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## Hansard

[UK Parliament](#) > [Hansard](#) > [Commons: 18 July 2024](#) > [Commons Chamber](#) > [Post Office Horizon Scandal](#)

# Post Office Horizon Scandal

## Volume 752: debated on Thursday 18 July 2024

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🕒 9.34am

**Mr Speaker** >

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I wish to make it clear that I am once again waiving the provisions of the sub judice resolution in relation to this matter to allow Members to be able to discuss fully these issues of national importance.

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

(Thirsk and Malton) (Con)

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*(Urgent Question):* I congratulate you on your re-election, Mr Speaker, and thank you for granting this urgent question, which is to ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade if he will make a statement on financial redress for sub-postmasters and outstanding issues relating to the Post Office **Horizon scandal**.

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

(Justin Madders)

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I congratulate the shadow Secretary of State on his new position and on securing the first urgent question of this Parliament.

Members will know that the Government made a key manifesto commitment to ensure that justice and compensation are delivered as swiftly as possible for every postmaster caught up in the **Horizon scandal**. The Secretary of State has already met Sir Alan Bates, Kevan Jones and the chair of the Post Office, Nigel Railton, to discuss the progress being made and what more can be done. The Government intend to make a significant announcement on the new redress scheme before the summer recess. This scheme will apply to postmasters whose convictions have been overturned by the Post Office (**Horizon System**) Offences Act 2024 passed in the last Parliament.

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

I welcome the Minister to his role. I say in all sincerity that I wish him the very best of luck. We on the Opposition Benches, in the national interest, wish the Government to succeed. It is vital that his Department succeeds in its brief. When British businesses do well, we all do well.

I hope this urgent question, on a matter on which the House has been in agreement, will set us off on the right foot in working together in the national interest. That matter is of course compensation for sub-postmasters affected by the **Horizon scandal**. I was the previous Post Office Minister, and the House will know of my commitment and my party's commitment to the individuals whose lives have been torn apart by this **scandal**.

It is right that the Post Office (**Horizon System**) Offences Act received Royal Assent during wash-up to quash the convictions of hundreds of affected postmasters, but the Minister will know that the Act itself does not provide compensation, which is why, alongside that legislation, we announced plans for a new **Horizon** convictions redress scheme. This scheme will make compensation payments to those who have had convictions quashed by the Act.

In government, we ensured that Royal Assent was achieved as soon as possible so that there was no gap in the availability of compensation. It is only right that postmasters have access to swift and fair compensation. That is why we overturned those convictions. Those with overturned convictions have the option of immediately taking a fixed and final offer of £600,000. It is also why, in government, we changed the rules for those in the **Horizon** shortfall scheme so that they are entitled to a £75,000 fixed-sum award, bypassing the assessment process; so that all full and final settlements below that figure would be automatically topped up; and so that an appeal process for those in the HSS is also considered.

Although I am pleased that, as of 31 May, approximately £222 million has been paid to over 2,800 claimants across the scheme, I must push the Government for more detail on when the redress payments set out by the **Horizon** convictions redress scheme can be expected—we were told that it would be by July. I also note that the Department for Business and Trade has said that it “continues to work” on the new **Horizon** convictions redress scheme.

I ask the Minister—*[Interruption]*—when will the scheme be up and running? When does he expect the £75,000 top-ups and the HSS appeal process to be implemented, and the victims to be contacted to that effect? When will he open the scheme? Will he announce a date for full compensation under the **Horizon** convictions redress scheme?

**Mr Speaker** >[Share](#)

Order. I gently say to the Chamber that it is a new beginning, and we want to start on the right foot, not the wrong foot. It is difficult to go from Government to Opposition, but there is a two-minute limit for the Opposition and a one-minute limit for the third largest party. Please let's stick to the rules and start as we mean to go on.

**Justin Madders** >[Share](#)

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The shadow Secretary of State set out the intent he had in government, which we intend to carry on. We also believe there is absolutely no reason why we should not continue to work on a cross-party basis, as we agree with him on the importance of delivering fast and fair compensation, which is at the heart of all we are trying to achieve. We will be making a statement by the end of July, before the summer recess. As the shadow Secretary of State has already noted, we have committed to do that. We are working at pace with officials, victims and those who have been affected by the **scandal** to work up the detail, and an announcement will be made in due course.

