**THE BETTER GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE**

**Executive Committee Meeting**

**10:15 - 12:00, Tuesday 12th June 2018**

**Fabian Society, 61 Petty France**

**MINUTES**

**Present:**

Ursula Brennan

Roger Dawe

Christopher Foster

Tom Legg

Leigh Lewis

Richard Mottram

Peter Owen

Adam Sharples

Florence Vane

**Apologies:**

Paul Britton, Peter Makeham, Phillip Ward

1. **Minutes of the meeting on 1st May 2018 and matters arising.**

The minutes were agreed.

1. **Updates.**

It was agreed that the paper on complex systems should be sent to the PACAC clerk and the secretary to the Grenfell inquiry.

It was agreed that we should contact the Cabinet Office/Treasury team dealing with the Public Service Leadership Taskforce to make them aware of our interest.

It was agreed that we should await the Government’s response to the fourth report of PACAC’s Inquiry into Government Decision Making before offering any further comment.

1. **IfG report on the National Infrastructure Council**

Christopher Foster said that he had been invited to comment in a personal capacity on a 250 page draft report. Three key issues were raised. The first was the need for much better Government accounts which enabled costs to be accurately assessed and attributed to what was being built on a quarterly basis and compared with initial estimates. The second was a desire to make much greater use of cost benefit analysis in reaching decisions. The third was a suggestion that an executive agency with complete independence might be established to deal with Government infrastructure priorities. The report’s handling of means of deciding priorities was particularly weak.

Discussion continued into the next item on accountability.

1. **IfG group on accountability**

Richard Mottram said that he had recently attended a group meeting assembled to discuss the Whitehall sections of the IfG consultation paper. The group had included the head of the Major Projects Authority, several parliamentary clerks including the clerk of PACAC, and a number of Cabinet Office and Treasury officials. Themes that arose in discussion included the need to improve accountability for delivery, the dangers of considering policy and delivery separately, and the benefits of the local government model where issues were considered openly with officials serving all council members. The clerks were strongly of the view that Parliament did not suffer from lack of information, but from the capacity to process information meaningfully. Many of the issues discussed were of relevance to the IfG’s separate work on infrastructure. No conclusions were reached at this stage but another meeting was to be held in July.

In discussion the following main points were made.

* BGI had put forward a specific worked out proposal for improving Parliament’s ability to process information when scrutinising legislation, but it had not been adopted.
* Project scrutiny could be impressive, but it dealt with the implementation of what might have been a flawed decision. The initial decision itself could not be scrutinised.
* The permanent secretary of DfE, who was present at the meeting, had just sought a direction in relation to the introduction of “T level” qualifications. At issue was a delay of one year, but some projects were over ten years late.
* The Treasury’s focus on infrastructure tended to be too narrowly concerned with the value for money of individual projects.
* The decision to construct a third runway at Heathrow had been heavily influenced by the view that it was essential to have a major “hub” airport, which now seemed somewhat outdated.
* Cost benefit analysis was of little value in deciding priorities when wider political and commercial issues were involved – for example a comparison of the value of constructing the Channel Tunnel with improvements in suburban rail services.
* There was a need for some mechanism to advise on the overall scale and distribution by sector of Government support for infrastructure. Prioritisation within the separate elements could then be left to departments.
* Difficulties arose within the present system of Parliamentary scrutiny because we were attempting to justify on economic grounds decisions which had initially been based on political considerations.
* Major infrastructure projects had proved easier to deliver in France for a number of reasons: the lower density of settlement, the availability of the décret and the more technocratic character of the civil service.
* The priority of major infrastructure projects was often decided by their inclusion in the election manifesto rather than by any subsequent reasoned appraisal. However the system in the Netherlands whereby objective analysis was undertaken in advance of a general election showed that other approaches were possible.

1. **Other Business**

In discussion of future work by the group the following main points were made.

* The confused state of politics at the present time, with both the Government and the Opposition suffering from internal difficulties made it difficult to progress.
* We had had some success in promoting schemes to improve Parliamentary scrutiny, gaining support at the level of Parliamentary Committees, but they had made little impression on Government. We might consider means of developing powerful allies within Parliament.
* An area where we could continue to offer a high level of expertise was the future of the civil service.
* A topic we might consider is advice on what type of issue is or is not suitable for decision by referendum.

It was agreed that the Secretariat would canvas availability for a meeting on17th July, but the meeting would only take place if sufficient business was available.

15th June 2018