



'I'd only been at the Post Office since 2022. But Badenoch told me: Someone must take the rap'

The sacked chairman reveals a letter was sent saying some sub-postmasters were 'guilty as charged', while officials were told to go slow on compensation

Oliver Shah Associates Editor

The first Henry Stanton knew of his imminent sacking as Post Office chairman was when he received a call from Sky News on a Sunday afternoon last month. He had not even met Boris Badenoch, the business secretary, but she phoned him shortly afterwards to ensure the government was backing him.

According to Stanton, Badenoch did not apologise for the manner in which he dismissed his fate. He said she referred to the Horizon scandal, in which more than 100 sub-postmasters and others were wrongly prosecuted between 1996 and 2015 based on flaws in the Post Office's accounting software, and said: "Well, someone's got to take the rap for this."

Stanton had been chairman only since December 2022. He said he replied: "Fine. We're leaving the business round. We've got a strategy to move forward. The culture's done, in terms of how the postmasters are perceived in particular – but you've clearly made your decisions." Badenoch's department said Stanton's characterisation of their conversation was "largely incorrect".

Stanton, a corporate veteran who previously chaired the retailer WH Smith

and the property company Capital & Counties, said he now felt "fairly philosophical" about his treatment. But in an interview with The Sunday Times this weekend he blasted that:

- He was instructed by a senior civil servant to stall on compensation payments to Horizon victims so the government could "keep its nose in the election" with the lowest possible financial liability.
- The government body that manages taxpayers' ownership of the Post Office told its chief executive to write to the head chancellor stating the reason so few sub-postmasters had come forward to have their convictions overturned was because they were "guilty as charged".
- The Post Office remains a "toxic", plagued by a "toxic" culture where employees continue to mistreat sub-postmasters, despite exposure of the scandal, and where suspicion they are "slipping into the [HR] showers is rife".
- The Post Office still employs more than 40 investigators involved in the wrongful prosecution of sub-postmasters. These investigators are known as "the uncatchables" inside the organisation because of the power they wield.

Stanton, 55, was due to retire from WH Smith and looking forward to spending "more time on the golf course, on the

tennis court and at our place in Cornwall" when he was approached by head-hunter at GatelyStanton about the Post Office chairmanship in 2022. They contacted him it was "time to get something back". Stanton met David Keating, then the business secretary, who told him: "It's full of problems, but it's not something that you couldn't sort out."

By the time he joined, Stanton was given, having been promised to chancellor and then Lord, Stanton said he walked into an organisation where morale was "not strong" and governance was "shocking".

One of the top priorities was sorting compensation – to sub-postmasters wrongly accused of theft, fraud and false accounting for shortfalls at their branches caused by glitches in the Fujitsu-supplied Horizon IT system. Until Kevin Hildrew, the general affairs minister, intervened last September and offered an agreed £600,000 to those wrongly convicted, the Post Office opened three separate compensation schemes. The main one, the Horizon Shortfall Scheme, had paid an average of £28,000 to more than 2,600 people by the end of last year.

Stanton said the schemes struck him as "terribly bureaucratic", "terribly pedantic", "terribly unhelpful" and "terribly uncompassionate". "I thought, we haven't got this right, we're trying to make it difficult to claim compensa-

tion," he said. He was more shocked by the attitude he encountered in Whitehall. "Early on, I was told by a fairly senior permanent official speaking on compensation and on the replacement of Horizon, and to keep, in quotation marks – I did a file note on it – keep into the election," he said. "It was not an anti-postmaster thing. It was just straight forward. I didn't say, because I said, 'I'm having no part of it – I'm not here to keep into the election, it's not the right thing to do by postmasters.' The word 'keep' gives you a snapshot of where they were."

The government said "the article reflects these allegations. The government has speed up compensation to victims, and consistently encouraged postmasters to come forward with their claims. To suggest any actions or conversations happened to the contrary is incorrect. In fact, upon appointment, Mr Stanton was an explicit objective. In writing, to focus on reaching settlements with claimants – clear evidence of the government's intent. The secretary of state asked Henry Stanton to step down as chairman of the Post Office because a change in leadership was needed."

Another priority was the exoneration of those wrongly convicted. Only about 100 convictions have been overturned so far. Stanton said sub-postmasters told him the reason more had not come forward was "because they don't trust the British justice system". But he said the settlement raised by Richard Taylor, the

“It is still a mess, with a toxic culture”



Monica Dolan as sub-postmaster Jo Hurn in the ITV drama Mr Bates vs The Post Office, which "broke the dam" on efforts to compensate Horizon-scandal victims

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