

Justin Doherty

# NatWest, Farage and the decline of corporate behaviour

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NatWest boss Alison Rose (Credit: Getty images)

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The story of NatWest Group's rogue behaviour goes far deeper than Nigel Farage. It now emerges that many more customers have been de-banked, had their lives turned upside down, and businesses destroyed as a result of a rogue and rotten culture affecting the financial system.

Take Baz Melia, army veteran and decorated war hero. The consulting business he started upon leaving the military could not function after NatWest closed his account. They wouldn't tell him why and his paid work dried up as result. Or Alexandra Tolstoy, a single mother of three, whose only crime appears to be guilt by association with a former partner from Russia.

None of these people, or indeed the many others, ever had a chance to defend themselves. It has been a principle of English law for nearly a thousand years that if accused of a crime, you have a right to know what for, and to a defence.

Debanking can destroy lives

NatWest responded to Tolstoy after she wrote a desperate letter to Alison Rose, by telling her: 'Following my investigation, I can confirm we've followed the right process, and we're not obliged to enter into any discussion or provide a reason for our decision.'

NatWest is very keen to trumpet its precious values. Running through the dossier of emails released by Farage's subject access request, and all over their own website, you'd be forgiven for thinking this bank is, in fact, a paragon of integrity and morality. 'We set high standards,' 'we prioritise wellbeing,' 'we show empathy,' 'we act with integrity.' It goes on.

The golden rule of reputation is that it's what you do that matters, not what you say. Actions speak louder than words. All the rest is merely spin.

In NatWest and Coutts' case, what the bank's actions seem to have demonstrated are contempt for customers, failure to follow fair process, political posturing, double standards and unkindness.

Alison Rose 'has forged a reputation as a champion of women in business' according to her chums at the BBC, 'leading a review of female entrepreneurship for the government in 2019'. But how does that square with NatWest's role in de-banking a single mother who relies on her bank to pay rent and feed her children?

Rose's mealy mouthed half-non-apology to Farage hides behind the rules and regulations. The problem is presented as a banking sector issue to do with rules imposed on the bank; she has invoked 'wider change' and 'reviews of regulatory rules'. Did anybody at the bank ever consider the consequences of their actions?

Debanking can destroy lives. If you cannot pay staff or receive payments, your small business goes bust. If you can't pay your rent, you're homeless.

We all have an interest here. As taxpayers, we own 38 per cent of NatWest. It takes four minutes to change banks, thanks to the brilliant 'Switch' system (imposed on the banks to challenge anti-competitive behaviour) that automatically transfers direct debits. If this mess isn't cleared up fast, NatWest will haemorrhage customers, and billions of pounds of taxpayer money will be destroyed. As we enter the holiday season this story is not going to go away.

In the past, reputation and accountability went hand in hand and leaders would resign of their own accord when things went wrong. It showed integrity. On precedent we can take a good guess at how NatWest's leadership will behave: fighting to save their skin rather than doing what is right. That has to change, and fast.

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