**THE BETTER GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE**

**Executive Committee Meeting**

**10:15 - 12:00, Tuesday 28th November 2017**

**Fabian Society, 61 Petty France**

**Minutes**

**Present:**

Ursula Brennan

Paul Britton

Robin Butler

Symone Clark-McGuire

Christopher Foster

Leigh Lewis

Jeremy Moore

Richard Mottram

Peter Owen

Adam Sharples

**Apologies:**

Roger Dawe, Igor Judge, Tom Legg, Peter Makeham, Philip Ward.

1. **Minutes of the meeting on 24th October 2017.**

The minutes were agreed.

1. **Matters arising**

Richard Mottram had discussed the forthcoming IfG project on accountability with Bronwyn Maddox and had offered our services.

1. **Updates:**

Richard Mottram said that in view of our aim to recruit more people with recent experience of government and to adjust the gender balance of the group it was welcome news that Bronwyn Hill, Una O’Brian and Ruth Owen had agreed to become Associate Members.

In discussion of Amyas Morse’s comment to the PACAC inquiry that accounting officers’ responsibility for value for money could be in conflict with their responsibility for supporting their ministers it was noted that there were other factors that could give rise to similar tensions. For example a declared government policy of greater transparency could conflict with the aims of individual ministers. In discussion of other factors with a bearing on accountability the following were mentioned:

* The difficulty of arguing the need for extra resources to meet additional responsibilities.
* The declining influence of Parliament and Cabinet.
* The existence of a statutory civil service code defining the obligations of civil servants.
* The creation of Senior Responsible Officers.
1. **Revised draft evidence to the PACAC inquiry on Civil Service Effectiveness**

It was agreed that the draft, which had been amended to take account of comments received, should be submitted forthwith.

1. **The “guardianship” role of the civil service**

Peter Owen said that the draft had been produced in response to the request at the previous meeting for a blog going beyond the scope of the PACAC inquiry to draw attention to issues such as the decline in factual accuracy in government, the limited influence of Parliament and failures in communication between ministers on which the group had previously commented.

In discussion the following main points were made.

* There was a risk that the draft might be seen as looking back to an age when things were better. In practice the main difficulties arose when ministers sought to suppress information that might be damaging to their policies and this had always been a problem.
* There were manifest problems with the current state of British government and politics and it was appropriate to argue that the civil service had a part to play in dealing with them.
* It was interesting to read the blog alongside John Major’s recent lecture at Westminster Abbey. He had focused on problems with representative government and the rise of social media providing a facility for people to be targeted by lies to for political purposes.
* The blog raised the fundamental issue of whether civil servants had a responsibility beyond serving their ministers which would cause them to say “no” at some point. We should not be so complaisant that we were caught up in issues of doubtful legality.
* In a case involving an aircraft crash in which people had died the police had considered whether there was a case for prosecuting civil servants for manslaughter because they had paid too much attention to economy and not enough to safety. Similar issues arose in the private sector.
* It was incorrect to say that civil servants had a duty to Parliament and the public. They were solely accountable to their ministers who were in turn accountable to Parliament.
* Ministers were entitled to take bad decisions so long as they did not break the law or use public money for improper purposes.
* A weakness of the present system that might be worth drawing out is the apparent difficulty of holding ministers to account for poor decisions.
* Difficult cases arose where the view of experienced civil servants was that what the minister wanted to do was not based on sound evidence, would have predictable adverse consequences and would waste public money. In cases that were clear-cut a direction could be sought, but there was a huge grey area. Could there be an enhanced challenge to proposals which were unsoundly based with potential long-term adverse consequences?
* A particular problem was the inability to state categorically that we had reached the limit of our capacity. This was a topical issue in the light of the demands imposed by Brexit.

It was agreed that the current draft should not be published. Ursula Brennan would prepare a draft of a different blog about the perennial problem of taking good decisions when faced with severe capacity constraints.

1. **Review of BGI’s objectives**

In discussion the following main points were raised.

* Contrary to the suggestion at the previous meeting there seemed little point in producing a piece on special advisers. The real difficulties arose with the bad behaviour of a small number of individuals.
* There would be advantage in having some form of programme that could advance our stated aims.
* It would be helpful to consider at every meeting what issue we were aiming to influence.

It was agreed that we should continue the discussion at the next meeting.

1. **Any other business.**

The Secretary will seek to fix a date in the first half of January for the next meeting.

1/12/2017