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## Hansard

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# Post Office: Horizon Compensation Arrangements

## Volume 709: debated on Thursday 24 February 2022

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10.32am

**Andrew Bridgen** >

(North West Leicestershire) (Con)

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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 compensation arrangements for those sub-postmasters/mistresses who have been impacted by the **Post Office** Horizon software scandal.

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

(Paul Scully)

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First, I apologise, Mr Speaker, for the misunderstanding. I was prepared to make a statement, but obviously the current situation and affairs have got in the way. I am happy to provide an update on Horizon matters since I last made a statement in December. I met the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee last month, and last week the Select Committee published its interim report on the **Post Office** and Horizon IT scandal. The Government will consider the Committee's recommendations and respond in due course.

People need to know about how this scandal came about and what protections are in place to avoid history repeating itself. That is why the Government established the **Post Office** Horizon IT inquiry to investigate exactly what went wrong. The evidence from postmasters who have participated since the inquiry hearings began last week has been harrowing to hear, and I thank those postmasters for their courage and their willingness to revisit the trauma they have experienced. Compensation cannot take away the suffering that affected postmasters have experienced, but we are determined that each eligible person gets what is due to them, and that that is paid as quickly as possible. Of the 72 postmasters whose convictions have been overturned, more than 95% have applied so far for an interim compensation payment of up to £100,000, of which 63 offers have been accepted and paid. The Government are pushing for final settlements for quashed convictions to follow as quickly as possible, and negotiations on the first two have begun. The Government are determined that all unjust convictions are quashed. The **Post Office** is reaching out to affected postmasters.

The **Post Office** is also in discussion with other public prosecuting bodies responsible for the convictions of postmasters that may have relied on Horizon evidence to ensure that those postmasters are also contacted and enabled to appeal. Offers have been made to over 40% of applicants and compensation has been paid to 764 postmasters who have applied to the historical shortfall scheme. So far, 28 postmasters are proceeding through a dispute resolution process aimed at achieving acceptable settlements. At least 95% of those cases should have been dealt with by the end of the year.

With compensation for overturned convictions and the historical shortfall scheme well under way, the postmasters on whom my attention is now focused are those who exposed the whole scandal by taking the **Post Office** to the High Court. I know that many hon. Members support the Select Committee's view that it is unfair that they received less compensation than those who were not part of the case. I sympathise with that view too. I cannot yet report a resolution of that legally complex issue, but we are doing everything we can to address it.

The compensation that postmasters are due will exceed what the **Post Office** can afford, so the Government are stepping in to meet a good deal of the cost of that compensation. I recognise that is an unwelcome burden on the taxpayer, but the House, and I am sure taxpayers themselves, will agree that the alternative is unacceptable.

**Andrew Bridgen** >

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I thank the Minister for his response. As he is aware, the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who I am glad to see in his place, and I are the only remaining Members of the House who were part of the original **Post Office** review working party that was set up to address the issue over a decade ago. In the years that have followed, we and others have been repeatedly dismissed and fobbed off by all the previous incumbents of my hon. Friend's current ministerial position when we called out what we saw at the time, the evidence we had uncovered and what, in retrospect, with so many cases, was an obviously flawed computer system and a huge miscarriage of justice.

The issue was first highlighted to me by my constituent Michael Rudkin in 2011. He had been forced out of his position as a national representative of sub-postmasters and his wife had been advised to plead guilty to a crime that she had not committed because of a flawed computer system, which **Post Office** officials were too arrogant to believe could possibly be to blame, and because of a **Post Office** management whose relationship with the sub-postmasters I described in this House as "feudal" in 2015.

My constituents are just two of the hundreds who lost their jobs, assets and reputations in what is the largest miscarriage of justice in this country's recent history. Their lives have been affected for 20 years or more. There is no excuse for further delays to compensation. They were wronged by the **Post Office** and let down by Ministers and officials who apparently took the **Post Office's** word without question. They deserve justice and adequate compensation now—not in months and years when the Department, which is partly culpable for the situation, finally gets its act together.

I have written to the Minister, as I have been passed a letter from the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Lord Callanan, addressed to Lord Arbuthnot, who was also part of the original **Post Office** working party and maintains a strong interest in the issue from the other place. The letter states that no formal request for the funding of sub-postmasters' compensation has been submitted to the Treasury by his Department. Can the Minister clarify whether that is still correct?

