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## Hansard

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# Post Office Horizon: Compensation and Legislation

## Volume 746: debated on Monday 26 February 2024

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🕒 4.26pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade** >

(Kevin Hollinrake)

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With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement to update the House on the progress that has been made to support victims of the **Horizon scandal**.

Since this terrible miscarriage of justice was first exposed, the Government have been working tirelessly to put matters right for postmasters. We have set up an independent inquiry and funded various redress schemes that we have continuously improved to speed up compensation for all affected. That work has been taking place for many months, and long before ITV aired the excellent programme “Mr Bates vs The Post Office”. The work included our announcement last autumn of the optional £600,000 fixed-sum award for those who have been wrongfully convicted. We continue to develop our response to the **scandal**, and on Thursday I made a written statement detailing the way that we plan to legislate to overturn **Horizon**-related convictions en masse. We expect to introduce that legislation as soon as possible next month.

My statement set out that the new legislation will quash all convictions that are identified as being in scope, using clear and objective criteria on the face of the Bill. Convictions will be quashed at the point of commencement, without the need for people to apply to have their convictions overturned. The criteria will cover the prosecutors, extending to prosecutions undertaken by Post Office Ltd and the Crown Prosecution Service, as well as offence types, ensuring that those align with offences known to have been prosecuted by the Post Office. That means that only relevant offences such as theft and false accounting will be in scope. On offence dates, a set timeframe will ensure that convictions are quashed only where the offence took place during the period when the **Horizon** system and its pilots were in operation. The criteria will also cover the contractual or other relationship of the convicted individual to Post Office Ltd, so that only sub-postmasters, their employees, officers or family members, or direct employees of the Post Office will be within the defined class of convictions to be quashed. On the use of the **Horizon** system at the date of the offence, the convicted person will need to have been working, including in a voluntary capacity, in a post office that was using **Horizon** system software—including any relevant pilot schemes—at the time that the behaviour constituting the offence occurred.

Such legislation is unprecedented and constitutionally sensitive, but this **scandal** is unprecedented too. I am clear that this legislation does not set a precedent for the future, and nor is it a reflection on the actions of the courts and the judiciary, who have dealt swiftly with the cases before them. However, we are clear that the scale and circumstances of the miscarriage of justice demand an exceptional response. We are also receiving invaluable support from the **Horizon** compensation advisory board in this effort. Once again, I thank the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and his colleagues on the board, including Lord Arbuthnot. The board met on Thursday. We were joined by Sir Gary Hickinbottom and Sir Ross Cranston, who will be the final arbiters of claims in the overturned convictions and GLO schemes respectively. At the meeting, the board strongly supported the proposals in my written statement for legislating to overturn convictions. They also proposed sensible measures to accelerate compensation for those impacted.

One of the biggest constraints on the speed of redress for those who choose to take the full assessment route is that it takes time for claimants and their representatives to gather evidence and develop their claims. To encourage early submission of claims, once the Post Office receives a full claim from someone with an overturned conviction, it will forthwith top up their interim redress to £450,000. Of course, if they have opted for our £600,000 fixed-sum award, they will get that instead. Similarly, on the GLO scheme, where claims are typically smaller, we have implemented fixed-sum award offers of £75,000, helping claimants to move on with their lives. Those who are not satisfied with this fixed offer can continue to submit larger claims, and they will be assessed on a case-by-case basis. We have committed to provide offers on a fully completed claim within 40 working days in 90% of cases. If initial GLO offers are not accepted and independent facilitation is then entered, we shall forthwith pay postmasters 80% of our initial offer, to help ensure that they do not face hardship while those discussions are completed.

We have always been clear that our first offers of compensation should be full and fair. It is early days, but the numbers suggest that in the GLO scheme we are achieving that. More than 70% of our offers in that scheme are accepted by postmasters without reference to the independent panel. We will also ensure that postmasters are kept regularly up to date with the progress of their claims.

The advisory board has made a number of other helpful proposals. Those are set out in the report of the meeting, which my Department is publishing today. I have undertaken to give them serious consideration. I will advise the House when we reach decisions about those proposals, and I will doubtless return again with further updates as part of our unceasing determination to deliver justice for everyone caught up in this long-running and tragic **scandal**. I commend this statement to the House.

**Mr Deputy Speaker** >

(Sir Roger Gale)

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I call the Opposition spokesperson.

