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## Hansard

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# Post Office (Horizon System) Compensation Bill

## Volume 742: debated on Tuesday 19 December 2023

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### Second Reading

*[Relevant documents: Eighth Report of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee of Session 2021-22, Post Office and Horizon—Compensation: interim report, HC 1129, and the Government response, HC 1267; Oral evidence taken by the Business and Trade Committee on 20 June, on The Post Office, Session 2022-23, HC 1501; Oral evidence taken by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee on 17 January, on Royal Mail and the Post Office, Session 2022-23, HC 1045.]*

3.08pm

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

(Kevin Hollinrake)

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I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Post Office Horizon scandal, which began over 20 years ago, and the impacts of which are still felt today, is rightly described as one of the biggest miscarriages of justice in our history. The House will be aware that during the late 1990s the Post Office began installing Horizon accounting software, but faults in the software led to shortfalls in branches' accounts. The Post Office demanded that postmasters cover the shortfalls and, in many cases, wrongfully prosecuted them for false accounting or theft. Attempts to protest their innocence fell on deaf ears, and decent, honest and hard-working postmasters who served at the heart of our communities were subject to a range of abject harms.

Take the case of Alan Bates, who is one of a number of heroes in this tale. As many Members will know, Mr Bates is due to be immortalised on our screens on 1 January in the ITV series "Mr Bates vs The Post Office", which will make compelling viewing for many of us. He is an innocent man who, alongside his partner Suzanne, invested £100,000 of life savings to start a new life and run the post office branch in Craig-y-Don, on the north Wales coast. When shortfalls began to emerge, Mr Bates was accused by the Post Office of mismanagement and ordered to repay the difference immediately. He protested his innocence and identified some of the supposed shortfall as the result of an overnight software update. The Post Office continued to pursue payment, meanwhile refusing Mr Bates the IT access necessary to interrogate his own branch accounts. His **postmaster's** contract was subsequently terminated, with Mr Bates losing his livelihood, savings and reputation in his community in the process.

Suspecting that other postmasters may have suffered because of Horizon issues, Mr Bates launched his campaign website. Ultimately—15 years later—he gathered enough evidence to successfully take the Post Office to court and expose the scandal.

**Alan Mak** >  
(Havant) (Con)

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Like Mr Bates, my constituents Mr and Mrs Simpson ran a village shop and post office that suffered from the faulty software. They have campaigned for compensation through the Justice For Subpostmasters Alliance, and Mr Simpson himself gave evidence at the public inquiry. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to my constituents and their colleagues? Without their determination and courage, we would not be where we are today, delivering this Bill to support those victims.

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I particularly thank Mr and Mrs Simpson for their work—of course, a number of people campaigned so strongly on this tragedy. I pay tribute to his constituents and to many others like them who made sure we are here today, delivering justice and, indeed, compensation for those postmasters.

Alan Bates's case is one individual tragedy, but he is only one among many: over 3,000 people have suffered in some way as a result of this scandal. For some, that meant paying the Post Office money they did not owe. For others, it meant the loss of their livelihood, their home, their mental or physical health, or their family relationships. Too many have died before getting justice; saddest of all, some of those deaths were suicides. Each Horizon victim is a personal tragedy, and it is imperative that each and every one gets the justice and compensation for which they have waited too long.

This Government are committed to delivering justice for all Horizon victims. Part of that justice will come from making sure that everyone knows the truth about what happened, which is why the Government set up the statutory inquiry into the scandal chaired by Sir Wyn Williams. The work of that inquiry to date is commendable—it is doing important work in exposing the truth. From that truth will follow corporate and individual accountability, for which there is a strong appetite in this House and beyond. I sympathise with hon. Members' desire to see accountability right now, but we must let justice take its course.

**Mr David Davis** >  
(Haltemprice and Howden) (Con)

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On the Minister's point about corporate responsibility, I had the chief executive of the Post Office come and apologise to one of the people I have represented in this exercise. The point I made to him, which I hope the Minister will also take on board, is that the corporate behaviour of the Post Office has not been above criticism: it has employed very expensive lawyers to make this process much more difficult for the victims than it needs to be. I hope the Government will continue to encourage the Post Office not to do that.

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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Absolutely—we want to make it as easy as possible. I thank my right hon. Friend for his campaigning on this matter, too: he is one of a number of parliamentarians who has done fantastic work to make sure we are here today. I have referred to both corporate and individual responsibility. Corporate accountability is not enough: where we find that individuals are to blame, they should be held to account too.

Any compensation must be fair and just, and we have created a Horizon compensation advisory board to help us make sure that happens. I am very grateful to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), both for his campaigning on this matter and his work on the advisory board. He sits on the board alongside Lord Arbuthnot, who is another great campaigner on this matter, and two academics. Its reports, which are published on gov.uk, have been invaluable in helping us ensure that the schemes are working

properly and delivering fairness. As part of the Post Office's process for compensation for overturned convictions, it is —by agreement with claimants' lawyers—appointing an independent assessor for the process, whose role will be to ensure that fair compensation is paid.

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

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The Minister is right when he says that this is a miscarriage of justice. As I have often said in this place, I was formerly a **postmaster**, and I can remember when the tills did not balance. Unlike the Post Office, I believed my staff that it was not their fault—that there was an error. Luckily, those errors were not significant, and we just wrote them off. I thank the Minister for all he has done, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who has equally done an enormous amount.

The Post Office did not believe those innocent postmasters who were simply doing their job, but equally, Fujitsu supplied the software that did not work properly, yet I never hear about whether that company is culpable. Can the Minister tell me what Fujitsu has ever had to suffer from what has happened to everybody else?

**Kevin Hollinrake >**

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I thank my hon. Friend for his work on this issue, as well as his direct experience—he is one of the few people in this House who has that experience. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for all the work he did as my predecessor; his comments about Fujitsu, and about making sure that it is not the taxpayer alone who picks up the tab, are clearly on the record. Again, where responsibility can be assigned, there should be accountability, perhaps in the form of compensation paid by those companies. It is right, though, that the Sir Wyn Williams inquiry is allowed to take the time it needs to report and to identify blame where it exists. Those matters can then be dealt with at that time.

Alongside introducing this Bill, my Department published a revised version of the documents for the group litigation order scheme, which make clearer than ever that the scheme exists to pay full, fair and timely compensation. If compensation cannot be agreed with my Department, a decision will be made by a panel of independent experts. Any GLO **postmaster** who believes that the panel's award fails that fairness test can ask the scheme's independent reviewer, Sir Ross Cranston, to look at their case. Between them, those arrangements provide powerful and independent assurance that compensation is fair.

