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New development: Picking a way through minefields—Leadership with political astuteness for senior police

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IMPACT

This article will be of value to a range of practitioners and policy-makers concerned with operational policing or with the oversight of policing. Senior police officers, senior police staff, those aspiring to senior police roles, those involved in police leadership development, as well as elected politicians and their advisors, will find the article of considerable interest. It is also a call to arms for academics to pivot some of their research from formal governance structures of policing to identifying and analyzing the effectiveness of particular capabilities (skills, abilities, knowledge and behaviours) of political astuteness so that the police can remain operationally independent but are equipped to deal with politically complex situations involving diverse stakeholders in professional, constructive and impartial ways. The article examines the still-sparse literature on leadership with political astuteness for police officers, noting some promising avenues for policy, practice and research. In increasingly fraught political times, acting impartially but with awareness and understanding of politics is particularly important for senior police officers. Police training and development could usefully incorporate skills in political astuteness.

ABSTRACT

It is increasingly recognized by scholars that political astuteness is a valuable set of capabilities for senior leaders across public services. Yet senior police leaders may suddenly find themselves in the eye of a political storm having had little preparation to help them navigate through this. The academic literature recognizes the importance of skills to manage diverse stakeholders including elected politicians but is under-developed. This article draws on a literature review to explore political astuteness in policing, arguing that the practices of senior police officers could be usefully enhanced by further academic work into political astuteness for senior police officers to enable them to pick their way through political minefields.

KEYWORDS

Capabilities; police; policing; political astuteness; politicians; politics; skills

A democratic dilemma

All public services are inherently political, none more so than the police service, which is often at the sharp end of the controversies in both formal and informal politics given the range of services which policing provides (Bowling et al., 2019) and its ability to use state authority to enforce the law (Schroeter et al., 2023). At the same time, public servants are expected to operate impartially, without fear or favour (Alford et al., 2017). Furthermore, UK police are expected to conduct themselves under the principle of operational independence that is enshrined in law and protocol making clear that policing is intended to be 'operationally independent' of political interference and that the chief constable is answerable to the law alone on such operational matters. It is recognized that operational decisions, for example on how best to police a protest march, are best made by those officers closely involved. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS), 2024 has, however, recommended greater clarity on the definition of operational independence. Navigating impartially through potential political minefields thus requires considerable agility. Yet senior police officers may have little preparation or training for the politically contentious circumstances in which they may find themselves.

Why be concerned?

Imagine, for example, being a newly-installed chief constable. You find yourself suddenly in the eye of the storm, plunged into political controversy about an issue you had known little about—perhaps the bitterly disputed felling of trees, perhaps the toppling of a statue of a discredited historical figure or strident demands to ban a protest march. On occasion, you may have the home secretary, obviously far from happy, at the other end of the phone. How do you respond? What is your approach? You may have served with distinction as you climbed the ranks and yet may well not have previously found yourself in such close proximity to elected politicians as well as the informal politics of various stakeholders. The consequences of your actions in the political controversy can be profound—not least losing your job. What experience or training can you draw upon? What research is available?

Leadership and policing

There is considerable research which shows that effective leadership and management of any organization requires a wide range of capabilities (skills, abilities, knowledge and behaviours), especially when facing complex, 'wicked' issues where there may be disagreement on the causes let alone

solutions to problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Head & Alford, 2015). Many of these desirable skills and behaviours have long been readily acknowledged—competence, sound judgement, communication—but the value of political skills for managers across all sectors has, until recently, been less prominent. However, they are increasingly recognized as crucial where there are tricky issues involving diverse stakeholders (Buchanan, 2008; Butcher & Clarke, 2008). Such skills may be described for example as political nous or political ‘savvy’ but the term political astuteness is increasingly used, defined as ‘deploying political skills in situations involving diverse, and sometimes competing, interests and stakeholders, in order to create sufficient alignment of interests and/ or consent in order to achieve outcomes’ (Alford et al., 2017; Hartley, 2018).