 4.33pm

**Rushanara Ali** >

(Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab)

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May I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement? The **Horizon scandal** has rightly left the public outraged by the scale and shocking details of the injustice that has been committed. The **scandal** is one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in British history. It has robbed innocent people of their livelihoods, their liberty and, sadly, in numerous cases, their lives. More than 20 years on, the victims and their families are still suffering the consequences of the trauma of all that they have been put through. Until recently, there has been little progress and delays at every turn, which has caused even further distress.

Victims and their families have been trapped in a nightmare for too long. We all want to see the exoneration of all the remaining convictions, and the delivery of rightful compensation to all those affected sub-postmasters as quickly as possible. On the Opposition Benches, the Labour party has made it clear that we want to see a swift and comprehensive resolution to this insidious injustice, and we are committed to working with the Government to ensure that happens.

I recognise the important work that the Minister has done, both on the Back Benches and in his current role. The unprecedented scale of the legal work being carried out will be possible only with cross-party working and cross-party support. I want to take the opportunity to thank the advisory board for its tireless work in supporting the Government in getting this right, as well as hon. Members on both sides of the House and in the other House.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to progressing the legislation. Labour is committed to working with the Government to deliver rightful exonerations, but I know that many Members will have had questions following last Thursday's written ministerial statement, so I welcome the Minister returning to the House. I have a series of questions to pose to him. First, in the light of what he has said today, what further details can we expect on the legislation being tabled? Will he further clarify why convictions prosecuted by the Department for Work and Pensions are excluded from the legislation and what steps he will take to get the Department to deliver exonerations as soon as possible?

The Minister's proposals set a very difficult precedent, as he said, on the relationship between the legislature and the judiciary. Will he outline what conversations he has had with the Lord Chancellor about this matter and his views on it, which might alleviate some people's continued concerns?

As the Minister mentioned, there are also issues around precedent that could be exploited in the future for less appropriate purposes. Although I appreciate the assurances that he has provided on that, it would be helpful to understand and get clarification on what specific safeguards will be put in place to avoid this becoming a precedent. The cross-party nature of this work is critical to ensure that happens. However, some people are asking whether he considers that this particular example could be relevant in the future for other worthy causes.

May I also ask the Minister about the pre-**Horizon** system, Capture? Will he confirm whether prosecutions were made using Capture data and whether any sub-postmasters lost money due to Capture failings? If so, will he commit to those convictions being in the scope of the legislation and compensation schemes?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I thank the hon. Member for her collaborative comments. I am keen to work with her going forward, as we have every step of the way on this issue. I do not accept that we have made little progress. Let us be clear that 78% of all full claims that have been submitted have been settled—that is 2,700 claims that have been settled. Nor do I accept that there have been delays at every turn. That is not a correct characterisation of the situation.

With regard to our next steps, as I said, we expect the legislation to be tabled next month, which is as quickly as possible. I am working on this on very much a daily basis. On the differences between Post Office and CPS cases—those we are seeking to overturn with this legislation—and DWP cases, I think it is fair to say there was a different standard of evidence. Those DWP cases relied on evidence independent of **Horizon** such as the surveillance of suspects, collation and examination of cashed orders from stolen benefit books and girocheques, handwriting comparisons and witness statements. Those cases were very much not simply relying on **Horizon** evidence.

My engagement with the Lord Chancellor has been extensive, and our engagement with other stakeholders—including the hon. Member's shadow Front-Bench colleagues—has also been extensive. We decided that was the right thing to do. Having said that, these are unprecedented steps. I think that again speaks to the fact that we are keen to make as much progress as possible, rather than as little.

The hon. Lady mentioned safeguards. The standard of evidence is critical to get to this point. It is fair to say that the trailblazing 555, who successfully took their case to the courts in the first place, set a high bar for anyone to emulate or replicate. We will be clear in the legislation that convictions will be overturned based on objective criteria, as another way to deal with this. That speaks to the hon. Lady's last point on Capture, which I am very aware of and I have discussed with the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on several occasions, including immediately prior to this statement. We need to ensure that we have the right evidence base. I am happy to continue the dialogue on that, but it is important that we do not include cohorts where we do not have the evidence base, as we have for the cohorts that we have set out—where the CPS and the Post Office prosecuted cases. We are taking very serious measures to overturn the convictions. We should never resort to this kind of approach lightly.

