

# Better Together

A growing number of professional and voice of the sector bodies have expressed interest in an all-sector Better Governance Commission

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What qualities lie at the heart of great governance? That is the question that has exercised us over the past 12 months or so, as we have sought to build the case for an all-sector Better Governance Commission. To some readers of this journal such a question will have been a longer-standing concern; to others, whom we commend, it may have tipped into a career-long obsession.

But we suspect that many of you will want to ask questions of our question: Which sector? Which

setting? What regulatory framework or jurisdiction? What market place? Which client base? Of course these matters of context are as vital to this question as they are to any other, but ironically they can throw us off – rather than onto – the scent. The danger is that we drill down into whichever part of the governance landscape that we inhabit and, before long, we are answering a different question. In short, we find ourselves explaining why governance takes a particular form in our setting, with the implication that the demands we are dealing with are so specific that we have little to learn from our colleagues in other domains – in corporations, or charities, or community groups, or

the co-operative movement, or in various parts of the public sector.

This is to reply, almost exactly a discussion that one of us had a couple of years ago when researching a report on school governance published by the RSA in 2017 and launched in Parliament by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on School Governance in September of that year. 'I'm sure there's nothing that those of us in the business world can learn from your school governors', explained a leading figure in the sphere of corporate governance, before conceding an hour or so later that a grounding gained on school governing bodies might, after all, 'provide an interesting training ground for our Non-executive Directors.'

The seeds of a recommendation (Recommendation 29) were planted with the report, *Who Governs Our Schools? Trends, Tensions and Opportunities*, calling for agencies across the governance landscape... to work together to establish a cross-sector working group or Commission on Governance.'

**From recommendation to campaign**

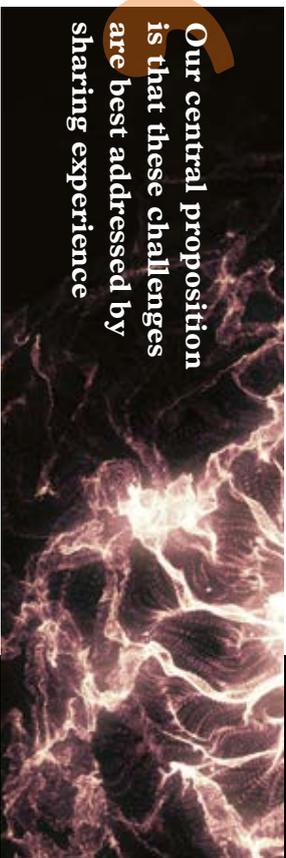
The first to pick up the gauntlet was Ann Reeder at Frontline Consulting. Ann – who has led efforts to establish the Non-Executive Academy, an association for non-executives based in organisations committed to the delivery of public services – offered to support efforts to make this kind of cross-sector working a reality by hosting a roundtable at Parliament in March 2018 and the #829 campaign, as we decided to coin it, edged tentatively onto the horizon.

Since then, a range of partners and their sponsors have stepped forward to host similar discussions. Attendees have been drawn from either from a specific sector or sub-sector or from, as was the case with our most recent roundtable convened by the IC-SA, a cross sector group of expert professionals. Each roundtable, whatever its precise composition, has explored a set of four broadly common questions:

- A** To what extent can those involved in governance in different sectors and settings learn from each other?
- B** What benefits might accrue from such learning and how might we facilitate this sharing of insight and experience?
- C** Can we identify a set of key principles that should inform governance, scrutiny and accountability, whatever the sector, organisational type and focus of activity and, if so, how might we go about this task?
- D** Is there the potential for greater transferability of board skills across sectors?

**Themes from our roundtables**

In truth, our discussions have been wider ranging, not least because each roundtable has drawn individuals not only with a sectoral interest but also from a wide range of backgrounds and, in some cases, governance responsibilities in various settings – as company directors, as the trustees of charities, as school governors, or as members of NHS Trusts. Thus,



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a robust range of key themes and challenges are emerging. Here we have elected to highlight six:

