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CCRC Decision on 44 Post Office Prosecutions

Volume 681: debated on Monday 5 October 2020

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🕒 3.36pm

Mr Kevan Jones >

(North Durham) (Lab)

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(Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the 44 **Post Office** prosecutions overturned by the CCRC.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy >

(Paul Scully)

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I appreciate the urgent question. The Government recognise that the Horizon dispute has had a hugely damaging effect on the lives of affected postmasters and their families, and its repercussions are still being felt today. I have spoken to a number of postmasters who have been affected by this ordeal.

On 2 October, the **Post Office** formally responded to the Court of Appeal and Southwark Crown court regarding convicted postmasters whose cases were referred by the Criminal Cases Review Commission. The **Post Office** has stated that it will not oppose 44 out of the 47 cases. The **Post Office** also sincerely apologised to postmasters for historical failings and underlined its commitment to delivering a fundamental review of the businesses and to resetting its relationship with postmasters, to ensure that this never happens again.

This decision by the **Post Office** is an important milestone for postmasters whose convictions are part of this appeals process. Friday's announcement was not, however, the end of that process. It is now for the courts to decide whether the convictions should be overturned. It would not therefore be appropriate for the Government to comment on these cases until that process is complete.

The **Post Office** continues to co-operate fully with the CCRC and is in the process of reviewing about 900 historical prosecutions. Should it find any new information that may cast doubt on the safety of a conviction, it has confirmed that it will disclose that information to the person who is convicted. We will continue to monitor the work of the **Post Office** closely. In addition, I am pleased

that the Government last week launched an inquiry, chaired by retired High Court judge Sir Wyn Williams, which will gather relevant available evidence to provide a public summary of the failings that occurred in relation to Horizon and assess whether lessons have been learned and concrete changes have taken place, or at least are under way, at the **Post Office**.

Mr Kevan Jones >

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I had high hopes for the Minister when he was appointed, but unfortunately he is reverting to type, like all his predecessors I have had to deal with over the last eight years. The hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen), Lord Arbuthnot and I have been campaigning on this issue for nearly nine years, and I know that many other Members across the House have individual cases and have been involved in this. It is six years since the three of us met the CCRC, and I am pleased that Friday's announcement made it clear that the **Post Office** would not pursue 44 of the cases. But those are simple words, and they belie the agony and torment of these individuals and of hundreds of other individuals who have lost their livelihoods, their good names and, in some cases, their freedom. In other cases, people have lost their lives.

I am sorry, Minister, but what you have said today is not good enough. I cannot get over the fact that this scandal—that is what it is—is still being treated as somehow an issue of the **Post Office**. The Government are the single shareholder in the **Post Office**; they are the ones who can actually make some changes, so I would like to ask them some direct questions.

First, as the single shareholder, were the Government involved in the decision not to take forward these prosecutions, in the same way they were involved with the £100 million they spent in defending the civil case last year? Secondly, in terms of the convictions that have been overturned, the Minister said in June that there would be a process in place for compensation. Will he announce a compensation process, or will these people have to pursue cases through the court for compensation? Can I also ask where we are at with the historic compensation process? I understand that 2,000 claims have been made, but not a penny has yet been paid out.

Finally, can I put this issue to the Minister? I am sorry, but the review he has announced is not good enough. It may have a retired judge at its head, but he does not have the powers to summon witnesses and cross-examine them. A full public inquiry is needed. Without that, we will not get to the truth of what is, as I have already said, a national scandal.

Paul Scully >

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I thank the right hon. Gentleman for those points, and I will try to deal with them directly. The decision to prosecute postmasters was an operational matter for the **Post Office**, and the Government are not involved in operational decisions. However, in hindsight, knowing what we know now, it is clear that different conclusions could and should have been reached by the **Post Office**, and that is why the inquiry is there to look at the lessons.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about a route for compensation, should postmasters who have been convicted have their convictions overturned. There are processes in place for them to receive compensation if appropriate, and that includes a statutory scheme under section 133 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988.

