' reliance on private fire departments. The private sector's provision of these services prevented residents from accessing services equally and fairly. Drawing on this current situation, this study aims to examine the administrative challenges faced during the LA fires through NPM implementations. In this context, the study introduces NPM reforms in light of leading studies on NPM and examines how privatization in water supply and fire services has altered public service delivery, particularly through the examples of the LA fires and the Kern Bank.

Keywords: New public management, governance, public service, marketization, Los Angeles fires.

JEL Codes: H83, H10, H41.

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Yeni Kamu Yönetimi Kamuya Ne Yaptı? Los Angeles Yangınları Olayı

Özet

Kamu hizmetleri devlet tarafından vatandaşların genel ihtiyaçlarını karşılamak için sunulurken Yeni Kamu Yönetimi (YKY), özelleştirmeler ile kamu hizmetlerinin sunum şeklini değiştirdi. Temel insan hakkı olan su temini gibi kamu hizmetlerinin özel sektör tarafından sunulması bu hizmetlerin eşit ve adil bir şekilde vatandaşlara ulaşmasında çeşitli sorunlar meydana getirdi. Güçlü piyasalaştırma uygulamalarıyla karakterize bir ülke olan the United States (U.S.), 2025 yılının başında Los Angeles'ta (LA) yaşanan yangınlarda NPM uygulamalarının yol açtığı sorunlara bir örnek oldu. Bu yangınların kontrol altına alınamamasında iki temel yönetimsel sorun dikkati çekti. Bunlardan birincisi itfaiyenin yeterli suya ulaşamaması ve diğeri eyalet sakinlerinin özel itfaiye teşkilatlarına başvurması oldu. Bu hizmetlerin özel sektör tarafından sunulması şehir sakinlerinin hizmetlere eşit ve adil erişimini engelledi. Bu güncel olaydan yola çıkarak çalışma, LA yangınlarında yaşanan yönetimsel sorunları NPM uygulamaları üzerinden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda çalışma NPM uygulamalarında önde gelen çalışmalar ışığında NPM reformlarını tanıtırken özellikle LA yangınları ve Kern Bank örnekleri üzerinden su temini ve itfaiye hizmetlerinde özelleştirmenin kamu hizmetinin sunumunu nasıl değiştirdiğini incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yeni kamu yönetimi, yönetişim, kamu hizmeti, piyasalaştırma, Los Angeles yangınları.

JEL Kodları: H83, H10, H41.

1. Introduction

Public service refers to the continuous activities provided to the public by the state or other public legal entities to meet general needs and provide public benefit (Onar, 1966, p. 13). Three main elements are important in defining public service. These elements are; that the service is carried out by a public institution, it is an activity that provides public benefit and the service is provided by the rules of public law (Çırakman, 1976, p. 76). The concept of service and public benefit are the prominent features in public service. Meeting social needs is the reason for the existence of the state and therefore public service is provided by a public legal entity (Çırakman, 1976, pp. 77-81).

The general principles in the management of public services are equality, free provision, continuity and regular provision. Public services are provided to the society under equal conditions. All citizens are equal under the law. Therefore, it is the right of all citizens to benefit from public services. The natural consequence of public services being provided to the public is that they are free. However, some of the expenses can be charged to the citizens considering the state of public finances. The fact that public interest is observed in public services requires that these services be provided continuously and regularly. Failure to meet a social need may cause social problems. In addition, the provision of public services should be shaped according to the changes in these needs over time (Çırakman, 1976, pp. 82-84).

However, this general acceptance began to change after the First World War, and by the 1980s, when the state was seen as responsible for the economic stagnation of the 1970s, there was a change in the entire administrative approach. The questioning of the effectiveness of the public sector resulted in a state-centred administrative reform generally referred to as New Public Management (NPM). This managerial approach, which gained momentum with the neoliberal transformation of the 1980s, paved the way for the state to act like the private sector through methods such as privatization of public services, deregulation, and reorganization to encourage competition (Geri, 2001, p. 445). Thus, NPM came into being when the role of the

State was presented as 'steering rather than rowing', as Osborne and Gaebler (1992) famously put it (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994, p. 16).

NPM is touted as one of the most striking international trends in public administration, presented as a solution to administrative problems such as deficit public spending. NPM incorporates automation in public service delivery, particularly in information technology, and complex decision-making styles alongside the long tradition of relying on individual country specializations in public administration. NPM has been adopted and spread globally, albeit in different forms, in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and many other OECD countries (Hood, 1991, p. 3).

While globalization and neoliberalism caused the role of the state to be redefined, the governance approach also enabled the private sector to sit at the decision-making table and open the door to undertaking the duties of the state. While the NPM changed all the functions of the state, it also created significant changes in the way public services were performed. The principles of the governance approach, such as openness, participation and accountability, resulted in the determination of service standards, the increase in the quality of public services, the narrowing of the scope of public services and the implementation of the principle of localization. The concept of public service also began to change and the concept of universal service began to be widely used. Thus NPM aimed to ensure that public services are effective, high-quality, efficient, transparent and accountable through the downsizing of the state and privatization (Altın, 2013, p. 116).

