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Horizon: Compensation and Convictions

Volume 743: debated on Monday 8 January 2024

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Mr Deputy Speaker >

(Mr Nigel Evans)

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Before I call the Minister, I will make a short statement about the House's sub judice resolution. There are relevant active legal proceedings relating to **Horizon** before the courts. In December 2022, Mr Speaker exercised his discretion in respect of matters sub judice to allow references to those proceedings, as they concern issues of national importance. That waiver is ongoing. However, I urge hon. Members to exercise caution in what they say, and to avoid referring in detail to cases that remain before the courts.

🕒 6.57pm

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

(Kevin Hollinrake)

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The Post Office **scandal** is one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in our nation's history, shaking people's faith in the principles of equity and fairness that form the core pillars of our legal system. I am very pleased that last week's excellent ITV drama "Mr Bates vs The Post Office" has brought an understanding of the **Horizon scandal** to a much broader audience. I have received much correspondence about the **scandal** and the emotional impact that the dramatisation has had. Those of us who have been campaigning and working on the issue for some years were already well aware of what happened.

I pay particular tribute to Alan Bates and his fellow postmasters, including Jo Hamilton and Lee Castleton, to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis), my Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), the hon. Members for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), to Lord Arbuthnot and other members of the **Horizon** compensation advisory board, and of course to key figures in the media. They played a key role in seeking justice and compensation for the victims. I also thank the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), for his continually constructive approach, as well as my ministerial predecessors, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully).

Watching last week's ITV programme has only reinforced our zeal for seeing justice done as quickly as possible. We are already a long way down that road. Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry is doing great work in exposing what went wrong and who was responsible. Full and final compensation has already been paid to 64% of those people affected. I have previously said to the House that my main concern now is regarding those still waiting for full and final compensation, and the slow pace at which criminal convictions related to **Horizon** are being overturned by the courts. Before Christmas, the advisory board published a letter that underlined exactly that.

This is not just a matter of getting justice for those wrongly convicted. Overturning their convictions is also key to unlocking compensation. Each person whose **Horizon** conviction is overturned is entitled to an interim compensation payment of £163,000. They can then choose whether to have their compensation individually assessed or to accept an up-front offer of £600,000. That offer is already speeding along compensation for a significant number of people.

In the light of the advisory board's letter about overturning convictions, I have spoken to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and to Lord Arbuthnot. I have also had a very positive meeting this afternoon with my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor. All of us in the House are united in our desire to see justice done, and we have devised some options for resolving the outstanding criminal convictions at much greater pace. The Lord Chancellor will, rightly, need to speak to senior figures in the judiciary about those options before we put them forward, but I am confident that we should be able to implement measures that address the concerns expressed by the advisory board. I hope that the Government will be able to announce those proposals to the House very shortly.

Of course, there is clearly great concern about the role of the Post Office in prosecuting these cases. The Post Office rightly decided to stop undertaking private prosecutions in 2015. If we are to make sure that a **scandal** such as this can never happen again, we need to look at the way in which private prosecutions such as these have been undertaken. Any company can bring private prosecutions in this way: this is not a special power of the Post Office. I know that the Lord Chancellor wants to give this issue proper and thoughtful consideration, and I am sure that he will report to the House about the issue in due course.

Getting justice for the victims of this **scandal** and ensuring that such a tragedy can never happen again is my highest priority as a Minister, as it has been throughout my 15 months in office. When we talk about compensation, we have to remember that the lives of the postmasters and their families caught up in this **scandal** have been changed forever. They have faced financial ruin, untold personal distress and a loss of reputation that no amount of financial compensation can fully restore. The Government recognise that we have a clear moral duty to right those wrongs to the best of our ability. To support those whose lives were turned upside down by the **scandal**, we have provided significant funding for compensation. We have also been clear that it should not be the taxpayer alone who picks up the tab. We will wait for the inquiry to report to make clear the extent of any other organisation's culpability for the **scandal** and any individual accountability.

Our aim is to ensure that every victim is fully recompensed for their losses and the suffering they have had to endure. To date, more than £148 million has been paid to 2,700 victims across all compensation schemes, 93 convictions have been overturned and, of those, 30 have agreed full and final settlements. Just over £30 million has been paid out in compensation to those with overturned convictions, including interim payments. Of course, we want to ensure that the process for agreeing compensation is fair, transparent and open to independent assessment. That is one of the reasons why I am today announcing that retired High Court judge Sir Gary Hickinbottom has agreed to chair an independent panel that will assess the pecuniary losses of those postmasters with overturned convictions where disputes arise. That will bring independent oversight to compensation payments in a similar way to Sir Ross Cranston's oversight of the group litigation order scheme and the independent panel in the **Horizon** shortfall scheme.

Of the original 555 courageous postmasters who took the Post Office to court and who first brought the **Horizon scandal** into the public eye, £27 million has been paid out to 477 claimants in addition to the net £11 million received through the December 2019 settlement. Forty-seven members of the original GLO group have also received compensation following the overturning of their convictions, totalling more than £17 million. We have received full claim forms from 59 of those postmasters who are eligible for the GLO scheme and issued 43 offers. There have been 21 full and final settlements paid and a further seven full and final settlements accepted. That brings the total number of accepted full and final GLO settlements to 28. I would encourage claimants' lawyers to continue to submit GLO claims, because my Department stands ready to review them and turn them round quickly.

It is worth noting that the 2,417 postmasters who claimed through the original **Horizon** shortfall scheme have all received offers of compensation. Around 85% have accepted those offers, worth over £107 million. In total, over £91 million has been paid out through the scheme, with the Post Office now dealing with late applications and with cases where initial offers were not accepted.

However, this is not just about compensation; it is about restoration—the restoring of people's good names and the restoring of the public's trust, both in our postal service and in our justice system. It is therefore only right that we get to the bottom of what went wrong and of who knew what and when. Although the scale of the problem is immense, the Government are unwavering in their

resolve to tackle it, to compensate those affected and to leave no stone unturned in the pursuit of justice. We owe that to the victims, to their families, to the memory of postmasters who have died since this tragedy first came to light and to those who, tragically, took their own lives after being accused of awful crimes they never committed. We owe it to everyone who has been caught up in this tragic miscarriage of justice.

I thank all Members across the House who are supporting us in this effort. Together we stand united, not just in memory of those who have suffered, but in shared purpose to ensure that such a tragedy can never, and will never, happen again. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker >

(Mr Nigel Evans)

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I call the shadow Secretary of State.

 7.06pm

Jonathan Reynolds >

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

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Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for the advance copy of his statement.

The **Horizon** Post Office failure is a **scandal** to which we have been responding for some time, but I welcome the way the recent ITV drama has brought the story to a wider audience. It is a powerful reminder of the way that art and culture can be used to tackle injustice and to raise public awareness. I also pay tribute, as I have before, to the sub-postmasters, to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), to Lord Arbutnot and to all those Members whose work has been integral in the progress to date to get justice.

A lot has been done but, as we all know, there is a lot more to do, because the **Horizon scandal** is quite simply one of the most egregious miscarriages of justice in British history—something that robbed people of their lives, their liberty and their livelihoods. Driven by the misguided belief that technology was infallible and workers dishonest, the Post Office prosecuted innocent people, causing unimaginable pain and suffering, which no amount of compensation can ever alleviate. To add insult to injury, the journey to justice for those sub-postmasters has been mired in a great many delays and barriers, and some of the people affected have, tragically, passed away before having the chance to see justice.

I recognise the attention that the Minister has given this matter, including by responding positively to the campaign to ensure that compensation payments are not subject to taxation. However, it is still an urgent priority to get compensation to all those affected, and it is unconscionable that convictions still remain, where it is clear that no wrongdoing has been committed. Justice must be served for those workers and their families, which is why Labour has called for all sub-postmasters to be exonerated in full. I listened carefully to what the Minister had to say about that, and I extend our support for any actions that may be required to overturn these convictions as quickly as possible, while ensuring that no victim has to re-enter litigation and relive the trauma they have experienced. I appreciate the Minister's acknowledgment that the public want to know that that will happen as soon as possible. I also welcome the review he announced into private prosecutions, because the public want assurance that nothing like this can ever be allowed to happen again.

It is right that the Sir Wyn Williams inquiry continues to uncover the truth. However, just when it was felt that this outrageous miscarriage of justice could not get any worse, more allegations have come to the fore, which must now surely be considered as part of that inquiry. It has emerged today that there are potentially dozens more victims from a pilot scheme. This afternoon, I learned from one of my constituents that they were informed only very recently that they are a victim of this **scandal**, so what steps are the Government taking to ensure that every victim is identified and encouraged to come forward?

It is clear that Fujitsu faces serious questions that demand a response. Those questions must be answered in the evidence sessions planned for the inquiry later this year. If it is found that Fujitsu knew the extent of what was occurring, there will have to be consequences that match the scale of the injustice. Additionally, those involved in the running of the Post Office who have received

honours must be held to the high standard that those honours demand. They will also have the opportunity to give their side of the story in the inquiry, but if that evidence is unsatisfactory, I would urge the Forfeiture Committee to consider the propriety of those honours and to take any further appropriate action.

For many people who watched the ITV adaptation, it will be hard to believe that this ongoing tragedy is not a work of fiction, so egregious and pernicious have the impacts been on people's lives. But this is not a TV show; it is very real and it has had real-world impacts. Lessons must be learned, and justice must be served. I have faith that the Williams inquiry will ensure that those responsible are held to account. It is right that innocent people have their convictions overturned not just so that they can begin to turn the page on this **scandal**, but to ensure that it leads to quick access to the compensation they rightly deserve, as the Minister said. However, I believe that that is just one of the many steps that will be required if amends are ever to be made for this most insidious of injustices.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words and support, and for the manner in which he delivered his response to the statement. We share an ambition to see exoneration, and I am very happy to work with him over the next few days to make sure that we are getting to the right place.

He raises a very important point about people who were involved in a pilot scheme for **Horizon**—an issue that has also been raised by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). We want to make sure that every single victim is properly covered by the various schemes, and I have asked everybody who has evidence of any kind, including the right hon. Member for North Durham, to furnish me with the details. I will make sure that we pick up anybody who is left outside the schemes.

The hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) mentioned Fujitsu, and I concur with his points. Anybody who is shown to be responsible for this **scandal** should be held accountable, including by making payments into the taxpayer's fund. I accept what he says about the honours system, as I have said before on a number of occasions. I speak as a former CEO. This is not to direct responsibility for any specific thing that happened—the Sir Wyn Williams inquiry is there to identify responsibility—but, as a former CEO, I would say that it is perfectly reasonable to ask the CEO who oversaw the Post Office during a critical time, when things went so badly wrong, to voluntarily hand back their honour. However, that is a matter for the person concerned.

Mr Deputy Speaker >

(Mr Nigel Evans)

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I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley >

(Worthing West) (Con)

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I refer my hon. Friend the Minister to the article in *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice* by M. R. McGuire and K. Renaud, entitled "Harm, injustice & technology: Reflections on the UK's subpostmasters' case".

First, page 444 shows the graph of the prosecutions, which rose from 10 in 1997 to nearly 80 in 2001. The people responsible should have noticed that we were not going to get ordinary, decent people—sub-postmistresses and sub-postmasters—suddenly going crooked on that scale. Secondly, the article talks about the bugs that were named after the sub-post offices where they were discovered: the Dalmellington bug and the Callendar Square bug.

