

Book Review – Richard Higginson

The Great Post Office Scandal: The fight to expose a multimillion pound IT disaster which put innocent people in jail

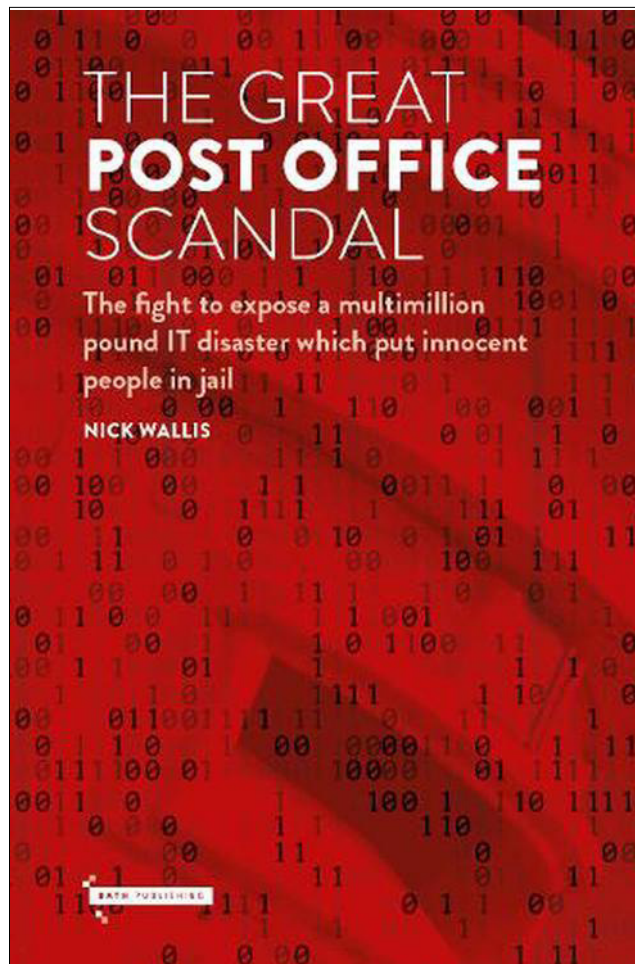
By Nick Wallis

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On April 23 2021, the Court of Appeal quashed the conviction of 39 former subpostmasters and ruled that their prosecutions were an affront to the public conscience. The scandal which the Court exposed has been described as one of the worst miscarriages of justice in UK legal and corporate history. The 39 were just a fraction of the 738 people who, between 2000 and 2015, were prosecuted by the Post Office for theft, false accounting and fraud. The prosecutions were largely based on evidence drawn from Horizon, the deeply flawed computer system produced by ICL/ Fujitsu that threw up duplicate entries, lost transactions and made faulty calculations. Where these errors resulted in apparent losses, subpostmasters were forced by the Post Office to settle discrepancies (often substantial sums) from their own pockets. Those who could not or would not pay were sacked and taken to court. Many have still not been paid adequate compensation.

To date only one significant book has been written about the scandal. This is it. The author, Nick Wallis, is an investigative journalist who has been following the story since 2010, when he met a taxi driver who told him that

his pregnant wife Seema Misra had just been sent to prison for a crime she didn't commit. Wallis broadcast his first investigation for the BBC in 2011, subsequently made two Panorama programmes, and dedicated a large



part of the next decade to exposing the scandal and helping the wronged subpostmasters seek justice. The great strength of his book is that he has met and interviewed many of the men and women who were badly treated. Their stories are heart-rending. As befits his

craft, his style is highly journalistic, and he delights in short chapters with dramatic endings, as if he was writing a macabre thriller.

Among numerous dubious aspects of the Post Office's behaviour over the last 20 years which Wallis highlights, the following struck me as especially scandalous:

- The original decision to go ahead with the implementation of Horizon when internal Post Office documents show they knew it to be unreliable.
- The uselessness of the helpline which was supposed to assist postmasters with problems.
- The response of the auditors – many of the postmasters who contacted the auditors for assistance were accused of wrongdoing. Why would a dishonest person who is allegedly fiddling the Post Office call in the experts for assistance?
- Each postmaster being told that they were the only ones who had problems – a disgraceful policy of sustained corporate mendacity.
- The failure of the postmasters' union, the National Federation of Subpostmasters, to offer meaningful support to members in difficulty or voice public concerns, supinely siding with the management in insisting that the Horizon system was robust. The postmasters only became aware that they were not 'alone' when one of their wronged number, Alan Bates, took the initiative and got several of them together. This

led to the formation of the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance campaign group. It was Bates who successfully took the Post Office to the High Court in 2018.

