**THE BETTER GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE**

**Executive Committee**

**Minutes of the Meeting held at the Institute for Government on 11th February 2014**

**Present:** Richard Mottram (Chair)

Robin Butler

Paul Britton

Roger Dawe

Christopher Foster

Leigh Lewis

Peter Makeham

Peter Owen

Adam Sharples

Phillip Ward

Aaron Ritchie (Secretary)

**Apologies:** Geoffrey Chipperfield

Tom Legg

**Minutes of the meeting on 21st January 2014**

The minutes were agreed. There were no matters arising.

**Updates**

The meeting with Alan Beith would take place on 25th February at 1.30 pm in Committee Room 13 in the Palace of Westminster. The BGI team would comprise Richard Mottram, Robin Butler, Roger Dawe, Christopher Foster and Peter Owen.

The request for a meeting had referred to “the way forward on a range of Select Committee recommendations … which the Government has decided to reject”. Roger Dawe agreed to produce a short note for the BGI team on the issues to be covered, focusing in particular on legislative standards and the backbench business committee. A further issue might be the inability of the Commons itself to set up a new Select Committee without the consent of the Executive. Robin Butler undertook to circulate to the group a letter he had received from Lord Wallace about the mechanics of setting up Inquiries in the Commons and the Lords.

Tim Livesey’s response to Paul Britton had referred to a new Labour steering group on preparation for government. Leigh Lewis had been invited to contribute to the work of the group and had indicated that he would be willing to do so on the understanding that he would be free to offer similar advice to other parties. If the group were to produce a public report it would be advisable for Leigh Lewis to be described as an “adviser” rather than a “member”. It would be important for key members of the steering group to be included in the invitation list for Ditchley.

In discussion of the balance between centralism and localism and the role of agencies it was agreed that Richard Mottram would consider whether a BGI report specifically on this topic should be prepared.

**Response to consultation on recruitment**

It was agreed that the draft response should be submitted, subject to a number of drafting amendments:

* We should make it clear that loyalty to the government is not personal to any particular administration or minister;
* any possible confusion arising from the fact that spads are technically civil servants, though in a special category, should be avoided;
* reference to the need for impartiality of civil servants should make it clear that this referred to political impartiality and extended to avoiding any appearance that they were not politically impartial;
* paragraph 17 should refer to “the Leader of the Opposition or a clearly identified shadow minister…”;
* the proposal in paragraphs 23 and 24 of the consultation paper that the ability to convert to permanency should be available for staff recruited on temporary contracts when they are on a Government programme to assist the unemployed or to promote the employment of people with disabilities should be welcomed.

Peter Owen undertook to prepare a revised draft for circulation to the group before submission.

In further discussion it was noted that a range of other issues affecting the civil service, including front-line service providers, might be covered in other BGI publications – perhaps the “manifesto for the civil service” that had been tentatively discussed at previous meetings.

**Constitutional significance of the Civil Service**

Christopher Foster, introducing the paper, said that it had been drafted as a personal contribution, referring to issues raised in his book *British Government in Crisis.* It stressed in particular the importance of factual accuracy in communication by minutes within government and in ministerial statements. The failure of Tony Blair to reveal to colleagues undertakings he had given to President Bush about the conduct of the Iraq war was an egregious example of poor communication.

In discussion the following main points were made:

* Poor communication within government was not a new phenomenon, though there had arguably been some increase in recent years.
* Factors that might have led to a decline in standards included the increased use of modern rapid-response communication by email, worries about leaks to the media and concern about the release of material under freedom of information provisions.
* There had nevertheless also been a decline in awareness of the importance of keeping a written record of decisions, which was regrettable and could undermine the ability of Parliament to hold the government to account.
* The heavy emphasis on declining standards in the draft paper might give rise to charges of “golden-ageism”.

In conclusion, Christopher Foster said that he would reflect on the discussion and consider amendments to the draft that would limit the dangers of misinterpretation so that it could be posted – still as a personal contribution attributed to him – on the BGI website. He would also attempt a parallel draft that could be presented as an agreed BGI view.

**Attendance at Ditchley**

Peter Owen, introducing the paper, said that the principal constraint on numbers at Ditchley was the capacity of the conference table. That was limited to 46 (there was also space for about a dozen observers). BGI representatives (including associate members) now amounted to 21, though not all would be likely to attend.

The group considered Annex C and agreed a number of additions and deletions. Peter Owen will circulate a revised list divided into two tranches, with the first tranche comprising 40 names to be invited immediately.

In discussion of the preliminary draft of an invitation letter, which had been circulated separately, it was agreed that the heading should be “Preparing for the Post-election Government”. It was for consideration whether the existing reference to coalition might deter some potential participants who would be reluctant to concede that a further period of coalition would be necessary. Richard Mottram undertook to provide amendments that would heighten the attractiveness of the occasion.

**Any other business**

It was agreed that Phillip Ward should approach Martin Stanley to see if he would be interested in joining the group as a full or associate member.

We should redouble our efforts to attract women members to the group. It would be useful to have this as an item for discussion in a future agenda.

**Next meeting**

Availability of members on 25th Feb, 11th March and 25th March will be canvassed.

PFO

12th February 2014