



Post Office communications director, who was suspended after a recording emerged of him saying that some sub-postmasters "downright stole" was widely shared in the Post Office's upper echelons. "There was this feeling expressed by board members to me that they haven't come forward because they're guilty as charged, and I felt passionately that that wasn't the case," Stanton said. The Post Office is understood to dispute this.

The release last month of the TV drama *Mr Bates vs The Post Office* unleashed a tidal wave of public anger, prompting Rishi Sunak and Hollisrake to promise unprecedented legislation to overturn all convictions related to the Horizon scandal. Before then, efforts to help sub-postmasters were "getting absolutely nowhere", Stanton said. "And then the dam broke." Although the Post Office affair is acknowledged to be one of the worst miscarriages of justice in British history, the pledge has been criticised by members of the judiciary, who argue that it would compromise the independence of the courts.

Stanton said UK Government investment (UKGI), the body staffed by former investment bankers that manages taxpayers' stakes in assets such as the Post Office, also appeared to oppose blanket exoneration. Last month – after the drama's airing – Nick Read, chief executive of the Post Office, wrote to justice secretary Alex Chalk, with a legal opinion from the Post Office's solicitors at Peters & Peters attached. The message said that in more than 300 cases, non-Horizon evidence supported sub-postmasters' convictions. "Basically, it was trying to undermine the exoneration argument," Stanton said. "It was, 'Most people haven't come forward because they are guilty as charged' – in other words, carefully about exoneration. I said to Nick [Read], "This is not right, this goes to the heart of how we as an organisation feel. You've sent that letter as if that's our view, and that is not my view, and it is not the view

of at least half of the board... If this gets out, we'd be crucified, and rightly so." According to Stanton, Read said he sent the letter at UKGI's behest. Stanton believes UKGI was trying to undermine Hollisrake's stance on exoneration. "It seems to me astonishing to prevail upon the Post Office to write a letter to Chalk which was undermining their own ministers," Stanton said. "It was terrible, terrible governance... I picked it up with the UKGI director [on the board of the Post Office, Lorna Gratton], who didn't deny it but didn't really want to talk about it. And I thought it was not my job to work out

700
Number of convictions achieved by the Post Office from 1999 to 2015 over accounting shortfalls

what the politics is behind all this." UKGI, supposedly headed as the Shareholder Executive, has had a representative on the Post Office's board since it emerged from Royal Mail in 2012. UKGI said: "We strongly refute the claims levelled by Mr Stanton, both in the facts presented and the suggestions made as to UKGI's overall role. UKGI did not commission the letter as Mr Stanton has claimed and only became aware of it once it had been shared with ministers."

A source close to the Post Office said Read's January letter was in no way seeking to influence the government's plans for mass exoneration and denied that it was sent at UKGI's behest. Stanton said that Read, 57, found UKGI's interference "desperately frustrating, to the extent that he hasn't got another job but he keeps wanting to leave". He added: "If I had to put next month's salary on whether he was here or not in six months, I would put all my money on him having left."

Shortly before he was ousted, Stanton was copied into an email sent by Elliot Jacobs, a sub-postmaster board director who runs eight branches in London and Hertfordshire. It said that a "culture that [postmasters] are guilty and 'on the take' is embedded in this company" and warned that "while we continue to [employ] 40+ people who earned innocent people were found guilty and who continue to believe that mantra, this will never change".

This was a reference to the Post Office's investigations team, which reports to Ben Post, the general counsel, and still includes Stephen Bradshaw, who denied allegations that he and his colleagues "behaved like mafia gangsters when they appeared before the Horizon IT inquiry last month. Stanton agrees with Jacobs's assessment. He said Read often described the investigations team as "the untouchables". I said, "That's terrible governance – you can't have people who are untouchable, particularly if they've done wrong". Stanton said: "And he said, 'Well, it would be terrible publicity to get rid of them and UKGI just don't need that'. A source close to the Post Office said it was not true that it continued to employ 40 investigators in the Horizon scandal and that it did not recognise the "untouchables" tag.

