Leading with political astuteness

A study of public managers in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom

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Executive Summary

Politics in and around public organizations

Most managers – private or public sector – have to cope to some degree with 'politics' in their work. Complex organizational structures, different professional specialisations, organisational sub-cultures, varying demands from the external environment, for example, can give rise to differing interests, goals, incentives, values or beliefs, and therefore to alignments and conflicts that are the stuff of politics.

However, managers tend to find politics to be somewhat problematic. If their colleagues engage in political behaviour, they may see this as distorting rational decision-making processes or undermining organisational harmony. The pervasiveness of politics means that dealing with these challenges puts a premium on political astuteness (also called political 'savvy' or 'nous' or having political antennae). Managers need to be able to understand their context (at both a micro- and a macro-level), 'read' other people's behaviour, understand the dynamics of power, and frame decisions and strategies that take these political factors into account. But, surprisingly, political astuteness, until recently, has attracted only modest attention in the management literature.

Public managers face an additional problem in relation to politics. In a nutshell, public sector organisations are subject to the authority or control of governments, which by definition are political. This imposes a double complexity on public servants. On the one hand, it means that they are more likely to be involved with both formal and informal politics. But on the other hand, it is generally seen as inappropriate for public servants to become too closely involved in politics. They are expected to exercise 'neutral competence', faithfully serving the elected government of the day in the execution of policies and the provision of advice, without exhibiting any bias towards any particular political party. In negotiating the tensions between these two expectations of the role, political astuteness is an increasingly necessary skill for public managers, but it has been relatively neglected in the research literature.

In addition, public managers have to work not only with elected politicians but also with a range of other actors, institutions and stakeholders. They may have to work with other government organisations, with civil society organisations and with movements that advocate or lobby on behalf of consumer, pressure and political groups. They may have to face the media to explain particular policies, events or incidents. They may therefore be working with a range of stakeholders where their legitimacy rests less on the exercise of their formal authority and more on persuasion and influence. They are, arguably, working with diverse and sometimes competing interests that may involve the use of political and not just technical skills.

Political astuteness is accordingly defined as:

> …..deploying political skills in situations involving diverse and sometimes competing interests and stakeholders, in order to create sufficient alignment of interests and/or consent in order to achieve outcomes.

This definition is neutral about outcomes. We assume that political astuteness can be used to pursue personal or sectional interests, as well as formal organisational or societal interests. It is important to note that our definition of political astuteness can cover a range of circumstances where there is contention, or potential contention, over purposes, priorities and resources. Thus 'political' is not just about formal institutions and actors. It encompasses the 'small p' as well as 'big p' politics – the informal as well as the formal – that can take place amongst the wider citizens and stakeholders who may also form part of the authorising environment. Finally, it includes the machinations of cliques and factions operating within and across as well as outside organisations.

Our survey of the literature relevant to the topic of public managers' political astuteness unearthed a number of gaps. Studies of private sector organisations adduce considerable empirical research, but their focus is largely on intra-organisational phenomena, taking little account of politics in the environments around organisations. By contrast, the literature on public sector organisations offers a more outward-looking perspective on the nature of politics, but when it comes to public managers' political astuteness in the organisational environment, the research is scanty. At the same time, there is a substantial literature addressing whether it is legitimate for public managers, but precious little empirical research against which to test it. This report is a contribution toward filling these gaps.

Research questions and method

The purpose of this research is to add to the understanding of how public managers see politics, the nature of their political astuteness, and how they acquire and use political skills. There has been surprisingly little interest in these questions, from a management perspective and so this research aims to remedy that gap.

We addressed the following questions:

- What is the nature of political astuteness in public management? How important is it to public managers' work?

- What skills do public managers have in leading with political astuteness, and what, if any, do they need to acquire?

- In what contexts do they use political astuteness?

- Does political astuteness vary by context, type of organisation and managerial level?

- How do public managers develop political skills?

The UK element of the research was conducted across the public, private and voluntary sectors in 2006 and published by the Chartered Management Institute (Hartley et al. 2007). This cross-national research is based on the public sector element of that original research combined with a substantial replication survey with public servants in Australia and New Zealand in 2010-11 and some further UK interviews.

A central element of our research is the conceptual framework of political astuteness skills, developed in the first (UK) stage of the project. The original study proposed, constructed and statistically tested a five dimensional framework of skills, which sought to conceptualise political astuteness skills beyond the narrower account of 'political skills as self-interest' extant in much of the literature. The items formed the part of the survey concerned with self-reported political skills. The five dimensions (ascending from the 'micro' personal level to the 'macro' strategic level) were:

The dimensions of the framework were:

1. **Personal skills:** Self-awareness of one's own motives and behaviours, and the ability to exercise self-control form an essential foundation for managing with political astuteness.

2. **Interpersonal skills:** The interpersonal capacity to influence the thinking and behaviour of others, get buy-in from people over whom the skill user has no direct authority, and make people feel valued.

3. **Reading people and situations:** An analytical factor, based on thinking and intuition about the dynamics that can occur when stakeholders and agendas come together. It involves using knowledge of institutions, processes and social systems to understand what is happening or what might happen.

3. **Building alignment and alliances:** Building alignment out of different interests, goals and motives requires recognising differences in outlook or emphasis but being able to forge these into collaborative actions, even where the diversity is substantial.

5. **Strategic direction and scanning:** Two major elements: a sense of strategic thinking and action in relation to organisational purpose; and thinking about longer-term issues that may have the potential to have an impact on the organisation not just on the horizon, but over the horizon.

These dimensions of political skill are interconnected and therefore together may be considered as a meta-competency, rather than as single dimensions of competency. Our research suggests that a leader needing to manage a complex set of interrelationships across organisations will require skills in each of these dimensions in order to lead with political astuteness. While personal and interpersonal skills are the foundation of building trust and understanding the needs and interests of other people and organisations, there is also a need for the skills of building alliances across those differences, and the ability to detect wider changes in the external environment that may have an impact on plans and objectives.

The research used a number of methods:

- Focus groups. 60 senior managers participated in six focus groups, which took place in London, Birmingham, Cardiff, Canberra, Wellington and Melbourne.

- Survey. 1012 senior managers and some middle managers participated in the on-line survey. The participants came from all four countries of the UK, from nine of Australia's ten member governments (at federal, state and territorial levels) and from New Zealand's unitary government.

- Interviews. A large number of survey volunteers in each country volunteered to be interviewed, and a total of 42 interviews were conducted across the three countries.

While the choice of the three countries had practical advantages for the researchers, there were institutional differences which were relevant. First, they are all primarily English-speaking countries, with some shared cultural heritage and language. Second, their democratic governmental systems are all derived from the Westminster system, i.e. their political executives are drawn from the legislature, and are formally answerable to it. This means that the interaction between politics and administration/management occurs in broadly similar contexts. Third, all three governments have been undertaking similar reforms aimed at improving the management of their public sectors and making public servants more accountable to politicians. At the same time, there are differences between the governmental systems of the three countries, which also may affect the research findings. These differences include unicameral vs bicameral parliaments and the presence or absence of federal systems. These differences are compared in the table below.

Table ES1: Comparison of key institutional factors: UK, Australia and New Zealand

Institutional factor	UK	Australia	New Zealand
Democratic elections, rule of law, free media etc.	•	•	•
Executive drawn from legislature ('Westminster' system)	•	•	•
Federal system		•	
Bi-cameral parliament	•	•	
Electoral system enabling significant minor party representation		?	•
Institutional guarantees of public service independence		•	•

We turn now to consider the findings from the research.

How public managers see 'politics': the aggregate view

'Politics' has on occasion been a dirty word – in organisations as well as in the processes of democratic governance. But the managers in our survey seemed to adopt a more positive notion of politics, as the set of processes by which societies establish collective priorities and act on them. At the very least our survey responses lend weight to an instrumental conception, in which politics is a means by which public managers learn what is required of them and through which they can get things done.

The sample of 1012 public managers saw politics as important in the organisational context in which they worked, when asked to rate a list of contextual factors, expressed in items such as 'External perception of my organisation is a significant consideration in my work', or 'Formal political decisions affect my organisation'. The most important factors according to respondents were those to do with the formal political world (a mean of 3.52 on a scale of 1-4) and the decisions that emanate from it (a mean of 3.68). But not far behind were less formal factors, such as working with external partnerships, being subject to regulation, and being in a highly visible media environment.

We also delved into how public managers defined politics in their workplace, and by corollary how they judged politics – specifically, how far their views reflected the 'dark side' of politics and how far a more constructive view. The same four positive understandings were the most important for respondents across all three countries, and the same two negative ones were least important (see Figure ES1). The most frequently cited were all meanings with positive or neutral connotations: alliance building (63 per cent of respondents); formal processes and institutions of government (56 per cent); scanning factors in the external environment (49 per cent) and ways in which different interests are reconciled (44 per cent). By contrast, a much smaller proportion saw politics in terms of 'pursuit of personal advantage' (10 per cent) and people 'protecting their turf' (19 per cent). The very clear picture that emerged is that public managers in the three countries were much more oriented to a positive view of politics in organisations than those reported in the generic management literature.

Figure ES1: Which of the following comes closest to your understanding of politics in your work as a manager?*

*Participants were asked to tick up to three options

These findings were reinforced and elaborated by a number of our interviewees, who saw political skills as a way of gaining a mandate, and/or as a way of making things happen:

> P08 (senior manager, AU): [Political astuteness is] primarily about mobilising support for a course of action. Now that might be support within the organisation, that is not people that you either work for or work for you directly necessarily, but that broader base of support. It could be mobilising support in political office.

The survey results varied according to managerial level. The more senior the managers, the more likely they were to subscribe to a positive or neutral conception of politics, and the less likely to see it in relation to personal advantage or turf. Conversely, middle managers were more likely to see it in negative or neutral terms.

The findings indicate that overall public managers in the three countries have a sanguine view of politics. They also indicate that managers seem inclined to adopt a view of politics which is instrumental rather than judgmental. Their strong leaning is toward notions of politics that are conducive to enabling public purposes to be crystallised (scanning the external environment, reconciling different interests) and achieved (alliance building to achieve organisational objectives, formal processes and institutions of government), rather than ones in which self-interest is the dominant concern. Public managers tend to give considerably more weight to their external environment than to the internal politics of their organisation.

At the same time, within those rankings of definitions, there were some differences of relative emphasis among the three countries. Most noteworthy was that even though the self-interest/turf protection view of politics was a minority view for British public managers, it was a significantly more substantial minority than for their Antipodean counterparts. For instance, 17 per cent of UK managers said they thought politics was 'pursuit of personal advantage' compared with four per cent of Australian managers and only one per cent of New Zealand managers, which is a substantial difference. Conversely, UK public managers were somewhat lower (a chi square test showed a significant difference at the .05 level) on alliance building, scanning the environment and reconciling differences.

How politically astute are public managers?

When it came to judging their own and their peers' political astuteness (using the 50 items in the 5-dimension skills framework), public managers in all three countries were fairly stern in their judgments. On the whole, they didn't see their own and their colleagues' political skills as better than average to good, especially the macro skills. They were a little more sanguine about their 'micro' skills, but interestingly reported that their colleagues were as good as or better than them in 'Reading people and situations', which is somewhere between the micro and macro levels. The evidence suggests that greater political astuteness is associated with more positive views about politics.

Figure ES2: Mean assessment of self and others across five domains of political skills (on scale of 1-6)
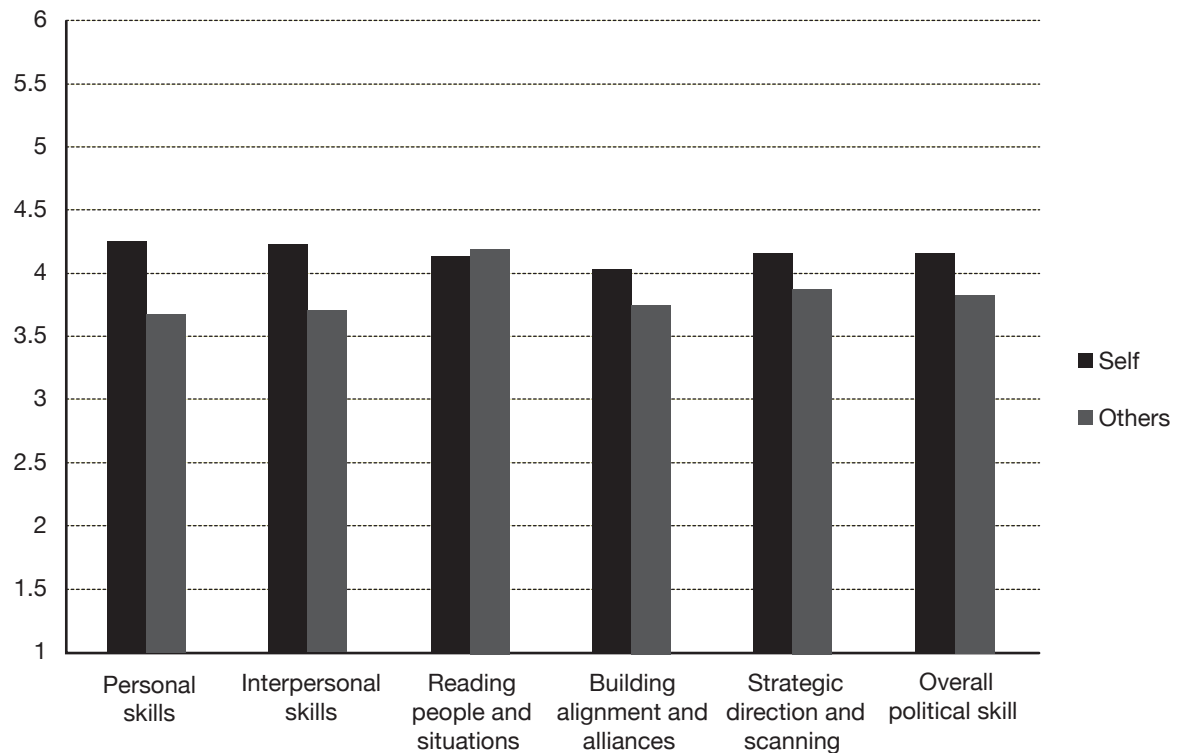
Respondents generally rated their own political skills more highly than those of their fellow managers (overall, 4.16 compared to 3.84 on a six-point scale; see Figure ES2). This 'leniency bias' or 'illusory superiority', which is of course logically impossible if the sample is valid, frequently occurs when survey respondents are asked to rate themselves and others. One interesting exception, however, was in their assessment of how effective their peers were at 'reading people and situations'. On this dimension, respondents rated their fellow managers slightly more highly than themselves.

Relationships between political skill and other variables

We explored these findings further by analysing demographic and other independent variables, namely: management level or seniority; managers' conceptions of politics; gender; and organisational growth.

Findings included:

- The more senior the managers, the higher they rated their own skills.

- Participants who subscribed to positive definitions of politics were more likely to rate their political skills as high than those who favoured negative definitions.

- Gender made no difference to participants' ratings of their political skills.

- Participants were asked whether their organisations were declining, stable, or growing. Those whose organisations were declining were more likely to rate their *colleagues'* (rather than their own) skills as low. The evaluation of colleagues was higher for those whose organisations were stable, and higher still for those whose organisations were growing.

Although the relative ranking of the five main types of political skill was the same for all three countries, the UK mean scores (both self-rating and rating of others) were significantly lower. In other words, public managers in the UK took a dimmer view of the effectiveness of their own and their peers'political skills than did their counterparts in Australia and New Zealand. To a certain degree also, UK managers tended to apply a harsher standard in their assessments of some of the political skills of their colleagues. On 'personal' and 'interpersonal' skills, UK managers marked down their colleagues by a greater margin than did Australian or NZ managers.

Where do public managers deploy political astuteness?

On the whole, public managers in our sample reported that they did not exercise political astuteness lightly or for the sake of personal advancement. In the main, they did so in situations or activities where it helped them do their jobs – either by garnering support for a particular policy, program or project, or by helping enlist other actors to contribute to the achievement of the public purposes in question. Consequently, it was possible for them to claim a degree of legitimacy for their exercise of political astuteness; it did not entail the 'illegitimate, self-serving political activities' that are the focus of much of the private sector management literature. However, the challenge for public managers is to judge how far they can cross the line from administration into politics without breaching democratic norms. Fortunately, political astuteness can facilitate those judgments as well.

The first message from the survey responses is that, overall, being politically astute matters to the public managers surveyed in that they rated items about context in which skills were used as of some to great value. In particular, managers saw it as valuable to be able to exercise political skills in respect of *domestic* politics, that is, politics in their home country – and more than the contexts concerned with *international* engagement. Managers clearly recognise that domestic politics is an important part of their work that calls for well-developed political skills. Also noteworthy is that Australian and New Zealand respondents on average found it more valuable to use political skills across a range of contexts than their British counterparts.

We also asked our participants for the top five activities for which political skills were currently most important in their organisations. From 12 choices, the following were the most popular:

- Shaping key priorities within the organisation

- Influencing external decision-makers e.g. politicians or central agencies

- Building partnerships with external partners

- Managing risks for the organisation

- Competing for resources within the organisation

The lowest ranked item, consistent with our earlier findings about the minimal importance of the 'dark side' perspective on politics in organisations, was 'Individual career advancement'. The next lowest was 'Reducing external criticism or negative media stories'.

The depth interviews allowed us to extend the picture further and gain a sense of how important politics and political skills are to public managers in our target countries. The answer, overwhelmingly, was that politics is ubiquitous and political astuteness is essential.

This supports the argument that they see the context surrounding their work as a broadly political one, as we have earlier noted.