I also refer my hon. Friend the Minister to the article in *The Sun* about my constituent Cheryl Shaw, who gave up in 2008. Having lost £400 week after week, she brought in the Post Office investigators, who claimed that they could not find anything to explain what was happening. She had to sell out, she lost her home and she took on work as a carer. She is illustrative of those who were convicted and those who gave up before they were prosecuted.

Many people now believe that the **Horizon** system was set up for one purpose and adapted to another, for which it did not work. When people started entering things twice, there was apparently a loss where the Post Office did not actually lose any money. If the Post Office did not lose any money, how could people have been properly prosecuted? The titanic error was the belief in technology.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my hon. Friend for his questions. I totally agree that people should be held responsible where, following an inquiry and investigation, they are shown to have wilfully neglected their duties. He raises an important point about the courts' attitude towards computer and technology-based evidence. My right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor is looking at that issue too, it having been brought to his attention by Paul Marshall, one of the leading barristers involved in this **scandal**.

I am sorry to hear about my hon. Friend's constituent, Mrs Shaw. I take it that she will have applied to the **Horizon** shortfall scheme, which should compensate people like her. If my hon. Friend would like any help or assistance to make sure that has happened, either for himself or for Mrs Shaw, I am very happy to provide it.

Mr Deputy Speaker >

(Mr Nigel Evans)

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I call the SNP spokesperson.

Marion Fellows >

(Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

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Mr Deputy Speaker, you were in the Chair when we last discussed the Post Office (**Horizon System**) Compensation Bill on 19 December. I do not think any of us who knew about the TV drama would have believed the impact it has had. It is bittersweet that it has had such an effect. It is really telling that MPs, peers, the media and many others tried to bring this issue into the public consciousness, but none of us managed to do so as effectively as a TV drama.

I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. Today I have been contacted by local sub-postmasters who want to meet me. They were never prosecuted, but they had shortfalls and paid money back to the Post Office. Many of them just walked away and retired, and they now have no evidence of what happened. When a sub-postmaster walks away from a post office, all the financial documentation goes back to Post Office Ltd. Can we have a thought on that, Minister?

Will the Minister confirm that all the money that went back to Post Office Ltd enhanced the profits on which, over the years, many bonuses were paid to Post Office executives? Will pressure be put on those people to repay those bonuses? I disagree with very little of the Minister's statement, and I think there is consensus across the Chamber on this, but some words sprang out at me: "very shortly" and "in due course". Can we please have fixed timelines for the reports?

I commend Sir Wyn Williams, whom I first met when he took on the inquiry before it became statutory. It sounds ridiculous for me to say that I was impressed by him, but I really understood that he was going to get to the bottom of what happened. He has done that in spite of grievous failures on behalf of Post Office Ltd.

There must be accountability for everyone in Post Office Ltd and Fujitsu who prosecuted and persecuted sub-postmasters over the years. I pledge that SNP Members will continue to put pressure on Governments of any colour to keep the momentum going to ensure that real justice is served, even if that involves more pressure on the former CEO and on the people who received honours because of their work for Post Office Ltd. *[Interruption.]* I see the Minister nodding and know he agrees with me.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Lady for her questions and, indeed, for her work on the all-party group on post offices. In terms of the case she raises of the postmasters who have suffered financially and in which there will be difficulty in providing information because of lack of evidence, the benefit of the doubt should clearly be with the postmasters in this situation. The **Horizon** shortfall scheme is there to

compensate people in that situation. If she needs any help with any of those cases I am very happy to assist.

On whether people repay bonuses or whatever else people might be held accountable for, in order to be fair we should wait for the results of the inquiry. We believe in process in this House and it is right that people have a right to reply and give their own evidence. I agree with the hon. Lady's confidence in Sir Wyn Williams, who is doing a tremendous job.

I am sorry that I cannot be more precise on the timescales, but I will be very disappointed if we go past the end of this week without giving more information to the House. I entirely agree with the hon. Lady about the accountability of individuals both for all reasons of justice and to act as a deterrent to anybody else who is ever tempted to do the wrong thing in such circumstances. These corporate failures and corporate abuses cannot continue and we need to make sure people realise that if it happens, they will be held to account.

Mr David Davis >

(Haltemprice and Howden) (Con)

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I congratulate the Minister and his immediate predecessor for the sterling work they have done in attempting to bring justice to this problem. However, the Government need to do four things: to stop the Post Office unnecessarily challenging the victims' appeals and find a more rapid method to exonerate all the innocent victims; to instruct the Post Office to stop hiring expensive lawyers to challenge the compensation claims and therefore to accelerate the payment mechanism; to strip away the Post Office's right to police its own cases; and to accelerate the investigatory procedures prior to criminal prosecutions of the real villains in this case—we know who they are. Does the Minister believe that he can achieve those four aims in months rather than years?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my right hon. Friend for his kind words and for all his work in the campaign for justice for postmasters. I also congratulate him on his recent knighthood; the whole of Yorkshire was rejoicing at his award.

I can assure my right hon. Friend on all four counts. Yes, we want a more rapid means of overturning convictions. Yes, we want to make sure that the Post Office does not challenge unfairly any attempt to overturn those convictions. Yes, too, on making sure that the investigatory process happens more quickly. Of course, some of these matters are outside our control, as he is fully aware, because of the separation of powers, but in terms of the policing of cases I am happy to talk to him after this statement about what precisely he means by that. There is an independent element to the way all the compensation schemes are running. They are not being policed or restricted by the Post Office; there are independent panels and independent assessments as part of all those processes, but I am happy to talk to my right hon. Friend in detail about what we can do in those areas.

Mr Deputy Speaker >

(Mr Nigel Evans)

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I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Liam Byrne >

(Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab)

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Justice delayed is justice denied but 85% of the convictions have still not been overturned despite the Select Committee warning last spring that the process was rolling much too slowly and having made recommendations for speeding it up. Many of those recommendations were rejected, yet tonight the Minister has told the House that only now is the Lord Chancellor exploring with the judiciary a way to speed things up. Will the Minister tell us tonight his timeframe for delivering justice to those who have been unfairly convicted? Can those who are still waiting for their convictions to be overturned expect justice to be done this year? Or must they wait until many more of them have, tragically, passed away without justice?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his work as Chair of the Select Committee, and I am very happy to be appearing before it next week to answer more detailed questions on these matters. He is right to say that most convictions have not come forward, which is precisely why we are making this statement today—so that more people with convictions have them overturned. One difficulty is that some of them have not come forward. Also, about 50 people who have come forward have not had their convictions overturned. We are looking at both those particular issues and I am happy to talk to the right hon. Gentleman about any of his recommendations.

Yes, we absolutely want to see these issues resolved this year. As we have said before, we want to see all compensation payments done by August, which was the original timeframe. Not all these matters are within our gift: we require victims and their representatives to bring forward claims and, in the current process, those seeking to overturn convictions to bring forward applications for that. That is a process that we are trying to expedite, and I hope to have some very good news for the right hon. Gentleman in the coming days.

John Redwood >

(Wokingham) (Con)

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As one who for all too many years has urged faster compensation and redress for those who have suffered in this scandal, I welcome the new sense of urgency and united purpose across the Floor of the House. When my hon. Friend is looking at the Post Office's right to bring private prosecutions, will he understand that it was the fact that it was 100% Government owned and accountable through this House to the Government that gave it so much more seriousness and weight against the innocent who were trying to defend themselves?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

My right hon. Friend makes a good point, and that definitely played a part in the Post Office's ability to take forward prosecutions. That is something that my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor is looking at across the piece, not least in connection with the Post Office, although, as I said in my statement, it has not taken forward any prosecutions since 2015 and I think it is highly unlikely that it would try to, even before things might be changed.

Mr Kevan Jones >

(North Durham) (Lab)

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I thank the Minister for his statement and declare an interest as a member of the **Horizon** compensation advisory board.

I think we need more TV dramas, because it has had a remarkable effect on attendance in this House tonight. The drama was successful because it spoke about the victims. Many of us who have been involved in this case for many years have met many of them—I know the Minister and his predecessor have too—and know the torment that those individuals have been through, and the drama was excellent in showing that. The key thing now, as Alan Bates said at the weekend, is to get the compensation out of the door as quickly as possible.

I welcome what the Minister says on overturned convictions. The advisory board made recommendations on that, and I think all 927 convictions need quashing. May I ask him whether we can consider that on Wednesday at our next meeting, and what timescale he is looking at? Can we also get the pre-**Horizon** scheme that has now become evident, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) referred to, bottomed out very quickly to find out how many cases there are and how many were prosecuted—I know of at least two—so that we can get justice for those individuals as well? If anyone thinks there are not still people out there, I had three people contact me this afternoon, and I have spoken to them. There are people out there who we still need to reach out to.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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Absolutely. I think the programme not only captured the type of people we are talking about here, whom people who have met the sub-postmasters are already aware of, but perfectly highlighted the Post Office's brutal and desensitised approach in these matters. That is part of the reason why the programme has created the situation we have today, and we welcome that, because we are keen to deliver the compensation scheme and get support for it across the House and across the nation.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his work on the advisory board. I certainly hope to attend that advisory board meeting on Wednesday and share some of our thinking at that time about what measures we are proposing. He raised an important point about the pilot scheme and people affected by the pilot version of **Horizon**. We believe they are still covered by the compensation schemes—I think he agrees with that as well—but we want to make sure that those people have been reached out to. As I said when we spoke about it this morning, if he shares the details of those people with me, we will find out whether they have been contacted, and if not, why not, because other people might be in a similar circumstance.

Sir Robert Neill >

(Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con)

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I welcome the sense of urgency that there now is on both sides of the House about this situation. Will my hon. Friend bear in mind two points in taking this process forward? First, although it is critical that we speed up the means by which these improper convictions are overturned, will he bear in mind that that will place exceptional and unprecedented strains on the appeal system and the criminal justice system, and that that would, if we followed the normal route, require unprecedented resources to be put in? Will he work closely with the Lord Chancellor to take on board the judiciary's ability to cope with that volume of cases being put forward?

Secondly, on private prosecutions, can I ask him perhaps to revisit the Justice Committee's recommendations from 2021—for example, that all private prosecutors should be subject to the oversight of His Majesty's chief inspector of the Crown Prosecution Service, to ensure proper standards of independence and objectivity in dealing with cases, which were clearly lacking in this situation?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my hon. Friend for his work. Yes, we share the ambition to speed up the whole process. I also thank my hon. Friend for what he has done with the Lord Chancellor, who mentioned my hon. Friend's work during our meeting earlier today. We are aware of the resources issue and the time scales around looking at individual cases; we are very much taking those into account in terms of the solution that we will hopefully arrive at. The Lord Chancellor is equally concerned about private prosecutions. I thank my hon. Friend for his work on that issue; again, our conversations today very much centred around his work on the Select Committee and its recommendations.

