

IN THE BACK



TOWN CENTRES

Postal disorder

COMMUNITIES secretary Steve Reed has set much, ahem, store by rejuvenating high streets across the UK, such as through a “Pride of Place” initiative run with the devolved governments of Wales and Scotland. Alas, one public body hasn’t got the memo on supporting town centres. Yep, it’s the Post Office.

A Post Office branch at the heart of a small town centre can provide a focal point and help neighbouring businesses, which was the function served by the one in Stornoway (pop. 7,000) on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. It was located a couple of hundred metres from the harbour and close to the shops, library and other amenities.

Until last year this was one of around 100 remaining Crown offices directly owned and run by Post Office Ltd. As with so many others, as part of the organisation’s drive to eliminate all Crown offices, it became a franchise run by a company called Universal Office Equipment Ltd. Then last month the Post Office announced the branch was to be taken over by the Co-op.

This might sound a better fit, but supermarkets prefer out-of-town locations with large car parks to town centres. And so it is with Stornoway Co-op, on the edge of town and not within convenient walking distance of the centre. Locals are objecting but suspect a stitch-up that will not be reversed, as the public body that could do most for town centres resolutely does most to damage them.

Across the country, the historic decision to franchise hundreds of post offices to WH Smith is wreaking even greater carnage now the high street chain has been taken over by private equity group Modella and disastrously rebranded as TGJones. The *Guardian* reported this month that the company is renegotiating its franchise agreements to make it easier to close the 60 post office branches it hosts in town centres.

Those in stores TGJones is closing under a cost-cutting drive are already on their way out. Last week TGJones announced it was closing its shop in the West Orchards shopping centre in Coventry next month – leaving the city centre with no post office. A manager at the shopping centre told the BBC that since the post office was “a massive footfall driver”, this was “a disaster”.

● Meanwhile, in shafting-former-sub-postmaster news, the Post Office is contesting convictions referred to the Court of Appeal where the cases relied on a dodgy computer system used in the 1990s called Capture. This pre-dated the infamous Horizon system and is linked to around 30 cases being considered by the Criminal Cases Review Commission. It isn’t just the victims who are disgusted.

Computer Weekly obtained a letter sent by chair of the Horizon Compensation Advisory Board Chris Hodges – across whose desk many an appalling miscarriage has passed – to Post Office chairman Nigel Railton telling him that his stance “causes fresh harm and insult” to sub-postmasters and that the Post Office should tell the appeal court it will not object to appeals.

PALESTINE ACTION

Damage control

WHEN the four Palestine Action activists found guilty of criminal damage in the Filton trial (*Eye* 1775) return to Woolwich Crown Court on 12 June for sentencing, they will learn whether they are to be condemned as terrorists under a draconian provision slipped into major legislation without public debate or scrutiny.

Palestine Action was not proscribed as a terror organisation when activists broke into Israeli defence firm Elbit Systems’ weapons factory outside Bristol in August 2024, causing £1m worth of damage.

Charlotte Head, Samuel Corner, Leona Kamio and Fatema Rajwani were originally arrested on charges relating to the break-in before being arrested for terrorism on day three, though that did not ultimately form part of the charges. However, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) applied for a “terrorist connection sentencing provision”, backed by the judge, Mr Justice (Jeremy) Johnson – a fact that could only be reported after the trial’s conclusion to avoid potential prejudice.

If invoked, it could see them serve harsher sentences with no automatic entitlement to early release, rather than for the criminal damage for which they were convicted. “This is a serious degradation of human rights and it has crept in without anybody properly considering the very dramatic implications,” said one legal insider. “We have gone almost overnight from being allowed to present acts of conscientiousness as mitigation – from the Suffragette movement... to the Fairford Five who sabotaged military aircraft bound for the Iraq War and were defended by Keir Starmer when he was a barrister – to them being classed as terrorists.”

The only time the provision was used previously was in sentencing of Parsons Green bomber, Ahmed Hassan, who got life in 2018 for detonating a device which injured 51 people on a Tube train. At that time, its use was limited to the most serious offences, such as murder.

Judges were given greater sentencing powers to protect the public in the wake of the

London Bridge terror attack of 2019, when radicalised Islamist Usman Khan stabbed five people, killing two. However, barely noticed within the wide-ranging package of legislation was a schedule lowering the threshold by enabling any crime with a maximum sentence of more than two years to be considered an act of terrorism under certain circumstances.

To qualify, the crime must have involved the use or threat of action intended to influence a government or intimidate a section of the public to advance a political, religious, racial or ideological cause. It must also be a specific type of action, including using explosives, serious violence against a person or serious damage to property.

The Filton activists insist their purpose was simply to damage weapons and thereby save lives. The law also does not state what constitutes serious damage. Legal teams believe £1m damage to be an unofficial threshold; however, there was no requirement on Elbit Systems to prove its losses in court and the company was reticent on the subject. The provision was not used against any previous activist campaigns, such as Just Stop Oil. Nor was it invoked in the sentencing of neo-Nazi terrorist Thomas Mair for the 2016 murder of Jo Cox MP. So why is it now being used against Palestine Action?

Freedom of information requests to the CPS, Attorney General’s Office, Home Office and Ministry of Justice seen by *Private Eye* show that none are advising on when non-terrorist offences should be sentenced as terrorism – or even know how many cases are ongoing. Further responses do admit, however, that the CPS or SO15 Counter Terrorism Command consulted with representatives of the Israeli government, armed forces or security services in the months between January 2024 and October 2025, the dates spanning Palestine Action cases. But the CPS refused to disclose precisely what was discussed.

In an earlier unsuccessful application to stay the Filton Six trial (two defendants were acquitted on all counts) on grounds of abuse of process, which can now be reported, defence counsel argued that the “terrorist connection appears to have been a politically motivated misuse and manipulation of the court process to facilitate the proscription of PA”.

Mr Justice Johnson disagreed.



INFECTED BLOOD SCANDAL

Fatal inaction

TWO years after the Infected Blood Inquiry concluded in May 2024, police have managed to consider just one chapter of its report – but have not been able to determine from that whether a criminal investigation into the grim medical experiments on children at Treloar’s School would be viable.

Deputy chief constable Rob Griffin, who is leading the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) review of the inquiry’s findings, said that given their scale and complexity, the review had started by looking at just the 40-page chapter on events at the specialist hospital school in Hampshire, where dozens of youngsters with haemophilia were treated with contaminated blood products.

The inquiry confirmed what the few

surviving pupils had long believed: that they were treated as “objects for research” rather than children, even though “the risks of treatment, including viral risks, were well known to the clinicians involved in decision-making” (*Eye* 1551). Neither pupils nor their parents were told about the risk and they certainly did not consent to it, the inquiry found.

More than 120 haemophiliacs attended the school between 1974 and 1987. Most have since died after contracting Hepatitis or HIV. Some tested positive for HIV while at the school, but were not told about it by staff. “This was unconscionable,” said the report.

Astonishingly, the inquiry’s findings on Treloar’s have not met the bar for criminal investigation and potential prosecution. Time for such prosecutions is running out, as many of the scientists involved in the 1970s have themselves died. Meanwhile, DCC Griffin says police will now move on to review the remaining chapters acknowledging that the glacial pace is “both unfortunate and regrettable”.