NPM questioned the way public services were provided and opened up discussions about who would provide the service. Privatization of competitive services and the provision of these services by the private sector began. Thus, it was ensured that the private sector, where there was sufficient competition, was utilized as much as possible (Weikart, 2001, p. 393). In this way, NPM aimed to use the market mechanism better through competition and ultimately to achieve efficiency in costs (Galnoor, et.al., 1998, p. 394). While Hood limits his claim that NPM harms the public service to changes in budgetary and control frameworks such as 'Top-level management' and 'creative accounting', and the imposition of tight resource control and measurable performance indicators (Hood, 1991, p. 9), the problem is much wider. The emergence of principles such as effectiveness and efficiency in the provision of public services by the private sector has harmed the equal, free and continuous provision of these services. The efficient and profitable provision of services by the private sector restricted citizens' equal and fair access to these services and privatization increased social inequality.

It is possible to see the latest example of this transformation in the Los Angeles (LA) fires. The fires that started on January 7, 2025, in different parts of LA, the most populous city in the state of California in the United States (U.S.) and spread rapidly due to strong winds, killed 29 people and burned thousands of kilometres of land. Thousands of buildings were damaged in the fires, people lost their homes and their lives. The fires caused great economic losses (Independent, 2025). The reasons for the fires were grouped under several headings as rapidly growing vegetation, climate change, strong winds and the city's rugged geography. The lack of access to sufficient water for fire control efforts increased the loss of life and property. Thus, the LA Fires revealed a fundamental management problem. The fact that the city's water resources were under the control of the private sector and the privatization of the water supply service created problems in responding to the fires and showed that the public service was not accessed equally (Independent, 2025).

The problems experienced in the fire services and the fact that some of the city's residents benefited from private fire services during the fires also emerged as a negative effect of NPM. The fire extinguishing efforts provided by the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD) were insufficient in the fires and some resorted to private fire companies. The problems experienced by the LAFD, which experienced budget cuts with the NPM approach, in controlling the fires and the call for private companies, for this reason, will bring up discussions on LA, which keeps a large part of its fire service under state administration, to make room for more private capital in this service in the coming days. Rhodes has portrayed citizens as guardians of the public interest in NPM. However is that possible under these circumstances? (Rhodes, 1996, p. 667). In the case of two separate public services, the LA Fires demonstrated how NPM’s focus on efficiency and profitability, prioritizing the private sector, can harm citizens.

Based on this current event, the study aims to address two fundamental problems experienced in the LA fires by comparing traditional provision of public services with those following NPM. In this context, the study attempts to examine how public service has changed as a citizen's right, particularly with its consequences in the LA fires, water supply and fire services, while presenting the work of prominent figures in the NPM literature (Hood, 1991&1994; Rhodes, 1996; Dunleavy, 1994). This study differs from its counterparts in that it examines a recent event, the Los Angeles fires of January 2025, and a specific example, the Kern Bank. The U.S. is a country characterized by strong capitalist order, privatization, and marketization practices. In addition to a case study, examining the U.S., where the NPM transformation has been so strongly experienced, distinguishes the study and contribue to the literature with a critical view of NPM.

In this context the first part of the study examines the transformation of public services through NPM and privatization. The second part introduces the LA fires, while the final two sections examine the privatization and marketization of public services in the U.S. and the fires specifically. The study reveals that LA fires caused more damage due to the lack of access to water and fire services.

2. New Public Management and Privatization of Water and Fire Services

The change in mentality in public administration has indicated that governments are not obliged to provide public services, but are responsible for the delivery of these services (Osborne, 1993). In line with this view, one of the main features of NPM is the introduction of privatization in the provision of public services (Hood, 1991, p. 3). Thus, the delivery of public services began to change. Until the late 1970s, fundemental services such as water supply, electricity, telecommunications, and public transportation, which were considered public goods in countries, were provided as public services. However, in the 1980s, the role of the state in the economy was narrowed down by the new public management approach, citing the poor performance of the state. This transformation was done through privatizations and governance to reduce the size of the government and reduce budget expenditures (Rhodes, 1996, p. 653-654).

NPM emphasized the importance of efficiency and productivity in the provision of public services (Kaboolian, 1998). Privatization in the NPM approach exhibits all these features. Privatization requires the removal of public monopolies in the production of goods and services created by the state in various ways, the pricing of public services, and the transfer of management to private firms (Akalın, 1990, p. 286). Privatization involves deregulation, that provides the regulation of the activities of private firms (Nankani, 2005, p. 165).

