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Breakfast Show Blog

Friday, 11 February 2011

Inside Out, BBC1 South, Mon 7 Feb 2011

Here is a transcript of the top story on the above programme. To watch it and/or read more about how it came to my attention, please [click here](#).

Transcript follows:

Jon Cuthill [presenter]: As lawyers prepare for a civil action against the Post Office on behalf of village subpostmasters, we've been talking to people across the South accused of cooking the books, but they swear they've done nothing wrong. So what's up behind the counters of our Post Offices?

Nick Wallis reports.

NW: "This Surrey Post Office has a new subpostmaster. The last one, Seema Misra, is behind bars, convicted of false accounting and stealing £74,000. Seema and her husband Davinder [photo below] maintain she didn't steal the money, but that inexplicable errors in her post office accounts made it look as if she had.



GRO

Davinder Misra: "I feel ashamed on this country. They put innocent... into prison. I am a good citizen. My wife always a good citizen. We are good people. She is everything for me. To put her into prison innocent. You're giving the whole family prison."

NW:

GRO

DM:

NW: "Seema's case is far from isolated. We've come across dozens of examples similar to this. Postmasters who feel they've been victims of a serious injustice. They say they were just trying to serve their community, but when things started going inexplicably wrong, the Post Office have pointed the finger of blame firmly at them."

NW: "There are plenty of services you can get from a Post Office nowadays. It's not just about buying stamps - you can get your tax disc, you can pay your bills online, get your lottery ticket, but all the transactions which take place behind this glass over here, are automatically recorded at a centrally located database. And at the end of the day, what the centrally located database says you have, must match what's in the tills behind the glass."

NW: "Subpostmasters, under their contracts, are personally liable for shortfalls."

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Jo Hamilton [photo above] knows this only too well. She used to run this post office in Hampshire but now the Post Office counter has been removed and she's only left with the village shop. Her troubles began when her Post Office computer terminal showed the money in her till didn't seem to match her takings."

JH: "I got to the end of the week on a weekly balance and I was £2000 down, so I ran the helpdesk, and they told me to do this, this and this, and the number actually doubled right in front of my eyes, in the space of three minutes. The upshot was I had to pay £4000 which I didn't have, so they took it out of my wages."

NW: "To Jo's horror the accounting discrepancies continued to pile up. She says she hoped it was just a computer glitch that would correct itself."

JH: "I always thought one day, some kind of electronic wizardry would happen

and it would put itself right. But it didn't.

JH: "There were nights... and people will bear me out... there were nights when I just sat there sobbing... cos I just didn't know what to do, how to get out of the mess.

JH: "I had no idea this was happening to other people. I thought I was the only one... and I just felt... absolutely terrified."

NW: "Jo's mistake was not to challenge the computer's figures, but to sign them off believing they were wrong. By doing that she was telling the Post Office everything was fine when it wasn't... which amounts to false accounting.

NW: "Eventually when the losses reached £36,000, she called in the Post Office auditors and the decision was taken to prosecute her. Jo, who says she's never even had a parking ticket, found herself in court."

Roch Garrard, villager: "The court case was amazing, 'cos we all trooped down to the Crown Court for the hearing. And the judge sort of... looked "what's going on here?" and it was quite clear that nobody there for a moment had thought that Jo had taken any money. But she had to plead guilty to false accounting, for saying the money was there when it wasn't.

RG: "But there was no explanation from the Post Office as to what had happened to this money. They didn't prosecute her for stealing the money. They just prosecuted her for not accounting for the money properly."

NW: "But that unaccounted for money had to be paid back...somehow."

JH: "I had to re-mortgage the house, and we borrowed £30,000 on that and the village lent me £3000 and gave me £3000 to make up the other six, for which I am very grateful."

NW: "Jo is not alone. Other subpostmasters have got together and have formed a campaign group. And in the next few weeks lawyers representing 55 of them plan to take the first steps in launching a civil action against the Post Office."

NW: "So Amanda, how big is this?"