Turning to compensation amounts, to date, around £138 million has been paid out to over 2,700 claimants across the three compensation schemes established by the Post Office and the Government. Those figures are regularly updated on the dedicated gov.uk page. So far, 93 convictions have been overturned. We have seen positive progress since my previous statement to the House on 18 September, which announced that postmasters who have had convictions on the basis of Horizon evidence overturned are entitled to up-front offers of £600,000 as a fixed sum in full and final settlement of their claim. I can confirm that following that announcement, the first 22 claimants have now settled their claims with the Post Office, taking the total to 27 full and final settlements—I hope this will encourage other postmasters to submit claims. I should add that a significant proportion of those claimants followed the fixed sum award route.

The GLO scheme, administered by my Department for the 500 trailblazing postmasters who took the Post Office to court and exposed the Horizon scandal, has already paid out roughly £27 million across 475 claimants. Postmasters who were neither convicted nor members of the GLO can apply to the Post Office-run Horizon shortfall scheme. I am pleased to say that every last one of the 2,417 people who applied before the scheme's original deadline have now received initial offers of compensation, and some £87 million has been paid out. The Post Office is now dealing with late applications and with those cases where the initial offer was not accepted.

I turn now to the provisions of the Bill before us. The Post Office (Horizon System) Compensation Bill, a small Bill of just two clauses, provides a continuing legal basis for the payments of compensation to victims of this appalling scandal. Principally, it will enable the Government to continue to pay compensation under the GLO scheme that my Department is currently administering. Compensation payments made under the scheme are currently paid under the sole authority of the successive Appropriation Acts, and Parliament requires all such payments to be made within a two-year period. The first payment of interim compensation was made on 8 August 2022, meaning that, with the law as it stands, no GLO payments can be made beyond 7 August 2024. This Bill removes that deadline.

This certainly does not mean we are taking our foot off the gas. We will still want to be able to pay compensation as quickly as possible. My Department is now committed to making an initial offer of compensation in 90% of cases within 40 working days of receiving a fully completed GLO claim, and many claims will be dealt with much more quickly. However, as Sir Wyn Williams has noted, the resolution of compensation claims requires actions by postmasters, their advisers and third parties, as well as by the Government.

In his interim report, which he provided to Parliament in July, Sir Wyn expressed concern that the August deadline could leave some postmasters timed out of compensation or rushed into making decisions. The Government agree that this must not happen, and the Bill ensures that it will not happen. All GLO postmasters will get full and fair compensation, and they will get it promptly without being unduly rushed.

In conclusion, until everyone has fair compensation, the truth is known and the guilty are held accountable, Members of this House and others will rightly continue to raise issues about this scandal. In the meantime, the House should know that this Government are on the side of the postmasters, and we will continue to give these issues our full attention and do our best to resolve them. This Bill is a further example of that, and I commend it to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker >**  
(Dame Eleanor Laing)

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I call the shadow Minister.

 3.21pm

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

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I want to begin by paying tribute to Members across the House who have worked tirelessly on this campaign, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for his work in campaigning on this issue and Lord Arbuthnot for his many years of work in tackling this injustice. Of course, as the Minister has said, we all pay particular tribute to Alan Bates for his pioneering work in this campaign and for working tirelessly to seek justice. Without his bravery and perseverance, the campaign would not be where it is today.

The Horizon scandal, as we have heard from the Minister, is a truly shocking miscarriage of justice and one of the most devastating in British history. The scandal has brought devastation to the lives of over 700 falsely convicted **sub**-postmasters, and 20 years on, they and their families are still suffering from the consequences and the trauma of all they have been put through. I want to pay tribute to their determination for pursuing justice. The wrongly accused **sub**-postmasters have had to endure unjust prison terms, family breakdowns, homelessness, bankruptcy, health consequences, being ostracised from their own communities and worse, to say nothing of the mental health toll and the stress they have all carried while knowing that they have been wrongly convicted. I do not think any of us can truly understand the scale of what they have suffered.

As of 10 August 2023, the Post Office Horizon IT inquiry and the court cases have heard that at least 60 **sub**-postmasters have died without seeing justice or receiving compensation, and at least four have tragically taken their own lives. Most recently, Tom Brown, a constituent of my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham, sadly, passed away. He was the **sub**-postmaster of several branches spanning 30 years, and he died without receiving his full and final compensation. My thoughts, and I am sure those of the whole House, are with his family and friends at this time, as well as with the many others who have lost loved ones affected by this horrific injustice.

Many have suffered and continue to suffer because of this scandal. Tracy Felstead was a post office worker who was jailed when she was just 19. Rubbina Shaheen suffered a prison sentence as a result, and had to sell her house and live in a van. Seema Misra was pregnant with her second child when she was convicted of theft and sent to jail in 2010. She said:

“It was the worst thing. It was so shameful.”

As a result, she experienced regular suicidal thoughts at the time. Those are just a few of the examples in a tragically long list.

This is a scandal that has destroyed victims' lives and taken everything from them, but this case is beyond just being a scandal; it is an insidious injustice that has been devastating and has in some cases claimed people's lives. The suffering of the sub-postmasters can never come close to being repaid, but the very least the Government can do is ensure that they receive their fair compensation as soon as possible. Many of those who, sadly, have passed away never lived to see their innocence proven or to see the compensation that they deserved paid. With further delays to the compensation, the Government run the risk of more sub-postmasters not receiving the compensation they deserve as soon as possible, so it is vital that Ministers act with urgency and speed.

**Matt Rodda** >  
(Reading East) (Lab)

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My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I pay tribute to the campaigners, particularly Mr Bates and, indeed, hon. Members from across the House. The point she makes about the Government, the Post Office and, indeed, Fujitsu learning lessons from this appalling scandal is absolutely right, and I do hope that the Minister, when he speaks later, will be able to address those points. Does she agree with me that it is very important that the Government learn the lessons and help the Post Office learn the lessons of such awful incidents?

**Rushanara Ali** >

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I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I know that the Minister will be keen to make sure that these mistakes are never repeated and that the lessons are learned.

It is vital that we act with urgency and speed, and I look forward to the full publication of the Post Office Horizon IT inquiry, so that we can ensure that those responsible are finally held to account. It cannot be right that they have not been held to account as yet, when so much time has passed. I want to thank Sir Wyn Williams and the inquiry team for their ongoing work.

The Labour party will work with the Government to do what we can to ensure that justice is delivered, and as such we support the Bill. The Government must now confirm how they will use the extra time that this Bill grants to deliver justice as quickly as possible. I welcome some of the detail that the Minister has provided in writing as well as what he has said today, and I hope that he ensures that the necessary action is taken to ensure delivery and that the compensation is provided as quickly as possible. Once again, I pay tribute to all those who have worked tirelessly to secure justice, and I commend this Bill to the House.

