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Dancing on Ice: leadership with political astuteness by senior public servants in the UK

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Acknowledgements

Biographical note

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Professor Hartley is Professor of Public Leadership at The Open University Business School. She has contributed to the field of public leadership and management for more than two decades through research, teaching and development work. This has shaped some of the thinking and ideas in the field about, for example: the value and use of political astuteness skills among public servants; the interplay between political and managerial leadership; and innovation in governance and public services. She joined The Open University from Warwick Business School where she was Professor of Organizational Analysis and co-founded the Institute of Governance and Public Management.

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1   Executive summary

Context and rationale for the study

The United Kingdom has generated some great caricatures of politicians and senior public servants working together, most notably the satirical comedy *Yes Minister* and the more recent *The Thick of It*. A few political or occasionally civil servant memoirs cover the same territory of the roles and relationships between these two forms of public leadership, and there are a small number of academic studies. However, there is still considerable mystique and even confusion around how politicians and senior public servants work together in a constitutional democracy. Existing codes of conduct and guidelines are not sufficient to express the complexities and dilemmas of such close working together because the dual leadership relationship, like the problems and policies worked on together, is dynamic and needs a fine balance of advice-giving and receiving; stakeholder processes; ethics; and management.

There has been even less description and analysis of the kinds of skills and judgements which public servants deploy as they work closely and on a daily basis with elected politicians. This report, based on detailed research interviews with senior public servants, aims to demystify how they understand and approach their work and whether and how they exercise leadership with political astuteness.

Sometimes called 'political savvy' or 'political nous' or having 'political antennae', political astuteness is a set of skills, 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. Earlier research by Hartley, Fletcher, Wilton, Woodman and Ungemach (2007) had developed and tested a five-dimensional Political Astuteness Framework: strategic direction and scanning, building alignment and alliances, reading people and situations, interpersonal skills and personal skills.

Leadership with political astuteness may be needed for a number of reasons. First, the public servant has to navigate the different interpretations of 'political' to be able to understand and act with recognition of diverse interests, but without being party political as this is proscribed within Westminster systems of government, central and local. Second, senior public servants work in a context of dual leadership – where they exercise leadership in their own right, with authority over an organization and its staff – but they must also subordinate their own leadership to that of the politician, who has the final democratic authority. They have to be flexible, sometimes taking the lead, sometimes offering advice in the background to the politician and sometimes being nearly invisible.

This flexibility is illustrated in the 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. 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.

This study is particularly timely, given that the roles and relationships between public servants and politicians are the focus of several current and lively policy debates. This report aims to offer some evidence to help those debates, by providing detailed and contemporary research on how senior public servants perceive their role in working with public servants, and whether and how far this requires the skills, knowledge and judgements of leadership with political astuteness.

The research focus and methods

The study is part of a wider research programme on leadership with political astuteness by public servants, which covers the UK, Australia and New Zealand (Alford, Hartley and Hughes, 2014; Hartley, Fletcher and Ungemach, 2013; Hartley and Fletcher, 2008). In the study reported here, the focus of research is about five key questions explored through one-to-one in-depth interviews with top-tier public servants. We examined whether or not public servants recognised or deployed the language of political astuteness, and whether they found it applicable to their own role and work; how public servants had developed their skills in political astuteness; how public servants viewed working with politicians and what kind of working relationship they achieved; how they exercised leadership in this close working relationship; and what challenged them most in working with politicians which they felt required them to deploy political astuteness. In addition, though ethical issues were not formally an interview topic, the researchers found that many of those interviewed reflected on those that they sometimes faced in working on complex problems and policies with politicians.

The focus of the research is on very senior public servants – those who are at the strategic apex of their own organizations, exercising leadership, and who have to work closely and regularly with elected politicians. We sought out those who were in chief executive positions in either name or function. For national government, this meant that we recruited permanent secretaries to the study and for local government, chief executives. All were in such positions or had been within a period of three years prior to interview, giving the study insights from both current and recent post-holders.

Seventeen of the most senior UK public servants took part in the research. We aimed for as much diversity as possible within that sample, and so included both men and women, with a variety of backgrounds including black and minority ethnic (BME) public servants. The interviewees held posts in all four countries of the United Kingdom. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. All interviewees and their organizations have been anonymised in this report.

Findings

The material from these interviews provides valuable insights into the roles of public servants operating at the top of their game. The interviewees are frank about the dilemmas which challenge both politicians and themselves, and many were willing to talk not only about the leadership challenges but also the mistakes made or paths not taken. The report is laced with powerful quotations which give both substance and colour to the analysis.

Most interviewees recognised, welcomed and related to the language of leadership with political astuteness to describe their work. The two who expressed reservations did so, not because they disagreed with the accuracy of the description, but rather because they were concerned that it might be misconstrued by politicians if widely used. They felt it might imply a usurping of the politician's legitimacy and authority and not give sufficient precedence to the ascendant leadership role of a minister or council leader over a permanent secretary or chief executive.

Public servants reported that they respected the role and function of politicians in a democratic society, and they were clear that their role was to do everything they could within reason and the law to achieve their lead politician's objectives. This was a complex undertaking in that sometimes the role was to support the politician's aims and goals, but sometimes politicians benefited from help in articulating their objectives or in developing relationships with relevant stakeholders. The metaphor of dancing on ice seems to describe well the partnership and continual adjustment that needs to take place between politicians and public servants in a delicate environment. Other metaphors used by the public servants interviewed were of the relationship being like 'a grey fog' or 'a marriage', representing the interactive nature of the working relationship.

Some public servants focused more on the importance of creating and sustaining a relationship of trust with the politician and others more on the need 'to be good at your job' as the overwhelming requirement of working with a demanding senior politician. However, all spoke passionately about their own integrity and the importance of their non-partisan position in the advice they gave.

A striking feature of all these interviews was how ethics and integrity were at the forefront of public servants' minds as they made judgements about the advice they gave and the role that they played working with politicians. One reported often overtly distinguishing between advice based on professional and managerial expertise compared with advice based on values or political savvy. The report reflects on two dimensions which are important: a knowledge continuum and a judgement continuum as public servants navigate the acceptable boundaries of political astuteness. Examples are given of where they had to bring all their political astuteness skills to bear in situations of considerable tension to reconcile formal and informal boundaries and the political consequences of advice given and actions taken and not taken. One interviewee talked of 'a steel knickers moment' to describe the experience of using all their political astuteness to stand fast in the face of extreme pressure while not undermining politicians.

The report's findings show that there is a particular combination of knowledge, judgement and skills required at the political/professional interface to perform the leaps and pirouettes needed by public servants to act in the public interest and serve their lead politician in today's political context. The permanent secretaries and chief executives reported being motivated by the general political objective to improve quality of life. When analysing how they had accrued the mixture of skills they needed to perform their role in the mutually dependent partnership of politicians and their advisers which makes governance work, they rarely talked about formal training. The two main sources of their learning were: watching and learning good and bad examples from senior public servants further ahead of them in their career; and observing and interacting with politicians at close quarters.

Key issues and conclusions

The study discusses the leadership space between the politician and the public servant, acknowledging the subtlety of the relationship and the balancing dynamic it has to generate if it is to be effective. The report reaches a number of conclusions which have significant bearing for policy debates about public service in the UK today. These are:

Conclusion 1. It is important to understand what it is senior public managers do. Leadership with political astuteness is an integral element of the work of senior public servants.

Conclusion 2. Leadership with political astuteness as exercised by UK senior public managers is a positive feature which has a vital role to play in democratic governance and public service.

Conclusion 3. Politicians and senior public servants exercise day-to-day dual leadership, the politician in the ascendant, but with a vibrant balancing dynamic reflected in the image of dancing on ice.

Conclusion 4. The combination of managerial skills, institutional and contextual knowledge and ethical judgement is needed to exercise leadership with political astuteness and these skills are part of the distinctive capabilities of the most senior managers in the public sector.

These conclusions are underpinned by four key issues:

a) Public manager empathy and respect for politicians

A common feature of all the interviews was the respect these permanent secretaries and chief executives felt for politicians as a breed. This respect is vital to the relationship of trust they need to engender with the politicians with whom they are working. They all agreed that relationships with individual politicians varied and they recognised that elected politicians responded to different pressures and influences from themselves.

b) The importance of ethics and integrity

Interviewees talked about their own ethical standards on the one hand and the need to look after the public interest on the other. Senior public servants regularly and continuously reflected on their roles and relationships in this light.

c) The vital role of knowledge, skills, judgement and context

The institutional knowledge required of senior public servants who work closely with elected politicians is made up of varieties of knowledge which range from formal and informal aspects of their own constitutional context through to tacit knowledge and insights about political and stakeholder relationships.

d) The value but also the limits of acceptable political astuteness

The evidence of the interviews is that political astuteness is primarily construed by public servants as a positive and vital force in their work but that there are judgements continually being made about when such astuteness could tip over into inappropriate advice, action or role-taking. This is a dynamic limit, dependent on the context, the issue or the relationship so it cannot be entirely set down in codes of conduct. The research reflects on two dimensions concerned with limits – the types of managerial and professional knowledge deployed and the degree of responsiveness to the politician.

The research has provided real insights into the roles and work of senior public servants, making a strongly evidenced case against the stereotype of the cautious, obstructive public servant as it is sometimes portrayed in satire or the less reflective media. Rather, this research portrays experienced people drawing on a wealth of detailed knowledge and values about the constitution and the institutions they work within, alongside their professional and general leadership and management experience. They apply these skills, knowledge and judgements to the political objectives on behalf of ministers or council leaders, while also taking stock of the public interest. They themselves say they do not always get it right, and the report includes some descriptions of mistakes and 'near misses'. However, the interviews show the fundamental contribution which leadership with political astuteness makes to staying upright on the slippery ice of public leadership – where dual leadership is necessary and where the partners in the dance must learn to trust and work with each other. The evidence in this report may change perceptions of permanent secretaries and chief executives as they work closely with elected politicians. It is of particular relevance in giving insights into the qualities which are needed to maintain effective public servant support to our constitutional arrangements and parliamentary democracy.

2   Introduction

Public servants working with politicians – a time to reflect?

There are some great caricatures in the UK of politicians and senior public servants working together. The satirical comedy, *Yes Minister*, or the more recent, *The Thick of It*, are prominent in many people's minds. The different tribes themselves – politicians and public servants – also contribute to common assumptions about roles and relationships. Sir Gerald Kaufman wrote *How to be a Minister* (1980), which is widely read by politicians and includes a critique of how the UK Civil Service operates, and Martin Stanley reciprocated with, *How to be a Civil Servant* (2000). Some political autobiographies and diaries of national politicians have also touched on relationships with their civil servants. There is less written material available directly from politicians in local government, who, if they have kept diaries, have not been so prone to publishing them.

Some serious academic research has generated insights into councillor–officer relations in local government or minister–civil servant relations in central government (e.g. Rhodes, 2011; Leach, 2010; 't Hart and Wille, 2006; Hood and Lodge, 2006; Svara, 2001, 2006; Hood, 2000; Stewart, 1996; Page, 1992; Campbell and Peters, 1988; Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman, 1981), but it is surprising how relatively few such studies there are (Rhodes, 't Hart and Noordegraaf, 2007). In particular there has been little focus on what it is that senior public servants actually do when they work with elected and appointed politicians[1]. The codes and standards required of public servants in terms of what they can and cannot say have meant that, except for one or two exceptional cases, and in guidance and interpretation from organizations such as the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE, 2005), overall there has been relatively little work on the roles of senior public servants working with politicians and the skills which the former deploy in working with the latter. In particular there has been little focus on what it is the public servants actually do when they are operating in that context.

There is still some mystery and confusion around how politicians and senior public servants work together in a constitutional democracy. The traditional view of public servants working with politicians, particularly in Westminster systems, is based on a clear separation of roles (Hughes, Alford and Hartley, 2013), reinforced by codes of conduct about what is seen as acceptable behaviour on both sides. Hughes et al. (2013) spell out the origins of that approach but also note that it does not reflect actual practice. But if it is not realistic, then how may we depict what happens in a working relationship between politicians and public servants? It can be argued that it would be helpful if there were greater transparency and less mystique operating within the corridors of the Establishment. But, just as importantly, if we are to continue a strong tradition of independent advice and leadership by senior civil servants and local government officers delivering the objectives of elected or appointed politicians as part of effective governance of the country, it would help if we could describe more systematically and accurately what it is exactly that senior public servants need to be able to do. This is particularly true at a time when the tradition of permanent public servants serving whichever administration the people choose to elect is called into question, together with concern about whether some public servants have the skills needed to deal with increasingly complex problems in a world of reduced financial resources.

This report aims to contribute to the understanding of the relationship from the perspective of the most senior public servants, whose job is to work on a daily basis with politicians and who exercise managerial leadership alongside the political leadership of these politicians. We will argue specifically that this requires political astuteness, and the report will analyse what this means to these public servants at the top of their game: how they use such skills and how, when and why they deploy such skills. This publication is designed to give insight into the real dynamics of how things work, and explode some myths.

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1 In the UK, most politicians are elected including all in local government. However, a small number of central government politicians serve as ministers from the appointed House of Lords. We will talk in this paper of elected politicians for ease of writing.

Its publication is timely for the UK in the context of discussions about the functioning of the civil service and the changing context of local government as it aspires to achieve local empowerment and community action while state and private resources shrink. The Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) has published its report titled *Truth to power; how Civil Service reform can succeed.* Key questions in the civil service centre on the balance of power between ministers and senior civil servants, whether senior civil servants have the right skills and if senior civil service activity can be competitively tendered. In local government, questions focus on the sustainability of historic management structures and cultures in a time of pressure on resources. Our research suggests that the contribution of the specific skills and knowledge of public servants, which include political astuteness and the translation of politicians' vision and policies into reality, should not be underestimated. Nor should the subtleties of the overlapping spheres of leadership between leading politicians and the senior public servants working with them be overlooked.

We use the metaphor of 'dancing on ice' to evoke 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. 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 politician has to lead or influence political direction, 'the party', social movements and stakeholders, while the politically astute professional has to feel and breathe the politician's objectives sufficiently to reflect their goals in their own leadership with due regard for legal, policy and financial frameworks, efficiency and staff motivation. What happens at this interface, and what skills equip top public servants to deal successfully with this dual leadership process?

The research behind this report

In the second half of 2012 the authors designed a research study to explore a series of key questions about 'Leadership with political astuteness' by senior public servants in both central and local government. The focus is on what constitutes political astuteness – sometimes called 'political savvy' or 'political nous' – and how experienced senior public service managers apply these skills and judgements of political astuteness when working with elected or appointed politicians.

The study forms part of a wider research programme on leadership with political astuteness by public servants, which covers the UK, Australia and New Zealand (Alford, Hartley and Hughes, in press; Hartley, Alford, Hughes and Yates, 2013; Hartley and Fletcher, 2008). In collaboration with academic colleagues at the Australian and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) the research team had already amassed a large amount of data through a large cross-national survey in all three countries, followed up by a set of interviews with public service managers.

