



## Innovatus dinner – 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2013

For the second Innovatus event, and once again over a very pleasant supper at the Institute of Directors in Pall Mall, we were lucky enough to have Dame Helen Ghosh, Director General of the National Trust.

Dame Helen spoke about a project very close to home – her own career and what she'd learned about herself – as well as the challenges of leadership in the public and not-for-profit sectors.



### **Serendipity**

Making it clear that there had been no masterplan, she characterised her career as a serendipitous progress, following themes and challenges that interested her. From studying history at Oxford (a grounding that's proving very useful for challenging assumptions at the National Trust), she took the Civil Service entrance exams as an established, high value path, particularly for someone from a background with a strong public service ethos.

Through the first ten or twelve years of a traditional civil service career (during which time she found Michael Heseltine to be an exemplary leader) Dame Helen worked increasingly in areas that had a significant effect on real people and places: regeneration and social exclusion.

### **Turning point**

A new appointment in 1997 was a turning point, leaving the Cabinet Office (and life as a 'policy wonk') to work in the Government Office for London in a role with tangible impact. With decision-making power about where money should be spent to make the greatest difference to people in one of the poorest parts of the UK, Dame Helen had to get out and about and really engage. She developed a litmus test for policy development: what would this sound like to a single mum living in a tower block in Newham?

In subsequent roles she led major change and delivery programmes in regeneration, benefits and HMRC, and in a further 'right place, right time' role as Permanent Secretary at Defra, in the areas of climate change, the environment and sustainable food supply.





### **Flexibility and work-home balance**

In an interesting aside, Dame Helen mentioned that in earlier times, regardless of potential or experience, no-one under 34 could be promoted to senior civil service level. Despite this (now ex) regulation, she sees the civil service as a very flexible and female-friendly employer, primarily because roles are openly advertised.

In her early-mid thirties, she had two children and worked (at least theoretically) part-time for some years thereafter. However, as flexible as her employers have been, she made it clear that she thinks that there's always a degree of real sacrifice on the way to a very senior position – and telling young women anything else does them a disservice.

Dame Helen made the point that her own career successes had been enabled by a partner who never questioned her priorities, by having great childcare and healthy (and happy) children.

She advises taking a clear look at yourself, and where you are in your life at the moment, in order to decide whether your current priorities and commitments are aligned.

### **When I say...what I mean is...**

When she joined the Home Office to lead delivery of their contribution to Olympic security, she greeted her new team with clarification of her most common expressions (as suggested by her previous team at Defra). These included:

'It's not a competition' – let's focus on a common purpose

'What's the problem we're trying to solve?' – recognising that many teams, departments and organisations spend a lot of time solving the wrong problem

'What's the story we're trying to tell about the organisation (or ourselves)?' – be clear and keep checking back on the brief

'Trust your tummy!' – your instinct, experience or first impression is often absolutely right (and when asked about her biggest challenge, she confessed that she would have acted more rapidly on decisions about people).

### **Moving on**

Wanting to try leadership in a different context (and inspired by Martin Narey, who had made the move from civil service to running Barnardo's children's charity), Dame Helen's new role at the National Trust pulls together her experience, skills and interests in changing places and people's lives, in history and the environment. As she said, "I have ended up with the job I might always have dreamed of".



**On leadership (and other things)**

When Dame Helen joined in 1979, the civil service wasn't remotely interested in developing leaders. She credits Gus O'Donnell with implementing the biggest step change, introducing the idea that it wasn't enough to be a brilliant policy wonk, you also needed to be able to communicate and have personal impact.

Having worked with a number of leaders that she definitely didn't want to emulate, and having always relied on the solid ('but woolly') drive to be as authentic as possible, Dame Helen learned an interesting lesson from Sir David Varney at HMRC about having a flexible management style: think about what you want to achieve, and the most effective way to get it (which may mean behaving in a way you regard as inauthentic). Tapping in to some things she already knew deep down, she worked with a coach on retaining her emotional resilience and thinking about what derailed her, she clarified what kind of leader she is and wanted to be.

(And sometimes, channelling Sally Bowles stepping on stage in Cabaret, you need to 'do the acting thing').

Being a good leader doesn't mean being indispensable; creating a strong team, building their abilities and delegating to them is more effective.

A long distance commute (in her case from Oxford) gives valuable reflecting time, and a diary with time out of the office or daily environment gives you energy and offers opportunities for fresh thinking.