In terms of the latest update on the historical shortfall scheme, the **Post Office** launched the scheme on 1 May to allow postmasters who were not part of the group litigation to have issues with shortfalls recorded in Horizon investigated and addressed. The window for applications formally closed on 14 August, but late applications are being considered by the **Post Office** on a case-by-case basis. There have been over 2,200 claims, and the independent panel advising the **Post Office** on the scheme is now assessing those.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the inquiry. A judge-led inquiry is very much what was asked for. We have Sir Wyn Williams, a former judge, at the head of that. He will be an independent chair; he will be able to ask the questions, push back at the Government and the **Post Office**, and get evidence. The reason it is an inquiry rather than a review is that, reflecting on the way its remit was worded, I have always wanted it to be a backward-looking review that enabled evidence to be sought, rather than to be done on just a desktop basis. We have clarified that in the written statement, and I believe this is the inquiry—albeit on a non-statutory basis—that will actually get the answers, and do it in a quick way that hopefully satisfies the sub-postmasters and gets the answers they want.

Lucy Allan >
(Telford) (Con)

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Almost 20 years ago, Telford resident Tracy Felstead—then a 19-year-old **post office** clerk—was wrongly convicted and jailed because of a glitch in the **Post Office** computer system. Last week, the **Post Office** finally conceded defeat in the long-running battle between David and Goliath. How did a respectable organisation such as the **Post Office**, a major software company such as for Fujitsu, the great and the good in the civil service, and Ministers from all parties fall prey to groupthink on such a grand scale, so that, despite this computer error occurring across the country, it was assumed that the only possible explanation was that all sub-postmasters affected were dishonest? What action will my hon. Friend take to ensure the **Post Office** and Fujitsu are properly held to account, and will he commit to determining who knew what and when during this shameful saga?

Paul Scully >[Share](#)

My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to get to the bottom of who knew what and when. That is why I am determined that, under Sir Wyn Williams's chairmanship, we can seek evidence to complement what is already available from Mr Justice Fraser's findings by speaking to the **Post Office** and Fujitsu, which have agreed to comply fully with this inquiry. I also hope that sub-postmasters will, through conversation with Sir Wyn Williams, agree to get involved so that they can share their evidence and stories and so that we can get to the bottom of this, exactly as my hon. Friend says.

Chi Onwurah >

(Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]

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The **Post Office** Horizon scandal may well be the largest miscarriage of justice in our history, with 900 prosecutions, innocent people bankrupted and imprisoned, careers ruined, families destroyed, reputations smashed and lives lost. I pay tribute to the Justice For Subpostmasters Alliance and all who campaigned with them, including Members on all sides of the House, and particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who secured this urgent question.

For decades, the **Post Office** denied all wrongdoing, imposing huge stress and legal fees on the victims and spending tens of millions of pounds in the process. Friday's announcement is a welcome relief for so many, but can the Minister tell us why, as its only shareholder, the Government allowed the **Post Office** to continue to oppose the appeals for so long? Far from it being merely an operational matter, as the Minister has said, will he admit that this represents a gross failure of oversight, and will he tell us how much this has cost the **Post Office** and, ultimately, the taxpayer? What is the estimated cost of the compensation that will now need to be paid to those prosecuted, and what of those who were pursued, harassed and bankrupted, but not ultimately prosecuted? It is right that the Government have finally announced a judge-led inquiry into this scandal, which Labour called for months ago, but despite this House having expressed its concerns forcefully, the terms of reference deliberately exclude compensation. Will the Minister amend the terms of reference to include compensation and deliver true justice for the victims?

A miscarriage of justice on this scale undermines confidence in the justice system. Is it right that the **Post Office** has the power of independent prosecution, and is the Minister reviewing it? The victims need justice, not more unanswered questions. The taxpayer needs to know just how much this failure of oversight has, and will, cost. Finally, the Government need to take responsibility for this debacle and ensure nothing like it can ever happen again.

Paul Scully >[Share](#)

I thank the hon. Lady for her question—there were a number of questions in that. In terms of the Government's involvement, as I say, the **Post Office**'s decisions are operational decisions for it and its board. What happened when—whether there was any Government involvement in terms of the Government shareholder, the board's appointee, as well as the **Post Office**—will come up in the independent inquiry, and it is right that they are questioned so that we find out what happened and when.

On the issue of compensation, if the sub-postmasters get involved in this inquiry and share their evidence, they will be able to share their stories and the losses that they have made, both directly and indirectly. However, an inquiry cannot direct compensation; ultimately, that has to be done through the courts.

Mr Andrew Mitchell >
(Sutton Coldfield) (Con)

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It is clearly not this very good Minister's fault, but it is clear, is it not, that a monstrous injustice by the state has been visited upon these poor postmasters and postmistresses, leaving us all, I would hope, extremely uneasy? By refusing to allow the inquiry even to consider the compensation that they should be given, are not the Government, who own, fund and direct the **Post Office**, in danger of making an already truly dreadful situation even worse?