The situations where political skills were rated as most valuable related to formal politics. But although formal politics had the most prominence, not far behind were skills relating to less formal politics in the surrounding environment. 'Thinking about the impact of public opinion on your organisation' and 'working with the media' were important, as were 'working with partners and strategic alliances' and 'scanning changes in society'. Interestingly, internal organisational politics was more mixed in its perceived significance. On the one hand, 'working with influential people in your organisation' was relatively highly rated, but on the other, 'working with cliques and power blocs in your organisation' was much less important overall.

One way of making sense of these findings is that they are all to do with securing the necessary means for getting things done, either in securing a mandate from political (and bureaucratic) superiors or their publics, or in enlisting other contributors to carry out the organisation's work. Persuasion was seen as vital for achieving outcomes. At a macro level, political astuteness was also seen as key in setting organisational agendas:

It appears from these findings that political astuteness is a very *useful* skill for public managers. However, there is also a question of whether using political skills is *legitimate* in a democratic political system. The politics/administration dichotomy attaches significant normative weight to the principle that political decisions should primarily or even exclusively be the prerogative of elected politicians. It is therefore seen as problematic for a line between the two domains to be breached. But at the same time, the findings suggest that public servants have to engage in political interactions of one kind or another in order to do their jobs. So a key issue for managers is how far they can deploy their political astuteness skills without compromising the legitimacy of their recommendations. In short, they need to be particularly cognisant of where the 'line' is

between politics and administration. The consensus from a majority of interviewees was that they saw no clear line. Some agreed that there was a 'zone' (also described as a 'no man's land'). Some saw it as a shifting line, incorporating either more politics or more administration at different times, while others saw a gap between rhetoric and reality. There were varying views as to whether 'breaches' of the line were a matter of public servants straying too far into politics or of politicians having too tight a grip on the public service. One consequence of this is having to make delicate judgements about when to deliver what the minister wants – even if it is sub-optimal – and when to push for a better one. Further complicating this picture was a related perception that politicians sometimes did not know exactly what they wanted. Other factors were the complexity of the issue, calling for expert knowledge as well as political judgement. Our interviews suggested four different approaches to handling the challenges thrown up by the politics/administration interface.

At the same time, how the managers dealt with this was also a function of the 'practical ethics' each brought to the job. Indeed, in a practical sense, the problems arising from 'crossing the line' seemed to be accommodated within organisations in realistic and quite pragmatic ways, once the assumption of a clear line was discarded and the sense of a zone adopted.

How is political astuteness acquired and developed?

The study shows both a need for public managers to develop greater political astuteness, and insights into how they might do that.

 First, the need: our study has shown that, as judged by public managers themselves, their political skills are adequate but not outstanding. They also consider political skills to be important for getting things done. Thus, there appears to be a need for further development of public managers' political skills. Our research delved into how managers had acquired their political astuteness, and found clear patterns that in turn suggest ways of improving the acquisition of political skills.

We found that overwhelmingly, managers learnt their political skills 'on the job' in various ways: gaining experience on the job, good or bad role models, and learning from their mistakes – and generally they did this learning on their own. By contrast, more structured or directive approaches were seen as less significant for the acquisition of political skills: psychometric testing, leadership books, or formal mentoring or coaching. Academic study also ranked lower than most of the 'on-the-job' options.

One way of categorising these results might be on the basis of how deliberately each influence is pursued. The most used methods were more experiential and haphazard, with the learning about political astuteness arising incidentally in the course of public managers' jobs. On the other hand, more structured and planned kinds of intervention were less frequently used.

Perhaps a more compelling reading of the data (in that it shows a stronger fit with the pattern of the responses) is that the more common learning approaches tended to be those the managers did *on their own* (for example, gaining experience in the job, learning from their own mistakes), whereas activities that involved learning-directed *interaction with others* (such professional coaching, formal mentoring, or attending a learning set) were much less common influences on political skill. One possible explanation for this is that a degree of illegitimacy still attaches to the notion of managers exercising political astuteness, and that it is therefore somewhat inappropriate for organisations to explicitly devote resources to developing this skill.

This suggests that more formal or purposeful approaches, or those removed from the realities of everyday work, are seen as less effective than other approaches. But we argue that a combination of the two types of approaches could be more powerful – for example, focusing academic study, learning sets and formal coaching on drawing lessons from and catalysing the day-to-day experience, helping make sense of it through theoretically informed reflection. The opportunities for using case studies, engaging in simulations and in confronting scenarios could help to bring insight and reflection into everyday experience, and develop longer-term habits of reflection.

The current study shows that most respondents learned their political astuteness skills through what are called 'emergent' rather than 'planned' development activities. However, experience on its own is generally seen to be insufficient for leadership development. The aphorism that some people have twenty years' experience while others have a year's experience repeated 20 times reminds us that learning from experience is not automatic. There is also the danger that inappropriate conclusions can be drawn from experience, in a process called 'superstitious learning', resulting in less than effective performance.

The findings obtained here suggest a rather hit and miss approach by organisations in developing their middle and senior managers to handle the complex and dynamic conditions of modern organisations. Given our knowledge that in many organisations mistakes and crises are covered up, or used in learning-avoidance blame games, then what is the foundation here for building on what appears to be very valuable experience? Should it be so haphazard; are there ways to build in reflective learning of political awareness skills? What appears to be important from our focus groups and interviews is that the opportunity to *reflect* on experience – by talking to a boss, colleague, mentor etc. – is particularly valuable.

These considerations suggest some future paths for leadership research and for leadership development policy and practice. There is a general consensus at present from researchers that many of the skills, mindsets and behaviours of leadership can be learned – they are acquired rather than inherited.

Implications and conclusions

It is crystal clear from this research that public managers' jobs call for the exercise of political astuteness. Key aspects of their work – such as determining purposes, building support, enlisting others to contribute – have a political dimension to them, which is better dealt with if managers are politically astute. But the report unearths a raft of insights beyond that basic understanding. These insights have implications for a number of significant issues in public management.

Firstly, and most basically, the public manager's job is undeniably political. Politics impinges on, indeed permeates, the normal work of government executives. A range of political influences – including the media, external partners, regulation, external perceptions and formal politics – are all acknowledged by our survey respondents as being of high importance. Moreover, the great majority of our interviewees tended to see the presence of politics as a given, background assumption. Of course, our respondents are middle, senior and very senior managers, for whom it might be expected that politics is more prominent in their roles and tasks. Some respondents talked about a particular point in the career ladder where they felt that they had to start paying attention to and understanding politics in circumstances from which they had been protected when they were lower down the pecking order.

Looking more closely at this phenomenon, it is evident that politics matters most to public managers when it allows them to get things done. Within that broad domain of politics in general, two aspects of politics stand out. Foremost is the formal political world and the decisions emanating from it, which they see as the political factor having the most impact on their organisations and work. Close behind in importance is the need to work with external partnerships, for example through the building of alliances

In Westminster systems in particular, decisions by ministers and other elected politicians are powerful indications of what managers can and cannot do. With clear, robust authorisation, the public manager has a licence to garner public and societal resources and deploy them for the mandated purposes. Indeed, such authorisation strengthens the manager's hand in dealing with other actors in the political environment who might have competing agendas.

Second, the dichotomy between politics and administration, articulated in much political science is not tenable in its entirety. In classical public administration theory, the role of managers in the public sector is to concentrate on *implementing* policy decisions, but to stay out of *making* those decisions, which is the preserve of elected politicians. Thus, politicians decide, while public servants administer. This principle has both an empirical and a normative aspect, each of which is challenged by our findings.

In empirical terms, we found abundant examples of public managers crossing the line into political behaviour, for example by articulating party positions into workable policies or by mobilising key stakeholders to influence ministers. It is demonstrably not the case that senior public servants confine themselves to carrying out decisions handed down from ministers' offices. The main reason for this is that public managers would find it very difficult to get their mandated tasks done if they did not seek to mobilise political support, engage with partners and more generally understand their political environments.

This also informs the normative aspect. Most public managers, while routinely breaching the politics/administration dichotomy, sincerely support the principle inherent in that dichotomy. They are committed to the view that in a democracy, the big decisions should be made by people who have the primary accountability to the public (in that they must face periodic elections), rather than by appointed and often anonymous bureaucrats. Consequently, it is seen as illegitimate for public managers to intrude into or even usurp the political prerogatives of elected politicians. Again, however, the reality is that it is difficult for them to discharge their mandates if they do not engage with politics, and do not exercise political skill in doing so. Public managers usually respect the 'line' or 'zone' between politics and administration, but find themselves on occasion forced to cross it. This means that one aspect of political astuteness is the capacity to recognise where the line is and calculate how far they can stray across it without compromising their ethical frameworks – or committing career suicide. This entails judging the trade-off between the substantive value of the policy or initiative in question and the risk of acting or being seen to act illegitimately. Knowing where 'the line' or 'the zone' is therefore turns out to be a capability that, to varying degrees, public managers need to acquire and maintain throughout their careers – hand in hand with the occasional unavoidable necessity of crossing into that zone.

Third, the findings reveal some interesting relationships between levels of political astuteness and certain other factors. One is their attitude to politics. On average, those managers who rated themselves and others as having higher political skills were inclined to eschew the view of politics as pursuit of self-interest or turf, and instead to see it in more positive terms such as building alliances or reconciling differences. Another intriguing finding is that managers who perceived their own organisation as 'growing' rather than 'declining', were also more likely to rate their own and their peers' political skills more highly. The mechanisms or direction of causality here are difficult to discern, but these data point to a potentially promising line of inquiry for future research.

Fourth, the study shows both a need for public managers to develop greater political astuteness, and insights into how they might do that and the report outlines some ways in which this can be achieved.

Fifth, the political astuteness framework emphasises the value of understanding divergent and sometimes competing interests, which brings new insights to understanding the tasks of leadership. Traditional leadership theory still focuses too much on a unitary view of the organisation and its partners – that building complete consensus and commitment, and 'selling' the vision to 'followers' is what counts as effective leadership. Increasingly, commentators are raising questions about this small group view of leadership applied to larger organisations or to society, where multiple interests exist. This research supports the value of pluralistic views of leadership, which requires an understanding of politics.

Indeed, it is arguable that all managers – public or private – are likely to be more effective to the extent that they supplement their analytical, organisational and operational skill-sets with a more textured view of the varied interests and stakeholders in their environments – a view that goes beyond thinking of them in terms of competitive market forces and also takes into account the political dimensions of environments. This suggestion is a contrast to the widely held assumption that government should learn from the private sector about how to be more efficient and effective. It implies that the public sector might provide lessons for private business about how to cope with the complex forces – political, environmental and social – that have beset the corporate sector in recent decades.

Politics can be a dirty business. But the views of the public managers we have surveyed and interviewed for this study show that political astuteness can also be a positive phenomenon, promoting reconciliation of contending viewpoints and enabling different stakeholders with different values or goals to work together in the public interest. In this respect, democratic politics can draw a positive message from one of our findings: that in the main, managers who are politically astute are more likely to hold a positive view of politics, and therefore are inclined to act in the public interest rather than their own when they find themselves having to enter the political domain. Our findings suggest that they are able to act in the public interest more effectively, precisely because they are politically astute.

Preface

Prof Gary Banks AO
Dean, Australia and New Zealand School of Government

As someone who until recently headed an organisation expressly designed to promote politically contentious reforms in the public interest, it gives me great pleasure to introduce this volume, especially given its strongly evidence-based nature.

Public sector managers operate in an inherently political environment, even where they are not dealing directly with politicians. The very nature and scope of the public sector are shaped by politics and political preferences. How public managers do their job, and how well, can in turn have significant political ramifications. Their 'astuteness' in operating within such an environment also will determine how effectively they can serve the public under the Government of the day. If anything, skills in this area have become more important today than ever before.

This study is therefore very welcome. It provides important insights about what kind of political skills are needed and when, and how these might be gained. The study is based on a large survey of senior officials across three countries, enriched by a significant number of more probing interviews.

The study is a highly collaborative work. It exemplifies the kind of research partnership we strive for at ANZSOG, one which capitalises on our network of government sponsors and university partners. ANZSOG's research focuses on issues that are important to government, while involving both scholars and practitioners in framing specific topics, gathering data and contributing insights.

We are therefore proud to have sponsored this project and to have been able to facilitate access to the wide range of public sector organisations that have contributed to its value.

Gary Banks

Acknowledgements

Chapter 1:

Introduction: Political astuteness and public management

Politics and political astuteness in the work of public managers

Most managers – private or public sector – have to cope to some degree with 'politics' in or around their organisations. This arises from a variety of causes – such as complex structures, differing professional specialisations, organisational sub-cultures, varying demands from the external environment, and often the sheer size of some organisations – which can give rise to differing interests, goals, incentives, values or beliefs, and therefore to alignments and conflicts that are the stuff of politics. However, managers tend to find politics to be at least a little problematic. If their colleagues engage in political behaviour, they may see this as distorting rational decision-making processes or undermining organisational harmony. They often interpret it as seeking personal advancement or manoeuvring to acquire resources and defend turf. To accuse someone of taking a position or doing something for 'political reasons' is often to imply that their motives are less than worthy and their intent is divergent from the good of the organisation. In short, politics is both inevitable but difficult for many managers. Particularly in the private sector, they want a world in which purposes are uncontested, authority and responsibility are clearly defined and allocated, and problems are largely technical in nature. That way, they can make clear decisions on the merits of issues and get on with implementing them, unencumbered by laborious processes, prevarication or contention.

However, given that politics permeates many managers' jobs, dealing with these challenges puts a premium on political astuteness (or 'nous', 'antennae', etc. – see below for a discussion of similar terms used by other researchers). Managers need to be able to understand their context (at both a micro- and a macro-level), 'read' other people's behaviour, comprehend the dynamics of power, and frame decisions and strategies that take these political factors into account. Executives who possess and deploy these particular skills are likely to have their products or programs prioritised ahead of others, their policies prevail, and requisite resources forthcoming. But, surprisingly, political astuteness, until recently, has attracted only modest attention in the management literature.

Thus politics is problematic in organisations in generic terms – without distinguishing between the private and the public sector. But when we focus specifically on the *public* sector, an additional problem arises. In a nutshell, public sector organisations are subject to the authority or control of governments, which by definition are political. This imposes a double complexity on public servants. On the one hand, it means that they are more likely to be involved with formal and informal politics. As both advisers and implementers of government policy, they necessarily interact with political overseers, and in the process can find themselves enmeshed in processes entailing value-judgments, contending stakeholders and political manoeuvring – arguably to a greater extent than their private sector counterparts. But on the other hand, it is generally seen as inappropriate for public servants to become too closely involved in politics. They are expected to exercise 'neutral

competence', faithfully serving the elected government of the day in the execution of policies and the provision of advice, without exhibiting any bias towards any particular political party (in government or out of it).

In negotiating the tensions between these two expectations of the role, political astuteness is an increasingly necessary skill for public managers, but it has been relatively neglected in the research literature. It has always been important for managers in the public sector to be able to work with the formal political office-holders, institutions and processes of the state, though classical public administration emphasised the separation of roles of politician and administrator (e.g. Weber 1946) and the need for civil servants to work with political impartiality with the government of the day (e.g. Burnham and Pyper 2008). Others have argued that the separation of roles is a myth or a construct (e.g. Svara 1998; 2001; Selden et al. 1999).These ideas will be explored further in Chapter 2 as they represent some key (and conflicting) ideas and advice about the skills and judgement that public managers need to exercise their roles effectively.

In addition, public managers have to work not only with elected politicians but also with a range of other actors, institutions and stakeholders. They may have to work with other government organisations, with civil society organisations and with movements that advocate or lobby on behalf of consumer, pressure and political groups (and to some extent this is also true for their counterparts in the private and voluntary sectors). They may have to face the media to explain particular policies, events or incidents. They may therefore be working with a range of stakeholders where their legitimacy rests less on the exercise of their formal authority and more on persuasion and influence. They are, arguably, working with diverse and sometimes competing interests that may involve the use of political and not just technical skills.

Several factors have heightened the salience of political astuteness for public managers in recent decades. One is the rise of network governance (e.g. Stoker 2006a; Provan and Kenis 2008; Benington 2000), which imparts a greater role to non-governmental actors in policy-making and service-delivery, and consequently a greater need for managers to interact with them as stakeholders. Another is globalisation, which has created a range of uncertainties about world governance, national stability or local priorities that managers need to take account of, and that may have unexpected or substantial repercussions needing to be addressed (e.g. Held 2010). A third is the increasing intensity, ubiquity and speed of media coverage, driven by the internet and its accompanying 24-hour news cycle, demanding very fast responses by governments and keen appreciation by managers of the media implications of policy issues. Quite possibly also the increasing salience of 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber 1973; Stewart 2001; Grint 2005) confronting governments has required managers to be more attuned to the political difficulties that often permeate those kinds of problems. In short, it is now even more important for public managers to be politically astute.

While the issue of how bureaucrats interact with politics has been widely studied in the political science literature, especially in public administration, the management literature on this topic has only begun to emerge in recent years – and is even more sparse in respect of the political astuteness of *public* managers. This underdeveloped area of our knowledge is the focus of this report.

The meaning of political astuteness: a preliminary account

Choosing the appropriate term for this study has been a little tricky. Originally, our term for the phenomenon under scrutiny was 'political awareness', which was the term used in the UK stage of the study. But on reflection, we felt that 'political awareness' was too passive, and decided to change our focus to 'political astuteness'. While on balance the latter term is preferable, we acknowledge that the dictionary definitions of 'astute' (see Table 1.1) include a mixture of positive, negative and neutral connotations. In particular, alongside relatively benign terms, such as 'shrewd', 'sagacious', 'discerning' or 'perspicacious', are darker words like 'crafty', 'cunning', 'sly' and 'of keen discernment, esp. as to one's own interests'.