Does the Minister agree that all the sub-postmasters who lost out due to the faulty Horizon accounting system should be compensated? I need not remind him that many hundreds of sub-postmasters are due compensation, not just those who have been wrongly convicted, who number at least 736, but the many hundreds—I suspect thousands—who made up shortfalls created by the faulty Horizon system out of their own pocket under threat and coercion from the **Post Office** but who were not criminally prosecuted. Can he inform the House whether a system has been set up to identify those individuals and put in place a scheme for their compensation?

I warn the Minister and the Government that it is better for us to get on the front foot with the issue, rather than let a claims management company look at the opportunity, which will undoubtedly result in more litigation and delay at a far greater cost to the Government, and ultimately the taxpayer. The Minister will have read the damning Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee interim report by now. It is time that we accelerated compensation, got closure for the sub-postmasters and ensured that it can never happen again.

**Paul Scully** >

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I thank my hon. Friend for his work in the campaign for both his constituent and for many other sub-postmasters across the country, and I thank the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), whom my h F mentioned, and James Arbuthnot—Lord Arbuthnot—to whom I spoke earlier this week. I have spoken to Nick Read, the chief executive of the **Post Office**, and officials about this because, as I was quoted as saying in *The Times* last week, this, of all my wide range of responsibilities, is the one area that keeps me awake at night and absolutely drives me to get resolution.

My hon. Friend asked about the 555 and our commitment. As I have said, the 555 have been pioneers in this area, and I will absolutely work at speed. I do not want this to go on a moment longer than necessary, which is why we have tried to do everything we can to short-circuit any bureaucratic processes to be able to get on and compensate everybody fairly. The 555 postmasters who secured the group litigation order exposed this whole scandal by taking the **Post Office** to the High Court, and they performed a massive public service by doing so. I have written to the Select Committee with details of the costs and the preparations we have made with the Treasury.

When talking about this legally complex issue, we must remember the timeline of this and the timescale with which we are working. Horizon was installed in 1999, and the prosecutions started in 2000. In 2004, Alan Bates set up the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance, and in 2009 press reports really started to look into the concerns about those prosecutions. Over this 20-year period, many different Ministers have been involved and there have even been **Post Office** reorganisations, but now—after this 20-year scandal, frankly—we want to make sure, at pace, that everybody, including the 555, get justice, answers and fair compensation.

**Seema Malhotra >**

(Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op)

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I, too, thank the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) for securing this important urgent question, and I really pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for all his work on this issue.

The Horizon scandal is perhaps the most devastating miscarriage of justice in British history, damaging the lives of over 700 wrongly convicted sub-postmasters and their families, and the lives of so many who have been affected but have not been convicted. I join the Minister in paying tribute to those postmasters who have been relentless in their quest for justice. As the judge-led inquiry into this scandal has just begun, we have now been hearing extremely moving and devastating testimonies. I recommend that every Member spends time listening to the accounts just to understand how widespread this injustice has been.

Last week's very important Select Committee report shows that, 12 years on, we are still painfully far from all the sub-postmasters receiving the compensation they deserve. Sadly, 33 of them have died before receiving any recompense. My thoughts and those of the whole House will be with their loved ones.

Given the cripplingly slow pace of justice, I want to press the Government on a few issues. First, without the extraordinary efforts of the 555 litigants, much of what we know would not have come to light. The Minister expressed his sympathy, but as Labour has pushed for time and again, will he now confirm that this group will be able to claim the compensation that is due, as he has hinted, and if so, when? Secondly, a year on from the historical shortfall scheme closing—I understand that over 2,500 have applied—only 30% of claims have been processed. Can the Minister outline what steps he is taking to hold the **Post Office** to account in urgently getting through this backlog, and can he clarify the definition of “eligible” that he stated? Finally, could he provide the House with an update on how long it will be before we get closure on compensation for all those affected?

The Minister is right that we will need to learn the lessons, understand the causes and ensure that this never happens again. The devastating reality of this scandal will be felt by so many families for years. The Government have taken some of the right steps, and we do appreciate that, but justice is not happening quickly enough and it is not going far enough.

