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Post Office Horizon System: Exoneration of Sub-postmasters

Volume 744: debated on Thursday 25 January 2024

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Jeff Smith >

(Manchester, Withington) (Lab)

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9. When she plans to bring forward legislative proposals to exonerate the remaining sub-postmasters with criminal convictions relating to the failure of the Post Office Horizon system. (Unique identification number 901144 (Unique identification number))

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

(Kevin Hollinrake)

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On 10 January, we announced the Government's intention to bring forward legislation within weeks to overturn the convictions of all those convicted in England or Wales on the basis of Post Office evidence during the **Horizon scandal**. I met the Justice Secretary only this week to make sure that those plans are on track, and we hope to bring forward that legislation as soon as possible.

Jeff Smith >

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Does the Minister have an estimate of how many convictions were made during the **Horizon** pilot? Will he confirm that those convictions will be included in the legislation, given that they were not made using **Horizon** data?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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We do not know that number yet, but we are very concerned about people who used the pilot version of **Horizon** and were potentially subject to similar abuses. We do believe they fall under similar compensation schemes, and there is no reason why they would not be covered by the legislation to overturn convictions.

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(Haltemprice and Howden) (Con)

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For the legislation to work, postmasters have to come forward. When I asked one of my constituents this weekend why they had not come to me sooner, they said it was because they had signed a non-disclosure agreement, but also because they had had to sign the Official Secrets Act. I thought that was so bonkers that I did not believe it, until I read page 26 of Nick Wallis's book, which says that postmasters do have to sign the Official Secrets Act. If that mad policy is still going on, will the Minister bring it to an end? Will he tell postmasters all over the country that they are completely at liberty to talk to their MPs about any aspect of the Post Office?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work he has done in this area. I understand that the requirement to sign the Official Secrets Act relates to the confidentiality of mail; it does not relate to the confidentiality of issues regarding mistreatment by Post Office Ltd. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point, and I will certainly raise it with Post Office Ltd, but I can confirm that that would not prevent somebody from speaking out, including to their Member of Parliament.

Mr Speaker >

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I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jonathan Reynolds >

(Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op)

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The Minister knows that we are willing to work with the Government on a way to exonerate the sub-postmasters and get them compensation as quickly as possible. The proposals will have to be imperfect, but they represent a clear option for resolving this terrible issue. As a way to ensure safeguards against any potential future misuse of precedent, could cross-party agreement be established as an essential provision for the exercise of powers of this kind?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Gentleman for the constructive way he has engaged with us on this issue. I know that the Justice Secretary spoke to the Leader of the Opposition this week on this very matter, and we are very keen to engage with the hon. Gentleman too. He is right to say the solution is imperfect. We believe it is the least worst option, but of course we will engage with him and make sure that he feels the legislation is in the right place.

Jonathan Reynolds >

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I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, and I hope that exchange gives some reassurance to all colleagues in the House. Will he confirm that all prosecutions that arise from the **Horizon** pilot scheme will now also be included in the exonerations, given that, although people were technically prosecuted without official **Horizon** data, it is very much the same issue?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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Again, the hon. Gentleman raises a very important point, similar to one made earlier. The circumstances were similar, so we feel there is no reason to exclude people who have been convicted in similar circumstances. Again, I am happy to work with him on that issue.

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