Too much too quickly

A RECENT report from the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee on the Government’s review of its arm’s length bodies is of interest, not least because the review has had a significant impact on a number of organisations involved in safeguarding animal and public health.

An early consequence of the review (otherwise known as ‘the bonfire of the quangos’) was the announcement at the end of June, just a few weeks after the Coalition Government was formed, that the Veterinary Laboratories Agency and the agency Animal Health are to be merged to form a single new agency. The announcement came as a surprise, because it was not accompanied by any of the consultation that has come to characterise government decision making in recent years. Although not quite following the timetable originally planned, things have since moved on apace.

The Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC), which has done much over the years to challenge the way people think about animal welfare, has been another casualty of the review. In October, it was announced that the FAWC would be discontinued as a non-departmental public body and reconstituted as a committee of experts (VR, October 23, 2010, vol 167, p 632), despite previous indications that it might survive in its present form.

Overall, across government, a total of 901 arm’s length public bodies, of all shapes and sizes, were considered in the review, with more than 90 being considered by Defra alone. Of these, 192 are to be abolished, 118 merged, 380 retained, and 171 retained and reformed, while another 40 remain under review.

In its report ‘Smaller Government: Shrinking the Quango State’,* the Public Administration Select Committee does not question the need to rationalise arm’s length bodies and the way they relate to central government – but it is scathing about the way the review has been conducted. The review, it says, ‘was poorly managed. There was no meaningful consultation, the tests the review used were not clearly defined and the Cabinet Office failed to establish a proper procedure for [government] departments to follow.’

The lack of clear guidance, the select committee says, led to inconsistencies in the outcome, with uncertainty about the purpose of the review – whether to save money or increase ministerial accountability – adding to the confusion. The reforms, it suggests, will not result in cost savings or more accountability. It expresses concerns about the legislation that has been drafted to enable the Government to implement the changes, and questions the wisdom of making so many changes to the machinery of government so quickly on such a grand scale.

According to Bernard Jenkin, the Conservative MP who chairs the committee, ‘The whole process was rushed and poorly handled and should have been thought through a lot more. This was a fantastic opportunity to help build the Big Society and save money at the same time, but it has been botched.’

There is always a danger in changing too much too quickly, as Veterinary Record pointed out while the review was happening. Not least among these are the resultant disruption of possibly essential day-to-day activities and the effects on the people involved (VR, July 17, 2010, vol 167, p 72).

Francis Maude, the Cabinet minister responsible for the review, has been quick to rebut the select committee’s criticisms, but it is likely to be some time yet before the Government responds formally. In the meantime, the Government would do well to pay heed to another of the committee’s observations, namely that, although the review itself is more or less complete, the much larger challenge of successfully implementing the reforms has still to be faced. As the committee points out, ‘Any organisation would struggle with changes on this scale. The Cabinet Office needs to prepare and issue clear guidance on how to manage this transition.’

* Available at www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpubadm/537/53702.htm

doi: 10.1136/vr.d222