**Jon Trickett** >

(Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab)

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It is good to see you back in your place, Mr Speaker. The new Minister will recall the old saying that a new broom sweeps clean, and I am sure he will make progress very quickly indeed. It seems to me that the Post Office **scandal** reveals a wider problem in British society. Whether it is Orgreave, Grenfell, contaminated blood or the problems at Hillsborough, the British establishment seems incapable of listening to the voices of ordinary people. Will he raise that matter with other Ministers and see whether there is a way for this Government to ensure that is not repeated?

**Justin Madders** >

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My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. In recent years, we, as Members, have reflected on the question of political accountability for decisions that have been taken and actions that have taken place over many years. We will be reflecting on how best to ensure there is genuine political accountability in the system.

**Mr Speaker** >

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I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

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

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I also welcome you back to your place, Mr Speaker. It is a genuine pleasure for me, as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, to be addressing the House on behalf of the third largest political grouping. My party will use the privilege of that position to hold the Government and Ministers to account. We will not be using it simply to stoke division and manufacture grievance. That is what the people of the United Kingdom, and Scotland in particular, voted for.

At the heart of the **Horizon scandal** was the culture at the centre of the organisation that failed to respect the work that was being done by sub-postmasters at the frontline. The Minister and the Secretary of State will meet with the chief executive of the Post Office. What evidence have they seen that that culture has actually changed?

**Justin Madders** >

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I do not know if the right hon. Gentleman is aware that the current chief executive officer has stepped aside for a brief period to concentrate on the inquiry. Over the coming months, we will be reflecting on the important questions that the right hon. Gentleman raises, particularly when the outcome of the inquiry is known.

**Gareth Snell** >  
(Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op)

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Referring to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett), what role does the Minister think this Government can find for third party organisations, such as WhistleblowersUK or those organisations that work with people to highlight such scandals? As my hon. Friend pointed out, this was a systematic failure across Government and society, and we simply cannot allow it to happen again.

**Justin Madders** >

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My understanding is that the last Government undertook a consultation on whistleblowing. We are reflecting on the outcome of that and on the important point my hon. Friend raises. Across a whole range of bodies in this country, whistleblowers have not been heard. We need to consider whether the current legislation gives them sufficient confidence to speak out, and whether their actions

and concerns are being addressed.

**David Mundell** >

(Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con)

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Many congratulations on your re-election, Mr Speaker. I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. I know he is genuinely committed to promoting British business at home and abroad, but is he aware of a serious issue flowing from the **Horizon scandal** that is now affecting current postmasters? In order to express their disgust at what has happened in relation to **Horizon**, some members of the public are not using the Post Office in the way they did previously. Will he and the Government commit to promote the view that the Post Office is safe to use, because the **scandal** has been resolved and because using post offices is good for the community?

**Justin Madders** >

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I am concerned to hear about such incidents. It should go without saying that the postmasters are not the ones who should take the opprobrium of the public on this matter. They are doing a fantastic job. They hold communities together and provide a public service. We should celebrate that and encourage people to use their facilities as much as possible. If the right hon. Gentleman has specific examples of postmasters receiving abuse or people being discouraged to use their services because of the **scandal**, I would be interested to hear about them.

**Caroline Nokes** >

(Romsey and Southampton North) (Con)

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It is a delight to see you back in the Chair, Mr Speaker. There were many sub-postmasters and mistresses who were not convicted, but who are seriously out of pocket due to the shortfalls that they themselves made up and deeply traumatised by the experience that they went through. Can the Minister provide reassurance that the Department will seek to ensure that they are supported, and that the compensation scheme is swift, effective but also very straightforward for them?

**Justin Madders** >

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I thank the right hon. Member for her question. Those are the principles that we want to address and carry on with from the previous Government: the system should be fair, swift and simple. We know that postmasters have already gone through an incredibly difficult time. We do not want to make it even harder by having a convoluted system. We absolutely agree that justice should be fair, quick, complete and straightforward for people.