Dame Diana Johnson >

(Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)

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The Minister referred to the brutal approach of the Post Office. It struck me that this was another example of what Bishop James Jones in the Hillsborough inquiry referred to as “The patronising disposition of unaccountable power”. The conviction of my constituent, Janet Skinner, has been quashed, but she has not received any compensation to date. Can the Minister put a firm time on when she will start to get that compensation paid to her?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the right hon. Lady for her work on this issue. On Mrs Skinner, I should say that all people on any of the three schemes get access to an interim payment. If Mrs Skinner's conviction has been overturned, she is entitled to an interim payment of £163,000. From then, she can take two routes. She can go for a full assessment, which takes more time as the issues are complex, assessing financial loss and detriment relating to things such as health. Our commitment is that 90% of those who go down a full assessment

route will have an offer made back to them within 40 working days; that is our target. The alternative is that she can pursue the fixed-sum award of £600,000. There is no need to compile a claim to do that—the money can be paid out pretty much instantly. That is not a route for everybody, but it has been a route for a significant number of the 30 people with overturned convictions who have decided to settle.

Paul Scully >

(Sutton and Cheam) (Con)

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Four hours of compelling storytelling has brought a fresh wave of interest, anger and frustration to people around the country and indeed in this Chamber—it is great to see so many people supporting the sub-postmasters' plight. The Minister has been working diligently on the issue for 18 months now, so he needs no reminder that, as the episodes start by stating, this story is true.

Will my hon. Friend diligently build on his work to make sure that the judiciary allow a blanket quashing of all the convictions, so that they can get to the Treasury to make sure that the funding is there for full and fair compensation and that the Post Office adheres to his timetable of August 2024? Sir Wyn Williams needs no reminder about getting those answers as part of his excellent work on the inquiry. Does my hon. Friend agree that the best way to do this is to remind all those people that we are all human first and politicians second? This is about human cost.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my hon. Friend. He talked about building on my work. Can I say that I am building on his work? He did a tremendous job in his role when this issue first came to light. We share the ambition to do something that expedites the process of overturning convictions. The time for quibbling is over; it is now a case of action this day and delivering that overturning of convictions. Clearly, we want to do that in a way that does not cause us any constitutional or legal problems across the system. We believe we have a solution and we should be able to give more details in due course—very shortly. Sir Wyn Williams's work is also playing a key part and I thank him for establishing the statutory inquiry, which is going to lead to so many answers that people rightly demand.

Mr Alistair Carmichael >

(Orkney and Shetland) (LD)

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The Minister has heard from me previously about the difficulties faced by the executors of my constituent, who was a victim of this scandal and has subsequently died. Ultimately, the difficulty with my constituent's case was that she had been putting in her own money to make up shortfalls and the executors did not know how much they should settle for, because the Post Office itself had no idea what the proper sum ought to be. In such circumstances, what can the Government do to ensure every victim of this scandal gets the full compensation to which they are entitled?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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Again, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the work he has done on behalf of his constituent and I am so sorry to hear she has passed away. I have a similar situation in my constituency, as Sam Harrison of Nawton, near Helmsley, sadly passed away last May before she received compensation. It is a tragedy. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, compensation will be paid to the executors, who will probably be family members, so it is not about any saving of money but nevertheless we still want to accelerate the process. I totally agree with what he says about the lack of evidence in some cases, which may be 20 years old. In those situations, the benefit of the doubt should be with the victim, ensuring that the settlement is assessed as generously as possible and paid out as quickly as possible.

Priti Patel >

(Witham) (Con)

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I thank the Minister for his statement—he has said a great deal already—and pay tribute to those sub-postmasters who fought for justice, including one of my constituents who was part of the 555 who undertook the group-led litigation. Will the Minister give an insight into the steps that will be taken to review the actions and accountabilities of Fujitsu, as well as its culpability, as it is still awarded contracts, week after week, across Government? The entire **scandal** has demonstrated acute institutional state failures that have to be acknowledged. What review will take place of the corporate governance actions of the Department that oversaw shareholder responsibilities towards the Post Office during this period, and what changes can proceed around the governance and accountability of the Post Office?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. I share her wish to pay tribute to the sub-postmasters who campaigned so long and effectively on the issue. I read with interest the piece she wrote the other weekend about what she thinks should be done, and I agree with much of what she said. As I said earlier, anybody who is responsible, either at a corporate level or individually, should be held to account, which may include payments to assist with compensation and looking at the contracts that have been awarded. It is right to let Sir Wyn Williams undertake his inquiry, report properly and assign blame, and we should take action, at a corporate or individual level, at that time, to make sure both of those bodies are accountable.

Barry Gardiner >

(Brent North) (Lab)

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The Minister said that this was about not just compensation but restoration. That is true, but is it not also about misfeasance in public office? Will the Minister confirm that the maximum penalty for a public servant who willingly and knowingly acts in manner that results in harm, injury or financial loss to an innocent party is life imprisonment?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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Well, the hon. Gentleman raises an important point about accountability. We have given Sir Wyn Williams the chance to look at all these issues and determine accountability and individual responsibility. I have dealt with a number of different scandals over the years, from the Back Benches as well as in my ministerial role. They happen at a corporate level too often for us to simply carry on in the way we have done in the past, so I am happy to take away the hon. Gentleman's points about the potential penalty for the offence he describes, which I will discuss with officials and others.

Sir Robert Buckland >

(South Swindon) (Con)

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Anybody who cares about the interests of justice in our country will be horrified not just at the nature of these miscarriages of justice, but at the sheer scale of them. Does that not beg a very important question? This is an unprecedented set of circumstances and, in my judgment, it requires an unprecedented approach: there should be legislation on the Floor of the House to deal with the convictions of this huge class of people who are not just not guilty, but victims. I urge the Minister and the Lord Chancellor to look urgently at the question of legislation—I know that it would be supported in this House—to create a presumption of innocence that will cut the Gordian knot and support the victims and their families who have been enduring this horror for too long.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his question and for his work on this issue, and I appreciate the engagement that he has had with the Lord Chancellor. As my right hon. and learned Friend said, this situation is unprecedented. We certainly discussed legislation on the Floor of the House at length today in a meeting with the Lord Chancellor and officials. He will be aware that the Lord Chancellor is speaking to the judiciary about these matters. He may want to do the same and make his feelings known to ensure that there is no barrier to making sure that we can legislate in the way that he describes.

Sammy Wilson >

(East Antrim) (DUP)

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Sometimes with hindsight it is possible to see that mistakes were made and that an injustice was carried out, but it beggars belief that, at the time, the Post Office, Fujitsu and Ministers believed that people who were trusted pillars of society suddenly turned into a mass group of thieves, plundering millions of pounds from their employer. Surely those who were observing this at the time must have known that something was wrong, yet they spent hundreds of millions of pounds persecuting and prosecuting people who were innocent and who have suffered intolerably. Will the Minister assure us that those who were guilty of negligence at that time or perhaps, even worse, cynical abuse of their position, will be held to account?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I thank the right hon. Member; he has contributed to every debate on this issue that I have been involved in as a Back Bencher and as a Minister, and he has paid close attention to this all the way through and demanded justice. As I said, the approach of the Post Office was brutal, gratuitous and shocking. Should people be held to account? Absolutely. I do not think we can start to dissuade people from taking these wrongful, disgraceful actions without a deterrent. Certainly, holding people to account by whatever means possible, including potentially prosecutions, would be a significant deterrent for people thinking of doing this kind of stuff in the future.

Tim Loughton >

(East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con)

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I very much welcome the Minister's approach, but I also pay tribute to the work that he did to raise the profile of this issue before he took on that role. This is a **scandal** of historic proportions and heads must roll, with or without gongs attached to them. I am aware of only one sub-postmaster in my constituency who was pursued by the Post Office and not convicted, but it struck me that that is because I have very few sub-post offices left. Are there grounds for investigating whether the Post Office used this dodgy accounting to mismanage the profitability of individual branches to accelerate the closure programme of many of those branches, which left us, in many cases, with very few post office branches left for our constituents to use?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his work. He raises a very important point. The motivation behind the actions of the Post Office and executives and managers in the Post Office is something that Sir Wyn Williams is looking at as part of his inquiry, and I am very interested to see the results of that. There is no sense that I am aware of that this was just another method of trying to contribute towards the closure of a post office. Despite the closures that my right hon. Friend has experienced, that is principally about the general nature of the impact on high streets of changing shopping habits, which is causing difficulties for some of the network. We are determined to try to ensure that the post office network is more viable and more sustainable, including for individual businesses. A more generous deal on the banking framework between banks and post offices, in terms of the remuneration that they get to manage access to cash, for example, is one of the ways that we can make post offices more sustainable. We are fully committed to maintaining a significant network across the country, and it is currently set at 11,500 branches.

Stephen Doughty >

(Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op)

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It was referenced earlier that many people involved in this terrible **scandal** are coming forward—more since the drama—but of course a small proportion have not. The Minister and his Department have been trying to track down those who are eligible for compensation, including by writing to Members of this House. What support will the Department provide in forensic person and company searches to try to track down all those who are eligible but may simply have become so exasperated or exhausted that they walked away and wanted nothing further to do with it?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

The hon. Member raises an important point. We have written to all the people with convictions, for example, to say, "Please come forward." It is not about a lack of ability to identify individuals; a lot of it is about the confidence of those people to come forward after what they have been through. We hope that making it easier to overturn a conviction and easier to access compensation will encourage more people to come forward. As he said, people have been coming forward—people have come directly to me since the ITV programme was aired—so we think that what we are doing and have done is helping with that, but we certainly need to do more to convince people that coming forward is the right thing to do and that they can be confident of good treatment.

Caroline Nokes >

(Romsey and Southampton North) (Con)

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Many people who were running sub-post office branches were not victims but were left demoralised by what they saw happening to colleagues and people across their network and quietly gave up what had been their living and, in some cases, their homes. Will the Minister indicate whether there will be support to enable those people to come forward, give their stories and ascertain whether they might also be eligible for compensation because they felt forced out by the lack of care shown by the Post Office?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

My right hon. Friend raises an interesting point. Certainly, the **Horizon** shortfall scheme should compensate anybody who was directly affected by the **scandal**—not just financially but through other, non-pecuniary issues they faced and suffered from. I am happy to take her point away and see what information we might have in that area.

Joanna Cherry >

(Edinburgh South West) (SNP)

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Many of my constituents have emailed me over the past few days because they, too, watched the powerful dramatisation that we have all seen. What they want most is for the Post Office and individuals within it to be held to account, as other hon. Members have said. Does the Minister agree that looking to the facts of what has happened, many of these people may well have claims for malicious prosecution and that where evidence has been withheld or lies told in court, the police should look at whether there has been perjury and—seriously—a conspiracy to pervert the course of justice, which would of course carry with it an extremely hefty prison sentence?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

The hon. and learned Lady is right to point out malicious prosecution, which forms part of the compensation package available to those people who have convictions. In terms of offences and things that happened that led to these issues that people are or may be guilty of, we expect the police or other enforcement agencies to look at that carefully. There is nothing to stop them bringing forward prosecutions where they can see that people would be guilty of a certain offence.

