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Hansard

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Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill

Volume 750: debated on Thursday 23 May 2024

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Consideration of Lords amendments

Mr Deputy Speaker >

(Mr Nigel Evans)

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I confirm that nothing in the Lords amendments engages Commons financial privilege.

Clause 2

Meaning of “relevant offence”

🕒 7.15pm

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade >

(Kevin Hollinrake)

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I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker >

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With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendment 2.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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This is an historic day. It has been a great privilege to be the Minister for the Bill, and I thank our officials for moving with lightning speed to get it to this point, only five months from when the process commenced. I also thank Members in all parts of both Houses for their co-operation and their collegiate approach to the Bill, including the Opposition Front Benchers, who have provided great support, which we greatly appreciate. I thank the Justice Secretary, my Department's Secretary of State and the Prime Minister—the Bill would not have been possible without their support.

This is an historic day because, as a result of the Bill, convictions will be overturned on Royal Assent. With His Majesty's agreement, that means they will be overturned tomorrow.

Rushanara Ali >
(Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab)

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Along with the contaminated blood **scandal**, the **Horizon scandal** remains a terrible stain on our nation's recent past. It is one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in our nation's history, and over the course of the debates on the Bill we have heard the testimonies of victims, and the lies and obfuscations of those who were responsible, expressed by Members across the House. That has rightly made Members of both Houses and the public deeply frustrated and angry at the injustice that sub-postmasters and their families have faced.

It is right that the Government have introduced legislation to exonerate those who have suffered for so long, and the time provided for the Bill today allows us to ensure that it is concluded. We must not lose sight of the task at hand during this wash-up, and we must ensure that the hundreds of innocent people who were wrongfully convicted get the justice that they deserve, and the compensation and exoneration that they desperately need. The Opposition have supported the Bill, and we support the independent inquiry and wish to see it continue its work. Even this week, with the testimony of Paula Vennells, shocking new information has been revealed, and we will continue to push for justice for the victims.

At previous stages, the Minister provided assurances that he would ensure that cases from the Capture IT system are looked at, because this Bill does not cover the wider extent of the **scandal**, and that the company responsible for **Horizon**, Fujitsu, and its executives will honour the commitment that they made to provide compensation, rather than leaving it to taxpayers to do so. I hope he can update us on any progress he has made since giving that undertaking in the House. This Parliament will soon dissolve, but Ministers of the Crown carry on for a few more weeks. I hope the Minister will make every effort to ensure as much progress as possible is made, so that the families receive the redress they desperately need.

In the other House, the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson highlighted Lord Arbuthnot's desire to see those convicted by the Court of Appeal included in the Bill before us. At the time of speaking, the Government opposed that. We are sympathetic, but we nevertheless remain opposed to Parliament becoming, in effect,

“the appeal court for the Court of Appeal”.

We would, however, support appropriate proposals to give the 13 people not covered by the Bill the opportunity to seek redress in the courts. I hope the Minister is able to look at what might be done to work with Lord Arbuthnot to find a satisfactory solution for those 13 cases.

In conclusion, I am grateful to colleagues from across both Houses for the work they have done, particularly the Members of Parliament who worked so tirelessly to ensure that the plight of sub-postmasters and their families was raised. Their work highlighted that in this and other scandals, such as the contaminated blood **scandal**, it is the constituency connection and our relationship with the people we represent that is often the most powerful insight into seeing injustices early on, and seeing broader patterns that expose major failures in our system, be that in the contaminated blood **scandal** or the **Horizon scandal**. The message is very clear: whoever and whichever party is in power, Ministers, civil servants and those in positions of power must listen very closely and not dismiss the concerns of Members of Parliament who raise those cases, which can expose a bigger pattern of injustice, or the citizens we represent.

Mr Deputy Speaker >
(Mr Nigel Evans)

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Order. Before I call Marion Fellows, I note that earlier today Kevan Jones announced that he will not be standing at the next election. On behalf of all the victims, I thank you, Kevan, for the doughty fight that you have put up on behalf of them all. You have been absolutely amazing in what you have done. You are sitting next to Jackie Doyle-Price—I knew it was only a matter of time before she crossed the Floor. More amazing things have happened recently, so it doesn't surprise me.

Marion Fellows >

(Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

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I had decided that I would not speak, but I feel compelled to do so. I am very pleased that the Bill has passed. I am very pleased that all the victims who have been exonerated by the Bill will be exonerated tomorrow, except those in Scotland, which I am still unhappy about. I think it is a huge pity and shame that that did not happen, and that the three sub-postmasters who came down here especially the last time the Bill was before the House did not even get a chance to hear what was being said because of the ways of this House, where nothing is ever fixed. We can bring people 400 miles, but they have to go back the same day and they cannot stay.

I want to pay tribute to someone I can safely say is my friend, the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), for all the counsel and help he has given me. I already gave a little tribute earlier today, but I could not possibly not say thank you to Lord Arbuthnot and to the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), who so stoutly defended Scotland the last time the Bill was before the House. This place is sovereign, but not when it comes to Scotland, so independence had better come soon.

Mr Deputy Speaker >

(Mr Nigel Evans)

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I call our right hon. Friend, Kevan Jones.

