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Sent: Tue 21/04/2015 4:39:27 PM (UTC)
To: Melanie Corfield; [GRO] Ruth X
Barker; [GRO]
Subject: Email

Both
David Aaronovitch is a writer on the Times who published a great book about conspiracy theories. I know him a little. I would like to send him the note below. Views?
Mark

Hi David

Many thanks for connecting through Twitter. We had occasional contact when I was Jack Straw's SPAD. I find myself now, as Comms director of the Post Office, in the midst of what feels like a conspiracy theory - and having read your brilliant book on this very subject I wanted to share it with you.

It's a long story but I will try to keep it short. A group of ex-postmasters believes that our computer system, used for millions of transactions every day, led to losses in their branch. Some were convicted of offences relating to these losses.

Being a responsible business we set out to work through whether they had a case. We appointed a firm of independent forensic accountants, called Second Sight, to take a look. This was in 2012.

They reported in 2013. They suggested that there were no systemic issues with the computer system but that our training and support may not always have reached desired standards. Most of the reporting focused on two glitches in the IT, which had been remedied and which did not affect any of the postmasters involved (and no-one lost any money).

Our response was to set up a mediation scheme for those with complaints to have a chance to raise their issues. We advertised the scheme and around 150 cases (not all with convictions) came forward. We paid for them to get professional advice, set up a working group with an independent chair (a former judge) to decide on whether mediation should be taken on in each case and contracted Second Sight to review each case following our own investigation.

Second Sight also set out to produce "thematic" reports aimed at aiding the process. We've provided thousands of pages of information to Second Sight: everything but legally privileged information.

The case of the subpostmasters is led by a group called the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance. They have the support of a few MPs (or ex MPs) notably James Arbuthnot, Oliver Letwin, Mike Wood and Andrew Bridgen.

The MPs initially supported our approach but around Christmas time they withdrew their backing, alleging that we were blocking cases from mediation. This is not supported by the facts.

They secured a Westminster Hall debate. I can send you the transcript but in short the Post Office was lambasted for its approach and sometimes in an extraordinary fashion. We responded with a detailed document setting out our position on each accusation. One allegation is that we had run an underground room where employees - in "casual clothing" - manipulated the branch account of post offices. This is not possible but was stated as fact in Parliament.

Our contractual relationships with postmasters were described as Victorian - in fact they are standard franchisee contracts.

The debate did not secure much media coverage but was covered - twice in a week - by the BBC One Show.

The debate then led to a select committee hearing to which we submitted significant evidence. Again there was little coverage except by BBC Inside Out and Private Eye, which has reported on the issue regularly.

This BBC coverage was generated by a freelance journalist, Nick Wallis. His blog is here xxx It sets out very clearly his views on the Post Office. He believes we set out to destroy lives.

We completed our investigations in March. In order to speed the process we agreed to mediate all cases without a court

judgement. In cases where there had been legal proceedings, legal avenues remain open. We've offered all cases a meeting with their MP where they agree. Only two have agreed to this despite repeated offers.

We published a report on the process, importantly setting out that that after almost three years there was still no evidence of faults with our computer system or indeed of miscarriages of justice (if evidence of latter did emerge we would be under a legal duty to make them known). This report wasn't covered by any media outlet other than PA.

Second Sight's final report was sent to applicants last week and led to significant BBC coverage on Monday. On this occasion, in the interests of transparency, we offered to send the report - which we contest for a number of reasons - to interested parties along with our response, which is very detailed. The coverage was all based on the Second Sight report and it's allegation with a standard "post office denies it all" final line.

I think the Post Office has gone over and above the call of duty on this matter. We've taken the concerns of a small number of people (150 from the 500k who have used the system over last decade), listened, set up a process with independent oversight, paid for professional advice. But we are portrayed by Nick Wallis, James Arbuthnot and others as a disgraceful organisation.

I've looked as dispassionately as I can at the evidence and I am as satisfied as I can be that the Post Office has acted honourably and fairly throughout.

We have not always put spokespeople up on the issue - perhaps that is a mistake - because of the need to avoid discussions about individual cases. And so we can be accused of not doing ourselves any favours in that sense.

But overall I simply feel that conspiracy has taken over here (Nick Wallis' blog or the Twitter feed of CWU postmasters, where I was recently depicted as "Comical Ali" give a sense of it). I think my main frustration is that it seems impossible to get a fair hearing - in media, in Parliament or anywhere.

One could argue that it has not had much coverage - you may not be aware of the issue. But that seems beside the point to me.

I'm not sure why I am sharing with you and hope you don't mind me doing so. I appreciate that this, if it is a conspiracy theory, hardly ranks alongside those described in your book. But I think it is interesting and thought you might do so too.

I hope all is well with you and thank you again for reading.

Best wishes
Mark

Mark Davies
Communications and Corporate Affairs Director

GRO

Sent from my iPhone