Better Government Initiative (BGI)

Ditchley Conference June 2014

Introduction by the Conference Chairman

The aim of this conference was to look ahead to next May's general election and beyond. What challenges would a new Government of whatever form face? What lessons could be learned from the coalition experience?

The report below sets out some of the points that emerged in the discussion. I might briefly set the scene on some of the underlying issues that struck me and my BGI colleagues.

First, there was a recognition that the world around us was changing quickly whether in terms of technology or how people engaged with each other and with government. Power was being distributed. Whatever the outcome of the Scottish referendum, there would be a profound impact on our constitutional arrangements and muddling through might no longer do (although there was no appetite for a written constitution). Governing at the UK level may be about to get harder.

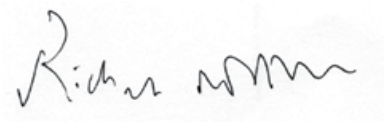
Secondly, while international comparisons suggested we could take pride in the integrity of our system of government, there was an uneasy feeling that in a scorecard based on the incidence of "blunders" we might have a worryingly high score in comparison with other advanced "western" nations. It would be helpful to get a better sense of whether this is the case and, if so, why? Some of the answer might lie in the pace of politically-driven change where a more considered, evidence-based approach might well yield dividends. As you will see from the discussion, there were also awkward questions about how we recruit, develop and move around the system both politicians and civil servants.

Thirdly, there was recognition that government is not a business or a collection of businesses but that it might have something to learn from how the best businesses align and embed objectives across the whole of their organisation and build mutual commitment to success. The separate "tribes" in government, parliament and the judiciary did not interact enough, informally as well as formally, and too much of the debate around accountability was about buck passing and blame. What would a culture of success look like (recognising the asymmetry in the world of politics, as refracted through the media, in interest in success as opposed to failure)? While the "trust" word may be in danger of overuse, there were clearly big trust issues that needed to be tackled.

Lastly, there was a suggestion that much of the discourse of government in the last 30 years had been based around rather crude versions of nostrums about public management linked to equally crude understandings of the discipline of economics.

This era might be drawing to a close. We had, for example, to ensure policymaking and delivery were linked together. Markets were potentially better than monopoly, whether in terms of delivery by public, private or third sector delivery agents, but this required considerable skill in commissioning and market making and regulation.

These and many other issues are touched on below in ways I hope you will find of interest. We will be addressing some of them in the BGI's future work.



Richard Mottram

Chair
Better Government Initiative

4th July 2014

Better Government Initiative

7th Plenary Conference in association with The Constitution Society

Ditchley Park 19th – 20th June 2014

Session 1: Welcome and conference overview.

Sir Richard Mottram welcomed the participants. The principal focus of this seventh Better Government Initiative (BGI) conference would be on topics relevant to the incoming government following the general election on 7 May 2015. In accordance with our normal practice, views expressed in the course of discussion would be unattributed.

Session 2: The Coalition experience.

BGI's "Good Government: Mid Term Review", published in November 2012, looked at the activities of the Coalition Government under four main headings to see how far it had contributed to improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of the processes of government. We concluded that progress had been made in some areas such as more effective Cabinet government but we remained concerned about poor and rushed preparation of policies, the lack of agreed standards for legislation and strategies for dealing with failures of implementation. What did we think of the progress made since then?

The following main points were made in discussion.

- It was important to distinguish between the many changes since 2010 that had come about because of social and economic factors and those which were the result of the Coalition's policies and activities.
- The Coalition had delivered a substantial programme of legislation in line with the coalition agreement, if not in line with either party's manifesto. Whitehall had adapted successfully to the new arrangements. Decisions on policy making had been reached through a process of bargaining, with a recognition of the value of more open policy advice both from within the civil service and from outside.
- Although the recommendations of the BGI and the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee for mandatory standards for legislation backed by a Parliamentary Committee had been rejected there had been improvements. Many more bills were now published in draft, public bill committee proceedings were published and committee chairmen were now independently elected. But there was still a failure to distinguish between bills which needed to be enacted quickly, where there might be little time for independent advice, and those which could be considered at more length and would be long lasting in their effects.
- The strengthening of departmental boards with experienced business people as non-executive directors had been a success and was now welcomed by Permanent Secretaries.
- Relations with the civil service were still uneasy and there was concern about some of the reform proposals, but the drastic cut in numbers had been successfully carried out. There was now a wide recognition that in various areas the civil service lacked necessary skills. The pay freeze was creating resentment, and perhaps inhibiting good people from joining or encouraging them to leave.
- There was still a need for greater understanding of how speed in reaction and delivery could be crucial, and for greater willingness to look at alternative methods of reaching policy objectives.
- The relationship between departmental Ministers and No.10 was not clear. On a number of occasions, the centre had derailed departmental policies in ways potentially damaging for departmental Ministers. While intervention by the Prime Minister was legitimate in view of his responsibility for the