Table 1.1: Dictionary definitions of 'astute'

Dictionary	Definition
Macquarie	of keen penetration or discernment; sagacious; shrewd; cunning [L *astutus,* from *astus* adroitness, cunning]
New Oxford Shorter	of keen penetration, esp. as to one's own interests; shrewd; sagacious; crafty
Australian Concise Oxford	1) shrewd, sagacious, 2) crafty
Oxford Australian Essential Dictionary and Thesaurus	clever; shrewd
Chambers	shrewd, sagacious ,wily
Collins	cunning; shrewd; sagacious; crafty; wily; sly; subtle; keen
Merriam-Webster	having or showing shrewdness and perspicacity [an astute observer] [astute remarks]; also: crafty, wily
Wiktionary	1) quickly and critically discerning, 2) shrewd or crafty

This might give the impression that we are in part calling for public managers to act with cunning or slyness to advance their own interests. But in fact we make no *a priori* judgments with our terminology, and indeed embrace its ambivalence. Far from being a problem, this is consistent with the stance we adopt towards political astuteness, which is that it *can* be used for good, bad or neutral purposes. In fact, as our study shows, it turns out that positive outcomes tend to be more dominant in practice. Rather than becoming entangled in contending meanings and the debates surrounding them, our approach is to specify clearly what *we* mean by 'political astuteness', which we define after an extensive literature review as follows:

> Political astuteness involves deploying political skills in situations involving diverse and sometimes competing interests and stakeholders, in order to create sufficient alignment of interests and/or consent in order to achieve outcomes.

This definition is neutral about outcomes. We assume that political astuteness can be used to pursue personal or sectional interests, as well as formal organisational or societal interests. Political astuteness is conceptualised as a set of skills and judgements exercised in context for a range of legitimate or illegitimate purposes. It follows that if public managers are inevitably involved in politics, some will display greater skills than others: they are simply more astute.

Other scholars have employed a variety of terms that describe similar concepts (see Table 1.2).

Table 1.2: Phrases with some similarity to political astuteness

Phrase	Author(s)
Political astuteness	Gandz and Murray 1980; Dickinson et al. 2011; Hartley et al. 2011; Beu and Buckley 2004
Political savvy	Bryson and Kelley 1978; Chao et al. 1994; Ferris et al. 2005
Political awareness	Hartley and Fletcher 2008
Political acumen	Perrewé and Nelson 2004; Hackman and Wageman 2005; Dutton et al. 2001
Political 'nous'	Baddeley and James 1987a; 1990; Squires 2001
Socio-political intelligence	Burke 2006
Political skills	Riccucci 1995
Political antennae	't Hart 2011; Benington 2011

It is important to note that our definition of political astuteness can cover a range of circumstances where there is contention, or potential contention, over purposes, priorities and resources. Thus 'political' is not just about formal institutions and actors. It encompasses the 'small p' as well as 'big p' politics – the informal as well as the formal – that can take place amongst the wider citizens and stakeholders who may also form part of the authorising environment. Finally, it includes the machinations of cliques and factions operating within and across as well as outside organisations.

Research aims and methods

Our purpose is to add to the understanding of how public managers see politics, the nature of their political astuteness, and how they acquire and use political skills. Specifically, drawing on the relevant literature, a substantial survey and a considerable number of interviews, we sought to address the following questions:

- What is the nature of political astuteness in public management? How important is it to public managers' work?

- What skills do public managers have in leading with political astuteness, and what, if any, do they need to acquire?

- In what contexts do they use political astuteness?

- Does political astuteness vary by context, type of organisation and managerial level?

- How do public managers develop political skills?

The original stage of this study was conducted across the public, private and voluntary sectors in the UK in 2006, with a focus on political *awareness,* and was initially published as a research report by the Chartered Management Institute (Hartley et al. 2007). This report is based on the

public sector element of that original research combined with a substantial replication in Australia and New Zealand in 2010-11, focusing on the public sector only. At the same time, some additional literature was reviewed, and the focus was slightly shifted (to political *astuteness*). In addition, 17 further interviews were undertaken in the UK in 2012/3 with senior public servants as part of a satellite study. That research is being published separately (Manzie and Hartley, 2013) as well as featuring in this report.

A central element of our research is the conceptual framework of political astuteness skills, developed in the first (UK) stage of the project. The original study proposed, constructed and statistically tested a five dimensional framework of skills, which sought to conceptualise political astuteness skills beyond the narrower account of 'political skills as self-interest' extant in much of the literature. The items formed the part of the survey concerned with self-reported political skills. The five dimensions (ascending from the 'micro' personal level to the 'macro' strategic level) were:

- Personal skills

- Interpersonal skills

- Reading people and situations

- Building alignment and alliances

- Strategic direction and scanning.

The dimensions are described in more detail in a later section of the report.

The focus groups

Prior to dissemination of the survey, six focus groups were conducted with senior managers in London, Birmingham, Cardiff, Canberra, Wellington and Melbourne to solicit information about political skills, the contexts in which they are used, and the ways in which participants' own political skills had been developed. The focus groups were held with managers from several different locations in order to explore different types of governments (e.g. central, commonwealth, local, devolved, state). A total of 60 managers participated in these focus groups, which were tape-recorded and written up for analysis.

The survey

Participants for the self-report survey were recruited in a number of ways. In the UK, participants responded to an email invitation sent from the Chartered Management Institute (the national professional body for managers) to its middle and senior management members.

The primary method of recruitment in Australia/NZ was through the central agency responsible for government employment in each state/territory and also the federal government. The head of the public service in each ANZSOG jurisdiction (the CEO of the Public Service Commission or Department of Premier/Prime Minister and Cabinet) was emailed an outline of the study and a request for his/her cooperation in the dissemination of the survey instrument. Once agreement was received, each relevant central agency was sent a letter of invitation for potential participants, along with a draft covering note encouraging employees of that government to take part. They were asked to forward these messages to all of the senior managers in their jursidictions. Two secondary methods of recruitment in Australia/NZ included an advertisement on ANZSOG's website, and an email from ANZSOG to alumni of its core programs, all of whom are middle or senior managers in the target governments.

Slight modifications were necessary in the Australia/New Zealand element of the study, because the survey was originally developed for use with managers from the public, private and non-profit sectors in the UK. A small number of questions were altered, added or eliminated to reflect the different institutional context while maintaining comparability across countries as far as possible.

The survey instrument was hosted online by the UK Chartered Management Institute for all three countries, and was accessed via a link in the email invitation.

The survey was developed by the UK researchers according to the political skills framework described in Chapter 4, which was developed through information from focus groups, a senior manager advisory group, and a review of the literature (see Hartley et al. 2007, p. 23-27). It was underpinned by the five-dimension framework, with further sections examining participants' understanding of politics; the situations in which political skills are useful; the effectiveness of participants' skills; their evaluation of their colleagues' skills; the development of these skills; and their importance to participants' organisations. Survey questions were mainly quantitative, and used Likert scales.

The survey participants

Participants were 1047 public sector managers from Australia, New Zealand and the UK, 78 per cent of whom self-identified as senior managers. We aimed to exclude junior managers on the grounds of their being unlikely to have strategic leadership roles, sufficient experience in dealing with complex competing interests in their work, or the need to deal with politics in the environment surrounding their organisations. In this we were not entirely successful, though the low numbers of junior managers (3 per cent of total respondents) shows that our targeting of middle and senior managers was largely accurate. The junior managers were excluded from all analyses, leaving a final pool of 1012 participants. Almost exactly a third of these respondents were female, and two thirds were male.

The participants came from all four countries of the UK, from nine of Australia's ten member governments (at federal, state and territorial levels) and from New Zealand's unitary government. Thus, the scope of the study encompasses employees of UK public services, as well as all Australian and New Zealand state, territory and national governments (with the exception of Tasmania).

We compared the demographic characteristics of the three samples, in order to ensure that they can be compared and amalgamated into one database. In particular, the Australian sample closely matched the federal level Senior Executive Service as a whole in both age distribution and gender, based on figures reported in the *State of the Service* report for the year the survey was conducted (2010).

Table 1.3: Numbers and managerial level of participants

Managerial level	Australia	New Zealand	UK	Overall
Department head, Deputy Department head, Director or equivalent	69 (15%)	21 (30%)	97 (19%)	187 (19%)
Senior manager	375 (83%)	33 (46%)	219 (42%)	627 (62%)
Middle manager	9 (2%)	14 (20%)	171 (33%)	194 (19%)
Did not answer	1 (0%)	1 (1%)	2 (0%)	4 (<1%)
Total	**454**	**69**	**489**	**1012**

Proportions unequal between countries (chi-square = 201.17, p = .001)

Table 1.4: Demographic characteristics of the sample

Characteristic		Australia		New Zealand		UK	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Country		454	45	69	7	489	48
Gender	Male	268	59	47	68	350	72
	Female	183	40	22	32	134	27
	NA	3	1	0	0	5	1
Age	Under 40	41	9	11	16	40	8
	40-49	162	36	25	36	160	33
	50-59	221	49	26	38	222	46
	60+	29	6	7	10	64	13
Size of organisation (# of employees)	Fewer than 100	39	9	6	9	38	8
	101-1,000	136	30	32	46	112	23
	1,001-5,000	128	28	23	33	128	26
	5,001-10,000	57	13	6	9	81	17
	Over 10,000	92	20	2	3	125	26

The interviews

In the survey, a final question asked participants if they would be interested in being interviewed for the follow-up phase of the research. A large number in each of the three countries volunteered, and 25 interviews were conducted in this phase. In addition a separate but linked research study yielded 17 interviews with very senior UK public servants, drawn from the highest rank in both local and central government (Manzie and Hartley, in press), making a total of 42 interviews in all. These interviews are analysed and quoted here where they illustrate particular points.

Interview participants were from Australia, New Zealand and the UK, including all but three of the states and territories of Australia. They also included both line and central agencies, and both middle and senior managers/directors. The interviews were semi-structured and followed up some of the areas of the survey where more textured and contextualised responses could be given, and where the meanings and understandings of politics and political astuteness could be explored further. All interviews except two were tape-recorded. (the exceptions were due either to organisational policy or a technical failure, and detailed notes were taken instead and then written up shortly after the interview). Analysis was undertaken by thematic coding using software package NVivo to organise the themes.

The political astuteness framework

A crucial output of the British phase of the study was the development of a 50-item political skills framework, which informed the content of the survey questionnaire. This framework was based on research with UK managers across all sectors by Hartley and Fletcher (2008), who identified the key skills of political astuteness as nominated by the managers themselves across a range of contexts. A conceptual framework of the skills of political astuteness was then created and tested (see Table 1.3), and subjected to statistical analysis for the robustness of its domains and of the overall framework (Hartley, Fletcher and Ungemach 2013).

Table 1.5: The framework of political astuteness skills

Dimension	Description
Personal skills	Self-awareness of one's own motives and behaviours.
	Having a proactive disposition (initiating rather than passively waiting for things to happen).
	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.
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 organisations.
	Discerning the underlying not just the espoused agendas.
	Thinking through the likely standpoints of various interests 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 differences and plurality and forging them into collaborative action.
	Working with difference 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 organisational 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 that may potentially have an impact on the organisation.
	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.

Institutional features of the three countries' governmental systems

We originally chose to explore public managers' political astuteness in Australia, New Zealand and the UK for the very practical reason that they were (or in the case of New Zealand were near) where we were based. We had institutional connections we could draw on to gain access for our focus groups, surveys and interviews. But once we had started our research, we realised that there were other advantages of focusing on these three countries.

First, they are all primarily English-speaking countries, and with that share a long cultural heritage, which reduces the possibility of the data being distorted by linguistic differences.

Second, their democratic governmental systems are all derived from the Westminster system, i.e. their political executives are drawn from the legislature, and are formally answerable to it – although they often dominate it through their parliamentary majority. This means that the interaction between politics and administration/management occurs in broadly similar contexts.

Third, all three governments have been undertaking similar reforms aimed at improving the management of their public sectors and making public servants more accountable to politicians. These reforms, which have been seen as standard-bearers for what has been called the New Public Management (Hood 1991; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011), have had implications for the relationship between senior public servants and ministers, and are relevant to this study. The reforms are also increasingly taking account of network governance.

At the same time, there are some non-trivial differences between the governmental systems of the three countries, which also may affect the relative incidence across the three countries of different attitudes to politics, perceptions of astuteness, and opinions about the relationship between politics and administration. These differences, such as unicameral vs bicameral parliaments and the presence or absence of federal systems, are set out below, and are referred to in some of the analysis in this report.

When it comes to governmental arrangements, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand all sit squarely within the Westminster tradition, which shares in common with other democratic polities the essential conditions of democracy: the rule of law, free multi-party elections, freedom of expression and assembly, and so on (Stoker 2006b). What distinguishes it from other traditions of polities around the world is that the executive government is drawn from the legislature, rather than the strict separation between the two found in systems such as that of the United States. The government of the day is formed from that party or coalition which can command a majority of votes in the lower (or only) house of parliament. Ministers are appointed from among those majority parliamentarians, and are answerable to parliament.

Despite this basic similarity, there are also important institutional differences among the three countries, set out in the table below. First, Australia differs from the other two governments in having a federal system. The national government (referred to as the Commonwealth) formally shares power with the six states, each of which has its own Westminster-style government. These states are not mere administrative divisions of the Commonwealth, but rather have their positions guaranteed by the Constitution, which is very difficult, if not impossible, to amend.[1] The practical implication for public managers is that both formulating and implementing policy may require dealing with other governments within the federal system. The Constitution's authors did not provide a precise division of powers or formal machinery for conflict resolution, leading to a system of 'cooperative federalism', which rests on a series of accommodations between the levels of government. As Emy and Hughes put it, this leads to 'a great deal of conflict, competition, hard bargaining and political grandstanding' (1991).

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[1] The Constitution lists particular matters over which the Commonwealth has power, and leaves anything not mentioned to the States. However, High Court judgments and other factors have tended to expand the Commonwealth's sphere of influence over time. To change the Constitution requires a referendum in which a majority of the voters and a majority of the states must support the change. Since Federation in 1901, only 8 matters out of the 44 put to a referendum have been passed.

Second, whereas Australia and the United Kingdom have bi-cameral parliaments, New Zealand's parliament has only one chamber, its upper house having been eliminated in 1951. In both the UK and Australia, the upper house may not necessarily have the same party make-up as the lower house, meaning that the government formed on the basis of its majority in the House of Commons (UK) or House of Representatives (Australia) may need to negotiate on legislation and other matters with those controlling the upper house – particularly in Australia, where the Senate is elected rather than appointed. By itself, this has meant that New Zealand governments, once elected in their own right, are able to act decisively while in office – as was observed, for instance, in the radical reform governments of the 1980s and early 1990s. The practical implication of this for public managers is that in bi-cameral systems, additional political considerations may impinge on the formulation and implementation of policy. There may be less certainty and a greater need to take other stakeholders into account in advising governments.

Table 1.6: Comparison of key institutional factors: UK, Australia and New Zealand

Institutional factor	UK	Australia	New Zealand
Democratic elections, rule of law, free media etc.	•	•	•
Executive drawn from legislature ('Westminster' system)	•	•	•
Federal system		•	
Bi-cameral parliament	•	•	
Electoral system enabling significant minor party representation		?	•
Institutional guarantees of public service independence		•	•

Third, the countries differ in their voting systems, in ways which affect the likelihood of minor parties gaining representation in parliament. Specifically, the UK has a 'first past the post' (FPP) system, which makes it harder for minor parties to gain seats in parliament. On the other hand, New Zealand has since 1994 had a 'mixed member proportional' (MMP) system, which facilitates minor parties gaining seats and acts as a check on the major parties. Indeed, this system was introduced specifically in response to dissatisfaction with the perceived dominance of major parties in the unicameral parliament. Somewhere in between is the Australian system of preferential voting for the lower house (similar to the Alternative Vote system rejected by the UK in the 2011 referendum), which gives minor parties some influence in policy terms at election time, but does not in itself prompt their greater representation in parliament. More importantly in Australia, the voting system for the Senate is proportional, which in practice ensures that minor parties and independents are represented in the Senate, and in likelihood hold the balance of power. The practical implication for public managers of voting systems is similar to that of having bi-cameral parliaments: they increase the range of stakeholders that have to be taken into account in policy-making and implementation.

Finally, the three countries vary in the extent to which the separation of politics from administration is underpinned structurally. While there is a social consensus in all three countries that the civil service should be politically neutral, there is variation in how strongly it is backed up by legislative obligations. Most important in this respect are the processes by which appointments and dismissals are made. All three countries have institutions designed to ensure that these processes are governed by the merit principle – that public servants should be hired or fired on the basis of their competence and/or performance, not on the basis of political allegiance or bias.

To some extent this insulates public servants from the vicissitudes of politics. In the UK, civil service recruitment is under the oversight of the Civil Service Commissioners, who administer a merit-based recruitment code, approve senior appointments, and hear complaints of breaches of the code. The Australian Public Service Commission plays a similar role. Yet in both cases, the government of the day may try to informally influence the appointment and dismissal of department heads, who have the authority to play an important role in upholding the independence of the public service. In New Zealand, there are similar processes administered by the State Services Commission, albeit less detailed in procedural terms. However, in New Zealand there is a further guarantee of the independence of the civil service, namely that department heads (Chief Executives) cannot be dismissed without the permission of the State Services Commissioner.

This arrangement has real teeth: there have been cases in recent years where a Minister sought to terminate a Chief Executive but the Commissioner, after enquiring into the matter, disallowed the dismissal. The net effect is that NZ public servants have a somewhat greater sense of the separation of politics from administration. This sense has been reinforced by the fact that NZ has gone even further than the other two countries in structuring services in such a way that policy functions are clearly separated from administration, with the implication that those public servants performing the latter roles are relatively insulated from formal 'big p' politics. However, the unicameral parliament in conjunction with the proportional voting system mean that politics is likely to be significant in NZ managers' work.