The current study reported here develops that cross-national research base in two important ways. First, it has enabled the authors to deepen the understanding of what political astuteness means for public servants/managers in their close working with elected or appointed politicians. Second, it aims to provide insights into dual leadership, where leadership is, to some extent, at least shared across different roles and sources of authority. The seniority of the public servants in this study – all in the top tier – means that much of their work is complex and strategic and involves sustained working with politicians as well as with other stakeholders. These one-to-one in-depth interviews provided material which enables us to analyse the nuance of these relationships and how they work. Appendix 1 sets out the description of what both permanent secretaries and local authority chief executives do and the frameworks which define their occupations. These descriptions are part of the institutional framework in which these professionals exist.

Research design

To answer the questions about whether, how and where senior public servants deploy political astuteness skills in their work with elected and appointed politicians, the researchers constructed a research project to examine these matters as seen by public servants themselves. The research examined key questions through interviews with top-tier public servants:

- How far or not did the interviewees recognise or deploy the language of political astuteness, and did they apply this concept to their own role and work?

- How did they develop their skills in political astuteness?

- How did they view working with politicians and what kind of working relationship did they achieve?

- How did they exercise leadership?

- What challenged them most in working with politicians that required their deployment of political astuteness?

In addition, though it was not formally an interview topic, the researchers found that many of those interviewed reflected on the ethical issues they faced in working with complex problems alongside politicians, and so this is reported as well.

Thus, a wide range of issues was covered and the interviewee was requested to illustrate their key points with examples and cases.

Seventeen interviewees were carefully selected to cover roles in both central and local government because both these contexts involve close working relationships between senior politicians and public servants. The number was chosen on the basis of the time period then available to the team. We identified the top tier – those working as permanent secretaries (central government) and chief executives (local government) – because the focus was on the role of those at the strategic apex who exercise leadership in either name or function[2]. Our sample included some of the most senior UK public service managers, the majority being currently in service but a few having left those roles within a period of three years prior to interview in July 2012. This meant that they were either living the daily experience of working with politicians or they had recently retired or left and so were able to give a perspective which was still relevant but had the benefit of distance. The sample also included some interviewees who had worked in the top job in both in central and local government, in order to gain insights into differences and similarities in working in these two contexts. The seventeen public servants were in posts in all four countries of the UK and included both genders, both majority and minority ethnic groups and a range of professional disciplines. This variation in role, career, location and personal demographics ensured a diverse sample. We selected public servants who were viewed, in reputational terms, as effective in their current (or most recent) posts. The interviewees were generous with their time and most interviews lasted between one hour and an hour and a half.

The research used semi-structured interviews – specific themes were explored but not in a fixed order and with a range of related follow-up questions. The use of interviews provided qualitative data and enabled the exploration of meanings and nuances as experienced by the public servants, as well as the collection of context-based experiences and dilemmas in which they reported using political astuteness. The research team consisted of an academic and a practitioner, following the co-research method, (Hartley and Benington, 2000). In this research design, the practitioner is a peer to the interviewees and shares their professional background either currently or recently (in this research the interviewer had worked at a senior level in both central and local government). The rationale is that such an interviewer can engage on a peer-to-peer basis, which enables the interviewee to talk more freely and

deeply because they can take tacit knowledge for granted, and they may be less tempted to present an unrealistic picture of their work.

The research drew on an existing Political Astuteness Framework by Hartley and Fletcher (2008) as outlined in the next chapter. In terms of method, this framework was not explicitly discussed with interviewees in order to avoid influencing their views.

All interviews (bar a couple for technical reasons) were digitally recorded and a full transcript prepared and analysed. Interviews without a transcript were undertaken with full notes, which were written up shortly after the event. The interviews were undertaken in the second half of 2012 and early 2013. Interviews were given an identification number for analysis by the researchers but are anonymised in this report. Some detail has been removed from quotations where it would identify the individual or their organization but the quotations still provide richness and complexity. Transcripts were analysed for common themes and types of event or experience.

We first explored with the interviewees whether or not they found the concept or idea of 'leadership with political astuteness' helpful as a description of their own work, and also whether they would distinguish between 'political astuteness' and 'political awareness'. Most recognised and were comfortable with this language but some of those interviewed initially found it challenging to define and describe the qualities they needed to fulfil their role in supporting politicians in policy-making, service delivery and governance. This suggested that much of their knowledge was tacit and rarely articulated explicitly, although development of themes and concepts started to happen through interview questioning.

We have few means to test the veracity of the points the senior public servants made and we are reliant on their own powers of analysis and self-observation to obtain the material from which we draw our own analysis, interpretations and conclusions. However, given the career background and variety of experience of these individuals in senior civil service and local government roles, their own powers of analysis are highly developed and some of them were willing to relate episodes when they had made mistakes or where they would have handled things differently with hindsight. All this has added considerable depth to the data we gathered.

3 Frameworks for understanding leadership with political astuteness by senior public servants

Background

There is an extensive literature about the concept of leadership and its different manifestations (Yukl, 2010; Storey, 2010; Grint, 2005; Hartley and Benington, 2010). In this section as background to this research we review key literature about leadership and political astuteness.

Hartley and Allison (2000) consider three perspectives on leadership: the person (their qualities such as behaviours and skills); the position (the leadership authority and legitimacy which derives from the role, job or constitutional position); and the process (of influencing others, sense-making, and mobilising action and attention towards particular purposes). In this report we draw on all three perspectives as they each add insights into the complexities of leadership by senior public servants.

Hartley and Fletcher (2008) have argued that leadership theory and research, until recently, has tended to focus on leadership in the organization (leading subordinates) rather than leadership of the organization (in and around the organization, which includes leading partners and other stakeholders). Yet, increasingly, leadership is exercised in a complex array of networks and with a variety of stakeholders, and this is particularly true for leaders at the strategic apex of their organizations (e.g. the public servants interviewed for this report), where leadership can be as much of those outside the organization as within it (Heifetz, 2011).

Exercising leadership on behalf of the organization has two crucial features. The first is that leadership is deployed by organizational leaders beyond the remit of their formal authority as well as within it. They have to engage others in joint purposes and goals with people and groups who are not their subordinates and who cannot be ordered to do things. So, influence, negotiation, persuasion and developing a compelling vision become key skills. Influence and negotiation are enhanced where there is a detailed understanding of the goals and interests of those others (e.g. Malhotra and Bazerman, 2008; Fisher, Ury and Patton,1999). This report argues that influencing skills contribute to political astuteness skills. The second feature is having to work with stakeholders who may have some shared but also some divergent interests and goals – so leadership is sometimes exercised in spite of opposition from certain stakeholders. This goes well beyond the traditional leadership literature which tends to assume that leadership is exercised where there are shared goals (e.g. see the critiques by Drath, McCauley, Palus, van Velsor, O'Connor and McGuire, 2008; Hartley and Fletcher, 2008). A key skill for leadership becomes understanding the 'politics' in the sense of understanding where and how different individuals and groups may have convergent or divergent interests which change over time – and how to craft these into a way forward on key tasks.

This is consistent with Crick's (2004) definition of politics as the mobilisation of support for a decision, position or action whereby:

People act together through institutionalised procedures to resolve differences, to conciliate different interests and values, and to make public policies in the pursuit of common purposes. (Crick, 2004, p. 67)

In this spirit, the report focuses on both 'small p' as well as 'big P' politics – the different goals, values, priorities and interests of individuals and groups in relation to a particular issue, as well as formal working with elected (and in the UK appointed) politicians. Public policies and most public services are under the formal control of politicians, and politicians themselves are elected representatives of wider constituencies and stakeholders, with a democratic mandate to represent the whole (regardless of their political party affiliation if they have one). Yet within a society, ideas and priorities are likely to be both ambiguous and contested because of the varied interests which make up the public. Decisions and actions by politicians are subject to debate, accountability and scrutiny. This context increases the potential need

for political astuteness among public servants: the set of key skills and judgements which enable leaders to create outcomes from divergent interests.

Some authors have recognised that leadership needs to mobilise a range of stakeholders in a shared-power world (Crosby and Bryson, 2005; Hartley and Allison, 2000). The field of complexity leadership (e.g. Uhl-Bien and Marion, 2009) recognises interactive dynamics in formal and informal processes of organizations and environments but this has not yet been formulated using the concept of political astuteness.

The shared-power world of leadership roles in many public organizations is characterised by a particular type of shared (Denis, J-L., Lamothe, L. and Langley, 2001) or distributed (Gronn, 2002) leadership, which we call dual leadership (Hartley and Benington, 2010). At the strategic apex of the organization there are two roles which carry leadership responsibilities and expectations: the political and the managerial found in central and local government, or the professional and the managerial, as in universities and hospitals. Each role is imbued with a particular authority to carry out certain goals and tasks. As in any 'leadership constellation' (Denis et al., 2001), there are explicit and implicit negotiations over the boundaries and the overlaps in authority and function between the two roles. Research on the NHS has examined the relationship between chairs and chief executives, where they distinguish between:

co-action, where the chair and CE see themselves working together towards the same goals, and counteraction, where the ways in which they enact their roles provide checks and balances for each other. (OPM/NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement 2009, p.6)

Exworthy and Robinson (2001) have also examined these health roles. In addition, there is research in the private sector about the relationship between chairs and chief executives, which notes that it is the relationship, and not just the rules and procedures, that is important (Kakabadse, Kakabadse and Barratt, 2006; Stewart, 1991).

Leadership with political astuteness

Dictionary definitions of the words 'astute' or 'astuteness' contain both positive and negative connotations. They generally use the word 'shrewd' (e.g. *Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Online, Macquarie Dictionary Online, The Chambers Dictionary*). A number also use the word 'sagacious' and other expressions, such as 'discernment' or 'keen penetration', and 'crafty' or 'clever' also come into play. The *OED* defines 'astute' as, 'Of keen penetration or discernment, esp. in regard to one's own interests; shrewd; subtle; sagacious; wily, cunning, crafty'. In common usage, the adjective 'astute' is more often than not used in a complimentary way to describe insight, judgement and intelligence combined, and this connotation is drawn on in the research reported here. An example, which comes from the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, quotes G. B. Shaw writing about Germany and Russia: 'It seemed an astute stroke of German imperial tactics to send Lenin safely through Germany to Russia.'

There is also a growing academic literature about political astuteness and the political skills involved in such astuteness. They are seen as a valuable, even necessary, set of skills for organizational leaders (Gandz and Murray, 1980; Dickinson, Freeman, Robinson and Williams, 2011). Other phrases capture a similar idea and are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1   Phrases with some similarity to political astuteness

Phrase	Author/s
Political astuteness	Hartley, Alford, Hughes and Yates, 2013; Dickinson et al., 2011; Beu and Buckley, 2004; Gandz and Murray, 1980
Political savvy	Ferris, Treadway, Kolodinsky, Hochwater, Kacmar, Douglas and Frink, 2005; Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein and Gardner, 1994; Bryson, 1978
Political awareness	Hartley and Fletcher, 2008
Political acumen	Hackman and Wageman, 2005; Perrewé and Nelson, 2004; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill and Lawrence, 2001
Political 'nous'	Squires, 2001; Baddeley and James, 1990, 1987a
Socio-political intelligence	Burke, 2006
Political skills	Riccucci,1995
Political antennae	Benington, 2011; 't Hart, 2011

(Alford, Hartley and Hughes, 2014)

However varied the language, the recognition of the need for leadership to notice, to analyse, to understand and to address diverse and sometimes competing interests and perspectives within and around organizations has been growing in recent years, whether this is in relation to corporate political influence (e.g. Barley, 2010); to championing innovation (Hargrave and van de Ven, 2006); or to public services (Baddeley and James, 1987b). In the work of the research teams associated with Hartley, research began by, tentatively, labelling these skills 'political awareness' (e.g. Hartley and Fletcher, 2008; Hartley et al., 2007), but as the research has progressed, the research team has made a distinction between 'awareness' – having conscious and/or intuitive understanding of divergent interests in the workplace – and 'astuteness', which consists not only of awareness but also the skills of being able to construct coalition or alignment out of divergent interests (e.g. Alford et al., 2014; Hartley, Alford, Hughes and Yates, 2013). This is an issue which will be examined further in the current fieldwork with public servants – does this distinction make sense to them?

The need to define political astuteness and analyse its constituent components for organizational leaders is particularly critical given the ambiguity around the words 'politics' and 'political'. Researchers such as Madison, Allen, Porter, Renwick and Mayes (1980) and March (1984) have argued that as a manager moves up the organizational hierarchy, objectives become more ambiguous and conflicting and thus there is more scope and more requirement for political behaviours. Pfeffer (1981) and Mintzberg (1983, 1985) raised the profile of 'political skill' for managers and Zoller and Fairhurst (2007) argue that leadership is inherently political, in the sense of having to address and work with or around diverse interests. Many commentators on management and/or leadership point to the need for effective political skills in managers, given the plurality of interests which have to be negotiated and mobilised (e.g. Buchanan, 2008; Butcher and Clarke, 2008).

However, the management literature, until relatively recently, has either not placed a great emphasis on the political skills exercised by managers or has castigated these as negative, self-interested 'politicking'. More recent work, by contrast, shows that political skills can be deployed constructively for organizational outcomes (Hartley and Fletcher, 2008; Baddeley and James, 1987a).

This is starting to be recognised in management competency frameworks to some extent. For example, the concept of political astuteness (NHS) or political acuity (Fire and Rescue Service 2012/13) is recognised in their leadership frameworks:

Showing commitment and ability to understand diverse interest groups and power bases within organisations and the wider community, and the dynamic between them, so as to lead health services more efficiently. (NHS Leadership Framework 2013, p. 30)

The programme will address three golden threads of self-awareness, political acuity and handling ambiguity. (Fire and Rescue Service Executive Leadership Programme 2012/13, p. 2)

In the context of researching the skills of public servants as they work with elected and appointed politicians, two further nuances of the concept of 'political' come into play. The first is in relation to the politically neutral role undertaken by public servants in Westminster systems of government (Hughes, 2012; Mulgan, 2004; Wilson, 1887) whereby public servants are expected, both through codes of conduct and through cultural practice, not to engage in work with politicians in ways which advance their own political views. Part of the interest in this research is in how public servants exercise political neutrality but without losing the political antennae which enables them to understand the interests of politicians and other stakeholders.

The second nuance of political is about acting in a party political way: advancing the interests and policies of a particular political party (to which their minister or council leader may be affiliated). This again is vetoed in Westminster systems of government (Hughes et al., 2013).

Surprisingly little has been written about ethics and political astuteness, though work by Provis (2006) and James and Arroba (1990) is valuable. Alford et al. (2014) examine how public servants use personal touchstones to decide whether their skills are being used to create public value or whether they are being co-opted into a particular partisan position on a complex topic. This report examines ethics in a live way which goes beyond the formal expectations expressed in codes of conduct to explore political astuteness in situations which are testing ethically as well as politically. It aims to shed light on how public servants conceptualise their work and act in ways which deploy political astuteness but which do not encroach on the legitimacy and authority of politicians.