Paul Scully >

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I thank my right hon. Friend for those personal comments. We are constituency MPs as well, so we can all, I hope, share the horror when we hear the stories of those people, who could easily have been constituents of mine. In terms of compensation, as I say, there are avenues open to those who have been wrongfully prosecuted, there is reason for people to be able to talk about their losses, and it is then for Sir Wyn Williams to present his findings when he concludes the independent inquiry.

Marion Fellows >
(Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]

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During this pandemic, the **post office** network has shown what a valuable community asset it is. Cases being reviewed in Scotland and the rest of the UK should result in financial compensation to all those innocent people who suffered as a result of the Horizon scandal. I pay tribute to all who have worked for justice in these cases. Will the Minister commit today to ensuring that the costs do not put the **post office** network at further financial risks? Also, does he still not understand that a non-statutory review is not an independent inquiry, as was promised by the Prime Minister?

Paul Scully >

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In terms of the **post office** network, it is up to the **Post Office** to work out how best to compensate people, and it will be looking at that in due course. We will continue to work with the new chief executive, Nick Read, who is looking to put the future relationship with postmasters on a sure footing. In terms of an independent inquiry, this is the judge-led inquiry that has been asked for, albeit on a non-statutory footing. It is judge-led and it is backward looking, in terms of taking evidence from all those involved. When the hon. Lady sees the findings at the end, I hope she will see that, although perhaps not everybody will get everything they want, we will get answers about who knew what, when.

Andrew Bridgen >
(North West Leicestershire) (Con) [V]

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May I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on securing this urgent question? The Minister is well aware of my long-term interest in this topic, which has been a running sore for far too long. How confident is he that the review that he announced last week will gain the support and participation of all the stakeholders involved in this issue, and will it be able to hold to account and hold responsible those who allowed this gross miscarriage of justice to occur? If it cannot do the first of those, what confidence can he have that it will ensure that this intolerable situation will never ever be repeated?

Paul Scully >

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My hon. Friend makes an incredibly good point. It is important, first, that Sir Wyn Williams engages with the sub-postmasters, led by Alan Bates, as part of the group litigation, to explain how he intends to investigate and take evidence, and I hope that they would therefore engage. I have talked about the fact that the **Post Office** and Fujitsu are ready to comply fully with the investigation, but if

there are important people with important evidence that is not coming out, for whatever reason, there are mechanisms available to the chairman, Sir Wyn Williams, to look at that further and to re-evaluate.

Sarah Olney >

(Richmond Park) (LD)

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Two post offices in my constituency are threatened with closure because of the difficulty of recruiting new sub-postmasters or sub-postmistresses. What impact does the Minister think the appalling case of Horizon has had on recruitment? Is he anxious about the future of post offices, particularly rural ones but even those in urban constituencies such as mine? What is the Department doing to work with the Post Office on this issue?

Paul Scully >

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Yes, I am anxious, because it is important that we keep the network up at the target level we set of 11,500. The hon. Lady is right that some of the difficulty is due to the situation gone by; some of it is due to the ongoing complexity of the Horizon system and resource availability. I am glad that the chief executive, Nick Read, comes from a business where he is used to dealing with people as stakeholders, not just as employees, so engaging in a more positive future relationship with postmasters. She is right to talk about rural and urban areas. In London, although clearly we do not want to lose post offices, it is relatively easy compared with some rural areas to get to the next post office, but that is not an excuse to diminish the network in London.

Caroline Nokes >

(Romsey and Southampton North) (Con)

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In his previous response, the Minister said he is anxious about the future of the network. I welcome the statement that the Post Office wants to reset the relationship with sub-postmasters, but if he is anxious, what measures is he going to take to make sure that that actually happens? He says that he expects compensation from the Post Office “in due course”, but will he put a timescale on that?

Paul Scully >

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On compensation, it depends on the situation of the people involved. Those who have been wrongfully convicted have recourse through the courts. I have regular contact with Nick Read, the chief executive, and other members of the board to make sure that we look at post office closures, as reported to me by MPs and from updates, and increase and improve recruitment of postmasters, which will be achieved through a better future relationship.

