

## **Post Office Opposition day motion.**

1.37 pm

**Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House regrets the proposal to close up to 2,500 post offices; recognises the vital role post offices play in local communities; notes the concern and unpopularity amongst the general public of closing such a large portion of the network; has concerns that the access criteria laid down for the closures consultation do not adequately take into account local geographical factors and public transport networks; is concerned that the consultation period is only for six weeks rather than three months, as recommended by Cabinet Office guidelines; believes that post offices must move with the times in the services they offer and that options for business expansion and developing business opportunities with local authorities should be explored further; and calls upon the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform to instruct Post Office Limited to suspend the compulsory closure of sub-post offices while these issues are re-assessed.

This matter affects both sides of the House in equal measure. I was concerned a moment ago that only two Labour Back Benchers were sitting in the Chamber but I see that the numbers are now swelling. I shall try to keep my remarks to a minimum, because I know that Members from all parties want to speak.

We are entering a critical phase of the Government's closure programme. Half of the country's constituencies have now gone through the process of consultation and as a result approximately 1,120 post offices are already destined to close. The network change is well on its way, yet the chorus of dissent that surrounded the then Secretary of State, now the Chancellor, when in 2006 he published his proposals for the most radical programme of cuts in the Post Office's history has not faded away, as his successor will have hoped. In fact, the more people encounter the process at first hand, the more they realise that it is not just unfair, but in many respects illogical; not just badly thought-through, but in some cases even avoidable.

I agree with what the Secretary of State has said on numerous occasions, that we have to face the facts about the future of postal services in this country. This debate has not been convened whimsically. We understand that the Post Office is haemorrhaging around £4 million a week; that the development of online mail has eviscerated part of the Post Office's traditional customer base; and that in this very difficult business climate, uncertain times lie ahead. Despite it being the one of the most emotional political issues, we do need to lead with our heads. So let me make it clear that we fully expect the network to shrink in size. We have never given our guarantee that no post offices will close, because it is not ours to give.

But Ministers have completely failed to understand the real social meaning of post offices. This is the classic failure of imagination that comes from a confined existence in Whitehall. Post offices are indeed small businesses, and many are struggling; but their role is profoundly important to British communities. Not just to the elderly, although they depend most heavily on its existence; not just in rural areas, although here their cohesive influence is especially powerful. But we should also remember that the people who may be the worst affected by the disappearance of their local branch are often single mothers living in our inner cities, in areas where the lack of access to banks and mainstream credit means they are heavily reliant on their local Post Office. Or to other local businesses, for whom the local branch is a kind of economic anchor.

With this in their minds, Ministers should have approached this issue with a programme of closures as the very last resort. It is to their shame (and to the shame of the former Chancellor, now Prime Minister, whose fingerprints are all over this top-down programme of cuts) that their first instinct was to press the self-destruct button instead. Despite claiming in their now infamous 1997 election manifesto – which has become a cemetery of ignored New Labour promises – that they would ‘ensure that...the Post Office...[is] given greater commercial freedom to make the most of new opportunities’, the Government has never breathed new life into the Post Office. All we have had since 1997 is a policy of compulsory euthanasia.

Over 4,800 branches have closed during the last decade, at a rate of more than three times faster than in the 20 years of the previous Conservative Government. If this current administration is allowed to continue this programme, they will have overseen the dismantling of a third of the entire network. Yet instead of giving the Post Office ‘greater commercial freedom’ they have done the opposite, removing critical services such as driving and TV licenses, passport applications and, most damagingly, benefits payments, which of course accounted for up to 40 per cent of some post offices’ business.

I shall make progress and then give Labour Members a final chance to chip in. I am conscious of the clock. The House can tell that I have been racing through my remarks as quickly as possible. I want to give hon. Members a chance to speak, but I shall point out aspects that matter particularly to Labour Members.

There was an early-day motion at the beginning of the year signed by 35 Members from the Labour Benches. It is pretty well word for word the motion before the House today. The only respect in which I have heard that it is thought to be different is the use of the word “instruct” in the context of instructing the Post Office to suspend its consultation. That is dancing on the head of a pin. It would be intellectually dishonest of any Member to think that that gives them a let-out clause.

The Government, through the shareholder executive, owns the Post Office. They instructed the compulsory closure programme to start in the first place, so they can equally instruct the Post Office to suspend it. As I said earlier, in part at least because of the local elections, they have already done just that. So the insinuation of the word “instruct” is no excuse for those hon. Members who have signed the early-day motion not to vote with us tonight.

Furthermore, we know that hon. Members, including Ministers and Cabinet Ministers, are campaigning in their own constituencies. I entirely accept that there are occasions when the Government—even the Government of their own colour—do something and hon. Members want to make a stand for their constituents, but what we are seeing are not just a few scattered examples of an hon. Member saying, “I must defend the interests of my constituents”; we are seeing a wholesale operation across the entire map, with almost every Member doing that. Thus, wholesale activity makes a mockery of what should be collective responsibility. Collective action has driven through collective responsibility.

Of even deeper concern is the fact that the Secretary of State revealed in an interview

“that he might campaign against Post Office closures in his own back yard.”

He said:

““I want to see what the detailed proposals are””—

he happens to be in charge of them, but never mind—

“but my job doesn’t make it impossible . . . I’m the member of Parliament for my constituency. If I think people have got a legitimate concern I’m going to raise it with the Post Office”.

Fair enough, except for this: when everyone is doing it, it is not just representing our constituents; it is collectively denying the entire policy of the Government.

There is a more perturbing point. As we all know, if a Member succeeds in keeping one post office open, under the current plans another one will shut. We can but ask whether a Secretary of State who is in charge of the shareholder executive that owns the Post Office might perhaps have more clout in those negotiations than a mere Back Bencher. If the Secretary of State can keep one or two post offices open in his constituency, where does that leave his colleagues in a neighbouring constituency?

The Secretary of State knows that our arguments are valid. He is very uncomfortable about the closure programme that has been forced on the Post Office. He knows, because he will have heard it every day from right hon. and hon. Members on the Labour Benches, that there is deep unhappiness across the entire House about the way that is progressing. He has a reputation in the Government. As shadow Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, I think that occasionally he speaks a lot of sense. However, the problem that he faces when he speaks that sense is that it is not necessarily popular with his Prime Minister—the very man whom he once described as someone who would make a “bloomin’ awful” Prime Minister— [Interruption.] I translate for the sake of decency.

Today, however, we learned something else, and the finger of suspicion points at the Secretary of State. We are told that somewhere in Downing street, someone—thought to be a member of the Cabinet—is a poet, a bard. Given the flavour of the language, it can be but one person. The four lines published on the website of *The Spectator* today are clearly the Secretary of State’s:

“At Downing Street upon the stair,  
I met a man who wasn’t Blair,  
He wasn’t Blair again today,  
Oh how I wish he’d go away.

Today is an opportunity for the Secretary of State to enjoy a massive political revival. He could make himself one of the most popular and rational men in the Government by instructing the Post Office to suspend the closure programme and give much hope to the many hard-working postmasters whose enterprise, hard work and service to their communities deserve better than they are getting from the Government.