Dimensions of political skills and judgement

Earlier research by the Hartley teams (e.g. Hartley, Fletcher and Ungemach, 2013; Hartley and Fletcher, 2008; Hartley et al., 2007) established a framework of political skills and judgement based on surveys and interviews with middle and senior managers themselves. This has been in relation to the concepts of both political awareness and political astuteness. This research has then been replicated in cross-national comparison with mainly senior public servants in Australia and New Zealand (Alford et al., 2014; Hartley et al., 2013). The research led the Hartley–Alford team to refine the thinking behind the concept of political awareness. They concluded from research that the phrase political astuteness better conveys the proactivity of senior public servant action than the still useful but narrower term political awareness. In this report the concept used is political astuteness and the word skill is used to cover a wide set of leadership capabilities, including skills, behaviours, mindsets and judgements. The five-dimensional framework is set out in Table 2.

Table 2   Hartley and Fletcher's Political Astuteness Framework

Personal skills	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).
Interpersonal skills	'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.
Reading people and situations	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 interest 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.
Building alignment and alliances	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.
Strategic direction and scanning	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.

(Derived from Hartley and Fletcher, 2008; Hartley et al. 2007)

While the political astuteness dimensions and framework were developed in research with middle and senior managers across all sectors, the research in this report focuses solely on senior public servants at the strategic apex of their organizations and working closely with elected and appointed politicians. This provides the opportunity to use and test this framework further in this particular setting, where political astuteness may well have particular intensity by virtue of its context. To what extent does it hold up as a useful framework of skills and judgement, and to what extent or where is it deficient in helping to understand the complex challenges of leadership by these public servants working regularly and closely with politicians?

Acquiring political astuteness

There has been much debate about whether leadership is innate or acquired (or a combination). The seminal study on this topic (Day, Harrison, and Halpin, 2009) argues, from evidence, that there are individual differences in appetite for and confidence in leadership, but that leadership experiences combined with reflection enable skills and capabilities in

leadership to be enhanced. This is the assumption underlying the array of leadership and management development activities in the public sector (Hartley, 2010; Glatter, 2009).

The earlier research on political astuteness (Hartley, 2010) found that middle and senior managers reported a number of experiences and events which helped them to hone their political astuteness skills. In particular, experiential learning was prevalent (through, for example, making mistakes, working alongside good or bad managers, or initiatives such as secondments). Other approaches such as coaching, leadership books and mentoring were less prevalent and were cited much less as valuable, influential experiences.

Leadership in context: taking account of the challenges

We have argued that the need to lead *beyond* as well as *with* authority, with a range of stakeholders who may have divergent and sometimes competing interests and in the context for public managers of the publicly exposed and accountable party political environment, means that political astuteness is a necessary element of organizational leadership.

Leadership cannot be considered solely as a set of personal qualities or capabilities (e.g. skills and judgement). A number of writers have argued that the exercise of leadership is best understood within its context (James, 2011; Burgoyne, 2010; Porter and McLaughlin, 2006) and with regard to the purposes that it is intended to achieve. Context shapes leadership by creating constraints and opportunities for leadership action, while leadership action can shape some of the softer elements of context through meaning-making and the mobilisation of consent (Hartley and Benington, 2010).

Two elements of context (at least) stand out in the work of senior public servants. First, there is the constitutional context, which sets out, through both rules and informal conventions, the role and purpose of the public servant (Rhodes, 2011; Hood, 2000). For example, there are important differences in the constitutional context of senior public servants in national as opposed to local government. This means that their working relations with politicians will be shaped by their context to some extent. Second, organizational leaders have to pay attention to layers of context (Hartley and Benington, 2010), including the national, political and policy context; the regional and local context (particularly for local government); and the internal organizational context. Political astuteness is deployed in reading the context at each of these levels while also assessing their interconnectedness. The challenges and purposes of leadership are also important to consider. What are the goals or outcomes that the leadership is trying to achieve? At a macro level, leadership has an important role in sense-making and in constituting or framing the challenges, which they are mobilising others to pay attention to (Storey, 2010). Du Pree (1998, p.130) argues that '*The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you*.' At a more immediate level, the challenges and purposes of leadership frame how to address problems in particular spheres and how to garner the right resources, skills and people. Not only does leadership require at least some specific technical knowledge of the subject, it also demands careful consideration of the ethics and values in which a senior public servant operates (Lawton, Rayner and Lasthuizen, 2013). Ethical concerns created a need for transparency in the democratic context and the proactive rules which govern well-functioning bureaucracies.

4   Findings from the research

Public servants' views of the concept of leadership with political astuteness

We started each interview by asking the interviewee whether or not they could relate to the phrase 'leadership with political astuteness' as a description of their work with elected or appointed politicians.

The majority of those interviewed said they could relate to this phrase. Some warmly welcomed it, others accepted it as an accurate descriptive term. There were one or two interviewees who had reservations.

Most interviewees said that the overlapping nature of politician and public servant arenas of work was at the heart of political astuteness. They distinguished between 'political awareness', which they thought of as *observing*, and 'political astuteness', which they defined as being able to *act* in order to achieve the best possible outcome (i.e. the objective of whichever politicians they were serving). Their definition of 'political astuteness', therefore, involved awareness plus action. One permanent secretary said:

Politics is not an ant farm which you observe with scientific interest. (Interviewee 1.)

Another, in trying to describe their thinking about the presentation of issues to politicians, put it this way:

We were trying […] not to take their [politicians'] decisions for them, but to understand the pressures that were on them that might make some of the decisions they were trying to take harder for them. And I think that's the astuteness versus the awareness, because you can be politically aware of a policy position and understand it, but the astuteness is in saying, 'OK, if they want to receive some more information, some more evidence, consider some more options, how are we then going to present that to them in a way that gives them the best opportunity to consider, rather than be railroaded by the pressure of a lobby group or the criticism it might generate?' So it's about trying to open back up the full range of judgements and decisions for politicians, rather than about saying, 'Why don't you do the thing we want you to do?' (Interviewee 2)

In other words the 'political astuteness' phrase was seen as being more proactive and requiring more savvy in order to decide what action to take or to recommend, and how to engage stakeholders. Some welcomed the recognition in the phrase of the sense of active application of judgement and expertise to help achieve politicians' goals. A number of those interviewed reinforced the point that the phrase 'political awareness' would not be enough.

Those who were nervous or hesitant about the phrase expressed the view that some politicians might misconstrue both the leadership aspect and the political astuteness aspect as being about senior officials either trying to manipulate politicians, or taking up the leadership role that was rightfully in that politician's domain. They reinforced the point made by all those interviewed that, to be an effective senior public servant, you needed to recognise politician space and public servant space. Their reservations were not based on the concept behind it or what they did personally, but rather on possible misinterpretation of the language by politician colleagues.

Some interviewees strongly likened their skills to conventional management skills, but 'with a twist.' One local authority chief executive said:

Well, I think it's a tough call […] to try to articulate what it is that has helped me to become relatively OK at what I do compared to others, and whether there is any kind of 'magic dust' – or whatever they call it. Actually, I approach my work with politicians as I approach my work with other people, in the sense that actually each of us has a particular perspective. We need to understand each other's perspectives and where we're coming from, what we're trying to seek out of an issue, what we're trying to achieve, and then actually – like any team I suppose – you need to work out how we can collectively get there. I think the added ingredient is – in

terms of a political environment for me – one [ingredient] is kind of the need for some agility really, because you always need to expect the unexpected […] A bit of resilience actually is required, and some courage I think […] to challenge the leader in a way which is respectful and constructive, but also is going to be clear that you have got a bottom line. (Interviewee 17)

However, whatever their analysis of the components of political astuteness, most of those interviewed identified with the phrase and were comfortable with the context of its use. Their discussions with us have enabled us to deepen our understanding of its key characteristics and why it is both legitimate and essential in a senior public sector leadership context.

How these public servants learned their political astuteness skills

In order to find out how the public servants learned their political astuteness skills, we explored their career background and how they entered public service. They were asked to reflect on how they had learned the political astuteness skills they found valuable in their job and whether there were any specific influences in terms of influential individuals, specific on-the-job experiences, events outside work, or more formal development opportunities which had helped them to acquire these skills and judgements.

The ways in which the different public servants interviewed had entered their branches of public service varied considerably. UK routes into public service are not through a single funnel like the École Nationale d'Administration (ENA) in France. Of the sample interviewed, some had entered through the voluntary sector or community action, others through the Civil Service Fast Stream programme. Others came into their public service milieu through specific professional training such as the law and then came increasingly into contact with politicians as they advanced up organizations. This was particularly true in local authorities. One chief executive, who had come up through the organization from a service perspective, described coming to a realisation that in her view she was operating at a much broader level than her professional discipline required and that she understood the operation of the 'small p' politics of the organization she was working in. She concluded that she could outperform those who were currently working with the politicians and being paid more than her, and decided to try to get into senior management. Another chief executive whose career had developed from a service role – rather than a policy or central role – very candidly described being appointed to a very senior director role in a high-profile urban area and having to come to terms with some pretty tough and openly aggressive political and managerial operators very fast as part of their development.

When asked to think about how they had learned their political astuteness skills, it was striking how many of the senior public servants commented on what they had learned from individual politicians via their direct experience of working with them. This in many cases seemed more vivid than, for example, advice from their line manager(s) or from specific development opportunities.

One of those interviewed talked admiringly of a famous local government politician with whom he had worked:

I think I've been very fortunate over the years. I've worked with some very, very experienced politicians, and one I'd cite is [Councillor A]. You just learn so much from somebody like that in terms of their experience. I went with him to a conference, I gave him a lift up, and he was there as a former president […] and it was like the return of the Messiah. He just knew everybody. And I just listened to stories, his experiences. I was fortunate as well, there was a visit – when our twin towns celebrated their fortieth anniversary – and [Councillor A] was there, and I was with him for three or four days. He'd tell you all the stories of his experiences […] and all these sort of things and the issues he dealt with. And just being able to draw on that I found was absolutely amazing […] I've been really fortunate to have [elected] members who have real skills, and you learn as much from them as you have done from a lot of senior officers who you work with and get to know, and get the same sort of benefits of their experience. (Interviewee 3)

More than one interviewee described having a political mentor or mentors – generally people who gave them guidance at a key moment or who provided opportunities which facilitated their development – for example involving them in a new initiative not technically within their area of responsibility. In some cases it was a politician who suggested to them that they should apply for the most senior post in their organization. In none of the cases mentioned, was this an issue of any kind of political link or alliance, but there was evidence from the senior public manager that the politician perceived that the manager could get things done and work with politicians.

One senior public servant identified three clear sources of learning and development for him. The first was from immediate bosses – one in particular who had had to deal with and survive major political change; the second was from mistakes; and the third was from peers, sometimes more informally, sometimes in an action-learning set or development group. A couple of those with a local authority chief executive background cited the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) 'New Chief Executives' groups, or common-interest groups such as associations of metropolitan or county chief executives, as good sources of support and learning, not just in the early days of their appointment, but as their experience developed. The issue of learning from one's own mistakes came up frequently with comments such as '*I was lucky not to go under.*' (Interviewee 4)

One public servant who had worked both in local government and the civil service described how, in one organization, they had set up training for middle-level staff in working with politicians in conjunction with an external academic source. This had a strong emphasis on educating the staff about the number of different forces playing on any single politician, and increasing the understanding of the specific interests and dilemmas of individual politicians. The term 'responsible gossip' had been coined to describe this kind of information – personal, political and place-sensitive – designed to be used to get better outcomes in joint working between public servants and politicians.

An issue in terms of using these experiences to help develop others is that in most cases there are only very small numbers of people to whom these stories could be told because of the Official Secrets Act, codes of conduct, potential press interest or reputational risk to individuals and organizations. This raises some interesting challenges about how learning and development about the edgier experiences of political astuteness can be shared.

Most of those interviewed concluded that they had achieved their positions as leaders with highly developed political astuteness skills through a combination of personal qualities and experience. In some cases, they had encountered 'political animals' early in their career either by being activists themselves at that stage, or by encountering politicians at close quarters[3]. In other cases, those interviewed, by virtue of their professional, rather than general management, background had worked closely with politicians at a much later point in their career and described either a very fast learning curve or gaining a feel for working with politicians by applying skills they had learned elsewhere, linked to an implicit understanding of political motivations.

What most of the interviewees acknowledged was that there had been little overt discussion in any context of issues such as the ethical issues and the specifics and ambiguities behind leadership in a political environment, let alone formal training or development, except in very informal situations, and in very small groups. At the same time, most recognised that political astuteness was not universally present in those public servants with whom they worked, either in local or central government. This suggests that there is much more which could be done to widen and deepen understanding of the qualities required of this type of leadership and to provide opportunities to develop these skills.

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3 *The level of seniority of the interviewees means that they are explicitly proscribed from engaging in political party activism, under legislation and as part of the 'Westminster' system of government. They can continue to vote in elections as a private matter.*

Motivations, objectives and roles

All the senior public service managers interviewed were able to articulate *what* their task was, and the types of language used were striking. They were very clear that their role was to do everything they could within reason and the law to achieve their lead politician's objectives.

One senior civil servant described the implications of operating in a political world:

So what does that mean in practice? Well, I think first of all there's a very straightforward thing about objectives: what are politicians trying to achieve? And they don't flow in any way the same way as they might do for a conventional executive or non-executive manager. They are in the end trying to pursue a political philosophy or indeed a particular party line. We must never be shy about what they're trying to do, so they're working to different objectives. Second thing is time scales are entirely different. I remember talking to one senior minister and saying you've got three years to make an impact on this agenda; he said, 'I don't think I'll have that long.' So they work with a level of urgency and pressure that is quite different. The third thing I think is that they work in an environment of much greater what I would call personal vulnerability. They're in the public gaze all the time [in] what they do. They have to account to a whole number of political audiences, their local constituency, the wider constituency, if they're national, and their party, of course. (Interviewee 4)

A notable feature of all these interviews was the respect that the public servants showed for politicians. At times this might be laced with some concerns about individual behaviours, such as whether politicians were prepared to be advised or give sufficient credence to advice given in good faith , but these concerns did not detract from clear-eyed analysis of politicians in general and respect for what they did.

