



Australian Citizens Party

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MEDIA RELEASE

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One person saved banking services in regional Australia —Christine Holgate!

Please sign and share the new Change.org petition: [“PM Morrison—apologise to Christine Holgate and reinstate her as CEO of Australia Post”](#).

Westpac’s 26 March 2021 announcement that it is closing another 48 bank branches across Australia should make every Australian say, “Thank God for Christine Holgate.” Because despite its bastardry, Westpac’s customers, especially those left behind by modern technology who prefer to do their banking face to face, can continue to access their accounts through their local post office, and that is thanks to Christine Holgate. The deal she did with the banks in 2018 saved the banking services provided by post offices, and the communities they serve, especially in regional Australia.

Australians should be shocked to discover how close more than 1,500 regional communities came to being cut off from all banking services in 2018. The politicians who represent those communities should be especially shocked, as it would have happened on their watch and with the complicity and due to the negligence of their parties. If it had happened, those communities would be withering and dying today, losing the small businesses like coffee shops, bakeries and small supermarkets that people use when they go to town to do their banking, because those people would have to travel to the closest regional centre instead. There’s also a good chance the communities would have lost their community licensed post office too, which were going bankrupt before Christine Holgate and her team achieved their deal with the banks.

Post offices have been agents for banking services in Australia since the Commonwealth Bank started in 1912, using post offices as branches. The privatisation of the Commonwealth Bank in 1996 coincided with the era of banks closing down hundreds of branches, which left increasing numbers of Australians relying on post offices for their banking. The 6 October 2018 *Daily Telegraph* reported in the previous 12 months the Big Four banks shut down 196 branches, leaving “some remote and regional towns with nowhere to do their banking”. As banks shut branches, usually citing the progress of online technology, those people left behind by technology lined up at post offices, where the queues got longer and longer. By 2018, a review of banking services at post offices revealed that Australia Post was losing \$48 million a year providing its Bank@Post service; in a [8 February Citizens Insight interview with the Citizens Party](#), Licensed Post Office Group Executive Director Angela Cramp revealed most of that \$48 million loss was coming out of the pockets of the community LPOs and sending them broke.

The review recommended scrapping Bank@Post services. In other words, it recommended cutting off 1,550 regional communities around Australia, already abandoned by the banks and relying on post offices, from banking services altogether. This recommendation was a death warrant for communities in regional Australia.

Only one person stood in the way—Christine Holgate. As the new CEO of Australia Post, appointed in October 2017, Christine Holgate had analysed the whole business and identified that making banking services financially viable was the pathway to saving the LPOs, making Australia Post profitable, and, most importantly, saving the regional communities that post offices serve. She had travelled around the world to visit postal operations in other countries and from examples in France, Switzerland and India had identified that combining postal and banking services was the secret to making the public postal service viable into the future. Christine Holgate opposed the recommendation, adamant that Australia Post should not abandon regional communities like the banks had, and insisted that the banks should be convinced to pay properly for post offices serving their customers. Banks already paid a small fee per post office transaction, which wasn’t covering the cost, so she asked them to each pay a \$22 million annual Community Representation Fee to ensure Australia Post could maintain and expand the infrastructure of postal banking services.

Christine Holgate formed and led a small team of executives who worked exhaustively for many months to convince the Big Four banks to agree to this deal. Although \$22 million was loose change to banks that were making profits of \$7-10 billion per year, they foot-dragged and quibbled and tried to negotiate her down, but she insisted. The 2020 Maddocks inquiry acknowledged her team worked “nights, weekends and holidays” to achieve the deal. Interestingly, these negotiations were taking place against the backdrop of the banking royal commission, where the banks’ reputations were being

shredded every day. Perhaps seeing the necessity to repair reputational damage, finally CBA CEO Matt Comyn broke first and agreed to the deal; Westpac and NAB quickly followed. The only bank to hold out was ANZ, whose CEO Shayne Elliott refused to deal, callously indifferent to his abandoned customers, who are now the only major bank customers not able to access their accounts through Bank@Post.

In an 8 October 2018 press release announcing the deal, Christine Holgate said: "I am extremely appreciative that the nation's largest bank has taken a lead position in supporting Australia Post. This investment will not only help save a critical service in Post Offices serving the communities of Australia, it saves jobs and supports the viability of our local Post Office partners. ... Approximately 30,000 CBA customers use Bank@Post every day."

It is therefore criminal that this is the deal for which Christine Holgate was ambushed by Labor Senator Kimberley Kitching two years later, using the pretext that she awarded each of the hardworking executives who worked to achieve it a Cartier watch. Even more criminal is that nobody in the government or Australia Post even attempted to provide the context for the watches, so the public could understand that they were an exceptional reward for an exceptional deal. Instead, the very people who would not have cared about cutting off 1,550 regional communities from all banking services falsely condemned and drove out of Australia Post the one person who saved them.

The Citizens Party has exposed the prevailing banking and privatisation agendas behind the removal of Christine Holgate, but her unique leadership must also be acknowledged. For that reason, the Citizens Party urges all Australians to sign and share a new Change.org petition: "[PM Morrison—apologise to Christine Holgate and reinstate her as CEO of Australia Post](#)".

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