Dr Rupa Huq >

(Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)

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Will the Minister join me in thanking all those at the Post Office and Royal Mail who have kept us all going throughout this crisis? As we know, a disproportionate number are from BME communities, who have experienced such death and suffering, like my constituent Varchas Patel and his family. They are pleased that their appeal is not being contested, but they wonder what action is now being taken against those at the top—those in management and leadership positions in the organisation—who presided over this scandal. Or are this algorithm-obsessed Government stuck in a “computer says no” mode?

Paul Scully >

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I can assure the hon. Lady that the computer very much says yes, which is why we have launched an independent inquiry.

Elliot Colburn >

(Carshalton and Wallington) (Con)

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I have not yet had the chance in this place to congratulate my constituency neighbour and former boss on his ministerial appointment.

I have met Carshalton and Wallington residents, including Nirmala Fatania, who have been affected by the Horizon scandal and whose lives have been turned upside down. Will my hon. Friend assure me that the **Post Office** will co-operate fully with the inquiry, that we will learn the necessary lessons and that we will make sure that nothing like this ever happens again?

Paul Scully >[Share](#)

I thank my hon. Friend—I did not ask him to say what he did, but it is gratefully received and he can come again.

All of us as constituency MPs hear from people like Nirmala Fatania. We are determined to get the answers through the independent inquiry, so that this can never happen again.

Dr Julian Lewis >

(New Forest East) (Ind)

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Does my hon. Friend accept that those present or former **Post Office** officials who perpetrated this disaster and perpetuated the agony of the victims must be punished, not promoted, and shamed, rather than rewarded with honours, as I believe happened in at least one prominent instance?

Paul Scully >[Share](#)

Yes, the Honours Committee and any future employers need to look at the background of any person involved in this. However, as I said, the inquiry is independent, and I do not want to stamp my authority on it. It is now for Sir Wyn Williams to question people and get answers. I want everyone, including people at the **Post Office** who were involved and are now no longer employed there, to engage in the process.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck >

(South Shields) (Lab)

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For years, pleas from MPs to address this scandal have been ignored because of the Government's cosy relationship with the **Post Office**. My constituents Kevin and Julie Carter and Dionne Andrew, like hundreds of others, have had to fight for justice every step of the way as they try to clear their names. They have lost more than the Minister can ever comprehend. What protections will the Government put in place so that never again can powerful organisations behave in this way and use the criminal courts with such unaccountability?

Paul Scully >[Share](#)

I am glad to report that the **Post Office** is not using private prosecutions any more—the Justice Committee met last week to talk about private prosecutions—but the hon. Member is absolutely right to talk about her constituents and the losses they have suffered. I am glad that the independent inquiry will be able to get to the bottom of that to make sure that it can never happen again.

Scott Mann >
(North Cornwall) (Con)

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In my previous life, I remember collecting the mail from **post office** branches at the time the Horizon scandal was happening. I remember vividly the sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses not being able to balance the tills at that time and having the stress and anguish of that resting over them. While it is absolutely right that we recognise the hole the **Post Office** is in, it is worth remembering that at its heart—its very core—is not some mythical bogeyman, but hard-working sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses across the country. The reputational damage that has been done by the Horizon scandal threatens their very livelihoods, and we need to act on this now. With the traditional banking system closing many of the branches in rural communities, what can the Department do to ensure that **post office** branches have a workable banking system and can offer other services to make these vital rural services more viable?

Paul Scully >

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I thank my hon. Friend for that really important point. It is important to remember what a vital service the **post office** is for all of us, and we must make sure that while we are looking backwards at the situation with sub-postmasters, we do not threaten the future viability of the network. On banking, we are working with the **Post Office** as it introduces greater services for various banks to expand the branches and the types of banks they can deal with in-house.

Martyn Day >
(Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]

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I would urge the 73 Scottish cases whose convictions may be unsafe as a result of this injustice, which was overseen by consecutive Labour, Tory and Lib Dem Ministers, to contact the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission as a matter of urgency. Will the Minister, with his predecessors, write a cross-party letter to the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance apologising for the parts they have played in this saga?

Paul Scully >

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I would echo the hon. Gentleman's call for people to make sure they are in touch if they believe their convictions are not safe, because the **Post Office** is determined to make sure, as it looks back and reviews those 900 prosecutions, that it will be in contact—it is committed to being in contact itself—with anybody it feels is part of the Horizon process.