government's overall strategy, the basis for interventions was sometimes unclear and the government appeared to lack strategic coherence.

- There had always been negotiations about policies and priorities, even with single party government. A key difference in a coalition was that either party could veto a proposal. Moreover, while individual Ministers had in the past, after discussion and by agreement, voted against the government on single fundamental issues (concerning the EU for example), individual Ministers now seemed inclined to reject policies on more arbitrary grounds. This undermined cabinet collective responsibility.

- Mr. Maude's vision for the civil service seemed in some respects to be contradictory. In some ways he was a traditionalist: he said that he respected the impartiality of civil servants and understood that the role of civil servants was to give objective advice and that of Ministers to take decisions and answer to Parliament for them. But seeking greater Ministerial involvement in appointing Permanent Secretaries and wanting senior civil servants to be accountable directly to Parliament cut across those principles. His criticism of deficiencies in civil service skills was, however, justified.

- Leadership was a crucial factor in inspiring the whole team in government - Ministers and officials - with a sense of common purpose. It should operate at all levels, recognising the constraints that applied: the Prime Minister must work with the "quad"; departmental Ministers need to work with each other. Permanent Secretaries would be to some extent hampered by a culture that made it difficult for them to promote the vision or purpose of policies without being accused of not being impartial. Personal qualities were obviously necessary for leadership, but success came from understanding that, while the impetus might start from the top, it was up to the individual to drive it down through whatever levels of responsibility he or she had.

- There were particular problems for the civil service because central management is now split between the Cabinet Secretary, the Head of the Civil Service (who also heads a department) and a Permanent Secretary in the Cabinet Office. Who was accountable for giving a sense of common purpose and understanding of long term objectives to the service?

- The principles behind the Contestable Policy Fund and the What Works Centres were valuable, but their effects in providing alternative policies would be limited unless they fitted in with political priorities. Developing alternative policies to those endorsed by Ministers would be difficult. The delicate balance between seeking and providing independent advice and ensuring a commitment to the achievement of political aims had not been sufficiently addressed.

- The reduction in the churn of Ministers since 2010 was welcome, but the large churn in Permanent Secretary posts was of concern; indeed the whole problem of senior civil servants' changing posts in search of promotion, or moving to other public bodies or the private sector, was worrying. Businessmen frequently complained that officials did not know their jobs because they had only recently been posted.

- The coalition agreement had been signed by the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister and circulated to, and approved by, Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs. It could therefore be argued that there was a commitment to the agreement. But those who had been directly involved were a small number. It was impossible to generate a strong sense of commitment and purpose unless consultation and discussion took place on a much wider basis.

- The proposal for Extended Ministerial Offices needed careful handling. We should not seek to emulate the continental ministerial *cabinet*. But there could be advantages in providing a wider range of advice and experience to Ministers.

- While the relationship between Parliament and the Executive had in some ways improved, the quality of legislation had not. Pre-legislative scrutiny did not sufficiently consider what problem the bill was supposed to solve. Post-legislative scrutiny needed to be able to test results against objectives.

- It was a mistake to think of government as a huge business; it has too many conflicting objectives, too many interests, and all its activities must be justified democratically.

Session 3: Accountability in new models of delivery. *The answer to the question "who is to blame?" when delivery of outsourced government projects goes wrong tends to be long and complicated. It is not easy to prise apart the strands of responsibility of ministers, officials, consultants and contractors, all of whom have key parts to play. The accountability to Parliament of Ministers and officials for delivering major projects has been a particular bone of contention. Can we see a way forward in dealing with these issues?*

The following main points were made in discussion.

- The "new" models of delivery had in fact been in use for some 20 years but had still not been internalised by the policy community. Whitehall had not thought through what made an effective commissioner and how that role differed from other roles such as service planning and change leadership.

