

Funding the Future

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I have to admit that I appear to be using the word 'depressing' quite often on this blog of late. That might, however, reflect my current sentiment about the state of the world. If that is apparent, I feel I should apologise, but it is hard to do so when so much of what is happening in politics and beyond can only be appropriately described in that way.

Yesterday provided further examples. The links to the stories are readily available in all media. Start with the Guardian.

Henry Staunton, who was recently sacked as chairman of the Post Office by Kemi Badenoch, appeared before a House of Commons select committee. The Tories on that committee sought to discredit him. What, however, became readily apparent was that he had come out of retirement to undertake this task because he saw it as being a social obligation to do so. In his mid-70s and with a good pension, he did not need the money. He took the risk of accepting the job to favour the government, and Badenoch had returned the favour by sacking him.

That was depressing enough. The attempt by Jonathan Gullis MP to then smear him was equally depressing. Henry Staunton's retort, which put Gullis very firmly in his place and cast doubt over both the ethics and truthfulness of Badenoch, was well worthwhile watching for both reasons.

Ultimately, though, what was clear from the exchanges with Staunton and others was that civil servants acting on the instruction of ministers were doing exactly what Staunton had claimed, which was to delay payments to postmasters who had been wronged by the Post Office. The weasel words of a senior civil servant clearly seeking to defend Badenoch's position only made matters worse for her.

Then, another select committee heard from David Neal, who was very recently sacked by Home Secretary James Cleverly MP as the UK's border inspector for telling the media about the fifteen reports that he had written on Home Office failings in managing that system, none of which had been published or acted upon. This, he had felt, left him with no choice but to draw attention to these issues if action was to be taken upon them. His evidence referred to the shocking leadership of the Home Office on this issue.

His contempt for its incompetence was apparent, and rightly so.

Then, this morning, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee published its latest report on the failings of HM Revenue and Customs. As they note, for the fifth year in a row, its service levels have declined. The result is that taxpayers are unable to secure the help that they need to pay the right amount of tax.

As importantly, they question HMRC's figures within the tax gap and its use of that flawed report as a management tool, which is something that I have done, persistently, over many years.

But, for the purposes of this narrative, their conclusion that these outcomes are the consequence of deliberate action on the part of HM Treasury and the senior management of HMRC is what matters. Returning to the theme of depressing evidence of the decline in public services as a consequence of the deliberate policy of those put in charge of them by successive Conservative governments deliberately undermining the services the government supplies, this deliberate undermining of the tax system by those tasked with managing it takes some beating.

Is it any surprise that people are depressed about the state of this country when those tasked with its management are deliberately trying to undermine the competence of the government so that they might harm the well-being of the state that we live in? If that is not depressing, what is?