 3.27pm

**Paul Scully** >  
(Sutton and Cheam) (Con)

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Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to ease my way back on to the Back Benches and speak about this issue and a number of others. After nearly four years of dealing with covid and its effect on the hospitality sector, the Online Safety Bill and gambling harms, nothing has kept me awake at night more than the plight of the sub-postmasters who fell within the Horizon scandal and the biggest miscarriage of justice in British court history.

I welcome the Bill and thank the Minister for all his work in trying to rectify the situation. It is horrendously complex, with many strands of compensation and a lot of different competing needs and demands. It is lovely to see on the officials' bench some familiar faces of those who have worked tirelessly over many years, including preceding my time as Minister.

This provision is not just to extend the time available and ensure that we are ahead of the process for August next year, but is important in itself to keep this issue in the public eye. Mention has been made of "Mr Bates vs the Post Office", which I am looking forward to seeing in the new year. With all the competing interests of what is happening in the middle east, in Ukraine, and in people's personal lives here in the UK, it is important that we remind ourselves of what can happen if one corporation oversteps its reach. We must always remind ourselves of that, and we must drive our way through to solving this issue, getting the answers that the postmasters need and, importantly, restoring their financial situation as best we can to where they were before the detriment occurred.

I remember how we pulled levers when I was a Minister and used the fact that the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, stood at the Dispatch Box and said, in answer to a question, that he would happily look at a public inquiry. That gave me carte blanche to lean in and ensure that we used that authority, and with the backing of officials and my Department, we started what was originally a non-statutory inquiry that then became statutory. It had to become statutory after we heard from the judge in the Court of Appeal. At the time I genuinely wanted it to be non-statutory, not because I wanted to resile from anything that was happening, but purely and simply for speed and ease. It was so that we could concentrate on getting the postmasters compensation and the answers they wanted, rather than having a layer of lawyers—frankly we are seeing that at the covid inquiry at the moment—looking at other things outside the narrow term of reference. We clearly had to have a statutory inquiry once the judge at the Court of Appeal outlined his thoughts.

Despite the complexity, when I first spoke to Sir Wyn when appointing him at the beginning, we were hoping that the inquiry would be wrapped up by now, and it is frustrating that by necessity he is still going through the deliberation, taking evidence and working through a hugely complex situation. It is disappointing but understandable that compensation is taking so long to get out, for reasons that the Minister has already described regarding how we work through such complexities.

The shadow Minister talked about how the Minister might use the extra time beyond August. I hope we do not need that extra time and that it is there to get ahead of the process, rather than saying that we will extend the process because we have carte blanche permission to go beyond 24 August and kick it into the long grass. As we have heard, people cannot wait. People are dying, people are taking their own life, people have been forced out of their villages. Indeed, the constituent of one hon. Member was forced out of the country for fear of the shame of something they had not done in the first place.

With hindsight, if I were back at the start of the process I would like to run the compensation all in one go from the Department. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) is nodding his head, because he asked about that at the time. I very much take on board the work he has done not just as a campaigner but on the advisory committee. I put a lot of weight both on his words in the Chamber and on those he said to me informally outside it, when we could talk in more depth about what was happening with his constituent and the other people we were speaking about. If we had run the compensation as one process within the Department, it could have helped to narrow the focus of what needed to be done. I am not asking the Minister to go down that line, but whatever happens in the months to come, I hope he will always look at providing flexibility and at what more we can do to keep the pressure on. There is a phrase in the civil service and in government about doing things “at pace”. It is a phrase I never really hear outside government—I always heard it in government—and the problem is who defines what pace something is. What we mean is quickly, or “more haste less speed”, as my old teacher used to say.

As I have said, this is the best thing I will ever do in politics, and the officials in the Department, many of whom are here today, have repeated that. It has become very liberating, because I think we are all on the same page. We all want to get this done now, not only so that we can get people compensation, but so that we can get answers and justice, and put on the hook those who should be on the hook, rather than the taxpayer.

It is also important to do that for the future of the Post Office. I see the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), the chair of the all-party group on post offices, in her place. If this was any other type of corporation or company, the chances are that it would have gone to the wall and gone bust by now as the reputational damage would have been too big. The Post Office is too important for the fabric of our society to allow it to go by the wayside. To address its the future, we have to tackle the past as well. Making sure that those two strands are running together is so important.

I will leave it at that. I do not want to keep the House too long, but I remember Tracy Felstead, Janet Skinner, Seema Misra, Christopher Head, Lee Castleton and other people, some of whom still keep me in touch with what is happening, usually on Twitter, or X.

I wish everyone in this House a merry Christmas. I hope that we all have a good rest and a happy new year, but I want those postmasters affected to have as good a Christmas and new year as they can. I want to make sure that Christmas 2024 is an even better Christmas and new year for them, because by then, I hope we will have sorted the compensation as best we can and brought this to a close, so that they can move on, and so can the Post Office.

**Madam Deputy Speaker >**

(Dame Eleanor Laing)

🕒 3.35pm

**Marion Fellows >**

(Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

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It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully). In no way do I want the speech I am about to give to seem mean-spirited, but things have to be said, so I will say them, and I hope in a justifiable way. While the Bill is welcome, to ensure that no Horizon victims who were part of the group litigation order miss out on compensation, we must ensure that despite the extension, all efforts are made to compensate victims fairly as soon as possible. I thank the Minister for his remarks on that in his opening speech.

It is hard to see why such a Bill, which does nothing more than empower the Secretary of State to pay compensation, has taken so long to get here. Concerns were first published in the media in 2009. In 2015, the Post Office scrapped its independent investigation into the system by Second Sight the day before the report was due to be published. Post Office Ltd conceded a court case admitting Horizon faults more than four years ago, on the day of the last general election—a move that seems to have been timed to avoid scrutiny.

Calls for compensation have been clear and long. This Bill could have been passed in the first months of this Parliament, but it was not. It is now coming to the fag end of this Parliament, and we need to move on. I know that everyone is committed to that, but facts are facts. We still have no idea, three and a half years after settling, why the situation was allowed to go on for so long.

Many victims, as we are all well aware, have sadly passed away, and some by their own hand. They never saw proper justice and proper compensation for the years of trauma they endured at the hands of Post Office Ltd. Their families still suffer. The ongoing inquiry has been blighted by further delay and disclosure issues by Post Office Ltd. Each inquiry delay disgracefully delays justice and the payment of compensation. There must be no further setbacks obstructing the delivery of justice. The inquiry has uncovered further scandal upon scandal, and the pervasive culture throughout Post Office Ltd between 1999 and today has been one of dishonesty, incompetence and deceit, raising further questions over all Post Office convictions in this period, not just those linked to Horizon.

