

Nationalised industries, quangos and Ministers

The way the Post Office, a nationalised industry throughout, treated its sub postmasters must have destroyed the myth that nationalising a business makes it ethical, good for its staff and customers and capable of resolving public policy problems. Just as the old nationalised water industry tipped sewage onto beaches, and the nationalised railway kept cutting services and sacking staff whilst failing to run the trains on time, so modern nationalised bodies show they are no good at doing what customers need and want. The Environment Agency wrecked the Somerset levels by not using pumps and not keeping the drains and ditches clear. The North Sea Transition Authority delights in closing down our oil and gas fields so we can import more fossil fuel generating more CO₂. Local Councils pursue vendettas against motorists. DEFRA has been specialising in stopping us growing our own food with large grants to let the land go wild.

It is curious how this century Labour, Lib Dem and Conservative Ministers have been keen on more so called independent bodies with greater powers. They seemed to think they would do a better job and would take the blame and the strain. Instead many of them did a worse job whilst the blame as far as the public is concerned rested with the Ministers who could have changed the instructions or the management of the body. Some Ministers have become timid or have been house trained to believe they must simply rely on the advice and defend the statements and actions of these independent bodies even when they are obviously wrong and or upsetting many members of the public.

Government needs fewer of these bodies. It needs to supervise them effectively. When I was a Minister with reporting quangos I insisted on an annual review meeting of the previous year's performance and actions prior to publishing the annual report, and an annual budget meeting to discuss how much they should spend and how much public money or underwriting they might need in the year ahead. If big issues cropped up or if their performance was poor there could be additional meetings during the year. I reported any intervention I made to Parliament and was prepared to discuss the published budgets and annual reports which became open documents.

If necessary I asked a CEO or Chairman to leave