Some descriptions of purpose seemed to match a traditional view of politicians articulating their objectives and public servants delivering them:

I came into the role of a Chief Exec with a clear view – but, I know some of my peers will challenge this – that my job was to interpret what it was that the politicians were trying to do, and to use my best endeavour to help them to form the strategies which I, in turn, would shape into tactics and operational delivery. My role was to facilitate the expressed wish of the politician – after all they are the representatives of the people. (Interviewee 5)

However, others articulated more complex roles. A number commented, empathetically rather than critically, that sometimes politicians not only did not know exactly how to achieve their objectives, but they could not articulate in tangible terms what their objectives were. This goes against the conventional model of politicians deciding what they want to do and officials working on implementation. This may indeed be the eventual outcome but what it points to is a much 'greyer' area of developmental thinking which is done between elected or appointed politicians and their officials. One interviewee said:

One of the great shocks to me was that not all politicians had acquired the skill on the way up of articulating clearly the rationale for what they wanted to do, because one thinks of them living a life of speech-making. And one thinks of mastering the skills of persuasion as being one of the things that distinguishes those who have successful political careers from those who don't. But that doesn't always take the form of being able to explain the thrust of their activity simply and clearly. So, some politicians needed some marriage of those traditional civil service skills of using language, and an empathetic understanding of what they wanted to communicate; others didn't need that kind of help at all. (Interviewee 1)

Recognition that some politicians do not always express their views and philosophies clearly can generate tension between politicians and their officials. Some lack of clarity will inevitably occur when a politician's broad pre-election policies need working up after an election. At other times a politician may make tactical use of ambiguity for a certain period of time as part of the legitimate political process to do with internal or external political party rationales. The interviewees identified that this dynamic could cause tension as officials sought clarity in

order to communicate objectives and actions to stakeholders or staff or to encapsulate policy in legislation. Political ambiguity means that senior public servants have to bridge political and managerial space. One permanent secretary described senior management activity as translation:

I think it's important to say that what we're talking about here applies […] it's stating the obvious in a way, we're talking about the senior levels. I've often thought that we are the kind of […] the translators. We are the people who occupy a space between politicians and many people who don't have, especially in local government, and don't need to have, contact with the politicians. This is about perhaps middle and senior officials, actually, who play this role, I think, and for a lot of other staff you don't need to carry that into their role. So when we talk about this political handling skill, the really good managers can do all that, and then when they're having a conversation with the staff delivering the bins or whatever, that's diminished to nothing and it's about the task, so you have to almost be a conventional manager and a political manager. (Interviewee 4)

This suggests that the role of the public servant operating at a senior level in an environment with elected or appointed representatives is both conventionally managerial and about politics. But it would be wrong to interpret the role of a manager with political astuteness as being party political. All those interviewed were clear that it was not their role to *be* a politician or to act in a party political way. At the same time, some made reference to their own ability to be political and to advise politicians on politics. This is a delicate role, described by one local authority chief executive like this:

I also feel that my job is to challenge the members too, to the right place within the context of the politics which they're supposed to be presenting. (Interviewee 5)

Context and power

In both local or central government there can be a rapid turnover of portfolio-holding by politicians as a result of an election or reshuffle. When a politician and public servant first work together after such a change, the politician may only know the public servant by reputation, even when they have had a hand in choosing them. A number of the interviewees, from both central and local government, described the process of getting to know you that takes place subsequently. They cited small incidents which had made a difference, for example the sorting out of the politician's office space and personal administrative support, and were symbolic of the public servant being able to fix things and therefore gain the trust of the incoming politician.

The ground rules about relationships between politicians and their senior public servants are both written and informal. The public servants interviewed made frequent reference to the need for a professional relationship with politicians rather than friendship.

Most of those interviewed highlighted that a good relationship with a leading politician is better where it is based on an understanding that the public servant works professionally with any politician in power and the public servant is not a closet politico with particular sympathies. This understanding is part of the informal ground rules of the relationship and the institutional culture in which both senior civil servants and local authority chief executives operate in the UK. This means that demonstrating integrity, or avoiding any comment or action which seems to prejudice it, is imperative. Opportunities to demonstrate integrity arrive in a variety of ways. These may bring the public servant into conflict with the politician and opportunities to show integrity occur more frequently when things are going wrong. This is relevant to the role of ethics in public sector leadership (discussed in Chapter 6).

One public servant with experience at a senior level in central and local government said how helpful they had found the explicitness of many of the procedural rules in local government. In both local and central government, the implicit and explicit ground rules on confidentiality are of particular importance to the relationships with politicians.

The judgements about information sharing and 'how far you can go' were reported to be particularly useful. On many occasions following discussion between the lead politician of the controlling party and the public servant, there was an agreement about what information would be given to the opposition politician or group, who needed to be briefed.

One senior public servant recounted how under the normal rules of information sharing they had gone to brief an opposition spokesperson privately (which was understood as part of the procedural rules by the politician in power) but had realised later as a result of public use of that information by the opposition politician that they had given more information than was either appropriate or advisable. The public servant 'fessed up' to their politician about the mistake including how it had arisen and was complimented by the politician for their honesty and judgement. The public servant being interviewed, while regretting the mistake, said that they felt that it had strengthened the relationship with the politician as the politician had received direct and personal confirmation that the public servant would be honest with them.

Most interviewees described particularly strong personal relationships that they had experienced with some individual politicians. The party origins of the politician were not the factor which influenced those relationships. They tended to be based either on longevity – knowing people for many years in different situations – or sometimes on joint survival in post of a very difficult and contested political and public policy issue. One individual (Interviewee 11) described how when she needed to deal with a personal urgent family situation she felt able to explain the problem to a senior politician whom she knew well. The senior politician 'covered' her sudden absence, and the public servant attributed this incident to the deep trust and respect between them based on an acquaintance of many years.

One chief executive in particular drew attention to both the quality of the political leaders he had worked with and the longevity of their terms in office as strong contributory factors to his own success and consequently that of his local authority. Given the evidence from other interviews about the importance of the opening days of a relationship between a politician and their senior public servant, it seems likely that rapid turnover in politicians elected or appointed to particular positions does not strengthen the effectiveness of political–public servant relationships. It inevitably means a very quick getting to know you period with a much compressed period in which trust must be built.

Understanding politicians and the lives they lead

One senior public servant started their interview by suggesting that the key skill they and colleagues at their level had required was to understand the generic motivations of politicians. He said:

Not to exaggerate it but I used to say to junior colleagues, they're not like us – not quite from another planet, but they're not like us! And therefore the motivations of the politician are a very interesting mix of often the high-minded and the low-cunning. Because to be an elected politician you have to put yourself where the majority of people don't put themselves, in other words, in front of your fellow citizens, and you have to take 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' that go with that. But my impression has been that the vast majority of politicians, although they don't always come across obviously, have a high-minded reason for being there, beyond simply the acquisition of more power. (Interviewee 6)

This was a point repeatedly made in the interviews.

This understanding of motivations and dynamics, both of politicians in general and of the individual, came up time and time again. A number of interviewees mentioned the importance of their own emotional intelligence to success in working with politicians. This need for emotional intelligence is reflected in the Political Astuteness Framework in the Interpersonal Skills and Personal Skills dimensions, though it is not sufficient on its own.

But allied to an understanding of what motivates politicians was a need for senior public servants to understand the sheer brutal reality of political life. A number of the interviewees identified and acknowledged the influences on politicians' behaviours. Many recognised that

the senior politicians they worked with were accountable to a wide range of stakeholders. Stakeholders to which UK politicians are accountable include: for national politicians, their constituency; for local politicians, their ward or division; regional and national political party structures; residents, businesses, voluntary and public sector partners; colleagues in cabinet and group, including prime minister or council leader; in local government, their own political groups and the council including scrutiny; or for national politicians, MPs from their own party and parliament, including select committees; and of course the media (not forgetting websites, blogs and tweets).

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 minister's thinking styles, contrasting a key minister whose approach was to seek to test boundaries by starting with an extreme position and working back, with another who had a pretty clear view of where they wanted to go and was just looking for advice on how to get there.

The observation of another experienced interviewee was that sometimes in a developing relationship, and also more generally, being there was important to both the building and preservation of trust, as a visible statement of loyalty and commitment to resolving the presenting problems. That same senior public servant self-critically observed their own handling of a serious crisis and concluded that they took longer than they might have done to recognise when direct working was needed between themself and their elected politician instead of working through more junior staff. That individual had, however, corrected the situation as soon as they recognised it and kept close to the politician in a supportive way.

The issue of being visibly present to ministers or councillors was cited on a number of occasions by senior public servants, in particular when relationships were relatively new.

The contribution of political astuteness to building trust between politician and public servant

In terms of senior public servants *gaining* the trust of their lead politician, many of those interviewed talked about the importance of having some mutually achieved identifiable successes as quickly as possible in order to build trust. One senior public servant referred to achieved successes or 'pennies in heaven'. In other words, storing up goodwill with politicians could help either when things were not going so well, or when there were more difficult messages to relay to the politician, which were less likely to be well received.

One permanent secretary was very clear about the importance of competence (as one of the two most important elements of trust):

What I always say to people is […] be good at your job. Almost every minister that I've met, what they really want in their civil servants is for them to be good at it. And all the other stuff about relationship building is irrelevant unless you're actually quite good at what you do. So you focus on that bit first. (Interviewee 8)

Another permanent secretary commented:

I think competent government is much underrated. (Interviewee 6)

Those public servants who had worked for a longer period with their leading politician – these tended to be more in local than central government – talked about both individuals developing an intuitive judgement about what role was best played by each in different situations. One local authority chief executive related an experience of when they and a relatively newly in post lead politician were struggling with an issue of importance to the local authority. The chief executive realised that he had under-estimated the degree of concern the issue was causing to the politician. He described how a loyal colleague had tipped him off as to how seriously concerned the council leader was, which enabled the chief executive to address the question directly with the politician in an informal way and work even more energetically and with a renewed approach to resolve it. The chief executive said that he had learned a great deal from this experience, saying:

I think the difference was that he then thought that I was trying to help him. That's really what made the difference; it's not the solution, the content of it, because we could have found something else if necessary I'm sure. (Interviewee 9)

This reinforces the point about the importance of the politician's trust in both the intention and the competence of their chief executive. The chief executive on the other hand had learned to look well beneath the surface of what seemed to be taking place in the relationship and resolved that in future he would give this politician more opportunity to articulate what they might be feeling and thinking by providing the right context for that to happen.

One chief executive interviewed said:

I think there's been something over recent years, there's been more and more of a tension between senior officers, as a consequence of the economic situation, and the financial challenges that we face, and I'm sure it's not just here but I think two things come out of that. One is a real expectation from members that everything will be solved by efficiency, and there will be a few difficult decisions to make in, you know, what services are we going to cut, what services are we going to stop altogether, and secondly I suppose linked to that, if we're having to make savings that impact on large numbers of the workforce […] what's happening at a senior level, and there's kind of a tension there about trust and respect of senior officers who are seen to be the messenger bringing very bad news, very difficult decisions. And I think it's presenting challenges for both members and officers in managing that relationship over these difficult times, and the relationship has never been more important now, because now we need people working together to get the best possible solutions for the organizations. The solutions that will best protect jobs and best protect services. So I think we're into a different environment now than we were five or six years ago. (Interviewee 3)

There is no doubt that the issue of trust between politicians and senior public servants is heightened when the going gets rough. One official reflected on a period when things in the external environment were going wrong, saying that while he never felt the leading politician had lost personal faith in him, he felt that the politician did lose faith in the organization, and that inevitably there was a point when lack of faith in an organization could lead right back to the person in charge of it.

Knowledge, skills and judgement

It is important to analyse what being good at your job means in this context. There are various components to this. The Political Astuteness Framework makes reference, among others, to, 'Strategic thinking and scanning' and 'Reading people and situations'.

One local authority chief executive specifically identified an ability to look forward and project the future as something his professional skill could bring:

I think it is the ability actually not just to take stock of today, but to analyse what's going on around you, to see what's happening in the wider world, and to make the connection between what might happen in the future and what is happening today. I find that often the politicians I work with are really good at crystallising today based on the experiences they've had, but they struggle to get into the bit that says, and this is what I need to do differently tomorrow. (Interviewee 5)

This testimony supports the 'Strategic thinking and scanning' element of the Political Astuteness Framework. Some politicians would clearly contest whether they were just 'today focused' and see themselves as a person who has vision about what might happen in the future. But certainly one of the things public servants see themselves as supplying, based on their experience and knowledge, is the ability to convert fact and operational knowledge into political language and communicable concepts for the long-term as well as the present.

The 'Reading people and situations' dimension of the framework includes 'acquiring and using a wider knowledge of institutions, political processes and social systems that impact on your organization'. Where the interviewer drew this out, some interviewees acknowledged that part of their skill and judgement in terms of doing their job was the understanding of how

democratic procedures or constitutional issues worked. Others specifically highlighted, in their in-depth examples, that their understanding of how these things worked was fundamental to their ability to do their job. We argue that this knowledge of factual information, understood in context and combined with extensive experience of the consequences of different governance actions, is what constitutes the specific technical and professional expertise of those public servants who work with senior politicians.

A number of those interviewed described instances where their specific ability to apply flexible thinking to apparently inflexible rules meant that they had been able to deliver for politicians. One interviewee (Interviewee 1) discussed how he had worked with an incoming administration in a very specific political context on highly political issues – but issues that in his view were absolutely within the purview of a senior civil servant. His focus was on how to make the new administration's policy and decision-making work in a complex political situation and how to build new norms around existing procedures without breaking fundamental constitutional or procedural rules. In order to do this the interviewee had to think hard about his own bank of procedural knowledge and apply this to the current, unprecedented situation. At the same time, he was also seeking to build trust with the lead politicians in the administration. In this instance he had convinced those involved in these discussions that what he was proposing could work and that he was seeking to give them the best advice to achieve their objectives. But he was also increasing their knowledge of what it would take to achieve the things they wanted within the democratic system.

All those interviewed emphasised the importance of demonstrably listening as part of an armoury of communication skills. One interviewee thought that a questioning approach was prerequisite:

I think the first thing is an intense curiosity in other people. You have to be interested in people, and I did some training years ago and the question that has always stuck with me and I've always used, is 'Why would they?' You have to be able to think, 'Why would people want to do this?' And you have to think that when people have particularly weird views – and you come across a lot of these – there is a reason for their weird view […] (Interviewee 10)

Another interviewee emphasised a basic human values approach:

I think the bottom line is always remembering that it's human beings that you're dealing with. I think a lot of people forget that. They treat people for […] you're such and such a party or you're such and such […] I always find if you can get to the bottom line as to why someone is interested in a particular issue, you can diffuse it. There's always a rationale or reason. So it's giving people time. It's genuinely listening, it's genuinely seeking to hear diverse views. It's then trying to find common ground and be open to that, and do, you know, just basic good manners and common sense. It's treating people equally and with respect, and it's also being grateful and thankful when people work with you. That has worked, you know – it's always worked for me. I have found that you can disarm the most angry of people, politicians in particular. (Interviewee 11)

Referring to the challenges of giving advice, in which communication skills lie at the heart of the process, one senior public servant said:

I think the hardest skills on these decisions we talked about is to be able to be robust in saying what you think without it becoming seen as blocking. So being able to find a way of getting your view across and challenging somebody. (Interviewee 4)

The importance of being able to have robust discussions about 'policy' and the right course of action was further emphasised by a public servant who had worked both in local and central government:

The other thing in terms of ground rules is create the space to have the disagreement. And actually, having disagreements, provided both parties handle them respectfully and courteously, is absolutely the right thing to do. (Interviewee 17)

Many of those interviewed did see those types of discussions as being tense and finely balanced, partly because of the very public implications of the decision, and partly because of the nature of the relationship ambiguities which could change very quickly because of the pressures on the politician.