The actions of Post Office Ltd employees at various levels and in various departments, including those responsible for auditing and investigations and in the legal departments, have been brought to light in the most recent stage of the inquiry. At every level, there was clear culpability. The boastful manner in which some of those responsible celebrated the convictions of innocent sub-postmasters, while knowing of Horizon bugs, adds insult to injury for victims.

The Bill is too narrow in its scope, and in the interests of justice, it should be broadened to ensure that everyone who has been investigated and convicted by Post Office Ltd has their case investigated to ensure that no other miscarriages of justice have happened. There are still questions to be answered about the Post Office's co-operation with the inquiry and its relationship with Fujitsu, past and present. In April 2023, Post Office Ltd renewed the contract with Fujitsu, which created and provided the Horizon software, for another year. So far, Fujitsu has avoided any financial penalties as a result of the faulty software, with the burden falling on the Government and Post Office, but in January 2022 Members of the other place said that Fujitsu should dig into its pockets for doing nothing while the scandal unfolded in front of its eyes. The inquiry is investigating how much Fujitsu was aware of the problems with its software, the risk of false reporting and what could have been done to prevent the tragedy.

Gareth Jenkins, the former chief architect at Fujitsu, was due to give evidence at the statutory public inquiry on 6 and 7 July this year. So far, he has not been able to do so. Some 4,767 documents, including some that are significant to Jenkins's evidence, were only received from Post Office at 10.32 pm on 5 July, allowing no time for lawyers to analyse them. He was scheduled to give evidence after the summer break, and he subsequently asked for a guarantee that his testimony could not be given as evidence against him, which was denied. We are still waiting to hear from him. I therefore support amendment 1, tabled by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), which would ensure that we know the whole truth about the alleged errors carried out by Post Office Ltd, beyond Horizon. All potential victims of the practices of Post Office Ltd must get the justice they deserve.

Beyond that, real questions need to be asked of successive UK Governments—whether Labour or Tory—who allowed the scandal to fester under their watch. As the sole shareholder in Post Office Ltd, successive UK Governments have utterly failed in their oversight of the company, allowing the most widespread miscarriage of justice to continue for two decades.

Even in more recent times, the current UK Government have allowed repeated scandals to occur, with bonusgate being one of the many despicable recent episodes that have brought yet more shame to a once trusted national institution. The Secretary of State for Business and Trade described the debacle as

“news to us as Ministers.”

However, documents obtained through a freedom of information request by campaigner Eleanor Shaikh show that Ministers and officials endorsed the Post Office inquiry metric as part of their approval of its chief executive officer and chief financial officer in the transformation scheme. A letter requesting approval was sent to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy’s permanent secretary and accounting officer in July 2021, outlining details comprehensively. The document was then sent to the Secretary of State for Energy and Industrial Strategy, and Ministers gave their endorsement five months after the inquiry became statutory. Likewise, the UK Government Investments representative on the board was well aware of the inquiry’s sub-metric.

It is absolutely clear that Post Office Ltd’s current system of governance needs to be addressed immediately to ensure a greater level of oversight and transparency in decision making by the Government and the UKGI representative on the Post Office Ltd board. There are questions to be answered about Post Office’s co-operation with the inquiry and its past and present relationship with Fujitsu. The management of Post Office Ltd has been exposed, and questions remain over its continued stewardship of our post office network. Indeed, I became interested in post offices because of the decline in the network, knowing nothing of Horizon at the time.

Earlier this year, London Economics produced a report showing that the social value delivered by Post Office is 16 and a half times greater than the financial input it receives from the Government. Closures have picked away at the post office network, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam mentioned. The Department for Business and Trade must do more to protect communities.

I extend my sympathies to the victims of this scandal, who still endure the trauma inflicted by Post Office Ltd. The Minister is right: we are all here today to make sure that people get the compensation they deserve. However, some of the figures are sobering. I understand that some of the problems may be due to the difficulty of making a claim in the first place, and I thank Dan Neidle for his exposure of that.

I pay tribute to all the campaigners. I will also make a special apology—to Alan Bates—because at one point, when I did not realise the significance of what had happened, I said that I did not believe in witch hunts. I still do not believe in them, but evidence is building against those who have made serious mistakes and errors, and who, in some cases, have hidden facts.

I was pleased to hear the Minister talk about corporate and individual responsibility, which is really important. I thank him for saying that compensation claims will still be pursued vigorously. This is really a technical Bill to allow payments to carry on, and they must do so as speedily and efficiently as possible. Nothing can make up for the trauma that so many people have gone through, but we need to compensate those who have suffered, and we need to compensate them properly, well and timeously.

🕒 3.46pm

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

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I declare an interest as a member of the Horizon compensation advisory board. I rise to welcome the Bill and the reasoning behind it, as outlined by the Minister. I must say that the Minister is committed to ensuring that we make the scheme as fair and equitable as possible. As he said, it would have been unjust to have left the sword of Damocles that was the arbitrary deadline of next August hanging over the heads of potential claimants. It is right that the Bill is brought forward. I echo the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) that we do not want to see delays in compensation, but, because of the trauma that individuals are involved in and the complexity, some cases may take longer than others.

May I, at this point, put on the record my thanks to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam? Having dealt with the issue for more years than I care to remember—and, I must say, having dealt with a succession of useless Ministers who literally accepted what their civil servants said and continued to parrot that, even when they knew that the Horizon system was at fault—it is a credit to him that he was the only one who grasped the situation and got to understand its complexities. I also welcomed the private chats we had on some of the issues. He is right that the scheme is not easy to implement, but he was willing to question things that were clearly wrong and to put it through. I would not want to make the Minister blush, but if people want an example of a Minister doing his job

and having something to look back on and be proud of, they should look at his response to this matter. I do not want to downgrade the present Minister, who has picked up the baton and, as the poacher turned gamekeeper that he is, is following through to ensure that the scheme and justice are delivered for those individuals affected by Horizon.

As has been mentioned, I first got involved because of a constituent called Tom Brown, who came to my surgery. I say to any new Members in the House that if they ever get a case in a constituency surgery and think, "This sounds complex, but it just seems wrong," they should dig into it and stick with it. Tom was a **sub-postmaster** in North Kenton in Newcastle. He had worked at other post offices before that, but he and his wife had bought a **sub-post office** in North Kenton for £150,000, which he saw as an investment not only for him but for his family's future. He ran it with his wife; they had a convenience store, and it was successful until the Horizon computer system came along. Like many victims, he was given initial training on the system, but it came out in the inquiry that it was completely inadequate.

