

Mr Bates vs the Post Office plunges Tory government into deeper crisis: The need for serious drama

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Rarely has a television drama had the social and political impact of ITV's four-part series *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*. It plunged Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Conservative government into a major political crisis by its exposure of Britain's worst ever miscarriage of justice affecting nearly 1,000 sub-postmasters.

There have been few occasions when a television show has been so central in political life. Testifying to the show's quality, this also points to a wider issue: Art matters.

The show's lead actor, Toby Jones, said of the supportive response among the population to *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*, "In most of the political upheavals in history, not least ancient Greece and revolutionary Russia, that drama has been at the centre of political change, that people have used it to humanise, dramatised and bring forth change."

Audience response indicates how receptive viewers are to serious dramas about serious issues. *Mr Bates* became the most watched programme of the year on any channel, with an average audience of 9.8 million viewers per episode. The first episode has been seen by 10.9 million viewers. The series and its accompanying documentary, *Mr Bates vs the Post Office: The Real Story*, have been streamed 16.6 million times.

This led the BBC to repeat its 2022 *Panorama* documentary, *The Post Office Scandal*, outlining the plight of hundreds of Post Office sub-postmasters wrongly accused of theft and false accounting. *Mr Bates* dramatises their story.

Within days, the government announced the possibility of an unprecedented blanket amnesty for the 900 convictions linked to the deeply flawed Horizon accounting program and the cover-up mounted by Fujitsu, the Post Office and successive governments. Only 93 of these wrongful convictions have been overturned so far.

If the scale of injustice surprised some viewers, the scale of audience response startled the government. In 1995, John Major's Conservative government announced the procurement process for a new computerised Post Office system. The successful bidder was Fujitsu, with its Horizon system, largely because it was the cheapest option in most categories. The £1.5 billion contract was financed under the private finance initiative (PFI) model introduced by Major but championed by the 1997-2010 Tony Blair/Gordon Brown Labour governments.

Rolled out from 1999, initially under Labour, Horizon eventually

covered 18,000 post offices. Postmasters immediately experienced unexplained accounting shortfalls but received no help when they reported them. Instead, the Post Office started prosecuting. Between 1999 and 2015, 736 sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses were convicted.

Citing postmasters' contractual liability for any shortfalls, the Post Office hounded them out of their jobs, forcing many into bankruptcy and leading to the imprisonment of 236. At least four committed suicide. Lives were ruined.

The Post Office sought to suppress the truth about Fujitsu's faulty IT system, issuing legal threats to the press and lying to parliamentary committees while destroying evidence. *Mr Bates* tackles the sub-postmasters' fight for justice against this.

Few media outlets covered the story regularly. Actor Will Mellor described cast members saying, "Can you believe what these bastards put these people through? Can you believe they knew what they were doing and they just kept turning the screw?"

The Post Office stonewalled victims seeking help. As Alan Bates, who founded the Justice for Sub-Postmasters Alliance (JFSA) in 2009, put it, "everyone accepts that there can be problems with computer systems, that is everyone but the Post Office."

Bates, played by Toby Jones, is the central figure in writer Gwyneth Hughes's dramatisation. He and his partner Suzanne (played by Julie Hesmondhalgh) took on a post office in 1998. His first Horizon problem, in 2000, was rectified, but further shortfalls appeared. The Post Office terminated his contract with three months' notice.

The series opens with the Post Office attempting to shut down Bates's office before his contract expires. He refuses to let them in, adamant that his accounting is not at fault. The real Bates has said that previous experience with similar systems had given him "enough experience to suspect the truth... they were wrong, and I knew they were wrong."

The Post Office insisted Horizon could not be accessed remotely. But it was a network system, as Bates has explained, and "any networked system has the potential for allowing remote access somewhere along the line if you have the means of accessing it."

We see each victim being told when ringing a help line that they were alone in having problems. Bates had refused to sign accounts he knew were wrong, but Jo Hamilton (Monica Dolan) is arrested

on charges of theft and false accounting. Noel Thomas (Ifan Huw Dafydd), convicted and imprisoned, spends his 60th birthday behind bars. When Lee Castleton (Mellor) fails in attempts to defend his innocence in court, the Post Office saddle him with punitive costs of £350,000. National Federation of Sub-Postmasters rep Michael Rudkin (Shaun Dooley) saw Fujitsu's Horizon department remotely accessing live accounts and found his own system showing retributive losses immediately afterwards.