**Paul Scully >**[Share](#)

I thank the hon. Lady, and I sympathise and empathise with everything she said. I know that for everybody affected, whether the 555 or those who were not prosecuted but lost money, nothing will be quick enough, and there is nothing we can do to restore up to 20 years of hurt and distress. On the 555, yes we want to ensure that those people who broke open the case and were the pioneers get

full compensation. I am not yet able to outline a resolution for them, but I am working at pace within my Department, and with our legal representatives, **Post Office** legal representatives, and those of the Justice For Subpostmasters Alliance. I hope to have news for the hon. Lady as soon as possible.

Again, the historic shortfall scheme is not moving as fast as anybody would like. The **Post Office** has paid the de minimis cases and the most straightforward, smaller amounts. For the rest, it is working through the early cases, which will then benchmark the value of compensation for others. That will then allow the **Post Office** to start rattling through these cases a lot quicker. The **Post Office** says that it wants this to be 95% finished by the end of the year. I want to say 100% by the end of the year, and that is the kind of timescale I am working on.

**Lucy Allan** >  
(Telford) (Con)

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I thank the Minister for his response, and for his tone. My constituent, Tracy Felstead, is due to give evidence to the inquiry on Friday. She wants people to be held to account, and so do I. We know that civil servants were non-executive directors on the board of the **Post Office**, and that they were principal accounting officers for UK Government Investments. We know that civil servants told Ministers to come to this place and to tell MPs that there was “nothing to see here.” Those civil servants are not on the list of the core participants giving evidence to Sir Wyn Williams. How can those civil servants be held to account by Ministers for their failure to act in this case for so many years?

**Paul Scully** >

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I thank my hon. Friend for the work she does on behalf of Tracy Felstead and others. Tracy’s case is one that I often hold up as someone who was so young that she has spent more than half her life under this absolute shadow, explaining to her children now what happened all those years ago. On civil servants, I set up an independent inquiry to get those answers, and it is right that it remains independent. I do not want anybody to feel that they can get away with this, or that they do not have to answer those questions. I will ensure, as I am sure will my hon. Friend, that Sir Wyn calls up exactly who he needs to call as the facts are uncovered, so that everybody answers without fear or favour.

**Mr Kevan Jones** >  
(North Durham) (Lab)

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I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) on securing this urgent question, and I join him in thanking Lord Arbuthnot for his tenacious efforts over the years. I congratulate the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee on its report. It is clear that the only reason this scandal was unearthed was that 555 postmasters, including my constituent Tom Brown, took the **Post Office** to court. They were forced to settle because the Government and the **Post Office** used a tsunami of public money to defend the indefensible. The Minister and I have spoken. He knows that these people need compensation. The report recommends an independent comprehensive scheme, outside of the **Post Office**, and that is what we need now. I congratulate the Minister on what he has done in this area, but if the problem is the Treasury, can he not call that out now, so that we can put the fire on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ensure we get the funding that is needed properly to compensate these individuals? The Minister knows as well as I do that this scandal will not go away.

**Paul Scully** >

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I reiterate my thanks to the right hon. Gentleman for the work he has done for Tom Brown and all the postmasters. There is no single blockage in the Treasury. We are trying to work through the holistic view about where the money is coming from and how that is justified to taxpayers—as I said at the beginning, however, when taxpayers understand the scale and depth of this, they will clearly want to ensure that those postmasters get their review. We are also trying to unpick that legal settlement, which was, as he rightly

describes, pushed through the **Post Office** under considerable pressure, considerable cost and considerable might. That will take a few days, but I want it to take days, not months—certainly not years—and I am working as quickly as I can to get that resolution. I am really hoping that I will be able to come back to the Dispatch Box and have good news for him in the next few days.

**Siobhan Baillie >**

(Stroud) (Con)

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My hon. Friend the Minister may have just answered my question, but I will press him. I do not doubt the complexities and legalities, and I know how sincere he is on this issue for the brave group of postmasters who fought and were acquitted at the earlier stages. However, my constituent Nicola Arch and her family's lives are on hold. She lost her job, and she tells me that when the Stroud newspapers covered the story, she was spat at and she lost her home. She thinks that she will have to litigate again. She is waiting. I was going to press him on a timeline, but I think he said days, not weeks or months. Will that be the case—for more information, at least—so that they can have some comfort in the knowledge that information is coming?

