

“It’s every breath we take here”: Political astuteness and ethics in civil service leadership development

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Summary This article uses survey and interview research with senior civil servants to argue that leadership with political astuteness is a specific contextual requirement for public servants who work closely with politicians. Also important are technical skills, judgement and a sharp sense of ethics and integrity. The ‘fine balance’ of political astuteness and other capabilities are shown in a framework about leading in an ethical way. Implications for the development of civil servants are considered.

Keywords political astuteness, leadership, ethics, judgement, technical expertise, civil service

Impact statement Leadership with political astuteness deserves serious attention from civil servants and from learning professionals as it is mainly practised for socially constructive and democratic purposes and is not inevitably manipulative or ‘Machiavellian’. Political astuteness is concerned with understanding and working with diverse and sometimes competing interests across a range of stakeholders. For the UK Civil Service, politicians are at the heart of this. Setting out what ethical political astuteness is; its connection to other skills required by senior civil servants; and how these can be developed should be helpful to all who work with politicians and for those who aspire to those roles.

Introduction

There is still considerable mystique and even confusion about how politicians and senior public servants work together in a constitutional democracy. This is notably the case for the UK Civil Service. In the United Kingdom, the witty caricatures of “Yes, Minister” or “The Thick of It” are familiar but misleading about how civil servants work in a professional and nuanced way with the political leaders they serve, while having their own leadership authority and responsibilities. Even existing codes of conduct, guidelines, and the Northcote-Trevelyan heritage, do not sufficiently express the complexities and dilemmas of such close working together because the dual leadership relationship is dynamic and needs a nuanced mixture of advice-giving and receiving; managing stakeholder processes; making ethical judgements; and managing implementation. The approach also varies in different constitutional models (Neuhold et al, 2013).

Developing capabilities, including judgement, in those civil servants whose roles bring them into a close and daily working relationship with elected (and also, in the UK, appointed) politicians needs to start with clear and evidence-based analysis of the requirements which make civil servants effective in working with politicians. This article, based on survey and interview research with senior public servants, makes the case for professional development to include the acquisition or enhancement of civil servants’ capabilities in leadership with political astuteness. For shorthand, we will refer to capabilities as skills although these include not only skills, but also abilities, values, mindsets, practical wisdom and judgement. The article examines political astuteness and shows that it is essential to the leadership and management of complex policy and implementation issues which are contested or involve multiple stakeholders in a political environment.

However, the article also argues that a focus on political astuteness alone would be a mistake: civil servants must also retain their much-prized technical expertise (professional and institutional expertise) and operate with ethics and integrity. In this way, decisions and professional leadership are based on an awareness of interests but are also grounded in technical expertise and ethics, so that the civil servant is able to “speak truth to power”: capabilities which are seen as very important in Westminster systems of government. Without technical grounding, there is danger that a civil servant becomes detached from the kinds of expertise which add value for the Minister or for Parliament. Additionally, the research indicates that a part of political astuteness includes having empathy with politicians - an ability mentally to step into their shoes, without themselves being party political.

In the context of the civil service, political astuteness without ethics and integrity could lead to so-called ‘Machiavellian’ behaviours – the deployment of political astuteness to further personal or sectional agendas at the expense of constructive social and organizational outcomes which create public value. This article explores how political astuteness along with other behaviours, values and judgements is most often used constructively for the public good, and also how these skills, values and judgements can be developed for senior and aspiring senior civil servants.

Leadership with political astuteness may be needed for a number of reasons. First, civil servants have to navigate the different interpretations of “political” (both informal politics within and between people and organizations and formal institutional and constitutional politics). They need to understand and make proposals which recognise diverse interests and reflect a political environment, but are not “party political”, which is proscribed within Westminster systems of government. Second, senior public servants work in a context of dual leadership. They exercise leadership

in their own right, with management authority over an organization and its staff, but they must also harmonise their own organizational leadership with that of the elected politician, who has the final democratic authority. Senior civil servants have to be flexible, sometimes taking the lead, sometimes offering advice to the politician in the background and sometimes being nearly invisible. Third, they have to work not only with elected politicians but also with a range of other actors, institutions and stakeholders. These may include other government organizations, civil society and consumer, pressure and political groups as well as different private sector entities.

Civil servants may also, more rarely, have to face the media and Parliamentary Committees and Inquiries to explain particular policies, events or incidents. They are therefore working with a range of stakeholders where their legitimacy rests not only on the exercise of their formal authority but also on persuasion, credibility and influence. We argue that navigating these complex, varied and dynamic interests, goals and values means reading the politics, understanding and analysing differing interests and then deciding how to act with judgement and integrity. All of this has to be done within a constitutional and ethical framework. This article explores these skills.

