

problemswithpol

The Unaccountable Face of Post Office Ltd

Post Office Trial. What is the truth?

🕒 December 14, 2018 👤 Tim McCormack

It is fair to say I think that the coverage of this trial in the mainstream press as well as social media has been a bit one sided. Nick Wallis's live coverage of the trial via a twitter feed plus the fact that the evidential documents he has obtained have been published for all to see, has allowed commentators like myself to establish and communicate opinions that are not entirely unbiased. I make no bones about the fact that while I want the Post Office network to eventually flourish, that has to be under new management and a new ethos regarding the relationship between the company and the subpostmaster community. I believe the outcome of this trial will be a catalyst for that change and I am hopeful of a just verdict in favour of the claimants.

Nick Wallis has endeavoured to maintain a neutral reporting stance and in that regard has repeatedly (I am led to believe) encouraged both Post Office Ltd (POL) and the National Federation of Subpostmasters (NFSP) who are broadly supportive of POL's case in this trial, to respond with comments that he can publish alongside the commentary of others. Both parties have issued short statements to the effect that they cannot comment while the trial is ongoing but stand by their position with regard to the claims made by the Appellants.

By restricting themselves in this way I believe that POL and the NFSP are doing themselves an injustice because in some instances the documents that have been published can be misconstrued and harm can be done to their side of the argument if these, perhaps misinterpreted, documents and/or published comments on them are not publicly refuted.

So in the interests of fair play can I for once take a contrarian opinion to my more well known stance of criticising the role Paula Vennells (CEO of POL) has played in all of this and provide what I consider a better interpretation of what has become a rather infamous email chain that has been published as evidence for the claimants. <https://www.scribd.com/document/393804483/Bates-v-Post-Office-Paula-Vennells-email-chain> (<https://www.scribd.com/document/393804483/Bates-v-Post-Office-Paula-Vennells-email-chain>).

This is the sequence of emails originating from an internal POL email Ms Vennells sent to Mark Davies (then head of marketing) and Lesley Sewell (then chief information officer) where she asked them for assistance with possible replies to potential questions that were likely to come up in a forthcoming Government Select Committee hearing <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/business-innovation-and-skills/news/oral-ev-post-office-mediation-01/> (<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/business-innovation-and-skills/news/oral-ev-post-office-mediation-01/>).

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There appears to me, on social media at least, an interpretation of misdemeanour on Ms Vennells' part in looking for an answer to be provided to her that would enable her to deflect questions from the Select Committee if asked whether or not POL could access Horizon remotely (I think it safe to assume that she was referring, in her email, to accusations made public that POL could remotely interfere with branch accounts and which POL had repeatedly denied).

I don't think that interpretation is correct. If anything I take some encouragement from what Ms Vennells actually asked because it serves to explain in a small way perhaps, her attitude to the persistent claims made by subpostmasters that there is definitely a problem with Horizon.

Ms Vennells is the CEO of POL. She cannot be expected to delve into the minutiae of every complaint that is received by POL and in particular complaints levelled against such a sophisticated system such as Horizon. She has to be reliant on her subordinates to establish the circumstances and the merits of the complaints and report back to her the significance of their findings. Having said that, not only must she take ultimate responsibility should her support staff be unable to accurately determine the true circumstances, she is totally responsible for having employed them in to their positions in the first place.

Complaints about Horizon are not new. Since it was first introduced in 2000 there are ongoing instances of problems with both the hardware and software components of the system. Ms Vennells must have been aware from an early stage in her career at POL that this was a very important issue and any evidence to suggest Horizon is unreliable would cause an existential threat to the business model that POL currently and historically work under where much of the financial transaction risk is passed to the subpostmaster network. Ms Vennells' opinion on the reliability of the system must be significantly influential then on her determination to fight these allegations in court. I think it is fair to say that she accepts what has been told to her as being the truth by her management colleagues.

My point then, about this chain of emails, starts with her opening question:

1) "Is it possible to access the system remotely? We are told it is" (the possible question from the select committee)

And Ms Vennells then asks: "What is the true answer?"

My interpretation of the email chain stops here. She is asking her colleagues for the truth. Nothing more and nothing less. What her colleagues did after that in reply is clearly open to interpretation but I leave that for others to do and speculate on. However, considering the question she has put, surely there is some doubt now in her reliance on what has been told to her in the past.

Ms Vennells joined POL in a senior position, in 2007. This email chain is from 2015 when she is now the CEO and she is now (8 years later) asking for the truth to be told. I am sure if the answer she received had not been the one she was expecting she would have been angry, but I am just as certain she would have told the Select Committee the answer she received regardless of any potential personal humiliation she would have encountered.

For me, I think this question of hers "What is the true answer?" is crucial in understanding what has gone wrong inside POL. The perception of truth is based on who you ask what the truth is. As Socrates pointed out:

I went to the artisans, for I was conscious that I knew nothing at all, as I may say, and I was sure that they knew many fine things of which I was ignorant, and in this they certainly were wiser than I was. But I observed that even the good artisans fell into the same error as the poets; because they were good workmen they thought they knew all sorts of high matters, and this defect in them overshadowed their wisdom

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Perhaps Ms Vennells, albeit as long ago as 2015, is beginning to realize that while her 'Artisans' are supplying her with what they believe to be the truth, the actual truth belongs to the claimants and that she has been misled, not deliberately perhaps, but misled all the same for some considerable time.

One thought on “**Post Office Trial. What is the truth?**”

1. **Iain Tarron.** says:
December 15, 2018 at 12:18 pm

Tim

IMHO think this is a naive view – you've got to be a REALLY unenquiring and incompetent CEO NOT to have bottomed that question long before being summoned to parliament

And the second half of that sentence after what is the truth talking about what “she believes” is basically saying (without saying) “find a form of words that I can present that backs up our case”

Lets not forget, at this point their sincere hope was that JFSA would never raise the funds to pursue the case and would wither and die if the lid could be kept on.

All no doubt, so that she can feign faux outrage at having been misled if the inconvenient truth did eventually surface.

She must be thanking God for the distraction of Brexit, otherwise she would have been hauled back to parliament and roasted for POL admissions at the trial about how THEY CAN AND HAVE remote access

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