Weighing up all these factors together, it is possible to argue that formal politics is most salient to Australian public managers and least salient to those in the UK, with New Zealand somewhere in between. Australia's federal system and bi-cameral parliament in particular dictate that its public managers have to be aware of, and operate in, their political environment. This is reinforced by its voting system, which increases the likelihood of minor party representation in the Senate. At the same time, its civil service oversight processes, while relatively robust, are not as strong as those of New Zealand.

By contrast, the UK public service has not had to deal with state 'provinces', and its relationships with the devolved governments of Scotland, Wales and Ireland are still being shaped. Moreover the UK's House of Lords is overall less of a political obstacle for the government than is the Australian Senate, and the Civil Service Commissioners have sufficient authority to safeguard public service independence. On balance, the world of politics seems to be experienced by UK public managers as a separate realm from which policy is dictated by politicians (at least in theory) rather than a blending of worlds requiring increased negotiation.

Finally, while New Zealand has a strong custodian of civil service independence in the State Services Commissioner, other features of its governance arrangements – notably, its unicameral parliament and its proportional voting system – dictate that public managers understand and interact with the world of politics, not on a partisan basis but as a necessary means to get things done.

This report: A roadmap

The next chapter will situate our research in the context of the literature on political astuteness and public management. Then in Chapter 3, we will explore what the managers in our sample understand by the term 'politics' as applied to their work. Chapter 4 will set out our five-level framework of political astuteness skills along with participants' assessments of themselves and others according to that framework. Chapter 5 will examine where and how managers in our sample use their political astuteness skills, as well as looking at where the line or 'the zone' is between legitimate and illegitimate political behaviour. Finally, we will examine the development of our participants' political astuteness skills in Chapter 6, and put forward some implications and conclusions based on our findings in Chapter 7.

Chapter 2:

What past research tells us

The political astuteness of managers is the subject of research of varying volume and relevance in both the private and public sectors, and in two cognate and partly overlapping disciplines: organisation/management theory (which is generic in coverage in that it considers both sectors) and public administration (which clearly is confined to the public sector). Here we first consider what the organisation and management literature tells us about private sector and generic management, then explore what both the management and public administration research have to say about public sector managers.

Research on political astuteness of private sector and generic managers

Although political astuteness is increasingly recognised by practitioners and scholars as relevant to managerial effectiveness, its treatment in the management literature has been patchy in some respects and contested in others (Buchanan 2008). The term itself is rarely used but there is a large literature about politics in organisations, and about political skills of employees within organisations.

The most noteworthy feature of the general management literature is that it focuses overwhelmingly on 'micro' situations – namely, political astuteness *within* organisations. Some studies analyse the implications – positive or negative – for managers or employees as individuals (Perrewé and Nelson 2004; Rosen et al. 2009; Todd et al. 2009; Treadway et al. 2004; Wei et al. 2010; Zivnuska et al. 2004). Others consider them within dyads, usually supervisor-subordinate (Brouer et al. 2009; Harris et al. 2007; Halbesleben and Wheeler 2006; Kolodinsky et al. 2007), or small work groups (Ahearn et al. 2004; Liu et al. 2011). More consider relationships of various kinds between the political astuteness of managers and perceptions of politics at the level of the organisation (Drory and Romm 1990; Allen et al. 1979; Christiansen et al. 1997; Kacmar and Carlson 1997; Butcher and Clarke 1999; Ammeter et al. 2002; Balogun et al. 2005; Holbeche 2004; Byrne 2005; Buchanan 2008; Miller et al. 2008; Friedrich et al. 2009).

But only a handful of authors have paid due attention to the astuteness of private sector managers dealing with 'macro' political situations – those in the environment *outside* their organisations. Exceptions reside in two modest clusters of research. One is the literature concerning corporate lobbying (see Hillman et al. 2004; Harris and Lock 1996). The other is in some of the literature on strategic management, where a few writers have gone beyond considering market environments to address political ones. Best known is Freeman (1984), who elaborates a strategic approach based on understanding stakeholders. But his model doesn't really encompass 'political astuteness' in any depth (see also Johnson and Scholes 1999; Quinn et al. 1988; Christensen et al. 1982).

Although the emphasis on micro situations is widespread, the literature offers varied findings on what managers understand 'politics' to mean. Most of it defines politics in relatively negative terms, while other scholars adopt a more positive stance. On the negative side, it is seen as self-interested behaviour by managers seeking to further their career or personal interests (Halbesleben and Wheeler 2006; Byrne 2005; Ferris et al. 2002; 2005). For example Ferris et al. (2002), reviewing a large number of definitions, note that organisational politics is often conceptualised as self-interest. Relatedly, it is interpreted as 'politicking', and associated with blaming, attacking, scapegoating, manipulation and exploitation (Mintzberg 1985; Allen et al. 1979; Eiring 1999; Graham 1996). Another variant sees it in terms of waging 'turf wars' (Buchanan and Badham 1999; Bacharach and Lawler 1980). Other terms used to characterise politics in organisations are: 'unsavoury' (Calhoun 1969); 'evil, corruption and blasphemy' (Keen 1981); the 'shadow side' of management' (Egan 1994); and 'social disease' (Chanlat 1997). In short, what Hall et al. (2004) call the 'dark side' of politics often gets the most exposure.

In part, this could be understood as a logical corollary of the emphasis of the literature on micro situations. If the focus is on narrower entities such as individuals and work groups rather than the organisation or society as a whole, it is likely that more narrowly defined interests will be in play; the broader interests of the organisation or the public at large are less likely to be noticed or attract scrutiny (Valle and Perrewe 2000).

Not surprisingly, those subscribing solely to the 'dark side' conceptualise politics as dysfunctional for organisations. They argue that it has no place in rational processes and systems of management, since it makes it harder to establish a clear future direction or vision for the enterprise, and hampers efforts to get things done once a way forward is laid down (Gandz and Murray 1980; Voyer 1994). It absorbs valuable time and resources in internecine disputation and back-biting, fostering an inward-looking culture (Madison et al. 1980; Eisenhardt and Bourgeois 1988; Ferris and Kacmar 1992). Managers engaging in single-minded pursuit of personal interest and turf protection to the detriment of the organisation are likely to be seen as performing poorly not only in their formal political context but also simply as managers (Ferris et al. 1996; 2002; 2005; Byrne 2005; Miller et al. 2008). In particular from this perspective, preoccupation with gaining political advantage amounts to the adoption of a less strategic approach to management; it diverts attention from understanding the wider environment, and from consideration of the future, towards immersion in the intra-organisational present (Eisenhardt 1999, 8). Thus, without a balancing or compensating focus on organisational or societal outcomes, this view of politics as self-interest can be problematic.

This 'dark side' view of managers exercising political astuteness takes normative shape in the perspective that it is illegitimate, in the sense of not being sanctioned by formal authority (e.g. Mayes and Allen 1977; Mintzberg 1983; 1985). One recent article referred to 'illegitimate, self-serving political activities' (Chang et al. 2009, 779). Mintzberg characterised politics as 'individual or group behaviour that is informal, ostensibly parochial, typically divisive, and above all, in a technical sense, illegitimate – sanctioned neither by formal authority, accepted ideology, nor certified expertise'(1983, 172).

However, a smaller but significant part of the literature adopts a more positive view of organisational politics – in particular, that it is not simply a matter of conflict and contention between actors, but also of efforts to bring them together. In a review of the literature, Smith et al. conclude that 'Now organizational politics are broadly seen to include those activities used to advocate for and reconcile multiple interests and goals' (2009, 430; see also Bower and Weinberg 1988; Butcher and Clarke 1999). Others adopt a more mixed view. From a survey of 250 managers across both public and private sectors, Buchanan concludes that 'political behaviour is not necessarily seen as damaging, but is perceived to generate both functional and dysfunctional individual or organisational consequences' (2008, 61).

These more positive definitions downplay the conceptions of politics as dysfunctional or illegitimate. Some scholars suggest that the application of political skills by managers can be positive because the skills are conducive to bringing about organisational change or organisational learning (Butcher and Clarke 1999; Lawrence et al. 2005), while others see it as helpful in creating networks or in distributing leadership roles (Balogun et al. 2005; Friedrich et al. 2009). Several studies point to the contribution of managers' political skill to organisational outcomes, either in helping to get things done (Smith et al. 2009) or more diffusely in creating an atmosphere of employee support and trust which assists organisational functioning (Ammeter et al. 2002). Political behaviour in organisations has been observed to promote greater clarity through contention of ideas, forging a degree of consensus out of difference, managing complex organisational change, generating innovation, and reducing personal stress and strain (Buchanan 2008; Block 1987; Mangham 1979; Hargrave and van de Ven 2006). Perrewé et al. (2007) construe politics as part of the 'positive organizational behaviour' movement, and Buchanan (2008) notes that over half of the middle and senior managers in his sample thought that politics contributed to organisational effectiveness.

In summary, the major part of the literature on politics in private sector organisations tends to focus on the individual or micro-situation, to define organisational politics in terms of self-interest, and consequently to regard it as mainly dysfunctional and illegitimate for organisations. Significant minority strands, however, take issue with one or more of these assessments.

The literature on political astuteness of public sector managers

Whereas the previous section focused on the private sector research, this section draws on both management research and public administration literature to consider political astuteness in *public* sector organisations. Firstly, the management research offers a number of studies considering political skills in public agencies (Ahearn et al. 2004; Baddeley and James 1987a; 1987b; Butcher and Clarke 2003; Ferris et al. 2005). Like their counterparts considering private firms, some tend to pay more attention to micro conceptions of politics, and some of those adopt negative perspectives on how managers use politics, its functionality and legitimacy (Rosen et al. 2009; Byrne 2005; Halbesleben and Wheeler 2006). But others take a more positive view, seeing politics as potentially useful for the organisation. Butcher and Clarke, for instance, argue on behalf of 'the constructive value of politics', which they see as 'the reconciliation of different interests' (2003, 477-478; see also Baddeley and James 1987a; Holbeche 2004). Usually if not always, the constructive approaches are founded on macro perspectives (Baddeley and James 1987a; see also Charlesworth et al. 2003; Butcher and Clarke 1999).

In the public administration field, however, the literature on political behaviour and skills of public managers is fairly sparse. The little there is tends to lean towards the 'macro' perspective, and to that extent is the mirror opposite of the micro perspective found in much of the management research. For instance Olfshki (1990) studied 30 appointed CEOs of government agencies in three US states, and found that 'understanding the process' and 'leadership as interweaving interests' were among the major types of political skills they used

Secondly, there is a vast public administration literature that studies the interface between external politics and public managers (see e.g. Rainey 2003, 99-123; Hughes 2012; Long 1949). Indeed the necessity to deal in some way with the formal governmental environment of political institutions and actors is recognised as a defining feature of public management. It is seen as the source of policy mandates, of resources, and of contributions of time and effort to policy purposes (Moore 1995; Allison 1980; Kaufman 1981). But this literature has little to say about when and how public managers exercise political skills. A few explain and recommend particular skills and knowledge _to_ managers about how to deal with politics in the public domain (e.g. Bryson 2004; Moore 1995; Bower and Weinberg 1988). But hardly any authors study the political astuteness _of_ practising managers as they apply to their external environments. Thus on the one hand, public administration researchers say politics is important, indeed crucial to public managers, but on the other they have little to say about *how* managers should hone their skills to deal with it.

However, with its basis in political science, what the field of public administration does provide is a bigger canvas to define politics, offering broader and less negative views, on the whole, than the management research. Its more pluralist perspective sees politics as a set of interactions within and between public and private institutions, covering both formal and informal activities. Politics is, for example, described as 'all the activities of conflict, negotiation or co-operation over the use and distribution of resources' (Leftwich 2004). Another constructive view comes from Crick (2004, 67), who defines politics as the mobilisation of support for a position, decision or action where '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' – a perspective markedly different from the 'politics as self-interest' view.

One important extension of this perspective is the idea that politics entails reaching beyond difference to find ways of cooperating in order to achieve consensus about broader purposes that are shared – despite differences in emphasis, values or specific goals. Dunn has captured this in his suggestion that politics are the 'struggles which result from the collisions between human purposes: most clearly when these collisions involve large numbers of human beings... it takes in, too, the immense array of expedients and practices which human beings have invented to cooperate, as much as to compete with one another' (quoted in Stoker 2006, p. 4).

The present study is designed to shed more light on how well these perspectives reflect the way public sector managers view politics. To facilitate this, we adopt a broad definition of politics in and around organisations, to allow space for differing conceptions. Drawing on the original UK phase of our research, we take the view that:

> politics is about mobilising support for, and consent to, action in the context of diverse, and sometimes competing interests and may involve either collaboration or competition depending on purpose; that politics can be legitimate as well as illegitimate, that it can be about pursuing either or both of self-interest and organisational interests; and that these activities can take place external or internal to the organisation (Hartley and Fletcher 2008).

These definitions of politics have important ramifications for managers. Bacharach has argued that political competence may make 'the difference between someone who can get an idea off the ground and accepted in an organisation and someone who can't' (2005, 93). It is also possible that 'constructive' politics can play a key part in achieving organisational outcomes (Holbeche 2004). Accordingly, politics may or may not result in positive outcomes – it can be seen as 'an important social influence process with the potential of being functional or dysfunctional to organizations and individuals' (Allen et al. 1979, 82). Either way, managers cannot afford to ignore the political behaviour going on around them.

Alongside this ambivalence as to whether political behaviours may be seen as *functional* for a government organisation, there is scepticism as to whether they are *legitimate.* One reason is similar to that discussed previously for private sector organisations: politics is seen as not sanctioned by official authority within the organisation, and risks undermining the organisational hierarchy. But in the public sector an even more serious reason has been advanced as to why public managers engaging in politics, especially in the external environment, may be seen as illegitimate: it is potentially undemocratic, as it threatens to encroach upon the role and authority of elected public officials (such as ministers or presidents, among others) as the key political decision-makers. In short, it might give public managers too much power relative to the politicians.

This is, of course, an old issue in public administration, going back at least to Woodrow Wilson's articulation of the politics-administration dichotomy (1887), progressing through periodic debates (Waldo 1948; Long 1949), the public choice perspective (Niskanen 1971) and the New Public Management (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000; Pollitt 1990). More recently, the public value debate in essence is about the extent to which public managers should encroach upon the perceived prerogatives of elected politicians to make policy, and become, as Rhodes and Wanna argued, 'platonic guardians and arbiters of the public interest' (2009, 162; see also: Moore 1995; Benington and Moore 2011; Alford and O'Flynn 2009). An important element of this debate concerns the argument that political activity by public managers is particularly inappropriate in Westminster governments, where the discipline of party systems and consequent control of the legislature by the executive circumscribes managers' room to act. In these governments, Rhodes and Wanna argue,

> … politics are inherent in all the situations and choices managers make, and in the choices others make that impact on the manager. We should be clear, and managers should recognise for their own good, that they are being asked to play a high-risk political game (2009, 170).

But while this argument is prosecuted in theoretical terms, there is almost no empirical research on whether managers in Westminster frameworks actually do find it harder – in either practical or normative terms – to exercise political acumen.

In summary, the literature relevant to the topic of public managers' political astuteness contains a number of gaps. Studies of private sector organisations adduce considerable empirical research, but their focus is largely on *intra*-organisational phenomena, taking little account of politics in the environments around organisations. By contrast, the literature on public sector organisations offers a more outward-looking perspective on the *nature* of politics, but when it comes to public managers' political *astuteness* in the organisational environment, the research is scanty. At the same time, there is a substantial literature addressing whether it is *legitimate* for public managers, but precious little empirical research against which to test it. This report is a contribution toward filling these gaps.

Chapter 3:

What do public managers understand by politics in their work?

The review in the previous chapter showed that the major part of the literature on politics in and around organisations has an individualist bias, and a concomitant tendency to focus on more negative aspects or interpretations of political processes and activities. Our research challenges this perspective, and instead lends weight to the more modest but important literature that adopts a more macro and positive perspective.

How public managers see 'politics': the aggregate view

The first issue relates to how important our sample of 1012 public managers saw politics as being in the organisational context in which they worked. Respondents were given a list of contextual factors, expressed in items such as 'External perception of my organisation is a significant consideration in my work', or 'Formal political decisions affect my organisation', and asked 'How far do the following apply to your organisation?' (see Table 3.1). The results were striking: responses were above 3, and a significant number above 3.5. The surveyed managers clearly saw their environment as a broadly political one. Not surprisingly, the most important factors according to respondents were those to do with the formal political world (a mean of 3.52 on a scale of 1-4) and the decisions that emanate from it (a mean of 3.68). But not far behind were less formal factors, such as working with external partnerships, being subject to regulation, and being in a highly visible media environment.

Table 3.1: 'How far do the following apply to your organisation?'
(mean figure given, based on 1-4 scale - ANOVA with post-hoc Bonferroni test)

		AU	NZ	UK	Overall	Sig diff at .05 level
We work in a highly media-visible environment	Mean	3.40	3.43	3.37	3.37	None
	SD	.79	.73	.76	.82	
We work with a range of external partnerships	Mean	3.60	3.53	3.53	3.50	None
	SD	.58	.56	.61	.73	
We operate in a highly regulated environment	Mean	3.39	3.3	3.56	3.45	AU and UK
	SD	.66	.75	.61	.70	NZ and UK
External perception of my organisation is a significant consideration in my work	Mean	3.30	3.36	3.28	3.30	
	SD	.68	.66	.72	.74	
My work is directly connected to the formal political world (e.g. state/national govt, parliament)	Mean	3.47	3.59	3.56	3.52	
	SD	.73	.71	.76	.77	
Formal political decisions affect my organisation	Mean	3.64	3.71	3.78	3.68	AU and UK
	SD	.62	.51	.47	.66	

With this background picture, we delved into how public managers defined politics in their workplace, and by corollary how they judged politics – specifically, how far their views reflected the 'dark side' of politics and how far a more constructive view. The very clear picture that emerged from responses to the question 'Which of the following comes closest to your understanding of politics in your work as a manager?' is that public managers in the three countries were much more oriented to a positive view of politics in organisations than those reported in the management literature (Table 3.2).