Sir John Whittingdale >

(Maldon) (Con)

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While applauding the extraordinary courage and resilience of the sub-postmasters who have campaigned for justice for so long, does my hon. Friend agree that the makers of "Mr Bates vs The Post Office" and ITV represent public service broadcasting at its best and that without that we would not be having this statement?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I entirely agree; the programme brought the **scandal** into everybody's living rooms, and although many people were vaguely or even very aware of it, they did not see its real effect in terms of the people it affected or the brutal way in which they were bullied and forced out of their businesses and livelihoods—and in 200 cases, I think, put in prison. The programme has done a fantastic job. We should pay tribute to ITV, its producers and the actors concerned, as well as to the many journalists—not least Nick Wallis, Tom Witherow and Karl Flinders—who brought these issues to light and into the public consciousness, which I am sure played a part in the producers' decision to make the programme.

Clive Efford >

(Eltham) (Lab)

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I also pay tribute to the Minister, and to all the people he mentioned in his statement, for their work. We must recognise and accept that it is not sound to base any criminal conviction on **Horizon**. My constituent was one of the original 555 in the group litigation order scheme. His conviction was overturned, so he is now seeking full compensation in the overturned convictions scheme, but his is one of three cases that the Post Office says there is no public interest in pursuing. It says that **Horizon** was not intrinsic to his conviction, but the figures used in his conviction were produced using **Horizon**. That is a Kafkaesque situation and it cannot be allowed to stand. The Post Office should not be anywhere near deciding who gets compensation and what compensation they get. It should be removed from the process. It has been shown to be untrustworthy and incapable of dealing with the matter in an even-handed way. Does the Minister agree?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

The hon. Gentleman has contributed to virtually every debate or statement on this matter, and I thank him for his work on it. We agree with him, and indeed the compensation schemes agree with him, that the **Horizon** evidence should not play any part in whether or not somebody is found guilty. There are obviously different schemes: the **Horizon** shortfall scheme, and the group litigation order scheme, which people who were part of the group of 555 sub-postmasters took forward. To clarify, the 40-day target for a response to any claim is under the GLO scheme, not the overturned convictions scheme, although we are equally ambitious about providing rapid offers to people who bring forward claims for overturned convictions. He raises an important point about public interest cases. Again, we have discussed that today with the Lord Chancellor. We want to ensure that everybody affected gets fair compensation and that the Post Office has as little influence as possible in those cases. Ideally, in terms of overturning convictions and access to compensation, we would deliver something completely outside the Post Office's jurisdiction.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena >

(North East Hampshire) (Con)

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It is progress that £27 million of compensation has now been paid to 477 of the 555, and that 47 of the GLO group have received compensation totalling £17 million following the overturning of their convictions, but my constituent Jo Hamilton tells me that it is still far too difficult and that people are still being far too easily messed around in the process. Will the Minister look again at how he can make it even easier and clearer for people to claim their full and final compensation?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

That is exactly what we are attempting to do. I have met Jo Hamilton. She is a wonderful and incredibly tenacious individual, and one would never guess from her disposition that she had been through the trauma that she has. We accept that, at the moment, the processes for overturning a conviction or for compensation are not as rapid as we would like. That is exactly what we have been looking at for some time, not least over the past few days. We have had good conversations today, and we hope to have clearer and better news for my right hon. Friend in the next few days.

Tim Farron >

(Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD)

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I thank the Minister for his statement and for his work on this issue. Like so many Members, I represent people whose lives were destroyed by this outrageous injustice, two of whom I have been in touch with again today. On their behalf, I urge the Government to provide swift and fair compensation, and call for the immediate exoneration of all those who bear the crushing and unjust shame of accusation and conviction.

This scandal has also created outrage and disgust among serving postmasters who were not themselves victims and may post-date the scandal but who simply do not wish to be associated any longer with an organisation that can treat people in the contemptible way that the Post Office has treated the victims. Does he recognise that this is a moment of real crisis for the post office network, such that one of my postmasters has already resigned and another has threatened to do so for that very reason? Will he instruct the Post Office to go above and beyond to support the network, postmasters and potential postmasters, so that we still have a post office network at the end of all this?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I agree with all the hon. Gentleman's points. Swift and fair compensation—absolutely. An immediate overturning of convictions is something that we are looking to achieve as soon as possible, if it is possible, clearly subject to the caveats I set out earlier. Despite what the Post Office has done, most members of the public still look at the post office network with great admiration. It is greatly valued in our communities, so I do not believe that it is a damaged brand, but it is right that postmasters should have a much better relationship with the central management at the Post Office and the network itself. Much work has happened in that area, including the recruitment of 100 area managers to try to improve that relationship. That relationship will also be improved by making individual post office branches more financially sustainable, as the hon. Gentleman and I have discussed. We are very keen to do things such as the banking framework and the new parcel hub opportunity for those postmasters. The post office network has a bright future and a sound reputation, and we are keen to reinforce that.

Mark Pawsey >

(Rugby) (Con)

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We have already heard about the work of the Business and Trade Committee, which looked at this issue for our February 2022 report. One of the most distressing features from our evidence sessions was hearing about the many people who were affected but were unwilling to come forward because it was too painful and they wanted to put the matter behind them. As we saw in the ITV drama, the Post Office was just not trusted. That led to the Committee's recommendation that there should be a trusted point of contact for people to go to. Will the Minister join me in welcoming today's news that 100 new people have come forward? Will he do his utmost to encourage everyone affected to come forward and claim the compensation that they are due?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for all his work on the Select Committee, of which he is a long-standing member. We are very concerned about the people who will not come forward for whatever reason. The best way to tackle that is to make it easier to get compensation. That is one of the reasons why we brought forward the fixed-sum award route for overturned convictions—there is no requirement to submit a detailed claim to access that £600,000—and made it easier generally to overturn convictions by making those two routes easier. We think that is the best way to convince people to come forward. The message should go out loud and clear from every Member of this House to the people affected: "Please come forward, because you will be treated fairly and you will be compensated quickly."

Barbara Keeley >

(Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab)

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I am raising points from constituents who have been moved by the ITV drama on the **Horizon scandal**. I want to reiterate the points made by my hon. Friends and hon. Members on the Government Benches about the value of such a drama in bringing home the extent of the **scandal** to a much wider audience. I congratulate all those involved in making the drama, and the investigation work that went into it. May I add my voice to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) to support the review of private prosecutions? That is the power that allowed the Post Office to be a supposed victim, investigator and prosecutor. Finally, my constituents are deeply concerned about the delay in paying compensation to victims. Can the Minister expedite the payments in any way?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I share the hon. Lady's point that the dramatisation was invaluable in raising awareness and in making sure that we bring forward measures as quickly as possible—all things that she mentioned. As I said, private prosecution is something that I discussed with the Lord Chancellor today, and he is keen to look at that in the general context. I am sure that he will report to the House in due course. I agree with the hon. Lady entirely on delays. We want to expedite this process of overturning convictions and paying compensation, to make it much quicker and easier. That is the best way to resolve these issues and ensure that as many people as possible are confident to come forward.

Dame Maria Miller >
(Basingstoke) (Con)

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Following the ITV drama broadcast last week, I have been contacted by many constituents, and they will welcome the Minister's focus today on justice for every single victim. But he knows that, despite his efforts and those of many other Ministers, the Criminal Cases Review Commission has said that many of the 700 people who have had criminal convictions will not take part in a further legal process, perhaps because of their understandable collapse of trust in the Post Office, and also in the judicial system. Now is the time for the Government to consider how all convictions that relied on evidence from the **Horizon** system, which must now be seen as unsafe, could be quashed without victims having to endure further legal wrangling.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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My right hon. Friend raises important points. That is exactly the experience so far: people will not take part—of course, the Criminal Cases Review Commission can only do so much if they do not—despite the fact that the Post Office now looks at every single case and will write to people when it is not going to contest an appeal. It is trying to be more proactive in ensuring that people come forward, but I share my right hon. Friend's ambition. Ideally, we would like a process that does not require a convicted postmaster to come forward—something that we could do across the board. That is exactly what we are looking at, and I hope to have some news for her in the coming days.

Amy Callaghan >
(East Dunbartonshire) (SNP)

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I thank the Minister for his statement, and pay tribute to the sub-postmasters who have led the campaign. Concerns over **Horizon** have been in the air for at least 14 years. That is 14 years of pain, injustice and uncertainty for the victims and their families. Is it not time for the Government to take decisive action both to identify victims of **Horizon** and to mass-exonerate those convicted?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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The hon. Lady raises an important point. That is exactly what we are trying to do, and what the statement is all about. As I said, we have compensated 64% of victims thus far with full and final compensation, and provided interim compensation to practically everybody who has come forward with a claim. She is right that we are disappointed that more people have not come forward to overturn their convictions. That is exactly the problem that we are trying to solve, and we are looking at innovative legal ways to do that. As I said, we hope to have some news very shortly.

Sir Edward Leigh >
(Gainsborough) (Con)

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I am glad that the Minister is asserting the principle of ministerial responsibility, which has long been clear, ever since the Crichton Down case. Even if the Minister is not personally responsible, he is responsible for what goes wrong. When I was Minister for the Post Office, that was made clear to me. It is reprehensible that at least one of my successors is trying to dodge the bullet and just say, "I was given the wrong advice." If we own the Post Office, the Minister is responsible. That is a principle that we have to establish.

Looking to the future, I have often been in touch with the Minister regarding the views of David Ward, who is the president of the sub-postmasters north-east branch. What the branch wants now is for a line to be drawn under this, for compensation to be paid, for the reputation of the Post Office to be re-established and for the Post Office management to treat sub-postmasters properly from now on.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I totally agree with my right hon. Friend. As Ministers, we must bear responsibility for what we do, as well as expect people within the Post Office, Fujitsu and others to bear responsibility. As Ministers, we must serve a useful purpose. I totally agree about drawing a line under this. That is exactly what we want to do, in two ways: by overturning convictions and by paying full and final compensation. I am pleased to say that around 30 people with overturned convictions have been able to draw a line under it by being compensated fully for what happened to them. We should try to build on that, and make it happen much more quickly. That is what we are working on right now, and we hope to deliver solutions in the very near future.

Andrew Gwynne >
(Denton and Reddish) (Lab)

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I thank the Minister for his statement, and for the work that he is doing to push the issue to a conclusion. I pay tribute to my constituent, Della Robinson, who was the sub-postmistress at Dukinfield post office in my constituency. She was convicted in 2013 of false accounting. Her conviction has been quashed as part of the S55, but she lost everything. She lost her shop, she lost her home, she lost her friends and she lost her reputation. Heads have to roll, because people were in the know at Fujitsu and at the Post Office. While I am not somebody who seeks retribution, heads really must roll in this case because of the lives that were destroyed. As a daughter of Denton, Paula Vennells really ought to do the right thing and hand back her CBE.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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On behalf of the Government and the Post Office, I apologise for what happened to Della Robinson. These are tragic cases, as the hon. Gentleman says, with people losing not just their shop and their business but their home and the respect of their local community. That must have been devastating for her. She clearly has a route to compensation now, having overturned the conviction. There is either an immediate route through the fixed-sum award, or there is the detailed assessment. If it is the detailed assessment, we are keen to ensure that it is delivered as quickly as possible to put Della—Mrs Robinson, I should say—back in the position she was in before the actions of the Post Office.