The immediate trigger for Stanton's ousting was a row over the appointment of a new senior independent director. The government wanted a Whitehall insider but the Post Office board voted for Andrew Darlow, a financial services veteran who was already a director. "That was a big part of it," Stanton said. "I was acting as the servant of the board, and I wouldn't change one jot of it."

Stanton thinks the government should offer wronged sub-postmasters £1 million each in compensation and get on with quashing convictions. "The public believes this is the best, and frankly, if we paid more than we might do in a hard-bit case, I don't think the public would mind one jot," he said. "And in respect of exoneration, if ten out of several hundred were guilty, I don't think the public would actually feel that was a big deal. Society has let down the postmasters, so therefore society needs to dig into its pockets to make up a fair and decent contribution."

A business department source said: "This blame-passing was a feature of Mr Stanton's time in the Post Office and emblematic of his lack of control over the organisation and why the board needed new leadership."

The Post Office said: "Post Office is very aware of the terrible impact from this appalling scandal and miscarriage of justice. We refute both the assertions put to us and the words and phrases allegedly used, and are focused on supporting the government's plans for faster justice and redress for victims. No one within Post Office is out of reach of the inquiry."

Editorial, page 20

British film-maker finds Putin's troops wielding West's weapons

Larisa Brown Security Editor

MAGAZINE Behind enemy lines in Ukraine Pages 18-25

Russian troops fighting in Ukraine have obtained western weapons, including anti-tank missiles, either from the battlefield or the black market. Vladimir Putin's soldiers were discovered with German hand grenades, Polish mortar rounds and AT4 rocket launchers of the type sent to Ukraine by the Americans and the Swedes. Evidence of the weapons in the hands of Russian troops was uncovered during a rare unofficial embed with them in Ukraine between autumn 2022 and spring last year. The film-maker Sean Langan travelled into the Russian-occupied Donbas region and spoke to soldiers on the eastern front about how the conflict was affecting them.

In November 2022, some nine months after Russia invaded Ukraine, Langan arrived at a commander's house in Svatove, a city on the Krassa River in Luhansk oblast, eastern Ukraine.

As they passed lines of damaged Russian tanks and trucks, listening to a techno singer and landing the exploits of the shadowy Wagner mercenary group, the driver said: "We just have to stop to pick up some gifts."

He parked by a gate and returned with two anti-tank missiles, which he claimed were Javelin. The claim could not be independently verified. Both Britain and America have supplied Ukraine with the one-manportable precision weapon system, which uses "fire-and-forget" technology capable of defeating targets up to 2.5 miles away, built jointly by Raytheon and Lockheed Martin, the weapon guides itself to the target without any external commands or controls.

At a nearby house the driver showed a cache of what he described as "blatno weapons", including a shoulder-held rocket-launcher with instructions in English on the side and another in Swedish. They appeared to be Saab-

made AT4 launchers. Almost every unit Langan met had similar supplies, some taken on the battlefield but others apparently found their way onto the black market and into Russian hands.

When pushed on how they had got hold of some of the weapons, the Russians said they had been "acquired" rather than captured on the battlefield. However, they would not give any further details. They simply laughed and said "they had more than enough".

Ben Barry, a senior fellow for land warfare at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said he had seen credible photographs, from early in the war, of Russian troops having captured a Ukrainian logistics base where there were containers that looked like Javelin missile containers.

He also saw photos of Russian troops showing off

British-made Nava light anti-tank weapons of which more than 5,000 were sent to the Ukrainians by the UK. "They all looked pretty credible to me. If you turn your mind to the beginning of the war, there was a lot of Ukrainian-held territory, particularly in the south and the east that the Russians overran quite quickly. I think it is quite likely that Russia captured some western weapons from withdrawing Ukrainian forces," he said.

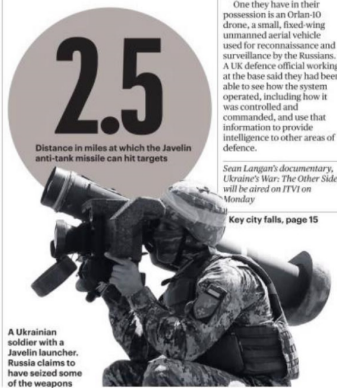
But he added that he had seen no credible evidence of a black market selling western weapons destined for the Ukrainians.