**John Redwood** >  
(Wokingham) (Con)

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Will the Minister take UK Government Investments out of its role of controlling and supervising the Post Office? It has allowed these gross injustices to go on for too long, allowed the Post Office senior managers to rack up huge losses of £1,391 million to last March, with more to come this year, and given the executives bonuses for losing us that much money. It has left the Government with a great

financial black hole. Would it not be better to change the Post Office management, to have it report directly to the Minister, and to make its No. 1 task giving justice to the sub-postmasters?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He and I have had serious conversations about the future of the Post Office, which I am keen to continue to engage on. The current UKGI representative who sits on the Post Office board is Lorna Gratton, for whom I have a great deal of time and respect. Clearly it is important that the inquiry does its work to determine who did what in the past. As we look to the future, there are different opinions on how the Post Office should be governed. I am happy to keep those discussions ongoing with my right hon. Friend.

**Marion Fellows** >

(Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

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I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. Under successive Labour, Tory and Liberal Ministers, Post Office Ltd has overseen the largest miscarriage of justice in UK history. The **Horizon scandal** is just appalling. Unusually, both the Scottish and Northern Irish Governments have written to the UK Government, calling on them to rule on devolved affairs. It is vital that the UK Government work to ensure that exonerations in Scotland and Northern Ireland take place at the same time as those in England and Wales. *[Interruption.]* I do not find this amusing at all, but obviously the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) does.

**Amy Callaghan** >

(East Dunbartonshire) (SNP)

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Utterly shameful.

**Mr Deputy Speaker** >

(Sir Roger Gale)

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Order.

**Marion Fellows** >

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The devolved Governments have no power or locus in the UK Post Office, so we really need to get this together. When will the legislation for both the exoneration and the redress schemes be published? The Scottish and Northern Irish Governments have written to ask for UK-wide legislation. We need the UK Government to act, because otherwise we cannot guarantee simultaneous legislation that is compatible and comparable with UK Government schemes. When will there be a response to the Scottish Government? This is really important.

There were reports yesterday that Post Office Ltd has only now brought in external investigators to investigate its internal investigators. Does that not seem quite late to the Minister? Why was that not done earlier? Is it just to avoid the appearance of continued cover-ups in Post Office Ltd?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I thank the hon. Lady for her work and for her points, including on the devolved issues around Scotland and Northern Ireland which she is right to raise. We considered that very carefully. When we originally set out to legislate, we were very clear that it would be for England and Wales only, but that we would work with our counterparts in the other parts of the United Kingdom on what they might do. Indeed, we have responded to them already. We met them last week before we announced the legislation in this statement to the

House. We decided to legislate for England and Wales only, because justice is a devolved matter. As she said, the Post Office is UK-wide, but justice is a devolved matter in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and of course they have different legal systems in those areas and different prosecutors. Taking action to interfere with the independent judiciary is a very, very serious thing to do, of course, but we believe that it is the right way. We are working closely with our counterparts in the devolved Administrations to ensure they understand our legal approach and we are very happy to assist with any legislation they may seek to undertake in their own Parliaments.

On redress, there is a single UK-wide scheme, so once somebody's conviction is overturned they can access redress in exactly the same way as anybody in England and Wales. On the investigation or investigators, that is initially a matter for the Post Office but also for the inquiry to see what happened in the past. There is little point in the huge expense of setting up a public inquiry, as Members called for, and then seeking to do the inquiry's work ourselves. We need to see exactly what the inquiry makes of that and of many other issues.

**Mark Pawsey >**  
(Rugby) (Con)

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I commend the Minister and the Secretary of State for the firm and consistent approach the Government are taking to getting justice for the affected sub-postmasters. We heard earlier about precedent. The Minister will know that many of us have concerns about precedent in bringing forward special legislation in this case, although we know, of course, that many hundreds of innocent sub-postmasters have suffered the most serious miscarriage of justice. The Minister just said that the scale and circumstances of the Post Office's actions in this case rightly require an exceptional response. Will he set out how using that mechanism will ensure that the people we are bothered about, the sub-postmasters, benefit speedily and accurately from those measures?

**Kevin Hollinrake >**

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I thank my hon. Friend for his point and for his work on the Select Committee. He is right that we will take those steps very carefully and very much as a last resort. He concluded his question on exactly the right point. This is about sub-postmasters and the speed of overturning those convictions: the speed to justice. We looked at doing that through other means, but did not feel that they would achieve the same level of speed. He may be aware that hundreds of people have passed away—there was a report in the newspapers over the weekend—waiting for compensation and justice. That is just not acceptable. We made the difficult decision to deal with this situation in this particular way. As we have often described it, this is the least-worst option but it is still the right option.

