

Board member spells out Post Office executive dysfunction

Nick Wallis Tue 24 September 2024 19 comments 8 min read



Saf Ismail, Post Office Non-Executive Director

The utter dysfunction of the Post Office as an organisation has been laid bare by one of its serving directors. Saf Ismail was one of two Subpostmasters (the other being Elliot Jacobs) appointed to the Post Office board in 2021.

Ismail appears to be a decent man, wholly unprepared for the mediocre, venal nature of the people he found himself dealing with once he joined the Post Office board. At the moment both he and his business (which runs seven branches and a banking hub) is currently under investigation by the Post Office for undisclosed reasons. He has therefore stepped back from being a board member whilst the investigation is ongoing. That was all the information disclosed by the Inquiry.

Ismail described the Post Office as "so bureaucratic, to get anything done just takes a very long time". This would be unhelpful at the best of times, but right now, according to Ismail "there's so many fires... within this organisation that need putting out."

Recalling joining the board, Ismail told the Inquiry "The NEDs [Non-Executive Directors]... were welcoming and were hospitable, however the wider executive made it difficult... we didn't feel as welcomed".

Though welcoming, the NEDs don't appear to know what they're doing, or, as Ismail says in his witness statement:

"the board have a limited level of operational understanding required to challenge the executive, as board members do not have frontline Post Office experience and, as such, they do not fully appreciate the complexities and challenges PMs [Subpostmasters] face. The only individuals with any operational nous or understanding of PM economics are myself and Mr Jacobs."

It is perhaps unsurprising that Post Office execs, rather than welcome Ismail and Jacobs' operational understanding, saw their expertise as a threat. Ismail said that in early 2023 the Post Office's Chief People Officer, Jane Davies told Ismail that the Post Office CEO Nick Read "was not happy with... postmasters being on the board because we were too awkward, too challenging and that he wanted that to be reversed".

Mushroom Men

Ismail claims that he and Jacobs were deliberately kept in the dark by the board and executive about key decisions being made by the business.

"Up until recently," he said, "we were not provided access to any of the other committee documents that we were not on... when I spoke to the previous Chair, Henry [Staunton], and to Jane Davies, they particularly mentioned how the wider Executive ensured myself and Mr Jacobs were blocked out of meetings that involved talking about bonuses and salaries. We were actively excluded from their meetings."

Ismail and Jacobs were keen to ensure a greater board-level understanding of the Subpostmasters' concerns (which, in a way, is their job) and so proposed bringing forward the appointment of their successors and having an 18-month handover. This was rejected.

Tail wagging the dog

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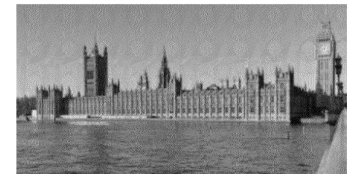
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that it should be candidate A, out of A, B, C, D, for example. However, the wider Executive has then totally ignored that advice, providing no reasoning whatsoever, and then gone and recruited candidate B."

Ismail named the appointment of Chief Retail Officer, Martin Roberts, as a specific example of this. Roberts apparently later turned out to be, in Ismail's view "not good enough". Ismail also claimed the Executive chose what information they fed the board in order to get the decisions they wanted. He told the Inquiry this led to the board making bad decisions which cost the business money.

Julian Blake, who questioned Ismail on behalf of the Inquiry, asked if there were parts of the executive doing this repeatedly. Ismail said: "Yes, I feel procurement is particularly poor, legal is extremely poor".

Damningly, Ismail alleged that the key driver of actions and attitudes at the Post Office is its bonus culture. In his witness statement, Ismail wrote:

"senior leaders within POL [Post Office Ltd] are obsessed with their remuneration. I have seen an unhealthy and unjustified obsession with bonuses and remuneration within POL."

Ismail said this led to decisions which harmed the business, writing:

"the previous POL Head of IT, Jeff Smyth, was due to receive a bonus linked to delivery of a programme to exit POLs Belfast data centres. This programme was, in my view, a waste of public money approximately in the region of £35 million... the executive tried to deliver this project at any cost to release bonuses."



Julian Blake




If this is true, it's borderline fraudulent.

The Untouchables

Most of the rest of the afternoon was taken up with a discussion about the Post Office's habit of hanging on to its bad apples in the legal, retail and investigations team, or, worse, allowing them to leave the business, and then re-hiring them as contractors to work on historic Postmaster cases, much to the alarm of the Postmasters they'd screwed over.

Ismail said these people were described by Nick Read as "The Untouchables" because *"there's no accountability for them... they were untouchable because there'd been complaints, there'd been various points where, for example, on the legal team side, on the past roles side, it just wasn't moving quick enough, and there was no performance management, no accountability."*

Earlier this year, in the light of comments made by the Post Office Director of Communications, Jacobs and Ismail sought a meeting with the then Post Office Chair, Henry Staunton. Jacobs had recently been placed under investigation by the Post Office and both men were angry. Staunton's note of the meeting was shown to the Inquiry.