The same four positive understandings were the most important for respondents across all three countries, and the same two negative ones were least important (see Table 3.1). The most frequently cited were all meanings with positive or neutral connotations: alliance building (63 per cent of respondents); formal processes and institutions of government (56 per cent); scanning factors in the external environment (49 per cent) and ways in which different interests are reconciled (44 per cent). By contrast, a much smaller proportion saw politics in terms of 'pursuit of personal advantage' (10 per cent) and people 'protecting their turf' (19 per cent).

Table 3.2: Which of the following comes closest to your understanding of politics in your work as a manager?*

Purpose of politics	AU%	NZ%	UK%	Overall %	Sig diff at .05 level (chi square)
Alliance-building to achieve organisational objectives	67	71	58	63	AU and UK NZ and UK
Formal processes and institutions of government	58	62	53	56	
Pursuit of personal advantage	4	1	17	10	AU and UK NZ and UK
People 'protecting their turf'	13	7	27	19	AU and UK NZ and UK
Scanning factors in the external environment that the organisation needs to consider	59	64	37	49	AU and UK NZ and UK
Ways in which different interests are reconciled	52	45	36	44	AU and UK

*Participants were asked to tick up to three options

These findings were reinforced and elaborated by a number of our interviewees, who saw political skills as a way of gaining a mandate, and/or as a way of making things happen:

P08 (senior manager, AU): [Political astuteness is] primarily about mobilising support for a course of action. Now that might be support within the organisation, that is not people that you either work for or work for you directly necessarily, but that broader base of support. It could be mobilising support in political office.

P06 (senior, AU): As you become more senior you don't necessarily have the luxury of always being able to just think about the correct answer … it is about what is a workable answer, what people are ready for, and how you might be able to get something through. I think as you become more senior, you realise that there's more complexity, there's more dimensions to consider other than just the purest answer to a problem. And see now I think that being able to manage the political dimension is about getting things done.

P14 (middle, UK): The politics of it was mobilising our internal parties to all either disagree with me and say stop or agree with me and be mobilised as a joint common front.

These survey results varied according to managerial level. The more senior the managers, the more likely they were to subscribe to a positive or neutral conception of politics, and the less likely to see it in relation to personal advantage or turf. Conversely, middle managers were more likely to see it in negative or neutral terms.

Taken as a whole, these findings are clearly less mixed than the position advanced in the management literature; they indicate that overall public managers in the three countries have a sanguine view of politics. They also indicate that managers seem inclined to adopt a view of politics which is instrumental rather than judgmental. Their strong leaning is toward notions of politics that are conducive to enabling public purposes to be crystallised (scanning the external environment, reconciling different interests) and achieved (alliance building to achieve organisational objectives, formal processes and institutions of government), rather than ones in which self-interest is the dominant concern. They also indicate that – again, contrary to the management literature – public managers tend to give considerably more weight to their external environment than to the internal politics of their organisation.

> P07 (senior, AU): [Political astuteness is] being aware of the context and environment in which you work at a strategic level, and being aware I guess of the underpinnings of and all the different players that are involved in something, so being a bit wise about the environment in which you work.

> P10 (very senior, NZ): It means having an awareness of the operational environment in which you're working, and by that I mean having an awareness of your minister, his or her behaviours, the Cabinet, their relationship or lack of with each other, their core drivers in terms of policy drivers, how that relates to our work, the connections between their broad vision and political decision with [what community views are] on that direction, and for me I think of it as having an awareness and understanding of all those aspects in a real sense, and then that brings to bear how I think about contextualising the advice I give.

> P34 (very senior, UK): I think the astute official operates in a way that draws in evidence, ideas, views from elsewhere, recognises that the politician will be doing the same, and then what I think the astute official seeks to do is to find a way of synthesising all of this noise from the wider environment and bringing it down into a digestible form that the politician might use.

To a modest degree, some of these responses are related to the contextual factors referred to in Table 3.1. Not surprisingly, politics was more commonly defined as 'formal processes and institutions' by those who saw their work as 'directly connected to the formal political world' or their organisations as affected by formal political decisions. These two contextual factors also loomed large for those who did not see politics in terms of reconciling different interests.

Even more noteworthy – and to be discussed further in Chapter 5 – is that there is a relationship between managers' perception of their own levels of political skill (or of managers around them) and their conceptions of politics, with higher skill levels being associated with more positive conceptions, and lower levels associated with more negative conceptions.

Differences among the three countries

At the same time, within those rankings of definitions, there were some differences of relative emphasis among the three countries. Most noteworthy was that even though the self-interest/turf protection view of politics was a minority view for British public managers, it was a significantly more substantial minority than for their Antipodean counterparts. For instance, 17 per cent of UK managers said they thought politics was 'pursuit of personal advantage' compared with four per cent of Australian managers and only one per cent of New Zealand managers, which is a substantial difference. Conversely, UK public managers were somewhat lower (a chi square test showed a significant difference at the .05 level) on alliance building, scanning the environment and reconciling differences.

As already alluded to above, there were some parallel differences between the UK on the one hand and Australia and New Zealand on the other in respect of perceived levels of political skill – and some robust concomitant associations between those levels and the extent to which managers are oriented to more positive understandings of politics, as Chapter 5 will discuss.

Conclusion

'Politics' has on occasion been a dirty word – in organisations as well as in the processes of democratic governance. But the managers in our survey seemed to adopt a more positive notion of politics, as the set of processes by which societies establish collective priorities and act on them. At the very least our survey responses lend weight to an instrumental conception, in which politics is a means by which public managers learn what is required of them and through which they can get things done. This is not inconsistent with what we expect of public servants in a democratic polity.

It also puts a premium on political astuteness. If politics permeates the work of public servants, then their ability to perform the roles expected of them is dependent on how well they can understand political actors, read situations, win stakeholders over, form alliances and involve them in implementing policies and programs. Having touched on some aspects of the political environment, we now turn to consideration of the meaning of political astuteness as a foundation for consideration of how skilled public managers are, how they use political skills, and how they acquire them.

Chapter 4:

How politically astute are public managers?

Assessing the political skills of public managers is a complex undertaking. Their political astuteness will reside in their cognitive understandings, their remembered experiences and their capacity to abstract from the particular to the general. Short of being able to read minds, these call for observation of actual behaviour in managerial situations, preferably over a sufficient period for patterns to be adduced, classified and compared. Not the least of the difficulties in doing so is the sheer cost of placing researchers with a large enough sample of managers to garner statistically valid inferences. An even more profound problem is the likely reluctance of senior managers to be observed in the course of making often politically sensitive decisions.

Our approach has been to engage our sample as 'co-producers' of these assessments in a structured fashion, thus capitalising on their positions as embedded observers over time of their fellow managers. Each survey participant was asked to assess their own level of skill on each of the 50 items in the framework (self), and also to assess that of the managers with whom they worked (others). This enables comparisons between different skill types as well as between different managers, as well as triangulating from the perspective of actor compared with observer. This chapter details our political skills framework and then reports the main findings about levels of political skill, firstly taking all three countries together in aggregate and then comparing them with each other.

The conceptual framework for political skills

The UK phase of this study gave rise to a five part conceptual framework of political skills (Hartley et al. 2007), which was subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis (Hartley, Fletcher and Ungemach, 2013).

1. Personal skills: Self-awareness of one's own motives and behaviours, and the ability to exercise self-control, form an essential foundation for managing with political astuteness. The personal skills dimension is also about being open to alternative views so that it is possible to listen and reflect on the views of others. And it is about having a proactive disposition, initiating rather than waiting for things to happen. Understanding motives, interests and influence is central to effective management with political astuteness; without a firm underpinning of personal skills, the 'higher' skills will not be effective.

2. Interpersonal skills: This dimension concerns the interpersonal capacity to influence the thinking and behaviour of others, get buy-in from people over whom the skill user has no direct authority, and make people feel valued. These are 'tough' as well as 'soft' skills because the ability to

negotiate, to stand up to pressures from other people, and to handle conflict in ways that achieve constructive outcomes is important. They may be viewed as core management and certainly core leadership skills, but they also constitute foundational skills for political astuteness. Some elements of this dimension go beyond direct leadership skills, such as cultivating relationships which have potential rather than immediate value, and knowing when to rely on position and authority and when to rely on less direct methods of exerting influence. The dimension also includes coaching or mentoring individuals to develop their own political sensitivities and skills.

3. Reading people and situations: This factor has a strong analytical aspect to it, and is based on thinking and intuition about the dynamics that can occur when stakeholders and agendas come together. It includes recognising the differing interests and agendas of a variety of people and their organisations, and discerning what may be the underlying as opposed to espoused agendas. This entails thinking through the likely standpoints of varying interest groups in advance of dealing with them, and using a wider knowledge of institutions, political processes and social systems to understand what might happen. Finally, it includes recognising where one may be seen as a threat to others and their interests. This dimension lies at the heart of political astuteness skills, as it concerns the power, influence and interests of different groups. It is primarily concerned with analytical rather than influencing skills.

4. Building alignment and alliances: This dimension is a crucial skill of action, which requires the previous elements of skillin order to be effective. Building alignment out of different interests, goals and motives requires a detailed understanding and appreciation of the context, the players and the objectives of each stakeholder. It is about recognising differences in outlook or emphasis but being able to forge these into collaborative actions, even where the diversity is substantial. This dimension goes beyond much of the literature on partnerships where finding consensus and commonality is the key skill. It requires working with difference and with conflicts of interest in order to forge new opportunities, and builds on the proactivity of personal skills in actively seeking out alliances and partnerships rather than relying on those which are already in existence. It includes being able to bring out and deal with differences between stakeholders, not conceal them or hope that if they are ignored they will somehow go away. Tough negotiation skills (from interpersonal skills) may underpin the capacity to build a realistic and useful consensus without ending up with the lowest common denominator.

5. Strategic direction and scanning: Finally, we reach the important question of purpose: what these political astuteness skills are being used for. This dimension includes two major elements. The first is a sense of strategic thinking and action in relation to organisational purpose, so that the understanding of power, interests and influence is set within a strategic aim. This includes thinking long-term and having a road map of where the manager wants to go so that he or she is not diverted by short-term pressures. Secondly, this dimension requires strategic scanning – thinking about longer-term issues that may have the potential to have an impact on the organisation not just on the horizon, but over the horizon. It requires analytical capacity to think through scenarios of possible futures, to think about small changes which may herald bigger shifts in society and the economy, and to find ways to analyse and manage (as far as possible) the uncertainty that lies outside the organisation. This last includes being able to keep options open rather than reaching for a decision prematurely.

The interconnectedness of the five dimensions

These dimensions of political skill are interconnected and therefore together may be considered as a meta-competency, rather than as single dimensions of competency. Our research suggests that a leader needing to manage complex set of interrelationships across organisations will require skills in each of these dimensions in order to lead with political astuteness. While personal and interpersonal skills are the foundation of building trust and understanding the needs and interests of other people and organisations, there is also a need for the skills of building alliances across those differences, and the ability to detect wider changes in the external environment that may have an impact on plans and objectives.

It is true that there has been significant attention paid to the concept of emotional intelligence (e.g. Goleman 1995), and this may reflect an awareness by managers and trainers of the need to address some of the personal and interpersonal skills outlined above, but the emotional intelligence approach has largely been taken up within a limited leadership perspective and without any of the strategic or political context that is addressed here.

Ratings of political skills

Moving to our findings, where did managers see themselves as being relatively strong or weak? In all three countries, public managers had a generally higher opinion of what we might call their 'micro' political skills – personal skills, interpersonal skills, and reading people and situations – than their 'macro' skills – building alignment and alliances, and strategic direction and scanning. (Note that in other important respects there were significant differences between them in this area, to be discussed below.) This was also largely true of their assessments of the political skills of other senior managers in their organisations, although the differences in this respect were not so marked (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: Mean assessment of self and others across five domains of political skills (on scale of 1-6)
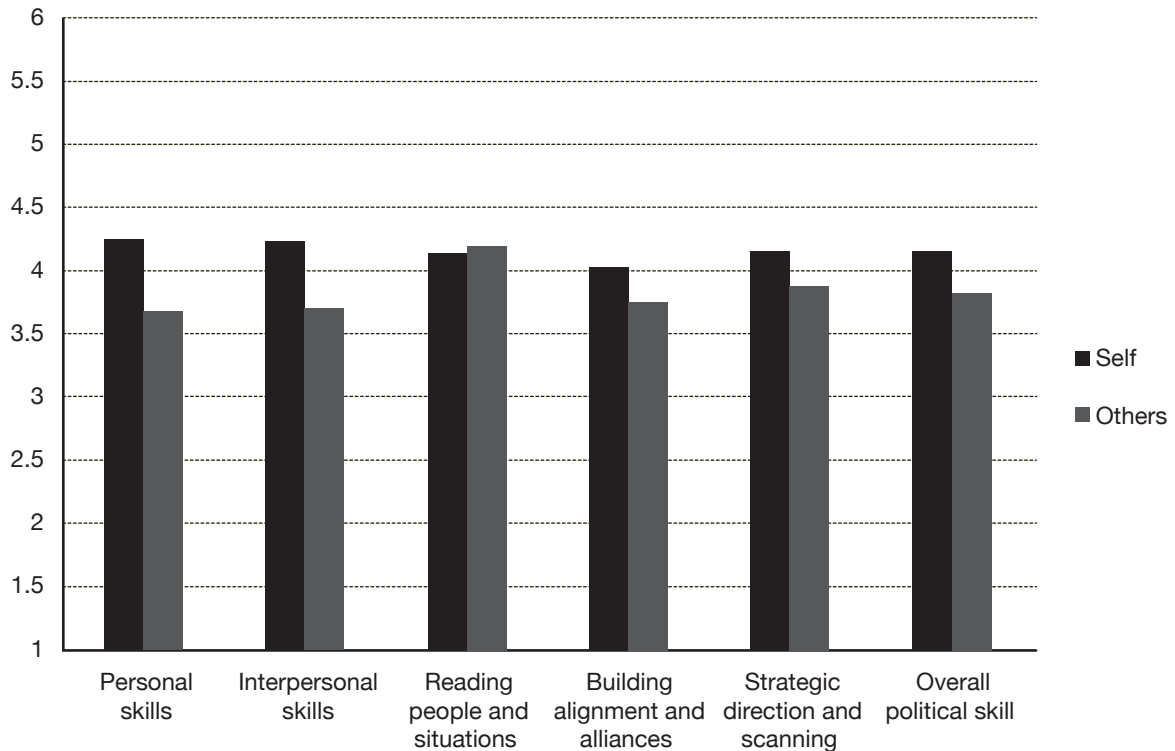
The more positive self-assessment of 'micro' skills is perhaps not surprising, as personal and interpersonal skills might be more easily acquired and practiced than building alliances or developing strategy skills. However, another influence may be at work here, namely that managers would be reluctant to think of themselves as lacking on something as basic as personal and interpersonal skills.

Respondents generally rated their own political skills more highly than those of their fellow managers (overall, 4.16 compared to 3.84 on a six-point scale; see Figure 4.1). This 'leniency bias' or 'illusory superiority', which is of course logically impossible if the sample is valid, frequently occurs when survey respondents are asked to rate themselves and others (Donaldson and Grant-Vallone 2002; Dunning et al. 2003). One interesting exception, however, was in their assessment of how effective their peers were at 'reading people and situations'. On this dimension, respondents rated their fellow managers slightly more highly than themselves.

Allowing for the leniency bias, it is noteworthy that managers generally gave their own and their fellow managers' political skills an average to good rating. These are not emphatically high evaluations. Yet at the same time, as will be discussed in Chapter 6, they felt that being politically astute matters. Thus there was a clear gap perceived between need and capacity.

Relationships between political skill and other variables

We explored these findings further by analysing demographic and other independent variables, namely: management level or seniority; managers' conceptions of politics; gender; and organisational growth.

One finding was a clear association between managers' conceptions of politics and the level of political skill they report for themselves and their colleagues (see Table 4.1). Those who defined politics as self-interest or protection of turf rated their own political skill levels, and those of their colleagues, significantly less highly than those who employed other definitions (for example, those who selected 'pursuit of personal advantage' as one of their definitions of politics rated their own skills at an average of 3.9, whereas those who did not rated 4.19). By contrast, those who defined politics as 'alliance building' or 'scanning factors in the external environment' rated their own and their colleagues' political skill levels significantly more highly on average than those who didn't. Put more pithily, managers who subscribed to the 'dark side' image of politics reported themselves as being on average less politically skilled than those who didn't.

Table 4.1: Assessment of political skill by conceptions of politics*

	Politics is…							
	Pursuit of personal advantage		People 'protecting their turf'		Alliance-building		Scanning factors in the external environment	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Assessment of self	3.9	4.19	3.99	4.2	4.2	4.09	4.22	4.1
Assessment of others	3.27	3.86	3.54	3.87	3.87	3.69	3.9	3.72

* Participants were asked to select up to three out of a total of six options. For the purposes of this analysis, managers are separated into those who chose to tick a particular definition, and those who did not.