**Paul Scully >**

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I believe from my Twitter feed that my hon. Friend is meeting Nicola Arch tomorrow—Nicola and I have those exchanges. Again, my heart goes out to Nicola, because being spat at and stigmatised shows the extra suffering that people experience. It is not just about the convictions, tragic as they are, or the money, difficult as that is; it is about what has happened to these people in their communities as former champions of those communities. I cannot give her the timescale. As I said, I am working at pace and need to give myself a little bit of leeway, but it is days or weeks—it certainly will not be a moment longer than is necessary to put these people out of their misery and give them compensation and justice.

**Mr Speaker >**

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I call the SNP spokesperson, Marion Fellows.

**Marion Fellows >**

(Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

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I am speaking in a dual role as I am also chair of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices. The Minister, the APPG and I meet regularly. He has described the Horizon case as “harrowing”, but it is beyond that, and it has gone on far too long. I commend all hon. Members of this place past and present—I will not name them all—who have worked tirelessly on it. The nub of the matter is: is the Treasury really on board for all the money required to compensate for this farcical tragedy and for supporting the continuation of the **Post Office** network? It is disgraceful that people in Government and the civil service have known about it for so long—far too long—and almost refused to do anything about it. I do not include the Minister in that, because I know that he is working hard, but it requires more than him to work hard; the different silos of Government need to come together and completely sort it out.

**Paul Scully >**

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I thank the hon. Lady for her work on the **Post Office** in general as chair of the APPG. She talks about the case being harrowing, and that is why I am so determined to get it done. We have heard about Tracy Felstead and all the years of it that she has had, and frankly nothing that I say at the Dispatch Box will make her trust me because every member of authority, whether in Government, the **Post Office** or the judicial system, has let her and all those people down. We need to act—actions and outcomes are what matter—which is why I am so driven to ensure that we can resolve the case as quickly as possible.

The Treasury is not a blockage. Clearly, we are having conversations with the Treasury not only to ensure that we can underwrite the additional costs for the **Post Office** beyond what it can afford, as it has outlined in its accounts, but to give the **Post Office** the future that it needs. Realistically, we will not be able to get to that until we have sorted out the past. We continue to work constructively.

**Mr David Davis >**

(Haltemprice and Howden) (Con)

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I associate myself with the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) and the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). They are absolutely right, and they have been long-term campaigners on the issue. Mr Speaker, I smiled to myself when you made your statement, but I understand it and support it. This Minister cares passionately about the issue, and, whatever he says, as a long-term Whitehall hand, I see the symptoms of a Minister caught between the jaws of the Treasury and Whitehall lawyers. Lawyers do not always deliver justice and the Treasury rarely does. What I will say to him is this: nobody deserves justice more than the 555. They opened up the worst miscarriage of justice in modern Government. If it helps him in his battle to get this done quickly and properly, I will say this to him: if he cannot do it, we will find a way of having this House instruct the Government to do it. Let him use that in his battle with the Treasury and the lawyers.

**Paul Scully >**[Share](#)

I can quote the Francis Urquhart line back at my right hon. Friend, but any pressure will be gratefully received. The last two years of covid have been about learning to speed up Government. As someone who has been running small businesses for 25 years, I am used to making decisions, cracking on, getting on and doing things. The Government do not always work that way. We have learnt in the past two years how to do it and I fully expect it to happen in this case.

**Kim Leadbeater >**

(Batley and Spen) (Lab)

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As a relatively new Member of this place I am coming to this frankly unbelievable scandal much later than many of my colleagues. However, I recently met a former postmistress in my constituency, Alison Hall and her husband Richard, who have suffered unbelievable stress and financial hardship as a result of this scandal. As well as losing their existing business in Hightown, they were also forced to abandon plans to open a new **post office** in Roberttown. Does the Minister agree that alongside the dreadful personal trauma that this scandal has been for so many, and which must be urgently addressed, it has had a seriously detrimental impact on communities like mine in Batley and Spen?

**Paul Scully >**[Share](#)

My heart goes out to Alison and Richard. Absolutely. Post offices offer not just economic value. Having more branches than banks and building societies put together has a social value, bringing communities together, and at the heart of that are sub-postmasters. That is why we need to give the **Post Office** a real future by sorting out the past.