From: Henry Staunton 
Sent: Sunday, January 14, 2024 6:48:46 PM
To: Henry Staunton  <henry.staunton@postoffice.com> 
Subject: Project Pineapple

Note of conversation with Saf and Elliot on Sunday 10 January

Saf said the views expressed by Richard Taylor, and previously by management and even members of the Board, still persisted - that those PMs who had not come forward to be exonerated were "guilty as charged". It is a view deep in the culture of the organisation (inc at Board level) including that Post Masters are not to be trusted. SOMETHING NEEDS TO BE DONE.

Martin Roberts and certain members of his team were singled out. There has been no feedback on the investigation into Roberts (inc for inappropriate behaviour and lack of integrity). He was responsible for the postage stamps debacle where changes were made to accounts by his team just like Fujitsu. If Elliot had not been on ARC the controls would not have been strengthened. Roberts and his team do not want any extension to their terms of office as they believe new PMs would not have the experience to challenge them.

Equally Saf and Elliot are FED UP WITH THE AMOUNT OF POWER WIELDED BY FOAT. He and other members of the senior team act as if PMs ARE GUILTY UNTIL PROVED INNOCENT ("as per my experience" they both said). "No one believes us" is a constant refrain from PMs. WHILST FOAT IS AT THE HELM NOTHING WILL CHANGE. We must also part company with all those investigators who

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Equity and ethics are not the amount of power wielded by Foat. His and other members of the senior team act as if PMs ARE GUILTY UNTIL PROVED INNOCENT (" as per my experience " they both said). " No one believes us " is a constant refrain from PMs . . . WHILST FOAT IS AT THE HELM NOTHING WILL CHANGE . We must also part company with all those investigators who behaved so terribly with PMs . What on earth is happening if Steve Bradshaw is still with us - his performance at the Inquiry was a disgrace and reflected terribly on Post Office . Foat uses his leadership of the Inquiry team as an instrument of his power - it all has to stop . The PM " is not the enemy . " " Only PMs can solve this " and tell us how to change . JB is an ex police man . His behaviour has been unacceptable and he needs to move on to prove we have changed .

The payment to one of PM of £16 as compensation said it all .

There are some 48 people involved in Investigations . There are over 40 just like Bradshaw . These people need to go . Project Phoenix was allowed by Foat to go into the long grass . Bradshaw went into one of Saf's stores some years ago and immediately said " we are closing you down " . PMs tell him not much has changed since . There is a complete lack of respect for PMs and that has to change .

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The reference in the above note to "JB" is to John Bartlett, the current head of the Post Office investigations unit. Ismail told the Inquiry that Project Phoenix was an internal investigation into the actions of various Post Office staff who behaved abominably during the scandal with a view to ensuring they couldn't continue to damage Postmasters or the Post Office itself. Steve Bradshaw was a case in point. Bradshaw was the first person to give evidence to the Inquiry this year after the screening of the ITV drama Bates v Post Office. Dressed entirely in black, Bradshaw gave a disastrous performance, coming across like a small-minded bully.

Ismail told Blake:

"In terms of Steve Bradshaw, I did mention at at least two to three Board meetings, towards the back end of '23 that the business needs to be prepared for what's coming out and, again, [I was] ignored. And then once Steve Bradshaw gave testimony, the Board and the wider executive were "How is Steve still in the business? What's going on? Why have we not dealt with this?" And that's providing you some context in terms of where the long grass came from because we thought it should have been dealt with"

Staunton circulated his note to Ismail and Jacobs and asked if it was correct and whether he could send it in confidence to Nick Read (who I'm told was sitting in the Inquiry watching Ismail give evidence). Ismail and Jacobs men agreed. Read forwarded the note to Steve Bradshaw and Martin Roberts.

Ismail continues to give evidence today, and will be followed by his Subpostmaster NED colleague, Elliot Jacobs.

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19 responses to "Board member spells out Post Office executive dysfunction"

 **GRO**
October 3, 2024 at 1:27 pm

I'm sure you'll get to it but Elliot's testimony was a far more damning indictment of current policies and procedures. His account of the arrogance of the current investigations team was astounding.

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 **GRO**
September 30, 2024 at 10:08 pm

How do you change an organisation's culture? Simply, you cannot!

Culture includes deep-seated values, attitudes and beliefs ingrained over decades. Organisations will self-destruct before surrendering their biases, prejudices, warped beliefs and integrity voids.

Amazon would be foolish to buy PO, even for £1.

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sort of recruitment/promotion mechanism which ensures that SPMs themselves are given the opportunity to serve in all the senior roles in head office.

Incidentally, I spent the last eight years of my career in EDP/ADP/IT (call it what you will) working for an American company, later bought out by HP, and the bonus culture was completely counter-productive to the achievement of constructive and productive effort aimed at maintaining and enhancing the automated system for the benefit of the customer.

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GRO
September 25, 2024 at 8:08 pm

It would be normal at this point to say "I'm Shocked". But this is the Post Office, they just carry on with their old ways. Subpostmaster (SPM) Representative Non Executive Director, Elliot Jacobs has just had a repeat of the "Thugs in Suits" (TIS) encounter.

