**THE BETTER GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE**

**Executive Committee Meeting**

**10:15 - 12:00, Tuesday 24th October 2017**

**Fabian Society, 61 Petty France**

**Minutes**

**Present:**

Paul Britton

Symone Clark-McGuire

Roger Dawe

Christopher Foster

Richard Mottram

Peter Owen

Phillip Ward

**Apologies.**

Ursula Brennan, Robin Butler, Howell James, Tom Legg, Leigh Lewis, Peter Makeham, David  Normington, Adam Sharples.

**Minutes of the meeting on 26th September 2017.**

The minutes were agreed.

**Matters arising.**

Peter Owen had watched the IfG video of the presentation by Rupert McNeil; it seemed to indicate that his thoughts on issues such as development of the Leadership Academy and the problems arising from loss of corporate memory were reasonably consistent with our own. In discussion it was noted that the arrangements for the Leadership Academy were as yet unclear and might rely too heavily on the willingness of departments to commit resources to its work. It was agreed that the Secretariat should seek a meeting between Rupert McNeil and Richard Mottram and Leigh Lewis.

It was agreed that in view of the tight timetable for submissions and the wide coverage which already dealt with most of the matters we might have wished to raise we should not submit evidence to the HoL inquiry on the Brexit Bill.

**Updates.**

It was agreed that Peter Owen should draft an email from Richard Mottram to the following people with recent experience in the civil service: Helen Ghosh, Bronwyn Hill, Peter Lauener, Jeremy Moore, Una O'Brien and Ruth Owen (now in Australia). The email should include the final draft of the evidence to the current PACAC inquiry and the “Our Work” paper as indications of the scope of our interest, invite their views on the papers, and enquire whether they might be interested in making a regular contribution to our thinking as members or associate members. It would be important to establish before the emails were sent whether they had already retired from the civil service. Roger Dawe would telephone Peter Lauener to establish his current position.

**Draft evidence to the PACAC inquiry on Civil Service Effectiveness** (EC1024n1\_PACAC evidence).

There was general agreement that the draft was an excellent response to key questions raised by the inquiry. However the need to respond point by point to PACAC’s concerns and the inevitable delay while the evidence remained in confidence would blunt the impact of the presentation of our views. This might be overcome by producing a separate blog referring briefly to the inquiry but presenting the views in an order and a form different from the submission of evidence.

In discussion of the draft the following main points were made:

* A number of written comments had been received from Ursula Brennan, Robin Butler, Leigh Lewis and Martin Stanley. Christopher Foster will forward further comments.
* There was a case for going beyond the strictly defined scope of the inquiry in order to attract more interest by drawing attention to wider issues of grave concern such as the decline in factual accuracy in government, the limited influence of Parliament and serious problems in communication between ministers. The civil service had a critical part to play in all of these areas.
* A major problem in Parliament at present was that many MPs disagreed with the direction of their parties’ policies.
* We might draw attention to the difficulties faced by the civil service if ministers were committed to driving forward policies based on ideological aims.
* We should bear in mind that the Chair of PACAC, though generally sympathetic to our views, was a committed Brexiteer and would be hostile to anything that might be interpreted as backsliding.
* The over-frequent moves of civil servants were due not only to the self-management of careers but also to the tendency of senior managers to regard some of their more able staff as firefighters to be moved from one critical area to another.
* All successful commercial enterprises focused on growing their own talent.
* The difficulties with SPADS arose not so much from the large numbers, though that did enable them to engage in detailed micro-management, but from the difficulties of disciplining them for inappropriate behaviour if they retained the support of their minister. Particular problems arose where they sought to promote their own ministers’ interests against those of other ministers.
* There was little evidence that departmental boards had made as much difference as had originally been hoped, but they had generally been of some benefit. Much depended on their relationship with their Secretary of State.

It was agreed that Richard Mottram would revise the draft in the light of discussion at the meeting and the written comments received. Peter Owen will prepare an initial draft of a separate blog taking the submission of evidence as the occasion for publication but ranging more widely.

**Review of BGI’s objectives** (EC1024n2\_our work)

In discussion of the group’s objectives it was agreed that the “Our Work” section of the website was tautly drafted and remained appropriate as a statement of BGI’s general philosophy; however it would be desirable to have some more focused statement of the group’s objectives. It was difficult, given the nature of our work, to set detailed specific outcomes we might aim to achieve within a defined timescale. On the other hand we might try to target our efforts more proactively in particular areas rather than simply reacting to issues as they arose from parliamentary inquiries or government initiatives. We had done this in the past by concentrating on the legislative process with some success in Parliament (now continued by the recommendations of the HoL Constitution Committee’s recent report) though shrugged off by government. Our focus on the civil service had also been consistently maintained and was an area in which we could bring a high level of detailed expertise to bear. Other possible themes on which we might adopt a more proactive stance might include the proper role and effective deployment of SPADs and the practical impossibility of implementing every aspect of Brexit within the timescale so far envisaged (Martin Donnelly, former Permanent Secretary of Department for International Trade, might be able to contribute on this).

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

**Any other business.**

Richard Mottram would shortly be meeting Bronwen Maddox and would report back on the outcome. The IfG were contemplating a study on accountability which might be of interest.

The secretariat will canvass 21st November and 28th November for the next meeting.

25th October 2017