This dual leadership flexibility is illustrated in our metaphor of “dancing on ice”, which evokes the delicate, symbiotic and sometimes precarious process of working together which elected or appointed politicians and senior public servants have to undertake, particularly if each wishes to be successful. Manzie and Hartley (2013, p. 4) describe it as “*The sense of moving together, giving each other space, sometimes one in the spotlight, sometimes the other, where sometimes the partnership may stumble and occasionally fall, encapsulates this dual leadership relationship as it operates in the UK constitutional system. The politically astute professional has to*

feel and breathe the politician's objectives sufficiently to reflect the latter's goals in their own leadership".

The research

This article draws on extensive research about leadership with political astuteness by civil servants and their peers in other parts of public service. We draw on some existing research to set the scene and explain the components of political astuteness and how civil servants and their peers regard it and use it. That research is shown in Table 1. The paper then uses new evidence to explore four cornerstones for civil servants working with politicians: political astuteness, technical civil service skills, judgment and ethics. The elements are combined in a framework about the ethical use of political astuteness and this then leads into implications for the development of civil servants working with politicians.

Table 1 about here

This article draws on three existing research studies, combining insights in new ways including a new framework for considering political astuteness and ethics. First, a study which examined political awareness among 1,475 managers across all sectors (Hartley and Fletcher, 2008) and which identified some of the key capabilities for managers to work with diverse and competing interests regardless of sectoral context.

Second, a three-country (UK, Australia and New Zealand) study of mainly senior and some middle managers across all public services and at national/federal,

state/devolved and local government levels. This had both quantitative and qualitative elements. It included a survey with 1012 respondents. Many survey participants in each country volunteered to be interviewed, and a total of 42 interviews were conducted across the three countries (Hartley et al, 2013; Alford et al 2017).

The third study was based on in-depth and extended interviews with 17 of those 42, who were UK public servants at the strategic apex of their organization and working closely with a counterpart politician. These were permanent secretaries working with a secretary of state and other departmental ministers, and also chief executives in local government working with council leaders and cabinet. (Manzie and Hartley, 2013). While the constitutional contexts of central and local government are different, the local authority chief executives interviewed focused on the dual leadership with the local authority Leader which has many parallels with those of a senior civil servant with Ministers. In the last twenty years or so there has also been significant movement by local authority chief executives into senior positions in central government (for example at Director or Director General level, some rising to be Permanent Secretary) involving application of their leadership with political astuteness skills developed in local government to roles in the UK Civil Service. For ease of reference the article refers throughout to “civil servants” since we apply these insights to the UK Civil Service.

We recognise that a possible weakness in the research could be the use of self-report in the surveys and interviews. It is possible that civil servants could have chosen to present their “best self” to the researchers, creating a rosier picture than the messy reality on the ground. We aimed to mitigate this risk in several ways. First, the surveys were anonymous, which reduces social desirability effects.

Indeed, the Hartley et al (2015) article notes that the self-reporting of political astuteness skills was markedly modest and also showed wide variation, suggesting that social desirability was low. Second the civil servant interviews of the third study were conducted by a former senior civil servant, thereby enabling the interviewer to expertly probe. Finally, the interview transcripts show frank, revealing and reflective discussion in which civil servants actively pointed out their mistakes, their pain in making them and what they had learnt. This seems to indicate that they were appraising themselves with an honest eye and not through rose-tinted spectacles.

We have brought the findings of our quantitative and qualitative data together in new and revealing ways to consider not only political astuteness but the value of technical skills, judgment and ethics, focusing on the implications for the development of political astuteness in civil servants. We present a new framework which reflects the need for a fine balance between competing pressures, where the civil servant continually has to assess their use of political astuteness and technical expertise and their degree of dependence on or independence from the politician. This is, we argue, fundamental to the life of the Civil Service in the UK.

Leadership with political astuteness

There is a growing academic literature about political astuteness and the political skills which underpin it (Baddeley and James, 1990; Butcher and Clarke 2008). Politics within organizations has been a strand in management studies since its origins, but for some time it was seen as illegitimate, a sign of dysfunctionality and primarily focused on self-interest. While that can be the case – there is evidence of ‘politicking’ in many organizations (Mintzberg, 1983; Buchanan, 2008) - there is also an increasing awareness that not only can the skills of political astuteness be

deployed effectively and fairly for the public good, but also when working at the heart of a constitutional democracy, they are a requirement. This was recognised and endorsed by all those interviewed in the second and third studies.