The scandal started with SPM's being audited and visited by (IB, POID, SIS) Investigators and interviewed in police like conditions. Taped interviews. At the Police version of these you have the right to a solicitor. Not PO, you may have a "friend" present but they may not speak on behalf of the SPM.

Previously, Mr Rudkin, representing SPM's saw at Fujitsu HQ witnessed a back door into the Horizon accounts of SPM's without their knowledge. As an SPM himself the TIS found a discrepancy! To shut Mr Rudkin up?

Is it inconvenient for PO to have Jacobs serving a further term as SPM representative on the Board? Somehow there are discrepancies at his sub post offices. Seems Elliot needs to be put under pressure by PO. He has had a typical TIS interview.

Nothing changes, intimidation as normal from PO Investigators. Thugs in Suits.

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GRO
September 25, 2024 at 7:58 pm

The evidence from the 2 SPM NEDs was clear, concise, seemed to be well balanced, and courageous. One of the few things the PO did well was the shortlisting process for SPM NEDs that meant these 2 guys ended up on the Board. The content of the evidence was breathtaking; PO has learnt nothing from the past, the culture hasn't changed, and SPMs continue to be treated as criminals who haven't been found out yet. Nick Read should hang his head in shame; hope there's no payoff linked to his resignation.

[Reply](#)



GRO
September 25, 2024 at 2:44 pm

I would like to know

.....what this top little and top late is costing EVERY DAY

.....why are all these ridiculously over paid executives are still in jobs

.....especially those who have stated under oath " they don't remember"

.....as a layman I believe this enquiry should have STARTED with THE CEO and

And in a few days it would have been clear that ALL the management were economical with the truth

....These two directors should be reinstated and given power to sack almost everyone...including the boss who is no better than the outgoing vicar who lied to the tribunal and MUST GO TO PRISON

[Reply](#)



GRO
October 2, 2024 at 12:41 pm

I understand where you're coming from, but the inquiry knows exactly what they're doing. They're building up the evidence & then they can confront those most responsible. If they started with those people, without having built up walls of evidence first, they'd be able to wriggle out of responsibility.

Unfortunately it takes time to do it properly.

[Reply](#)



GRO
September 25, 2024 at 12:16 pm

What an eloquent compassionate man. I agree with the others, Post Office would have done well to actually have someone of his calibre to run the Post Office. Not once (although I didn't hear all his comments) did I hear "I can't recall/remember".

[Reply](#)

[Reply](#)**GRO**

September 25, 2024 at 6:20 am

Ismail and Jacobs should be running the Post Office.

[Reply](#)**GRO**

September 25, 2024 at 3:50 am

It sounds as if virtually nothing has changed at POL. My heart sank as I read this piece because the themes were all so familiar.

Why is the Government allowing this craziness to continue!!

I don't know if it is possible to do so, but this organisation needs of be shutdown, rebooted and run by clever, principled people who aren't fixated on bonuses.

[Reply](#)**GRO**

September 25, 2024 at 10:35 am

yes as alan bates said sold off to amazon for a £1

[Reply](#)**GRO**

September 24, 2024 at 10:34 pm

Yes. I was at yesterday's session when Saf Ismail was answering questions. A very coherent, impressive and courageous man. He said he had at one point considered resigning as a result of the way he was treated. Lucky for sub postmasters AND the Post Office that he decided to persevere. It must, too, have been very difficult for Ismail to speak so honestly with Nick Read sitting just a few yards away from him.

[Reply](#)**GRO**

September 26, 2024 at 9:23 pm

Agreed.....not easy...

Read has been observing at many sittings.... knowing that flack is coming his way..

[Reply](#)**GRO**

September 24, 2024 at 9:36 pm

A superb summary of today and literally words fail me...

The level of corruption and incompetence with seniors on big compensation terms in staggering.

As Crozier said the Govt said be generous on bonuses...

Does one think that Staunton knew what was going but failed or was unable to act....?

[Reply](#)**GRO**

September 24, 2024 at 8:19 pm

Great info but where is the accountability. What the hell was the government doing to allow this farce and such a waste of money paid to these cretins

It's not good enough for the PMs all of them to keep saying year after year the tax payer has to tighten its belt while they add the taxpayers money to these fat no obese cats.


[Reply](#)**GRO**

September 24, 2024 at 7:18 pm

Never forget the victims.

[Reply](#)



 **GRO**
September 24, 2024 at 4:38 pm

Saf Ismail is one of only a few good guys employed by the Post Office. His comments and views about Steve Bradshaw were spot on and justified as he was shown up to be the narrow minded bully he is at The Inquiry back in January.

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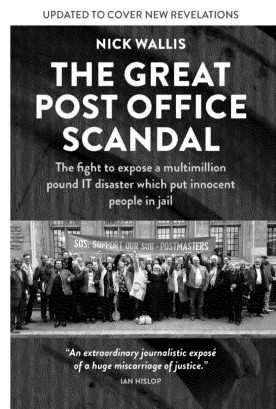
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