- 1** Each sector is marked by particular barriers to entry, and therefore faces specific challenges in terms of widening participation, and extending and evidencing diversity, and that each sector might improve its practice by exposure to the practice of those in other settings
- 2** In some settings, well-intended attempts to 'professionalize' governance can serve to weaken the 'connectedness' between governance boards and those they serve, intentionally strengthening governance in one respect while unintentionally weakening it in another
- 3** The interplay between those involved in governance roles and those who hold executive responsibilities is a much more nuanced relationship than represented in the literature and in induction and development programmes for non-executive directors, trustees, school governors etc. who hold governance responsibility as well as those who report to governance boards (Chief Executives, etc.)
- 4** Within our organizations and across our stakeholder communities, governance-literacy beyond the Boardroom is often low, with the purpose and efforts of those who serve as directors or trustees or governors routinely misunderstood, sometimes the subject of caricature and often unacknowledged
- 5** At a time when many citizens feel disconnected from, and mistrustful of, the political sphere, a similar dis-connectedness from, and mistrust of, those involved in governance would represent a 'double-whammy' not just for the effectiveness of our organizations, but for the health of our democracy and our society – in the corporate world, this trust deficit has the potential to impact negatively on the bottom line while obscuring positive interventions, for instance in the sphere of corporate responsibility while in amongst charities it can have a profound impact on the generosity of both donors and grant makers
- 6** Governance within each sector and sub-sector is marked by particular qualities, requirements, and expertise – the resultant diversity of practice across the sectors opens up learning opportunities and the prospect of newly shared insights inside and outside our boardrooms, whatever their setting.

**A Better Governance Commission**

Our central proposition is that these challenges are best addressed by sharing experience and expertise across the sector, a process that itself promises to enhance governance literacy and build, or rebuild, trust in governance. Our roundtables, delivered by volunteers and hosted without charge, have begun to identify some of the big issues, but we now require a much more rigorous investigation into the kind of issues that we have identified above, an investigation that a properly resourced and formally established Better Governance Commission, to be launched later this year and reporting 12 months later, could address. Drawing on the seven roundtables held so far, we think that such a Commission might achieve at least three objectives:

- Increased and genuine cross-sector learning – such that we can answer the core question that this article opened with and nail down the fundamentals of great (or at least good) governance, whatever the sector or setting
- Better governance literacy beyond our boardrooms – in our businesses and workplaces and across the customers, communities and constituencies that we serve
- Increased and deeper diversity within our boardrooms – such that a greater understanding of governance across sectors

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and beyond boardrooms increases board effectiveness, widens participation, strengthens accountability and guards against group-think, outcomes that are achieved, in particular, through an increase in the cross-sector mobility of talent and experience

Our efforts are now focused on securing the funding, organizational, media and political support to establish such a Commission and on identifying and recruiting Commissioners. It is fair to say that we have been encouraged by the initial response. As well as the Non-Executive Academy, Frontline Consulting and the IC-SA, we have been privileged to also have support from the Institute of Directors, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, the schools-focused National Governance Association, Trustees Unlimited and the multi-disciplinary management consultancy Campbell Reckell.

In addition, we are discussing various research, dissemination and event partnerships with Cass Business School, the Open University and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Corporate

Governance. Through these and other discussions further doors have been, or are being, opened, not least to journals such as this – this is the third in a series of distinctly focused articles that we have published – but also to senior officials, leading practitioners and policy influencers.

**No time to waste**

As we have argued elsewhere, (Breslin and Rezek, *Governance*, September 2018, Breslin and Rezek, *Governance and Leadership*, January 2019), how we exercise governance in our corporations, our hospitals and schools, and our charities is too important to be left to chance. Any sector specific review is likely to deny itself the opportunity to learn from elsewhere, and to develop governance literacy beyond the boundaries of its own backyard, even if casting an eye across the recent range of governance codes and frameworks emerging in different sectors and subsectors reveals more that is shared than is different.

We believe there is benefit in pulling this learning together in a process that both acknowledges the distinctive and identifies the common. And, we have no time to waste. Sadly, the case we make for an all-sector Commission has been stimulated and continually reinvigorated by a recurring news agenda that has highlighted very public (albeit very

different) examples of organisational collapse or wrongdoing. From Kids Company to Carillion, from BHS to RBS, from Oxfam to Grenfell, from Volkswagen to Patisserie Valerie, and cursing through a range of safeguarding and abuse, industrial-scale tax evasion and executive pay scandals, one theme has appeared pervasive: an at least apparent failure of governance.

Meantime, multiple examples of high quality, professional and committed governance, as celebrated in these pages and in a range of largely sector-specific journals, remain unacknowledged beyond their particular communities, with the lessons from these successes remaining locked within sector-specific and sub-sector specific settings.

It's time to get out of our personal and professional governance ghettos, time to make governance 'open door' rather than 'secret garden', time to develop governance literacy beyond our boardrooms, and time to understand just how intrinsic great governance is – across all sectors – to our individual, collective and corporate wellbeing. **n**



**TRANSFORM GOVERNANCE**

Dr. Tony Breslin and Cosette Rezek have established TransformGovernance, which in its work includes a focus on cross-sector governance issues.