- There was a clear continuing trend towards commissioning of services as opposed to direct service provision by departments or agencies. A main reason for this was that the provider could be given greater incentives to perform, although those brought with them the risk of gaming the system or cheating

- Problems which occurred did not generally come from the complexity of the commissioning process but arose further upstream in policy formulation. Those who commissioned the contracts should be involved in advising ministers so that they were clear about what it was intended to achieve and could help to reduce failures from poor upstream decision making.

- Commissioning was a neglected essential skill that went beyond procurement. Failure of commissioned services took many forms but accountability was clearer so long as there was effective internal and external scrutiny.

- Government programmes tended to fail – or fail at first - no more than in the private sector. The private sector, which did not have the same public scrutiny, found it easier to conceal failed projects. The National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee needed to develop a more mature response to failure in the public sector: the object should be to learn from failure in order to improve government.

- It was naïve to contemplate bringing failed activities under the direct control of ministers as an appropriate remedy for problems with outsourced services. Bringing troubled services like the Passport Agency in house was unlikely to be a cure-all.

- The private sector would have to get used to more public scrutiny of the way they delivered public services. They were beginning to respond more readily to Freedom of Information requests and not hide behind commercial confidentiality. (Moves towards full "open book" accounting were, however, likely to be resisted.) This added scrutiny, while inevitable, would make doing business with government much less attractive to many private companies.

- It was a matter for concern that after many years of increasing use of outsourcing there had been no attempt by the civil service to gather evidence about the pros and cons of different delivery approaches and the circumstances in which they were most appropriate. There was inconsistency even in the delivery of similar services such as pension schemes.

- The approach to contracting and accountability should focus on relationships and developing a shared sense of purpose. Effective contracting should proceed on the basis of trust and not by reference to detailed contract terms.

- Where there were many units involved, as with academy schools, a proportion were bound to have problems. That did not necessarily indicate a failure of the overall approach. Failure should be used more positively to encourage learning and innovation.

- The public needed to be more engaged in the choices about local service provision. Too often they looked for action at the national rather than the local level. Stronger local institutions could improve public understanding of decisions and failures. Policies such as the side-lining of local education

authorities had broken the connection between schools and the wider community (instead focusing on a smaller group of parents of current pupils).

- For the commissioning model to work effectively there needed to be a rich and diverse pool of potential partners to develop productive relationships and promote innovation. Centralisation would not help this. The systematic removal of responsibilities from local authorities had not been helpful in this context.

- Some people doubted the basic economic rationale for outsourcing services: that competition guaranteed improved performance and lower costs. Experience suggested that it could also kill openness and honesty.

- Accountability worked best when people knew what they were accountable for and those who held them to account were seen to be interested in being fair. This reduced the risk of gaming and encouraged learning.

Session 4: Parliament and the unwritten constitution. *Parliamentary sovereignty has its limitations when faced with the power of the Executive. The consensus that underpins our unwritten constitution is also under strain in other areas, with pressures to politicise the civil service and tensions between Ministers and the judiciary. The Scottish referendum, whatever its outcome, will raise profound new questions about the relationship between the component parts of the United Kingdom. Is the time approaching when we need a written constitution?*

The following main points were made in discussion.

- The view that the limitations in Parliamentary sovereignty should lead us to consider a written constitution was based on a confusion between power and sovereignty. Supreme legal authority, and therefore sovereignty, rested with (The Queen in) Parliament. A written constitution would not strengthen Parliament. It would weaken Parliament by transferring power to a document that would then be subject to various interpretations.

- Parliamentary sovereignty did deliver accountability; the accountability of Secretaries of State for their departments was real and the decay of deference had increased pressure when there were problems. The alternative approach of blaming individuals did not help; there would be no incentive to tackle intractable problems if failure just attracted blame.

- Accountability to Parliament would be more effective with positive political leadership influencing wider society. Effective political leadership based on agreeing and sharing objectives, supporting implementation and learning from mistakes (rather than blaming and punishing) would encourage improvement and accountability and create legitimate respect for disagreement.

- The effectiveness of the unwritten constitution depended on the players in the constitution recognising mutually how it worked. The way to improve the working of the constitution was to ensure that there was effective dialogue between Parliament, the executive and the judiciary. A written constitution would transfer power from the politicians to the constitutional document as interpreted by the judges.