Not long after Horizon was installed, Tom started having shortfalls. If they were small, many people just made them up, but in his case they got to £85,609.03. He could not reconcile it, despite going to the helpline and saying, "Look, something's wrong here." The helpline just ignored him. In November 2008, two Post Office employees came along to do a branch audit, which is when the nightmare for Tom and his family began. He was accused of stealing the £85,000. Despite his efforts to explain the shortfalls in the system, no one listened, nor did they listen in the many other victims' cases.

Tom had invested in property: he had his business, investment properties and his own house. He had the indignity not only of his name being in the local newspapers as someone who had stolen £85,000 but of having his home searched by the Post Office, looking—strangely enough—for the £85,000, as though he had it stuffed under the bed. The indignity of that is remarkable. We must remember that these individuals were pillars of the local community; people looked up to them and respected them in their communities—and that was suddenly all torn away.

In his witness statement to the inquiry, Tom describes the sensational media wildfire, which was disturbing for him and for his family. He is open in his statement that he considered suicide—sadly, we have heard that at least four people have taken their own lives. He did not because of his strong family. The irony of his situation is that when the Post Office prosecuted him, the case went to Crown court only to be withdrawn on the day it was heard. He was found not guilty of false accounting because no evidence was put forward. The judge said in his summing up:

"I'm sure you'll be taking this further, Mr Brown".

By that stage, Tom was left bankrupt. He was accused of stealing £85,000, his name sullied. That led to hardship not just for him but for his family. He had to sell his properties and his business, after it floundered. His son had to take him in and also got into financial difficulty, borrowing money to support his father, and they ended up in social housing in my constituency. The family were completely broken. I want to stress this aspect: we talk about the individual victim, but the effect on their families must be highlighted and compensated. Some family members need counselling because of the effects on them, and Tom's witness statement to the inquiry sums that up well.

Sadly, Tom did not live to see the compensation he deserved, nor to see his name cleared and those involved in his case brought to justice; he passed away a few weeks ago. I add my condolences to his family. His name is still there with Alan Bates, who has been mentioned, and the others who fought this case.

Would we have got to where we are today without those people? No, we would not, because even when the Post Office knew that the system was flawed, it spent £100 million of taxpayers' money defending the indefensible in court as a result of the litigation brought by Alan Bates and the rest of the 555. The tactic of the Post Office was very clear: it was to use public money—our money—to outspend the postmasters who had taken it to court. That was outrageous, given that it subsequently came to light, during the inquiry and also in court, that the Post Office knew that it did not have a leg to stand on. It was forced to settle out of court because it had run out of money, which was the intention of the Post Office and the Department that was in charge at the time.

Do we need to get this system moving? Yes, we do. Having been on the advisory board, I understand the complexities of the scheme. Would we start where we are starting now if we were starting afresh? No, we would not—but 60 people have already died, including Tom, and it is imperative now for us to try to get this compensation paid to their families and to the other postmasters. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam also said that we would not have started here. We now have the group litigation scheme, the historical shortfall scheme and the overturned convictions scheme. Is it too late to try to pull those three into one? I personally think it is, and I do not know what the Minister's civil servants would do if we suggested it. In any event, I do not think that it is the way forward.

One thing that I do welcome is the appointment of Sir Ross Cranston as the final arbitrator in the process. If people are not happy about the levels of compensation they receive, there will be that final independent arbitrator. There has always been this point about independence. Do any of those involved trust the Post Office? No, they do not. Do I trust the Post Office? No, I still do not trust it, given the way in which it has handled this matter.

**Paul Scully >**

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The right hon. Gentleman is making a great speech, and he has got to the crux of the situation, by talking about trust. The postmasters have had plenty of words—20 years of seemingly reassuring words—that they cannot trust, and it is incumbent on all of us to act.

**Mr Jones >**

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I entirely agree, and I think that that is how the hon. Gentleman helped—in trying to cut through the words. But whatever I say, he says or anyone says, are these people ever going to trust the Post Office? In his statement to the inquiry, Tom said:

“I think the Post Office are the most corrupt organisation around.”

I have to say that I do not disagree. This was not about people making mistakes; in public administration, people do make mistakes. This was clearly a cover-up conspiracy and, I think, downright criminality on the part of certain individuals. I will return shortly to how we are to get justice in respect of those individuals, but the Bill is about compensation, and I think it important that we take this step forward.

I want to pay tribute to some of those who have kept the fire burning over the years, including Lord Arbuthnot—James Arbuthnot, who has been a tireless campaigner on this issue since he was in the House of Commons—Nick Wallis, and Karl Flinders of *Computer Weekly*. They have done great work in pushing the issue forward, and they need to be thanked for it.

I also want to raise an important point in respect of the schemes we have now. I did not think that new developments could come about, but they have. This is relevant to amendment 1, which I tabled but which was unfortunately not selected for technical reasons. Lo and behold, a few months ago I learned that there had been another scheme, which could almost be described as a son or daughter of Horizon but which preceded it. It was trialled in the north-east of England. The only reason I knew about it was that I was contacted by the son of a lady somewhere in the north-east—she does not want any publicity—who wanted me to come and see her. When I went to see her, I thought, “This sounds like a Horizon case but it can’t be because the dates are wrong.” Lo and behold, we now learn that 300 trials were done, mainly in the north-east, before Horizon. That lady will not get compensation. She was prosecuted and I understand that another case has now been found. This also came out at the inquiry. When all the publicity came out about Horizon, why did no one come forward and say, “By the way, do you realise we had another system on the go at the beginning and we prosecuted people under that system?”

I know the Minister is on to this, and I am certain that the advisory board is as well. There are potentially other people who were prosecuted because of another failed system that was not Horizon. That needs addressing as matter of urgency because there are people out there who are clearly innocent. I think the lady I have just mentioned could be described as having post-traumatic stress disorder. She was completely mentally scarred by the episode. If we can get justice for that individual and others, we should certainly do so.

**Jim Shannon >**

(Strangford) (DUP)

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I commend the right hon. Gentleman for making that salient point. I am aware that there are many affected postmasters and families in Northern Ireland, including some in my constituency. What they are seeking is a timescale for when all postmasters in Northern Ireland—and, indeed, across this great United Kingdom—can expect to receive their compensation, and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman is going to ask for that now. Those in my constituency have not received any word about compensation yet. Does he agree that when the Minister sums up the debate, we want to be given the timescale for the compensation? We want to know that right away.