Secondly – and perhaps unsurprisingly – very senior managers (4.33 out of 6 overall) rated their skills on average higher than senior managers (4.19), who in turn rated themselves higher than middle managers (3.88). These differences were statistically significant, and held true for all five dimensions of political skill (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: Self-assessment of political skill by managerial level
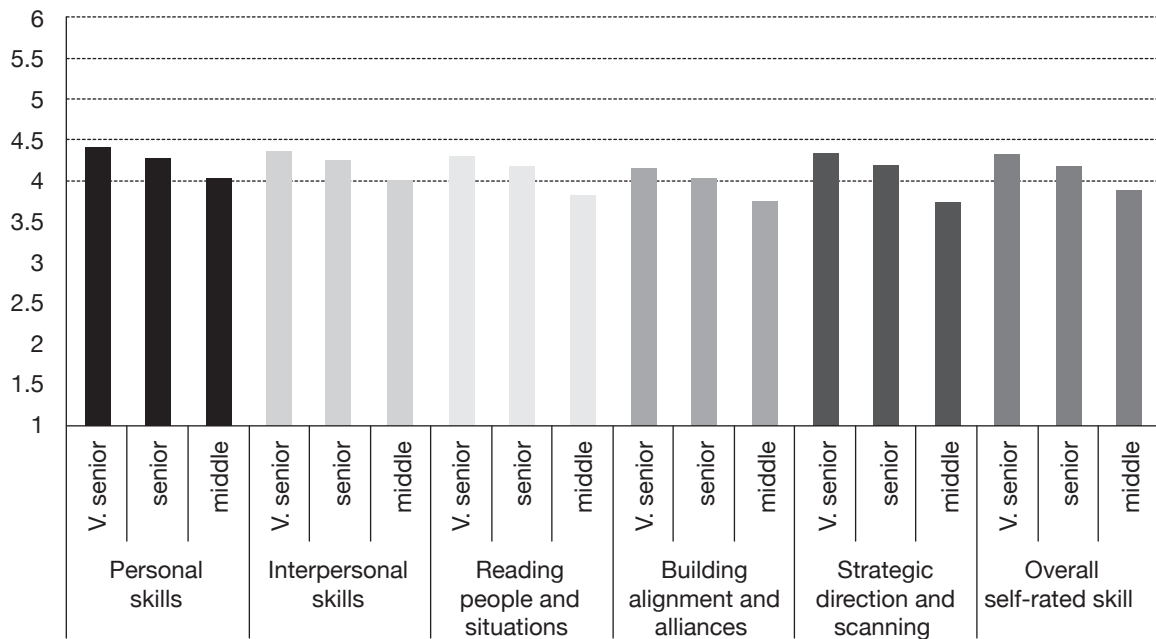
There are four possible explanations. First, it may be that possessing such skills aids promotion and achieving senior levels. Second, it may be that the greatest demands made on political skills are at the top of organisations, where strategic challenges requiring political 'nous' are most complex and where engagement outside the organisation is often particularly high. Thirdly, managers may need time to develop political skills, and only reach their peak in the higher echelons of the organisation (however, the finding that it is primarily level and not age that predicts higher ratings suggests this is less likely). Finally, it may be that top managers have the most inflated views of their own capabilities.

There may be an element of truth in all of these, but other data from the study (to be discussed in Chapter 6) indicate that leaders learn their political skills in a largely haphazard way through experience, trial and error, and learning from the examples – and mistakes – of others. Other supporting evidence comes from Buchanan (2008), who found that 80 per cent of a sample of UK managers had no training in this area.

Another demographic finding was the absence of any gender difference on self-rated skills (Figure 4.3). Others have argued that gender differences in leadership and management are more about perceptions of appropriate behaviour by gender than about actual skill (e.g. Schein et al. 1996; Sinclair 2005). Buchanan's (2008) study indicated that women appear to engage in political tactics as readily as men, so it seems that they not only feel equally *effective* in this domain, but they are also equally *active.*

Figure 4.3: Self-assessment of political skill by gender
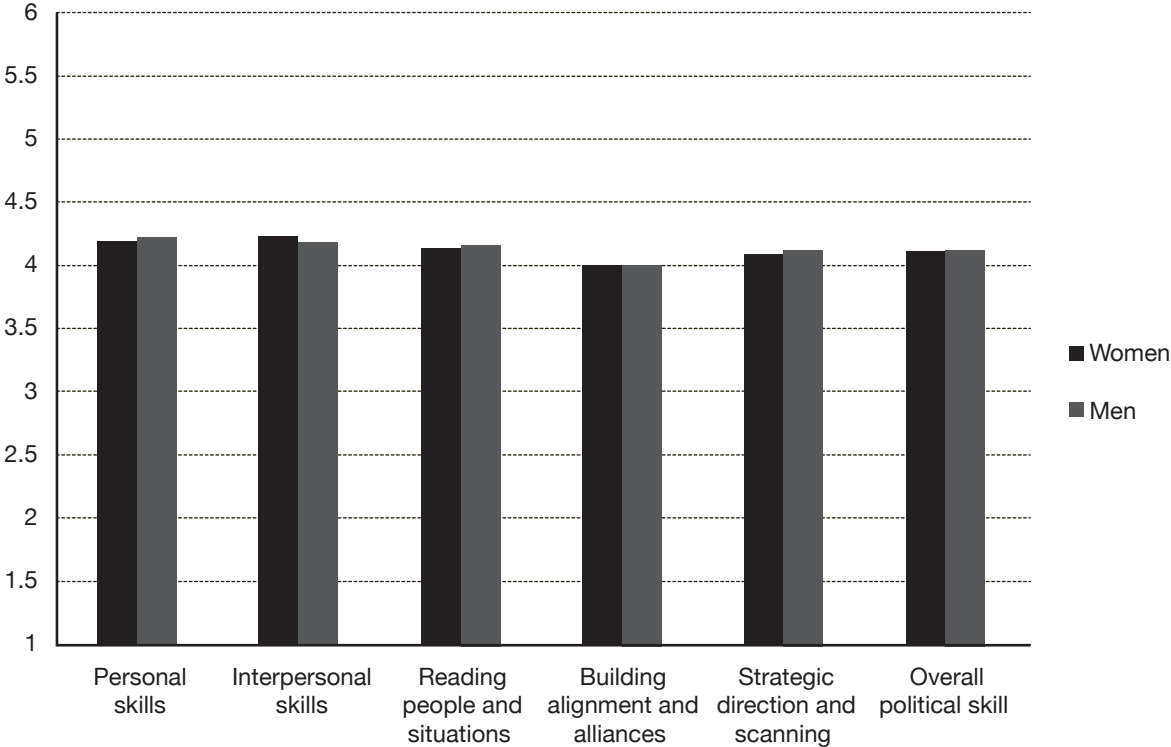
Fourthly, it is very interesting to note that the *'growth' status* of respondents' organisations made a statistically significant difference to how they rated the political skills of their managerial colleagues. Participants were asked 'How would you describe the state of your organisation's growth?', and their assessments of their own political skills and those of their colleagues were analysed on the basis of whether they indicated that their organisation was declining, stable, or growing (Figure 4.4). Participants' evaluations of their *own* skills were unaffected, but they tended to rate their colleagues' skills as relatively lower if they perceived their organisation to be declining, and relatively higher if they believe it to be growing.

Figure 4.4: Assessments of others' political skills by organisational status of respondent
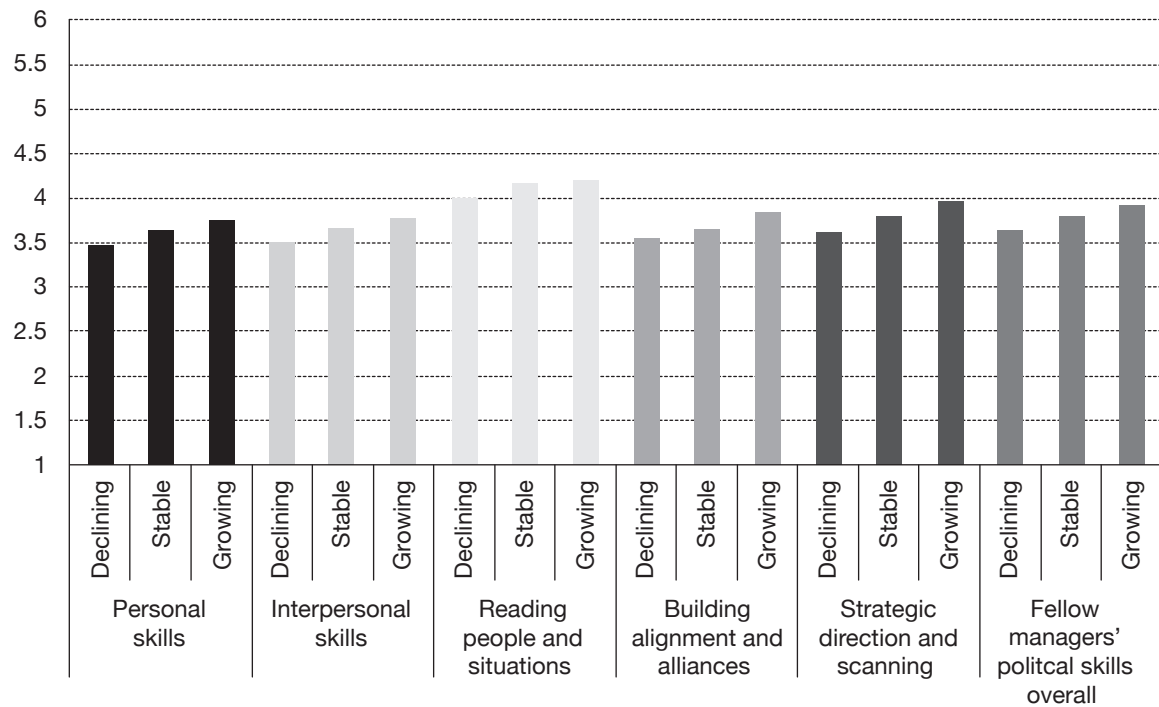
When speculating about the causes we must be clear to note that correlation does not imply causation, but these results do suggest that there is some relationship between organisational success and the political skills of managers. One interpretation could be that the growth of an organisation is a mark of success, to which its more politically skilled managers contribute – and more generally, that political skill on the part of managers is good for organisational performance. Another interpretation, in the public choice vein (see Niskanen 1971), could be that cunning, self-serving managers are playing the political game cleverly to garner more money and staff for their increasingly bloated bureaucracies. Closer examination revealed that this stepwise pattern was strongest in the UK sample, although the scores for 'stable' and 'growing' organisations were still higher than the score for 'declining' organisations in Australia and New Zealand.

Differences between countries

Although the relative ranking of the five main types of political skill was the same for all three countries, the UK mean scores (both self-rating and rating of others) were significantly lower. In other words, public managers in the UK took a dimmer view of the effectiveness of their own (4.09) and their peers' (3.68) political skills than did their counterparts in Australia and New Zealand (4.22 and 4.35 for self, and 3.98 and 3.99 for others). To a certain degree also, UK managers tended to apply a harsher standard in their assessments of some of the political skills of their colleagues. On 'personal' and 'interpersonal' skills, UK managers marked down their colleagues by a greater margin than did Australian or NZ managers.

These differences could, of course, be attributable to some form of native British modesty, but more realistically may be explicable by the greater distance of most UK public managers from the political realm given the degree of centralisation of UK government, as discussed in Chapter 1. Put simply, they may have less occasion to apply political skills in the formal realm of politics than their Australian and New Zealand counterparts, and feel less confident about them as a result.

Table 4.2: Assessments of self and others by country

Domain of political skills	Self (mean, scale of 1-6)			Sig. differences at .05 level (ANOVA)	Others (mean, scale of 1-6)			Sig. differences at .05 level (ANOVA)
	AU	NZ	UK		AU	NZ	UK	
Personal skills	4.28	4.45	4.19	AU and UK NZ and UK	3.81	3.86	3.49	AU and UK NZ and UK
Interpersonal skills	4.26	4.36	4.16	AU and UK NZ and UK	3.87	3.87	3.51	AU and UK NZ and UK
Reading people and situations	4.19	4.32	4.03	AU and UK NZ and UK	4.32	4.29	4.06	AU and UK
Building alignment and alliances	4.07	4.19	3.93	AU and UK NZ and UK	3.89	3.87	3.58	AU and UK NZ and UK
Strategic direction and scanning	4.27	4.3	3.99	AU and UK NZ and UK	4.04	3.96	3.7	AU and UK
Overall	4.22	4.35	4.09	AU and UK NZ and UK	3.98	3.99	3.68	AU and UK NZ and UK

Conclusion

When it came to judging their own and their peers' political astuteness, public managers in all three countries were fairly stern in their judgments. On the whole, they didn't see their own and their colleagues' political skills as better than mediocre, especially the macro skills. They were a little more sanguine about their 'micro' skills, but interestingly seemed to feel that their colleagues were as good as or better than them in 'Reading people and situations', which is somewhere between the micro and macro levels. The evidence suggests that greater political astuteness is associated with more positive views about politics, which raises further questions to be addressed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5:

Where do public managers deploy political astuteness?

So far in this report, we have been considering *attributes* of public managers: how they see politics and what their level of political astuteness is. This chapter looks at *behaviours:* what public managers actually do with their political skills, and when they do it. It begins by considering how important political skills are for public managers, then looks at the situations in which they use them. Finally, it examines some of the factors that seem to be associated with where they exercise political astuteness.

First, however, a methodological issue associated with the two-stage nature of the study needs to be explained. It is important to note that, while the great majority of the questions were common across the three countries, Table 5.1 reports on five that were only asked in Australia and New Zealand, and three that were only asked in the UK. As a result, there is no comparison between the UK and the other two countries for those questions. The reason was that the original UK survey covered private sector managers (removed from the sample for this second stage study) as well as public sector ones. Certain other questions were important but were framed in UK terms – such as 'Working with UK central government', or 'Working with European Union institutions and officials'. On these issues we framed new questions for the Australian and New Zealand respondents that were more context-appropriate (e.g. 'Dealing with Ministers', 'Dealing with central agencies such as Treasury or the PM's Department', and 'Working with different levels of government').

Importance of political astuteness

The first message from these responses is that, overall, being politically astute matters to the public managers surveyed. On a scale ranging from 0 to 4, respondents' average scores on the items under this question were around 2.8 (where 2 is 'of some value' and 3 is 'very valuable'), In particular, the respondents saw it as valuable to be able to exercise political skills in respect of *domestic* politics, that is, politics in their home country. When items focusing on *international* engagement – such as 'Scanning changes internationally', or 'Working with EU institutions or with global governance organisations' – were taken out of the analysis, the average score noticeably increased, to nearly 3 (2.95). Managers clearly recognise that domestic politics is an important part of their work that calls for well-developed political skills. Also noteworthy is that Australian and New Zealand respondents on average found it more valuable to use political skills across a range of contexts than their British counterparts.

The depth interviews allowed us to extend the picture further and gain a sense of how important politics and political skills are to public managers in our target countries. The answer, overwhelmingly, was that politics is ubiquitous and political astuteness is essential:

P01 (very senior, AU): It might be just the way I approach things, but I just think they're something that you use most of the time in most relationships.

P06 (senior, AU): I think it really has to be part of what you do every day.

P07 (senior, AU): You can't afford to push it away… everything you do is political and it would be stupid I think to think that you can operate without being political in any way.

P08 (senior, AU): …in senior executive positions in government, what I'm struggling to do is think of a situation where I haven't found political skills to be useful, rather than examples of where I have.

P23 (very senior, NZ): …the strange thing is, it completely pervades my life. It's every breath we take here.

P26 (very senior, UK): If you're going to be a managerial leader in an organisation that is controlled by elected politicians, you have to have political understanding, nous, deftness with it. …because without that you can be a very very effective managerial, operational, tactical person, but you can just go crunch with the politicians, and it will not work.

P30 (very senior, UK): If you don't understand how differently they operate in terms of their drivers, what makes a good politician, what's the environment they're working in, you simply can't be effective as a manager. And that's where the astuteness comes in on the job.

This supports the argument that they see the context surrounding their work as a broadly political one, as Chapter 3 and particularly Table 3.1 showed.

Table 5.1: 'Please rate the extent to which you find it valuable to use political skills in the following situations' (mean score, scale of 0-4)

		AU	NZ	UK	Overall	Sig diff at .05 level
Questions common to all jurisdictions (differences tested with ANOVA)						
Thinking about how public opinion has an impact on your organisation	Mean SD	3.01 .73	3.03 .79	3.20 .83	3.1 .79	AU and UK
Working with the media	Mean SD	2.87 .86	2.97 .83	2.83 .90	2.86 .88	
Scanning changes in society for their impact on your organisation	Mean SD	2.81 .87	2.87 .83	2.87 .86	2.84 .86	
Scanning changes internationally for their impact on your organisation	Mean SD	2.33 .90	2.23 .94	2.09 1.14	2.21 1.02	AU and UK
Working with global governance organisations	Mean SD	1.89 .91	1.96 .84	1.75 1.09	1.83 1.00	
Working with partners and strategic alliances	Mean SD	2.77 .89	2.68 .81	3.14 .86	2.94 .89	AU and UK NZ and UK
Working with influential people in your org	Mean SD	3.02 .84	3.01 .80	3.12 .81	3.07 .82	
Working with cliques and power blocs in your organisation	Mean SD	2.46 1.08	2.48 1.18	2.50 1.14	2.48 1.11	
Questions not common to all jurisdictions (differences tested with t-tests where applicable)						
UK: Working with regional or local government	Mean SD			3.2 .93		
UK: Working with UK central government	Mean SD			3.12 .94		
UK: Working with European Union institutions and officials	Mean SD			2.12 1.13		
AU/NZ: Dealing with Ministers	Mean SD	3.42 .77	3.44 .78			
AU/NZ: Dealing with other politicians	Mean SD	2.93 .92	3.19 .85			AU and NZ
AU/NZ: Dealing with central agencies such as Treasury or the PM's department	Mean SD	3.15 .78	3.16 .79			
AU/NZ: Dealing with interest groups	Mean SD	2.93 .80	2.71 .76			AU and NZ
AU/NZ: Working with different levels of government	Mean SD	2.77 .85	2.78 .71			

Situations in which public managers exercise political astuteness

So far we have established that politics in general plays a large part in public managers' work, and that consequently they see political astuteness as an important aspect of their skill-sets. Now we delve further, to consider which specific types of political skills matter the most. In this respect, there are areas of broad similarity across the three countries (see Table 5.1).