With this approach, to provide public services more efficiently and effectively, a contract was made for those interested in the private sector and public-private partnerships were designed to meet public needs. Thus, the policy in the operation of the infrastructure's goods and conditions changed significantly with neoliberal policies, privatization of public goods and opening up the marketization of public services. One of the important areas of this was the water sector. To increase the efficiency of the water service, this service was transferred to the private sector. In economics, efficiency is defined as a resource allocation that results in the maximization of net benefits obtained from the use of the resource. The state acts with parameters such as social benefit, equality, and service quality while providing the service. The private sector, on the other hand, acts for profit (Fauconnier, 1999, p. 60). Therefore, efficiency concerns do not have the same meaning for the public and private sectors.

Although the new public management approach emphasizes the concept of efficiency, the most important concept in the provision of public goods and public services is equality. Equality is the provision of equal and fair access to public services for every citizen. Fauconnier (1999) examines the concept of equality from various perspectives. Vertical equality, also called distribution equality, refers to the fact that resource users bear costs proportional to their income levels, that is, the costs they can afford. Horizontal equality corresponds to the principle of benefit; according to this principle, different individuals who benefit from any good or service in the same amount should pay the same price for it. In addition to these concepts of equality, there are two other concepts of equality in public services such as water supply. The first of these is geographical equality, which refers to the equal distribution of services to different geographical locations (such as urban and rural). The second is directing consumption by considering future generations, that is, intergenerational equality (Fauconnier, 1999, p. 40). Privatizations are problematic for all these elements of equality because the private sector only wants to make profits, while social benefits or adequate access to services for every citizen are secondary to the private sector.

However, the value of public services such as water supply in the eyes of society and the impact of the absence of such services on individual and social welfare require the public sector to undertake this service without considering the cost (Rondinelli and Kasarda, 1993). The state may even provide certain services free of charge or at a discount to meet basic needs. Preventing health problems that may arise from the absence of water services is important for social welfare and should primarily be the responsibility of the state (Fauconnier, 1999, p. 43). The provision of such services by the private sector may cause some segments of society to be lack of water due to high water prices or in cases such as water scarcity (Kessides, 1993). Moreover, using healthy and clean water is a universal human right. According to the World Health Organization, people have the right to use up to 100 litres of personal water per person per day (Arnold, 2009, p. 814).

Despite all these negativities, the participation of the private sector in financing, constructing and managing water supply infrastructure increased after the 1980s. In 2000, 93 countries privatized their water services. The privatization of water in developing countries was criticized because water is a human right. The privatization of water services was also supported by global actors. International organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank supported this transformation. These organizations presented the privatization of water services as a condition for providing loans, especially to developing countries, and directed these countries to multinational corporations (Arnold, 2009, p. 796).

With the World Bank's structural reforms, the right to operate the municipal water system in Cochabamba, Bolivia, was granted to a private consortium headed by Bechtel Corporation with a 40-year concession. The municipal water system could not meet the needs of more than 40 per cent of the population in the region because they did not have access to the network. Four months later, water prices increased by 400 per cent and workers were forced to spend more than a quarter of their income on water. As a result of the anti-privatization protests that tens of thousands of people from various segments of society participated in, hundreds of people were injured and $20 million in material damage occurred. A 17-year-old child was killed in the protests. The government cancelled the contract. The consortium filed a $25 million lawsuit against the country. As can be seen here, water, which is seen as a means of profit by global organizations, is a basic human right and a public good that must be protected by the state and it should not be a trade subject. These words were included in the Cochabamba Declaration, a non-binding declaration (Arnold, 2009, p. 798).

Despite various events and reactions experienced all over the world, the transfer of water services to the private sector continued (Bakker, 2003: p. 36). In countries such as France, England and Spain, municipal water supply infrastructure was transferred to the private sector with long-term contracts (Bakker, 2003, p. 37). Like European countries, countries such as the United States and Canada also privatized water services. In countries outside the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 183 water and sewerage projects with private participation were initiated between 1987 and 2000. Türkiye, China, Argentina, Bolivia, Indonesia, Morocco, South Africa, the Philippines, Poland, Chile and Thailand are countries where water services were opened to the private sector. Privatizations were not limited to countries and reached a global level. For example, Thames Water, the largest water supply company in the UK, expanded beyond London to provide services on four continents and reached more than 25 million customers (Bakker, 2003, p. 35).

The definition of water as a commercial good rather than a public good has caused water consumers to be seen as customers rather than citizens. Seeing water supply as a business to be made profitable rather than a public service and focusing on maximizing economic efficiency has restricted citizens' right to access water and harmed social equality. Thinking that the private sector will provide more efficient water allocation by citing the increasing scarcity of water resources has both increased the price of the service and disrupted social equality. While the private sector offers scarce resources at a higher price, significant problems such as social inequality and lack of hygiene have emerged for those who have money and do not have access to water. As a result of the NPM, the quality of public services has decreased and equal access to these services has not been provided since a balance could not be established between public regulation and the social rights of citizens. Citizens had to use less efficient services for a higher price (Kiparsky, et.al., 2021, p. 63). This supports Dunleavy & Hood's (1994) criticism that NPM's temporary outsourcing would be problematic for the public service.