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

Yes. We now have this Bill and we have got the compensation scheme moving, and I think we need to move very quickly to get the money paid out.

Another issue relates to overturned convictions. Nearly 900 people have been convicted, 700-odd through the Post Office. Some of them in Northern Ireland and Scotland were convicted under a different system. Some were prosecuted by the DWP, for example. I will not rehearse the arguments now, but only 93 of those convictions have been overturned and that does not sit right with me. Somebody asked me why people had not come forward, but they are never going to come forward. They have been so scarred and traumatised by the court process that they will never go anywhere near a court process again. We need to tackle that, and I will cover that when I speak to my amendment later.

I welcome this Bill. My final point is on responsibility. If this scandal had happened in the United States, which takes a very different approach to financial crime and misdemeanours, people would be in jail by now. The evidence is all there, and I accept that Sir Wyn is slowly prising it out of the Post Office, but there are individuals such as Paula Vennells, who, ironically, got a CBE in 2019 for services to the Post Office, even though she oversaw all that was going on. I have written on numerous occasions to the Honours Forfeiture Committee to get that taken off her, but I have had no answer.

If there is one broad lesson to be learned from this scandal by Ministers and future Ministers, it is that when the state does something like this that is so wrong, there should be no hiding place for anyone who has been responsible. Sir Wyn is doing a great job in his inquiry to unearth some of these things. Fujitsu has been mentioned. That is an organisation that definitely has some huge questions to answer.

I think there are two parts to this. First, we have to get the compensation paid. The Minister has committed to trying to put people in the position they would have been in if they had not been affected, which is what we need to do. Will the compensation ever fully compensate them for what they have been through? No, it will not—they will have a scar—but it will help. The other important thing is that the people responsible should be brought to justice and have their day in court. Clearly, they need to answer for it.

I finish with the final line of Tom Brown's evidence to the public inquiry, at paragraph 89:

"I would...like to find out who was responsible once and for all and to see someone take accountability for the wrong doings of the Post Office."

I could not have put it better myself.

 4.05pm**Sammy Wilson** >  
(East Antrim) (DUP) [Share](#)

I will be brief. First, I want to congratulate the Minister and his predecessor, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), on the way they have progressed this issue, which has caused so much devastation for businesses, families and individuals right across the United Kingdom. People who thought they had a good business, worked at it, invested in it and trusted the Post Office to do right by them, found that they were betrayed by those who knew that mistakes were being made and knew that the system was faulty, yet, rather than admit to the failings, decided to pursue innocent individuals.

I do not want to elaborate on the stories we have heard today, but this Government body and its officials wilfully pursued cases that they knew would destroy individuals, families and reputations. As has been said, postmasters and postmistresses are often regarded as pillars of society in their village or locality, and they suddenly found themselves painted as if they were thieves.

It was known from an early stage, it would seem, that the accusations were totally false. One **postmaster** said to me, "Surely somebody in the Post Office must have known at an early stage that it was not one or two individuals but hundreds of people who had served blamelessly for many years. Did they think a virus had come into the system and turned them all into criminals? Somebody must have asked questions." It seems that someone did ask questions and that, as the inquiry has shown, it was known at

an early stage that there were flaws in the system and the system was wrong. Even when it was found that these people were right, tens of millions of pounds were spent on pursuing them through the courts, as that was an easy way to shut them up, rather than admitting that mistakes had been made.

I welcome the three things the Minister has said today, although he will have to come back on a regular basis to reassure us. The Bill extends the period in which payments can be made, but we cannot keep delaying compensation for the many who have been left destitute, had their reputation ruined and lost their business. Although the Minister has indicated that, technically, all the Bill will do is allow the compensation period to be extended in case that is needed, I hope that provision will not be used—I accept his assurance that he does not intend for it to be—to drag out the compensation scheme, and that it is only for cases with complexities that will take time to work out. I hope he will come back regularly between now and August to update us on the number of cases that have been dealt with, settled and sorted out.

I welcome the point the Minister made about corporate and individual responsibility. We need to have that, because it was clear that individuals in the organisation knew that what was being done to **sub**-postmasters and **sub**-postmistresses was wrong and yet the corporate response was, “Let’s not admit anything.” As a result, some people were dragged through the courts and finished up with prison sentences. It does not really matter what level of compensation we give, because how can we compensate for broken marriages, ruined reputations, wrongful imprisonment, premature deaths and even driving people to suicide? No level of monetary compensation will ever deal with that, which is why it is important that those responsible are held to account, that there is no hiding place for them and that we do not see the affront we have had so far of the head of the Post Office at the time actually being rewarded. Indeed, not so long ago a Member drew to the House’s attention the fact that the Post Office bonus scheme meant that individuals in the Post Office were actually being given bonuses for giving information to the inquiry that they ought to have been giving in any case. What the Minister said on that is important.

I noted the Minister’s comment that taxpayers should not have to bear the burden of the money that has to be paid out. Fujitsu knew that its system was flawed and it has not been held to account. The Minister said that,

“where responsibility can be assigned”,

the Government would seek to have compensation drawn from Fujitsu. The evidence given to the inquiry already shows that a large degree of responsibility can be assigned to Fujitsu. If that is the case, I trust that the Government will be rigorous in pursuing that company. It seems odd that a company that supplied such a system should have had its contract renewed not so long ago. We need greater scrutiny of that and we certainly need to see not only individuals held responsible, but the company that supplied the faulty software held responsible for making some of the financial compensation to these individuals.

It is good that we have the Minister and his predecessor, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam, here today. They are to be congratulated on the rigorous way in which they have pursued this matter. It gives hope that at least this issue is not going to be ignored, but it is important that we have regular updates so that the public can have assurance that Parliament and the Government are not ignoring it.

**Mr Deputy Speaker >**

(Mr Nigel Evans)

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I call Gerald Jones to make the last Back-Bench contribution.

 4.13pm

**Gerald Jones >**

(Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab)

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Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I rise to make a brief contribution. As we know, the Post Office Horizon scandal is one of the most insidious injustices our country has ever seen. The Post Office was one of Britain’s most well-known and trusted brands, but the sheer scale of false prosecutions and the aggressive way in which they were pursued has destroyed its reputation. But more than that, it destroyed the reputations, lives and livelihoods of former **sub**-postmasters who had been upstanding members of their local communities. Post Office managers decided to aggressively pursue prosecutions against **sub**-postmasters even when they knew that the Horizon system had deep-rooted faults. The Post Office compounded that by telling individual **sub**-postmasters that they were

the only ones experiencing problems. That was clearly not the case. Quite simply, those cold, calculated decisions ruined lives, including those of some of my constituents in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. I have learned from them, over a number of years, about the impact on their lives, livelihoods, mental health and wellbeing. The fact that the Post Office was able to mount prosecutions in such a cavalier way is simply shocking.

