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Former Post Office chief Paula Vennells told: quit public jobs

Pressure mounts after IT scandal payout

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Paula Vennells earned £4.9m during her seven years in charge of the Post Office
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The former Post Office boss who oversaw its prolonged court fight against hundreds of sub-postmasters wrongly prosecuted for stealing from the tills is under pressure to resign from her roles with the NHS and the Cabinet Office.

Paula Vennells — who was appointed CBE last January and joined the Cabinet Office as a non-executive director in February, before leaving the Post Office — “ought to be under a cloud”, said the Tory peer Lord (James) Arbuthnot.

Vennells' roles include chairing Imperial College Healthcare Trust, one of the biggest NHS hospital groups, and sitting as a non-executive on the boards of retailers Dunelm and Morrisons.

“I don't think if I were running an NHS trust, I would want her to be involved in it,” said Arbutnot, a former MP who has demanded an inquiry into the sub-postmaster scandal. The taxpayer-owned Post Office accused hundreds of stealing and some were jailed. It later emerged that they were victims of a glitch in an IT system provided by Fujitsu, installed in 1999-2000.

After a three-year court battle, the Post Office agreed this month to pay £58m to settle claims by 550 sub-postmasters, having run up £23m of legal costs. Chairman Tim Parker said the Post Office had “got things wrong in our dealings with a number of postmasters”, but Vennells initially refused to apologise.

She became chief executive in 2012 and earned £4.9m during her seven years in charge. The Anglican curate has in the past spoken of how her Christian faith has influenced her approach to business.

This month, a judge said the Post Office's denials that its IT system had been plagued with bugs amounted to “the 21st-century equivalent of maintaining that the earth is flat”. Mr Justice Fraser also said that Fujitsu had provided “wholly unsatisfactory evidence”.

Vennells, 60, apologised last week after being approached by newspapers, saying she was pleased “long-standing issues relating to the [IT] system have finally been resolved”.

She also said: “It was and remains a great source of regret to me that these colleagues and their families were affected over so many years. I am truly sorry we were unable to find both a solution and a resolution outside of litigation and for the distress caused.”

The Cabinet Office said all board members were held to the “highest professional and personal standards”, including complying with the code of conduct for board members of public bodies. Imperial College Healthcare Trust said Vennells was playing a “key role” in ensuring its continued improvement.