

My Speech at the Parliamentary Debate on the Future of BBC Local Radio

Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con): I entirely agree with that passionate defence of localism by Rachael Maskell. Local must mean local and we do not want people in the BBC in London imposing on us their views on how our local radio should be conducted and how big our locality should be. I see behind the centralised planning at the BBC a distorted version of what our constitution should look like within the United Kingdom, and a wish to impose that—against the clear majority wishes of people, whenever they have been asked about these subjects in referendums and elections.

It is not just that the BBC wishes to create phony regional groupings instead of truly local radio, but that it has a very distorted view of devolution. The BBC seems to be an enthusiast for devolution to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but it does not even know England exists. It always wants lopsided devolution. One of the four important constituent parts of the United Kingdom is scarcely ever mentioned; it is never suggested it should have any powers or right to self-government and there is no engagement with English issues on BBC radio in the way that there is a clear engagement with Scottish, Welsh or Northern Ireland issues. That causes enormous resentment.

In my own case, local radio is organised at the county level, at Radio Berkshire. That makes sense, because it is an area that we can recognise and there is some loyalty to our royal and ancient county. Many people now do not know that it had its borders artificially compressed in a local government reorganisation some 50 years ago, under a Conservative Government that I think made some mistakes. The county retains an enormous amount of goodwill and residual loyalty, and people are very happy for our local radio to be organised at that scale. If people had real choice, however, I think Wokingham would rather have a different radio from Reading, and I think we would probably rather have a different radio from Windsor, because we have a different set of issues. But we accept that there have to be some compromises because talented people need to be appointed and paid wages, and that cannot be done to a sensible budget at very local levels.

I urge the BBC to look in the mirror and understand why, in many respects, it is getting so out of touch with its audiences. It has a very narrow range of views and issues that it will allow people to discuss, and it has a particularly warped perspective on how we feel about our areas and what our loyalties belong to. I am allowed to express views from time to time on BBC Radio Berkshire. It does not put me through the ordeal of a pre-interview to find out whether my views are acceptable and fit its caricature of a Conservative in the way that nearly always happens if national radio is thinking of interviewing me. Then, I always have the double interview, and I quite often fail the first interview test because my views are clearly too interesting or unacceptable, or do not fit the caricature that the radio wishes to put into its particular drama. So people are spared my voice on

radio and I have more free time, which is perhaps a wonderful outcome from those events.

I do not find that my local radio quite plots the drama as strongly as national BBC radio and television. I am very grateful for that because I think that good, independent broadcasting of the kind that the BBC says it believes in should allow people of decent views—not extremists who want to break the law, or racists—to conduct civilised conversations and debates through the medium of the BBC. But all too often, that is truncated or impossible because of the way in which the editors operate and their pre-conceived set of views, about which they wish to create some kind of drama.

Colleagues have made extremely good points, which I will emphasise, about the treatment of staff and the way these kinds of proposals are planned. If the BBC wishes to run truly local services, it must listen to us—the local people and the local people’s representatives—and treat its staff well, and be aware that they have given good service in the past and should be taken on a journey of change that makes sense for them as well as for the BBC. This all looks rather top-down, abrupt and unpleasant. Successful organisations understand that their own journeys, evolving as institutions, are best conducted if, at the same time, they allow good journeys for the staff who give them loyal service. That does not seem to be happening in this case.

I will spare you a bit of time, Madam Deputy Speaker—I have made the main points that I wished to make. The BBC needs to be more open to a wider range of views. If it wants to be local, it has to ask us what local means.

Cold Weather Payments

I have been alerted that Cold Weather Payments have been triggered in some post codes in the constituency.

Constituency	Wokingham
Trigger period	7/12/2022 to 13/12/2022
Postcode districts affected in your constituency*	RG1, RG2, RG30, RG40, RG41, RG45, RG5, RG6, RG7
Met Office weather station(s) triggered	Odiham

Cold Weather Payments are made to recipients of selected benefits. To trigger the payments, the average temperature at a specified weather station must be recorded as, or forecast to be, 0°C or below for seven consecutive days. The DWP provides further information for claimants here:

<https://www.gov.uk/cold-weather-payment/eligibility>

The alert was **triggered on 7/12/2022** for the period 7/12/2022 to 13/12/2022.