I agree that people individually must take responsibility. Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry is there to identify who was responsible, exactly what they did or did not do and how that contributed to the **scandal**. Where possible, those individuals should be held to account by any means, including prosecutions. Certainly, it seems to be an obvious opportunity for those who have received honours for service to the Post Office to return those honours voluntarily.

Sir Julian Lewis >
(New Forest East) (Con)

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If individual employees of the Post Office face serious criminal charges for malicious prosecution or criminal conspiracy, how would the Minister feel if it turned out that the Post Office proposed to pay for their legal defence costs, given how it treated its own sub-postmasters?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I would not feel good about that at all. My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I will take it away and take advice on it. That would not seem to me to be an appropriate thing to do at all.

Andrew Bridgen >
(North West Leicestershire) (Ind)

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On 19 August 2008, my constituent Michael Rudkin, in his position as chairman of the National Federation of SubPostmasters, visited Fujitsu's headquarters in Bracknell and inadvertently witnessed IT engineers there secretly altering the accounts of sub-postmasters in **Horizon**. When the managers at Fujitsu realised what my constituent had seen, they ejected him from the building, and he travelled back to his post office in Ibstock, where his wife Susan was his office manager.

The next morning, Mr and Mrs Rudkin were subject to an early morning raid by the Post Office's inspectors, who declared that a £44,000 deficit had appeared on their computer overnight. Criminal convictions resulted. I never believed it was a coincidence that the Post Office found this massive deficit shortfall on my constituent's computer the same day he uncovered what Fujitsu was doing. When I challenged Fujitsu, it said that Mr Rudkin had never been to its premises and it had lost the visitors' book for the day in question. My constituents want to know who will be held to account for more than a decade of false incrimination and humiliation suffered by my constituents.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Gentleman for all his work on this matter. He has been a constant contributor to these debates to make sure that we see justice for his constituents and other people affected by this **scandal**. Mr Rudkin was one of the stars of the show in the dramatisation, and I am so sorry to hear what happened to him and his wife through the Post Office's actions. It seems incredibly coincidental that those two things coincided—the visit to Fujitsu, what he discovered at that point and then what happened the next day in discovering a £44,000 shortfall in his accounts. We all now know that Fujitsu and the Post Office were able to amend the post office accounts. It seems incredibly coincidental, but also, as I said, brutal and cynical in terms of what might have happened. We should let Sir Wyn Williams determine exactly what has happened and who is responsible before we judge and blame. I am just as keen as the hon. Gentleman to see individuals held to account for what happened in this **scandal**.

Mr David Jones >
(Clwyd West) (Con)

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May I echo the point made a few moments ago by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel)? The **Horizon** computer system, which has been the cause of so much misery to so many postmasters and their families—including my constituent, Mr Alan Bates—was supplied by Fujitsu, which continued to be paid to maintain it. Fujitsu is also the recipient of multimillion-pound contracts from many public bodies, including Departments. Indeed, it has recently had contracts awarded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Home Office and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Can my hon. Friend say why a company that has been the cause of such distress to so many of our fellow citizens continues to be the beneficiary of public sector contracts?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

Once again, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend's constituent, Alan Bates, who was very much the star of the show, both in the dramatisation and in reality. It is because of his tenacity and his commitment that this has come to light. The **Horizon** system is being rebuilt. Fujitsu is not rebuilding it, so the Post Office will move away from the current **Horizon** system, but it needs a system today to cover one of the largest retail networks in the world. We need to make sure that it has a system it can use right now, but it will no longer be Fujitsu's responsibility.

As for other Government contracts, we are of course looking at those. Whether it is contributing to compensation or looking at access to Government contracts, our view is that we should let Sir Wyn Williams complete his inquiries and report, and then make a decision on what happened, who is responsible and exactly what we will do about individuals or organisations at that point in time.

Kate Osborne >

(Jarrow) (Lab)

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I thank the Minister for his statement and for recognising the work that I and others have done to highlight this **scandal** over many years. Of course, the recognition should go to the many sub-postmasters, including my constituent, Chris Head, one of the 555, for their tireless campaigning for justice.

I want to pick up the point made by the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones). Last October, I asked the then Minister whether, in light of the **Horizon** and sub-postmaster **scandal**, he would pause existing contracts with Fujitsu and undertake a review. I am pleased to hear that that is happening. We should pause existing contracts and stop awarding Fujitsu multimillion-pound contracts. Fujitsu continues to take billions of pounds in profits, including £10 billion a year in Government contracts, while our sub-postmasters await compensation. Will the Minister agree to stop awarding contracts to Fujitsu, and can he tell me how many contracts have been given to it since this **scandal** came to light?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

Again, I thank the hon. Lady for her work on this, both in the House and in her engagement with others who have taken a particular interest in the **scandal**. I also thank her constituent, Chris Head, who is a regular commenter on various points on Twitter, and I read his contributions all the time. He gets his message across very effectively.

Let me be clear that we think that the right process is that we use Sir Wyn Williams's statutory inquiry to identify exactly who is responsible and what they are responsible for. At that point in time, we will decide whether it is right to give any organisation access to Government contracts. That is the right process. Of course we have concerns about what has happened in the past and about that particular organisation, but we have to follow the process in order to make a decision about how we move forward.

Neil O'Brien >

(Harborough) (Con)

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Does my hon. Friend agree that we should create a special legal process to more rapidly overturn these wrongful convictions, and to accelerate compensation, including for those who have not come forward? Will he take steps to stop the Post Office prosecuting and fighting victims in court? Does he agree that it would be right for Paula Vennells to hand back her CBE, given her role in this disgraceful miscarriage of justice?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

To answer: yes, yes and yes. Yes, we want a rapid legal process, and that is exactly what we are discussing today. I am keen to deliver that as quickly as possible. The Post Office has stopped prosecuting—it has not prosecuted since 2015—but the Justice Secretary will look at the wider aspects of private prosecutions. My thoughts on Paula Vennells are exactly the same as my hon.

Friend's. It is a perfect opportunity for her to hand back her CBE voluntarily. Further down the line, if the Williams inquiry is able to assign blame, other potential avenues could be taken.

Chris Stephens >

(Glasgow South West) (SNP)

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One of the most chilling parts of the dramatisation revealed that dozens, if not hundreds, of people were told, "This is only happening to you. You are the only one who is reporting a problem with this system." It is safe to assume that someone, or some individuals, oversaw and dreamt up that particular corporate spin. May I push the Minister further, and ask whether he agrees with many in the House that the Government now need to recover the bonus payments made to the executives who oversaw that corporate lie?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I agree with that description. The dramatisation was indeed chilling, not least that part of it. It made you feel physically sick to keep hearing those words spoken to individual postmasters: "It is only happening to you." That was very disturbing, and it clearly must have been a corporate position.

I share the hon. Gentleman's ambition when it comes to what he regards as sanctions, and indeed other sanctions that are applicable, but I think we need to follow a process, particularly in respect of individuals. We believe that the best route towards identifying who is responsible and holding those people to account for what they did is Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry.

Anna Firth >

(Southend West) (Con)

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I welcome the Minister's statement and his hard work in this area. Like many others, I have been written to by people who will welcome the Minister's comment that he supports the removal of the CBE from the former chief executive of the Post Office, but does he agree that removing a gong does not deliver justice, and nor does compensation? It is not a question of retribution but a question of justice, so does he agree that if Post Office employees have erroneously accused others of wrongdoing—whether negligently, recklessly or deliberately—they must feel the full force of the criminal law that they wrongly imposed on others?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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Let me be clear about this. I am not taking the position that we should remove the CBE, and that should not be our position, because we have not yet assigned blame to individuals. However, given that during that critical period the Post Office clearly failed in so many areas and in so many shocking ways, it would be sensible and reasonable for the former CEO to hand back an honour that was given for services to the Post Office. There may be other avenues, and my hon. Friend was right to identify some of the potential avenues, but we think that Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry is the best way to identify who was responsible.

I agree with my hon. Friend that this is not about retribution but about justice. I have spoken to some of the victims of this scandal and others, and there are two things that they want. Obviously they want compensation, but they also want people to be held to account, and I entirely share my hon. Friend's ambition for that to be done.

Dame Nia Griffith >

(Llanelli) (Lab)

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We have all been appalled by the fact that the Post Office went on and on, for so many years, prosecuting and ruining the lives of sub-postmasters. It certainly makes us ask who knew what. As the Minister said, we want to ensure that this type of scandal can never happen again, so perhaps he will understand how disappointing it was that in December the Government stopped short of

agreeing to introduce a Hillsborough law to ensure that victims could secure the disclosure of crucial information and to place a duty of candour on all public servants. Will he now talk to ministerial colleagues about reconsidering that decision?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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We are very keen to find out exactly who knew what, and Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry was made statutory so that people could have access to all the information. There is nothing to which they should not have access, and all the disclosures should be available to the inquiry. That should lead to people being held to account, and the exploring of other avenues in respect of what might be done at that point and the evidence that is uncovered. I am not aware of the issue that the hon. Lady raised about what happened in December, but I am happy to take it away and look at it.

Douglas Ross >

(Moray) (Con)

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The **Horizon scandal** is exactly that: an appalling **scandal**, which could potentially be continuing today but for the commitment, dedication and efforts of a small group of people who were determined to get to the truth. I hope that one of those people, Alan Bates, can finally accept the honour he deserves, but he will do that only when Paula Vennells does the correct thing and either hands back her CBE or is rightly stripped of it.

In the context of wider convictions, in Scotland the prosecution of individuals rests solely with the Crown Office, and criminal case reviews are a devolved matter. What discussions have the UK Government or the Lord Chancellor had, or what discussions do they plan to have, with the Scottish Government and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service to ensure that Scottish victims of this **scandal** secure the justice that they deserve?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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My hon. Friend is right that Alan Bates has said he will not accept his OBE until Paula Vennells' CBE has been withdrawn. That is another good reason for her to hand back her CBE, because it would allow Alan to be recognised, quite rightly, through the honours process.

My hon. Friend raised a good point, and we are keen to ensure that anything we do is UK-wide, not just England-based, so I am sure that those conversations will take place. The conversations we have had with the Lord Chancellor have really only happened today. We need to get to a position that would resolve this situation and meet the requirements of the advisory board and others across the House. I am sure that that conversation will be going on between the Lord Chancellor and his counterparts in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Ben Lake >

(Ceredigion) (PC)

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In recent days, I have been written to by many constituents expressing their horror at the extent of this injustice and, indeed, their outrage that honest, innocent sub-postmasters such as Mr Noel Thomas were not only convicted but imprisoned for a crime they did not commit—indeed, a crime that had not in fact happened. Those constituents will be glad to hear about some of the actions the Minister has outlined to accelerate not only the exoneration of those who were wrongly convicted but the payment of compensation.

The Minister referred to those who are impacted by this **scandal** but who might not have been convicted themselves. One sub-postmaster in my constituency paid up for a shortfall that had not actually occurred, because of the pressure and the fear of conviction. Do we have firm information about, and a grasp of, how many sub-postmasters and former sub-postmasters might find themselves in that position? Is it not now for the Post Office to reach out to those individuals to ensure that they come forward for compensation?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his points. Yes, as I say, we are keen to exonerate more people more quickly; that is exactly what we intend to do and what we have been looking at today, and we hope to give more information as quickly as possible. We want there to be quicker, easier exoneration and also easier compensation. That is exactly the opportunity that the scheme for overturning convictions delivers. People can take a more detailed assessment route, where it takes time to compile and respond to a claim, or they can simply move past that system and take a fixed award of £600,000, which is available to anybody who has an overturned conviction. That should encourage more people to come forward.

