

MPs, the establishment and expertise

The Horizon scandal is a good extreme case of what can go wrong when too many Ministers and MPs accept official advice and believe experts, only to discover later that the official advice and expertise is badly wrong and doing grave harm.

I am all in favour of expertise. If I was ill I would seek advice from a doctor as they know so much more than I about diseases and health problems. I would also be aware of the need to ask what the side effects of treatment might be and what the record of success has been if treatment was proposed as ultimately I would have to make the decision about what to do.

Valuing experts does not mean that experts are always right. Indeed, in the areas I know best where I have some expertise of my own I am well aware of the divergence of opinions amongst the experts. This makes a Minister's job both very interesting and very challenging. Advisers advise and Ministers decide. Sometimes a Minister needs to ask for a second opinion or a different expert view. Good Ministers are generalists but they have a sense of when the expertise is well based and when it could let them down. Good Ministers also wish to achieve good results for the public they serve. That too can demand changing experts to get a better answer.

I and a few other MPs, impressed by the work of James Arbuthnot, asked questions about Horizon from early days of the problems emerging. We all knew good honest local PO managers and could not believe some of them were accused of fraud and false accounting. As we realised the numbers involved I asked how senior managers of the Post Office and senior officials in the sponsor department could think there was suddenly a big outbreak of fraud around the same time as a new accounting system was introduced. It was also strange that no evidence came forward of these alleged fraudsters suddenly having bloated bank accounts or stuffed wallets of their own, going on a spending spree from the profits of crime.

It was frustrating that so many senior officials and Ministers stuck to the Post Office line. In future blogs I will look at other very worrying examples of where establishment thinking based on errant expertise is doing damage. As readers will know, I have been challenging establishment thinking over inflation, growth, reductions of CO₂, energy policy and migration amongst others. When people say they want change in the way we are governed, they are often seeking change in the controlling theories and policy prescriptions. When all the main parties accept the same expertise which turns out to be wrong democracy is damaged.