**Mr Deputy Speaker >**  
(Sir Roger Gale)

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I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

**Liam Byrne >**  
(Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab)

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May I put on record my gratitude to the Minister for the speed and attention he is paying to this issue? The bottom line, however, is that redress is too slow and the offers are too low. Papers that the Select Committee is publishing this afternoon show that at the core of the problem is a toxic culture of disbelief of sub-postmasters, which still persists at the top of the Post Office. Indeed, the board minutes for March last year show that board members lamented that the board was tired and constantly distracted by historical issues and short-term crises. I am afraid that that is not good enough when only 40% of the allocated budget for the Horizon scheme has been paid out and only 4% of the budget for the overturned conviction scheme has been paid out. When the Minister brings forward his Bill, will he make sure that the Post Office is now taken out of every single one of the compensation schemes, and that a hardwired instruction to deliver, with a fixed, legally binding timetable to deliver compensation agreements, is written on the face of the Bill?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >[Share](#)

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his points, his kind words earlier, and his work on this matter. I know that he will be chairing a Select Committee session on it tomorrow, and I look forward to his recommendations.

I agree that compensation has been delivered too slowly. We are trying to accelerate its delivery every single day, and we are, I think, doing good work with the advisory board to ensure that that happens. I do not accept that the offers are too low, although I am not saying that there are no exceptions; no compensation scheme will be 100% perfect. In respect of the GLO scheme, for example, 58 full claims have been submitted and 41 have been accepted without reference to the next stage of the process, involving the independent panel, which would seem to indicate that the offers that have been made are fair. Of course people will not take my word for it—they will only accept it when those cases have been resolved—and there are bound to be high-profile cases, as indeed there have been, in which people say that the offers are too low. However, we are determined to ensure that everyone has full compensation that is also fair to the individual, fair to the other individuals within the schemes and, of course, fair to the taxpayer.

As for the people who are running the scheme, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, the **Horizon** shortfall scheme was set up as a scheme run by the Post Office, with an independent panel including eminent KCs such as Lord Garnier. I have met its members, as has the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), and we have confidence in it. Nevertheless, we are looking at recommendations from the advisory board for an independent appeal process. The GLO scheme is independent of the Post Office; it is within our Department, and we are working to ensure that the offers are fair. As the right hon. Gentleman suggested, we are considering bringing the overturned conviction scheme back in-house, and we will have more to say about that in due course.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned 40% of the budget. We set a maximum budget of £1 billion—not a cap, but a maximum budget at this point. Part of the reason why only 4% of overturned convictions claims have been settled is the fact that the convictions have not in fact been overturned, which is why we are legislating in this way. Once those hundreds of convictions have been overturned, en masse, people will have access to rapid compensation via either the fixed-sum award, whereby compensation takes only days, or the full-assessment route, which takes longer.

The right hon. Gentleman spoke about a legally binding route, and of course we will look at all the various suggestions that are made. We have just legislated to extend the timescale for GLO compensation because we did not want to be bound by an arbitrary date, and I think he supported our legislation. I would therefore caution him against suggesting a legally binding date, because not everything is in our gift, in terms of when we receive a claim and how fast it can then be processed.

**Priti Patel** >

(Witham) (Con)

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The Minister will be aware from my correspondence of the case of my constituent Mr Graham Ward—one of the 555 in the GLO. He has been in touch with me in the last week, and I think it fair to say that he has expressed his deep frustration about the processes that the House is currently discussing in respect of redress and access to compensation. The £75,000 fixed-sum offer is less than the impact that he has experienced. In his statement, the Minister referred to the 40-day process that people might wish to go through rather than accepting the lump sum. May I suggest to him that that should be looked into? Graham is having to undergo medical assessments and various doctors' appointments, and all this is a terrible ordeal that continues for him, but so many others have also been part of this. I urge the Minister to bring a human element to his considerations, and to recognise that £75,000 does not even scratch the surface when someone has lost their business, their livelihood, the goodwill and their reputation. That is what we must restore sooner rather than later.

**Kevin Hollinrake** >[Share](#)

I thank my right hon. Friend for her constant correspondence and engagement with Mr Ward. I wrote to her recently about the case, and asked to be kept updated on his progress.

The £75,000 is one of two routes that people can take. If they feel that their claim is below £75,000, they do not have to submit any evidence and can simply opt for the £75,000, take that money off the table, and move on with their lives. If they feel that their claim is significantly higher than that, they can opt for the full-assessment route, which inevitably takes more time because assessing

someone's loss is a complex process. The submission of a claim for financial loss will require forensic accountants on behalf of the claimant, and other assessments of the type that my right hon. Friend mentioned will also be needed. All the compensation schemes with which I have been involved during my time in this place have been complicated, but we are trying to simplify this one. Only last week we discussed with the advisory board measures to accelerate the process, but the fundamental principle is that claimants such as Mr Ward should always be given the benefit of the doubt.