In terms of other people who had shortfalls but have not been convicted, there is the **Horizon** shortfall scheme. Some 2,417 people applied to that scheme within the timescale. About another 500, I think, applied after time, but they have still been accepted into the scheme. Anybody in that position should have access to compensation. One hundred per cent of the people in the original cohort—the 2,417—have had offers, and 85% have accepted, so we are making significant progress. All postmasters should have been communicated with and written to, but if the hon. Gentleman is aware of any postmaster affected who has not been, I am happy to work with him to make sure they can access compensation.

Mr Philip Hollobone >

(Kettering) (Con)

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This is the worst **scandal** in the history of the Post Office since it was first established in 1660. That was the year of the restoration after the English civil war. In that same year, Parliament passed an Act of Oblivion, which exonerated all those who had previously opposed the Crown and which facilitated, through Parliament, a blanket royal pardon. Might not that sort of mechanism, together with swift compensation, be the most appropriate way to bring justice to all the affected sub-postmasters?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

My hon. Friend's knowledge of history is greater than mine, but the essence of what he says is something we concur with. Whether by means of the route he mentions or other routes, we are keen to ensure that we make it easier to overturn convictions, ideally without the postmaster having to do anything. That is something we are looking at now but, again, we need to have conversations with the judiciary and other elements of the system to make sure that there are no unintended consequences from what we are doing—in terms of precedents, for example. However, our ambitions are exactly the same as my hon. Friend's.

Debbie Abrahams >

(Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)

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Following on from what the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) said, the chair of the independent advisory board, Professor Chris Hodges, is also suggesting that a simple piece of legislation could be introduced to the House, which would ensure pardons en masse and quickly. Will the Minister speak in particular about compensation for bereaved families where former sub-postmasters or sub-postmistresses took their own lives?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I thank the hon. Lady for her question and again pay tribute to the work of the advisory board, including the chair Professor Chris Hodges, Professor Richard Moorhead, Lord Arbuthnot and the right hon. Member for North Durham. It has done fantastic work and I hope to attend its meeting on Wednesday, where we will discuss some of these issues. It is a further tragedy, of course, for the bereaved families. I have a family in my constituency in exactly that situation. The same amount of compensation should be made available to the family. I know that that is cold comfort for many people in that situation, but it is the least we can do to ensure that at least some compensation is paid to the family, who will also have been affected by this **scandal**.

Richard Graham >
(Gloucester) (Con)

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There is one aspect that has not been touched on yet: the role of the National Federation of SubPostmasters. Mark Baker, a former sub-postmaster, was elected to the executive council in 2001. He later gave written evidence to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee in March 2020, stating that the NFSP had

“been aware of the issues with the Horizon system for many years”,

but effectively successive CEOs have been compromised by a grant funding agreement with Post Office Ltd. Will the Minister, whose own determined persistence on this matter I much admire, confirm that the role of the NFSP is being looked at by the Williams inquiry? This should have been the union that spoke up for the sub-postmasters. I suspect that there are many lessons to be learned, as well as finding out who knew what in the NFSP.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I engage with the NFSP, Calum Greenhow and others. I think there is a better relationship now between the network and the NFSP, but it is important that it is a representative relationship. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend raises a very important point. There is nowhere that the statutory inquiry cannot look to identify responsibility. He points it in a certain direction that I am sure it will be aware of, but it may well listen to his comments on the Floor of the House today and look at it as a consequence.

Patricia Gibson >
(North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)

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Only last year, when the sheer scale of the **scandal** had already been uncovered, the CEO and senior Post Office leaders were awarded tens of thousands of pounds in bonuses for their work on the inquiry into Post Office failings. Meanwhile, some of the victims of the **scandal** have died while waiting for compensation. This has outraged my constituents, constituting as it does incompetence and insensitivity on stilts. The Minister has today committed to ensuring and expediting justice for the victims of this **scandal**, and that is widely welcomed, but what steps is he prepared to take to ensure the recovery, in full, of all bonuses paid to Post Office leaders?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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Certainly in terms of what the hon. Lady regards as the sub-metric—the work of the Post Office contributing towards the inquiry—we accept that should never have been the case. All the people who received bonuses at senior leadership level have voluntarily returned the bonuses that were attached to that sub-metric.

I share the hon. Lady’s concern about the number of people who have passed away while waiting for compensation. That is a tragedy in itself. We are keen to deliver compensation as quickly as possible and make sure that the families of those individuals who have passed away get access to compensation as quickly as possible.

Angela Richardson >
(Guildford) (Con)

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In April 2022, I was contacted by a former Guildford constituent, sub-postmaster Abdul Sathar Abdeen, through his wife Vanessa, both now located in Sri Lanka. Between 1999 and 2005, they spent thousands of pounds settling shortfalls, including selling a property in Sri Lanka. By the time news of compensation reached them in Sri Lanka, the scheme had closed. Will my hon. Friend confirm that those who have been impacted and now live abroad are able to apply for compensation?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I am sorry to hear what has happened to Mrs Abdeen. I assume that my hon. Friend is talking about the Horizon shortfall scheme, and my officials and I are very happy to work with her to make sure that any late applications are considered. It sounds like this was a late application, and I am happy to work with her offline.

Mike Amesbury >

(Weaver Vale) (Lab)

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I thank the Minister for his work and for his constructive statement. When can we expect Fujitsu to be held accountable and to pay significant compensation to those affected?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words. We should not prejudge the outcome of the inquiry. It is a statutory inquiry, and we should respect the processes it is undertaking. It is due to conclude later this year, and we hope for a report very shortly afterwards. At that point, we should be able to determine who is responsible and what action should be taken to make sure that their actions are properly dealt with in terms of individual responsibility or corporate responsibility, which may include a contribution to the compensation funds.

Martin Vickers >

(Cleethorpes) (Con)

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The excellent TV drama brought home to millions of people what I and many Members of this House already knew, which is the trauma caused to individual people. On a wider scale, it surely means that the Government must look again at the accountability of many of these arm's length agencies, which are operationally independent. We need to look again at governance, management, ministerial responsibility and how Members of this House can hold them to proper account.

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I agree that accountability is key. I think it is fair to say that my Department has learned lessons on governance. I spend a lot of time meeting the Post Office and, indeed, the Government's representative on the Post Office board, UK Government Investments, to make sure that we have proper oversight of this arm's length body. My hon. Friend is probably referring to something wider than the Post Office—other arm's length bodies—and he raises a very important point to which we should certainly give consideration.

Rachael Maskell >

(York Central) (Lab/Co-op)

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I understand how complicated it is to calculate compensation for individuals. My constituent's numbers disappeared off their screen as transactions were being put through. Will the Minister ensure that more resources are put into supporting the process so that compensation can be paid more expediently?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

The hon. Lady is absolutely right. These are complex matters, and there are two ends to the compensation journey. One is the compilation of a claim by the claimant, which may include legal advice and assessments of health conditions, for example, so it can take time to compile a claim.

Under the GLO scheme, which is the most recent scheme, we have committed to responding to 90% of claims within 40 days. We believe we have the right level of resources at our end to make sure we can respond fairly and quickly. The assessments are made on the compensation side by independent individuals and panels. We think it is a good process and we think it is resourced properly but, of course, we will continue to give it proper oversight.

Peter Aldous >
(Waveney) (Con)

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No current or former sub-postmaster in the Waveney constituency had been in touch with me before today, but I have received two emails today from constituents whose lives have effectively been destroyed. This raises two questions. How many people were simply bullied and intimidated into keeping quiet and paying up? And what justice and recompense will be available to them?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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Although it is tragic to hear that anybody has been involved in these kinds of cases, it is good to hear that people are coming forward. Again, one of the added benefits of the dramatisation is that people are more willing to come forward, and we have seen a good number coming forward. I am very happy to make sure that my hon. Friend's constituents are pointed in the right direction and that they have access to the appropriate scheme to get compensation, because they should be compensated to the degree of both their non-pecuniary losses, for any impacts on, for example, their health or any distress or reputational issues, and of their financial situation, as we return them to the position they were in prior to the episode taking place. We are keen that his constituents get access to those schemes.

Kenny MacAskill >
(East Lothian) (Alba)

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As both a defence agent and as Justice Secretary, I was aware that even a postie who failed to deliver the mail, let alone a sub-postmaster who stole the mail, faced a custodial sentence. That was viewed as correct and I accepted it, because there are occupations where probity is essential and where exemplary sentences are required to be imposed. But this is worse and it is wider. This is a conspiracy to silence. It is a conspiracy by those with reputational, financial and institutional interests to bury the little person and to obtain convictions. They knew convictions were coming. I believe that the integrity of our justice system and indeed of our society requires that nobody is above the rule of law and that, where such actions take place, exemplary sentences are imposed. Will the Minister seek to ensure that?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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That is exactly what we want to do and that is why we set up the statutory inquiry to try to identify culpability and responsibility. Whether that leads to corporate sanctions, in terms of contributions to compensation schemes, or individuals who might face prosecution or other sanctions, that is absolutely right. Of course there will be different agencies looking at different things that the inquiry uncovers as part of its process, including not only crime agencies, but the Honours Forfeiture Committee. We are very keen to ensure that that happens. The hon. Gentleman mentions financial incentives—as Charlie Munger once said, “Show me the incentive and I’ll show you the outcome.” I am sure that played a part in some of the terrible mistreatments of postmasters.

Dean Russell >
(Watford) (Con)

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As I have stated previously in this House, the **Horizon scandal** was an absolute travesty. My thanks, as should all our thanks, go to Alan Bates, for his relentless work to stand up for victims—and they were victims of one of the worst miscarriages of justice this country has ever seen. While I am very aware of the legal complexities and the challenges around righting these wrongs as we go through the various stages, will my hon. Friend, who I know is passionate about getting this right, confirm that he is working at the very highest level of Government to ensure that any blockages, delays or stutterings in this process are cleared through? Does he agree that every single current Member of Parliament—all 650—and every Member of Parliament in the future should make sure not only to watch the ITV drama series, but to read “The Great Post Office **Scandal**” by Nick Wallis, which originally helped to shine a light on this appalling **scandal**?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my hon. Friend for all his work as one of my predecessors. He was an excellent postal affairs Minister—for all too brief a time, I think it is fair to say, but he did a great job, and I know some of the things he put in place in this area are important to the whole process. Of course we are working at the highest level: the Prime Minister is taking a personal interest in these matters, so I see no barrier in terms of willingness to right these wrongs from anywhere in Government, right to the highest possible level. I had a meeting with the Justice Secretary today, who offered some positive ways forward in the next few days.

I completely agree with my hon. Friend that we should all watch that programme to learn lessons about not only this particular **scandal**, but the potential for future scandals based on the same kind of motivations. He mentions the “The Great Post Office **Scandal**”, written by the excellent journalist Nick Wallis, who has been such an important part of uncovering the truth of this horrendous **scandal**.