Rob Butler >
(Aylesbury) (Con)

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Last week, the Justice Committee, of which I am a member, published a report into private prosecutions, which was prompted by the Horizon scandal. Does my hon. Friend agree with its recommendation that any organisation that conducts a substantial number of private prosecutions should be required to meet the same standards of regulation, accountability and transparency as public prosecutors, and will he discuss that with the Lord Chancellor as a matter of urgency?

Paul Scully >

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I thank my hon. Friend for that, and as I have said, I pay tribute to the work that the Committee has done. The Government will certainly consider the very many sensible points that have been raised in the report, and we will report back in due course.

Andrew Gwynne >
(Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]

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My constituent Della Robinson was formerly a local sub-postmistress in Dukinfield, and she lost almost everything in this scandal, including her reputation. I welcome the latest announcement, but when did the Minister know that the Post Office would not oppose the appeals, what discussions did he have with Post Office officials and did they discuss the amount this would cost the Post Office and, ultimately, taxpayers?

Paul Scully >

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We discuss that with the Post Office regularly, and it is the Post Office's decision not to oppose the appeals. This is clearly part of the recognition that it got things wrong so much over a period of time. I am glad that this change of approach is something that can get to the bottom of sub-postmasters' questions and clearly right the wrongs of the past.

Robert Largan >
(High Peak) (Con)

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My father used to be a postman, and I know the vital role that postmasters play in serving many of our communities, especially in rural areas such as High Peak, but the way that many of them have been treated during this scandal is appalling. Can the Minister assure me that he will do everything he can to make certain the Post Office keeps to the commitments it has now made and that we learn the lessons so that something like this can never happen again?

Paul Scully >

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My uncle was a sub-postmaster in a rural area, and I saw the way he worked; that predated Horizon. We have watched people like him and my hon. Friend's father work so hard in their communities, and the last thing they should expect is the scandal that has befallen some of these individuals. We must make sure that through this independent inquiry we get the answers so it can never happen again.

Mr Barry Sheerman >
(Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]

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Is the Minister aware that I chair the all-party miscarriages of justice group? I have never seen anything as awful as this: so many people's lives made a misery; their reputations ruined; their whole future and their families broken up. This is so important that I would have expected today at least the Secretary of State on his knees in sackcloth and ashes. Will the Minister make sure that these people get justice, because this was not done by machines or computers; it was done and organised and managed by people, and they should be held to account? Does the Minister agree?

Paul Scully >

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The brief answer is no in terms of the chairmanship; in terms of the Secretary of State and sackcloth and ashes, I am the postal affairs Minister so I am the one who set up the inquiry and I am determined that we get the answers the hon. Gentleman is seeking.

Jason McCartney >
(Colne Valley) (Con)

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I, too, put on record my thanks to our community post offices; they have provided a vital lifeline during this pandemic in my villages and towns in Colne Valley. In terms of the inquiry, can the Minister assure me that my constituent Maria, who is one of the victims of this scandal, and all the other victims will be able to give evidence so that they will be heard and that we will get some conclusion to this inquiry within the next year?

Paul Scully >

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It is up to Sir Wyn Williams how he wants to frame that inquiry, but it is absolutely set up for sub-postmasters to have their voices heard and to report back within about a year.

Gavin Newlands >

(Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]

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I thank the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and agree with what he said. This has been a dreadful affair during which neither the **Post Office** nor the Government have covered themselves in glory. A constituent of mine was sent to prison as a result of Horizon issues and was forced to sell their family home, leading to the breakdown of their marriage, yet in a letter to me the Government said they had no plans to prosecute anyone as a number of decision makers were involved. My constituent's life is in tatters; who is going to be held responsible?

Paul Scully >

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On who is held responsible, let us wait for the response from Sir Wyn Williams and the independent inquiry. I know that, from Justice Fraser's findings, some names have been recommended to the Crown Prosecution Service for it to discuss and investigate.

Martin Vickers >

(Cleethorpes) (Con)

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Like other Members across the House, I have constituents whose lives have been destroyed by this scandal, and I welcome the establishment of the inquiry. Can the Minister assure me that any recommendations that emerge from it will be acted on promptly, and will he undertake immediately to speak to senior management at the **Post Office** to establish whether structures are now in place to ensure that nothing like this could happen in the interim?

Paul Scully >

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Absolutely: I want to ensure this is dealt with in a timely fashion, and we will take all the recommendations very seriously, because we want to get to the bottom of this. I continue to work with, and speak to, Nick Read, the chief executive, and listen to him and push him to ensure that the lessons have been learned and the structures are in place.

