**THE BETTER GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE**

**Executive Committee**

**Minutes of the Meeting held at the Fabian Society on 6th September 2016**

**Present:** Richard Mottram (Chair)

Robin Butler

Symone Clark-McGuire

Geoffrey Chipperfield

Roger Dawe

Alun Evans

Peter Makeham

Peter Owen

Adam Sharples

Martin Stanley

Phillip Ward

**Apologies:** Paul Britton

Christopher Foster

Tom Legg

Leigh Lewis

Barbara Moorhouse

**Minutes of the Meeting on 12th July 2016 and matters arising**

The minutes were agreed.

It was agreed:

1. that Peter Owen should seek advice from Pau Britton on further action in respect of the third sector paper and whether we should resume discussion with the Government’s third sector team, now in DCMS;
2. that, in preparation for a further meeting with Philip Rycroft, Andrew Blick should advise on whether there were particular constitutional issues that might be raised at this stage and Phillip Ward should arrange a meeting for himself and Peter Owen with Tony Travers (LSE) to seek a briefing on the current state of English local government finance policy and related issues such as “the powerhouse of the North” and the allocation of funds between UK countries;
3. that Richard Mottram should arrange to meet Jeremy Heywood.

**Updates**

Robin Butler had been invited to meet David Davies on the following day. It seemed likely that this was intended more as a courtesy call than a request for advice on Brexit matters.

**BGI’s working methods**

Peter Owen said that it had become clear that it would not be practicable to raise finance on the scale envisaged for the ambitious “New BGI”. The previous meeting had nevertheless decided that the group should remain in existence. We therefore needed to consider how to increase our impact within broadly our present level of resources (this was likely to involve some extra input from members). A number of proposals for developing key themes, improving methods of getting them across, and widening the membership base were listed in the paper.

In discussion the following main points were made.

* We should not altogether abandon the aim of raising additional finance. Alun Evans would be speaking to the Wellcome Trust about funding.
* It was unlikely, given the background of our current members, that we could develop Brexit as a major theme.
* It would be beneficial for individual members to feel free to comment on topical issues without waiting for a discussion in the Executive Committee. Where new ground was to be broken it might be possible to notify members in advance.
* A widening of the membership to much larger numbers of retiring civil servants could have a significant impact. Practical means of achieving that should be considered.

It was agreed that Phillip Ward would advise the group on possible options for a substantial widening of the membership.

**Follow up to the Chilcot report**

Two draft papers had been circulated informally to Executive Committee members: one, by Martin Stanley, focused on the charge that Chilcot had been too lenient in his discussion of the actions of senior civil servants; the other, by Richard Mottram, offered a wider account of the lessons to be learned from the Chilcot report.

In discussion the following main points were made.

* Andrew Turnbull would fiercely resist the criticism of him in the draft papers. It was widely known that Tony Blair would not take advice from civil servants on issues to which he attached personal importance. The theoretical decisions attributed to Turnbull were beyond his power to make.
* The decisions not to have a Cabinet Committee on Iraq and to hold no meetings of the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee in the run up to the war were driven by personalities – notably the wish to exclude Claire Short, then Overseas Development Secretary, from the policy-making process.
* A more blatant example of abuse of process was the prolonged withholding of the Attorney General’s advice from members of the Cabinet.
* Civil servants were under a general duty to respect Ministers’ wishes. We might nevertheless consider whether there might be a formal requirement, analogous to a direction in financial matters, for Ministers to provide an instruction in writing when ordering a departure from established processes of government.
* Ministers’ growing influence over civil servants’ careers made it increasingly difficult to “speak truth unto power”. There was too little evidence in the Chilcot Report that senior civil servants were doing enough in terms of policy advice. They seemed to have followed the Frances Maude model: restricting themselves to executing Ministers’ decisions.
* It might be argued that the deficiencies identified in the report had now been dealt with by the establishment of the National Security Council and National Security Adviser. Even if these measure would have been effective in preventing the errors identified in Chilcot, however, they would not deal with similar mistakes in other fields. Too much depended on the personal power of the Prime Minister to manipulate the process of consideration.
* The description in Chilcot was a clear example of “group think” where, as well as ministers, senior staff in the Home and Foreign Service, the military and the intelligence services had all come to regard seeking favour with the USA as a key objective of government policy. Greater Parliamentary scrutiny of Executive processes might have provided a wider perspective.
* Our final paper should refer to the long-held BGI insistence on principles of good government including firmly evidence-based policy and collective decision-making. Chilcot was an excellent example of what could go wrong if these were ignored. The paper should go beyond simply pointing to deficiencies and offer some thoughts on improvements in process, perhaps through enhanced Parliamentary scrutiny of process and a formal procedure analogous to the request for a direction.
* None of our thoughts on improved procedures would have any effect on the Executive without the support of Parliament. A possible option for putting across our message on Chilcot might be through an open letter to Bernard Jenkin, the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee, which would not be subject to the same constraints on publication as a formal submission of evidence. (The committee is due to take evidence on Chilcot from Jeremy Heywood on 14th September.)

It was agreed that Richard Mottram would revise his draft paper in the light of the discussion.

**Brexit – have we a contribution to make?**

It was agreed that we could not engage as a group in discussion of the merits of Brexit and did not presently have the resources or membership expertise to tackle the Brexit process as a general theme. There might however be individual issues on which we could usefully comment.

It was noted that Tom Legg had been a member of the European Communities Act 1972 Bill team.

**Other business**

Members’ availability will be sought for a meeting on either 4th or 11th October.

7th September 2016