These are not party political skills, concerned with advancing the interests of a political party; but, rather, the influencing skills of working in situations, often complex, where both means and outcomes may be contested within an organization, a community or in a society. It means using key skills of understanding and working with interests in a professional, impartial and ethical way to create, in the case of public servants, public value.

Unsurprising, then, that effective leadership can be enhanced by political astuteness (Baddeley & James, 1987; Douglas & Ammeter, 2004; Doldor, 2017) across all sectors, particularly at more senior levels (Gandz & Murray, 1980; Kimura, 2015). This is particularly salient for public organizations, given the different interests which have to be managed in such settings (Christensen et al., 2020). What is far more surprising, given that police often have to deal with inherently political matters, is the lack of attention paid by many academics to the analysis and application of political astuteness for police leadership.

Political astuteness in policing

We examined the literature about political astuteness in policing, in a wider systematic review about the dynamics of how police work with elected politicians, largely but not exclusively in the UK (Roberts & Hartley, 2024). Here we reflect on some of the insights and gaps from this literature and what this might mean for ensuring policing is fit for purpose. We draw on literature from 1995.

Roycroft (2016) and Montgomery (2021) refer to the need for police leaders to have ‘political acumen’ but do not develop the notion. Murray (2021, p. 218) explicitly refers to ‘political awareness’ and ‘political astuteness’, comparing two cohorts of Canadian senior police officers, separated by 20 years. She noted that, in comparison to the first cohort of 2000, the later sample ‘are more politically adept than former leaders’. Hartley et al. (2019) unpack the components of political astuteness for police leadership (such as the ability to ‘read’ people and situations) in a study of rural crime. Other authors use similar terms: for example, ‘political know-how’ (Fleming & Rhodes, 2018); ‘political skills’ (Hills, 2012; 2014). These studies do not, however report, on the acquisition of these skills.

Glancing references to police skills or behaviours are made by some authors that may be relevant to a discussion about operating within a political environment, for example ‘network management’ (Fleming, 2004; 2008). Gill (2013, p. 154) describes the invitation to party political leaders

from the UK Police Federation to its annual conference as ‘a sign of political astuteness’.

Suggesting that successful leaders require personal, political and strategic awareness, Meaklim and Sims (2011, p. 23) describe the principles underlying a public sector leadership programme aimed at senior police officers. ‘Influencing, negotiating and managing reputations in order to maintain political alliances within the multi-agency environment’ is one such principle. From our empirical research, however, it seems that training for how best to work with politicians as police officers climb the ranks is the exception. Bayley and Stenning (2017) report, too, on how unprepared police chiefs had felt for the challenge of leading a police service and for dealing with their ‘political supervisors’.

Indeed, how senior police officers interact with politicians, let alone operate within political controversy, is curiously little explored in the academic literature. The issue may be mentioned fleetingly, but coyly. There is reference to the increased complexity of the context in which police work by scholars in many countries—a more uncertain and volatile world, newer forms of governance, a changing pattern of crime, and increased expectations from the public (Schroeter et al., 2023; Rowe, 2020)—and an acknowledgement that in a more complex and challenging context, a range of different policing capabilities and skills will be required (for example Pearson-Goff & Herrington, 2014; College of Policing Leadership Review, 2015).

What, however, those necessary capabilities are and how they might best be acquired is rarely fleshed out, including in the 2015 Review (College of Policing, 2015) cited above. While Pearson-Goff and Herrington (2014) usefully identify seven key characteristics for police leadership in a dynamic environment, they do not examine specifically the capabilities required to operate in a political environment. Hartley et al.’s (2019) study of the policing of rural crime however, outlines five key dimensions of political astuteness.

