**THE BETTER GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE**

**Executive Committee Meeting**

**10:15 - 12:00, Tuesday 9th July 2019**

**Fabian Society, 61 Petty France**

**MINUTES**

**Present:**

Ursula Brennan

Robin Butler

Tom Legg (Chair)

Peter Owen

Adam Sharples

Florence Vane

Phillip Ward

**Apologies:**

Andrew Blick, Paul Britton, Roger Dawe, Peter Makeham, Richard Mottram

**Minutes of the meeting on 28th May 2019 and matters arising.**

The minutes were agreed. It was not known what contacts Richard Mottram had had with Amyas Morse.

**Updates.**

* It was agreed that Peter Owen would contact the PwC group to signal our interest in the quality of government.

* Robin Butler said that the Constitution Committee of the House of Lords had begun a study of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act with a view to establishing how it would interact with the collapse of a government following a successful vote of no confidence. The act was due for review in 2020 and there was pressure to get rid of it at that stage as it had proved to be of little practical value

**Work on accountability**

Tom Legg said that he had some concern about whether the term “accountability” correctly reflected our main concerns. The strict dictionary definition referred to examination of actions that had taken place in the past, whereas our focus was on influencing future events.

In discussion the following main points were made.

* We had generally used the term “accountability” in relation to the fitness for purpose of the processes by which decisions were taken, which would affect future outcomes. Nevertheless it might be appropriate to adopt a different title for any future work. There was a good deal of overlap in our thinking between accountability, transparency and responsibility. Distinguishing between the responsibilities of Ministers and civil servants was an area of particular difficulty within our system of government.

* The Constitution Society was currently undertaking work relevant to the processes of government decision-making. There might be scope for some collaboration.
* The present tumultuous state of government arose primarily from the conflict between popular power and parliamentary power. That was a constitutional matter outside out remit. However it was questionable whether the existing conventions determining the conduct of government, which were within our remit, would be robust enough to withstand the resulting pressures.
* It seemed anomalous that a majority in Parliament opposed to a no-deal Brexit would be unable to prevent it short of bringing down the government.
* Accountability might be hampered by ministers’ reluctance to have uncomfortable advice recorded.
* The PAC was in a position to see advice and criticise when inadequate advice had been offered. However its focus tended to be narrow, not touching on the balance of priorities within departments.
* Former civil servants should not be bound to remain silent so long as they did not reveal confidential details of matters in which they had been directly involved.

In conclusion it was agreed that a further discussion with Amyas Morse, and perhaps some contribution to the Constitution Society’s work, might be helpful but that there seemed little point in proceeding with a wide-ranging project on accountability at this stage while all eyes were on Brexit and the turmoil in the main political parties. We might be in a better position to offer advice on good government in the autumn when the issue of Brexit had been settled and the questions of implementation had to be faced.

**Other business**

The next meeting will be held in late September/early October.

14th July 2019