Mr Toby Perkins >
(Chesterfield) (Lab)

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Harjinder Singh Butoy, my constituent, not only lost his business, lost his home and was bankrupted, but had the agony of being sentenced to 18 months in prison for something he knew he had never done. Justice, for Mr Singh Butoy, is not just getting him the compensation he still waits for; it is seeing those who sat by, knowing that he was the victim of an injustice, and watched him go to prison face justice themselves. While it is absolutely crucial that the statutory inquiry takes on all the information it needs to, it is important that we get justice as quickly as possible. What can the Minister say about how we can ensure that the importance of getting all the information does not mean that this process goes on for years and years, as with other miscarriages of justice we have seen in the past?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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It is tragic to hear about what happened to Mr Singh Butoy; I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work in drawing awareness to that case. As I said, people in these situations want two things: rapid compensation and the holding to account of the people responsible. We are keen to deliver on those two key things. We want to make it easier to overturn convictions and, once that has happened—from what the hon. Gentleman has said, it seems that Mr Singh Butoy’s conviction has been overturned—we want there to be access to rapid compensation, which we can deliver through the fixed-sum award or the full assessment route.

We also want to make sure that we hold people to account. Sir Wyn Williams’s inquiry is responsible for identifying exactly what went wrong and who was responsible. It is due to report later this year; we do not want it to carry on for years, but we want to give it the time and breathing space to do its job properly and we do not want to put any artificial limits on its ability to do that. We hope that the inquiry will end this year and report shortly after. We are keen that any actions against organisations or individuals can be taken at that time.

Siobhan Baillie >
(Stroud) (Con)

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As my hon. Friend knows from meetings and debates, my constituent, sub-postmistress Nichola Arch, moved me to tears when she described the public shaming and abuse that happened in our usually kind Stroud constituency at the time of the **scandal**. Her grown-up child has only ever known her as the post office lady fighting faceless corporations who lost jobs and her house in the meantime.

Given how people were treated and their losses, there is no one type of victim. That makes the issue hellishly complicated and it is really difficult to compile evidence. Will my hon. Friend use the national energy now behind this case to work with his excellent officials, who have worked incredibly hard on this, to simplify the schemes yet further? For example, could the £600,000 lump sum be done at levels that require limited and defined evidence, so that people are not exhausted yet further?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my hon. Friend for her question and her work on behalf of Nichola Arch, whose case is one of the most prominent in this **scandal**. She is right to say that assessing loss is complicated, which is exactly why I work with officials. I agree with her description of them as excellent; they are just as passionate about delivering compensation as Members of this House. We are working on a daily basis.

My hon. Friend is also right to say that the fixed-sum award for overturned convictions simplified things significantly. A significant number of people have full and final settlements on an overturned conviction—30 people have chosen that route so far. But I hear what my hon. Friend is saying about a simplified process in other areas of compensation. That is certainly something we are working on and looking at wherever we can.

Dr Rupa Huq >

(Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)

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ITV and the power of drama deserve our praise for galvanising Government action far faster than the questions I have been asking here since 2020. As well as Mr Bates there was Mr Patel, who was forced to give a false confession to avoid prison. He had the humiliation of attending the graduation of his son, my constituent Varchas, while electronically tagged. Despite Mr Patel's conviction having been quashed in 2020, he has had zilch compensation and suffered huge ill health. Can the Minister sort that, make sure that heads roll and make good on Paula Vennells's promise to me in 2018, when she pulled the plug on Acton crown post office, that we will get a post office again? We are still waiting.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Lady for her question and work on behalf of Mr Patel. If Mr Patel's conviction was overturned in 2020, he should have received £163,000 in interim compensation, which was made available to anybody with an overturned conviction. He can also access two routes: either a fixed-sum award of £600,000 or the full assessment route. He can make a decision based on whatever level of compensation he and his advisers think he is due. One route is undoubtedly quicker than the other due to the complex nature of assessing claims. I agree with the hon. Lady about people being held accountable, as I said in my statement and in response to other Members. Picking up her point about Acton post office, Paula Vennells does not have much influence over that any more, but we can ask questions about that on the hon. Lady's behalf.

Derek Thomas >

(St Ives) (Con)

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When I first became an MP, I met two constituents who had suffered as a result of the **Horizon scandal**. I was struck by the utter betrayal they felt. They had lost the job they loved and that they had seen as a form of public service, serving their community for many decades. I welcome everything that the Minister has set out on future action, but may I push back gently on his suggestion that the network is in a good place today and that there was no reputational damage? In the town of Porthleven and in Newlyn, a large village, we cannot get a business to touch the Post Office. Can the Minister do more work to restore the reputation of the Post Office, so that people have the service of a sub-postmaster or sub-postmistress where they need them?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

My hon. Friend is right to point out the nature of the public service provided by sub-postmasters. The great passion and the store set by sub-postmasters, such as Jo Hamilton, about their role in the community and the service they provided to that community came across loud and clear in the ITV broadcast. It was not just about losing a job, but about losing their place in the community, so my hon. Friend is right to draw attention to that.

It is important to resolve these situations quickly now, for the reputation of the Post Office, overturning convictions and getting compensation out of the door to everyone affected by the **scandal**, and we are working towards that every day. The post office network is still revered across the country, so I believe it still has a strong reputation at an individual level, but we must make the network more sustainable and viable. If the network is more lucrative, that will attract more people into becoming sub-postmasters. We are working on that all the time, through initiatives such as the banking framework and other opportunities.

Kirsten Oswald >

(East Renfrewshire) (SNP)

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Many constituents have contacted me looking for swift and straightforward action. I am interested in what the Minister has outlined, but it will be important to see further flesh on the bones as we progress, and very quickly. I would like to hear more from him about how we can best deal with those hard-to-reach cases, such as people who may have walked away absolutely scunnered and significantly out of pocket, who may not come forward without the concerted action that they deserve.

The protracted nature of the issue has dampened people's enthusiasm for taking on a post office—we cannot shy away from that and our communities deserve that we do not do so. In my constituency, the post office in Neilston will close on Saturday in what is known as a “temporary closure”, but it is only temporary if someone will come forward to take it on. Too many communities in East Renfrewshire and further afield do not have post offices, which are essential. I take on board what the Minister has said, but what more can be done, over and above what he has set out? Much more is needed to make sure that people have the confidence to take on the post offices that our communities need so much.

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She is right that we need to make the compensation schemes and the overturning of convictions swifter and more straightforward, and she is right to point to the fact that some people are reluctant to come forward in the first place. We are keen to deliver a solution that does not require sub-postmasters to come forward in order for us to overturn a conviction, as has been called for by Members of this House. We have been looking at that and we are working on it right now.

I represent a rural constituency and the Government provide significant financial support of £50 million a year for rural post offices. We are determined to restore the reputation of post offices through this work and make them more financially stable generally, by increasing the remuneration opportunities for postmasters. We think that is the route that will ensure people will come forward and run post offices in rural locations, which is as important to me as it is to the hon. Lady.

Paul Howell >

(Sedgefield) (Con)

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I apologise because this will obviously be repetitive, but the actions and governance of the Post Office have been incomprehensible. Many people will only have realised what has happened because they saw the ITV programme—I encourage them all to come to me or to any other MP if they do not know where to go to. I first engaged with this situation as a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee along with colleagues in March 2020, and it shocked me then as it does now. For me, the most shocking aspect, as has been repeated across the House, was the number of people who were told they were the only one. The obvious cover-up from people within the Post Office delivering those statements is wrong, shocking and outrageous. Can I encourage the Minister to do everything he can to ensure that those people feel the full force of the law so that the sub-postmasters, who are the real victims, feel like they have got some justice at the end of this outrageous situation?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I reassure him that repetition is no barrier to contribution in this place, as he will recognise. I also thank him for his work on the Select Committee, which is hugely important. We heard the words “You’re the only one” time and again in those dramatisations. It was horrific. It was a blatant lie, and somebody must have known that it was a blatant lie. Those lies led to some people going to jail and others suffering other forms of financial detriment, and detriment to their health and that of their families. Should prosecutions flow from that wherever possible? I would say yes.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle >

(Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op)

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I share the thoughts of almost everyone—there has been almost cross-party unanimity on this issue—but I am still worried about the ongoing treatment of sub-postmasters and their liability. In 2018, my local post office was subject to an armed robbery. Those who ran the post office were hauled up to the regional office, where they were interrogated. They felt like criminals. They were not allowed to bring their reps from the Communication Workers Union; they were told they could bring reps only from the National Federation of SubPostmasters, which they had no trust in. In the end, although of course they were found not to have given over the money willingly, they left and handed over the post office to someone else. There is a problem with the liability of sub-postmasters, and particularly the fact that the Post Office has closed Crown post offices, which would not have such liability. Will the Minister look again at how liability works for sub-postmasters?

I echo the calls that we should look again at private prosecutions. The CCRC said in its 2020 report that the private prosecutions process is haphazard and the fact that the Government do not even know what private prosecutions are going on, because there is no central register, is detrimental to the very reforms they might need to make. Will the Minister at least look at having a central register of private prosecutions, and a regulatory overview, possibly of the Crown Prosecution Service? It was created for the very purpose of separating prosecutions from the police, and we now need to do that for other public services as well.

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I thank the hon. Member for raising that troubling case, which I am happy to look into on his behalf, if he would like. I think he said that case was in 2018, since when I feel there has been a change in relationship between the Post Office and the network—I am not saying that it is universally good or universally supported by the network, but there has been some improvement—including the recruitment of 100 regional managers, so there is more of a relationship-based approach between the network and Post Office Ltd.

On private prosecutions, as I said earlier, we should look at that in the context of this particular **scandal** as well as the wider connotations of private prosecutions. The Justice Secretary has committed to do that, and I am sure that he will report to the House in due course and take on board the Justice Committee’s important recommendations on this matter.

James Sunderland >

(Bracknell) (Con)

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The Minister has today provided the House with what I see as three key assurances: namely, that compensation will be paid quickly to all victims; that wrongful convictions will be overturned; and that those responsible, whether from the Post Office, Fujitsu or elsewhere, will be held to account, ideally with criminal prosecutions. Does he agree? Can he reassure my constituents in Bracknell that a judicial system that presided over so many wrongful convictions will also be reviewed?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

My hon. Friend is right; rapid and fair compensation is exactly what we are seeking to deliver. It has to be seen to be fair. We also need an easier route to overturning convictions, and we are determined to take that forward, as well as individuals being held to account. He raises an important point on the judicial system, and potentially the trust we place upon computer records seems to have played a part in this case. That is a lesson we potentially need to learn across the legal framework, and I know the Justice Secretary has that in mind.

Alan Brown >

(Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)

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The Minister is aware that this is not just about those who were wrongly accused and convicted; it is also about those who were falsely accused, were not prosecuted but who still experienced consequences. I have a constituent who believes she was a victim of **Horizon** false accusations. She lost her post office franchise as a consequence, but the associated pressures led to her losing her main business as well. Can the Minister confirm whether she would be eligible for compensation? How does she go about accessing compensation? For similar victims of false accusations without prosecution who sadly have died, how does the deceased's family access compensation?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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There are three compensation schemes for good reason—it is not ideal to have three different schemes, but we are where we find ourselves. We have the **Horizon** shortfall scheme, the group litigation order scheme and the overturned conviction scheme, and it sounds as though the hon. Gentleman's constituent would fit into the **Horizon** shortfall scheme and should be able to apply to that. I am happy to make sure that he is aware of the route that his constituent can take. In assessing financial loss, consequential losses are a part of that assessment, and it sounds as though there is a case for consequential loss in that particular case. It can certainly be something that financial compensation takes into account. With regard to the families of deceased individuals, they can still claim to the same compensation schemes and should be compensated in exactly the same manner and to exactly the same degree.

