

From: ARBUTHNOTJG [GRO]
To: David Bristow
CC: JONESDI [GRO]
Date: Thu, 26 Nov 2009 16:42:09 +0000
Subject: FW: Post Office threats!!

Dear Mr Bristow,

As promised in my previous email, I am now able to raise with you the contents of an email I received earlier this year from a local councillor, which discusses the case of another postmaster in my constituency. I do so because I would like to know whether you recognise any of the circumstances and believe there are commonalities with your case. The councillor's email is reproduced below but I have removed the name of my other constituent and the reporter mentioned, for reasons of data protection:

[A reporter on a national trade newspaper] has details on eleven cases and is intending to feature seven. An FOI request has established that there have been 250 cases where the Post Office has summarily terminated a local franchise. Anecdotally, this has often happened where a local Postmaster has asked questions about the computer system. The Post Office swiftly removes all records, as it entitled to do under a rather one sided contract, so there is no evidence and reconstructing a paper trail is nigh impossible.

Again anecdotally, what often happens is that when discrepancies start to arise the Postmaster makes up the difference with his own money but perhaps watches his records more in future. When it happens on a larger scale then he/she declines to keep putting in money and starts complaining. If he complains too loudly or too specifically then the Post Office cancels the franchise contract and removes all records.

Some overworked and careless Postmasters make the mistake of pressing the 'Enter' key when starting the computer in a morning since the system will not open if it is not pressed. They may press it to be able to serve the customer standing in front of them, meaning to sort things out later, but pressing it constitutes agreement that the cash in the till is what the computer screen says. If it is not then they can be prosecuted for False Accounting.

People careless enough to get themselves into this position are then offered a deal: plead guilty to False Accounting, refrain from raising any awkward questions in Court, sign a 'gagging order' and pay whatever the computer says is missing and the Post Office will not oppose a light sentence. Protest your innocence or try to defend yourself in any way and the Post Office will press charges of Theft and push for a "deterrent" prison sentence. It is a brave person who takes that risk.

[A local postmaster] is comparatively lucky in that people in [the area] knew the postmaster was innocent and also that a lawyer resident handled the postmaster's case on a pro bono basis. The Post Office case was that the postmaster had several thousand pounds in the till and stole it but it was an obvious management failure on their part to imagine that that such a small operation could have accumulated such a large sum of cash in the till, even if the postmaster had pressed 'Enter'. The PO 'Help Line' was worse than useless and one occasion the keys they instructed the postmaster to press increased the apparent cash discrepancy; they were unable to correct that so it was left 'owing' even more. I happened frequently to be sending letters to the US which required a specially printed stamp. If the machine did not print, the postmaster would hit the print key again but I now suspect that it probably charged the value twice. Everyone in the village knew that it was a question of sloppy record keeping rather than anything else and over 100 people sent written testimonials to the

Court. The vicar went into the witness box, not to plead mitigation but to affirm the postmaster's character.

This issue is no longer about this postmaster. That is water under the bridge and no one really believes there is any chance of "clearing the postmaster's name" or the village getting its Post Office back. What is of greater importance is that so many suspiciously similar cases are coming to light and the possibility that a State institution is perpetuating injustice on a large scale and wrecking many lives rather than admit that it might have made mistakes.

As a result of my making contact this week, I have also received an update from the councillor which says:

Cases are also pending about an office in [the north] and one in [Surrey]; in the latter instance the Judge adjourned proceedings after hearing defence testimony from 'Computer Weekly.'

I gather that this issue is gathering momentum and that Shoesmiths are preparing a class action suit. If I can make further introductions or help in any way please do not hesitate to ask; at such a stage as is appropriate later I would be grateful if you would let me know how things are going.

I look forward to receiving your response to the councillor's comments.

Yours sincerely

James Arbuthnot