**Mary Robinson >**

(Cheadle) (Con)

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I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) for securing this urgent question. I know he will agree with me that the role of the whistleblower has been pivotal in highlighting the known issues with the Horizon system. This has been a devastating series of events for many people, but for constituents like mine who saw their father die in the premises of their shop without seeing his name cleared, the devastating impact has been absolutely tremendous. There is a difference between a settled sum in a civil court and compensation. People need to be adequately compensated for the traumas and the experiences they have had. They have had their names cleared, but they now need to be compensated for what has happened to them.

**Paul Scully >**[Share](#)

I thank my hon. Friend for all the work she does on protecting whistleblowers. As I say, I want to make sure we can get fair justice and compensation for everybody involved. That needs to go through a process and we need to get the balance right. That will be done by benchmarking people's losses and how they have been affected. We have regular conversations both with postmasters and, importantly, their legal representatives to fully understand the harm done to them, so we can reflect that in any scheme we put forward.

**Andy McDonald >**  
(Middlesbrough) (Lab)

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I thank the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) for securing this urgent question and I pay tribute to the Minister, because I know he cares passionately about this issue. He came before the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and expressed himself with great candour. May I press him on the issue of fair compensation? We have heard from many Members today, and we will hear more, that the correct way to address this situation is not by fair compensation, but by full compensation for all those past losses and expenses. They have paid money back to the **Post Office** and they need that money back. They need their future losses recovered, their pension losses recovered, and psychiatric injury and exemplary damages for their loss of liberty. That needs to be reflected in the system. We cannot have a compensation system on the cheap. These people have to be compensated in full. Will he commit to that?

**Paul Scully >**

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I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words at the beginning of his question. He outlines the complexity of what we need to do and what the **Post Office** needs to do to right this wrong. That will be reflected in conversations with legal representatives to ensure, without being able to restore the past 20 years to the people affected, we do everything we can to make sure they get full and fair compensation.

**Duncan Baker >**  
(North Norfolk) (Con)

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As a former postmaster, I think I speak for everybody when I say that this Minister has done more than anybody else in his position to pursue this injustice. Last night, I was told that the community of Sheringham in my North Norfolk constituency is losing its **post office** and I will do everything I can to get it back for them. That shows how important it is for everybody to have postmasters and mistresses in their areas.

Compensation is one thing, but over 800 people were prosecuted and fewer than 80 have had those overturned. What pressure can my hon. Friend put on to speed up that process, and when are we going to start talking about Fujitsu and its role in this?

**Paul Scully >**

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My hon. Friend brings to the House his experience of being a sub-postmaster and of the social value of the **post office** in his area. He is absolutely right; we have asked people to come forward to have their prosecutions overturned. Clearly, some of those people have been let down. They do not trust the **Post Office** and the Government, but we are trying to work through legal representatives of other organisations to encourage them to do that. We want to ensure that we can get people through this system as quickly as possible. I will make sure that I do everything I can with him and others to get this sorted out.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael >**  
(Orkney and Shetland) (LD)

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If the Minister really wants to borrow quotes from Francis Urquhart, I suggest to him that he might want to

“put a bit of stick about”.

because the **Post Office**'s handling of the historical shortfall scheme has been nothing short of another scandal in itself. I recently took part in what I can only assume was ironically titled a “good faith meeting” in which the **Post Office** itself was not represented. It only had a lawyer from Herbert Smith Freehills, which, I understand, is not exactly at the budget end of the market. At the end, they said to us, “Of course, if you want to take this further, you should be aware that the offer we have made could be withdrawn”. That is how the **Post Office** is approaching the issue. It is still the same culture that caused the problem in the first place. My more recent meeting was a bit more promising, but it is clear that anybody who has settled under that HSS has probably not had a just settlement and the Minister and his Department need to look at it.

**Paul Scully** >

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I will certainly continue to look at it. We want to encourage people to go through such things as the alternative dispute resolution so that we do not need to have prolonged cases going through the courts yet again. As I said, we want to get this sorted out quickly, but not in haste. We do not want to get it wrong so that we have to start all over again. I will certainly keep the **Post Office**'s feet to the fire.