There was common agreement, however, that political astuteness was not enough. Those interviewees who had worked in local government in particular, endorsed the view that some officials who believed themselves politically astute had a tendency to try to deliver political objectives without question, without necessarily sufficient managerial insight or operational competence to back this up. These individuals could be dangerous as, in giving advice to politicians on policy or services that was designed to comply with political objectives, they lacked the technical knowledge to be able to give accurate advice on deliverability and possible benefits and risks. Managerial competence and procedural knowledge were necessary both to deliver objectives and to prevent serious mistakes with dire consequences operationally and politically.

One of the chief executives interviewed made an explicit link between competence ('professionalism') and ethics:

My starting point in being politically astute is that first and foremost you have to do a professional job: you have to do what you believe is professionally the right thing to do, and the right thing for the organization. And by demonstrating that through your actions, through your interface with politicians, you emphasise your neutrality, and I think if there is one thing that's of utmost importance in this interface between politicians and officers, it's being able to demonstrate that you are neutral, and you're serving the entire council. You recognise that there is a different role that the leader of the council has from the leader of the minority group, but you recognise that role, and you serve that role in the best way you can. (Interviewee 3)

The process of advice-giving, brokering and resolution

Everyone interviewed talked unreservedly about the central advice-giving role of the senior public servant. The basic principles behind advice-giving and the dynamics within it were reported to be very similar in both local and central government, despite some differences in the extent of written advice and the extent to which the advice is made public. Most of those interviewed talked unreservedly about the challenges of giving that advice. It is the area which draws upon all the elements of the Political Astuteness Framework. One senior civil servant (Interviewee 7) talked about 'minimising the amount of telling'.

He explained that this meant the ability to get across difficult messages to politicians (who are the more senior in the relationship) without either appearing to be telling them off or giving them instructions. This calls for the avoidance of the clumsy or the blunt instrument while not ducking issues which need to be tackled. He went on to describe with admiration a senior colleague (but junior to him) whom he thought was one of the best he had ever seen at working with politicians. The interviewee talked about his colleague's extraordinary social and emotional skills, and ability to think ahead and to understand what were no-go areas and what turned the politician on. In particular he highlighted his colleague's ability to tell a story and present a vision for the politician of how s/he might get from here to there.

This interviewee also addressed head-on the *Yes Minister* picture of wily officials manipulating a naive politician. He recognised that there was a question about what was manipulation and what was well-placed advice. However he was clear that most real manipulators got found out and that it was a mistake to think politicians could easily be manipulated. He also said:

The worst kind of civil servant is the sort that thinks they are in charge. (Interviewee 7)

Another permanent secretary talked about how they tried to find solutions to problems, in particular where there might be differences in opinion between their senior colleagues, or other stakeholders and politicians:

I've used three positions. First, I know what I want to do and what needs to be achieved, well I have a view, it's a perception of those things, some right, some wrong. Secondly, the

politicians have a view, and that too has some right, some wrong. What I found very useful is trying to put those two analyses together and then looking at it from a third position. So if I were an outside observer, and I can see tension between these two perspectives, what would I say to both of them, and how do I now find a position which isn't the lowest common denominator, but it's building on that constructive tension. I found that mechanism, and sometimes I actually used physical movement in a room, to allow me to look at the thing differently. It is a really helpful way of beginning to unpick [the] issue. It helps in advising politicians how to get ownership from others to make things work. (Interviewee 10)

The same interviewee went on to comment on common ground:

It can be about a range of things. It's usually about the common ground, and usually you agree on eighty per cent, and twenty per cent you don't. It can be on the mechanics. It can be on style. It's on whatever is in this box of tensions that is stopping you being able to move it on in the direction you want to move it on. But it's not about copping out. Often what people do is say, 'You know I can empathise with you, but I don't actually agree with you,' and once they've empathised they will use what they know about you to manipulate a solution. It's not about that; it's about trying to reframe the problem so actually it's reframed in a way that there's a common stake in the new reframed problem, rather than being what it looked like before. And part of that is then something about knowing when to fight and when not to fight. (Interviewee 10)

Another individual who had worked at a senior level in both central and local government talked about the vital value of these types of brokering skills:

[…] this skill to broker issues and to get to conclusions that are then deliverable, this is the most important thing. There are people who can broker issues, but then have produced an outcome that can't be translated into a managerial task, and there are people who are very good at developing managerial descriptions and solutions who can't broker the issues with the political network. It's being able to do both that singles out somebody who's effective I think. I think a third skill you need in a way is a skill in which you are genuinely enabling politicians to reach a view on what they want to do, and allowing you to help them find how they want to do it. (Interviewee 4)

In discussions with these senior individuals, a number of them highlighted the importance of stakeholders in influencing policy-making and how public servant insights and relationships with stakeholders were intrinsic to giving well-founded advice to politicians, which is all part of the essential brokering and resolution skills. We will examine the nature of leadership in relation to stakeholders in Chapter 5, The leadership space.

5 The leadership space

Politics, public service and leadership

Many of those interviewed identified a leadership dilemma at the heart of the environments in which public service leaders operate. On the one hand they have to be leaders of groups of staff, and organizations, in an autonomous way, but at other times they have to subjugate their leadership to a more political space, at times being invisible. This flexibility is illustrated in the dancing on ice metaphor, where two partners have to move in the same space, but each with different roles, sometimes supporting, sometimes taking the lead. This capacity to switch between these two positions was identified by many of those interviewed. A senior public servant described the bridge between these two styles like this:

First of all the ability to understand the underlying rationale of the political leadership, whatever it is, and as you and I know, that's not anything as naive as being able to read a manifesto. It's about understanding how the political leadership understands its own political imperatives, and understanding that political leadership brings its own challenges in terms of managing a political environment as well as the public-facing dimension. So it's not just the more conventional distinction that public service leaders do the inward-facing stuff and political leaders do the outward-facing stuff; it's the understanding that both of you are managing a complex set of relationships, each in their own spheres. (Interviewee 1)

The interviewees emphasised that these were not static concepts and that they changed depending on circumstances and personalities. One of those interviewed (Interviewee 10) identified that working in this borderland between politicians and public service managers was, 'by its nature ambiguous and conflictual'.

Critically, however, none of the senior public servants interviewed saw their role as being to negate politics. A leading local authority chief executive encapsulated these issues well:

I operate with two simple sort of […] well, I was going to say principles. I don't know if they are principles, really; they are more like points. The first is that in local government, which is where I am, councils are political organizations. My job is not to take the politics out of the place. My job is actually to in some respects celebrate the politics, because that's the lifeblood of the place. And to deliver on the political agenda that has been set by the ruling political administration. Not to deliver on their party politics; that's their business. But to deliver on their policies, and I think something happened in the past where there was a sort of view that the politics was dangerous, that our job as chief executives or senior staff is somehow to manage the politics out of the situation, but that is not what we're here for. We are there to put parameters around it. We are there to stop it furthering party political ends, and to ensure the obvious things about being legal and affordable, and all the sort of things that help. The second issue is, and I always have this in my mind, when you're working with a politician, and let's model it on a chief executive–leader relationship. Those relationships are most effective, in fact they are only truly effective when they are a double act. As a chief executive you have to do two things. You have to have very strong emotional intelligence that works out what the [council] leader has and what else is needed in that relationship. The second thing you have to do is accept that the leader's not going to change. So you're the one that has to adapt to that double act. So if you've got a headstrong [council] leader , confident, eloquent, determined, what you've got to articulate is a degree of broader view, little bit of restraint, little bit of 'Have you thought this through?' If you've got a leader who is more introverted, more in the role because they are driven by values rather than proposals, then your job is actually to translate the values into proposals. (Interviewee 12)

A number of interviewees talked about overtly discussing, with the lead politicians they worked with, what each of their roles should be in particular situations – trying to work out how each could use their status, skills and networks best to achieve the objectives in question. They also made it clear that they talked explicitly about the importance of brokering and negotiation skills, both with the politicians in question and with other protagonists in order to achieve solutions and political goals.

A local authority chief executive commented:

I always say you are in a situation of power where at the end of the day you cannot win, so you have to be clever and flexible and pragmatic about how you're going to make things work. (Interviewee 13)

One or two of those who had operated in both central and local government felt that they were less able to exercise their people and staff leadership skills in central government than in local government because of the restrictions of working predominantly for a government based on a single party or coalition. Their more formal relationships were with government ministers rather than with locally elected councillors across all parties because of ministerial constitutional arrangements and the ambiguity of where leadership accountability sat in the civil service. However, all those interviewed were agreed that creating an effective relationship between a permanent secretary (who is a civil servant) and a secretary of state (who is usually an elected politician) or between a chief executive (a local government officer) and a council leader (who is an elected politician) required effort on both sides and was difficult to set down entirely in formal rules, being dependent as it is on the context, tacit knowledge and mutual skills and abilities. The reflections and metaphors used by this council chief executive reflect this.

Well, I think it's about relationships primarily. I think it's about […] just accepting that there's grey fog in between your realm and theirs. So manning the barricades and saying, 'You will not pass over here' and 'I will never pass over there' is not particularly helpful […] Because we became [council] leader and chief exec at the same time […] that relationship's worked really well, but it's been like a marriage, you know, like an arranged marriage. (Interviewee 13)

In some cases, with tacit or overt agreement, senior public servants spent time working on the relationships with stakeholders, in effect on behalf of politicians. Sometimes these relationships were part of work on improving operational effectiveness of services; sometimes to gain acceptance or active support for new legislation. One interviewee gave a compelling example of where, with the authority of his leader and on behalf of the local authority, he negotiated complex and sensitive issues related to the local schools structures with powerful and controversial local stakeholders to achieve a workable outcome.

A number of the interviewees highlighted the importance of stakeholders in influencing policy-making and said that public servant insights and relationships with stakeholders were intrinsic to giving well-founded advice to politicians, and part of the key brokering and resolution skills of effective public servants. A common theme was helping politicians to do three things: first, to synthesise the myriad of ideas and influences upon them; second, to help them reach views on policy or operational matters; and third, to work with stakeholders to ensure the effective delivery of what the politicians were seeking to achieve. One interviewee talked of the struggles they felt they had had, to get politicians to engage with partner or stakeholder organizations – in order to get things done in the right way, rather than just have an expectation that, once policy was agreed, it would happen automatically:

So, I remember early on being absolutely astounded when there was a conversation about how did you get the outside world to do what the ministers wanted, and I was talking about ownership. If we've got something, we engage people in helping shape the solution. You can corral them through the party political process, but at the end of the day the better they understand it, the more they own it, and I remember a politician saying,'I don't want ownership, I just want people to get on and do it,' And me trying to say, 'Well, people won't get on and do it unless they believe in it. And actually they will find a thousand ways of stopping it, and you will never know, because they have the knowledge, we don't.' We depend on the knowledge and abilities of the people out there, and our job is to catalyse it and to harness it and to focus it, not to actually just tell people what to do because it won't happen. (Interviewee 10)

This kind of interaction is a good example of a senior public servant challenging the politician, giving advice which is trying to get their politician's policies delivered better, but to which the politician is unreceptive. But it also demonstrates the active discussion about stakeholders which takes place between politicians and senior public servants.

A chief executive explained how relationships were built up between politicians and their public servants, and started by talking about respect for politicians:

It is quite important. I like politicians because I believe that the vast majority of them are there because they really want to change the world. They want to see the people that they represent have a better deal than they've got, whatever party they are. You may define a better deal for people in different ways depending on whether you're Tory or Labour but I think it's the same thing. And they're genuinely in it for that basis. I think the difference between them and officers is most officers have a big chunk of them which is about their own career and their own power base. And that gets in the way of the purity of, 'What do we want to do for people?' So, I've always been able to link with politicians at that level. What do we want to do for the people that we serve? (Interviewee 13)

This issue of successful senior public servants either liking or respecting politicians shines through in their interviews and underlies many of their comments. This does not mean that every public servant in our interviews liked every politician they had worked with but it does mean they were comfortable with working with politicians as a breed. They respected and endorsed the role and activity of politics. This perhaps marks out these interviewees from the UK population in general, where trust in and respect for politicians is low and declining. One of the chief executives interviewed referred to respected council leaders he had worked with over a long period and how he supported them in their roles:

I've never really had to get involved in any of that politics really. The politics were for Councillor C and Councillor D to sort out. Occasionally I got invited to the Labour Group to give one of my dashing presentations about what the future was, so we can get cheering on. But that was my role, as a cheerleader, not as a political leader. So for me that's been that relationship. I try to create a very distinctive perspective about how the city moves forward, and to try and provide leadership within [name of place] and also with the private sector about how we move ourselves forward. That's not just happened overnight; that's been a hell of a lot of hard work, and we do organize ourselves in [name of place] around a very mature base. (Interviewee 14)

All the senior public servants emphasised in different ways how active and facilitative they believed they should be in enabling politicians to achieve their political objectives. One permanent secretary described a debate among his peers prior to an election, about whether they should be very proactive in terms of helping sort out political brokering of arrangements for governing or whether there should be more of a role of standing on the sidelines, in which politicians should sort out their own business and the senior civil servants should only materialise when the business was done. The interviewee marshalled strong arguments against the latter. He argued that there was likely to be a better and more sustainable outcome for governance, not to mention more workable solutions, with the skills, experience and knowledge of process which the public servants brought to the table, provided they advised the politicians in good faith and did not seek to be politicians themselves. However, he noted that:

Some colleagues clearly felt that that took one into a political space even though there was no implication that involved one behaving in a partisan way. (Interviewee 1)

While a number of those interviewed cited politicians joking with them that they themselves were very able politicians in their own right, all the interviewees were very clear that while they understood a lot about politicians and with the right sensitivity could be very helpful to them, they themselves were *not* politicians. Indeed one chief executive recounted how he very specifically told his more junior staff that they must not make themselves 'the fifty-first

politician' in a council of fifty councillors (specific numbers changed to preserve anonymity). He amplified this point in discussions about ways of working by saying:

I think if you try to be too politically aware, astute, you would meet yourself coming back. You'd be trying to cover all the bases, and my approach has always been to say right, I've been given a task, I know what's to be done for the Council, I'll do that and I'll make sure it's done either through myself or through whatever officers in a way which is in the best interests of the Council. You then have a set of skills which is about how you then relate that to the elected members, how you get ownership of that, and how you then get agreement to move forward in the way that you've recommended […] you will get into situations where you know you could be making a recommendation that the political leadership of the Council might not agree with. But as long as you're setting out all the rationale behind your recommendation, and it's a situation where the alternative that's proposed by the Council isn't something that's going to be illegal, you don't have an issue. (Interviewee 3)

All of those interviewed did believe that there was absolute legitimacy in being 'in the thick of it', and understanding the political battlefield and thinking through the strategy of how to deploy troops there, while recognising that not all senior public servants would agree with them and would believe that this was a bridge too far. There are differences in terms of how this plays out in central and local government environments because of the differences in constitutional and institutional context.