The Ukrainians also acquired large amounts of Russian equipment. Some has ended up in the UK, at RAF Wyton, Cambridgeshire, home to several of defence intelligence officers who examine the weapons to learn how to disrupt them on the battlefield.

One they have in their possession is an Orfan-40 drone, a small, fixed-wing unmanned aerial vehicle used for reconnaissance and surveillance by the Russians. A UK defence official working at the base said they had been able to see how the system operated, including how it was controlled and commanded, and use that information to provide intelligence to other areas of defence.

Sean Langan's documentary, *Ukraine's War: The Other Side*, will be aired on ITV1 on Monday

Key city falls, page 15



Distance in miles at which the Javelin anti-tank missile can hit targets

A Ukrainian soldier with a Javelin launcher. Russia claims to have seized some of the weapons

Royal Mail slows letters for fines and hospital visits to save £650m

Oliver Gill Royal Mail is planning to slow down the delivery of billions of letters, including those for hospital appointments, fines and court documents to save up to £650 million annually. The postal monopoly is "actively exploring" proposals to lengthen the time it has to deliver letters from public services such as the NHS and the Ministry of Justice.

Sources said talks have started with hospitals, government agencies and large businesses on the feasibility of their post being delivered within three days rather than the present two. This "bulk mail" makes up about seven in ten of all letters posted in the UK.

Plans to slow down these deliveries represent a work-around from Royal Mail chiefs after Rishi Sunak ruled out cutting postal rounds from six to just three days a week so that the company could balance the books. Royal Mail, privatised in 2013 by the coalition government, racked up a £219 million half-year loss in November. The company's precarious financial position is partly a result of letters

posted halving between 2012 and 2022 – from 14 billion items to just 7 billion. Yet the company has a legal responsibility under what is known as the universal service obligation (USO) to deliver letters to every address in the country six days a week. Changing the USO requires the government to enact new legislation, a move that has been dismissed by both Conservative and Labour politicians.

While the number of postal rounds per week is enshrined in law, the speed at which letters are delivered is not. Delaying the service by a day would only require the approval of regulator Ofcom, industry sources said.

66
The law does not say at what speed the post must be delivered

Martin Seidenberg, who last summer became Royal Mail's chief executive in three years, is thought to still want to cut postal rounds to three a week, despite the opposition from Westminster. But conscious of political opposition during a general election year, he has ordered senior managers to explore options that would avoid the need to change legislation while still yielding significant cost savings.

Under the present rules, first-class post should arrive at its destination the next day and second-class items within three days.

But most letters – 5.1 billion items, representing 70.4 per cent of the letters sent in 2022-23 – are so-called "bulk mail" from public services and businesses. Regulations stipulate these must be delivered within two days of posting – but some organisations are already opting for a five-day service that is cheaper.

A one-day extension would bring the timeframe for bulk mail deliveries in line with second-class post, simplifying the system into a more straightforward two-tier structure where all letters are

either delivered the next day or within three days.

By creating a clearer two-tier system in this way, Royal Mail could save between £150 million and £250 million, according to the regulator Ofcom.

Royal Mail has been fined for failing to meet delivery targets and criticised for covertly prioritising the sorting and delivery of parcels over letters. The company has also been embroiled in an industrial row that led to 18 days of strike action by the powerful Communication Workers' Union. The dispute ended last summer.

A spokesman for Royal Mail said: "Ofcom's report demonstrates that reform is urgently needed to protect the future of the one-price-goes-anywhere Universal Service. We are doing everything in our power to transform, but it is not sustainable to maintain a network built for 20 billion letters when we are now only delivering seven billion."

"We are actively considering the options put forward in Ofcom's report, in discussion with our customers, employees and unions."

Based on shot power as recorded in England's top professional men's league in the 2022-23 season.