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

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I declare my interest as a member of the **Horizon** compensation board, and I thank the Minister for his statement. It is welcome to see him, rather than the Secretary of State, present today's statement. I welcome the approach that the Government are taking on overturned convictions, but I note that it includes pilots.

I have given evidence to the Minister and the public inquiry about the Capture system. Those affected need to be included in any overturned convictions and to get compensation. I am slowly getting the evidence out of the Post Office and from individual cases, and it comes back to a point that the Chair of the Select Committee just made about the role of the Post Office. The Minister wrote a letter at the weekend to the Select Committee, saying that the culture at the Post Office has changed, but it clearly has not; the toxic culture is still there. Until the Post Office is taken out of this process altogether and forced to regurgitate the information, nothing will change. The Minister knows that one of the advisory board's recommendations is to do exactly that. Until we do it, postmasters will not have any faith in the process.

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I thank the right hon. Gentleman again for his tireless work over the years and, indeed, for his work in recent months on the advisory board. It is hugely important for accelerating this process.

We have discussed Capture on a number of occasions. It is important that we have the right body of evidence on that, and I am keen to work with the right hon. Gentleman to make sure that we do. Clearly, intervening in matters that were independently decided by the courts is a step we take very rarely—it is unprecedented in this context—but I am happy to discuss that further with him and to help him seek evidence from the Post Office where he needs more evidence on this issue. We discussed it last week, and I am keen to make sure that we have the process running as independently as possible.

I can assure colleagues, any claimants out there and the wider public that every single process—not least the GLO scheme and the overturned convictions scheme—has an independent reviewer. It is Sir Gary Hickinbottom for the overturned convictions scheme and Sir Ross Cranston for the GLO scheme. These are very highly regarded individuals, who will make sure that postmasters who come forward are fairly treated and get the redress they deserve.

**Siobhan Baillie** >  
(Stroud) (Con)

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I welcome the care that has been taken to set out how extraordinary this circumstance is and the fact that we are not leading ourselves into setting any precedents. I also welcome scrutiny of the Bill as it comes forward.

On compensation, it is right that evidence is checked and that we are thorough, but I am concerned that the Government's payment clock will start to run only when they are satisfied that they have all the information on individual cases. It is very difficult for some postmasters to collate documents covering 20 years, some of which have been destroyed or damaged. This is causing a lot of stress, in a similar way to what my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) described. Will the Minister explain the Government's position regarding evidence? Given the process of trying to speed up the payments, are we able to get to the point at which we are taking a view on claims, so that we can kickstart the 40-day process and get the money out the door?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I thank my hon. Friend for her engagement with this issue and for her work on behalf of her constituent, whose case I am very aware of. Yes, we absolutely should be taking a view where evidence is impossible to obtain. Of course, it is fair to request certain bits of information to support a claim, but where such information is not available because it pertains to 20 or 25 years ago, it would be unreasonable to expect that as the basis for a claim. As I said earlier, where there is an absence of evidence but a broader claim that is compelling, there is no doubt that the claimant should get the benefit of the doubt, and I am very keen to make sure that her constituent gets compensation as quickly as possible.

**Andy McDonald >**  
(Middlesbrough) (Ind)

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I thank the Minister and his predecessor for their work on this. I know that he has been paying a lot of attention to it. On the issue of full and fair compensation, may I express a worry about the £600,000 option? It has been said that this is a complicated process, but it does not have to be. Schedules of past and future loss are regular events when calculating these matters, and if ever there were a case for aggravated and exemplary damages, surely this is it. My fear is that people who are up against time limits and perhaps getting older will want to accept the £600,000, which will be a vast undersell of the true value of their claim. What mechanisms is the Minister putting in place to ensure that people do not undervalue their claim and take that easy option to bring the matter to a close?

**Kevin Hollinrake >**

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The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. Full and fair compensation lies at the heart of this matter, and we do not want people to feel that the £600,000 is the only option for getting compensation in quick time. It is there for those who want to take the money, walk away and draw a line under the matter, particularly where they think their claim is below that figure. As the hon. Gentleman might have heard me say earlier, on the recommendation of the advisory board and others involved in the process, as soon as a full claim is received, individuals in the overturned conviction cohort will get their interim compensation of £163,000 topped up immediately to £450,000. That will ease the financial pressure and reduce what he suggests might be an incentive for people to take a lower amount than they deserve. A significant amount of money will be paid forward on that basis while the remainder of the compensation claim can be properly assessed.