One chief executive commenting on working with politicians said:

I need to understand them as individuals and people, but I also need to understand what their party is saying, so that I can lock the advice I'm giving them back into things which make sense. So there are political realities, and there are managerial realities, you know? Now not all chief execs see the world in that way: some chief execs perceive themselves to be managerial entities in their own right whose job it is, in a way, to bring sanity to a mad world […] I think there's got to be an additional element of self-awareness which I think some chief execs don't bring to the table. This self-awareness orientates around the extent to which as a chief exec I act as both manager and political beast simultaneously […] It's interesting, one of the things that I think is very different between working as a local government public servant as opposed to a civil servant is that I am required to have a deep understanding and engagement in the politics of the administration. Whilst I am not allowed to act in a way which shows bias, I am expected to deploy it in my thinking. Moreover, if the [political] administration's political values do not accord with my own, I can always move on to another authority where I feel more comfortable with the politics. (Interviewee 5)

The reinforcement of the sense of being in the battle but not of it came from another local authority chief executive:

I suppose one of the skills I think chief execs have to have is the ability to sort of stand back and see the whole system in operation, the different fluxes and forces that are at play, the kind of almost four or five steps on in the conversation, all the time. And being able to see that with the different interests of the political parties, the election coming, the wider reputation change of the organization, what this company could have done, and your proper constitutional role of defending effective governance for the taxpayer. That balance all around. And at that point you have to become a political actor. (Interviewee 15)

What does being a senior public service leader involve?

The evidence of these interviews shows not only that the process of leadership by senior public servants is integrally linked with the skill of political astuteness, but that leadership itself has some particular complexities at these senior levels of public service in the UK.

The leadership task at this level encompasses:

- shared leadership with politicians fuelled by professional, politically astute advice-giving
- leading stakeholder processes to find solutions that support political objectives
- leading on ethics issues
- leading on management issues

These activities take place in the context of dual leadership (Hartley and Benington, 2010), and this is a subtle and changing relationship between different roles and elements in the leadership constellation (Denis et al., 2001). Government ministers and council leaders are the primary leaders, but their public servants also exercise leadership. These roles are at first sight in the shadow of political leaders but under a close spotlight can be seen to be highly dynamic, either in support or in leadership modes.

The issue of advice remains a complex one. In relationships within both the civil service and local government, some writers give the impression that there is a right answer in terms of advice to politicians. On some occasions there may be a more straightforward answer, e.g. in dealing with an asbestos problem in a building. But even on what some people see as technical issues, e.g. the building of a road, it can be seen that, while elements of it may be technical, it can be anything but straightforward politically. Where issues are complex, or wicked (Ritell and Webber, 1973), with wide variations in public opinion and no obvious solution (e.g. legislation on the legality or otherwise of particular classifications of drugs, or family breakdown) it is even less clear. When being explicit about an issue could cause the political downfall of a minister or a council leader, advice is increasingly less technical and calls more and more for powers of political astuteness and the use of imagination.

Leadership with stakeholders and partners often involves overt discussion and division of responsibilities between politician and senior manager to focus on whose input is likely to be most effective in that situation. One of the chief executives interviewed described the proactive building of political alliances across several authorities, which he felt were predominantly politically driven and required almost no involvement from the chief executive, as the council leader's political clout and advocacy skills were the best way of progressing this agenda. On other more technical issues, the chief executive had taken the lead.

In these interviews leadership had to be at its most sophisticated in relation to the issue of ethics. It had to encompass hard-edged knowledge about rules and procedures, imagination and integrity to understand not only any actual but any perceived risk of wrong-doing, and sensitivity to persuade others of this perspective. In the next section of this report, Chapter 6, we will consider the issue of ethics and political astuteness.

Management issues might be seen as the most straightforward element of leadership, comparable with the management challenges of any private sector organization. But even the most senior manager in a public service organization stands in the shadow of their political lead, and must communicate to at least their most senior colleagues the political objectives behind the work of the organization. Management issues are not entirely outside the ambit of the politician but generally, within the balance of the dancing on ice relationship, they lean much more towards the senior public servant.

Crucially, however, the skills of political astuteness are what enable senior public servants to decide whether and how to deploy these four elements of their leadership – advice-giving, stakeholder processes, ethics and management – effectively and with sensitivity. The following excerpt from the interview with a chief executive of a metropolitan council about

what advice he would give more junior staff reflects very clearly some of the interactions between these four leadership elements, reflecting the chief executive's passion whether working with staff, politicians or with stakeholders:

It's values. What you're there for, who you're there for and how you should measure yourself, and the point that you're only as good as your last failure. So, politicians are to be worked with but on the understanding that they're 'switched on' by different things. Understand the place we are, and fundamentally work for the place. And no one will ever ever shoot you for working your socks off. That's why I think if you look at the people in this place, particularly second, third and fourth tier, you will see a collection of driven people. And not just hugely talented people, but people who are quite frankly driven. And are motivated day by day, not just because they want to work for a progressive council, we can all have views about how good or bad [name of place] is, but I do think it's one of the most progressive councils in the country. But actually it's not about working for the city council, it's actually working for the city. I think people get that here. And what we've been able to do is articulate and communicate that sense of being and that sense of place to our private sector leaders. And, in fact, it was some of them who actually drove me in that way in the 70s. (Interviewee 14)

This quote came from references to that particular council's promotion of economic prosperity – a classic example of where the political and managerial face of the authority are in complete alignment, much as in the dancing on ice metaphor.

6   The role of ethics in leadership with political astuteness

Steel knickers moments – dealing firmly with public accountability issues

One of the clearest findings of our research into the behaviour of senior public servants in the UK is their strong focus on ethics and the public interest and their use of political astuteness to deal with these issues. Our research suggests that specific aspects of ethics and governance apply in a party political democratic environment and are a major part of the contexts in which public servants operate.

We are not referring to 'ethics' in this context in terms of a code of ethics, tick-box checklist or ewhitestoneangel.co.uk

ethics committee. 'Ethics' in our research means written and unwritten codes and standards that exist in political and public servant interaction and the world in which they operate. In many cases these are to do with relationships, values, integrity and transparency (Lawton et al., 2013).

Every interviewee in this sample placed a strong emphasis on their own integrity, often linking this to issues of gaining or retaining the confidence of politicians of different parties, and to their own ability to make judgements about appropriate and inappropriate actions. Interviewees frequently used words like 'integrity', 'honest', 'truthfulness', 'trust' and 'trustworthiness'. For example, one public service manager in describing her appointment to her senior post said:

I thought that, for me, that was a major breakthrough and a vindication that I was held equally with respect by all parties. And that's something that I have really strived to do because to me the bottom line is integrity. The one thing that people cannot take from you is your integrity. (Interviewee 11)

In nearly all of the interviews, public servants clearly felt that they could not do their job effectively unless they were perceived as independent and working without party political allegiance. Interestingly, a number of them had historic connections to a political party (e.g. as a former member or activist), but in every case this had been in the past and they stated explicitly that they had subjugated their residual personal views to the requirement to give impartial advice backed up by technical and professional expertise, either from their own staff or experts from other organizations.

It was not surprising that many of those interviewed gave examples of when they had had to resist pressure from politicians, but, although several had found the particular situation stressful, it was seen as very much being part of the job. One former local authority chief executive used an unusual phrase to describe how it felt:

I got them to understand that effective governance was as important for their political control and leadership as it was important for the Council in its entirety, on its own, and they had an interest in that, the quality of the Council with or without political control. I was almost […] you kind of go into an uber-professional steel knickers kind of moment, but everything – I can remember staying up night after night, just rewriting and rewriting risk registers and scenarios of what to do. It culminated in a Monitoring Officer investigation. (Interviewee15)

In that scenario, an irregularity had been found in the way in which a large contract had been tendered that demanded an investigation, which would potentially involve a close examination of decisions taken by the politicians in power as well as having an impact on external companies who had won the contract. The chief executive reflected on the steps they had taken and the actual process of exercising political astuteness, which, in this case, had included intense intellectual activity under pressure, to work out an appropriate way of proceeding which would meet public interest, political and ethical requirements. In this instance a Monitoring Officer investigation – an internal investigation by a senior legal officer – was triggered internally to establish any misconduct issues. A number of those interviewed described these kinds of 'steel knickers' moments – being able to resist pressure from a

number of quarters, while balancing the requirements of conflicting objectives – even if they used different expressions to describe them. In this instance the chief executive concerned was clear that, through systematic analysis, persuasive ideas and strong underlying frameworks, they had ensured that the local authority had acted with integrity.

Another senior local authority chief executive made a very strong distinction between, on the one hand, advice that was based on their perception of the values of the politicians they were advising, and, on the other hand, technical advice from officers based on what was practically doable. They linked this issue closely to their own personal standing and integrity:

I have very very strong values, and I've probably got quite strong political associations, which I try very hard not to make public. And as a result of that I think I'm very very careful to watch myself in a way that perhaps people who have not been so partisan might not be, so I am extraordinarily careful. And I'm particularly careful therefore not to be antagonistic to people who are putting forward views with which I'm not – I would not be a natural supporter of. So I'm always extremely careful to make sure – and my technique is always ask open questions, always always ask open questions. The other thing I've always done, and do very much now, […] is make it clear to them what I personally think, so that there can never be […] any misunderstanding about the technical advice that you give as opposed to the values that you hold […] in giving the advice to councillors here I make sure that the advice that we give is about how practical something is to implement, whether it is technically possible or not, and the issues which are around value judgements about whether that is something that councillors would wish to do on the basis of their values, so I'm very clear about being able to give technical advice and giving values-driven advice and separating the two. (Interviewee 16)

A couple of those interviewed had experienced situations where they felt that this commitment to integrity and giving sound advice had damaged their relationship(s) 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.

Where political astuteness and defending the public interest overlap – power structures and legitimacy

Most of those interviewed alluded to the public interest and their need to defend it. There is no doubt that the term public interest is a difficult one. Some politicians might argue that the term is sometimes used by officials as a blocking device to support the advice being given by the official to a politician. In our interviews there were a number of cases where the public servant being interviewed had given advice, which was in their view in the public interest, that was not received well by the politician. At best, this made for an uncomfortable relationship and, at worst, created an active risk to their position. There is no doubt that the interviewees saw looking after that 'public interest' as part of their role. It is clear that this can be an area of tension between the politician domain and public servant domain, as politicians' legitimacy to have the final say about what constitutes the public interest comes directly from their elected or appointed status. Public servants, however, also have responsibility and legitimacy to defend the public interest, sometimes statutorily defined, sometimes defined in accountabilities to Parliament. This potential clash of power structures made the political astuteness with which the public servants approached these tensions even more essential. This was not about tricks or brinkmanship. It was about having a framework of principles to find solutions which were acceptable politically, but at the same time right and legitimately defensible to whoever wanted to know.

A number of those interviewed gave examples of serious ethical or public interest issues related to policy where they felt they had applied leadership with political astuteness in their advice-giving to politicians, sometimes engaging in overt conflict in order to resolve the situation.

In one case the individual had to advise their council that it had a legal requirement to take actions related to implementation of the council tax which were in direct conflict with the

principles of the political party in control of the council. Another interviewee described the temptation to agree to something which would have satisfied a particular group of politicians under short-term pressure but which they believed would have been wrong in terms of the long-term public interest:

I think there is a responsibility to the public and I think there's a tricky balance here. I think if you're not having an eye to the agenda beyond the immediate, if you like, you're not fulfilling your wider public duty, and I remember [Senior Civil Servant A] used to say that there were two roles in the service: one was the standing role which was there regardless of government in power; and the second was to serve the government of the day. Part of the standing role is, I think, you don't take decisions that would completely stymie future generations, for example. (Interviewee 4)

The interviewee suggested the following key advice he would give anyone working at this kind of level, brokering advice to politicians on challenging subjects:

I'd say you can either have pain now or pain later, and usually the pain later is a lot worse […] if there's an idea and you're absolutely sure it is not going to work, you've got good evidence to back it, then don't go along with it. (Interviewee 4)

A permanent secretary who had had to deal with an issue which eventually led to a ministerial resignation referred to the key lesson they had learned from the experience:

The main one being always say what you think, exactly the moment you think about it […] There are at least two occasions in that story where I knew what the right thing to do was and didn't say so because I didn't think it was my place to, and I was right and I didn't say so. (Interviewee 8)

A number of those interviewed talked about the kinds of 'tests' which they applied in their inner thinking when they were trying to work out the right path to follow or the right advice to give a minister or a senior councillor, in particular where potential ethical issues are involved. When being explicit about an issue in the wrong context could cause the political downfall of a minister or a council leader – should this be taken out of context – advice is less managerial and technical alone and calls more and more for powers of political astuteness and the use of imagination, as well as experience and judgement. One chief executive said:

I think the one thing I've always thought is if this appears on the front page of the newspaper, can you defend it? (Interviewee 15)

A permanent secretary saw press perception as secondary to the issue of whether any action fitted with the principles of fair governance:

That test is about being able to connect back to the principles […] it is saying I have to be able to locate this action in some framework of principle that people would recognise and accept […] It's a good mental test to apply, and on the whole I prefer to apply it to some hypothetical member of the public than to the press […] And of course, another version of that, and a conventional version of that which has more practical implications, is to ask oneself the question, 'If the opposition party knew I was doing this, would it make it impossible for them to trust me in future if they formed a government?' (Interviewee 1)

It is interesting that in the latter case the senior civil servant concerned linked the rightness of the action both to firm bureaucratic principles protecting governance *and* to the potential perception of their role in it and the values with which he would be associated. Earlier in this paper we have emphasised that these kinds of judgements must also be linked with knowledge of both a technical and contextual nature.

How political astuteness helps to deal with difficult situations

As in any profession, senior public servants have their war stories. Some of these relate to having dealt with very difficult standards issues, or to being under enormous pressure from one or more politicians. The chief executive who described one of these times as being a

'steel knickers moment' did so because it had been a moment when they had needed to hold their nerve, think through the right course of action and persuade a number of nervous actors and stakeholders to follow the recommended course of action in a direction which they did not necessarily want to take, for political or other reasons.

Many of these moments came when senior public servants were trying to work with politicians to find solutions to complex local or national issues, against a background of a clear legislative or statutory framework. Often there are rules and regulations which, to put it mildly, do not lend themselves to the politics of the situation, for very good reasons – they were designed to get clarity and transparency and to drive people into accountable decisions. Finding a politically defensible, appropriate, transparent answer to a problem could test relationships significantly, the interviewees reported.