The uniformly strong casting reflects these calculatedly isolated stories. Toby Jones's quiet but doggedly intelligent Bates is a brilliant focus for the kind-hearted Jo, the pugnacious Lee and the bitter Michael.

Hughes brings out the full impact of the Post Office's criminal conduct on each of them when they finally share their stories through the JFSA. Dooley is outstanding in Rudkin's frustrated rage and guilt at having blamed his wife. Mellor is immensely moving when Lee breaks down for the first time.

Jones has said, "You make drama like this because it's about people's relationship with their community... It shows that people can talk to each other and unite and take action."

A quiet rage marks the series. The Post Office bring in independent forensic accountants to exonerate Fujitsu. This backfires when Second Sight's Bob Rutherford (Ian Hart) uncovers IT faults and believes the sub-postmasters. The Post Office ends Second Sight's involvement.

Hart's presence again points to the wider issue of serious dramas. This excellent actor has a long record in fundamentally serious work with the likes of Ken Loach and Neil Jordan. He was outstanding in *Help*, one of the few serious dramas about the COVID pandemic.

Mr Bates conveys brilliantly outrage at this injustice. Bates (Jones) agrees to a Post Office mediation scheme proposed by CEO Paula Vennells (Lia Williams) in 2012. The Post Office closed it down three years later, when Second Sight were about to report on miscarriages of justice.

The JFSA then undertook a group litigation order lawsuit, representing 555 sub-postmasters. They won a moral victory, but nothing like restitution. In December 2019, the Post Office conceded. The claimants were awarded £58 million compensation, but after legal costs were left with just £11 million—approximately £20,000 for each claimant. Only 11 victims have so far been compensated in full.

The script recognises the continued wilful obstruction and delaying tactics, and that justice is still to be done, but pins its faith on the very system that created the problem. The responsibility of government and parliament as the sole shareholder of the Post Office is stated clearly, but the full extent of governmental criminality and cover-up is not explored.

Most attention has been directed at the CBE (Commander of the British Empire) awarded to Vennells in 2019 for "services to the Post Office." She was appointed CEO in 2012 by then Tory Prime Minister David Cameron in the drive to privatise the Post Office, part of Royal Mail Group. Royal Mail's CEO at the time, Adam Crozier, is not portrayed. He subsequently became CEO of ITV.

Some 1.2 million people called in a petition for Vennells to be stripped of her award. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, Director of

Public Prosecutions at the Crown Prosecution Service during at least 27 of the prosecutions, could not even back this demand. Vennells herself then announced she would return it.

Hughes presents Tory MP James Arbuthnot (Alex Jennings) as a concerned champion of his constituent, but his intervention was aimed at managing a crisis that might derail privatisation. Now Lord Arbuthnot, he continues in the same role, encouraging illusions in the official inquiry and limited prosecutions.

To date, no executives of the Post Office, Fujitsu or any of the government ministers involved have been punished. Fujitsu, with revenue last year of \$27.4 billion, is still receiving huge private government contracts. Horizon, now extended to 2025, will have a lifetime value of £2.4 billion. Since 2012, four government departments have awarded Fujitsu 68 contracts worth £2.7 billion. Private profit cannot be jeopardised, and Arbuthnot is there to limit the damage.

Mr Bates takes Tory pretensions of concern at face value. This finds its most grotesque expression in allowing Tory MP Nadhim Zahawi to play himself in a parliamentary committee grilling the Post Office. This venal and cynical chancer, sacked over allegations of tax avoidance, gets to pose as a moral champion.

Even the partial presentation of these crimes is both powerful and moving. A mass audience of workers was shown a massive injustice.

After sub-postmaster Martin Griffith (Colin Tierney) took his own life, Second Sight concluded he was innocent. Post Office negotiator Angela van den Bogerd (Katherine Kelly) offers his widow (Clare Calbraith) a settlement, providing she withdraws from the investigation and discusses it no further.

In court, van den Bogerd (Kelly) was forced to reveal that the Post Office had long known Horizon could be accessed remotely. Director James Strong shows her weeping at her desk afterwards—for herself after being found out.

As Mellor asks, "Can you believe they knew what they were doing and they just kept turning the screw? Where's the humanity in this, where's the people going, 'This is wrong'?"

Jones has called drama a place that "suggests change," even if people "don't believe that it can deliver change." *Mr Bates* has confirmed that drama addressing serious issues can have a major impact. The growing need for change demands and must be given artistic expression.



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