A similar situation occurred in the fire service. In the 1980s and 1990s, private sector provision of fire services also began to increase. Privatization of fire protection services was difficult due to resistance from both the community and firefighters. However, as in the case of the United States, these privatizations were made and studies have shown that cities save an average of 15% to 50% on these services by doing so (Johnston, 2001, p. 3). So was it appropriate to transfer the fire department because savings were made?

Fire service is an important service that will cause loss of life and property when its quality decreases. The fact that the private sector operates cost-effectively may justify privatization, but here again, the issue of social benefit arises. In the event of a possible fire, will those who pay more be intervened? Will there be places where no intervention is made? The privatization of the fire department faces similar criticisms to the privatization of other public services. The basis of the criticism is that private companies prioritize cost savings over quality service. This can jeopardize public safety in the event of a fire.

Another major obstacle to privatization is the loss of public employees' jobs. Privatization of public services leads to the loss of public employees (Johnston, 2001, p. 7). A further case is dedication. The International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) emphasizes that municipal firefighters are public officers committed to saving lives, on the other hand private firefighters may not risk their lives to save others, which would reduce the quality of service provided by private companies (Johnston, 2001, p. 13).

A further concern arises in terms of training to ensure the competence of firefighting personnel. IAFF sees training as one of the reasons why fire departments cannot provide the same quality of service as state. Since private companies are not willing to pay for the high level of firefighting training that public organizations have, the competence of human resources cannot be increased as much as public personnel (Johnston, 2001, p. 13).

An equally significant challenge experienced in the privatization of public services is that taxpayers do not receive equal service (White, 1978, p. 190). Citizens who pay their taxes but do not pay the additional fee charged under the name of subscription, etc. for public services provided by the private sector (as in the example of fire service subscription in the U.S.) cannot benefit from the service. This is contrary to the feature of providing public services equally and fairly to the entire society.

As a result, it can be seen that there are different approaches to service provision between public and private fire departments. The municipal fire department prides itself on fighting fires and aims to reduce response times, whereas the private fire department only wants to provide an efficient agreed service at a reasonable cost (Johnston, 2001, p. 13).

Privatization follows the same path in all services such as health, education and security. The abandonment of the provision of these services sometimes causes the state to be exposed to different costs, as in security services, while preventing citizens who do not have money to access the service from benefiting from the service (Light, 2001, pp. 36-37). The NPM forces the state to provide services like the private sector with its "profitable" methods. However, it should not be forgotten that the state is not a private sector and that all citizens have the right to benefit from the public services provided. The provision of these services is essential, not their profitability. The consequences of moving away from the traditional understanding of public administration can be seen in many areas. For this reason, the recent LA fires need to be looked at from this perspective.

3. The Los Angeles Fires

The fires that started on January 7, 2025, in different parts of Los Angeles (LA) and spread rapidly due to high winds have burned nearly 150,000 kilometres (about the size of 8,540 football fields). 29 people died in the fires, and evacuations were ordered for approximately 150 thousand people. More than 12 thousand buildings were damaged in the fires. The economic loss from the fires is estimated to be between $250 billion and $275 billion. (Independent, 2025).

The LA Fires broke out as a brush fire in Pacific Palisades, a Los Angeles neighbourhood east of Malibu, on Tuesday morning, Jan. 7. The fire grew to 94,890 kilometres before being brought under control Friday, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire). While firefighters battled the largest fires, additional fires broke out in the Los Angeles area (CA Gov, 2025a, Cal Fire, 2025).

Crews were able to stop the spread and bring the fire under control. Those fires, which include the Lidia, Archer, Woodley, Sunset, Kenneth, Hurst and Auto fires, have been brought under control, according to Cal Fire. The fires have scorched a total of 9,7 kilometres (Cal Fire, 2025). Two weeks after the initial fires, the Hughes Fire began on Jan. 22, 2025, near Castaic Lake in north L.A. and quickly grew to more than 40,4 kilometres. It was completely brought under control on Thursday after covering 42,1 kilometres. According to estimates published by JPMorgan, insured losses from the fires could exceed $20 billion, and total economic losses could reach $50 billion (NBC News, 2025).

The Eaton Fire began hours after the Palisades Fire near a canyon in the vast national forest lands north of downtown Los Angeles. According to Cal Fire, it has grown to 56,7 kilometres and was also brought under control on Friday. The agency reported that 10,491 structures were damaged or destroyed in the fire (NBC News, 2025). It was announced that 34,788 people were assisted after the fires, $142.7 million in aid was provided, and all of the state's water was restored (CA Gov, 2025b, FEMA, 2025).

