

For the attention of the Rt Hon. Liam Byrne.

GRO

From Henry Staunton

By Email

Henry Staunton henrystaunton

GRO

March 1, 2024

Dear Mr Byrne,

Post Office and Horizon: Ensuring full and fair redress

Thank you again for the opportunity to come to the House on Tuesday and give evidence to the Business and Trade Committee.

I think we all agree that what has happened to these poor postmasters and their families is a tragedy and a scandal, and needs to be addressed with far greater urgency than it has to date. I am delighted to see your Committee doing what it can to maintain pressure on Government and other relevant institutions to live up to their duty to expedite redress.

With that in mind, and having reflected on the heart-rending testimony last Tuesday of the postmasters themselves, not to mention the evidence of deep dysfunction within the Post Office - the extent of which I really only understood towards the latter stages of my short tenure as chairman - I wanted to set down some further thoughts on what now needs to be done.

It seems to be that Government and the Department for Business & Trade have been allowed to use the Post Office as a *fig leaf* for their stalling, their evasion, and their prevarication for too long.

Instead of owning up to their failings and doing the decent thing by the poor postmasters and their families, they have consistently hidden behind the Post Office's skirts, spinning their way away from trouble. This has been proven over the course of the last decade and has been made very clear to me over the course of the 13 months I was Post Office chairman.

The Government cannot continue to dodge its responsibilities, pretending in public to be all heart and compassion, while it allows stony-faced lawyers to rack up their hours doing their best to prevaricate and penny-pinch. The very framework of the compensation must change.

Not only must the Government stop ducking its responsibility to compensate those wronged, it must do so promptly. A hard, concrete deadline - ideally no more than six months - must be agreed. Speed is of the essence; postmasters are dying off as the Government attempts to evade its obligations. It's the oldest trick in the book.

Rather than delaying proceedings, the Government needs to proceed with a sense of urgency. Convictions must be overturned; postmasters must be

exonerated. Most of all they must be believed, listened to, heard, rather than having to be put on trial all over again.

The proposed compensation of £600,000 is better but not enough. Compensation of £1m for each convicted postmaster strikes me as appropriate. Thousands of other postmasters, who were not convicted but who lost everything —and have been treated so shoddily, for so long, by so many feckless Ministers — have agreed terms after a desperately brutal and toxic process. Forget time-consuming case reviews: they must be offered realistic, proportionate, and fair redress, *now*.

The Post Office needs to be removed completely from the process of administering compensation and the responsibility handed over to a fully independent body created for that sole purpose.

And, finally, the Post Office itself should be demutualised and taken out of arms-length government control, ideally by handing it over lock, stock and barrel to the postmasters themselves. For it is they not the pen-pushers at the centre who know their customers, their neighbourhoods and their communities and will restore the post office to its rightful place in our nation's economic life.

When I spoke out about the issues, the last thing I wanted to do was to make this about individuals, but to throw a light on why the system is failing and why postmasters are still being so badly treated, despite so many broken promises. Yet my attempts to highlight these issues have been met, as I said to the Committee, by a shameful closing of ranks by people, who are more interested in covering each others' backs, than doing what they know to be right.

Again as I said on Tuesday, if, as a result of having not taken my dismissal lying down, I will at least have achieved something, if the sunlight of disinfectant which the Secretary of State so approves of, means that government now lives up to its promises.

Yours

Henry Staunton