From political science, there is a renewed interest in the political astuteness of civil servants and other public managers. Rhodes (2015) argues for the importance of rediscovering and appreciating the craft skills of “*counselling, stewardship, prudence, probity, judgment, diplomacy, and political nous*” in civil servants (p. 638). He argues that having political antennae is central to such skills because of the primacy of politics for top public servants since they work with politicians. Gray and Jenkins (1995) reinforce this view: “*it is important to recognize that neither the study nor practice of public administration or public management can be divorced from politics.*” (p. 76). They critique the divorce of politics from management in ‘new public management’ and in an earlier article draw on a long tradition in public administration that there should be “*systematic recognition of bureaucracies as political organizations*” (Jenkins and Gray, 1983, p.178). Rather than there being a ‘politics/administration dichotomy’ there is a debate (Svara, 2001; Overeem, 2005) with a number of academics pointing to the existence of a zone (Alford et al, 2017) where a degree of implicit negotiation takes place between senior civil servant and the minister with whom they work.

Political astuteness is a set of skills (capabilities, knowledge and judgements) about the interests, goals and values of stakeholders and how to exercise leadership in ways which take account of diverse and competing interests among stakeholders. It is sometimes called ‘political savvy’ or ‘political nous’ or having ‘political antennae’ (Hartley, 2017). The survey with 1012 mainly senior public managers in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, found that the majority of public managers viewed “politics

in your work as a manager” in constructive terms: 63% endorsed the idea that it was “alliance-building to achieve organizational objectives”; while 56% said it was “formal processes and institutions of government”. Nearly half (49%) said that it was “scanning factors in the external environment that the organization needs to consider” and 44% said it was “ways in which different interests are reconciled”. These are all what might be considered constructive aspects of workplace politics. Only a small minority endorsed the “dark arts” view of politics in their work: 10% said it was “pursuit of personal advantage” and 19% as “people protecting their turf”. (In the survey, respondents were asked to endorse up to three statements about politics in their work as a manager, so total percentages go above 100%). Overall, while the so-called Machiavellian use of politics exists (and civil servants need to be aware of this) the emphasis is largely on the constructive use of politics (whether this is informal organizational politics or working in a formal political environment). Not surprising, then, that one permanent secretary said: *“it’s every breath we take here”*. The 17 in-depth interviews with UK permanent secretaries and local authority chief executives in the third study reinforced the sense that understanding and working with diverse interests was a key part of the skill set for leadership at the organizational apex.

Research using a five-dimensional framework of leadership with political astuteness, was used in the three-country study with public managers (Hartley et al, 2015) and then specifically applied to the dual leadership of UK top public servants - working with politicians (Manzie and Hartley, 2013). This framework is neutral about outcomes (whether prejudicial or beneficial to democracy) and aims to make explicit the key behaviours, attitudes, judgements and cognitions which make the difference between public servants who are politically astute from those who are politically

naïve, politically clumsy or “too political”. There are five dimensions in the framework, which go from micro to macro skills. The five dimensions are: personal skills; interpersonal skills; reading people and situations; building alignment and alliances; and strategic direction and scanning. These are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

These dimensions of political astuteness are inter-connected and therefore together may be considered a meta-competency or meta-capability, rather than single dimensions. While personal and interpersonal skills are the foundation of building trust and understanding of varied interests and perspectives, there is also a need to read and interpret these interests in their historical, institutional and cultural context. It is also necessary to build alignment and alliances across different stakeholders and to keep a strategic view of purpose. The survey and interviews suggested that civil servants are more effective where they supplement their analytical organizational and operational capabilities with a richly textured view of the varied interests and stakeholders in and around the minister and the policy or service field they work with.

Political astuteness combined with technical skills and judgement

Political astuteness may be valuable but by itself is not sufficient for a civil servant. For civil servants it needs to be exercised with technical skills and judgement. It is important to be clear what we mean by technical skills for a civil servant, particularly as the UK Civil Service is famous for recruiting to its senior ranks on a generalist basis. In undertaking their leadership task of working closely with politicians, senior

civil servants report that they draw on a detailed understanding of the constitutional, institutional and organizational contexts in which they work. Interviewees commented on this regularly. This understanding ranges from layers of knowledge about formal and informal aspects of the constitution – rules and principles which bound public life in the UK – to the skills of “policy-making” and shaping legislation. For example, a key part of many civil servants’ experience is being part of a “Bill Team” devising the content of a Bill to Parliament. Part of a civil servant’s role in a key policy area will be to support the Minister in taking forward legislation and driving the process including liaising with other departments and parliamentary staff. While there is support from legal experts, the possession of the knowledge and capability of how to do this might be described as “technical skills”.

