

November 14, 2014

(sometime this century; copied, I believe to the Mature Times)

A Bank-Rant

An open letter to the CEO of the RBS

This is not from 'Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells', but might well be. Or we would he be asking ' Haven't the banks been sufficiently pilloried in the past five years? In the name-and-shame game, aren't the new baddies our MPs?'

Well, if so, I'd say he'd gone soft. After all, at least we've got a lot of new, yet-to-be-proved guilty if not necessarily innocent people who have moved into Parliament since the expenses scandal a year or two back. Am not aware of any corresponding clear-out in the banks; indeed, these seem to have provided a well-paying penitentiary for not a few de-selected MPs.

Now I'm sitting comfortably, let me tell you my own anecdotal experience with Westminster Bank. That dates me doesn't it? But that's what it was called back in the 1950s when I first started earning a proper wage. My then employers insisted they pay this into a 'proper' bank, and no, not the Post Office Savings variety which had served me well enough in my teenage years; indeed in my attic I sometimes come across their account books, nostalgic surrogates for the diary I never managed to keep.

In my early years, Westminster proved no bad deal. True, the manager persuaded me to keep my account in his Croydon branch even when I moved to the Midlands. This, and the impossibly restricted hours his branch kept meant I saw him rarely, but he did send the occasional, single-paged letter addressed to me personally as 'Mr B', rather than the sheaves of largely irrelevant bumph I now get to 'Dear Customer'. And on the two occasions I got into debt through my own idiocy, he showed himself to be a not unkindly father-confessor.

Fast-forward to the last decade, during which time my bank has sent me just one personal letter. Admittedly, this was from someone near the top, an assistant to the Chairman, no less. And the chairman of the Royal Bank of Scotland, which by then had taken over National Westminster, who at some point before that had been formed through a merger with the plain old Westminster I had originally joined. But I rather liked the new brand name, as in my naivety I'd assumed that what was good enough for our Highland-loving Queen was good enough for me. And after all the Scots by repute ought to be ideal as bankers: honest but canny. Indeed, amongst my accumulation of oft-repeated jokes (the ones, a generation ago, would draw the response 'when I first heard that, I fell out of my pram laughing') concerns the morning-after reflections of a series of young women of various nationalities, the Glasgow lass's being 'Och, man, do y'expect y'breakfast as well?'

I digress. The chairman at the time was one Sir Tom McKillop, a Scottish enough name to be sure. And shrewd enough to resign, I surmise, in time to avoid the humiliation his successor received, of having to say 'sorry' on television. This was along with RBS's putative competitors, following the scandal which, if I remember correctly, introduced the term 'toxic mortgages' into the language. I wanted to ask, did their Dads never tell them, as my Dad told me "contrition is not enough. You must make good the harm you have done"? Well, I didn't ask, but how much of their ill-gotten bonuses they returned, if any, I have never heard.

Digression suspended, at least for a bit. Sir Tom's lieutenant did write an excellently composed, personal, and contrite letter, saying he was both crediting £100 to my account and sending me a Christmas hamper. My immediate impulse was to retort something about 'Judas Money', and declaim 'For my finances I look to my bank and for my sustenance to Sainsbury's'. But by the time I got round to putting pen to paper – or should it be digits to keyboard? – I'd woken up to fact that Sainsbury's do offer banking services, and in any case I had quite enjoyed the tinned pineapple.

One final winge, and that about the very recent past when I found myself unable to open my account on-line. Twenty minutes telling Authority about my mother's maiden name – again! – then directed to an icon I couldn't find on screen. Didn't want to phone so-called helpline for reasons above, and because I was out of UK at the time. But to my surprise, I did manage to find a site which produced a personal email from a lady who, inter alia, said she was redirecting my beef to Yorkshire Bank. Why?, I wanted to ask, but resigned myself to accepting that if much of my personal information was already the common property of people from Bikini to Berwick, why get uptight about a lad from Leeds who probably knows a thing or two about spin bowling? Well, I shall never know, because he never replied – perhaps he was a stonewall batsman instead. For after the 9 days deadline promised by said lady, I'd heard nothing. In my reminders to her my language became, I confess, less gentlemanly, and hers less expansive. In desperation, I tried to get into the online system once more and after reciting once more my mother's maiden name – behold I succeeded!—And all my money was still there! Now was the original problem with me, or, as I suspect, had the young lady found the glitch and fixed it? Once more, I don't know, because neither she nor the Yorkshire lad has ever told me.

O.K. enough wingeing. How about some specific questions for RFBS's top Brass? Here goes:-

1) You may well ask 'why don't you make an appointment to see your branch manager? To which I'd well reply

a) 'my branch doesn't seem to have a manager, or if they do, they keep her/him and her/his name well hidden' and

(b) on both the occasions I've phoned to make an appointment, the disembodied youth (who for all I know, is speaking from Bikini Atoll) has asked for two digits from my PIN number. I kid you not! And when in desperation I've given in, the unknown stranger continues to pump me for personal information, including, yes, my mother's maiden name. Am reminded of the World War films with the stereotyped Nazi officer declaring 'vee ask ze questions!' But I'm not asking for my rights under the Geneva Convention, I just want to have a chat with my bank manager.

Ok, my question: why don't you have a 'secret shoppers' who tries out these systems to see if other of your customers receive the same mis-treatment?

2) One of the least uncertain projections about the future is that we British oldies are getting more numerous, dying later, showing ever less concerned to leave our loot to our feckless progeny, and, despite our moans, not significantly impoverished. Providers of incontinence pads and world cruises have woken up to this what about the banks?

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