**Lee Anderson** >

(Ashfield) (Con)

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In 2008, Harjinder Butoy, who ran a **post office** in Sutton-in-Ashfield, was jailed for three years and four months after he was wrongly convicted of stealing over £200,000. It has taken him 14 years to clear his name. He is bankrupt, he cannot get a job and it has destroyed his life. Compensation is one thing, but when are the people responsible for this going to be brought to justice?

**Paul Scully** >

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I thank my hon. Friend for that question; my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) said much the same sort of thing. I set up the inquiry with Sir Wyn Williams to get to the answers on this. The prosecutions department has been keeping this in abeyance as well. It is important to be able to investigate. That will come up with the answers and, whatever those are, legal proceedings or whatever will flow from that.

**Ian Mearns** >

(Gateshead) (Lab)

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The individuals concerned who have had so much damage done to them need not only compensation, but damages awarded for grievous injustice, reputational damage, emotional trauma, mental health damage, stress and the wrongful contempt from their communities. The Minister referred to the importance of post offices to their communities. What the **Post Office** also did as part of this process was to cynically use it to permanently close **post office** branches, so many communities, first, had their postmaster or mistress taken from them in dreadful circumstances and then they had their branch closed. Will he review that because an awful lot of branches were permanently closed in an awful lot of places as a result of this scandal? To reiterate comments from across the House, there needs to be a day of reckoning for those who perpetrated this dreadful injustice on these people.

**Paul Scully** >

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I want to make sure that everybody comes before the inquiry to give evidence and feels confident in doing so, so I do not want to impose my opinions at this stage about who did what; otherwise, the inquiry would not be independent. Once the answers are known, however, there will be that day of reckoning, I am sure.

On **post office** closures, at the moment we are exceeding the 11,500 criterion, which still stands, alongside the access criterion. It is incredibly important to have that social value that I have talked about.

**Philip Dunne** >  
(Ludlow) (Con)

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My constituent Rubbina Shaheen lost her livelihood and her home. She was wrongfully convicted of stealing £40,000 from the **Post Office** and served 12 months in jail in 2000. She is one of the fortunate ones who have received some compensation, but it has all gone to the lawyers she had to engage to protect her name. I back the calls across the House for a proper compensation scheme to reflect the damage that has been inflicted by a faulty computer programme. I endorse the comments of colleagues: why has Fujitsu not been held to account for the damage that it has caused to so many people?

**Paul Scully** >

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My heartfelt thoughts go out to Rubbina Shaheen and her family. That is exactly why those who were convicted had the £100,000 interim compensation: to ensure that they could go a little way towards restoring some of their losses and that, if they needed legal representation, they had those costs paid for. We are working at pace trying to achieve full compensation.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** >  
(Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op)

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The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) and I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice. This is the greatest miscarriage of justice that anyone can remember in this country. Most of us have had such tragic cases, and we have worked across parties as Members of Parliament doing our job. I have found the people I have helped pathetically grateful for MPs of all sorts standing up in this House and working on an all-party basis to get this right. Justice and compensation still need to be delivered fast—the faster, the better.

**Paul Scully** >

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I agree with everything the hon. Gentleman said. What he says about individual MPs doing amazing work goes to the heart of the early part of the problem, when all the sub-postmasters thought that it was just them. They did not realise that so many people—hundreds across the country—were suffering the same issue because of a faulty bit of software. It was only when they came together, when pressure built, when there was coverage in the media and when other champions raised the issue in this place and elsewhere that it burst open with the 555. Now we need to make sure that we bring it to a proper conclusion.

**Martin Vickers** >  
(Cleethorpes) (Con)

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I welcome what the Minister has said today. To be honest, previous Ministers have failed miserably to grasp the situation; I welcome the fact that since his appointment we have made rapid progress. I had a couple in my surgery who were elated a few months ago because they thought that real progress was being made, but were deflated when they came a few weeks ago. They are an elderly couple. When convictions are quashed, surely compensation can follow pretty quickly—a quashed conviction is clear evidence to all that they are innocent. They should get at least an interim payment. What can the Minister do to assist in those circumstances?

**Paul Scully** >

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As I say, we have made good progress on interim payments. If my hon. Friend's constituents have not applied for or received their interim compensation of up to £100,000, will he please let me know? I will certainly look into it, because that is exactly why those payments are there: as a stepping stone to the final sums.