- The ability of the executive to change the nature of the constitution through its control of Parliament was not absolute. The government did get defeated in Parliament, especially in the House of Lords where it had not had a majority for some time. Select Committees had been stronger under elected chairmen. Overall, Parliament had become more effective.

- Debate about the relationship between the judiciary and politicians reflected a number of factors:

· In the past there had been a closer relationship and sense of understanding between the judiciary and Parliament. Over one hundred judges had been in Parliament between 1870 and 1970; there was now only one MP who has been a High Court judge and the percentage of MPs who were lawyers had fallen from about a quarter in the 1930s to around a tenth. There was less mutual understanding and consequently a need to reconnect law and politics.

· There was however more dialogue than supposed. There had been over 250 instances of judges giving evidence to Select Committees in the last twenty years, a level of contact much greater than in most similar parliaments.
· The scope for interpretation of the Human Rights Act had given more power to judges and to a judicial philosophy which was based neither on Parliamentary approval nor on elections.
· There was disagreement about the extent to which judges were obliged to be consistent with the decisions of the European Court in Strasbourg and the ability of Parliament to legislate to overrule such decisions.
· There was also disagreement about whether there should be any involvement of Parliament in the appointment process for senior judges (on the US model).

- When the "tribes" who operate across government and politics – professional politicians, the media, the civil service and judges - met there was often a lot of goodwill but in practice their ways of thinking were very different. Better dialogue between them was necessary for our informal constitution to work well.

- The nature of our constitution would be affected by a series of momentous changes over the next few years. Even if the Scottish referendum did not lead to separation further devolution to Scotland would nevertheless follow. There was then the likelihood of further devolution to Wales, Northern Ireland and to some cities in England. Reform of the House of Lords was incomplete. A referendum on UK membership of the EU had been promised. This set of changes could be dealt with in a piecemeal way as in the past or considered in the context of the whole constitution. Legislation passed by the executive then in power could overturn the established consensus and profoundly alter the constitution.

- There had been a move to write down more "rules" that underpin how government works, for example the Cabinet Office manual and the Civil Service Code. The status of such codes was uncertain; they could be seen as components of a written constitution or just as necessary reference manuals.

- While some elements of the informal constitution had been written down it had not been codified. An attempt to see what a written constitution might involve had extended to many pages.

- Our constitution, whether written or unwritten, was set within a political culture in which it was thought that elected politicians would sort out problems at a national level. We should be moving away from that towards dispersed authority and dispersed power so that different communities could reach different appropriate conclusions about the same issue.

- We needed to find ways to raise the consciousness of the value of our constitutional institutions so that they were better understood and respected. What should be our equivalent to children in the US learning to revere the values of the American constitution?

Session 5: The shape of government to come. *Over the last half-century the processes of government have been transformed. The post-war concentration on a "command economy" approach to the provision of public services has been whittled away through denationalising, outsourcing and the creation of autonomous bodies. Meanwhile, technological advances have made it possible to do more, and know more, with previously unimaginable speed, precision and economy. Where will the next half-century take us?*

The following main points were made in discussion.

- Among the trends and pressures that will shape future government some familiar tasks and challenges were unlikely to go away: funding the rising costs of health and social care, raising sufficient tax from an eroding base, and allocating limited spending within a tightly constrained fiscal programme. But in some respects the conditions of 'supply' and pressures of 'demand' of government were shifting. On the supply side, technology offered governments new tools. On the demand side, we were seeing more public pressure for care of the elderly, for example, and less for military intervention and overseas aid.

- While in the West this was a period of retrenchment, in other areas such as India and China it was an era of confidence and growth. Access to knowledge and data would be important drivers.

- Determinants of the shape of government were likely to include the following.