Robin Millar >

(Aberconwy) (Con)

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The building on Queens Road in Craig-y-Don in my constituency, where Alan Bates served the community as sub-postmaster, is now a charity shop. It is one small reminder of the damage that has been done to lives and livelihoods across the country. I welcome the Minister's statement and his tone. I welcome the progress that the Government are making, but I also know that he has seen the interim report from the inquiry. He has heard the mood of the House this evening, which is that a great **scandal** requires a great response. Does he agree with me that, in addition to prompt payment of fair compensation, now is the time to consider legislation for the overturning of unsafe convictions, to consider the powers of the Post Office and to consider Fujitsu's status as a framework provider for Government contracts? Does he agree that we need to see justice where actual wrongdoing has occurred, and soon?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that he has done on this, and I share his ambition on delivering. This has been a great **scandal** and we need a significant response to it. Our discussions today with the Lord Chancellor were very much along the lines of attempting to do something unprecedented in this space, and we are working on that right now. I hope to give my hon. Friend something more definite in that regard in the coming days.

With regard to Fujitsu and individuals, we think it is right for the inquiry to be given time to ascertain who did what, who did not do what, and who is responsible for the **scandal**. When the inquiry reports in due course—it should be concluded by the end of this year, with a report hopefully soon after—we should be able to make decisions on those areas at that point. Certainly, our prosecution authorities should be able to make decisions with clearer sight of the information and the evidence that has been ascertained.

Jim Shannon >

(Strangford) (DUP)

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I thank the Minister very much for his clear commitment and dedication to this issue. On both sides of the Chamber, we are impressed that he wants to find a solution and a way forward. I commend the ITV drama, which clearly illustrated the impact on the ordinary, normal, wee people—as they said themselves—and the brutality of the Post Office **Horizon** scheme on good people who were so badly wronged. All of us in this Chamber are here as elected representatives to speak up for those people who were badly wronged.

Having seen some of the horrific effects—in particular, a 20-year-old girl was imprisoned because of the defective scheme and had her entire life marred by that system—I seek clarity about the possibility of the Minister overseeing not just a vital and necessary reimbursement scheme but an official pardoning scheme to have the records wiped in England, Scotland, Wales and for us in Northern Ireland. As the only MP from Northern Ireland in the Chamber at the moment, I wish to see the same justice and compensation for those people as well.

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I thank the hon. Member for his contribution and his kinds words. Even though I was very familiar with all the detriment that postmasters had experienced due to the **scandal**, the most shocking part of the dramatisation was the brutality shown by some of the Post Office managers—it was inconceivable. I completely share how appalled he is by what he saw in the programme. Anybody who has not seen it should watch it.

Across the board, we are looking very closely at overturning convictions. We are determined to do that not just for England but UK-wide, and we are working with the devolved Administrations to make sure that we do something right across the piece. Although there are different prosecution authorities in different parts of the UK—in Scotland, for example—the Post Office seems to have been involved in the compilation of those files in every part of the United Kingdom, so it makes sense to have a scheme that covers every part of the United Kingdom.

Dr Neil Hudson >

(Penrith and The Border) (Con)

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I thank the Minister for his statement and for all his efforts on this issue over a long period. I echo his tributes to all those who have campaigned on this issue for many years. The Post Office **Horizon** IT **scandal** was an outrageous miscarriage of justice, affecting so many innocent postmasters and their families. Many constituents have contacted me to express their concerns and outrage over this miscarriage of justice. Will my hon. Friend reassure me, the House and the country that this Government will do all they can to compensate all the victims as soon as possible, including by looking at exonerating them all collectively, so that this wrong can be made right both swiftly and compassionately?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

My constituents have also written to me, appalled and outraged at what has happened. Again, we should pay tribute to the people behind the programme who have brought it to the public's attention. I agree; we are looking for a process where all victims can be compensated quickly. We have compensation schemes in place already, and 64% of those affected have been compensated. On overturning convictions, we are looking at a collective exoneration to see what is legally possible. That would open the door to rapid, immediate compensation of £600,000 for people who choose that route. The full assessment takes more time, and people would have to choose the right route for them. It should deliver on all the ambitions that he sets out.

Michael Shanks >

(Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab)

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This disgraceful **scandal** reached every single part of the country, including in Scotland, where the Crown Office held prosecutorial power rather than the Post Office. In 2020, the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission identified 73 potential victims, of whom only 16 have come forward to date. Clearly, there is still work to do to get the message out to people that they are entitled to have their conviction looked at. Of course, the scheme only reaches the people who had a conviction in the first place—many affected by the **scandal** never had their case taken forward but still lost their reputation and their livelihood.

Today, the First Minister of Scotland said that he will look at a mass exoneration in relation to these convictions, and I think that is the right approach. I wonder whether the Minister will confirm that he and the Lord Chancellor will take that forward in England, because across the whole of the UK, we need a system where everyone understands what will happen next, so that no victim anywhere in the country who was affected by this **scandal** is left with justice not served.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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Again, I share the hon. Member's ambitions in every part of his remarks. We, too, are disappointed that we have not had more people coming forward to have their convictions overturned, for a number of different reasons. Those people have been written to several times by different bodies, including the CCRC. We are keen to get the message out, but we do not think that that is the whole problem. We think there is a confidence issue for some of those people in coming forward after so many years, after what has happened to them, so we are very keen to say to them, "You will be treated fairly and dealt with as quickly as possible."

A mass exoneration scheme, as the hon. Member described it, is something we are looking at. I cannot confirm that today on the Floor of the House, but we certainly think that that kind of blanket overturning of convictions, together with a rapid compensation scheme, will mean that more people get access to justice more quickly. That is something we are very keen on, and to deliver it UK-wide would absolutely be the right thing to do.

Duncan Baker >

(North Norfolk) (Con)

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As a former sub-postmaster, last week's drama brought up many emotions from my time serving from 2014 to 2019. I have mentioned Fujitsu five times in this Chamber, asking five times about its involvement. We now know, finally, that it had a back door into the live system. Minister, when will Fujitsu face justice for its utter incompetence in all of this? How can it be made to contribute compensation for the many postmasters with claims, instead of that being done the taxpayer, who is not responsible for this **scandal**?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my hon. Friend for being a constant contributor to these debates. He brings real-life experience of these matters, which we very much value and appreciate. I would be very happy to keep up our regular engagement on these issues. He is not shy of informing me of different things that I need to be aware of and I appreciate that engagement.

Of course, the back door into the sub-postmasters account seems to have been a key contributor to this **scandal**, and Fujitsu seems to have had that back door. We are yet to establish how much of that was Fujitsu doing it unilaterally or whether it was being done on the instruction of the Post Office. The inquiry is there to give us those kinds of answers. The inquiry is committed to concluding by the end of this year and reporting shortly after. At that point, we will know who was responsible for what, and we should then be able to identify who can be made responsible through potential financial contributions, rather than the taxpayer alone having to pick up the tab for this very significant compensation package. I am just as ambitious as my hon. Friend is to make sure that those who are responsible pay for what they have done.

Sarah Edwards >

(Tamworth) (Lab)

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I, too, pay tribute to the ITV drama— many constituents have written to me about how powerful it was—and to the BBC’s podcast, “The Great Post Office Trial”, which I listened to a couple of years ago. **Horizon** is accounting software, yet at every turn it seemed that it lacked the very principles of accounting that those who study the fundamentals in accounting recognise. Where were the checks and balances in the system, and why did the governance of the Post Office also lack the same checks and balances? It appears that no reconciliations were done to cross-check the software, and the principles of integrity, objectivity, professional competence and due care were clearly not applied to this critical software in the way that accountants are held to them in the code of ethics. After many years, why are we only now hearing that there was a failed pilot and that that could have averted this disgraceful abuse of power and miscarriage of justice?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Member for her contribution. I, too, have had many constituents contacting me who are appalled by what they have seen on television. She is right to draw attention to the fact that this was not the first time that this had been publicised. There is Nick Wallis’s book, “The Great Post Office **Scandal**”, and his podcast, which is well worth listening to. He goes into these matters in even greater depth, and she is right to pay tribute to those broadcasts and publications.

All the questions that the hon. Member asks are valid. When was it established that this was going wrong? Where were the checks and balances? Where was the duty of care? That is what the inquiry is there for. The inquiry was established after the court case and there was vigorous debate in this House about the type of inquiry it should be. It was ultimately settled on that it should be a statutory inquiry because of the greater powers that a statutory inquiry has, so it should be able to get to the bottom of the questions she rightly asks. Once we have got to the bottom of those questions, we can start to identify who was responsible specifically for what and make sure that those people are held to account.

Alistair Strathern >

(Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab)

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I thank the Minister for his work on this really important issue. It is a really heartbreaking story of injustice, and I am sure we would agree that it has been allowed to drag on for far too long. It was incredibly heartening for me that so many constituents were moved by the powerful ITV dramatisation to write to me about this injustice and ask what I will be doing about it as their MP, but it is also tragic to see that it had to come to this, after years of powerful and brave campaigning by some of the postmasters affected. We owe it to them to act with the urgency the situation requires.

While I acknowledge that the Minister has set out some challenges in giving certainty about timelines today, can he at least provide a timeline for when we will be able to say with certainty that everyone affected will have received compensation and that all those who were wrongfully convicted will have their convictions overturned? Alongside that, accountability is such an important issue here, and I would welcome some details from him on how he will work with colleagues from different parties to make sure that all those who are accountable, including Fujitsu, are held to account.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. I agree that it has taken too long to get to this point. If it was not for people like Alan Bates, some of the journalists who were referred to earlier, Lord Arbuthnot, the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and many others, this may have never come to light, but it has taken too long. We need to act with pace and as quickly as possible to expedite many things here, as we have referred to already. We are keen to overturn convictions very quickly. It may require legislation, and I am sure we will get support from both sides of the House for any legislation we may need.

The hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Alistair Strathern) is right to push us on timelines. As we have said, we are keen to deliver compensation, wherever possible, by August this year. We want to overturn convictions as rapidly as possible. Ideally, we would like it to take weeks, not months, to do that, but it will obviously be dependent on a number of factors. The compensation will come through all three schemes. The first scheme has practically been delivered for the 2,417 people who applied within the appropriate timescale. One hundred per cent of those people have been made offers, and 85% of them have accepted. There are some people

who applied to the remaining schemes out of time, so we are working on those applications right now and hope to deliver them as quickly as possible. I think 75% of them have been made offers, but we are left with the GLO scheme and the overturned convictions scheme. We hope to overturn the convictions by August this year, if not far sooner than that.

Mr Speaker >

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That was a very important statement and was much needed. I thank the Minister for staying at the Dispatch Box for so long. I also thank ITV, because it has certainly made the country aware of this absolute **scandal** against innocent people.

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