**Andrew Gwynne** >

(Denton and Reddish) (Lab)

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I pay tribute to the fortitude and strength of character of my constituent Della Ryan, the former sub-postmistress of Dukinfield post office in my constituency. Compensation is one important side of the equation, but another is ensuring that natural justice is not just seen to be done, but done. The hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) posed an important question about the involvement of civil servants in that justice over a long period. What assurances can the Minister give the House that there can be no hiding places at all for those involved in perpetuating this injustice?

**Paul Scully** >[Share](#)

I ask the hon. Gentleman to pass on my heartfelt sympathies to Della for what she has been through.

This is exactly why we set up the inquiry. My Department has said from the beginning that we will work with the inquiry in the fullest sense to ensure that we offer all the information, support and evidence that Sir Wyn wants, and I have received an assurance to the same effect from Fujitsu and the Post Office itself. I am determined that that process will be carried out.

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

(Thirsk and Malton) (Con)

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I thank Members on both sides of the House, and indeed the Minister, for their efforts. As for the 555, lives have been ruined. Now lives have been lost; people die. The compensation must be delivered quickly. Why can people not have access to interim payments? That is the least we could provide. I accept that there are the legal challenges that the Minister mentioned, but this is something that we could and absolutely should do now.

As for the independence of the scheme, Herbert Smith Freehills acted for the Post Office in the litigation to reduce compensation, so how can it be right that it now acts with the Post Office in delivering compensation? That cannot be right, especially given that Herbert Smith Freehills oversaw the Lloyds Bank compensation scheme that was judged independently to be unable to deliver fair and reasonable outcomes to the victims, so it all had to be done again. If we do not put independent oversight into this—with a High Court judge—it will all have to be done again as well. We must act now to change the way in which this is working.

**Paul Scully** >[Share](#)

That is why the Post Office has an independent panel to oversee the process. So there is independence. On the interim payments for the 555, they are there for overturned convictions. That is a legal issue that I am working through at the moment because, in the eyes of the law, it was a full and final settlement. That is what I have to tackle at speed because the 555 will understandably not understand this and want to crack on now; they want to receive the compensation. I am determined to ensure that that happens.

**Jim Shannon** >

(Strangford) (DUP)

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I concur with those who have thanked the Minister in particular for his genuine interest and commitment, which we all recognise.

The report produced by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee makes difficult reading for those who took their cases to court and are worse off than those who did not. Constituents of mine who are affected have been asking, where is the equality for all that was promised? Their reputations are shattered and they are financially bereft. Will the Minister direct his team to

right this wrong as quickly as possible?

**Paul Scully** >

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I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words and for his ongoing interest. I am pleased to say that, as the first week of evidence to his inquiry finishes, Sir Wyn will be travelling around the country. He will go to Cardiff, and also to Belfast. It is important for him to hear from people close to where they live, so that they can feel comfortable and confident about giving evidence. However, the hon. Gentleman is right: we need to crack on with this and secure the equality that he seeks.

**Scott Benton** >

(Blackpool South) (Con)

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Sadly, some of those who have suffered so much are no longer alive to see justice served. Will the Minister do all in his power to ensure that the full inquiry reports back as soon as possible, so that those who are accountable can finally be held to account?

**Paul Scully** >

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I can assure my hon. Friend of that. People have died because this has taken so long, and other people have died because they have committed suicide. It has been horrendous, and that is why we are determined to ensure that we can get this sorted out as soon as possible.

**Margaret Ferrier** >

(Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind)

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Soon after I was elected, I was contacted by a constituent whose father had been wrongly caught up in this scandal. He lost everything: his livelihood, and, more important to him, his reputation. He sadly passed away before he had the opportunity to clear his name, and he will never see the benefits of this compensation. Have the Government any plans to offer personal, individual apologies to the family members of postmasters who are no longer with us?

**Paul Scully** >

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I cannot give a particular commitment, but what I can say is that the Prime Minister is personally exercised by this, which is why we met some postmasters last summer. I was talking to him about the matter just yesterday. He is personally involved, and he gives me the kick that I need in order to give other people a kick to ensure that we can get everyone the apology, the compensation and the justice that they need.

**Mr Speaker** >

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That is the end of the statement—the urgent question, actually. It should have been a statement.