

Meeting with Ian Wright MP, Chair, BIS Select Committee
Tuesday, 8 September, 2015 – Portcullis House

(In attendance: Iain Wright MP, Asst Clerk to Committee, Mark Davies, Jane Hill and Patrick Bourke)

Substance

1. IW indicated that he had already met with fellow MPs Kevan Jones and Andrew Bridgen, together with Alan Bates of the JFSA. The Assistant Clerk to the Committee had also attended. He was keen to stress that he wanted to be scrupulously fair and transparent in his dealings. We thanked him for that and began by giving him a quick briefing on the history of the issue, including on the steps we had taken to 'speed things up' as requested by the Select Committee back in February.
2. He asked why we had not spoken about individual cases. We repeated our well-rehearsed reasons and he appeared to understand that doing so, even now, would result in PO being accused of further 'bullying'. It was clear that he understood the appeal of the little man versus the big corporate 'David and Goliath' characterisation that this issue lent itself to.
3. In this section of our discussion, we went onto explain that we felt that the integrity of the PO and its handling of this issue (including protecting confidentiality where we had promised to do so) was of paramount importance, even where this might occasion some arguably avoidable reputational damage. Other organisations might have chosen differently.
4. In addition, our approach to resolution of these complaints was informed solely by the evidence of what happened in each case. Where we are at fault, we put our hands up and make appropriate compensation. However, where we are not, we cannot be expected to make payments because it is the 'easy' or expedient thing to do. In any event, the Post Office would quickly find itself answering difficult question from the Public Account Committee if it were to be making payments, arguably from public funds, in circumstances where there was no liability or responsibility to do so.
5. He was most perplexed by JA: why would a parliamentarian of his standing continue to push the cases if there was really nothing underlying the accusations. We accepted that JA had to be taken seriously (as indeed we have throughout) but we simply could not understand it either.
6. He asked about Fujitsu and remote access. We took him through, in detail, why what was being alleged did not (because it simply could not in a technical sense) happen. Moreover, even if it were technically possible, what on earth would the motivation for doing so be in circumstances where there is no possibility of pecuniary or other interest? We offered to write to him with our rebuttals of the various allegations most commonly made against us, including those which featured on Panorama.
7. We explained the role and on-going work of the CCRC, gave him the new statistics on the mediations and indicated that Tim Parker would be asked to look at this issue, and PO's handling of it as a whole, afresh as a matter of priority.

8. We then had a very candid and open conversation about what the role of the Committee might be in all of this. On the one hand, he explained, these were serious allegations about an important public business in BIS', and therefore, the Committee's remit. On the other hand, he continued, he was not interested in simply providing 'another day in Court' for our detractors.

9. He told us that he was determined that the Committee was there to add value, that there were a huge number of topics he was aware of where he thought it could make a real contribution. "Bluntly, I have a reputation to protect, as well as the Committee's to consider – is this, in your honest view, something we should have in front of us now?"

10. Invited to be candid, we did precisely that, and expressed the view that the Committee was not as well equipped (or empowered) as the CCRC to examine the accusations being made in the criminal sphere and, on the civil side, we had 50 or so mediations to conduct between now and Christmas. We would, however, co-operate absolutely fully in the event of any decision to conduct an inquiry, whether now or later. In short, we advised him that an inquiry at this stage would certainly add heat, but shed no further light, on this issue. That did not, of course, preclude a useful session at a later stage. He appreciated our candour on this.

11. We went on to make clear, however, that he ought to expect the PO to be considerably more robust and indeed candid, including about those cases which have been featured so prominently by the BBC and other outlets, in evidence to any such further inquiry in a way that we had not felt able to (for very good reasons) back in February. We had a strong sense that this landed with him.

Comment

12. This was a friendly, candid and constructive meeting and we are confident he would make the same observation. He is clearly a much more substantial (and fair minded) figure than his predecessor which makes for a refreshing change. The presence of the Assistant Clerk to the Committee added an element of formality and official record which is to be welcomed.

13. We said we would write to him to thank him and to provide him with our rebuttals to the various accusations. We also secured his agreement to a further meeting if, in the event, he decided to proceed with an inquiry sooner rather than later, so that we could be clear about its parameters and terms of engagement.

14. Mindful that he needs to go back to the 'other side' with something, we will suggest that while we do not judge this to be the right time for an inquiry to take place (the CCRC and the mediations needing to be allowed to run their course), we will of course keep him regularly updated as to progress on the various fronts so that he might make an informed decision about the timing and nature of any inquiry he determines necessary.

15. In conclusion, our judgement is that:

- a. At best, he will not set up an inquiry this side of Christmas (and if the CCRC and mediations work goes well for us, potentially at all); but

- b. At worst, any inquiry will have a very different character to the February session – critically, in the degree of fairness, rigour and transparency we can expect from his Chairmanship of the Committee’s work.

9 September 2015