The Civil Service has also focused much more in recent years on the skills of policy-making, aiming to define it as a profession. These types of technical skills, rarely discussed in the literature, are critical to the functioning of senior civil servants and our research shows that they draw on this knowledge on a daily basis. Some civil servants may have had a background originally reflecting professional skills and knowledge such as economics or management. But our research suggests that where civil servants come from a specific professional background they do not abandon that knowledge as they move up the management ladder but rather they deepen and augment existing skills with in-depth and extensive knowledge of civil service methods, constitutional and democratic codes of practice, and how to work with stakeholders.

Leadership with political astuteness: Key skills

Civil servants report that contextual and political skills are necessary for their effectiveness at work (Hartley et al, 2015; Manzie and Hartley, 2013). These are the skills of understanding both the political context and the varied interests which exist in public matters where there are a range of views, goals and stakeholders, and where many issues are controversial, contested or uncertain. They are the skills of thinking ahead about the possible moves of different actors and the consequences for a policy or service, not just the planning or implementation of policy. They include the deep tacit knowledge of and insights into political and stakeholder relationships, and the possibilities and potential pitfalls of media and public opinion.

These skills do differ from more generic management skills, which are possessed by a much larger group of staff and are visible in all sectors. This also raises questions about whether management skills and capabilities can be applied generically or whether to be applied effectively there needs to be high awareness of particular contexts. The recent emphasis on generic management skills has perhaps underplayed these important contextual aspects of institutional knowledge and capability for civil servants.

Civil servants reported increasingly drawing on these skills as they became more senior and came into more contact with elected or appointed politicians. They also acquire a greater understanding of the broader context in which they work: the roles and motivations of politicians; how they can deploy professional skills from a range of sources to achieve political goals; and how to give advice which contributes to overall public value.

Empathy

Empathy with politicians was acknowledged by most civil servants and their peers as being essential to effective leadership with political astuteness (Manzie and Hartley, 2013). This is not about liking individual politicians necessarily or approving of what they do, but rather of understanding them both individually and as a group so that the civil servant can work with and for them in a democratic way. It is about having regard for their feelings, needs and rights and being able to put themselves in their shoes in order to be able to give the best advice in the most appropriate way for that politician at that time.

This understanding of motivations and dynamics, both of politicians in general and of the individuals they worked with, came up time and time again in interviews. Allied to that understanding of politicians was a need for senior civil servants to understand the sheer brutal reality of political life. A number of the interviewees identified and acknowledged the varied pressures and influences on politicians' behaviours. Many recognised that the senior politicians they worked with were accountable to a wide range of stakeholders including their constituency; regional and national political party structures; residents, businesses, voluntary and public sector partners; colleagues in cabinet including prime minister; other government departments especially Treasury and Cabinet Office; MPs from their own party and Parliament including Select Committees and of course the ever-more intrusive media.

Allied to insights about politicians in general was the need to get to know politicians as individuals. One permanent secretary talked about the need to learn about the individual ministers' thinking styles. S/he contrasted the way of working with a key minister whose approach was to seek to test boundaries by starting with an extreme position and working back from that, with another who had a pretty clear view of where they wanted to go and was looking for direct advice on how to get there.

All those interviewed reported a deep respect for the role of politicians in government and this influenced them to be highly motivated to support the democratic process. They reported being keenly focused on politicians' objectives and how they would help politicians achieve them, while being very clear that they themselves were not politicians nor should they be. Much of their motivation was based on the belief that politicians in general want to improve society, and that by working with them, civil servants can also have a role in that. This sense of personal motivation and empathy is an important consideration in leadership by civil servants and it is at variance with the well-embedded UK cultural stereotype of the disdainful civil servant in *Yes Minister*.

Empathy is a key part of the leadership with political astuteness framework of Hartley et al (2015). It can be seen as part of the personal and interpersonal skills dimensions set out in the framework (Table1), an aspect of emotional intelligence. A number of interviewees mentioned the importance of their own emotional intelligence to success in working with politicians. Empathy is also relevant to the dimension of 'reading people and situations' in terms of deeply understanding the interests of stakeholders, in this case elected politicians.

Ethics

Political astuteness without an ethical stance could be highly problematic, leading to so-called Machiavellian behaviour – the dark arts of the TV drama 'House of Cards' - double-dealing, back-stabbing and 'politicking'. On the other hand, political astuteness with ethics can be doubly powerful – helping both to navigate tricky circumstances and understand the limits of political astuteness.