· We are in a phase of increased emphasis on distributed power and modesty about what national governments can achieve. The best governments will be skilful at mobilisation and management of energy and resources in society more widely.
· Radical transparency through open data opens new possibilities, for example for distributed regulation.
· Governments are increasingly using trials to test new policy ideas, with a strong emphasis on data and evaluation. This offered a new approach to policy development which starts with practice and then iterates into policy.
· The UK is in the lead on more rigorous use of evidence through the six 'What Works' centres. This was potentially a major culture shift which could change the role of politicians.
· Any government is currently likely to be facing a deficit of trust and confidence and a lack of engagement. Some, such as the Finnish and Estonian governments, are creating online platforms for public involvement in creating new legislation.
· Social media offer the possibility of new relationships between Governments and citizens. Monitoring trends on social media for example could provide a more immediate idea of concerns and mood than conventional polling and consultation.
· We are seeing a shift away from optimisation towards resilience in a number of fields such as financial regulation. Systems thinking was one of the key gaps in civil service skills.
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- It was arguable how far governments should seek to inspire citizens with bold visions, and how far they should tune in more to what citizens were feeling and understand better why they were disengaged. Some argued the need to have a clear sense of direction, not simply abdicate responsibility to the latest opinion poll. Others pointed to the steady decline of the traditional political parties and of deference towards political leaders.

- It was noted that data, wealth, and therefore power may be accumulating in dangerous pockets. Several participants commented on the declining influence of economics. It was debatable whether the best metaphors for society might be drawn from engineering or ecology.

- Other countries were taking long term investment in science much more seriously than the UK.

Session 6: Preparing for Government. *BGI's 2010 report "Reforming Parliament and the Executive" and the more recent "Mid Term Review" both emphasised the importance of thorough preparation of Ministers taking up new roles. Will the Opposition have fair and sufficient access to civil service advice in advance of the May 2015 general election? Are there lessons to be learned from the devolved administrations?*

The following main points were made in discussion.

- The main themes currently under consideration in this area were the need for improved contact between politicians and civil servants, in particular pre-election contact between officials and Opposition politicians, and ministerial induction and development.

- The four main 'tribes' involved in government (politicians, lawyers, the media and civil servants) each had different modes of thinking and too often did not understand each other. Extended and regular contact between them – and in particular between politicians and officials – was therefore to be encouraged, irrespective of the electoral cycle.

- It was currently well accepted that there should be significant contact before a general election between likely future Cabinet members and their likely Permanent Secretaries and Directors-General. But there was some debate about the optimal extent and timing, and perhaps nature, of such interaction. There was broad agreement that such conversations should focus on the exchange of information, and that civil servants should not offer political advice on policy development. Civil servants found the conversations to be very helpful in preparing to assist new Ministers after the election.

- Informal contact between politicians and officials was more frequent in other countries, for example France, but was also common in Scotland where civil servants were well used to mixing with politicians, for instance in the restaurants of the Scottish Parliament building. Pre-election discussions would be more effective if there had been previous regular contact along these lines.

- Changes of government were welcome to the vast majority of civil servants. It was professionally challenging and rewarding to help new Ministers to introduce new policies. The caricature of an official machine determined to thwart new Ministers' policies and maintain the *status quo* could hardly be further from the truth. However, although elections came along regularly, changes of government were rare events, having taken place over the last 40 year in only 1979, 1997 and 2010.

- The maintenance of strict impartiality on the part of the civil service helped build trust in advance of a change of government. Politicians should welcome civil servants' drawing attention to the difficulties associated with the practical application of their policies and not see this as 'obstruction'. Civil servants found it helpful when politicians made it clear whether they wanted to be presented with novel ideas after coming into office, or simply wanted officials to comment and advise on the ideas in their manifesto.

- There was no agreement as to the length of the pre-election period during which contact was to be encouraged. On the one hand, an extension to 18 months would allow deeper and less hurried engagement, and would help the Opposition to prepare more effectively, well before even an extended election campaign got under way. It would also help both sides to think more deeply about likely first session legislation. Against this, however, it was argued that the extra months would in practice add little to the opportunities that are currently available, might make it difficult to maintain the distinction between information exchange and giving policy advice, and could corrode the sitting government's faith in the impartiality of its officials.

- The conversations should not be restricted to one-to-ones with particular Shadow Secretaries of State, as they can and do find themselves in departments that they have not shadowed. The conversations could also with advantage be extended to departments' Directors who would in practice lead many if not all of the initiatives of the incoming administration.

- A small number of countries had established 'Departments of the Opposition' staffed by civil servants. Such an innovation would raise obvious issues within our present arrangements (which envisage that pre-election advice and fresh thinking should be sought from think tanks etc. with the assistance of 'Short Money') but should not be too readily dismissed.