One local government chief executive (Interviewee 16) referred to a complex planning problem where they had needed to exercise a very high degree of intellectual and political astuteness, and described the kinds of tensions and dilemmas they faced in trying to meet the concerns of the politicians involved while at the same time meeting planning requirements in the long term and maintaining relationships. The site that was technically and practically appropriate for an important council development was extremely controversial locally. There was a local election mid-process and a number of local MPs were closely interested in the planning issue and being put under pressure by local people. This issue was prolonged and deeply felt and resulted in some very testing judgement and relationship challenges for the chief executive involved. However, the interviewee felt that the actions they took and the advice given, underpinned by very strong and well-substantiated technical advice, were not only vindicated later in terms of resolution of the issue, but also reinforced the trust placed in them and their integrity. This person had needed to consider the procedural and strategic framework of planning law, the views of local people in a variety of different places with different stakes in the process, some 'big P politics' in terms of relationships with local MPs, as well as the positions of leading politicians taken over several years and during elections. The chief executive had to apply skills which reflected both the 'Strategic direction and scanning' and 'Reading people and situations' aspects of the Political Astuteness Framework to try to lead their council in the management of the process in a transparent and appropriate way and to advise the politicians on why that route was the most appropriate – and do all this in a constantly changing tense situation. Putting a foot wrong might not just bring reputational, legal and financial damage to the council, it might also seriously damage their personal relationship with the politicians concerned and hence their ability to function. They commented:

I was very very keen to find a way out for them, couldn't, and therefore gave them the advice I gave them on the basis that actually this […] might be the wrong advice but it's the only advice, and you really need to go for it, and if it doesn't work, it might not work, you can deal with that as and when. So I started off by wanting to help them, and it was only when I'd convinced myself that there was no alternative that I was prepared to really push it. I got a huge amount of support from the staff, and I don't think without the really high-level technical support that I got from planners and engineers, which is not something one normally says […] So actually through giving consistent advice, by constantly standing up to political pressure and having clear justifiable reasons for what we were doing, we actually got to the stage where the Secretary of State completely ruled out all the objections, the site went ahead, the building was built, we bought out the company, got out of that relationship because it was inappropriate, and we ended up with one of the highest recycling rates. (Interviewee 16)

In each case, the public servants explained the personal angst and intellectual energy required to deal with this, coupled with the bank of experience and knowledge they drew on to navigate their way through a harbour scattered with icebergs and sharks. All those interviewed articulated a perception of themselves as being persons of personal and professional integrity and described this as being fundamental to their role as senior public servants.

These accounts give a sense of the pressures on top public servants: thinking about how to comply with all the requirements of transparency and openness, including public and stakeholder communications, while managing the situation with individual politicians who understandably would be wary about any possibly negative findings and outcomes which might be seen as a reflection on them, either personally or politically.

In the two scenarios above, the individuals interviewed felt able to talk about and analyse them because they believed the solutions had been right for the public and by public service standards and ethics. Nevertheless they had felt very challenged, with the feeling that anything could go wrong at any moment, whether for the politicians, for the organization, or for themselves as professionals seeking to do the right thing.

A number of those interviewed gave examples of individual politicians who had wanted, from time to time, to push the boundaries of acceptability according to central or local government rules or procedures. Sometimes this was to authorise expenditure in ways which neither internal audit nor the public would deem to be acceptable. It could be to do with rules which had been made for a reason, but the politician wanted an exception to be made. Sometimes it might be about a politician intervening inappropriately in a staffing decision. In some cases the interviewees described standing their ground with the senior politician and refusing to authorise something which needed their agreement. In others, the interviewee described how they had found a solution to try to manage an apparently unacceptable situation with a specific rationale and mechanism, for example, by writing a special letter to seek authority for an exception to be made.

The interviewees frequently expressed the view that while most politicians might not like actions which were perceived as blocking or unreasonable at the time, on some occasions at least – usually after reflection or after circumstances had developed which supported the public servant's advice – the politician had acknowledged that the advice given had been valuable. This demonstrates perhaps the effectiveness of the political astuteness that the public servant had exercised. It would be wrong to suggest that public servants spend their whole time trying to prevent politicians doing unacceptable things, but there is no doubt from the evidence of those interviewed that when these occasions do occur they can be testing in terms of relationships, which can then affect much more complex issues such as controversial policy discussions. Dealing with these sensitive tensions acceptably is an important part of political astuteness.

7   Dancing on Ice: discussion of key issues and conclusions

This report has examined whether and how senior public servants exercise leadership with political astuteness in their daily work with elected and appointed politicians. It is an important moment, both in policy and academic terms, to examine these issues, with opportunities to stimulate reflection and shape thinking for the future.

First, there are several current debates and questions in the public sphere about the roles and effectiveness of the UK Civil Service. These come from a number of sources, including the 2010 Coalition Government's questioning of the role of the UK Civil Service. The Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) report commissioned by the Cabinet Office and called *Accountability and Responsiveness in the Senior Civil Service* explores the links between ministers and the senior civil service in the context of international practice. The Public Administration Select Committee has conducted an inquiry and has published its findings in the report titled *Truth to Power: How Civil Service Reform Can Succeed*. There is also increasing prominence being given to the views of the Public Accounts Committee and other House of Commons select committees when they scrutinise the competence of individual senior civil servants. Furthermore, given the pressures on public service budgets, particularly in local government, and a strong interest in community empowerment, there are also questions about conventional management structures in a time of austerity, with more use of shared chief executives and shared services. Much of the media focus tends to be on the Civil Service, but the issues in local government are actually just as challenging of previous conceptions about roles and relationships, albeit in a different way. So, how should public servants work at the most senior level and does it require leadership with political astuteness as a key skill?

In academic terms, this report is one of the few to examine the work and skills of public servants in their dealings with elected politicians, and to rehabilitate the sense that political astuteness is an important managerial skill. Before we consider the implications of this study, we must review the strengths but also the limitations of this research.

We have gained privileged access to detailed interviews with seventeen of the most senior and most widely admired public servants in the UK. They are at the top of their game, and are seen by their professional colleagues as effective in working on a daily basis with politicians. Many are well known and recognised for their contributions to public service. They cover the whole of the UK and both local and central government roles (and some have worked in both). One issue which some will be wary of is that these interviews are based on self-reports. It might be argued that testimony from these able individuals will be clever and self-serving. We cannot rule this out, but, on the other hand, the interviews were all conducted at close quarters about relatively current or recent events by someone who had been a professional peer, which will reduce the likelihood of unrealistic responses to questions. Furthermore, the interviews were noticeably consistent in terms of the type of examples, conclusions and propositions. Finally, the interviewees reported on mistakes, dilemmas and confusions as they tried to lead their organizations and work with politicians, so their interviews were certainly not a sanitised view of life at the top. There are only a very few such accounts of life at the top about the public servants who work with politicians in the UK.

Our sample includes career civil servants and career local government officers, as well as those who have swum in both waters. The predominance of references to the skills required to be politically astute as key to the function of their leadership confirms its importance in both these parts of the public sector.

Four key issues

There are four key issues which have emerged from the research which are vital to the debate about the exercise of political astuteness by senior public servants.

a) Public manager empathy and respect for politicians

All those interviewed reported a deep respect for politicians 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. Much of their motivation was based on the belief that politicians in general want to improve society, and that, by working with them, public servants can also have a role in that. This links very directly both to what the senior public servant does to execute that role and how they do it. This is an important consideration in our conclusions and one which is at variance with the well-embedded cultural stereotype of the disdainful civil servant in *Yes Minister*. It also supports the reading people and situations aspect of the Political Astuteness Framework in terms of deeply understanding the interests of other stakeholders, in this case elected politicians.

b) The importance of ethics and integrity

Interviews show that public servants are in a regular, even continual, internal dialogue and reflection with themselves about how they operate in an ethical framework demanding high standards of personal and professional integrity. Extreme examples of these ethical issues are at the tough end of senior public service life. Sometimes the 'steel knickers' described by one local authority chief executive (Interviewee 15, Chapter 6, Steel knickers moments) are essential – and several interviewees talked about similar moments. The interview evidence shows that senior officials in central and local government have deeply held democratic values, allied to a strong sense of their own personal integrity. The strong ethical framework can be seen as part of the public service ethos (Rayner, Williams, Lawton and Allinson, 2011; Needham, 2006; Perry and Wise, 1990) and part of public servants considering what they perceive to be the public interest. Of course this does not guarantee that the judgements made by public servants in the public interest are the right ones, but the evidence is that this consideration is a major influence upon them and upon how they lead their organizations. This appears to be a very important element of the political astuteness of public servants.

(c) The vital role of knowledge, skills, judgement and context

In undertaking their leadership task of working closely with politicians, public servants report that they draw on a detailed understanding of the constitutional, institutional and organizational contexts in which they work. This is described in the Political Astuteness Framework (Hartley and Fletcher, 2008; Hartley et al., 2007) widely referenced in this report. Our findings, based on detailed semi-structured interviews, reinforce this approach to understanding political astuteness. This understanding ranges from layers of knowledge about formal and informal aspects of the constitution – rules and principles which bind public life in the UK – to deep tacit knowledge and insights into political and stakeholder relationships, and about the possibilities and potential pitfalls of media and public opinion. These are particular types of managerial, technical and professional skill that, although rarely discussed in the literature, are critical to the functioning of top public servants, as our research shows that they draw on this knowledge on a daily basis. Many managers may have risen through the ranks on the basis of particular professional and technical skills such as legal or other qualifications, but our evidence suggests that senior public servants do not abandon these skills as they move up the management ladder; rather they deepen and augment existing skills with in-depth and extensive knowledge of public administration, constitutional and democratic codes of practice, and working with stakeholders. They increasingly draw on these skills as they become more senior and come into more contact with elected or appointed representatives. 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.

We can consider that these broader contextual and political skills are the technical and professional skills, knowledge and particularly judgement possessed by senior public servants and which are necessary for their effectiveness at work. It is common to call such skills, knowledge and judgements the capabilities of the leader (Boyatzis, 2006, 1982; Crosby and Bryson, 2005). They are the skills of understanding both the context and the varied interests which exist in dealing with public matters where there are a range of views, goals and stakeholders, and where many issues are controversial or contested. They are the skills of thinking ahead about the possible moves of different actors and consequences for a policy or service, not just planning or implementation. 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 are generic or are highly contingent on particular contexts. Of course, the answer may be that they have some elements of both, but the recent emphasis on generic management skills has perhaps underplayed these important aspects of institutional knowledge and capability.

(d) The value but also the limits of acceptable political astuteness

This paper uses research evidence to confirm that the skill of political astuteness in the hands of senior public servants is generally a virtue rather than the negative and manipulative skill it is sometimes portrayed as in popular culture and in much of the traditional management literature (with some honourable exceptions) (Buchanan, 2008; Vigoda-Gadot and Drory, 2006). The view of the interviewees is that political awareness or astuteness in this context is generally deployed for the public good, either to assist in delivering democratically supported objectives, or to prevent breaches of ethical frameworks and principles. There is increasing recognition that political astuteness skills in leadership and management are important to navigate the complexities of multiple goals and multiple stakeholders, particularly for those leaders who have to work both inside and outside their organizations. This research confirms this trend of rehabilitating politics as a necessary skill and argues that it is fundamental to the work of senior public servants.

Using the interview evidence, we reflected on whether there can be too much political astuteness, if its use is not balanced by the right level of competence and knowledge and an underlying ethical framework. The ethical and reflexive questions which public servants asked themselves on a continual basis indicate they have a keen awareness of the pitfalls of failing to use political astuteness or using it inappropriately. Misreading the context or the motives of politicians, misjudging the intensity of the political issue, trying to hold the line on appropriate advice, or getting too close or too involved in partisan issues were all themes that interviewees reported being aware of as they navigated their dual leadership roles. They also gave examples of where they themselves had made mistakes or where public servant colleagues had, in their view, got the balance wrong. The very notion of balance – also present in the dancing on ice metaphor – suggests limits on political astuteness.

Our initial analysis suggests at least two dimensions to using political astuteness:

i) A knowledge dimension – how far the public servant draws on 'pure' managerial and professional knowledge

This encapsulates the risk of taking insufficient account of the politics on the one hand, or using political knowledge but with the risk of failing to be grounded in managerial and professional knowledge on the other. Somewhere along this continuum is the appropriate mix of both managerial–professional knowledge and political knowledge; outside of that appropriate range there can be problems with lack of or too much political astuteness.

ii) A judgement dimension – about the degree to which the public servant is responsive or not to the politician

This encapsulates the risk of too great a degree of responsiveness by the public servant with the risk of the politician not receiving the frank and fearless advice they deserve and need. On the other hand, relentless adherence to a rigid interpretation of the separation of politician–

public servant roles and powers could make the public servant unresponsive, hiding safely behind rules and codes but creating frustration for the politicians.

Either of these dimensions may be problematic, illustrating the porous nature of the boundaries of political astuteness. Again, neither too much nor too little responsiveness may be the ideal. These boundaries, as our interviews show, are not fixed positions. The degrees of knowledge and judgement vary with the issue, the context, the relationship already established with the politician, and so on. Balance only happens through dynamic motion.

Four conclusions

Conclusion 1 It is important to understand what it is senior public managers do. Leadership with political astuteness is an integral element of the work of senior public servants.

Senior public managers in the UK, whether in central or local government, operate in part as traditional management leaders, generally exercising leadership over large organizations in their own right, but they have to subjugate their leadership to a more political space than managers working in other contexts. At times they have to make themselves virtually invisible in deference to the political leadership for whom they work and which exercises final authority in our system of democracy. Most interviewees warmly welcomed the term 'leadership with political astuteness' as a description of their role. There were a couple of interviewees who had reservations about the phrase, but their concern related more to how the phrase would be perceived by elected politicians than to the accuracy of the label in relation to their own role and skills. They felt it might give the impression that public servants try to manipulate politicians, or take the leadership role which politicians view as their own domain.

We draw on the Hartley and Fletcher (2008) Political Astuteness Framework which sets out the key capabilities required to be politically astute and is largely supported by these in-depth interviews. However, in the research reported here, we have additionally identified the important role of ethics, which was not included in that framework (as the framework is skill-based and skills can be used for a variety of different purposes, whether malign or public interest purposes). We had not set out to explore ethics, but the issue came up repeatedly in the interviews and was the touchstone for many public servants as they navigated particular policy, relationship or stakeholder dilemmas. It is central to their weighing up of how to act in a context of diverse interests and needs, and in consideration of the public interest.

We conclude that in the analysis of political astuteness of senior public servants both by public managers and academia, there needs to be a greater emphasis on capabilities and judgements about ethics, in order to reflect more forcibly the realities of the particular context in which they operate. Of course, ethics features in other leadership contexts, but it is particularly pertinent to public leadership (Lawton et al., 2013) and is critical at the top level.

Conclusion 2 Leadership with political astuteness as exercised by UK senior public managers is a positive feature which has a vital role to play in democratic governance and public service.

The concept of leadership with political astuteness rehabilitates the predominantly negative connotations of political astuteness which are prevalent in the field of generic management (see also Alford et al., 2014; Hartley et al., 2013). A small number of scholars are now arguing for the value of political astuteness skills, both in general (Buchanan, 2008; Butcher and Clarke, 2008, 2003;) and for public managers (Baddeley and James, 1990, 1987a, 1987b). We argue that it is an essential part of the multi-faceted leadership required of senior public servants in supporting politicians to achieve political objectives. Indeed, we can go further: if senior public servants do not possess those qualities of political astuteness, they may blunder into complex political situations and actively undermine politicians as well as being unable to broker solutions for them and for relevant stakeholders.