The reasons for the long-term extinguishing of the fires and the damage they caused fall into several categories. One of them is that the rapidly growing vegetation fuels the fires. Rorry Hadden, a fire science researcher at the University of Edinburgh, explains that the heavy rainfall in 2024 due to the El Nino weather event increases the risk of winter fires (BBC, 2025).

Researchers at the University of Edinburgh’s fire sciences explain that the rainfall that fell before the fire caused significant vegetation growth, which could potentially fuel the fire. Other experts, such as those at the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, say that the wet weather in 2024, followed by a dry spell, has created “the perfect conditions for wildfires to spread”. This transition from very wet weather to dry weather is known as a hydroclimate whip.

According to a recent study, the risk of this happening globally has increased significantly since the mid-20th century (BBC, 2025).

Another culprit for the fires is climate change. A combination of drought-like conditions has caused Southern California to receive less than 10% of its average rainfall since October 1, 2024, and strong offshore winds hitting the region have led to what the National Weather Service calls “the worst possible” fire weather. The agency has issued a red flag warning, or increased risk of fire danger, for 19 million people. Wind gusts of up to 70 miles per hour were recorded in several locations across the region (BBC, 2025).

Climate scientists have pointed to the weather swings that California has experienced in recent years, alternating between drought and heavy rainfall, as a key driver of the fire weather that has gripped the region. This back-and-forth between states, along with the recurrence of drier conditions in a warming climate, has increased wildfires in Southern California (NBC News, 2025).

High winds turned the blazes west of Los Angeles into a fast-moving wildfire. The fire spread through dry vegetation and encircled the Pacific Palisades neighbourhood near Santa Monica. These winds are typically hot and dry, further drying out the moisture in the vegetation. Known as Santa Ana foehns, these winds made the fires unpredictable and made it easier for fires to take hold, grow, and spread rapidly once they started. In some cases, these winds knocked down power lines and sparks from wires ignited the surrounding vegetation, causing fires. The winds carried embers from burning vegetation and ignited the fires. The domino effect of the embers caused not only property damage but also hazards to the people they crossed (BBC, 2025).

The rugged geography of LA also increases the risk posed by wildfires. According to experts, flames spread very quickly uphill. Canyons, valleys, and such things lead to extremely difficult fire behaviours. It makes it very difficult for someone to fight these flames. This situation also made evacuation difficult. It was emphasized that the narrow roads on the hillsides in the Palisades region were an additional challenge for those who wanted to escape from the area (BBC, 2025).

In addition to all these risky issues, the privatization policies carried out by the U.S., the privileges granted to capital, and the marketization of public services in line with neoliberal policies have created serious administrative problems in controlling fires. The privatization of water resources and the provision of firefighting services by private institutions have created administrative problems in controlling fires. The privatization of public goods and services has restricted the public's equal and fair access to services, as in the case of the LA fires, and has caused increased losses. The privatization of the water supply and the marketization of firefighting services, which pose administrative problems in controlling the LA fires, are examined below.

4. Privatization-The Water Case

Water supply privatizations that started with the NPM approach have been on the agenda in the U.S. since the 1980s, although they were not as early and widespread as in Europe. States such as Georgia and Atlanta defined water as a consumer good and left water supply to private companies with long-term contracts. States such as New Jersey and Pennsylvania provide water by municipalities and left the authority of how water services would be provided directly to them (Arnold, 2009, pp. 793).

These decisions resulted in 70 privatizations between 1997 and 2000 across the country and 600 transfers in 43 states in 2007. Thus, the share of the private sector in all water supply services increased to 15% (Arnold, 2009, pp. 786-792). Over the years, the difficulty of infrastructure problems increased privatizations, and especially in the state of California, the share of the private sector in water services increased to 22% (Kiparsky, et.al., 2021, p. 56).

In 1999, Atlanta awarded its water system management contract to a company called United Waters for 20 years due to the inefficiency of public sector water operations and high infrastructure costs. However, the municipality was forced to terminate the contract after four years due to the company's mismanagement and public complaints (Arnold, 2009, p. 799). After 2002, privatization rejections began in the country due to examples such as Atlanta. New Orleans and Orange County, California, began to reject privatizations due to environmental violations and lack of maintenance and stopped providing water service to companies such as United Waters and Veolia Water (Arnold, 2009, p. 802).

The Los Angeles City Water Company, despite using river water within the city, was criticized for its high profit margins and poor service. To prevent such service inadequacies, a provision was added to the city charter requiring two-thirds of the voters to approve private water supply (Fauconnier, 1999, p. 53).