The situations where political skills were rated as most valuable related to formal politics. In the UK, the highest rated situation was 'Working with regional or local government' (3.2) and among the highest was 'Working with UK central government' (3.12). In Australia and New Zealand, the highest ratings were for 'Dealing with Ministers' (3.42) and 'Dealing with central agencies' (3.16), while 'Dealing with other politicians' (2.96) was also among the highest. These all reflect the importance of formal political institutions and processes across all three countries. One interviewee commented that:

> P10 (very senior, NZ): It's definitely at the ministerial level where the political skills are most used from my experience, and it's definitely in the... organisation to external environment, where we have to be much more cognisant I think now in today's time, about the receiving environment and how we manoeuvre within it.

But although formal politics had the most prominence, not far behind were skills relating to less formal politics in the surrounding environment (also noted by P10 above). 'Thinking about the impact of public opinion on your organisation' (3.1) and the related issue of 'working with the media' (2.86) were important, as were 'working with partners and strategic alliances' (2.94) and 'scanning changes in society' (2.84).

Interestingly, internal organisational politics was more mixed in its perceived importance. On the one hand, 'working with influential people in your organisation' was relatively highly rated at 3.07, but on the other, 'working with cliques and power blocs in your organisation' was much less important at 2.48.

One way of making sense of these findings is that they are all to do with securing the necessary means for getting things done, either in securing a mandate from political (and bureaucratic) superiors or their publics, or in enlisting other contributors to carry out the organisation's work. Persuasion was seen as vital for achieving outcomes:

> P03 (senior, AU): Well anything involving relations with the outside world I guess, so... anything involving sort of stakeholders, industries, communities, ministers, other governments... I guess in its essence it's about where you want to achieve a change, and you need to persuade someone that change is worth doing, and to have them work with you to achieve that change.

> P31 (very senior, UK): …I was talking [to colleagues] 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. 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". 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.

At a macro level, political astuteness was also seen as key in setting organisational agendas:

> P05 (senior, AU): [Political skills are] most useful when involved in the strategic planning process for an organisation and trying to establish your strategic direction, and to ensure that your direction is well aligned. So having astuteness and being able to liaise with ministers or a minister's office or other stakeholders that are influential in setting that direction, is useful in terms of making sure that your strategic direction as an organisation is aligned.

These findings reflect a perception by public managers that they need to exercise political astuteness across a range of activities, indeed that the political process in their countries is rather pervasive in their work.

The findings were largely reinforced by data reporting the relative rankings of activities for which political skills were currently most important. Participants were asked to select the top five activities from a list of 12 (Table 5.2). The three items that counted among the top five for all three countries were 'Shaping key priorities within the organisation', 'Managing risks for the organisation' and 'Influencing external decision-makers'. The lowest ranked item, consistent with previously cited findings about the minimal importance of the 'dark side' perspective on politics in organisations, was 'Individual career advancement'. The next lowest was 'Reducing external criticism or negative media stories'. It is interesting that the activity of 'Competing for resources' was notably a higher priority for the UK than for the other countries, which may reflect a more centralised governmental system – though this is speculative.

Table 5.2: 'For which of the following activities are political skills most important in your organisation?'

Rank	Australia	New Zealand	United Kingdom
1	Shaping key priorities within the organisation	Shaping key priorities within the organisation	Shaping key priorities within the organisation
2	Influencing external decision-makers	Managing risks for the organisation	Building partnerships with external partners
3	Building partnerships with external partners	Influencing external decision-makers	Competing for resources within the organisation
4	Managing risks for the organisation	Building partnerships with external partners	Influencing external decision-makers
5	Influencing internal decision-makers	Analysing key future activities which may impact on the organisation	Promoting the reputation of the organisation
6	Promoting the reputation of the organisation	Promoting the reputation of the organisation	Influencing internal decision-makers
7	Analysing key future activities which may impact on the organisation	Securing external funding for your work	Managing risks for the organisation
8	Competing for resources within the organisation	Competing for resources within the organisation	Analysing key future activities which may impact on the organisation
9	Overcoming conflict and tensions within the organisation	Overcoming conflict and tensions within the organisation	Overcoming conflict and tensions within the organisation
10	Reducing external criticism or negative media stories	Influencing internal decision-makers	Securing external funding for your work
11	Securing external funding for your work	Reducing external criticism or negative media stories	Reducing external criticism or negative media stories
12	Individual career advancement	Individual career advancement	Individual career advancement

Is it legitimate for public managers to exercise political astuteness?

The foregoing discussion has made it clear that most managers find it important to bring political skills to bear in order to clarify collective aspirations, mobilise support from key stakeholders, and to help get things done by negotiating past road-blocks and enlisting contributions of time and effort. It appears, therefore, that political astuteness is a very *useful* skill for public managers. However, there is also a question of whether using political skills is *legitimate* in a democratic political system. The politics/administration dichotomy attaches significant normative weight to the principle that political decisions should primarily or even exclusively be the prerogative of elected politicians. It is therefore seen as problematic for a line between the two domains to be breached. But at the same time, the preceding sections suggest that public servants have to engage in political interactions of one kind or another in order to do their jobs. So a key issue for managers is how far they can deploy their political astuteness skills without compromising the legitimacy of their recommendations. In short, they need to be particularly cognisant of where the 'line' is between politics and administration. Our interviews provided extra insight into this issue.

The consensus from a majority of interviewees was that they saw no clear line. Some agreed that there was a 'zone' (also described as a 'no man's land'). Some saw it as a shifting line, incorporating either more politics or more administration at different times, while others saw a gap between rhetoric and reality:

> P11 (very senior, AU): I think there's a clear line formally; I think informally there's a little bit of overlap.

There were varying views as to whether 'breaches' of the line were a matter of public servants straying too far into politics…

> P19 (very senior, NZ): I don't think you can have too much political astuteness, but you can be too political. You can move from that sort of linesman on the ground putting the flag up to running on the field and kicking the ball... I don't think that's the role of the public servant.

…or of politicians having too tight a grip on the public service:

> P13 (senior, AU): I think [the line is] blurred. I think [politicians] get involved in a lot of things that they shouldn't get involved in.

In general, however, the perceived politicisation of the bureaucracy loomed as the greater problem. This sometimes placed public servants in the difficult position of having to determine whether to 'give ministers responses that they don't particularly like, where it's not the answer that they want hear, and sometimes they'll push back a little' (P20). As another put it, 'frank and fearless [advice] has taken a few body blows in recent years' (P03).

One consequence of this is having to make delicate judgements about when to deliver what the minister wants – even if it is sub-optimal – and when to push for a better one. One participant talked about his internal struggles:

> P18 (senior, AU): I'm on the line, am I going to cross it? Am I going to stay on the line and be ineffective? Or am I going to stay on the safe side of the line and be nice?

Further complicating this picture was a related perception that politicians sometimes did not know exactly what they wanted. Other factors were the complexity of the issue, calling for expert knowledge as well as political judgement, and the politician's personality.

> P36 (very senior, UK): In order to do [my job] I need to understand where politicians are coming from, 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.

Whatever the cause, the elected politician's unclear position typically dictated that the public manager exercise political astuteness about how to arrive at a reasonable decision.

> P30 (very senior, UK): I think you need a skill where you are genuinely enabling politicians to reach a view on what they want to do, and [the skill also] allows you to help them find how they want to do it.

Broadly, the interviewed managers pointed to four ways of handling the challenges thrown up by the politics/administration interface. One was what we will call *bureaucratic accommodation:* deferring to the elected politician's or their office's requirements even where they went somewhat into public servants' territory, and reciprocally being strict about not straying into political territory. This approach was relatively uncommon in our research.

Also less common was a second approach: *standing firm.* This entailed resisting politicians' demands for public servants to do things that amounted to engaging in party or formal politics. This sometimes ended in capitulation.

Third was *engagement* – having a dialogue with the elected official and their office to reach an understanding. This called for the manager to orchestrate a deliberative process which enabled the surfacing of knowledge while not pre-empting any particular decision by the Minister – and seemed to depend on the building of trust over time:

> P03 (senior, AU): We'll identify something that's not quite cooked or that needs sorting…so that we'll organise a small group meeting on a particular thing, and talk it through. And that works quite well in terms of "OK well now we've talked it through so we'll do this but not that..."

This seemed to go hand-in-hand with better relationships between the politicians and administrators.

Finally, a number of interviewees adopted a *pragmatic position,* wherein the differing tactics were applied at various times, depending on the players, the issues and the context.

For some public servants, dealing with these dilemmas resonated with personal values and beliefs and the need for a wider strategic perspective:

> P18 (senior, AU): It occurred to me I needed a way to integrate all these things; how can I prosecute this option without leaving my values behind? I've since had lots of conversations with my staff about this decision, when they hit similar situations in their jobs. Most good politically astute bureaucrats will struggle with this. That was my breakthrough moment, when I realised that there is a bigger picture. That sounds trite, but my realisation was that I needed to expand my mind and position that option in what is beyond that outcome.

At the same time, how the managers dealt with this was also a function of the 'practical ethics' each brought to the job. Indeed, in a practical sense, the problems arising from 'crossing the line' seemed to be accommodated within organisations in realistic and quite pragmatic ways, once the assumption of a clear line was discarded and the sense of a zone adopted.

Conclusion

On the whole, public managers in our sample reported that they did not exercise political astuteness lightly or for the sake of personal advancement. In the main, they did so in situations or activities where it helped them do their jobs – either by garnering support for a particular policy, program or project, or by helping enlist other actors to contribute to the achievement of the public purposes in question. Consequently, it was possible for them to claim a degree of legitimacy for their exercise of political astuteness; it did not entail the 'illegitimate, self-serving political activities' that are the focus of much of the private sector management literature. However, the challenge for public managers is to judge how far they can cross the line from administration into politics without breaching democratic norms. Fortunately, political astuteness can facilitate those judgments as well.

Chapter 6:

How do public managers acquire and develop their political astuteness?

It should be clear from the previous chapters that political astuteness is not something that public managers magically acquire overnight. It involves complex observation and judgment, which calls for a process of learning of some kind or another over time. This chapter considers how public managers develop their political skills – specifically, where and how such skills are learned at present, and what the implications are for more effective development strategies in the future.

The survey presented respondents with 24 possible sources of political skill development. They were asked to look at each item and choose any one of six responses: either 'Not applicable' (where they had *not* been exposed to that particular influence), or any point on a scale of 0-4 ('of no value' to 'extremely valuable') according to how useful it had been in developing their political – and not just managerial – skills. The results are shown in Table 6.1. For each possible influence, we have listed the number of respondents who said they had been exposed to that influence, and the mean score for that item. This enables consideration both of the pervasiveness of each influence or method, and how much impact it had.

Table 6.1: Influences on the development of respondents' political skills (mean score, scale of 0-4)

Influence	How useful?		Participants with exposure to this influence
Gaining experience in the job	Mean SD	3.18 0.69	1003
Handling crises	Mean SD	3.16 0.73	993
Learning from own mistakes	Mean SD	3.16 0.71	999
Good example of senior manager	Mean SD	3.1 0.79	993
Observing role models	Mean SD	2.93 0.75	990
Bad example of senior manager	Mean SD	2.88 0.95	955

Informal mentoring	Mean SD	2.75 0.79	899
Working with other organisations	Mean SD	2.74 0.78	946
Secondment to another organisation	Mean SD	2.69 0.97	447
Having time out to reflect	Mean SD	2.68 0.93	910
Seeing how things were done elsewhere	Mean SD	2.65 0.77	957
Experience outside work	Mean SD	2.6 0.95	927
Working with elected politicians	Mean SD	2.53 1.11	720
360 degree feedback	Mean SD	2.4 0.95	805
Informal coaching	Mean SD	2.38 0.86	702
Academic study	Mean SD	2.35 1	879
Attending development courses	Mean SD	2.28 0.889	932
Own family	Mean SD	2.2 1.07	935
General (leisure) reading	Mean SD	2.12 0.93	949
Attending a learning set	Mean SD	2.11 0.94	680
Formal mentoring	Mean SD	2.03 0.99	518
Professional coaching	Mean SD	2.03 1.05	479
Reading leadership books	Mean SD	1.92 0.89	943
Feedback from psychometrics	Mean SD	1.89 0.99	759

Frequency of development methods

A striking feature of the data is the type of influences that had *not* been experienced by our sample; large numbers of managers had not been exposed to certain situations or methods that can assist with the development of political skills. These included: professional coaching (53 per cent had not had this); formal mentoring (49 per cent); or attending a learning set (33 per cent) – all of which are common techniques for developing generic management skills (Day 2001). This appears to be not so much a case of avoidance of these approaches in general, but rather shows that they have not been used by organisations for the development of political astuteness skills. This suggests a gap in leadership development provision.

At the other end of the scale, almost all managers had used or been exposed to the following in the development of their political astuteness skills: gaining experience on the job; learning from their own mistakes; good example of a senior manager; observing role models; and handling crises. These are all experience-based and/or observation-based methods of acquiring political skills.

One way of categorising these results might be on the basis of how deliberately each influence is pursued. The most used methods were more experiential and haphazard, with the learning about political astuteness arising incidentally in the course of public managers' jobs. On the other hand, more structured and planned kinds of intervention were less frequently used.

Perhaps a more compelling reading of the data (in that it shows a stronger fit with the pattern of the responses) is that the more common learning approaches tended to be those the managers did *on their own* (for example, gaining experience in the job, learning from their own mistakes), whereas activities that involved learning-directed *interaction with others* (such professional coaching, formal mentoring, or attending a learning set) were much less common influences on political skill. One possible explanation for this is that a degree of illegitimacy still attaches to the notion of managers exercising political astuteness, and that it is therefore somewhat inappropriate for organisations to explicitly devote resources to developing this skill.

Usefulness of development methods

The data on how *useful* these methods or influences were perceived to be support the analysis presented above. The methods perceived as most valuable were by and large also those most frequently experienced (gaining experience in the job; handling crises; learning from mistakes; observing a good senior manager).

These findings are backed by our interviewees, one of whom learned a lot from her departmental Secretary:

> P23 (very senior, NZ): She was incredibly cunning at all of this. Very, very astute, and I remember I would go in with this notion that we could really tackle something head-on, and she would say "oh P23, I think we'll approach this one crab-wise", sideways you know. And she often had kind of cunning ways of approaching issues that were difficult.

Others too learned from observation, both negative and positive.

> P20 (senior, AU): Probably observation is one of the biggest ways I learn. I've looked at key leaders in my time and I've thought that worked well, that doesn't work well. ...there were some people I've worked with that I'd never want to work with again, but they were very good role models in terms of things not to do. ...you can see the effect that they have on other people, and you therefore consciously make a decision that you never ever want to exhibit those types of behaviours.

> P17 (middle, AU): So I've got colleagues in this project, colleagues in other projects, that I've noticed doing their work and talking to various people, building the coalitions, getting things done, and I watch them and see where I can I copy them.

Another talked of his experience and a series of small errors that helped him learn:

> P22 (senior, AU): Between federal and state I spent maybe eight or nine years in parliament, and I think that really...really developed the antennae there. And same as everyone you make small mistakes. Accumulated experience.

In short, the main methods of developing political skill were based more on experience rather than formal training or development. And some of these experiences were probably painful – learning from one's own mistakes and handling crises can be particularly stretching. We did not find these important skills being learnt through, for example, the careful mentoring or handing down of skills (within the experiential aspects of workplace learning). Neither did many participants report positive experiences with formal programs of development, although there was a glimmer of hope here:

> P21 (senior, AU): [The course] sort of pushed me to a different level where we were talking about the big and small p politics that I was dealing with here in Queensland, that they were dealing with at federal government level, and then the connections with diplomatic relations, so dealing with United Nations, and what Canada's doing, or UK's doing… [I realised that] although I think I've got an onion here and I'm very good at peeling back six layers to understand where the kernel is, there's bigger vegetables out there.

Another participant from the UK, remembering that she had learnt her political skills on the job, decided that she wanted to foster them more deliberately in her staff once she became a chief executive. She introduced a training program on working in a political environment, and included sessions where politicians worked with public servants to understand each other's needs and motivation. This training was particularly valued by her team ('the staff loved it').

But most of our participants were not so lucky – one summed up the 'painful experiences' method of development neatly as follows:

> P08 (senior, AU): I think sadly most of mine's been through trial and error. I'd like to pretend that there was something else involved in it. ...I guess if you bang your head against a brick wall for long enough you might start thinking to yourself hey every time I swing my head forward like this it hurts and this is the hundredth time I've done it so maybe I should stop. It's rarer, to stretch the metaphor perhaps, to see someone in the public service bang their head against a brick wall once and then go hmm, that hurt, let's have a little think about why that happened just then, and never hits their head against a brick wall again.

The developmental influences reported to be *least* valuable, also shown in Table 6.1, tended to be less observational and experiential, and more formal, organised and academic (e.g. professional coaching; reading leadership books; feedback from psychometrics). This is not to say that such methods could not be made relevant and valuable for developing political astuteness, but rather that they are not currently being experienced in this way. Another factor to consider is availability – as one participant said, 'I'm not aware of any course that is specifically there for the political antennae. That's something you seem to learn on the job in Australia!'