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

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I echo some of the words of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali). I had an email overnight from a lady in Australia whose father was prosecuted by the DWP. He had been extremely ill, and he was given a six-month prison sentence for a crime he did not commit. From the statement this afternoon it is clear that the scope of the Bill will apply only to prosecutions from the CPS and Post Office Ltd. Those who received a sentence from the DWP will therefore be outside the scope of the new law. That cannot be right, Minister.

**Kevin Hollinrake >**

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We have looked at this very carefully. In all the appeals based on DWP cases, the convictions have been upheld thus far. Clearly it is rare that we take the kind of route that we are taking now, in summarily overturning convictions. We see that the evidence bar was much higher in those cases. As I said earlier, there was surveillance of suspects and collation and examination of cash orders from stolen benefit books and girocheques, so there is a significant evidence base for these convictions. I would point out that people can still technically appeal their convictions. They can go through the normal Court of Appeal route. I would be happy to have a discussion with my hon. Friend afterwards to discuss this further if that would be helpful.

**Andrew Bridgen >**  
(North West Leicestershire) (Ind)

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After 14 years of campaigning on behalf of my constituents, Mr and Mrs Rudkin, and the other sub-postmasters who were victims, I welcome our now having almost a weekly update on the compensation scheme. I also welcome the Minister's announcement of more generous interim payments for the victims, but I have to disagree when he says that the sub-postmasters **Horizon scandal** is unprecedented. I am thinking of the infected blood **scandal**, the so-called Gulf war syndrome repayment **scandal** and the banking fraud **scandal**, and of course the House will have the vaccine deaths and vaccine harms **scandal** to look forward to, which will overshadow everything that has come before. Does the Minister think that those would benefit from a docudrama?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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The hon. Gentleman outlines particular scandals, but my responsibility extends only as far as the Post Office in that regard. As he knows, I come to the House quite often and I probably have enough on my plate in dealing with this issue right now. I thank him for all the campaigning he has done from the Back Benches on this issue and I very much hope that Mr and Mrs Rudkin get the compensation they deserve as soon as possible.

**Dame Diana Johnson** >

(Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)

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The Minister often comes to the Chamber to discuss this **scandal**, and I just wish that Ministers in other Departments, dealing with other scandals, came as often as he does, for which I compliment him. Will he Minister confirm that all those with overturned convictions will be compensated before the general election?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I thank the right hon. Lady for all her work on this subject and on the infected blood **scandal**. I contributed to that work as a Back Bencher, and I understand that £400 million has been paid out in interim compensation, but I know she will not rest until all the people she represents get full and final compensation.

On overturned convictions, not everything is within our gift. We are summarily overturning convictions en masse, and we hope to do that very quickly. We plan to table legislation next month, and we hope to overturn all the convictions by July. That will open the door to compensation through the two different routes. We are somewhat at the mercy of claims being submitted, which can take time. The £600,000 route is much quicker. I cannot say when the general election will be, so I cannot answer yes to the right hon. Lady's specific question, but I very much hope we will do so. Our original date was August, and we hope to get everybody compensated by the end of this year. We will do everything we can to ensure that is the case.

**Sarah Olney** >

(Richmond Park) (LD)

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We understand why the legislation to overturn convictions must be limited, but we have heard today from the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) about convictions that were secured through other systems and other prosecutors. What assessment has been made of the likely number of people who have been wrongfully convicted outside the boundaries that have been set? What might be made available for people who want to bring their own appeals against wrongful convictions but who cannot make use of the forthcoming legislation?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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It is fair to say that we can all now see a significant body of evidence showing that these were wrongful convictions, which is why we are acting in this unprecedented way. If the hon. Lady is referring to the Capture cases, we do not have that body of evidence thus far. We think the DWP cases are a different cohort because of the evidential standard. We are acting in this way because we do not think the evidential standard for **Horizon** was of the right level, and clearly a number of different factors were involved in these convictions. The DWP cases are different. There are around 70 to 100 cases in the DWP cohort, which means that the vast majority of the 983 convictions will be overturned by this legislation.

**Barbara Keeley** >

(Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab)

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I want to raise again with the Minister the shortcomings of the **Horizon** shortfall scheme. My constituent, Mr Pennington, was a sub-postmaster for over 20 years, and for 11 of those years he had the stress and worry of continually having to pay back shortfalls generated in error by the **Horizon** system. He has not received back all that he was forced to pay in, and he was offered only a derisory £1,500 for 11 years of stress and financial distress. I wrote to the Minister about this case five weeks ago, and I have still not received a response. Last week, the Business Secretary said that I will receive a letter very soon. How long will Mr Pennington have to wait for answers to his questions after so many years of financial stress and worry?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I will chase that correspondence as soon as I leave the Chamber. I thought I had signed the correspondence, and I apologise if the hon. Lady has not received it. I will ensure that she receives it at the earliest possible opportunity.