We are not referring to 'ethics' in this context solely in terms of a code of ethics, tick box checklist or an ethics committee (although these have their place in terms of constraining unethical behaviours). 'Ethics' here means written but also unwritten codes and standards that exist in politician and public servant interaction and in their institutional context, with multiple stakeholders. These, often implicit, codes norms and approaches are to do with relationships, values, integrity and transparency (Lawton et al., 2013).

A clear theme from the interviewed UK senior civil servants was their strongly reported focus on ethics and the public interest. They also talked about their use of political astuteness to deal with these issues. Civil servants clearly felt that they could not do their job effectively unless they were perceived as independent and working without party political allegiance.

It was not surprising that many of those interviewed gave examples of when they had had to resist pressure from politicians. Although several had found the particular situation stressful, it was seen as very much being part of the job. One described such incidents as a "steel knickers moment" - being able to resist pressure from a number of quarters, while balancing the requirements of conflicting objectives and keeping the longer-term public interest in view. Systematic analysis, persuasive ideas and strong underlying frameworks for action were critical to holding on to integrity in this encounter. Some of those interviewed had experienced situations where they felt that this commitment to integrity and giving sound advice had damaged their relationships with key politicians, sometimes with far-reaching consequences e.g. losing their own post sooner than planned. However, their attitude to this did not encompass any regret about giving this type of advice.

Extreme examples of these ethical issues are at the tough end of senior public service life.

Interviews also revealed how senior civil servants tried to maintain a strong sense of integrity and ethics. Many said they had regular, even continual, internal dialogue and reflection about how they operate in an ethical framework demanding high standards of personal and professional integrity. They thought hard about dilemmas and undertook thought experiments, for example on how a decision would be viewed in the media or how family and friends would view their behaviour. The interview evidence shows that senior officials exhibited deeply-held democratic values, allied to a strong sense of their own personal integrity. Of course, this is all self-reported and so does not guarantee that the judgements made by civil servants in the public interest are the right ones, but the strong and consistently reported evidence is that this consideration is a major influence upon them and upon how they lead their staff. They use political astuteness to think about different and competing interests, in the light of trying to achieve public value in their work (see also Alford et al, 2017).

A fine balance

Leading as a senior civil servant needs more than a list of desired capabilities. Leadership, we know from research, is about context, purpose, people and processes not just individuals (Bryson and Crosby, 2018). The complex issues addressed by both politicians and civil servants mean that context, issues, relationships and actions are dynamic and may change from moment to moment, meaning that leadership must cope with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity as well as 'brutal facts' (O'Neill and Nalbandian, 2018).

While this paper advocates the value of civil servants having political astuteness and supports this with evidence, it is clear that it is necessary but not sufficient. Political astuteness helps in perceiving and navigating different interests, values and goals, and working with elected politicians to help them achieve their goals within a democratic system. Political astuteness can help to navigate the relationship with the politician (Alford et al, 2017) and to “dance on ice”.

However, also important are technical skills and judgement and some degree of empathy for the politician and the immense pressures they live with; all set in an ethical framework which is lived and reflected on continually rather than being a code of conduct occasionally consulted.

But being in the spotlight in a dynamic environment and finding the ideal balance in a situation of conflicting logics or decision-making pressures, is not easy. Interviewees commented on colleagues in the past or present who had got things wrong, by over-emphasising some features at the expense of others or indeed, how they themselves had learnt through making the wrong judgements.

We have characterised this a fine balance between competing pressures. These are shown in Figure 1. First there is the horizontal dimension about whether the advice given is either too technical or too political. Civil servants can be less effective at either end of this dimension. They can be too technical if they present information and advice in formats which are not reflective of how their own politician thinks, works and acts. For example, reports which are too long, or use too much jargon, or which set out too many options with too many caveats or sub-issues. Or they may try and recommend options which are known to be difficult for the politician, without sufficient recognition of those political difficulties, or they may discount those

difficulties in too cavalier a way. This can result from a lack of recognition that advice drawn from the professions may not always answer all the questions the politician may need to consider.

At the other end of the continuum, civil servants can be too political. They can be so sensitive to the personal and stakeholder interests swirling around a Minister that they can lose sight of their key role – they are not special advisers but rather civil servants whose role is to analyse information and provide advice in ways which enable the Minister to reach conclusions about possible courses of action in the short and longer-term.

