THE JUBILEE CENTRE

FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Insight Series

Navigating the Pandemic: A Guide to Assessing Wisdom in Our Political Leadership

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"He who [has practical wisdom] is skilled in aiming, in accord with calculation, at what is best for a human being in things attainable through action" – Aristotle

"For all the virtues will be present when the one virtue, practical wisdom, is present" – Aristotle

The ongoing pandemic has posed challenging questions to our society, questions that have become more complex, consequential, and difficult to navigate. The most prominent questions of all at this present moment are those that address the relationship between the citizen and the state. How do we, as a society, balance freedom and safety? How do we ensure that we support our services and that we are supported by them? How do we keep people in work and alive? These questions have grown increasingly intractable during a period in which we now measure the life of the virus in years, rather than months, and the nature of problems that the virus brings as multimodal, rather than unimodal. We no longer ask 'how do we save the NHS from a pandemic?', we ask 'how do we save our jobs, lives, physical health, mental health, grades, and daily routines with no guarantee of a vaccine in the years to come?'.

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, in collaboration with Populus, recorded public attitudes to the coronavirus crisis in the context of character and virtue at two time points: early in the first wave (April) and late (June). The results of these surveys reveal encouraging consistencies in attitudes that span a period that began with an exponential growth in suffering and societal lockdown and ended with a slow return to normal life and lockdown easing. Compassion has always been a consistent priority for the British public when valuing the character qualities of their community (most important quality: April, 34%; June, 36%), and of themselves (most important quality: April, 25%; June, 25%). Nevertheless, further

inspection of these surveys and recent (non-peer-reviewed) research may suggest a new nuance to this analysis.

As hypothesised in a previous Insight Series paper, 'Coronavirus' Test of Compassion', there are indications that practical compassion is beginning to wane given a recent preprint suggesting that a mere 11% of people in contact with someone who has tested positive for coronavirus enter quarantine, and only 18% who develop symptoms commit to self-isolation (Smith et al., 2020). While this shift in attitude may be apparent now, it may have been gestured at in the second JCCV survey, as responses shifted from the majority in April agreeing that the health of older generations should be valued over the economy (agree: 55%; neither agree nor disagree: 36%; disagree: 8%) to a more ambiguous picture in June (agree: 45%; neither agree nor disagree: 45%; disagree: 9%).[1] This pattern of results may justify two possible conclusions. Firstly, it may be more appropriate to distinguish between principled compassion, which is still high (Smith et al., 2020), and practical compassion, which may be low. Secondly, this muddying of the waters may reflect a conflict within the public as they try to navigate a once-in-a-century problem, which was once short-term and unimodal, but is now long-term and multimodal.

It is ultimately in the hands of the government to weigh the interacting interests and costs to its public and determine the best set of policy actions. Items within both JCCV polls suggest that this is what the general public expect of their leadership. While respondents most value compassion in both themselves and their community, this is not what they value most in their leaders or senior political figures (April: 15%; June: 12%). Instead they most value good

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[1] Interestingly, in the June survey, the distribution of agreement reflects a bell curve, with younger and older generations the least likely to agree with the proposition that health should be valued over the economy (18-24: 40%; 25-34: 43%; 65+: 42%), while the middle generations were the most likely to agree with the proposition (range = 47-50%), suggesting that past narratives of the old and young being in conflict may not be quite right, especially since there were similarly high levels of agreement between age groups.

judgement, and crucially, they increasingly value good judgement (April: 33%; June: 40%). Similarly, while wisdom was valued as among the top 3 most important character qualities in leaders in April (37%; 3rd highest character quality out of 9), a greater percentage of respondents placed it in their top 3 in June (41%; 2nd highest character quality out of 9). It is clear that the British public increasingly seek good judgement and wisdom from their leadership. The next question that follows is by what criteria do we determine whether politicians are demonstrating their good judgement and wisdom?

Recent work by Grossman et al. (2020a) has proposed the common wisdom model (CWM) as an integrative model of wisdom, which seeks to enhance our understanding of wisdom by combining the common denominators of wisdom models previously suggested by a number of notable theorists and empiricists. The authors distilled this great body of literature into a model, which suggests the two most characteristic elements of wisdom are moral aspiration and metacognition. It is perhaps unsurprising that moral aspiration is a common theme of wisdom research; historically, wisdom and morality have been indelibly linked by philosophers of different traditions. It is difficult to consider the question 'what is the right thing to do?' without perceiving its moral subtext. However, the centrality of metacognition (the capacity to think about one's own thinking) may be more surprising. Grossman et al. (2020a) suggest that perspectival metacognition (metacognition that incorporates perspectives e.g. balancing multiple perspectives) is required for the implementation of abstract (moral) concepts, the avoidance of self-deception, and consequent 'wise' planning.

Research by the JCCV has also led to a new formulation of the Aristotelian phronesis model (APM), which attempts to operationalise Aristotle's conception of practical wisdom, or phronesis (Darnell et al., 2019). While the APM overlaps with the CWM in important ways, for instance, their shared foregrounding of moral motivation, they also diverge in key ways, for example, in emphasis on emotion (see Kristjánsson et al., *in prep,* for a discussion of the

relative merits of the APM and CWM; see Grossman et al., 2020b for a discussion of the suggested lacunae within the CWM). The present Insight Series paper by no means attempts to advocate for one model over the other, but merely highlights a broader range of potential signifiers of wisdom that we may seek in our politicians. The APM proposes a model with four components: 1) the constitutive function, or the ability to perceive the salient features of a situation. 2) The integrative function or the ability to integrate the different components of a good life, especially within dilemmatic situations. 3) Blueprint, or one's moral identity, and 4) emotional regulation, or the ability to regulate one's emotions, though crucially, not to suppress them, but to use them effectively. A measure derived from the APM has been found to predict prosocial behaviour in both adult and adolescent groups, suggesting the efficacy of this model as an effective operationalisation of moral wisdom (Darnell et al., *in prep*).

So, by what criteria do we determine whether politicians are demonstrating their good judgement and wisdom? The literature suggests at least six components for assessment, although of course it should be noted that these components overlap in some sense. We may assess their moral aspiration, their perspectival metacognition, their ability to perceive salient features of the situation, their ability to integrate these salient features, their moral identity, and their emotional regulation. In their moral aspiration, we can attempt to infer their goals and the moral content within. We might determine whether their goal has a distinctly moral content, which might be inferred from the moral quality in the language as they explain their approach to the crisis. For example, even discussions of saving the economy may distinguish the government's moral aspiration from the last crisis in 2008, in which similar discussions of the economy at least appeared to lack the same moral quality. We may assess their perspectival metacognition and related ability to perceive and integrate competing perspectives and problems. We might observe in their decision-making how effectively they perceive and integrate the perspectives and needs of those who are at low risk from the virus

and those who are at high risk. We may infer their moral identity from past decision-making. Finally, we may assess their levels of emotional regulation based on their ability to emote effectively and accurately, whether angry, empathetic, or restrained.

It is difficult to infer wisdom from others, and no doubt the public's perception of governmental wisdom will be prone to retrospective errors, but with the assistance of ever-developing models of wisdom present within the literature, it may be possible to determine whether the political leadership is satisfying the public's most valued demand of government – to be wise.
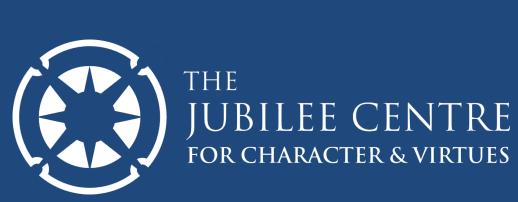
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