Despite these examples and ongoing appeals, the Kern Water Bank continued its operations (Kiparsky et al., 2021, p. 10). Kern Water Bank is the largest underground water storage facility of its kind and is located at the southern end of the Great Central Valley, a region that provides 80% of the state's surface water for agriculture. The water bank is connected to public canals and aqueducts that carry water from the Sierra Nevada mountains to Southern California (CWIN, 2025).

Kern Bank is a water bank that stores water on behalf of its partners, which include both public and private water agencies, for agricultural use, and a small number of municipal and residential customers. The bank stores water from the Central Valley Project (CVP), the State Water Project (SWP), and the Kern River (Kern Water Bank Authority, 2025).

Kern Bank is a large structure that covers more than 80,000 kilometers and has diverted approximately 3 billion cubic meter of water into the bank since 1995. The bank can pump more than 246 million cubic meter of water per year. This amount is used by approximately 2.1 million ratepayers in a year (CWIN, 2025). Member agencies are authorized to sell the stored water to third parties during droughts or as needed, as well as during their use of the water (Kiparsky, et.al., 2021, p. 1).

The California Department of Water Resources (DWR) transferred Kern Water Bank to the Kern County Water Agency (KCWA) in a "secret meeting" in Monterey in 1994. This secret meeting refers to what's often called the Monterey Agreement negotiations. In December 1994, top water officials from the DWR, major agricultural water districts, and urban agencies gathered at a hotel in Monterey, California. The meeting was closed to the public and not formally noticed under open-government rules, even though it involved decisions about the SWP-one of the most important pieces of water infrastructure in California. The purpose was to renegotiate the terms of how the SWP operated and allocated water among contractors. As part of the Monterey Agreement, DWR transferred the Kern Bank to the Kern Water Bank Authority, a public corporation comprised of water districts and a private company, Westside Mutual Water Company. Westside Mutual Water Company is controlled by Paramount Farming Company, the nation's largest agricultural enterprise (CWIN, 2025). The Westside Mutual Water Company is owned by Linda and Stewart Resnick, who own or control a combined 59% of Kern Water Bank through Westside Mutual Water Company and Paramount Farming Company's interests in Dudley Ridge WD (Kiparsky, et.al., 2021, p. 7). The transfer meant that a huge public asset, developed with state taxpayer dollars, ended up under private control, giving a small number of growers disproportionate influence over California's water supply.

Wonderful Company, owned by Stewart and Lynda Resnick and prominent among agricultural companies, is known to have significant control over water resources in the region. The Resnick family, which has made major investments in the agricultural sector, is one of the largest users of water in California through their company (CWIN, 2025). The company, which has approximately 526,000 kilometres of land in California, grows water-sensitive products such as oranges, pomegranates, pistachios and almonds. The Resnick family's high shares in Kern Bank are criticized for the equal distribution of water. It is alleged that the family used its influence to ensure various regulations were made in state laws to own these underground water tanks. Indeed, Kern Bank, which was previously owned by the state government, changed hands in a "secret session" and became a structure in which the Resnick family was also a partner after it was transferred to several private companies (CWIN, 2025).

The fact that water was not directed to the right places and water resources were limited during the fires in LA also increased the criticisms towards this family. When the users, Los Angeles firefighters wanted to use the fire hydrants on the streets to fight the fire, it was seen that there was no water in these hydrants. The state criticized the Resnick family for using more water than the entire city (Anadolu Ajansı, 2025). The water provider and the public authority responsible for monitoring water are as responsible as the family for citizens' inability to access water. This phenomenon, contrary to Rhodes' (1996) claim, invalidates the view that citizens can be guardians of the public interest.

In the LA fires; while the right to use water is considered a basic human right, it was seen that the water that belongs to Californians was not accessible when it was needed most. Although the infrastructure built to carry water throughout the state was financed by taxpayers, most taxpayers, except for a certain people, had no access to water. In addition to fires, there is also concern about who will use the water in times of potential scarcity. Due to previous negative experiences, the private sector seems to own the water, despite the regulations and delegation of usage rights in LA.

The Kern Water Bank's partners control enough water to meet the needs of more than a quarter of California's taxpayers or more than 10 million people. But the Bank is not controlled by the people whose taxes fund it, and it is not run in the public interest. When there is enough water, it is sold or made available to large farmers. In times of scarcity, the water is sold to California's urban users who have already paid for the water.

This sale makes the landowner group that controls the Kern Water Bank make huge profits, while at great cost to the public and environmental damage. In the case of a more risky and unexpected event, such as a fire, it causes not only economic loss but also loss of life. Privatization of water supplies not only reduces the efficiency and economic aspects of the service but also prevents usage of water equally and fairly as a basic human right.