Figure 1 about here

The vertical dimension relates to the relationship which the civil servant develops with their Minister. The question of how a civil servant exercises leadership alongside but separately from political leadership is a fraught question, captured in the “politics/administration dichotomy” (Svara, 2001; Overeem, 2005; Alford et al, 2017) and in the metaphor of dancing on ice. Recent work shows that, due to the complexity of issues, stakeholders and policies in modern societies, there is more likely to be a ‘purple’ zone of ambiguity than a clear dividing line between the political and the technical (Alford et al, 2017). So civil servants do sometimes move deliberately into space occupied by the politician, but they must not stray too far and research suggests that it must be for particular public interest reasons. They need to stay in the zone of joint working, the “dancing on ice” together. The vertical dimension is crucially affected by the civil servant’s degree of empathy for politicians

and sense of ethics and personal integrity. If they stick rigidly to their own side of 'the line' between politics and so-called administration, perhaps lacking empathy for the work of politicians, then their work may not be as productive or useful in a democratic context because exploration of complex issues and understanding the different pressures on a decision may fall somewhere between the two leaders. There is the risk of not building enough trust between the politician leader and the civil servant leader to explore and examine key issues, which may be important to both types of leadership. On the other hand, the civil servant can get too far into understanding and empathising with the views of the minister, not creating sufficient space between them, with the result that the civil servant is compliant rather than drawing on their own knowledge and expertise to challenge the minister constructively. A degree of collusion may develop, which risks losing the advantage of divergent views and values working together to achieve a productive outcome. (Eisenhardt et al, 1997).

Political astuteness needs to be allied to ethics, technical skills, judgement and an understanding of the world of the politician if civil servants are to be effective. Fortunately, research shows that political astuteness itself helps civil servants to navigate this hazardous terrain and stay in 'the zone' (Alford et al, 2017).

Developing political astuteness in civil servants

While most of this article has focused on analysing political astuteness, this section examines how civil servants can *acquire* or *enhance* their ethical political astuteness, while not abandoning their technical skills and judgement.

The research survey of civil servants and fellow public managers across three countries found that most public servants acquired their political astuteness skills in

informal and sometimes haphazard ways (Hartley et al, 2013) and this was echoed in the interviews with permanent secretaries (Manzie and Hartley, 2013). Many commented on what they had learned from directly working with individual politicians. Making mistakes, learning on the job, and having either a good or a bad line manager were all educative, but some were painful experiences. Some senior leaders identified mistakes they themselves had made in the field of political astuteness, even when they perceived they generally had both the aptitude and experience to navigate these waters.

There are two key questions. How much emphasis is currently being given to the political astuteness aspect of being a civil servant in the UK? And how can the UK Civil Service ensure that learning about political astuteness is done systematically?

The value of training and development for civil servants in the skills of leadership with political astuteness was raised in a Parliamentary Select Committee Report in 2015 (PASC, 2015), drawing on evidence from Manzie and Hartley (2013) and Manzie as a witness. Conclusion and recommendation 9 stated that:

“senior civil servants work in a context of dual leadership. This makes Civil Service leadership complicated and potentially confusing. This underlines the importance of leadership with political astuteness. People find it difficult to address this issue due to its sensitivity yet there has not been much structured, taught discussion of these complex issues and their interaction with policy and management. However, it is vital to address this issue. The steps which are being taken to improve the leadership training offer are encouraging, but more should be done to ensure that this approach is coherent and that momentum is maintained” (p. 20 and p. 36).

The same report also noted the over-reliance on experiential learning for leadership skills and recommended that a wider variety of learning approaches were deployed, including conceptual learning, reflective learning and experimental learning (the last largely being about action research approaches).

How far has that recommendation been taken? In 2017, the Select Committee commented that *“Questions remain [about] strengthening leadership capability within the civil service, and whether the learning that will be provided is sufficient to equip civil servants for the challenges they face”* (PACAC, 2017, p. 10). By 2018, the successor Select Committee, in reviewing the proposed setting up of the Civil Service Leadership Academy and the relationship between ‘the minister and the official’ (PACAC, 2018) noted that:

“we reiterate our predecessor Committee’s recommendation that such a body should “be a place in which Civil Service leaders can reflect and build upon their experiential learning”. In establishing this academy, we recommend that the Cabinet Office consult academics to ensure that this institution provides Civil Service leaders with effective access to conceptual, reflective and experimental learning. It must address the unique challenges faced by public service leaders, which conventional business training cannot”. (Paragraph 136 and also p. 45).

By 2019, the same Select Committee reported on strategic leadership in the Civil Service (PACAC, 2019) and pointed out quite sharply that it would be valuable to have a permanent location for learning and development for the Civil Service, quite apart from the promising new developments which had occurred with the establishment of the Civil Service Leadership Academy and the National Leadership

Centre. They continued to argue for the value of not only experiential learning (learning on the job) but also for conceptual and reflective learning.