Amanda Glover, Solicitor, Shoosmiths: "Well, we're told at the moment that the clients we've got are to some extent the tip of iceberg. We've got 55 people that have already come forward. We're told there more. We're waiting very much to see what final figure is."

NW: "All of people that you're representing - is there one thing that keeps coming up in your discussions with them?"

AG: "They all seem to be saying that the system has caused them

problems....

NW: "The computer system...."

AG: "The computer system. What we've found when talking to these individuals is there is a number of issues for some people. When you drill down, they have had problems with training, they've had problems with support of the system, so there are a number of factors, but it all seems to come down to what ultimately is stored in the computer system."

NW: "And you presumably wouldn't do this unless you were absolute certain that they have a case."

AG: "Yes, yes. I think, once you have met these individuals, what you do find is they are all very good citizens. They all come with the same story, they wanted to be part of the community, they're very believable and when you've got such numbers it has to be more than coincidence that this is happening to such a large number right across the country."



GRO

NW: "One of those people is David Bristow [photo above]. Soon after he bought his Post Office and village shop, he says his computer terminal began throwing up accounting losses. He called in the Post Office auditors. He says they found that some of the errors were down to him pressing the wrong buttons. But £42,000 of losses couldn't be explained. He says he was told he was no longer fit to be the subpostmaster.

NW: "Dave what's it like being here, rather than out the back in the Post Office serving your customers?"

David Bristow: "I was suspended and it's just been left like that. Although we have asked the Post Office many many times for info they haven't been forthcoming and so I am just suspended."

NW: "Can you say honestly, on the record, that you never took any of that money?"

DB: "Yes..."

NW: "You haven't been going on holidays abroad..."

DB: "No, no, no, no, no, no. There has been a discrepancy that is unexplained. The Post Office do not know how or when or why the discrepancy occurred. They have their records which say there is a discrepancy but I can categorically say I have taken nothing."

NW: "For more than two years David has been in limbo...running the village shop, with someone else running the Post Office counter for him. But at any time the Post Office could close it down."

NW: "As far Post Office are concerned, the only way this can be resolved is for you to pay them £42,000 which they say you owe?"

DB: "Yeah, yeah. If I paid £42,000 to them they would probably just take it and that would be the end of it. But I didn't take any money. It's a paper error, it's a computer problem or somebody, somewhere has not processed the information incorrectly, and they can't find it."

NW: "So this is it...the computer system which so many postmasters see as the root of all their accounting problems. We asked the Post Office a simple question. Is there anything wrong with it? They gave us this statement:"

Post Office: "The Horizon computer system is absolutely accurate and reliable, and has operated successfully in over 11,000 branches for more than 10 years. It has been fully, and robustly tested, and meets the relevant banking industry standards."

NW: "While Jo Hamilton pleaded guilty to false accounting, she says she has never understood what was supposed to have happened to the missing cash."

JH: "Nobody seems to be able to explain it properly and the Post Office never have to provide evidence that you've had any money. It's awful. If you are a law-abiding citizen and all of sudden find yourself in this situation... it's terrifying."

James Arbuthnot, MP for North East Hampshire: "I am actually very concerned about this, because there are a lot of cases which seem to be cropping up, all round the country.

JA: "The Post Office, has been, I think has been pretty hard-nosed in the way they have taken these cases to court. Now that is pretty tough for these people who have been faced with a new computer system which they have been struggling to master, and I think they need to think again, and be more sympathetic."

NW: "But the Post Office says sub postmasters are supported. They're given full training, including onsite supervision, and have access to a dedicated helpline."

NW: "There may well be dishonest subpostmasters just as you come across dishonest people in all walks of life, and of course the Post Office have every right to go after lawbreakers.

NW: "It says it deals with the transactions of 20 million people who visit its branches every week and has a duty to protect all the money in its care.

NW: "But some of those who have been accused of false accounting insist they never stole a penny, but were let down by the system, and didn't get the support they needed.

NW: "Meanwhile, as Davinder waits for his wife Seema Misra to finish her 15 month prison sentence, he faces another crisis. When she's released, they're going to have to figure out how to pay back the £74,000 Seema was found guilty of stealing."

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