I am familiar with the hon. Lady's case, having read about it and about the times she has raised it in the House and elsewhere. I am keen to look at this. The advisory board made recommendations about how we can make sure everyone feels that their settlement is fair. We are looking at those recommendations, and I will get the letter to her as soon as I can.

**Sammy Wilson** >

(East Antrim) (DUP)

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I thank the Minister for the urgency he has brought to trying to resolve this terrible injustice. It seems that this has been against resistance from within the Post Office, where an attempt is still being made to cover up the negligence and incompetence of the management. May I take him back to the points he has made about this legislation applying to Northern Ireland? I am not convinced of the reasons he has given: first, that this is a devolved issue; secondly, that the justice system is different in Northern Ireland; and, thirdly, that he does not want to step on the feet of the judges in Northern Ireland. In the past, legislation has gone through this House that has related to the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland, with Northern Ireland being included as the result of a legislative consent motion. Has he explored that opportunity with the Minister and the Executive in Northern Ireland? Has there been resistance from the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland or is it willing to co-operate if Northern Ireland were to be included?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his points. I believe he has contributed to every debate in which I have been involved in this House on this matter, so I thank him for his work. Clearly, justice and the judicial system are devolved to Northern Ireland. The difference here is that this is not simply legislating for general matters across the piece; it is about overturning individual cases, which I understand is unprecedented—it certainly is in my experience. We have engaged with the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland, and I am happy to continue to do so and to talk to the right hon. Gentleman about the points he has raised. These are difficult decisions to make. This was the decision we have taken but, as I say, I am happy to have a further conversation with him.

**Kate Osborne** >

(Jarrow) (Lab)

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The sub-postmasters have no trust or faith in the compensation processes being handled by the Post Office or the Government. Today's commitments will still not deal with all the inequalities in the schemes or the undue influence that the Post Office still has on the process. Echoing the sentiments of some of my hon. Friends, may I ask the Minister to agree to place the compensation schemes into an external independent body, completely outside the influence of the Post Office? I asked the Prime Minister, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) has asked, about the timescales for the legislation to overturn the convictions, but we still have not got an answer. If it is not before the general election, will it be before the summer recess? Finally, when will people be held to account for this miscarriage of justice, be it within the Government, the Post Office or Fujitsu?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I thank the hon. Lady for her campaigning on this issue. Again, she has been a key part of the campaign to ensure that people receive justice. Let me deal with the point about fair compensation. As I say, on the GLO scheme, 41 of the 58 full claims that have been submitted have been accepted without even going to the next stage. That would tend to indicate that those first offers are fair. I am aware of some people who feel that their offers are not fair, but I think it is wrong to look at individual cases in this context; it is right that we look to make all the schemes fair. As for undue influence, let me be clear that every part of this process has an independent element to it. Under the GLO scheme and the overturned convictions schemes, that is provided by retired judges, Sir Ross Cranston and Sir Gary Hickinbottom, in order to ensure that those schemes are independent of any "undue influence", as she puts it. Clearly, the GLO scheme is not being run by the Post Office; it is run by my Department. We are looking at recommendations from the advisory board about what we do with new cases of overturned convictions. On timescales, we have been clear today that we will table the legislation in March and we hope it completes its passage through both Houses by July at the latest. Again, that is not entirely within our gift.

**Stephen Farry** >

(North Down) (Alliance)

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Around this time last week, I reiterated my call on the Government to include Northern Ireland in this legislation, so I was disappointed to see that it applies only to England and Wales. There is a cross-party consensus in Northern Ireland for this House to take the legislation forward, and that includes my colleague the Justice Minister, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The Executive has just been restored and they have a large work programme to get through. We have a small number of cases in Northern Ireland. Doing our own legislation would require disproportionate effort and would involve considerable delay, which would remove equity across the UK. Let me reinforce the points made by my colleague the Justice Minister and ask: will the Minister reconsider the position as regards Northern Ireland and include it in the legislation? I understand that that is relatively straightforward to do.

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I thank the hon. Gentleman for his points and I am sorry to disappoint him. I understood last week that he might be disappointed in what we were about to announce later that day. I spoke to the Justice Minister in Northern Ireland that day, as I wanted to talk to her before I informed the House of our intention. I will continue to engage with the hon. Gentleman and the Justice Minister, as will my colleagues and officials, to ensure there is no delay for the people affected in Northern Ireland. Of course I am happy to have a continued conversation with him about that.