How far is there currently provision for formal as well as informal learning about working with ministers? It may be that aspects of political astuteness are being taught behind closed doors. The professional standards and codes used in the civil service are helpful in terms of the complex inter-relationships between ministers and senior civil servants but they do not teach how to navigate those relationships in day to day working. The Cabinet Office sponsored report about leadership (Public Services Leadership Taskforce, 2018) makes no specific reference to working with politicians even though its focus is on working across public services. The most recent competency frameworks/success profiles for the Civil Service make only limited reference to Ministers. However, given that political astuteness is in “every breath” the senior civil service takes, it is surely desirable that it is taught in an open and structured way.

Instead of treating political astuteness as a tacit skill, which is sometimes only hinted at in leadership frameworks, there is an argument that it should be up front and explicit. After all, civil servants work for organizations which are inherently political, both because they are led or steered by politicians and because many of the policy and service issues they deal with are complex and contested within society. It is therefore helpful to their work that they can understand and work with both formal and informal politics. It is important that civil service leadership development explicitly recognises the value of political astuteness, in its ethical and institutional context and acknowledges it as necessary alongside technical skills, and deployed to create public value (Benington and Moore, 2011).

At the same time, public servants must not become too closely involved in politics, particularly in Westminster model systems where the public service is permanent, serving the government of the day, so their service is expected to be party-politically neutral. Rather than expecting civil servants to learn how to handle these tensions by osmosis, we suggest making this explicit – using conceptual and reflective learning as well as experiential learning to deepen understanding and make it more transparent. Reinforcing this view, PACAC (2018) also argued that ministers also should learn to work with civil servants in a structured way, not gain their understanding solely through informal means.

Our argument for an openness about politics in public organizations can be woven through civil service learning for senior staff. It continues to be essential that aspiring and senior civil servants are taught about the history of the Civil Service, its development and its institutions and how these relate to other tiers and spheres of government. But they should also actively learn about political career structures and roles of politicians, including Ministers, along with ways to engage with Ministers, the Opposition and Parliament, rather than there being an assumption that they acquire that knowledge tacitly. Understanding should be built up through information and open discussion rather than through myths and misunderstandings.

In the 2019 PCAC Report on Strategic Leadership in the Civil Service (Para 39) Sir Stephen Lovegrove, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence and head of the Civil Service Learning and Leadership Board, commented positively on the value of “leaders teaching leaders” This can be very valuable but there can be some challenges to senior civil servants using their political astuteness experiences to help develop others. Sometimes it seems as if there are only very small numbers of people with whom such personal experiences – person, place and context sensitive

– can be shared because of the Official Secrets Act, codes of conduct, potential press interest or reputational risk to individuals and organizations. But we know such briefings have taken place whether through top tier senior management meetings, informal briefings to management in specific Departments or formerly by the National School of Government.

However, we argue that it is important for professional development to be underpinned by more than direct or vicarious experiential learning, important as that is. There is a need for conceptual frameworks to provide a framing, a point of departure and a basis for informed and even evidence-based discussion. This is the conceptual and reflective learning advocated by PACAC in their 2019 report (Para 6). This enables a body of knowledge and evidence to complement craft knowledge (Gold et al, 2010; Briner et al; 2009) and where reflection combines theory with practical experience.

There are several valuable concepts, we argue, in relation to leadership with political astuteness. First, for the Civil Service (and for certain other public servants) there is the opportunity to examine roles in terms of the concept of *dual leadership* (a point also noted by PASC, 2015). This is the negotiated order of a politician working with a particular civil servant being viewed as inter-dependent leadership – where there is some sharing of certain tasks or at least sharing of perspectives, and some encroachment on each other's leadership space (see Manzie and Hartley, 2013; Svara, 2001 Rhodes, 2005). It is clear that technical aspects of ministerial briefing, policy formulation, legislation, parliamentary questions and the role of Select Committees are being covered by the Civil Service College at least, but intrinsic to this should also be political perspectives on parliamentary and government activity.

Second, the conceptual framework of political astuteness skills or capabilities (Hartley and Fletcher, 2008), summarised in Table 2, can be used in learning and development activities in a variety of ways. Debating the five dimensions of skill, their inter-connections and context, whether they are present or absent in particular individuals from different perspectives and their application in a range of case study analyses, could be very beneficial. It would have the benefit both of providing a framework and of keeping such skills explicit, and open to critique and refinement. Such conceptual learning could occur through action learning sets, coaching and mentoring, use of case studies, reading and much more.