Mr Kevan Jones >

(North Durham) (Lab)

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Thank you for your kind words, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think this will be the last time that I speak in this Chamber, and I cannot think of a more fitting debate in which to do so, because it is the culmination of many years of fighting. I played a small part in getting justice for the sub-postmasters; much of it was down to Alan Bates and the families who went through this complete nightmare. Hopefully, they will get justice and truth when the inquiry reports next year.

This Bill was always going to be important because of the individuals involved. Unless you actually sat with many of these victims, they would not have come forward to clear the stain on their reputations or to gain access to compensation. It has been a long fight, and my partner in crime was Lord Arbuthnot. Someone asked me how we had got together on this. If people look back, they will see that we both served on the Defence Committee—he was the Chair at the time. He has been a very effective advocate and I pay huge tribute to him.

There have been many Members from all parts of the House—some are no longer here—who made a contribution over the years, and I think that their support needs to be recognised as well. Turning to the Ministers involved, I would like to mention the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who showed such tenacity in his determination to get justice. He was followed very ably by the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). I have called him a poacher turned gamekeeper, but he is a very effective one. He has driven this case forward, not in a belligerent way, but with patience and determination to ensure that people who have been wronged get justice. That is something that we should all think about.

People can turn round and say, “No, you are wrong, the system cannot be questioned.” And there are times when you can feel like you are ploughing a lonely furrow. But if you know in your gut that something is wrong, it is important to just keep going. This was one of those cases. But it has certainly been championed by the Minister, who has been an excellent advocate on behalf of all these people. It has not been easy. I accept that some of the decisions that he had to make were not easy and were not always welcomed by everyone, but he tried his best and we have this Bill today because of him.

I have one final thing to say, and this is unfinished business. The Minister knows what I am going to say now and it is about Capture, the pre-**Horizon** scheme, which I have been investigating. Hopefully, we will get justice for those individuals as well, and, again, the Minister is determined to get to the bottom of that by appointing an independent investigator to look at the cases that have been referred to him. I shall be looking from afar with interest, but I know that whoever picks up his brief or takes on this case will not be able to put it down unless they get that justice.

In politics, people often ask whether you can actually achieve anything. There is a lot of cynicism these days. I say to anybody who is aspiring to be a Member of this place that they can change things, they can make a difference, but they have to be persistent. Most of the time, people across the other side of this House may be political opponents, but they are not our enemies. We do the best in this place when we work together, and, in this case, cross-party working has achieved final justice for these people.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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With the leave of the House, I have a few final comments. The shadow Minister asked about the Capture software that was used prior to the **Horizon** software. The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) has pushed strongly on these matters, and we are having an independent investigation into them, which we anticipate will report later this year. I am sure that he will take a keen interest in that, as will those on the Opposition Front-Bench team. It is important that we get redress as soon as possible. The Bill opens the door to rapid redress for hundreds of victims of this **scandal**. We believe that we can get redress paid from July onwards, when the new scheme will be put in place. On the Court of Appeal, we are very interested to ensure that those people also get a fair hearing, and a rapid rehearing of their cases, and can be exonerated wherever possible.

 7.30pm

I thank many of my predecessors who worked on this, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who did a fantastic job in very difficult circumstances. Clearly, the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) has done a tremendous job on the all-party parliamentary group on post offices. It is always a pleasure to work with her. We do not always see eye to eye, but we usually do. I understand her points on Scotland. Of course, the legislation is now in its final state and, hopefully, Scotland will be able to effect it before the Scottish Parliament's recess, which is only a few weeks away. It shows what can be done when we all work together, as the right hon. Member for North Durham says.

The right hon. Member does tremendous work on the **Horizon** redress advisory board, which is the reason we are here. Victims of this horrendous **scandal** want to see two things: redress paid for their losses, and people held to account. Both those things will be achieved because of his work and that of the noble Lord Arbuthnot. I do not believe that either of those things would have happened had they not worked as hard as they have. The shocking evidence to the inquiry this week has been revealed because of their work, and we should be grateful to them. I concur with the right hon. Member: many people are cynical about this place, or people's motivations for entering it, but people enter this place to try to do some good and make change for the better. He has, both Houses have, and it is my pleasure to have been a part of it, too.

Rushanara Ali >

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On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to thank a number of colleagues who are stepping down. As has been mentioned, the Minister's predecessor, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), is stepping down. I thank him for taking the Bill and this work to the point that he did. I also thank the Deputy Chief Whip for the Labour party, my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). I discovered today that she is stepping down, and I am pretty gutted.

Most crucially, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). As others have pointed out, his work has been profound, along with that of Lord Arbuthnot and all the sub-postmasters involved in this important, powerful campaign. Again, I am very saddened that he has decided to leave the House, but I know that he will be a tireless campaigner to ensure that, whoever is in power after the general election, the work continues and victims get the justice and exoneration that they need. We are all incredibly grateful for the work that he has done with others across the House, and with the wider campaign. As has been pointed out, it is campaigns such as this that highlight the power of our democracy, and show it, and our political representatives, at their best. Kevin is the epitome of that, along with other colleagues who have exposed other scandals, working with their constituents. I thank all my colleagues across the House, and the Minister for the work that he has done on this important issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker >
(Mr Nigel Evans)

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This is such an emotional time for us, today and tomorrow. Holly, I did not know. We wish you well for the future. We will miss you greatly, but do not be a stranger, please. The same to you, Kevan.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendment 2 agreed to.

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