**THE BETTER GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE**

**Executive Committee Meeting**

**10:15 - 12:00, Tuesday 21st April 2015**

**Institute for Government**

**MINUTES**

**Present:** Richard Mottram (Chair), Robin Butler, Paul Britton. Roger Dawe, Alun Evans, Christopher Foster, Tom Legg, Barbara Moorhouse, Aaron Ritchie, Nat le Roux, Martin Stanley, Philip Ward.

**Apologies:** Geoffrey Chipperfield, Penny Boys, Howell James , Leigh Lewis, Peter Makeham, Peter Owen, Adam Sharples.

1. **Minutes of the meeting on 10th March 2015.**  
     
   The minutes were agreed.
2. **Matters arising.**
3. **Updates:**

* Barbara Moorhouse and Alun Evans were welcomed to the group.
* Christopher Foster said that he had attended a presentation by the C&AG on ‘[Securing value for money in public services: lessons learnt](http://links.govdelivery.com:80/track?type=click&enid=ZWFzPTEmbWFpbGluZ2lkPTIwMTUwMzA2LjQyNTI3NTQxJm1lc3NhZ2VpZD1NREItUFJELUJVTC0yMDE1MDMwNi40MjUyNzU0MSZkYXRhYmFzZWlkPTEwMDEmc2VyaWFsPTE3NDAzNzYzJmVtYWlsaWQ9Y2hyaXNmb3N0ZXIzMEBidGludGVybmV0LmNvbSZ1c2VyaWQ9Y2hyaXNmb3N0ZXIzMEBidGludGVybmV0LmNvbSZmbD0mZXh0cmE9TXVsdGl2YXJpYXRlSWQ9JiYm&&&100&&&http://www.reform.uk/event/speech-with-sir-amyas-morse-kcb-the-comptroller-and-auditor-general/)**’ on 17th March**, which had proved interesting. Reading between the lines, the C&AG’s message was that there were serious problems in the way that government managed programmes and projects, those involved often did not have the necessary skills, underlying performance and financial information were inadequate, and not much had improved in the last few years. In a conversation afterwards the C&AG had implied he would welcome a meeting with BGI members.

It was agreed that Peter Owen would follow up the possibility of a meeting.

* A PASC report on civil service impartiality was published on 23rd March.

It was noted that the report’s conclusions were consistent with our written evidence.

* The revised blog on decision-taking in a coalition was published on our website on 25thMarch.
* The record of the “Avoiding the Omnishambles” event and an audio file were posted on the website on 31st March.

1. **Review of “Avoiding the Omnishambles” (EC0421n1).**

Richard Mottram introduced Peter Owen’s note in his absence. The note raised two issues: attendance at the event and its impact; and whether the BGI should follow up any of the issues raised?

In discussion of the event itself the following main points were raised:

* The quality of the presentations had been high and the invited external speakers had focused on the issues on our agenda. It was a pity Lord Falconer had needed to leave early which affected the discussion involving the floor.
* On attendance the lesson was invitations had to be personally targeted and followed up. If we had persuaded the IfG to run it as a partnership event, more people might have attended. This was perhaps a possibility for the future. The Whitehall and Industry Group was another potential partner. Its business members might be interested in some of our agenda.
* Media attendance had been limited and there had been no follow up stories. Our storyline for the event had involved a number of themes and it was difficult to get impact on that basis. The event lacked a newsworthy hook. We needed to be more provocative.
* We had realistically to recognize that the political parties did not share our interest in, or perspectives on, the processes of government. At the top they had recent experience of being in government and did not feel they had lessons to learn from the likes of us. Their focus was also elsewhere on winning power.
* Perhaps we should ‘talk to the customer’, and get a better sense of what would make potential participants, including from the media, want to come.

In further discussion of future themes, the following main points were raised:

* We should accept that the Centre was going to be strengthened and that Extended Ministerial Offices (EMOs) were likely to be introduced whoever formed the government after 7 May. The question was whether we had anything interesting to say about acceptable and unacceptable ways of introducing them.
* A blog piece was one possibility. But this was a complicated issue. An alternative would be amore substantial piece perhaps with outside involvement and an event built around it. One way to get more impact would be to try to relate these changes to real world consequences in terms of blunders affecting individual voters and taxpayers. What were the risks from an ever expanding, rather closed world of Ministers and their advisers operating within a Westminster/Whitehall bubble? This was in part the theme of the event on avoiding the Omni-shambles- the difficulty was that the people at the top of both main parties had grown up politically in this bubble and did not see it as a problem.
* Another potential theme arose from the way in which the political parties were scattering promises during the election campaign, which the electorate discounted adding to their cynicism about the political class. Politics was an increasingly retail offer with promotions of various kinds open to the same criticisms as supermarket offers.
* Machinery of government change also was back on the agenda according to one Sunday newspaper and we might want to weigh in on this issue.
* Timing was difficult. Coverage might be slight or non-existent before the election but, depending on their nature, changes might be introduced from the outset by an incoming government. So comment after the election might be too late to have any influence other than hand-wringing.

Richard Mottram said he would give further thought to what the group might say about EMOs, in the light of recent developments and comment by others, and the form and timing of BGI comments. Other interesting themes had been raised which the Group should also explore.

1. **Outline of a possible second edition of *“British Government in Crisis”* (EC0421n2).**  
     
   Christopher Foster said that he had been invited to prepare a second edition of his book “British Government in Crisis.” He had circulated an outline synopsis that covered a number of areas on which the BGI had commented in its reports and blogs. He would like to draw on this material and the expertise of colleagues in the group in preparing a revised edition. Among the options the revised edition might be a BGI book or incorporate chapters authored by BGI members. Ideally from his perspective for some chapters he might sketch out the main headings to be covered and invite colleagues to be involved in the drafting.

In discussion, it was argued it would be difficult to agree a text around the table as a BGI book and a collection of essays would lose the focus and impact of a book by a single author. In drawing on the BGI’s work it would be helpful for the BGI’s own reputation to avoid any impression we looked back to a ‘golden age’ in any era and certainly not to one for government in the 1960s and 1970s and to convey a sense of an organisation with positive ideas.

Richard Mottram, summing up the discussion, said that the group would welcome Christopher drawing on the BGI’s work in preparing a new edition of his book. Individuals around the table would be happy to comment on draft material in areas of their expertise.

1. **Any other business.**  
     
   Aaron Ritchie said that all future meeting slots for this year had been put up on the calendar on the website. It was agreed that the next meeting would be held on 19th May.

24 April 2015