£25 will be paid to eligible residents within Wokingham constituency living in the postcode district(s) listed above.

[Compensation for Postal Managers](#)

I have pursued the issue of compensation for Postal Managers who were wrongly accused when the new computer system failed to account properly for their businesses. The letter beneath gives us the latest update on compensation, where I have urged the government to be generous and get these matters settled:

Dear Colleague,

POST OFFICE: COMPENSATION FOR HORIZON SCANDAL

The Post Office Horizon scandal, which began over 20 years ago, has had a devastating impact on the lives of many postmasters. Starting in the late 1990s, the Post Office began installing Horizon accounting software, but faults in the software led to shortfalls in branches' accounts. The Post Office demanded sub-postmasters cover the shortfalls, and in many cases wrongfully prosecuted them between 1999 and 2015 for false accounting or theft.

I am writing to update you on the latest steps that the Government is taking to ensure that swift and fair compensation is made available to postmasters.

Group Litigation Order scheme

The Government wants the postmasters who exposed this scandal through the High Court Group Litigation Order case to receive similar compensation to that available to their peers. In March 2022, the Chancellor announced that further funding would be made available to deliver this compensation. On 2 September my predecessor wrote to all postmasters in the Group Litigation Order group to ask for their views about whether BEIS or the Post Office should deliver the scheme, and whether it should be organised along the lines of the Historical Shortfall Scheme or based on Alternative Dispute Resolution. In short there was very strong support for an Alternative Dispute Resolution scheme, to be delivered by BEIS. This is the route that we will follow.

The informal consultation also requested views on other issues related to the scheme. Unsurprisingly, there was considerable concern among postmasters that the scheme should be subject to properly independent input. In the light of this, we have decided to create an independent advisory Board chaired by Professor Chris Hodges, an expert in alternative dispute resolution. The

membership of that Board will include Lord Arbuthnot and Rt Hon Kevan Jones MP who are recognised by colleagues across Parliament for many years of outstanding campaigning for the wronged postmasters. The advisory Board will be supported by a BEIS secretariat.

Since the consultation closed, a great deal of work has been done to develop the details of scheme, drawing on the detailed comments made in response to the consultation. I am today writing to members of the Group Litigation Order with further information about how the scheme will work.

We are now asking claimants to prepare preliminary information about their claims. In parallel, we are working to engage Alternative Dispute Resolution specialists and lawyers to deliver it. Those experts should be on board in early Spring, and at that point full claims will be submitted. I hope that compensation will start to flow before the summer, and that most cases can be resolved before the end of 2023.

We have already announced that we will meet postmasters' reasonable legal costs in claiming under the scheme. To enable lawyers to work on preparing claims, we are today announcing details of the costs tariff for the early phases of the scheme, which have been set by independent costs draftsmen. We will shortly be inviting claimants' lawyers to make proposals for the expert evidence which they will need. I am also pleased to say that the compensation payments will be disregarded for benefits purposes (once secondary legislation is in place).

I have placed on <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/compensation-scheme-for-group-litigation-order-case-postmasters> a copy of my letter to Group Litigation Order postmasters and a number of supporting documents.

Overtured Historical Convictions

I am also pleased to provide an update on Post Office's progress in delivering compensation to those with overturned historical convictions.

Lord Dyson considered the awards available for non-pecuniary damages, which are personal damages such as mental distress and loss of liberty, in an Early Neutral Evaluation process earlier this year. Since then, the Government has supported Post Office's approach to deliver compensation more swiftly by settling non-pecuniary claims first using the framework established by Lord Dyson. As of 1 December, 51 claims for non-pecuniary damages have been received and 37 offers made, worth £4.7m in addition to interim payments already paid.

Regarding pecuniary damages, which are financial damages such as loss of earnings, only 8 claims have been received to date, 2 of which have been settled in full and final settlement alongside their non-pecuniary damages. Government continues to encourage Post Office to process these claims as fast as possible.