Kate Osborne >

(Jarrow) (Lab)

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Campaigners have labelled the review into the **Post Office** as a whitewash and a betrayal, and instead are calling for a full independent inquiry with statutory powers, as agreed by the Prime Minister in response to my question to him in February, so will the Minister confirm that statutory powers will be given to the inquiry, meaning that full accounts from former sub-postmasters will be heard as evidence and witnesses will be cross-examined, to ensure that proper justice is served?

Paul Scully >

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The Prime Minister promised an independent inquiry, and that is what we have announced. We want to make sure that postmasters engage with it. The **Post Office** and Fujitsu have also said they will engage with it. It is now for Sir Wyn Williams to instigate the inquiry and get it under way, and he can always report back if he finds he is not getting the support he needs.

Kevin Hollinrake >

(Thirsk and Malton) (Con)

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When you have caught and removed the fox from the henhouse, it is never a good idea to put it back in there to compensate the rest of the chickens. We did exactly that with Lloyds, and I fear we are doing exactly that with the **Post Office**. There is no obvious means of compensation for those with criminal convictions. The jury is out on the historic shortfall scheme, and those who are employed as sub-postmasters through McColl's or the Co-op have no direct means of compensation. Will my hon. Friend confirm that the Government are committed to making sure that every single person who was disadvantaged is fairly compensated?

Paul Scully >

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There is a separate director within **Post Office** Ltd who is looking specifically at the historic shortfall scheme to make sure that the rest of **Post Office** Ltd has the capacity to reset its relationship with postmasters, but we will of course look at Sir Wyn Williams's findings. Postmasters who have had wrongful convictions have other methods of compensation, as I outlined in my original statement.

Emma Hardy >

(Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) [V]

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My constituent Tracy Major was falsely accused of stealing £24,000 from Anlaby Park **post office**. She was innocent. She has had her reputation destroyed; she has suffered unimaginable stress; and she is also looking at losing more than £150,000. She has received only £20,000 in compensation. How will the Government and the **Post Office** ensure she has the justice she deserves?

Paul Scully >

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If the hon. Lady's constituent was in the group litigation, the compensation was settled in a full and final settlement that was agreed with the **Post Office**. The **Post Office** has said it will not contest the wrongful convictions. We will see what happens in the courts, but anybody who has been wrongfully convicted who was not part of that group litigation will have other methods of returning to compensation.

Mr Marcus Fysh >

(Yeovil) (Con) [V]

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Sub-postmasters often operate in very small communities where everybody knows each other. This has been an incredibly painful experience for them, their families and their communities. I welcome the establishment of the inquiry, but will the Minister please assure us that it will not be a whitewash? Many sub-postmasters in my constituency are anxious to know that.

Paul Scully >

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Yes, I can assure my hon. Friend that it will not be a whitewash. I am determined to get the answers we need from the **Post Office** and Fujitsu and, indeed, from Government in terms of our role. We want to hear from sub-postmasters about their stories, their evidence and their losses. It is now for Sir Wyn Williams, a retired judge, to get to the bottom of it and to get those questions answered.

Clive Efford >

(Eltham) (Lab)

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People have had their reputations trashed. They have been made bankrupt. Others have gone to prison. What is the Minister doing to ensure that they are assisted while we wait for this inquiry? What we do not need is justice delayed and justice denied. We need action now, so what is he doing to assist those who are in real difficulties?

Paul Scully >

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What I am doing is announcing the inquiry; one of the big reasons I did not want it to be a statutory inquiry, although I can understand the impetus, is that statutory inquiries can last for decades sometimes and cause even more expense. In this way, we can get the answers within a year, I hope, so that we can put this issue to bed and get the answers that people want.

Sir Robert Neill >

(Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con)

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The Minister is aware of the Justice Committee's report on this matter. He will know that any wrongful conviction potentially undermines the whole of the justice system. Rather than waiting a year for the outcome of this review, will he meet urgently with the Attorney General, to discuss the specific recommendations that the Committee makes in its report to ensure that safeguards are applied? Through that, we can ensure that the standards applied by those who have the power to bring private prosecutions are, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) said, never less than those applied by the Crown Prosecution Service. Being judge, jury, investigator and victim potentially creates very great conflicts of interest.

Paul Scully >

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I pay tribute to the Chairman of the Justice Committee for all the work he has done and for the report the Committee published last week. I am always happy to speak to the Attorney General, and I will definitely take consideration in due course of that report.