Differences across countries

Table 6.2 shows the top eight developmental influences across the three participating countries. They share striking similarities – Australia's and New Zealand's top eight contain exactly the same items, but in a slightly different order. The UK's top eight contains six of the same items as Australia and New Zealand.

Table 6.2: Top eight developmental influences across three countries

Rank	Australia	New Zealand	United Kingdom
1	Good example of senior manager	Gaining experience in the job	Learning from own mistakes
2	Gaining experience in the job	Handling crises	Gaining experience in the job
3	Handling crises	Good example of senior manager	Handling crises
4	Learning from own mistakes	Observing role models	Good example of senior manager
5	Observing role models	Learning from own mistakes	Bad example of senior manager
6	Informal mentoring	Bad example of senior manager	Working with other organisations
7	Bad example of senior manager	Secondment to another organisation	Observing role models
8	Secondment to another organisation	Informal mentoring	Having time out to reflect

Implications for policy and practice

The analysis of how political astuteness skills have been acquired amongst this large sample of 1012 managers shows that the predominant source, experience or input into development is through the experiential route. This is useful because it reminds us that although it is tempting to think of leadership development as a formal, planned process (e.g. through courses or qualifications), it can and does occur in a variety of ways, and is often not intentional. The current study shows that most respondents learned their political astuteness skills through what are called 'emergent' rather than 'planned' development activities (Rodgers 2003; Hartley 2011).

However, experience on its own is generally seen to be insufficient for leadership development. The aphorism that some people have 20 years' experience while others have a year's experience repeated 20 times reminds us that learning from experience is not automatic. There is also the danger that inappropriate conclusions can be drawn from experience, in a process called 'superstitious learning', resulting in less than effective performance.

The findings obtained here suggest a rather hit and miss approach by organisations in developing their middle and senior managers to handle the complex and dynamic conditions of modern organisations. Given our knowledge that in many organisations mistakes and crises are covered up, or used in learning-avoidance blame games, then what is the foundation here for building on what appears to be very valuable experience? Should it be so haphazard; are there ways to build in reflective learning of political awareness skills? What appears to be important from our focus groups and interviews is that the opportunity to *reflect* on experience – by talking to a boss, colleague, mentor etc. – is particularly valuable.

These considerations suggest some future paths for leadership research and for leadership development policy and practice. There is a general consensus at present from researchers that many of the skills, mindsets and behaviours of leadership can be learned – they are acquired rather than inherited (e.g. Burke 2006; Antonacopolou and Bento 2004; Yukl 2006). Future, more planned development activity in this sphere might be taken at three levels: the individual manager; the organisation; and professional bodies and education and training providers.

Individual managers

At this level, it might be valuable to encourage the development of good skills of observation, reflection and questioning enquiry to maximise the learning from mistakes and crises – and from the example of other managers; to value mistakes for the learning they can bring; and to use 360 degree feedback to enhance skills.

Organisations

Organisations may need to consider developing political astuteness skills more systematically. This could involve managers from team leaders up to executives. It might involve embedding a policy of moving managers around the organisation to give them exposure to different cultures and practices, and encouraging them to take secondments in other organisations. Developing an organisational climate that tries to learn from mistakes and crises seems particularly valuable given how prevalent this is as a means of gaining and honing political skills. A number of our participants mentioned formal or informal discussion groups as a good way to encourage the development of political astuteness in their employees, for example:

> P23 (very senior, NZ): We tell a lot of stories. We have a weekly meeting all together with everybody, and there are other kinds of team meetings, and there's lots of sharing of experience, especially near-misses or disasters or things that you learn from. ...I'll tell people how it went and what I thought I did well and what I didn't think I did well, and what I learnt from it.

> P25 (very senior, UK): [We had executive coaching] over a period of months, we did sort of as a team. We had meetings focused on our leadership skills and behaviours, but also as individuals, and my discussion with him was quite challenging about the way I approach things, and different ways of looking at my operations and interacting with more senior colleagues.

There may be a need to consider political astuteness skills across whole teams, not just for individuals, and to use diagnostic instruments to help assess skills across a team or board. Overall, it is about ensuring that development programs reflect the importance of political astuteness skills.

Professional bodies and education/training providers:

Public service commissions and training and development bodies could examine their strategies for leadership development, and ensure that political astuteness skills are included in their competency and other frameworks in a way that takes account of a range of stakeholders. Many public service competency frameworks in Australia and New Zealand (but fewer in the UK) already do include various aspects of political astuteness, especially at senior levels, but they could be more explicit about the need to develop the political dimension of public leadership. Educational organisations such as ANZSOG could also include more content specifically directed toward the development of these skills.

Conclusion

In organisational efforts to develop their managers, the acquisition of political skills has tended to be a 'poor cousin' to more generic leadership skills, in part because it may not be seen as relevant to senior managers' jobs, but also perhaps because it is regarded as not quite legitimate for public managers to think and act politically. But previous chapters have demonstrated how unavoidable politics is in the work of public managers; they need to be politically astute in order to get their normal public service jobs done.

One way of thinking about this tension, and of finding out how to resolve it, is to recognise that many of the elements of political astuteness are likely to be useful in generic management terms, not only in the public sector. Thus personal and interpersonal skills, reading people and situations, scanning the environment and building alliances are arguably important to the role of leadership seen in broader terms. It may be that developing political astuteness is not far removed from what we see as the capability set of good leaders everywhere. But what political astuteness adds is deploying these skills in a context where different interests are recognised rather than commonalities assumed, and where part of the skill of leadership is to make things happen in spite of these differences.

Chapter 7:

Implications and conclusions

It is crystal clear that public managers' jobs call for the exercise of political astuteness. Key aspects of their work – such as determining purposes, building support, enlisting others to contribute – have a political dimension to them, which is better dealt with if managers are politically astute. But the preceding chapters also unearth a raft of insights beyond that basic understanding. These insights have implications for a number of significant issues in public management, which are explored in this concluding chapter.

The nature of the public manager's job

Firstly, and most fundamentally, the public manager's job is undeniably political. Politics impinges on, indeed permeates, the normal work of government executives. A range of political influences – including the media, external partners, regulation, external perceptions and formal politics – are all acknowledged by our survey respondents as being of high importance. Moreover, the great majority of our interviewees tended to see the presence of politics as a given, background assumption. Of course, our respondents are middle, senior and very senior managers, for whom it might be expected that politics is more prominent in their roles and tasks (as it is for managers in the private sector (Madison et al. 1980; March 1984; Gandz and Murray 1980)). And a couple of respondents talked about a particular point in the career ladder where they felt that they had to start paying attention to and understanding politics in circumstances from which they had been protected when they were lower down the pecking order. However, these points reinforce that politics becomes more prominent for more senior roles, not that it does not exist at lower ranks.

Looking more closely at this phenomenon, it is evident that politics matters most to public managers when it allows them to get things done. Within that broad domain of politics in general, two aspects of politics stand out. Foremost is the formal political world and the decisions emanating from it, which they see as the political factor having the most impact on their organisations and work. Close behind in importance is the need to work with external partnerships, for example through the building of alliances.

Both elected politicians and external partners are important in getting things done because they can supply or withhold things (such as resources or support) public managers need in order to do what they understand to be their jobs. Elected politicians, especially ministers, are key sources of authorisation for public managers to take a particular course of action. In Westminster systems in particular, decisions by ministers and other elected politicians are powerful indications of what managers can and cannot do. With clear, robust authorisation, the public manager has a licence to garner public and societal resources and deploy them for the mandated purposes. Indeed, such authorisation strengthens the manager's hand in dealing with other actors in the political environment who might have competing agendas. One participant encapsulated it neatly: 'I think that being able to manage the political dimension is about getting things done' (P06).

This is consistent with the next most salient political factor in managers' eyes: forming alliances and working with external partners. In a world of interconnected, complex or even wicked problems, and of seamless services for citizens, no single agency is likely to control all of the means for achieving purposes, for which it is necessary to mobilise permission and resources from the multiple parties involved.

Notably, our participants' involvement with politics was not just a matter of passively being impacted by and reacting to the ebbs and flows of politics. In addition, it entailed actively fashioning courses of action and engaging external actors such as politicians and partners to participate in them. Thus a major implication of our findings for the nature of public managers' jobs is that they entail dealing with a larger and more varied environment than that which faces their private sector counterparts. Corporate business executives deal primarily with a *market* environment comprised mainly of customers and investors, although some – for example, banks, oil companies, or insurance corporations – do encounter elements of politics, including arm's-length interactions such as dealings with regulation, procurement and perhaps public image, all of which are seen as constraints on the core business of providing goods and services to customers in markets. But public managers deal with a *political* or *authorising* environment, which has multiple and differing stakeholders, often on a daily basis, a mixture of divergent and convergent interests, and debate about policies and strategies. In addition, accountability requires a degree of transparency that a number of private firms can avoid. For the public sector, the core business of delivering public value entails the creation of collective benefits as well as private ones, and hence calls for engagement with those who are the arbiters of what is valuable – namely, elected politicians and the stakeholders to whom they listen.

The politics/administration dichotomy

The dichotomy between politics and administration, articulated in 1887 by Woodrow Wilson, delineates the respective 'territories' of politicians and public managers. In this construct, the role of managers in the public sector is to concentrate on *implementing* policy decisions, but to stay out of *making* those decisions, which is the preserve of elected politicians. Thus, politicians decide, while public servants administer. This principle has both an empirical and a normative aspect, each of which is challenged by our findings.

In empirical terms, the dichotomy has been perceived, especially by politicians and managers and by some but not all public administration scholars, to offer a valid account of the relationship between politicians and public servants. But our survey and interview responses show clearly that it is not how these two types of officials actually situate themselves. Leaving aside the issue of whether politicians intrude into administration, we found abundant examples of public managers crossing the line into political behaviour, for example by articulating party positions into workable policies or by mobilising key stakeholders to influence ministers. It is demonstrably not the case that senior public servants confine themselves to carrying out decisions handed down from ministers' offices. The main reason for this is the tension between their jobs and their situations, alluded to above: they would find it very difficult to get their mandated tasks done if they did not seek to mobilise political support, engage with partners and more generally understand their political environments. The increased salience of 'wicked' problems, which generally require multiple stakeholders to address the problem, may reinforce this (though even tame problems can shift from being routine to highly political and hence require political astuteness).

This also informs the normative aspect. Most public managers, while routinely breaching the politics/administration dichotomy, sincerely support the principle inherent in that dichotomy. They are committed to the view that in a democracy, the big decisions should be made by people who have the primary accountability to the public (in that they must face periodic elections), rather than by appointed and often anonymous bureaucrats. Consequently, it is seen as illegitimate for public managers to intrude into or even usurp the political prerogatives of elected politicians. To the extent that they do so, public servants are undermining representative democracy, since it reduces the authority and decision-making of politicians,

Again, however, the reality is that it is difficult for them to discharge their mandates if they do not engage with politics, and do not exercise political skill in doing so. Public managers usually respect the 'line' or 'zone' between politics and administration, but find themselves on occasion forced to cross it. This means that one aspect of political astuteness is the capacity to recognise where the line is and calculate how far they can stray across it without compromising their ethical frameworks – or committing career suicide. This entails judging the trade-off between the substantive value of the policy or initiative in question and the risk of acting or being seen to act illegitimately. Knowing where 'the line' or 'the zone' is therefore turns out to be a capability that, to varying degrees, public managers need to acquire and maintain throughout their careers – hand in hand with the occasional unavoidable necessity of crossing into that zone.

Implications for developing public managers

The study shows both a need for public managers to develop greater political astuteness, and insights into how they might do that.

First, the need: our study shows that, as judged by public managers themselves, their political skills are not outstanding. They see their own skill levels, in aggregate, as quite mediocre (average to good), and rate those of the senior managers they most closely work with as inferior to their own. With regard to particular types of political skills, while they assess themselves rather evenly across the range of skills from micro- to macro- ones, they tend to regard their peers as lacking in respect of personal and interpersonal skills. But intriguingly, they perceive their peers as outperforming them in respect of 'reading people and situations'. Not unexpectedly, more senior managers see themselves and their peers as more politically skilled than middle managers.

The data also reveal some interesting relationships between levels of political astuteness and certain other factors. One is their attitude to politics, as discussed above. On average, those managers who rated themselves and others as having higher political skills were inclined to eschew the view of politics as pursuit of self-interest or turf, and instead to see it in more positive terms such as building alliances or reconciling differences. Another intriguing finding is that managers who perceived their own organisation as 'growing' rather than 'declining', were also more likely to rate their peers' political skills more highly. The mechanisms or direction of causality here are difficult to discern, but these data point to a potentially promising line of inquiry for future research. On the other hand, gender did *not* play a role in political skill – women rated themselves no differently than their male counterparts.

Thus, there appears to be a need for further development of public managers' political skills. The study delved into how managers had acquired their political astuteness, and found clear patterns which in turn suggest ways of improving the acquisition of political skills. Most significantly, the study showed that overwhelmingly, managers learnt their political skills 'on the job' in various ways: gaining experience on the job, good or bad role models, and learning from their mistakes – and generally they did this learning on their own.

By contrast, more structured or directive approaches were seen as less significant for the acquisition of political skills: psychometric testing, leadership books, or formal mentoring or coaching – while academic study was ranked lower than most of the 'on-the-job' options. This suggests that more formal or purposeful approaches, or those removed from the realities of everyday work, are seen as less effective than other approaches. But a combination of the two types of approaches could be more powerful – for example, focusing academic study, learning sets and formal coaching on drawing lessons from and catalysing the day-to-day experience, helping make sense of it through theoretically informed reflection. The opportunities for using case studies, and engaging in simulations and confronting scenarios, could help to bring insight and reflection into everyday experience, and develop longer-term habits of reflection (and awareness that others may not see the situation in the same way as oneself, which is critical to political astuteness).

Implications for leadership

This study, as its title indicates, is about '*Leading* with political astuteness' (emphasis added), not just being politically astute per se. What is interesting about our findings is that they provide insights not only into the exercise of political skill, but also into leadership more generally – that is, beyond the political realm. A cursory survey of the categories and items comprising the inventory of political skills would strike anyone familiar with the broader leadership literature as overlapping key aspects of that literature. Put another way, managers who acquire political skills also in the process develop leadership skills.

For example, interpersonal skills include the capacity to influence the thinking and behaviour of others, to secure cooperation from people over whom the manager has no line authority, and to make people feel valued. They include 'tougher' skills such as the ability to negotiate, to stand up to pressures from others, and to achieve constructive outcomes from difficult conflict situations. These are all important in generic leadership and management. Similarly, the ability to understand the larger environment and diagnose what is really happening below the surface or over the horizon is a key capability for strategic leadership.

However, the political astuteness framework emphasises the value of understanding divergent and sometimes competing interests, which brings new insights to understanding the tasks of leadership. Traditional leadership theory still focuses too much on a unitary view of the organisation and its partners – that building complete consensus and commitment, and 'selling' the vision to 'followers' is what counts as effective leadership. Increasingly, commentators are raising questions about this small group view of leadership applied to larger organisations or to society (e.g. Drath et al. 2008), where multiple interests exist and where influence may need to
be directed not to followers (who may already be committed) but to the skeptical and disengaged who are needed to achieve outcomes (Heifetz 2011). Pluralistic views of leadership are likely to become more common, and to understand pluralism one needs to have an understanding of politics.

Indeed, it is arguable that all managers – public or private – are likely to be more effective to the extent that they supplement their analytical, organisational and operational skill-sets with a more textured view of the varied interests and stakeholders in their environments – a view that goes beyond thinking of them in terms of competitive market forces and also takes into account the political dimensions of environments. This suggestion is a contrast to the widely held assumption that government should learn from the private sector about how to be more efficient and effective. It implies that the public sector might provide lessons for private business about how to cope with the complex forces – political, environmental and social – that have beset the corporate sector in recent decades.

Conclusion

Politics has a dualistic status for public managers, who find that it is both complex and unavoidable. To do their jobs, they sometimes have to encroach on political matters. But widely held norms in a democracy tend to frown on appointed public servants playing that role, which ideally is the preserve of elected politicians. In short, politics is problematic for government executives. It can foster undue caution on their part, which might be politically safe for them but tends to limit the extent to which they conceive or implement valuable policies. Or at the other extreme, it can lead to risky behaviour, as public managers pursue valuable policies but find themselves in dangerous territory in the process.

This report has explored one of the ways in which public managers might better cope with these difficulties: by becoming more politically astute. Political skill can enhance public managers' ability to:

- conceive of purposes or policies that reduce contention while offering valuable outcomes;

- persuade other political actors of the merits of those purposes or policies; and

- be aware of how far they can stray into the domain of their elected political masters without transgressing community and democratic expectations and generating opposition for doing so.

But it can also lead to various types of gaming by both politicians and public servants, from withholding information to buck-passing. Thus, we worry that giving bureaucrats too much licence to engage in politics might allow them to suborn democratic processes for undemocratic or venal ends.

As we have explored in Chapter 2 and elsewhere, politics can be a dirty business. But the views of the public managers we have surveyed and interviewed for this study show that political astuteness can also be a positive phenomenon, promoting reconciliation of contending viewpoints and enabling different stakeholders with different values or goals to work together in the public interest. In this respect, democratic politics can draw a positive message from one of our findings: that in the main, managers who are politically astute are more likely to hold a positive view of politics, and therefore are inclined to act in the public interest rather than their own when they find themselves having to enter the political domain. Our findings suggest that they are able to act in the public interest more effectively, precisely because they are politically astute.

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