**Kit Malthouse** >

(North West Hampshire) (Con)

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Beyond compensation, one of the most important things that campaigners are looking for is consequences for those people who played a part in the creation of this **scandal**. The Prime Minister has made much about the integrity and accountability of his Government. Presumably that is retrospective. What consequence does the Minister envisage for those current serving Government Ministers who are deemed by the inquiry to have been negligent in their conduct in ministerial office in the past?

**Justin Madders** >

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That is a very important question. It would be premature of us to draw conclusions before the inquiry has been completed but, absolutely, we should be looking very carefully at all those individuals whose behaviour unfortunately led to the **scandal** happening and to it taking far too long to address. That is a matter for the inquiry to make recommendations on and, certainly, we will be looking to follow those up.

**Jim Shannon** >  
(Strangford) (DUP)

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I welcome the Minister to his place. I know that he was vociferous on this issue when he was on the Opposition Back Benches, so I have absolutely no doubt that he will deliver on it.

Some 26 postmasters implicated in the **scandal** in Northern Ireland are worried and concerned. It is imperative that all postmasters feel that they can have an open and frank discussion with no fear of repercussion in the upcoming investigations, and there can be no further unwarranted delays. Can the Minister confirm that, as a priority, he will make sure that postmasters have access at every level to ensure that their concerns are addressed and that he will make every effort to take steps in the right direction? Thank you so much, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker** >

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I do not see why that point should have come last. *[Laughter.]*

**Justin Madders** >

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What a surprise to see the hon. Member in his place today. I am sure that this will not be last time that we have an exchange across the Dispatch Box, but he does raise an important point. We absolutely agree that we need to make it as easy as possible for postmasters to raise their concerns and to get the justice that they have so long waited for.

**Mr Richard Holden** >  
(Basildon and Billericay) (Con)

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I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your return to your place, and the Minister on taking up his appointment.

Compensation is one part of this, but what victims of this **scandal**, such as Betty whom I met, want to see are truth and accountability. I am referring not just to Ministers, to whom my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) referred, but to those involved in the **scandal**. What can the Minister say to people in the Post Office and to Betty, who want to see those responsible in the Post Office properly held to account, as well as the compensation for their suffering?

**Justin Madders** >

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I thank the hon. Member for his question. He makes an important point. Justice is one side of the coin, but there is also accountability for what has happened. A lot of people want to see that: not just those directly affected, but everyone who has been outraged by the years of inertia and obfuscation that we have seen in this **scandal**. The purpose of the inquiry is to get to the heart of who knew what, who did what and who did not do what they should have done, and whether individuals should take some responsibility for their actions. I have no doubt that, when those recommendations are released, we will want to see some very swift action on the back of that.

**Andrew George** >  
(St Ives) (LD)

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I was privileged to be one of those MPs who, a decade ago, was campaigning on this issue in Parliament with the now Lord Arbuthnot and campaigning on cases in my constituency—people had been treated appallingly. Those people have not yet received compensation. If there is going to be any kind of delay in compensation to those who have suffered, is there any way that early, interim payments can be made to those who need the support now and certainly before too long?

**Justin Madders** >

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I thank the hon. Member for his question, and join him in praising Lord Arbuthnot's work in this area. As of 31 May, £222 million has already been paid out in compensation. There have actually been significant interim payments as well. We understand that, while this is a very large scheme, it is important that we get early payments, so I assure the hon. Member that interim payments are a very large part of this programme.

**Dr Kieran Mullan** >  
(Bexhill and Battle) (Con)

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The legislation that we passed was a blanket measure. It might be clear to us who is or is not included, but for the individuals affected it will not necessarily have been clear. Will the Minister update the House on the progress that has been made in identifying them and writing to them to confirm that their convictions have been quashed?

**Justin Madders** >

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I thank the hon. Member for his important question. We have been working closely with colleagues in the Ministry of Justice to identify those people who are affected by the legislation, and they will be contacted in due course if they have not been already.

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