**Amy Callaghan** >

(East Dunbartonshire) (SNP)

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I thank the Minister for his statement and his continued dedication to the victims of **Horizon**. Will he apologise to my constituent Louise Dar, former sub-postmistress in Lenzie, for the devastating damage that Post Office Ltd and **Horizon** did to her and her family's life and livelihood? Will he ensure compensation is swiftly given to Louise and all other sub-postmasters?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I apologise without hesitation. What happened to Louise and her family is a disgrace. It should never have happened, and we should not be in this situation, but we are where we find ourselves. We now need to do exactly what the hon. Lady has set out: seek to deliver compensation as quickly as possible. If she would like a conversation about that case, I am happy to help where I can.

**Clive Efford** >

(Eltham) (Lab)

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I come to the House virtually every time we have questions on this subject, or it is before the House, and I am taken in by the Minister's mellifluous bromides about the compensation scheme. However, a letter from the chief executive of the Post Office, Nick Read, suggests that over half the convictions are safe and that the Post Office would defend them. Furthermore, he says that the Post Office is taking on expert police investigators to investigate the investigators, which is pouring even more good money after bad. How can the sub-postmasters who have been convicted and those who have been wronged by the **Horizon scandal** have any confidence in a scheme that is influenced by the Post Office in any way? In making decisions, how much are the Government relying on information from investigations by the Post Office?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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The hon. Gentleman does contribute virtually every single time the issue is discussed, and I thank him for that. It is hugely important for postmasters in his constituency and further afield that his voice is contributing to those calling for the remedies needed. I am aware of the letter on this issue from the Post Office's chief executive officer, and what he says; it was his choice to write that letter. Today's statement, and the one on Thursday, illustrate that the letter had no influence on us; we think that introducing legislation is the right thing to do. We have always been clear that some guilty people will be made innocent through the process. We think that is a risk worth taking—the least worst option. As for the influence on compensation and other matters for individuals, we have ensured that there are independent processes running right through the compensation schemes. The advisory board is holding our feet to the fire very effectively, and I welcome its work.

**Carla Lockhart** >

(Upper Bann) (DUP)

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I thank the Minister for his statement and his efforts. He will be aware of correspondence from the Northern Ireland Executive and the Department of Justice; my Northern Ireland colleagues have alluded to it. It is a rarity for three parties in Northern Ireland to agree on something, but I believe it is outrageous that Northern Ireland is being excluded from the legislation. Will the Minister redouble his efforts and rethink that? This Parliament is sovereign. Time and again, this Parliament has intervened with laws and legislation on devolved matters in Northern Ireland, so will he go away and urgently relook at this situation?

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I can assure her that I will continue to engage with her on this matter, along with the relevant representatives from the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland, as will our officials. I understand her disappointment. I understand her preference, and the preference of some Ministers in the Justice Department, but we will continue that engagement and try to make sure that compensation in Northern Ireland is not denied or delayed; we do not want that in England and Wales, either.

**Jim Shannon >**

(Strangford) (DUP)

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I thank the Minister for the update. He referred to officers, family members and direct employees. I wish to ask this on behalf of family members. The news over the weekend indicated that 250 victims of the Post Office Horizon scandal have passed away; some of them had no knowledge whatsoever that their name would ever be cleared, or that compensation would come. Will the Minister say that every one of those people will have their family members compensated, that help and advice will be available, that they will receive an apology on behalf of their loved ones, and that this will be done as soon as possible?

**Kevin Hollinrake >**[Share](#)

I certainly apologise to all those people to whom the hon. Member refers. I read the reports this weekend about the number of people who have passed away. Indeed, one of my constituents, Sam Harrison of Nawton in Helmsley—one of the original 555—passed away last May prior to receiving compensation, which was devastating for the family. Just to be clear, those claims can still go forward and their estates will be compensated to the same degree. Nevertheless, that is slim comfort in that situation. “Family members” are those who have been directly affected by someone being convicted or prosecuted by the Post Office or the Crown Prosecution Service. Other family members can be compensated under the wider process—for example, where a house has been lost or a bankruptcy has happened. They can benefit through routes for compensation to the family in general. I am happy to have a discussion about everything that we need to look at in that area.

**Jonathan Gullis >**

(Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con)

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On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker >**

(Sir Roger Gale)

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Order. The hon. Gentleman will find out that I like to observe the courtesies of the House.

That concludes the proceedings on the statement. I thank the Minister and those on the Opposition Front Bench for their attendance.