Today, we are talking about compensation for former sub-postmasters. Members from across the House are clear that the compensation is for wrongful and malicious prosecution, and that getting compensation to all victims as quickly as possible is vital if we are to right the wrongs of that injustice. As the shadow Minister said, Labour will work with the Government to do whatever is required to deliver justice, and I will support the Bill.

However, the Government originally committed to resolving all compensation cases by Christmas. It appears that that has not happened, so will the Minister explain why that target was missed and how the extra time provided in the Bill will help to deliver justice to everyone as quickly as possible? As we all know, it simply cannot come soon enough.

🕒 4.16pm

**Sarah Jones** >  
(Croydon Central) (Lab)

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It is timely to be having the debate on the day we rise for Christmas, as we know that there will be many decent people affected who, 20 years on, are spending yet another Christmas without proper compensation. It has been a short but sobering debate on the victims of the Horizon scandal and how the Government intend to ensure justice is delivered. I am pleased to sit opposite the Minister again and to hear his commitment to a full and fair process, and I am pleased that the Bill is going through this place. However, the need to extend Government powers to deliver the compensation scheme is, of course, disappointing news to those affected.

I will not keep the House long to summarise our support for the Bill, to thank all those who have campaigned for so long and to ask the Minister to respond to some important points that have been raised. As Members have set out, the Bill extends the powers for the Government to deliver one of the compensation schemes for some of the victims of the Horizon scandal beyond August 2024. I join others in thanking those who have got us to this point. I pay tribute to the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance, which has campaigned for decades for compensation and justice. We could not have a debate in this place on this topic without thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who has been tireless in his work. I thank Lord Arbutnot for his work in this area, and many others.

The Horizon scandal is one of the most insidious injustices our country has ever seen. Getting compensation to all victims as quickly as possible is vital if we are to right this injustice. As the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), made clear at the start of the debate, Labour will work with the Government to do whatever is required to deliver justice.

There were some good speeches. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) worked hard as a Minister and is right to be proud of what he did in this area. It is good to see that he has eased himself back into the Back Benches. I noted his praise, which is increasingly rare, for Boris Johnson for starting the process for the inquiry. I am sure the Minister noted his lesson that if we were doing this from scratch, the Business Department would perhaps have run all the compensation schemes in the first place. The hon. Gentleman is right that we talk about doing things “at pace” in this place all the time, but we just mean quickly. We need to keep up the speed, which has been sadly lacking, given that we are 20 years on from the original scandal.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham gave a full, comprehensive and compelling speech. His quotes from his constituent Tom Brown were very moving, given that his constituent did not survive to receive his compensation. My right hon. Friend spelled out the indignity of his experience, describing how he was the pillar of his community, and how awful the situation had been for him and his family. I noted my right hon. Friend’s suggestion about the need for counselling for some people, because this has been extraordinarily impactful—way beyond financial terms.

My right hon. Friend also talked about the lessons that the Government need to learn. I noted his advice for Ministers and future Ministers. Without jumping to any conclusions, Mr Deputy Speaker, I took that advice, as did the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow. He talked compellingly about the clear evidence that the Post Office knew what the problems were, yet still spent all that money defending the indefensible. He was right to make that point so powerfully.

Questions about Fujitsu and others were well made by the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson). My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) made a good final speech, in which he called on the Minister to explain why the target has been missed and what more can be done.

This may be a relatively straightforward, simple piece of legislation, but it does relate, as all Members have said, to one of the UK's most widespread miscarriages of justice. We have heard tales of people who have been affected. So many of them spent their 60th birthday in prison as a result of errors. Other people lost their entire life savings repaying shortfalls. My hon. Friend the shadow Minister talked about Seema Misra, who was pregnant with her second child when she was convicted. She had an absolutely awful time. Local press reports at the time described her as "a pregnant thief", which is horrific. We need to keep those stories at the heart of everything we do while we try to make sure that people get the compensation they deserve.

Mr Deputy Speaker, we support the passage of this Bill, but we do have some questions that we would like the Minister to address, many of which have been set out today. The key one is what the Government will do in this extra time to ensure that compensation is delivered as quickly as possible. The Minister said that the Government are setting a target of 90% being completed within 40 working days. He used the expression, "promptly without being rushed". Will he elaborate a bit on what that means in terms of the resource and the capacity that will hopefully increase the number of cases moving through the system to get to a happy conclusion?

Alan Bates, who has been widely praised in this debate and who leads the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance, is reported as saying:

"it's all well and good extending the deadline, but the Government has to try to meet the current deadline. The lives of the victims who have lived with this for a long time are not being extended."

That is a good and sobering point. It would be helpful if the Minister said more about how he is going to speed up that work.

The Minister also made broader remarks. Can he clarify from his earlier remarks how many people have reached a settlement using the £600,000 offer that he announced? He said something about a proportion, but it would be helpful if he could give us a number. Does he have any estimate of the proportion of victims that he considers to be fully compensated? Does he have a timescale for the completion of compensation for those he considers not to be fully compensated? When does he hope to have all this done by?

The Minister has been asked how he will ensure that mistakes like this are not made again. Obviously, we have the inquiry, which is carrying on at its own pace. I do not know whether he has done any work on learning those lessons, so that we do not make mistakes like this again.

As we close the debate, I wish to end by again putting on the record our thoughts for all the victims who have not had their cases solved and who face another Christmas without justice.

🕒 4.24pm

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

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With the leave of the House, it is a pleasure to conclude this debate. We have heard insightful contributions from right hon. and hon. Members across the House, many of whom have championed this cause and campaigned for justice on behalf of postmasters for many years. I pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), the hon. Members for Jarrow (Kate Osborne), for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and others, who have demonstrated the best of cross-party campaigning in the interests of those affected by this scandal.

I have addressed the House many times on the subject of the Post Office Horizon scandal, both as a Back Bencher and now as the responsible Minister, and I want to respond to the specific points raised in the debate. The shadow Minister who opened the debate, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), rightly talked about further delays. I want to stress that this is not about further delays, but about preventing an arbitrary date being set, so that people whose claim has not been submitted or is not at the stage where it has been completed or settled can still get compensation.

I say to the other shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), as I said in my earlier remarks, that the commitment is that we will get 90% of offers out in 40 working days. We are doing a number of things to expedite settlements and accepted claims, not least the fixed-sum award for overturned convictions. She asked about the number of people who have taken

that route. For confidentiality reasons, we do not think it is right to state the actual number, but it is a significant proportion, so certainly it is a route that many people think is the right one for them to take. Obviously that is a matter for the individual, and claimants can pursue the standard full assessment process if they feel that is their best option.

