THE BETTER GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE

Executive Committee

Minutes of the Meeting held at the Institute for Government on 27 August 2013

**Present:** Richard Mottram (Chair)

Joey Carr

Roger Dawe

Christopher Foster

Tom Legg

Peter Makeham

Peter Owen

Phillip Ward

Aaron Ritchie (Secretary)

**Apologies:** Paul Britton

Robin Butler

Geoffrey Chipperfield

Leigh Lewis

Adam Sharples

**Minutes of the meeting on 30th July 2013**

The minutes were agreed. There were no matters arising.

**Updates**

Website

The new public website was now available.

Meeting with Ed Miliband

Nothing further had been heard from Tim Livesey. It was agreed that we would seek to renew our contact with him after the Labour Party Conference.

Publication of the BGI paper on civil service reform

Richard Mottram was in discussion with Bernard Jenkin, chairman of PASC, and Gillian Stamp, the specialist adviser to the Committee for its civil service inquiry. It would be important not to publish our report at a time which undermined publicity for the Committee’s own report. He would renew his contacts and advise further on the timing of publication which, ideally, should not be much further delayed. The possibility of an IfG launch event could be considered at that stage.

**Code of Legislative Standards and Joint Standards Committee – Next Steps**

Roger Dawe said that the PCRC had not yet had an opportunity to react to the Government’s dismissive response, published immediately before the recess, to their report on legislative standards. Until the PCRC considered the matter further in the autumn we should hold to the line put forward in our original recommendations. Thereafter there might be scope to consider a fallback position depending on the Government’s willingness itself to provide a clear undertaking on the standards it would apply. Meantime it would be important to maintain contact with Graham Allen (PCRC Chair) and Alan Beith (Chair of the Liaison Committee) to help them consider their tactics.

In discussion the following were the main points made:

* Some of the unwillingness displayed by the government might stem from difficulties faced by a coalition in settling the fine detail of proposals. On the other hand no government, whatever its composition, would be attracted by constraints on its freedom of action.
* It would be important to be able to support the PCRC’s line at the seminar it had arranged for 24th October, which the Leader of the House is to attend. Chris Foster and Richard Mottram had been invited. Roger Dawe would explore whether an invitation had also been sent to Nick Monck for whom he might substitute.
* It would be helpful to have some clear data to support the argument that standards of preparation of legislation had seriously declined and were damaging the Government’s reputation.
* There might be benefit in contacting individual MPs with whom we have links to try to get a picture of wider sentiment on the issue in the Commons.
* There were elements in the Government response that might be built on in developing an alternative approach.
* We should undertake an analysis of how far the existing guidance on legislation falls short of our recommendations. Our key concern is that there should be clear, publicly available standards for the preparation of legislation to which the Government is committed and which can be used as a yardstick by Parliament.
* We should establish contact with Graham Allen and Alan Beith to discuss tactics. At some stage it might also be appropriate to seek a meeting with the Leader of the House.

It was agreed that Peter Owen would prepare a comparison of existing guidance on legislation with our proposals and Richard Mottram would seek a meeting with Graham Allen.

**How can the BGI influence most effectively?**

Peter Owen said that it was timely, now that the facilities of the new website were available, to reconsider BGI’s approach to influencing improvements in government. Adam Sharples’ paper had been well received. Regrettably he could not be present, but this was likely to be the first of several discussions.

In discussion the following main points were made:

* There was general agreement that exerting influence was the central purpose of the group.
* Our target audience, in addition to those listed in the paper, should include the IPPR, the Civil Service Commission, the PAC, backbench MPs and Peers who could cast light on opinion in Parliament, and in particular younger Members, both in government and in opposition, who were likely to form the next generation of ministers.
* We should consider developing stronger links with Cabinet Office officials advising on the future of the civil service.
* Links with journalists should include those writing for periodicals in our area of interest.
* It would not be productive to place too much emphasis on attempting to influence the wider public. Most of the subjects we deal with are of limited interest to them.
* Persuading high-profile people to comment on our material could be a good way of getting the message across.
* There was no support for the “provocation” in the paper that we should go beyond our focus on procedure to venture into policy, but it was agreed that we should attempt to develop a more positive image. There was a risk that we would be seen as only concerned with negative criticism of government.
* There was general agreement that effective use of new forms of communication such as blogging and Twitter would be crucial. We should seek to monitor the scale of our website coverage.
* In discussion of the future of the civil service we should concentrate on the importance of preserving the civil service values in any future arrangements.
* It was doubtful whether time would be well spent on developing a set of formal principles for the group. The thrust of our effort was encapsulated in the reference in the “Our Work” section of the website to professionalism in policymaking and retention of a high-quality impartial civil service.
* We should have a practised system of responding to events by contacting each other and developing a line that can be posted and tweeted on the following day. It would be useful if individual members could be assigned to particular topics.

It was agreed that the topic would be further developed in later meetings. In the meantime Phillip Ward would set up a Twitter account for the group (this has been done).

**Civil Service Training of Policy Professionals**

Peter Owen said that the newspaper articles circulated with paper EC0827n2 had prompted some members of the group to reflect on how far the ease with which policy civil servants were portrayed as bumbling bureaucrats was due to the service’s reluctance to challenge the image of the “gifted amateur”, in particular through development and accreditation of relevant specialist qualifications. Should the BGI, as part of an attempt to develop a more positive image, consider producing a position paper on this topic?

In discussion the following main points were made:

* There was broad agreement that the failure of the civil service to encourage the development of accredited qualifications for policy professionals had been unhelpful. The opportunities had been plentiful – for example the six-month “long course” which provided non-specialist fast-stream entrants with a basic understanding of first-degree economics and statistics.
* This contrasted with other areas of the public sector, for example the NHS, where the completion of an MA course in health service management was a requirement for fast-stream entrants.
* The “portability” of a qualification was more relevant now that movement in and out of the service had become more usual.
* The need for specialist qualifications should not become a bar to the recruitment of the most able individuals, regardless of background.
* In some areas of the civil service, for example staff dealing with overseas development and the environment, specialist qualifications were more common. It was less common for them or those working in other areas to have qualifications in the decision-making process or the techniques of policy development.
* Expense was a factor. MPA courses were dominated by overseas students.

It was agreed that the topic merited further consideration. Peter Owen would contact Hugh Taylor to see if he would be prepared to conduct a more structured discussion.

**Meeting with Civil Service Commissioners**

David Normington’s secretary had attempted to contact the BGI, unfortunately at a time when the info@bgi address was down, to seek a meeting on the Government’s civil service reform plan. Aaron Ritchie had now spoken to her and would be seeking to establish the availability of Robin Butler, Roger Dawe, Leigh Lewis, Richard Mottram, Peter Owen and Phillip Ward to meet the Commissioners later in September. It would be appropriate for the Commissioners to see the Group’s report on civil service reform (if it had not yet been published, on and in confidence basis).

**New Website**

The site included a “latest post” on the Government’s response to the PCRC report on legislative standards. Some technical problems relating to access to the members’ section of the site should be resolved shortly.

**Future Meetings**

The next meeting will be held at 10.15 am on Tuesday 10th September at the IfG.

**Any other Business**

It was agreed that a brief reference to the death of Nick Monck should be posted on the BGI website (this has been done).

Peter Owen would contact John Elvidge to inquire about the timing of future consideration of the paper he was preparing on the Scottish experience of coalition forming (a first step towards the production of a BGI paper on preparing for coalitions and the effective functioning of coalition government).

28 August 2013