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Dear Sharon and Nish

I'm writing to you on behalf of the British nation. Does that sound overwrought? Maybe. But I feel the need to speak for your customers up and down the land because we all know the problems facing John Lewis and Waitrose are huge.

You see, you are not simply chair and chief exec. You are custodians of one of the most valued, loved, and trusted retail brands this country has.

John Lewis and Waitrose are part of the fabric of everyday British life. They've been synonymous with fair values and trust for generations. Built on shared employee ownership, and shared accountability. John Betjeman wanted to be under your roof if the world came to an end because 'nothing unpleasant could happen there'.

That's what you mean to us. It's personal for us, too.

So your task isn't to turn around just another mediocre retailer under threat of going under. You're fighting to save part of our collective cultural identity.

But what's worrying me is that you might think your fight is purely financial. It's not.

The battle in hand is far more nuanced. It's about what makes up the soul of your brand. The intangibles, the shared beliefs, the beautiful things that can't be captured in financial projections but earn a little space in people's hearts.

Somehow, in recent years, you've let go of the soul. We've all felt the subtle, but powerful, erasure of what John Lewis is, a severing of what's always set your business apart.

At a time when we crave the constancy and comfort of brands we can actually trust, you've been chasing the new. New systems, new people, new identity...new owners. But here's the thing: that's not what we really want from John Lewis. And here's the other thing: that's not what younger generations want from you either.

What we want in this crooked, flighty, commoditised world of ours is unfailing quality, honest value, genuinely helpful service. What we want is to come to you when we're expecting our first baby and panicking about buying a cot. What we want is to come to you when we've finally made it onto the property ladder and want curtains and a sofa bed that'll last.

Right now though, all that is being slowly chipped away. From loud headlines to daily whispers.

Every time I open a newspaper it's a new headline on the financing, the systems, the operations, the ads.

Every time I pop in, it's another little miss. The newspaper? Gone. The coffee? Gone. Now returned.
(No doubt because of the uproar).

Your pledge 'Never knowingly undersold'? Gone too. Really? At a time when good decent value and integrity could not be important? Your new strapline 'for all life's moments' isn't a pledge. I'm not quite sure what it is.

This is about what's happening on the inside too.

John Lewis was founded by merchants – and powered by them for a century. By that I mean people with retail heritage, legacy and wisdom – as well as a huge passion for it. But in recent years, many of those people in your business have been replaced.

I get it. You need money men, financial innovation, new thinking.

But never forget to balance all that with the commercially instinctive, reactive, creative, retail-born folk in the business. It's an art. Not a science. And it's key to building great retail.

Just take a look at the US department store chain Dillard's. Their stock has outperformed Apple, Amazon and Tesla in the last few years. Their secret? Family owners who are true custodians of their business with no investors to answer to – they walk the shop floor, keep a constant eye on stock levels and have a hugely loyal staff. They've also resisted calls to knee-jerk change, kept their nerve, and lo and behold - generated about \$7 billion of sales a year.

There are a hundred of shops we can walk into to feel ignored and patronised. Please not yours.

So what do I believe would rekindle your soul and reconnect us all to it? Not a big Christmas ad, although you had quite the innings there.

No, this is about recommitting to the principles John Lewis was founded on: common ownership; the improvement of partners' lives; collective responsibility; and true enduring value. All this is what we used to feel pulsing through your brand every time we stepped onto your shop floor.

We know British brand history is littered with those who tampered with the Crown Jewels of their identity, the codes, values and conventions that made them who they are – or were. British Airways clings on. Rest in peace Laura Ashley. And dear Woolworths.

But failure for John Lewis and Waitrose is not an option. We can't lose you too. So while you fight for the financial brain of your brand, never forget there's a battle for its heart and soul too.

Kindest,
Mary Portas