- There was unanimous agreement that the performance of Governments could be improved if all Ministers were to take part in a significant induction process and subsequent development activity. These programmes were compulsory in all specialist professions and large organisations, and there was no good reason why they should not be undertaken by Ministers, few if any of whom have previously held senior positions in large organisations. Indeed, the need for such programmes was arguably more important in a political environment where Prime Ministers could appoint Ministers from only a very limited number of potential candidates.

- The obstacles in the way of the creation of effective development programmes for Ministers currently seemed to be as high as ever. Such programmes were not seen as a priority by the parties' leaderships, perhaps especially now that all three main parties had recent Ministerial experience. Leaders should signal strongly that participation in such programmes is important, but they seldom did so, and never showed leadership by participating themselves.

- The answer might be to persuade party leaders that development opportunities should be open to all aspiring politicians early in their careers. Access to such a programme might be seen as a necessary stepping-stone to a future successful career in politics, and so to be sought rather than avoided. Teaching could be provided by a wide range of individuals (not just civil servants). Such programmes could in principle be made available to a wide range of younger adults, so providing an alternative career path into politics to the arguably too narrow route involving PPE and a spell as a Special Adviser.

- The word 'training' was inappropriate in this context, giving the impression that Ministers were to be instructed in how to carry out their work. 'Induction' and 'development' would be more appropriate terms.

Session 7: Blunder-free Government. *"The Blunders of our Governments" by Anthony King and Ivor Crewe and "Conundrum" by Richard Bacon and Christopher Hope examined a number of notorious policy failures. BGI recommendations for avoiding such failures focus on process, but the King/Crewe analysis shows that failures of political judgement were also a major factor. What options are there for reducing the risks?*

The following main points were made in discussion.

- One of the most successful Prime Ministers of the last hundred years had been Margaret Thatcher who had achieved most of her objectives in office, especially on trade union reform and privatisation. She had done this by setting out her aims in very general terms in the 1979 manifesto and then proceeding step by step with implementation over a considerable period of time. Since then successive governments had introduced new policies far too rapidly.

- There would always be 'blunders' but they could be minimised by:

· Looking at the feasibility of projects before they were introduced rather than focusing on what went wrong at a later stage. For example this could be done through an 'Advance Assessment Authority'.

· Strengthening the role of parliamentarians as lawmakers. For example this could be done by merging Public Bill Committees and Select Committees, with the merged Committees proposing what kind of Bill they would like to see and then monitoring what the Government proposed.

· Reducing the churn of officials. Civil servants did not stay in their jobs long enough to build up expertise. This had been aggravated by leaving it to officials to manage their own careers rather than being managed within a structured range of relevant posts. Current turnover rates were absurd.

· Recruiting more Ministers with relevant experience from outside Parliament to complement the majority of Ministers and special advisers who were increasingly career politicians with little experience outside politics. The UK was unusual in the tradition of drawing Ministers only from parliamentarians.

- There was general agreement that governments now tried to do too much too quickly. Too many Ministers spent too short periods in particular posts. This gave them an incentive act hastily to make an immediate impact. A quieter, considered approach would be a step forward, with possibly a requirement to build consensus on big issues like the national curriculum and NHS administration. Citizens expected governments to improve things and have a sense of purpose but to take time to put workable arrangements in place. Policies should not run ahead of practicality; they should be tested against the realities of implementing them.

- It was desirable to have more scrutiny of the feasibility of proposals, both policy and process, before proceeding with legislation. In Germany what was in effect detailed Committee stage scrutiny of legislation preceded the Second Reading stage and there were opportunities to 'war game' new policies. But there was a risk that an excessively deliberative process might prevent action that involved risk but was urgent, e.g. on energy policy. Any organisation set up outside Parliament to undertake the task would be subject to judicial review.

- It would be damaging to merge Select Committees and Public Bill Committees. This would bring the Whips in to Select Committee business and make more difficult the very valuable contribution Select Committees achieved through members of all parties working together.

- There were divided views on the value of a change in the roles of the executive and the legislature in initiating legislation and doubts as to whether MPs would be more effective than Ministers. What was more important was to have less legislation and at a slower pace.

- There was strong agreement that it would be desirable to reduce the turnover of officials. It had been argued that officials now had the intellectual confidence to say 'no' but not the knowledge and experience to say 'yes'.