Policing and politics

The gap between the importance of the topic and the paucity of academic studies means that it is almost as though the real-life admixture of politics and policing is not seen to be a proper subject for academic inquiry, despite many scholars’ ready acknowledgement of the inevitably political nature of policing (for example Bowling et al., 2019) including in public debate (for example Dodd, 2023). Thinking about how police officers manage the interface between policing and politics seems to be kept at a distance by both academics and practitioners lest it stray into dangerous *party* political waters. However, given the inherent tensions in working with operational independence in controversial areas, it is something which deserves greater academic enquiry.

It is, after all, known that considerable pressure on the operational side of policing may well be applied on senior police officers by politicians (Winsor, 2013). Despite the principle of operational independence, political pressure has become more overt in recent years, particularly over the policing of protest marches in the UK (for example in support of Black Lives Matter and demonstrations by environmental activists). In 2023, the Commissioner of

London's Metropolitan Police, Sir Mark Rowley, came under very public political pressure by the then home secretary to ban a march in London in support of peace in Gaza. The HMICFRS inspection report exploring how police in England and Wales deal with 'politicised or contested matters' found that 'Most chief officers told us that they sometimes experience what they believe to be improper pressure or interference from significant political figures' (HMICFRS, 2024, p. 6). While such improper political pressure may come from police and crime commissioners (PCCs), local councillors or MPs, HMICFRS report that it is senior national figures who most consistently seek to influence police operations. When this occurs in public, the HMICFRS report suggests that it is harder still for the police to maintain an appearance of impartiality thus undermining public trust in law enforcement.

For police leaders to manage such pressures will require astute reflection and skilled navigation through a potential political minefield while aiming to retain operational independence. Indeed, London's 'Met Commissioner' (the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis) is formally answerable to two leading politicians, the home secretary and the London mayor, who may be from two different political parties—a tough ask.

PCCs were introduced in 2012 in England and Wales, in part to devolve police accountability locally, but the Home Office is still involved in more contentious operational matters (HMICRS, 2022; Davidson and others v. Regina, 2022). Is out-of-hours contact through the night as documented in the appeal judgement, Davidson and others v. Regina, between the home secretary and a chief constable legitimate political interest or an attempt to interfere with operational policing matters? How might a chief constable, at the most senior operational level of 'Gold Command' during a contentious protest, manage the demands of a home secretary (or a PCC), convey them (or not) suitably to those operationally in charge on the ground, communicate effectively with the press and seek to retain public confidence in policing?

Interestingly, there is a vigorous and healthy debate on the implications for operational independence of the police arising from the newer institutional structures and governance due to the creation of PCCs compared with the earlier police authorities (Davies & Johnson, 2016; Roycroft, 2016; Derfoufi, 2023). However, the literature is sparse on the capabilities (skills, behaviours and knowledge) that are desirable on the part of senior police officers to navigate relationships within the 'new' governance framework.

Other public services do have a growing literature about political astuteness (for example Baddeley & James, 1987; Hartley & Manzie, 2020; SOLACE, 2005; Hartley, 2024). Across the public services, political astuteness has been found to be a set of inter-related skills which are deemed necessary by senior leaders and which can be used constructively and impartially (Hartley et al., 2015).

Furthermore, we know from our empirical research how acutely aware senior police officers are of the delicate balancing act that is often required in their dealings with politicians, especially over publicly contentious issues where the line or 'zone' (Alford et al., 2017) between strategy and operations may be fuzzy. What is the distinction between political pressure and political interest, as raised in the 2022 appeal judgement (Davidson and others v. Regina) and the

impact on operational policing? Muir (2023), director of the Police Foundation, has, albeit with hesitation, publicly expressed his disquiet about politicians impinging on the principle of operational independence in policing.

Political disagreements are endemic in policing, so it is time—insistently, rigorously—to shed further academic light on the capabilities which police officers need to operate professionally, constructively and impartially in working with elected politicians and in handling the complexities of informal politics, both to ensure high standards from the police and to inform a proper public debate about policing and politics.

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