Not everything is within our gift, and that is one of the frustrations that we have, because these claims can be complex and require legal input from the claimant's side. It can take time for the claims to be compiled before they are submitted. That is one of the reasons why we think it is right to delay the long-stop date of 7 August next year.

The hon. Member for Croydon Central asked about the resources and about how we will expedite the settlements. She may be aware that we have recently committed to additional resources for the Post Office. Part of that is to increase the resources committed towards the inquiry, but another part is committed to compensation. We think all the resources are there to get this money paid out within the timeframes we have set out.

I pay tribute again to my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for all of the work he did on this scheme. It is perhaps a little bit ironic that I used to push him from the Back Benches and now he is pushing me from the Back Benches on a similar issue. He is a very sad loss to the Front Benches in this House; he did a fantastic job and he speaks with great authority on this subject. As he says, the best work he did in the Department he attributes to this particular area, so I thank him for all he has done.

My hon. Friend asks whether we need to extend this the long-stop date and why. It is very much a long-stop position. We want to get the payments out before 7 August but, as Sir Wyn Williams advised, this is the right thing to do. My hon. Friend also asked whether, if we were to start again, which I do not think is the right thing to do, we would do things in this way, with three different compensation schemes. I think Sir Wyn Williams said something very similar: we would not do it like that, but all together in one single scheme. However, we are not there and it is right to push ahead now with the work we are doing in this form.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is not in his place, said that we need to go faster, not slower. We are not going slower; we are going faster, and that is what we are keen to do. The same issue was raised by the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), who rightly pushed us to make sure we are delivering this at pace. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam also talked about doing things at pace; "pace" is a word I use a lot in my Department—my officials will probably support that remark—so I totally agree with him. If I may say so, I think the pace in a Department should be dictated by Ministers, so it is my responsibility to make sure that the schemes are delivered at pace.

My hon. Friend wished the House a merry Christmas; I am pleased, and I think we should all be pleased, that 27 families have had convictions overturned and may be able to enjoy their Christmas a little bit more than previous Christmases. Their ability not only to receive compensation, but to move on and move away from some of the trials and tribulations that they have faced in getting compensation and getting justice, is welcomed by everyone in the House.

As always, I thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw for the work she does on the all-party parliamentary group on post offices. She pointed out the very significant value that post offices have in communities. I could not agree with her more that the disclosure areas were unacceptable. That should not have happened and we made that very clear to Post Office management. I agree with her entirely on Fujitsu. Anybody who is shown to be responsible for the scandal should be held accountable, and that may also include compensation. We have stated that on the Floor of the House on a number of occasions. She refers to senior executives in terms of the inquiry sub-metric, having repaid bonuses voluntarily. Those are not something we would want to see in future. I also agree with her and others, including the right hon. Member for North Durham, about some of the people who have been instrumental in this matter outside this House. She referred to Dan Neidle. Nick Wallis, Karl Flinders and Tom Witherow have also been important contributors in ensuring that sub-postmasters get the justice they deserve.

I thank the right hon. Member for North Durham again for all his work and for his work on the advisory board. He talks about a sword of Damocles and is right to say that we are removing it. He speaks very movingly about Tom Brown and what happened to him: the indignity of having his home searched, hardship, bankruptcy, the impact on his family, and his reputation in the community. All were intolerable situations. He sadly passed away prior to receiving compensation. In my constituency, Sam Harrison, a sub-postmaster in Nawton, near Helmsley, went through a similar set of circumstances, certainly in relation to financial difficulty. She sadly passed away earlier this year without receiving compensation. There is a huge human cost, as well as a financial cost. I talked to the advisory board about potential counselling that might be made available to sub-postmasters. We also talked about restorative justice. Sir Wyn Williams has referred to that and it is something we are keen to look at.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned a predecessor to the Horizon scheme in the north-east. If we are on the same page, I understand that was a pilot scheme for Horizon, so we are confident that our current compensation schemes can deliver outcomes and compensation for the individuals he refers to, but if he does not agree with that I am very happy to have a conversation with him.

**Mr Kevan Jones** >[Share](#)

That is welcome, but I think the Minister knows my views on the advisory board. We need to try to find out exactly how many people were prosecuted and in what circumstances. It shocked me, and I think the Minister too, that even with all the publicity about Horizon, no one actually said, "By the way, we had this scheme." If it had not come out in the inquiry, or I had not intervened to see that individual in the north-east, would it just have been forgotten about?

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

Those people will not be forgotten about. I am very happy to work with the right hon. Gentleman and the advisory board on any matter he raises with me. I think we are very like-minded on all the issues he has brought to us so far and we are keen to deliver solutions where we think they are required. I agree with him about Sir Ross Cranston. I worked with Sir Ross from the Back Benches. He came in with the review of the Lloyds-HBOS scheme and did a fantastic job. I also agree with him on holding individuals to account. Whether it be Lloyds, HBOS or Post Office Ltd, I do not think we will ever stop these things happening until we hold individuals to account. He talked about Paula Vennells' CBE. I think Sir Tom Scholar, the head of the relevant body on the forfeiture of honours, has said that we need to wait until the end of the inquiry to consider that, but it should certainly be looked at. I completely associate myself with the comments of the right hon. Gentleman's former constituent Tom Brown in relation to holding people to account.

In response to the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), yes we are allowing ourselves extra timescales but we do not want to use them. On the Christmas deadline, I think we are on the same page on this. It was Christmas this year for the Horizon shortfall scheme. We have now delivered offers to 100% of those people who have applied through that scheme, which meets our objective. Nevertheless, many of those cases are complex and not everything is in our gift to ensure that claims are put in promptly so that they can be dealt with quickly.

I thank the right hon. Member for East Antrim for his kind words. I commit absolutely to giving regular updates to the House. I am very happy to come to speak to hon. Members about this, both on the Floor of the House and by other means. There are regular updates about compensation payments on the gov.uk website. I agree entirely with him about accountability and the need to ensure that the guilty are held responsible. He is right to say we will be rigorous with anybody who is shown to be guilty, including at Fujitsu. He is also right to say that there are some things associated with a tremendous scandal that we can never compensate people for. That is why we are here, keen to deliver a final resolution to these problems.

My Department and I continue to work hard to ensure that those affected by the Horizon scandal receive the full and fair compensation that they are owed. The Bill is just part of the action that the Government are taking to defend the interests of postmasters. I commend it to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).*

*Further proceedings on the Bill stood postponed (Order, this day).*

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