- The persistent pig-headedness of the Post Office, continuing for years to insist that their computer system was sound when it wasn't, prosecuting postmasters when it was scarcely conceivable that they could have appointed so many dishonest people in the first place, and in 2014 ignoring the critical conclusions of the report which they commissioned from Second Sight, an independent forensic accountancy firm. The accountants said they were not persuaded that Horizon was fit for purpose, that the Post Office's investigations prior to initiating civil recovery action or criminal proceedings were inadequate, and – a highly contentious point – 'our current, evidence-based opinion is that Fijutsi/Post Office, did have and may well still have the ability to directly alter branch records without the knowledge of the Subpostmasters'.

The results of this corporate failure are now well known. Many postmasters suffered public humiliation, bankruptcy, imprisonment and serious illness. One even committed suicide.

Although Wallis documents the scandal with great thoroughness, there are some important questions that the book left unanswered. Why was the Horizon system so inconsistent? Although the numbers of postmasters badly affected by it were large, there appear to have been many more who found it satisfactory (or never surfaced with complaints). How could this be? And why were the accused postmasters so

poorly served by the legal system which allowed so many 'unsafe' convictions?


Christians will share in the indignation about this injustice but also be concerned about the role played by Paula Vennells, the non-stipendiary Anglican priest who was Chief Executive of the Post Office from 2012 to 2019. She has been subject to massive criticism in recent years, much of it highly abusive. Yet in her early years in office, she earned considerable praise for turning the Post Office around from a perilous financial situation. It was on the back of this glowing reputation that I invited Paula to be a keynote speaker at the 2017 Faith in Business conference. She came over as a calm, compassionate, courageous and determined person and I wrote a positive profile about her which appeared in FiBQ 18:1 (and is actually cited by Wallis on p.173 of his book).

I must confess in retrospect that I should have been more alert to the postmaster scandal that was now rumbling strongly in the background, but had not yet become headline public news. Participants at the conference seem to have been similarly unaware. I do not recall anyone asking Paula any awkward questions about the issue.

Paula Vennells does not emerge well from Wallis's book. When she became Chief Executive she appears to have had an appetite for getting to the bottom of the Horizon problems, but then backed off, for reasons that are not entirely clear. She was less than forthcoming when questioned by a Parliamentary Select Committee and refused to let Nick Wallis interview her.

But while the evidence Wallis accumulates makes it difficult to defend her, I also have a strong conviction that

she has been unduly scapegoated for the scandal. Why does Wallis show no interest in the Chief Executives who preceded her, implemented the Horizon system and started the process of prosecutions, leaving the terrible mess that she inherited? And why has Tim Parker, who was Chairman of the Post Office from 2015-22, received so little censure compared with Paula Vennells? Accountability for the mistakes of an organisation surely rests with a chair as much as the chief executive. Yet Wallis only mentions Parker twice, very briefly. It may be that Vennells has attracted the lion's share of the criticism because she is a woman and a high-profile Christian.

During her interview at Ridley Hall (and this is cited by Wallis), Paula Vennells said that when she assumed her new role she took biblical inspiration from the young King Solomon, who showed humility in asking God for a wise and understanding heart, so that he could rule his people with justice (1 Kings 3:6-12). Very good, but my abiding reflection after reading this book is that there was even more to be learnt from Solomon's father King David, and the sorry episode when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and ended up conniving at the death of her husband Uriah (2 Samuel 11). Not that there is any sniff of sexual misdoing in the Post Office story, but there is a similar pattern to these two events separated by three millennia: each began with a serious initial error which led to one further error (indeed sin) after another, culminating in the most appalling cover-up. The lesson is that as individuals and institutions we find it all too difficult to admit our mistakes. People get seriously hurt as a result, and the end costs are much more expensive than when a mistake is recognised honestly and remedied quickly. 



Richard Higginson was Director of Faith in Business at Ridley Hall from 1989 until his retirement in 2018. He is now Chair of Faith in Business. He is a founder-editor of FiBQ and the author of several books, including *Faith, Hope & the Global Economy* and (with Kina Robertshaw) *A Voice to be Heard*.