As of 1 December, 82 claims for interim compensation have been received and

77 payments made, worth £7.7m. Post Office has also identified potential cases of hardship and offered and paid further hardship payments of £100,000 to 3 postmasters. Furthermore, following the recent statutory tax exemption and Early Neutral Evaluation, Post Office decided to increase the upper limit of interim payments for all future applicants to £163,000 (from the original level of £100,000). For those claimants who received the original interim payment amount of up to £100,000, the Post Office had focussed on progressing and settling their non-pecuniary claims. However, where claimants who had received the original interim payment amount of up to £100,000 and were not able to submit a non-pecuniary claim by early December and so it is unlikely that their non-pecuniary claim would be settled by the end of the year, Post Office has offered top-up payments of £63,000.

Historical Shortfall Scheme

I am also pleased to see the progress that Post Office has made in delivering compensation to postmasters through the Historical Shortfall Scheme. As of 30 November, 93% of eligible claimants have been issued offers of compensation, totalling £70.8m.

The cases that remain are some of the most complex and the Post Office is working to process these claims as soon as possible. However, the Government recognises the fact that those claimants who are yet to receive offers or payments may have been waiting for a considerable period of time for their cases to be settled. For these reasons, the Government is pleased that the Post Office will introduce interim payments for those who have yet to receive an offer or who have chosen to dispute their offer. This will be in addition to the existing hardship payments that the Post Office has already been providing to claimants in particularly difficult circumstances.

The Government announced in October that it is providing funding to the Post Office to enable eligible late applications to be accepted into the Historical Shortfall Scheme. The Post Office is beginning to process the late claims it has received to date, and I would encourage anyone else who thinks they might be eligible to get in touch with Post Office at the earliest opportunity to discuss their claim.

Benefit Disregard

The Government is aware of the impact of the Horizon scandal on affected postmasters, resulting in significant financial hardship, including bankruptcy for some.

Many postmasters have now received compensation payments which would take them over the £16,000 capital limit, rendering them ineligible to receive means-tested benefits and reducing pension credit entitlement. This risks prolonging the impacts of the Horizon scandal on these postmasters by affecting their eligibility to apply for benefits.

We are therefore introducing a benefits disregard for all Post Office and Horizon-related compensation. Once the secondary legislation for this disregard is in place, payments received by postmasters will no longer count

towards the capital limit for means-tested benefits and pension credits and will therefore not affect their eligibility to claim for these.

The Government will legislate to put this disregard in place at the earliest possible opportunity.

Yours ever

RT HON GRANT SHAPPS MP

Secretary of State for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy

[Gordon Brown takes Labour back to a broken model for the UK](#)

It was Gordon Brown who told us once devolution was granted to Scotland Scottish nationalism would melt away. As some of us feared, instead it gave the SNP a bigger platform and more resentments to work on. They proved masterful at governing badly whilst blaming the constitutional settlement and Whitehall for all their woes. Labour failed to put devolution in during the 1970s, used their big majority to do it after 1997, and later lost countless seats in Scotland as payment for their pains.

Gordon is back again setting Labour policy on this most vexatious of political insider questions. He wants more devolved powers for Scotland. He wishes to ignore England and make the devolution within our Union all the more lopsided. Just as the EU wiped England of their maps and tried to balkanise England into a set of unloved regions, so Gordon Brown wishes to do the same. He accepts that Labour lost the crucial referendum to set up an elected regional government in the North East and did not try again. So this time he wants to build regions up from so called partnerships between local Councils aggregating to a new region.

There is no strong regional identity in most parts of England. Exeter does not want to be governed from Bristol, Liverpool does not want to be managed by Manchester. Wokingham is variously bundled into the South East, Rest of the South East (x London), Wessex, Thames Valley, Berks, Bucks and Oxon. None of these regional groupings command our loyalty or consent. We would not vote for any of them to have governments.

People in my area belong to Wokingham Borough or to West Berks. We belong to the county of Berkshire in the country of England. We identify with Berkshire and with England without either having a government. Lop sided devolution has gone too far. Ignoring England's views and needs is wrong. Those who say they want power devolved should listen to people's own perceptions of their identities. The best devolution of power is not to new layers of government but to individuals and businesses to make more of our own decisions.

Further discussions with Minister Lucy Frazer about housing targets

I am having further discussions with Minister Lucy Frazer about the Levelling Up Bill and the housing targets.

