**THE BETTER GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE**

**Executive Committee**

**Minutes of the Meeting held at the Institute for Government on 20th January 2015**

**Present:** Richard Mottram (Chair)

 Robin Butler

 Paul Britton

 Roger Dawe

 Christopher Foster

 Howell James

 Tom Legg

 Leigh Lewis

 Peter Owen

 Aaron Ritchie

 Adam Sharples

 Phillip Ward

**Apologies:** Penny Boys

 Geoffrey Chipperfield

 Peter Makeham

 Martin Stanley

**Minutes of the Meeting on 16th December 2014**

The minutes were agreed.

**Updates**

**Publications**. The preceding month had been an especially active period with two reports, two blogs and an evidence submission published. Discussions were in progress with Manchester University about republishing “Financing Scotland”. The senior civil service report had been republished in Civil Service World online. The tweet accompanying our evidence submission was picked up by the PCRC and re-tweeted to their 900 followers. We are now adopting as standard practice accompanying each report with a blog and a tweet.

**Spring event**. Peter Owen said that the event had now been arranged for 16th March. The guest speakers would be Lord Falconer and Dominic Grieve. The title would be “Avoiding the Omnishambles” and the background document accompanying the invitations would be “The Next Government”. The proposed format was that Robin Butler, chairing the event, would briefly explain the BGI’s status and the broad purpose of the event (to consider practical operational considerations, based on BGI members’ experience, that would limit the risk of bungles); Richard Mottram would then outline the recommendations in “The Next Government” and invite the guest speakers to comment on the likelihood and practicality of their application by their respective parties. There would then be questions from the floor. The event would be preceded by a buffet lunch at 12.00pm and would start at 12.30pm and end at 2.00 pm. The one outstanding issue was whether we should have a third guest speaker.

In discussion the following main points were made.

* Publication of “The Next Government” should be deferred until 1st March.
* Adding a third guest speaker with a politically neutral perspective, such as Peter Hennessy or Gus O’Donnell, would make the initial presentation too cumbersome. A LibDem view would be valuable, since they would be likely to be influential in shaping a new government, but this might be achieved through a contribution from the floor rather than an additional speaker.
* There might be advantages in staging the event jointly with the IfG since this would allow access to their administrative facilities such as the issuing of invitations. However it might limit the reinforcement of the BGI’s brand and the initial agreement with Peter Riddell had been on the basis that there would be a clear distinction from IfG events and that we would handle our own invitation list.
* The Ditchley invitation list (perhaps expanded by the Constitution Society’s mailing list) might be suitable for this occasion. We should ensure that it included influential journalists.
* It would be helpful if Howell James could reflect on the marketing of the event.
* The event would be treated as public, with no reporting restrictions.
* The publication of “The Next Government” should be accompanied by a shorter blog that could be sent with the invitations to generate interest.

In conclusion the overall format of the event was agreed. Richard Mottram would reflect on whether the Ditchley invitation list would be likely, given the much greater ease of attendance at a two-hour event in London, to provide a sufficiently strong contribution from the floor to make a third speaker unnecessary and would explore with Peter Riddell the implications of a joint BGI/IfG event.

**Alun Evans** had now been added to the BGI members group email address.

**Ministerial churn**

Phillip Ward said that the original intention had been to produce an analysis of the data on ministerial movements. This had recently already been done by the IfG, however, and the paper had been turned into a commentary, in particular on what seemed to be the excessive credit given to the Cameron administration for maintaining stability.

In discussion the following main points were made.

* The performance of the present Government had been far better than that of its predecessors in some areas, notably the Department of Work and Pensions.
* The temptation to undertake major machinery of government changes had been resisted.

It was agreed that Phillip Ward should revise the paper to reflect the points made in discussion and that it could then be published as a blog, without further clearance, at the end of the month

**Coalition decision-making**

Paul Britton said that the paper had been drafted in response to a concern that the BGI’s previous statements on collective decision-making might appear to pay too little regard to the realities of coalition government. The present draft was intended as a *ballon d’essai*, to be developed in the light of discussion.

In discussion the following main points were made.

* In a speech at the IfG on the previous day the LibDem minister David Laws had suggested that coalitions were inherently more likely to ensure evidence-based scrutiny of policy proposals. He had stressed the importance of the DPM’s chairmanship of the Home Affairs Committee, the appointment of a LibDem Chief Secretary and the role of the Quad in ensuring that the junior partner’s voice was heard.
* It was sometimes difficult to distinguish between problems that might have arisen as a result of deficiencies in arrangements in collective decision making and those that resulted from individual ministers’ wish to pursue a personal agenda.
* It would be appropriate for us to make clear that we recognise the complexities that arise with coalition government, and perhaps to point to the wide varieties of coalition practices in other countries.
* Allowing some element of public dissent was healthier than a situation where a formal position of unity was undermined by clandestine briefing.
* Although some “game playing” was inevitable as partners in a coalition sought to preserve a distinct identity, there needed to be a bedrock of firm rules. For example a clear distinction needed to be preserved between statements of party policy and statements of government policy and it should not be acceptable for ministers to announce policies that affected other departments or involved substantial expenditure consequences without prior agreement.
* The House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution had recently prepared a paper on collective responsibilities.
* The version of the Ministerial Code issued by the Coalition reasserted the principle of collective accountability with the added words “save where it is explicitly set aside”. There was no clarity however about what this procedure would involve.
* In practice there had been relatively little dissent within the coalition on party lines. With the possible prospect of more elaborate alliances we might look back on this as the Golden Age of coalition government!

In conclusion it was agreed that Paul Britton should revise the paper in the light of discussion as either a blog or a more lengthy report for further consideration by the group. Paul Britton should also consider whether the relevant section of “The Next Government” should be amended.

**Other business**

Andrew Blick said that the Constitution Society had been endeavouring to secure a common approach between the advocates of a constitutional convention. A stripped-down statement had been prepared focusing on fair representation of the constituent countries and the degree of devolution to the English regions and identifying further issues to be developed in a later convention. Labour, the LibDems and Plaid Cymru were on board. The Conservatives had not decided. It was unlikely that the SNP would wish to participate.

Leigh Lewis suggested that a subsequent meeting might consider an oral item on the implications, if any, of increasing diversity for the procedures of government,

The next meeting will be on 10th February

20th January 2015