**THE BETTER GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE**

**Executive Committee**

**Minutes of the Meeting held at the Institute for Government on 26th August 2014**

**Present:** Richard Mottram (Chair)

Andrew Blick

Paul Britton

Geoffrey Chipperfield

Roger Dawe

Christopher Foster

Tom Legg

Leigh Lewis

Peter Owen

Adam Sharples

Martin Stanley

Phillip Ward

**Apologies:** Penny Boys

Robin Butler

Peter Makeham

Aaron Ritchie

**Minutes of the Meeting on 29th July 2014**

It had also been agreed that Phillip Ward would prepare a first draft of a response to the PCRC’s request for evidence on constitutional matters.  
  
**Updates**

It was proving difficult to find candidates for the Civil Service Chief Executive post at the salary offered and so close to an election.

The Ditchley Conference would range far beyond the domestic constitutional issues discussed in the PCRC’s report “A New Magna Carta”, but that could usefully provide the topic for a session on the case for a written British constitution. Richard Mottram would seek to secure an invitation for Graham Allen.

Leigh Lewis would provide a short piece that could serve as a BGI blog when his book was published.

**BGI Communications**

Peter Owen said that since the paper, recording the views of Martin Stanley and Penny Boys on the tone and focus of BGI communications, had been issued Howell James had suggested that we should prepare a communication strategy for the next nine months. A meeting would be arranged. A preliminary discussion at the present meeting could help to clarify the questions to be addressed.

In discussion the following main points were made.

* It was timely to reconsider exactly what we are trying to achieve and how to go about it. The governors’ meeting had concluded that our ultimate target should be the Executive, since only they were in a position to take decisions, but how could we best influence them?
* We might be more successful with a serving Executive if we appeared to be more understanding of their difficulties, but more influential with a future Executive if we were more critical of current policies. It was possible to adopt either stance on different occasions.
* In the past we had sought to work with each of the separate parties, but the forming of the coalition had put an end to that. Labour now seemed to regard us as conservative figures and the Conservatives were preoccupied with the media.
* Outsiders saw us as an important voice for the civil service, which was unable itself to participate in the debate about good government. We would not wish to be seen solely as apologists, but it was important to explain the relevance of the civil service’s role.
* It was inevitable, given the composition of the group, that we would be accused of “golden ageism”. We should consider how best to combat that.
* Our audience was the whole of the political class including serving civil servants. That was a wide range and we could not expect to be accepted by all.
* Our approach to the serving Executive had tended to be through senior ministers with whom we had established links by previous professional contact. Their numbers were dwindling and we ought perhaps to refocus our approach on the wider policy community.

In conclusion it was agreed that, subject to the availability of Howell James and a substantial number of Executive Committee members, the major part of the next meeting would be devoted to this topic.

**Executive Agencies**

Christopher Foster said that executive agencies and other approaches to outsourcing of services could be extremely valuable, particularly where a straightforward and clearly defined task was to be performed. But other cases were far from clear cut and the approach had at times been muddled. Concern had been expressed about the lack of accountability to Parliament. The paper listed a series of questions that needed to be addressed; this could be a suitable topic for a wide-ranging BGI report.

In discussion the following main points were made.

* There was an inevitable tension in the use of outsourcing arrangements between ministerial control and operational freedom.
* There were answers to many of the questions raised in the paper. Agencies enhanced accountability if operated within a set of agreed principles; so did NDPBs if there was a clear framework.
* There had been a period when it seemed that Executive Agencies had provided the ideal balance between ministerial control and management autonomy. They had significantly improved the quality of service to the public.
* In the Department for Education the term “agency” was now applied to what were in effect simply parts of the department.
* Executive Agencies had now become unfashionable and several had been abolished. This seemed to have arisen partly from ministers’ desire to assume direct control and partly from the move to reduce costs through centralising processes.
* The two areas where arm’s-length arrangements were most controversial were health and education – both with complex and politically charged objectives. Agencies appeared to work best where there was a clearly defined operational task and broad political agreement on the objectives.
* There was necessarily a great deal of variety in outsourcing arrangements because each was *sui generis* – set up to address a specific issue. It would be valuable to clarify the principles that made different forms of outsourcing more or less appropriate.
* This was an ideal topic for the BGI. The experience of Executive Committee members in this field was unparalleled and it would be hard to dismiss a report as the reflections of Sir Humphrey on a golden age.
* A review of agency policy published in 2002 would provide useful background material: <http://reut-institute.org/data/uploads/PDFVer/Office%20of%20the%20Public%20Service%20Reform%20Better%20Government%20Services%202006.pdf>

In conclusion, it was agreed that Christopher Foster should prepare an outline draft of a possible report. As a first step, members should let him have their comments on the questions raised in his paper.

**Draft blog on coalition**

It was agreed that Peter Owen would shorten the draft and make it clear that it drew on practical experience and Roger Dawe should suggest some key points to be highlighted.

**Other business**

An initial draft of a short paper by Leigh Lewis on the deployment and development of senior civil servants had been circulated shortly before the meeting. The broad approach of the paper was agreed. Discussion of a more developed draft will be included in the agenda of the 21st October meeting. Meantime colleagues should email their comments to Leigh Lewis. One immediate point was that the problems discussed in relation to top civil servants also applied to more junior ranks.

Tom Legg had been invited to give evidence to the Constitution Committee inquiry into the office of Lord Chancellor.

The next meetings are scheduled for 23rd September (subject to securing an appropriate quorum for the discussion on communication) and 21st October.

26th August 2014