Mr Alistair Carmichael >

(Orkney and Shetland) (LD)

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I welcome the progress that we have made thus far in getting at least an element of judicial oversight of this inquiry. Like others, I remain sceptical about whether it will be sufficient, but to proceed on the basis that it is, and that the undertakings that the Minister has given the House today are sufficient to do the job, will he now look at the damage that has been done to the availability of postmasters as a whole across the whole country? Communities such as mine rely on them very heavily, and it is becoming more and more difficult with every month that passes to fill those very important positions.

Paul Scully >

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I absolutely see the right hon. Gentleman's point. This may well be a contributing factor, but there are plenty of other factors that make it difficult to recruit postmasters, particularly in areas such as his. However, we will do whatever we can to fill those places and keep that network up.

Scott Benton >

(Blackpool South) (Con)

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The Horizon litigation process has caused immeasurable financial and emotional suffering and distress to the sub-postmasters who have been affected, including some of my constituents. Will my hon. Friend commit to studying whatever recommendations may come forward from the inquiry to ensure that this never happens again?

Paul Scully >[Share](#)

Yes—one of the reasons for making it a non-statutory inquiry is so that we can get the answers quickly, study them, put things in place and ensure that the **Post Office** has put the structures in place to ensure that it never happens again. We can keep its feet to the fire to make that work.

Navendu Mishra >

(Stockport) (Lab)

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The Communication Workers Union has been campaigning on this issue for a long time. I join others in paying tribute to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for getting this urgent question. The inquiry that the Minister has set up seems to lack statutory powers. Will he comment on that? I know that he has made other comments on that matter. Also, how much taxpayers' money was spent opposing appeals on the sub-postmaster scandal?

Paul Scully >[Share](#)

On a statutory inquiry, as I have said in a number of answers, I want to ensure that we can get the answers quickly, rather than having people, as I described in a previous answer, lawyering up, which adds expense and time for the postmasters who have been through so much. I deal with the CWU on a regular basis. In terms of taxpayers' money, the **Post Office** has funded the prosecutions through its own profits.

Marco Longhi >

(Dudley North) (Con)

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Sometimes when we hear the words “lessons learned” it can sound a little glib, if not a little trite. Given the extent and the depth of the harm caused by this scandal, can the Minister assure me and the House that we will get to the very bottom of what has gone wrong?

Paul Scully >[Share](#)

Nobody but nobody, least of all me, can fail to be appalled by what we read about some of the situations and some of the hardship and worse that many constituents have been through. That is why I am determined to listen to the evidence to ensure that we get those answers, so that it can never happen again.

Gareth Thomas >

(Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op)

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The truth is that Ministers have set up a half-baked inquiry in response to this extraordinary scandal, without the powers to fully get to the bottom of this mess. Will the Minister at least commit to returning to this House to set out in full both the compensation arrangements and any financial implications for the future of the **Post Office**?

Paul Scully >

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Let us see what the result is from Sir Wyn Williams's investigations and inquiry in the first place. Compensation is a matter for the **Post Office**, which has talked about the historical shortfall scheme. It wants to ensure that people who are wrongfully convicted are compensated accordingly.

Peter Gibson >
(Darlington) (Con)

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I welcome the Minister's decision to seek justice for sub-postmasters. What steps is he taking to support victims of this scandal now and to ensure that such mistakes never happen again?

Paul Scully >

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On what we can do, we can look for those answers now—not in five or 10 years' time. These people have suffered enough. They need answers, and they need to be able to draw a line under the stigma that has been attached to so many. That is why the independent inquiry needs to report back, hopefully within around a year, to be able to draw that line for them.

Drew Hendry >
(Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) [V]

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The Minister says he does not want a statutory inquiry. I think many of those affected will be sceptical about his reasons for that. Hundreds of people have been wrongly sued and pursued, with many imprisoned and many more losing their businesses and livelihoods. His Government and previous Governments have been central to an epic scandal. The Prime Minister promised a full independent inquiry. Why is that promise now being broken, like so many others by his Government?

Paul Scully >

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The inquiry is both independent and in full. It is one thing the Prime Minister promised, and it is one thing we have delivered. It has taken too long to get there, but we will get those answers in a few short months.

Mr Speaker >

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In order to allow the safe exit of hon. Members participating in this item of business and the safe arrival of those participating in the next, I am suspending the House for three minutes.

 4.20pm

Sitting suspended.

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