Similar problems to those seen in the LA fires have occurred in other countries, such as Australia, where NPM reforms increased costs and damaged the ability to provide quality services (Considine, 1997, p. 109). An evaluation of the New Zealand reforms reveals unanticipated consequences such as high social costs, high unemployment, economic inequality, increased distrust of political accountability and integrity, and changes in income security, quality of life, the natural environment, and interpersonal and intergenerational distributions (Halligan, 1997, p. 43). Regarding the Canadian reforms, Lindquist (1997) argues that the impact of reform on civil society and the quality of the public situation has had negative consequences such as increasing social inequality.

5. Marketization-The Fire Service Case

The history of volunteer fire services in the U.S. goes back to the 18th century. The first example, the Union Fire Company, was founded in Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin in 1736. This example soon spread to other cities because fire posed a serious threat to the economic and social stability of society at the time. Payments began to be made to these companies for the important service they provided. Thus, volunteer fire departments increased even more. The increase in companies providing this service should have resulted in the benefit of society, but this did not happen. Increased competition prevented firefighting and conflicts of interest began to harm society. By 1871, many cities began to ban volunteer fire services (Johnston, 2001, p. 16).

By the mid-1900s, the commercialization of fire services was back on the agenda. This was because residents of the state watched a neighbour's house burn to ashes. They could not get help from the state or municipality during the fire, and despite the fire calls coming from their service areas, no one answered. In response, residents of the state decided to start a fire subscription service, forming Rural/Metro (Johnston, 2001, p. 24).

Rural/Metro began operations in 1948 in an unincorporated area outside Phoenix, Arizona. Over the years, it became the largest and most successful private fire department in the U.S. and the company was very profitable. When the county incorporated Scottsdale in 1954, the city contracted with Rural/Metro for fire protection services (Johnston, 2001, p. 16). Rural/Metro expanded to Pima County in 1962, Yuma County in 1971, and Arizona in 1976 (Rural/Metro, 2025). While the company has seen such growth and expansion, many households in Rural/Metro service areas are in poverty, unable to afford fire protection (Bollig & Lynn, 2006, p. 3).

With the passage of California's Proposition 13 in 1978, local government interest in contracting out or privatizing government services to decline costs. By the 1990s, researchers estimated that the average U.S. city was contracting out 27 per cent of its public services, saving between 15 per cent and 50 per cent. The passage of Proposition 13 reduced local government revenues, dramatically changed how local governments financed themselves and pressured them to reduce costs while maintaining service levels (Johnston, 2001, p. 1-2).

The search for efficient ways to provide services was not limited to California. Nationwide, contracts between local government and private companies tripled from 1972 to 1982, from $22 billion to $65 billion after adjusting for inflation. Some experts estimate that contracting out increased by 16 per cent per year during this time (Johnston, 2001: 1-2). Some of the most recent examples of privatization are Wisconsin, Texas, and Massachusetts, which have adopted a competitive model in which public-private teams compete for contracts. In Indianapolis, public employees must compete with private sector workers to provide services except fire, police, and public works operations (Nightingale & Pindus, 1997, pp. 5-6).

In Lewiston County, fire service is also a competitive service. Lewiston Rural Fire Service (LRFS), a subscription fire department serving residents. LRFS began service in 1983 and is supported entirely by subscription fees. In this system, individuals can choose whether or not to have fire protection. The City of Lewiston does not have a public fire department. This service is provided only by LRFS, which is free to set its fees (Johnston, 2001, p. 16).

The company structures its service fees to match the amount of money residents will save on fire protection insurance. 80% of the community decides whether or not to subscribe to the service based on the savings they will make on their home insurance. While many residents are unable to make these savings, LRFS attributes this reluctance to subscribe to the service to citizens wanting to act “independently” (Johnston, 2001, p. 20). LRFS responds only to fires that endanger its subscribers’ property. In other words, even if LRFS receives calls for all structural fires in its service area, the company may not extinguish the fire if you are not a subscriber (Johnston, 2001, p. 21).

While LA is not keen on privatizing its fire service, the private sector's presence in this area appears to be increasing. The increasing competition in this sector caused the LAFD to receive fewer fire calls. To increase the revenue of the LAFD, the fire call centre began to provide services such as medical services and traffic assistance in addition to fire services (Johnston, 2001, p. 24).

While the issue of privatization of the fire service was being discussed, the LAFD fires revealed many different problems. One of these was the difficulties experienced by the LAFD, whose staff was reduced due to budget cuts, in controlling the fires. A short time before the fires, firefighters applied to the City for more resources. Firefighters said they were "at a breaking point". The head of the city's fire department union stated that the consequences of the fire department's budget cuts would be paid by LA residents and that people would die (CNN, 2025).

Despite being located in one of the most fire-prone areas of the country, the LAFD has less than one firefighter for every thousand people. Cities like Dallas, Chicago, and Houston have two firefighters for thousand residents. Up the coast from Los Angeles, the city of San Francisco has more than 1,800 firefighters for the city’s nearly 1.5 million residents and nearby communities, while Los Angeles has about 3,500 firefighters dedicated to serving a city of nearly 4 million. Despite being one of the 10 largest cities in the United States, LA's fire department is understaffed by nearly every other major city (CNN, 2025).

