

For the attention of the Rt Hon. Liam Byrne.
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From Henry Staunton
By Email

March 4, 2024

Dear Mr Byrne,

Post Office and Horizon: Ensuring full and fair redress

Clarification of my remarks

In my testimony to the Business and Trade Committee on February 27, 2024, I made reference to the Speak Up dossier prepared by the Post Office HR Director and the circumstances regarding the investigation into the Chief Executive Nick Read, which as you recall caused something of a stir.

I have since had the opportunity to access material not available to me prior to the Hearing which has shed additional light on those circumstances. This material which includes contemporaneous records, have provided me with further detail, which I was not able to recall from memory alone.

I have therefore now established the details of the incidents which the Post Office inquisitors decided were grounds to widen the investigation against the CEO, to include me.

The conversation, which was referred to in the Terms of Reference that were presented to me, was an account, taken completely out of context, of a conversation involving the HR Director, in January 2023. In that conversation, I referred to remarks made to me by a third party when I was in a previous role. I also asked about the ethnic origin of a candidate. I was, and have been a supporter of Board diversity, as evidenced in the current Post Office Ltd Board Non- Executive Director composition. The context of my conversation was that whilst reviewing a list of shortlisted candidates for a NED position, I recounted, by way of example of the obstacles that I had encountered previously in my attempts to promote Board diversity, a conversation I had had when I was chair of another organisation in which, a woman in a senior management role had said to me that she did not like appointing “girls” because they were, in her experience, “pains in the arses”. It was clear to the HR Director at the time that I was not personally using offensive terms, if anything the opposite, and she confirmed that to me subsequently. Indeed, given the context it could not have been understood in any other way.

Furthermore, it should be noted that, the HR Director and I were of similar mind in pushing the Post Office CEO for more to be done to increase ethnic representation at senior levels, as well as tackle the misogyny that was pervasive in the organisation

and spend less time agitating about his pay. I would add that one of the things that I am most proud of during my abbreviated tenure is the fact that the PO Board now includes no less than three ethnic minority directors. I personally oversaw the appointment of one of those directors, Mr Andrew Darfoor, as well as the appointment of a woman, Amanda Burton, as head of the Board remuneration committee.

When the HR Director came to write her Speak Up dossier, which was not a legal document but an expression of her frustration, she made reference to that conversation without naming me, and in an entirely different context. Her purpose, as she communicated to me, was to express what she felt was the attitude of the Chief Executive to her as the only woman in the senior management team: she felt that she was being treated by Read and his henchmen as a “pain the arse” for focusing on tackling the toxic culture rather than prioritising Read's salary.

Not only did she not intend to attribute that remark to me, but she specifically did not include me in her complaint, for the very simple reason that her issue with respect to her full complaint, entirely related to Nick Read’s conduct towards her and had nothing to do with me. Indeed, she had no doubt that I was fully supportive of her position, and she had previously come to me on numerous occasions for advice on how to deal with Read's behaviour towards her, which in her, and my view, constituted bullying as demonstrated in detail in the appendices to the Speak Up dossier.

The Speak Up dossier also covers in detail Nick Read’s badgering over his salary and repeated threats to resign which I referred to in my testimony.

It was only subsequently when she was interviewed by the Post Office investigators, and was questioned specifically about the reference to the unnamed Board member’s remarks, that she admitted that the Board Member was in fact me. However, they were clearly not interested in understanding the context of the remarks, which were quoting critically what was said by a third party on another occasion at another organisation. All they were interested in was the fact that they had stumbled on a pretext for widening the investigation to include me, which is why I can only consider this sham investigation as a stitch up.

I would also stress that despite what PO have said, I believe you will find that whilst other PO employees were named in the Speak Up dossier, the Speak Up complaint was entirely directed at Nick Read, his own conduct and lack of his management of the many governance and compliance issues. I believe that were you to have access to the Speak Up dossier you would be able to confirm that I was not specifically named in relation to the comment above, but it has now been used to justify a separate investigation into me, a fact which was not made clear to me.

Despite the unbelievably weak grounds for launching an investigation into me personally which was prompted by a primary complaint by the HR Director against the Chief Executive, and the Chief Executive alone, I have fully cooperated with the investigation, have answered all their questions to the best of my ability, and indeed have recently attended an interview with the Barrister leading the investigation. I take

assertions to the contrary by both the Post Office and the Business Department very seriously indeed. To me they are further evidence of the way closing ranks and covering people's backs have, through this entire sorry episode, been given priority over getting at the truth. I do not recognise the false equivalence between the allegations against Nick Read, some of which are serious, and the allegations against me which are flimsy in the extreme.

I remain at your disposal for any further information or clarifications you may require.

Yours

Henry Staunton