- Recruiting Ministers from outside Parliament with particular experience in relevant areas seemed much more common in other countries such as France and appeared to work well. A study of the performance of such Ministers in the UK had shown some successes but also some failures, mainly

because they ‘couldn’t do the politics’. Was it necessary for them to have to sit in Parliament? The whole area of bringing in expertise through the appointment of both Ministers and officials from outside needed further exploration.

- On the issue of the West Lothian question, which would again arise if there were a ‘devo max’ outcome following the Scottish referendum, one answer would be to follow the precedent of Northern Ireland after the First World War and radically reduce the number of Scottish MPs at Westminster. However, many key issues like the currency, defence and foreign policy would still need to be considered on a UK basis. It would be better if the answer came from English political arrangements on devolved issues.

- There often seemed to be an assumption that we did things better than other countries. But when questioned, people from other countries had had difficulty in identifying ‘blunders’ of the kind described in Professor King’s book.

- The present Government might be best remembered for the success of the 2012 Olympics and the introduction of same sex marriages, both of which were unusual in having been achieved by a consensus between parties.

Session 8: The conference’s outcome.

Sir Richard Mottram said that despite initial scepticism about the viability of coalition in a UK context the government had survived for a full term and introduced some important policy and process initiatives. Large reductions in the numbers and cost of civil servants had been successfully achieved, though their impact had yet to be fully assessed. There was some disquiet about current proposals for civil service reform, but there were also questions over how far civil service top management had provided effective and consistent leadership over the last 10–15 years.

The growing reliance on contractors for service delivery offered potential benefits of clearer accountability and incentives for better performance in comparison with monopoly in-house provision. But it brought with it too risks of gaming and cheating with consequent calls for the accountability of contractors to be aligned with the level of detailed, blame-driven scrutiny expected of public bodies. It was questionable how far they would be willing to work in such an environment. The unexplained differences in the models chosen for delivery by different departments had given cause for comment on the lack of civil service skills in organisational and process design. In view of concern about democratic deficit, there had perhaps been too little discussion of the progressive exclusion of local government from service delivery.

Discussion on Parliament and the constitution had been particularly concerned with the lack of adequate communication including private dialogue between the ‘tribes’ of government, parliament, and the judiciary, particularly at the level of the UK. The UK’s normal piecemeal approach to constitutional matters might not be an adequate basis for tackling the potentially momentous issues raised by the referendum on Scottish independence, its implications (whatever the outcome) for the relationship between the UK administrations and the promised referendum on UK membership of the EU.

In considering the future shape of government, the challenges seemed more predictable than the methods of tackling them though there were some indications of how things might develop, driven partly by technological advances and partly by changing social attitudes, towards a less top-down approach.

On preparation for government, the main emphasis had been placed on the need for induction and development arrangements for ministers. Indeed it had been suggested, half seriously, that as politics became increasingly professionalised from a narrow range of feeder higher education institutions, it could include a requirement to achieve recognised qualifications before appointment as a Minister!

A range of suggestions had been put forward for avoiding blunders – mainly involving a less hasty and more considered approach to the introduction of new policies. A particular concern was that the

narrowing of the background of those entering politics coupled with the background and experience of most senior civil servants meant that policies were increasingly designed by those with little experience of the complicated and sometimes messy lives of the population as a whole.

The discussion had been rich and diverse reflecting the mix of roles of the participants, although it was a pity that in the end all the prospective Labour attendees had dropped out. This might have affected the general tenor of the debate which had tended to favour less rather than more government delivered at a more deliberative pace. It was noteworthy how much of the discussion had focused on the nature of government rather than on specific procedural issues and on the need to look at systems as a whole including cultural issues if successful change was to be achieved.

BGI July 2014

Those participating in the Conference were:

Sir Alan Beith MP
Andrew Blick
Sue Cameron
Sir Geoffrey Chipperfield*
Roger Dawe*
Stephen Dorrell MP
Alan Downey
Lord Finkelstein
Sir Christopher Foster*
Richard Gordon QC
Prof Robert Hazell
Philippa Helme
Nick Herbert MP
David Howarth
Bernard Jenkin MP
Prof. Anthony King
Sir Thomas Legg*
Nat Le Roux
Peter Makeham*
John Mc Dermott
Sir Richard Mottram*
Geoff Mulgan
Sir David Normington
Peter Owen*
Peter Riddell
Aaron Ritchie*
Philip Rycroft
Adam Sharples*
Martin Stanley*
Lord Tyler
Phillip Ward*

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