Experts say no fire department in the world could have handled the storm and the intensity of the LA fires, which burned more than 161,874 kilometres, destroyed more than 12,000 structures. Indeed, crews from across the state, including the LAFD and the Los Angeles County Fire Department, which covers areas outside the city, participated in the extinguishing efforts. Despite this, images of people trying to save homes with garden hoses and no firefighters in sight were prominent in some places (CNN, 2025). The result of budget cuts, staff reductions, and lack of planning by city officials resulted in loss of life and property.

As efforts to extinguish fires continue in and around Los Angeles, celebrities have hired private fire companies to save their homes. Celebrities such as Adam Leber, the manager of singer Miley Cyrus, and billionaire Rick Caruso, who previously ran for mayor of Los Angeles, have tried to save their homes by paying private fire companies (Independent, 2025). Some have described this as a "class war" (The Hollywood Reporter, 2025). While those who can pay it use private fire services, those who cannot afford are not able to benefit. Private fire companies have stated that they operate outside the LAFD's jurisdiction and only assist with special calls that come to them (The Hollywood Reporter, 2025).

Private fire prevention organizations say they are ready to protect the public when public resources are stretched thin, and claim to fill the gaps when public fire departments cannot meet demand (News, 2025). However, this service is expensive and does not seem to be very comprehensive. Private fire departments charge high fees even though they can only provide protection or fire suppression services. Furthermore, this service, which is included in private insurance company contracts, results in people paying for both insurance and firefighting. Thus, those who can afford to hire private firefighters or receive services as part of their insurance policies are better protected than those who do not have access to these companies. This creates a significant ethical problem (NPR, 2025).

When private fire departments respond to fires, they do so by removing the properties that the private sector receives calls from the public agency's list (The Hollywood Reporter, 2025). This can jeopardize the integrity and planning of the public service being provided. Another problematic area arises here.

Citizens who can save on insurance can subscribe to fire service. If the subscribers' properties are in danger during a fire, residents of other states can receive fire service. However, this is a situation that contradicts the equality, fairness and accessibility of public service. The necessity of prioritizing the social benefit of services such as water supply and fire extinguishing over economic efficiency is revealed in the example of LA Fires.

The OECD (2000) stated that the aim of NPM is to make government more responsive to the needs of society (OECD, 2000). However, as the example of the Los Angeles fires demonstrates, NPM reforms do not appear to have been successful in making government more responsive to the needs of society. After years of implementation, many authors (Considine, 1997; Common, 1998; Halligan, 1997; Lindquist, 1997) argue that the results of the NPM movement demonstrate its inherent weaknesses (Atreya and Armstrong, 2002, p. 11). Unfortunately, the LA fires have been an example of this failure.

6. Conclusion

The most fundamental feature of public service is that it is provided fairly, equally, and free of charge or at a reasonable price. NPM changed this traditional understanding and brought privatization and marketization to the agenda with a concern for profit and efficiency. The provision of public services by private companies changed the extent and form of people's access to public services in many parts of the world. The concern for profit and efficiency overshadowed the real features of these services.

The LA fires, in which 29 people lost their lives and thousands of kilometres of land were burned, showed the results of the NPM approach in different ways. In addition to problems such as vegetation, climate change, strong winds, and the city's rugged geography, the fire department's inability to access water and effective control efforts prevented the fire from being brought under early control. These fundamental administrative problems showed how changing state administration and the way public services are provided within the framework of the NPM approach can have significant consequences on people's lives.

The LA fires revealed the important results of the private sector providing public services and the public working with the principle of efficiency. The fact that the city's water resources are controlled by the private sector and that Kern Bank keeps the water that is the right of the entire city under the control of a company and a family restricted the fire department's access to water in firefighting operations.

A similar situation occurred in the fire service. While the LAFD, whose personnel and resources were limited due to budget cuts, was having trouble controlling the fire, some city residents asked for help from private fire companies. However, to benefit from private fire service, one had to belong to a certain people, and the entire city could not benefit from this service.

Problems similar to those seen in the LA fires have occurred in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. NPM reforms have increased costs and harmed the ability to provide quality services (Considine, 1997). Economic and social inequality and the resulting inequity in the distribution of interpersonal services have led these countries to question NPM practices (Halligan, 1997; Lindquist, 1997).

Despite these negative developments, practices around the world show that there will be no return to the old public administration and that NPM reforms will continue in the future (Atreya and Armstrong, 2002, p. 13-14). However, contrary to this implementations, as seen in the LA fires, public services must be provided equally, fairly, of high quality and sustainably. To ensure public benefit, the state must allocate sufficient resources for the provision of public services and establish strong mechanisms to evaluate the private sector. Only then can the citizen become a guardian of public interest.

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