Third, the combination of both political astuteness skills and technical skills is critical for civil servants and the concept of the 'fine balance' as shown in Figure 1 could be used as a discussion tool. What are the situations when a civil servant's advice to a minister gets out of kilter either through being either too technical or not technical enough? What happens when a senior civil servant is either too compliant or too rigidly defending boundaries? This framework could be used to explore, sensitively, the mistakes made by a civil servant, providing underpinning knowledge as to why that particular course of action did not "work". It could be used to plan particular courses of action in complex and pressured scenarios. In some situations, where there is confidence and mutual respect this could even be explored and debated with particular ministers.

What is important is that in the quest to modernize some aspects of UK Civil Service learning and focus on more transactional skills like procurement and programme management, there is also explicit recognition of the four cornerstones of political astuteness, technical skills, judgment and ethics, which are all essential to sound policy-making and effective implementation. It is arguable that the ability to lead with

political astuteness is the key quality which enables the UK, as a Westminster system of government, to follow the model in which the senior ranks of the civil service do not change after a change of administration, Therefore, explicitly describing political astuteness and focusing on its development in actual and aspirant senior civil servants in a structured way, is essential both to the effective day-to-day practice of government and to the governance model which underpins our constitutional and ethical assumptions about those who serve Ministers in the UK.

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Table 1: The programme of research on political astuteness drawn on in this paper.

<i>Study and key publication</i>	<i>Research base</i>	<i>Aims</i>	<i>Use in this paper</i>
Hartley and Fletcher (2008)	3 focus groups with 41 managers from private, public and voluntary sectors Survey of 1,475 managers from all sectors 12 interviews	Develop the framework of leadership with political astuteness Consider how leaders view political skills in the workplace.	The framework of capabilities (skills) of political astuteness is used
Hartley et al (2015)	Senior and middle level public servants in Australia, New Zealand and UK 3 further focus groups with 19 senior public managers Survey of 1,012 public managers 42 interviews	Replication of political astuteness framework in three Westminster systems Focus on mainly senior public servants at national, devolved and local levels. How public servants worked with politicians	How civil servants and their peers regard political astuteness, and how they use these skills. How they work with politicians. How they have developed political astuteness skills
Manzie and Hartley (2013)	17 interviews from the previous study, with UK permanent secretaries and chief executives in local government were extended to focus specifically to examine dual leadership.	How do senior civil servants use political astuteness as they work with politicians	How permanent secretaries and their peers work with politicians. How they perceive ethics and integrity

Table 2 Framework of leadership with political astuteness (Hartley et al. 2007)

<p>Strategic direction and scanning</p>	<p>Strategic thinking and action in relation to organizational purpose. Thinking long-term and having a road map of the journey. Not diverted by short-term pressures. Scanning: thinking about longer-term issues in the environment which may potentially have an impact on the organization. Attention to what is over the horizon. Analytical capacity to think through scenarios of possible futures. Noticing small changes which may herald bigger shifts in society. Analysing and managing uncertainty. Keeping options open rather than reaching for a decision prematurely.</p>
<p>Building alignment and alliances</p>	<p>Detailed appreciation of context, players and objectives of stakeholders in relation to the alignment goal. Recognising difference and plurality and forging them into collaborative action even where there are substantial differences in outlook or emphasis. Works with differences and conflicts of interest, not just finding consensus and commonality. Actively seeking out alliances and partnerships rather than relying on those already in existence. Ability to bring difficult issues into the open and deal with differences between stakeholders. Knowing when to exclude particular interests. Creating useful and realistic consensus not common denominator.</p>
<p>Reading people and situations</p>	<p>Analysing or intuiting the dynamics which can or might occur when stakeholders and agendas come together. Recognition of different interests and agendas of both people and their organizations. Discerning the underlying not just the espoused agendas. Thinking through the likely standpoints of various interests and groups in advance. Using knowledge of institutions, processes and social systems to understand what is or what might happen. Recognising when you may be seen as a threat to others. Understanding power relations.</p>
<p>Interpersonal skills</p>	<p>‘Soft’ skills: able to influence the thinking and behaviour of others. Getting buy-in from those over whom the person has no direct authority. Making people feel valued. ‘Tough’ skills: ability to negotiate, able to stand up to pressures from other people, able to handle conflict in order to achieve constructive outcomes. Coaching and mentoring individuals to develop their own political skills.</p>
<p>Personal skills</p>	<p>Self-awareness of one’s own motives and behaviours. Ability to exercise self-control, being open to the views of others, ability to listen to others and reflect on and be curious about their views. Having a proactive disposition (initiating rather than passively waiting for things to happen).</p>

Figure 1: Figure 1 The fine balance of ethics