Mulgan (2004), writing about New Zealand public servants, makes the point that public servants need to be politically neutral but not politically neutered. In other words, they should eschew party political behaviours and actions but they still need to understand and work with politics in their role. Similarly, Moore (1995) argues that effective public servants are not just clerks and martyrs (i.e. passive implementers of the will of politicians) but instead are active shapers of public policy and value – while at all times recognising that the ultimate authority and legitimacy for decisions come from elected politicians.

Political astuteness is a matter of judgement as well as of careful and objective analysis. One interviewee emphasised that even in a generic senior public service context there are still shades of view about the legitimacy of degrees of political astuteness. But overall we believe our work advocates and reinforces the rehabilitation of the concept of politics and political astuteness in the public management field and endorses its importance in the success of senior public servants.

Conclusion 3   Politicians and senior public servants exercise day-to-day dual leadership, the politician in the ascendant, but with a vibrant balancing dynamic reflected in the image of dancing on ice.

While in hierarchical and governance terms the political leader is the more senior of the two leaders and holds ultimate authority, the day-to-day leadership with political astuteness is exercised by a political leader and managerial leader moving together, each exercising authority in their own sphere and having to find or create between them a balancing dynamic. We argue that the dancing on ice metaphor gives a more accurate sense of this fluidity – and sometimes precariousness – than static and linear descriptions of relationships between politicians and senior civil servants, based as they are on a line that neither should cross between their respective spheres of influence. By contrast, dancing on ice evokes the sense of moving together, giving each other space, sometimes one in the spotlight, sometimes the other, in an environment where the partnership may stumble and occasionally fall, and where the centre of gravity lies between the two, so that each is reliant on the other.

Different terms were used in interviews to describe where the spheres of politicians and public servants touch – 'grey fog', 'a marriage', 'overlap', and so on. Public servants, however, seem to assert and accept that these boundaries are not static, but change according to context. What does not alter is a very strong code of learned values and ethics. At the most senior level, this is combined with deep and extensive experience of working positively with democratically elected politicians. *Yes Minister* was a brilliant comic caricature, assuming a not-very-able politician and a machiavellian civil servant. The more recent comic triumph, *The Thick of It*, implies incompetence on both sides. Neither can reflect the subtlety and nuance of the real-life ice dance by politicians and senior public servants together, with its rise and fall and changes in dual leadership and the need to adapt to circumstance and to work together to avoid tripping or falling.

Conclusion 4 The combination of managerial skills, institutional and contextual knowledge and ethical judgement is needed to exercise leadership with political astuteness and these skills are part of the distinctive capabilities of the most senior managers in the public sector.

Should we consider this a new profession? Or at least a newly recognised and distinctive set of skills? The fluidity of the democratic environment in which these public servants operate, the multitude of different arenas and stakeholders, and the capacity for any issue with which they are dealing to become very political or subject to public scrutiny and interrogation do demand more than pure managerial skills or traditional professional expertise, or, at the other end of the spectrum, the ability to wheel and deal. Our research suggests that there is a specific expertise in how to marry political processes with managerial objectives in a way which operates within key codified constitutional principles while keeping one eye on considerations of public value and public opinion.

Implications for research, policy and practice

This research has explored how senior public servants use political astuteness to reference their ethical touchstones such as whether issues match appropriate governance principles, or how this would be perceived by press or public.

What about the future? The question of whether the senior public servant–politician relationship as currently practised is sustainable was not originally part of the research, but it was an issue raised by some of the interviewees, and is also present in current public policy debates. Some of those interviewed said that the strains on the public servant–politician relationship were increasing. They expressed concern about current pressures on public servant–politician relationships generated by the twin pressures of the political spotlight and expenditure constraints, along with the challenging policy issues those raise.

There are increasing numbers of uncomfortable choices to be made about policies and services in the public sector. If a politician does not feel a high level of trust in the advice they are given, or feels they have to sacrifice a senior official publicly as a response to negative press, governance or administrative outcomes, this will test the nature of public servant–politician relationships and the way they do business together. There are already indicators of tension in the relationship, as indicated both by discussions about possible outsourcing of policy advice from the Civil Service, and by the increasingly public attacks on individual senior public servants, whose codes of conduct and cultural expectations often preclude them from defending themselves in public arenas.

This is discussed in the IPPR report (2013), which proposes measures claimed to make civil servants more accountable. The interaction between politicians and senior public managers is subtle (Hood and Lodge, 2006). In seeking to make senior civil servants more publicly accountable (e.g. by making them publicly responsible for failure), it may also mean that civil servants will become more transparent about where ministers have ignored advice. (Currently they are likely to defend a position even where they know they themselves have advised against it.) While many people, including select committees, may see increasing accountability in the public arena as beneficial, the 'public flogging' element of this could breach one of the key bonds of trust between ministers and civil servants. It also begs the question as to whether senior civil servants will equally receive public credit for successes alongside a minister, where currently the credit projected publicly tends to be purely political. This is not to argue against accountability, which is self-evidently essential to effective delivery, but to acknowledge complexities in the context of those accountabilities in an environment uniting managerial and political leadership.

If the relationships between public servants and politicians are to be changed structurally, then there needs to be a detailed understanding of the leadership skills and, just as importantly, the values that public servants bring to the table. If, on the other hand, the current roles and relationships are to be preserved and appropriate skills developed in future generations of top-flight public servants, then this needs to be based on clear insights from research and an understanding of the sophistication of the interaction between politicians and their senior public servants.

This report has examined leadership with political astuteness by senior and accomplished public servants working with elected or appointed politicians. There are a number of issues which might be examined further in future research and policy development, including:

- The metaphor of dancing on ice and the skills of senior public servants seen from the perspective of the politician. This research has not examined the roles and skills needed from public servants as articulated by the political half of the partnership. We need more understanding of the political astuteness of public servants from the perspective of those politicians who work closely with them.

- The best way to ensure that leadership with political astuteness remains recognised and understood as a key part of senior public servant roles in UK constitutional relationships in the 21st century. Whatever the structural or procedural changes to the shape of public services, there needs to be room for the exercise of this context specific knowledge and judgment.

- Ways in which we could increase the capacity and success of UK political processes and public services by teaching political astuteness skills to public servants in a more systematic, overt and concerted way, while also ensuring that public servants retain and value their technical and professional skills.

This research has aimed to shine a strong light on what senior civil servants and local authority chief executives really think and how they work with politicians – a subject rarely written about other than in caricature. These findings demonstrate a strong and positive concept of leadership with political astuteness and emphasise that understanding the subtleties of the dual leadership in public governance is critical to achieving effective public policy and services. Despite all the imperfections of the democratic system and examples of political–public servant relationships going wrong, or being abused by either side, this process is the bedrock of a stable, well-developed parliamentary democracy. Robust political discussion and smooth political changeovers rely on the qualities of able, loyal and skilful senior public servants to oil those wheels and change political direction while managing day-to-day operations. They do this with impartiality but also with political astuteness. We hope this report goes some way to revealing these processes and understanding the values, ethics and skills of public servants as they work with politicians.

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Appendix 1
The institutional context: what do senior public servants do?

As well as understanding roles and purposes of leadership fulfilled by top public servants, the institutional context is relevant. One aspect of the Political Astuteness Framework already developed by the research team is 'Reading people and situations' (Alford et al., 2014; Hartley and Fletcher, 2008), and the interviewees consistently reported that they paid detailed attention to the context in which decisions had to be made, or relations with politicians and other stakeholders had been worked out. By 'institutional' context we mean not only the formal structures, roles, codes of conduct and job descriptions, but also the informal meanings, cultures, social norms and understandings which shape thought and action by public servants (Leach, Hartley, Lowndes, Wilson and Downe, 2005; Scott, 2001).

There are important differences of accountability between civil servants and those who work in local government. 'Civil servants' in this study means those at the top tier (i.e. Permanent Secretaries) who work for the UK central government. They may work in a ministerial policy environment in a government department, or they may have roles which also include managing very large-scale services such as HMRC or Jobcentre Plus. They are responsible to Parliament and its Government and MPs.

Public servants who work for local government at the most senior level are chief executives of local authorities. They are employed by a local democratically elected and politically autonomous local authority or council with no formal democratic connection to central government – although in the UK they receive a significant proportion of their funding from central government. Local government officers are not civil servants and they report to the elected politicians (called 'members', or 'councillors'), who together constitute the council and who are democratically elected to represent and govern their local area in terms of local decisions and services. While a chief executive will have a close relationship with their council leader, they have constitutional responsibilities to the whole council, and therefore have to develop effective day-to-day working relationships with the formal opposition. This duty to work with the opposition as well as the governing party or parties is in marked contrast with the duties of civil servants in central government, where the reporting lines of most senior civil servants will be to a single minister or team of ministers of the governing party or parties, and to Parliament.

Both senior civil servants and senior local government officers are bound by the Nolan Principles (see Appendix 2).

Permanent secretaries

The key defined role for all permanent secretaries in the UK is as Accounting Officer. This role is defined in the document *Managing public money* (HM Treasury, 2013) and is perceived very much from a management of resources perspective:

Formally the accounting officer in a public sector organisation is the person who parliament calls to account for stewardship of its resources. (HM Treasury, 2013, 3.1.2)

It identifies what a departmental accounting officer in central government should do in case of conflict between the most senior civil servant and their minister in this way:

If the minister decides to continue with a course the accounting officer has advised against, the accounting officer should ask for a formal direction to proceed. (HM Treasury, 2013, 3.4.3)

In practice this 'formal direction to proceed' is rarely used and is seen as a very serious step, indicative of serious disagreement between the Minister and Permanent Secretary and a refusal by the Permanent Secretary to take an action which they believe endangers financial probity or value for money or legal regulations.

This is supported by a statement that the Accounting Officer retains personal responsibility for: regularity and propriety; affordability and sustainability; value for money; control; management of opportunity and risk; learning from experience; and accounting accurately for the organization's financial position and transactions (information taken from HM Treasury, 2013, 3.3.3.).

However, while these formal documents set out the accountability frameworks which guide permanent secretaries, they do not evoke the real day-to-day business of permanent secretary life, which has come through in the research interviews. Rhodes (2011) produced a valuable account in *Everday Life in British Government*, and he also notes that there are a few insights into this in a small number of specific memoirs.

Through the website GOV.UK (accessed 13 August 2013), it was possible to read the roles of the Head of the UK Civil Service, Cabinet Secretary and Permanent Secretary of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills. The latter is attached at Appendix 3.

The description is generic, encompassing: advice to the Secretary of State; providing leadership to the Department; outlining the Accounting Officer's responsibility; contributing to the leadership of the Civil Service as a whole; and exploring reputation management. The personal business objectives of each Permanent Secretary in Whitehall are gradually being published, and they are tailored to the responsibilities of their specific Department, reflecting the balance between policy advice, staff leadership and financial accountability.

Local authority chief executives

The roles of local authority chief executives can vary according to the local authority which employs them, but there are some fundamentals. SOLACE (2005) noted:

The role of local authority chief executives is situated within the political and organisational context that surrounds it. It is essential to understand that context in order to understand local authority chief executives' proper roles and responsibilities. While it is not possible to prescribe what every chief executive […] should be and do, there are central elements to the role. One core element is to provide leadership at the interface between management and politics. (SOLACE, 2005, 3.2.5, p. 11)

The same report (Fig 2, p. 10), outlined the components of the chief executive's role as follows:

- *Managing the political/managerial interface*
- *Chief overall policy, strategy and planning adviser to the council*
- *Effective implementation of the council's policies*
- *Co-ordination of all the council's functions*
- *Leadership of corporate management team*
- *Line management and appraisal of chief officers*
- *Overall personnel management*
- *Performance management of the authority*
- *Promoting constructive external and internal relationships.*

The recent IPPR report (2013) attached a copy of a chief executive job description from the London Borough of Islington.

Many of the personnel aspects of this are described in local government shorthand as being the Head of Paid Service (Great Britain. *Local Government and Housing Act 1989*, Pt. I, s.4 (1–7)), and this phrase is seen in the local government culture as being emblematic of the distinction between officer management of the operational and separation from the activities of politicians – it is a phrase which chief executives often view as essential in their job description.

Some aspects of civil servant and local authority chief executive contexts differ: national versus local (whether in the UK, or England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland); more or less oriented to working with the whole elected body; the glare of national media scrutiny for permanent secretaries at select committee versus the sometimes intense local pressure at close quarters on chief executives who often live within or close to their local community; and finally the way in which they have been recruited to their posts. In local government this is done directly by a mixed panel of politicians, including opposition councillors; in central government Civil Service Commissioners, supported by relevant members of the senior civil service, make recommendations, with a name finally confirmed by the relevant minister.

Appendix 2
The seven principles of public life (the 'Nolan Principles')

The First Committee on Standards in Public Life, chaired by Lord Nolan (1995), established *The Seven Principles of Public Life*, also known as the 'Nolan Principles'. They are included in the Ministerial Code 2010 (Annex A).

They are:

Selflessness – Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other benefits for themselves, their family or their friends.

Integrity – Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might seek to influence them in the performance of their official duties.

Objectivity – In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.

Accountability – Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

Openness – Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

Honesty – Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.

Leadership – Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

Appendix 3
Permanent secretary performance objectives 2012/13

Extract from Permanent Secretary Individual Performance Objectives 2012/13 (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills).

Role of the Permanent Secretary

The role of the Permanent Secretary is to:

- Be a key adviser to the Secretary of State and his/her Ministerial team. This means providing support, counsel and challenge, to enable the Secretary of State and his/her Ministerial team to develop and implement their priorities.

- Provide strong leadership to the Department, working with their departmental Board, which is chaired by the Secretary of State and includes Non-executive Directors.

- Be the Accounting Officer answerable to Parliament, responsible for the Department's budget, ensuring value for money, giving priority to expenditure on front-line services (http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/psr_governance_accountingofficers.htm).

- Contribute to the leadership of the Civil Service as a whole, especially in delivering the Civil Service Reform programme (http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/reform).

- Work with Ministers to manage the external reputation of the Department, so that it is recognised for its delivery of public service and quality of its advice.

Permanent Secretary Objectives

- Objectives broadly reflect 'what' the Permanent Secretary is responsible for (focusing on delivery of the Government's objectives, particularly on growth; implementation and spending controls and efficiency) and 'how' they will deliver (building capability in their Department).

- Business delivery objectives take into account the priorities of the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, as well as the Secretary of State.

- Permanent Secretary objectives are shared with Departmental Boards and approved by Secretaries of State or relevant Minister and Departmental Lead Non-executive Director.

- The three types of objectives are required: business delivery, corporate and capability building. These are mapped to the Civil Service Leadership Model which sets out what is expected of Civil Service leaders.