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Post Office Horizon Scandal

Volume 743: debated on Wednesday 10 January 2024

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🕒 12.41pm

Sir David Davis >

(Haltemprice and Howden) (Con)

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(Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade if she will make a statement on compensation and outstanding matters relating to the Post Office **Horizon scandal**.

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

(Kevin Hollinrake)

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As the Prime Minister indicated a few minutes ago, I will inform the House about the further steps the Government are taking to address the **Horizon scandal**.

The Government are taking measures to speed up the flow of compensation. We have already set a target of issuing initial offers for 90% of group litigation order cases within 40 days of receiving a completed application. I announced in November that we would be introducing a £600,000 up-front offer for claims with overturned convictions, which people could choose to take rather than going through the detailed assessment process. This has already made a real difference. Before my announcement, only five of the relevant people had reached full and final settlements; I can now report that, with the help of the minimum payments, we have finalised 30 cases. This has obviously speeded matters along for those who have taken this up-front offer. It has also helped those who have chosen individual assessment, because resources can be concentrated on those cases.

I can announce today that we are taking similar measures in respect of the group litigation order scheme. We will now make people in that scheme an up-front offer of £75,000, which will save them having to go through a full assessment. However, as with overturned convictions, if they believe they are entitled to more, they are welcome to continue with the full assessment. Not only will this allow the Department to focus its resources on the larger cases, but it will allow claimants' lawyers to do the same. The pace at

which we can get claims into the scheme is the key constraint on how quickly we can settle them. The up-front offer is smaller for the GLO scheme than for the overturned convictions because the claims tend to be smaller. We estimate that perhaps a third of GLO claimants may want to consider this route. I am sure the House will welcome this measure.

When I made my statement on Monday, I heard Members from all parts of the House share my desire to ensure justice for postmasters who have been convicted of offences as part of the **scandal**. The whole House is united on this, and in the light of last week's excellent ITV series, I believe the whole nation is united on it, too. We have all been moved by the stories of postmasters who have been unjustly convicted and the terrible effects over the period of two decades on their finances, health and relationships. Indeed, we have seen whole lives ruined by this brutal and arbitrary exercise of power.

Hundreds of convictions remain extant. Some of those convictions will have relied on evidence from the discredited **Horizon** system; others will have been the result of appalling failures of the Post Office's investigation and prosecution functions. The evidence already emerging from Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry has shown not only incompetence, but malevolence in many of their actions. This evidence was not available to the courts when they made their decisions on individual cases. So far, 95 out of more than 900 convictions have been overturned. We know that postmasters have been reluctant to apply to have their convictions overturned—many of them have decided that they have been through enough and cannot face further engagement with authority. Many fear having their hopes raised, only for them to be dashed yet again.

The **Horizon** compensation advisory board has recommended that we should overturn all the convictions of the postmasters who were prosecuted in the **Horizon scandal**. I think its motivation for doing so is absolutely right, and we will work with it to speed up the process. May I put on the record my thanks to Lord Arbutnot, who is in the Gallery today, and the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for their work on the campaign generally and on that advisory board?

Following the recommendation would involve unprecedented action by Parliament to overturn specific verdicts of the courts. The Government completely recognise the importance of an independent court system and judiciary, so the recommendation raises important issues of constitutional principle. This is therefore not a decision we can take lightly. It also creates the risks of a different sort of injustice.

I am sure that a great many people were wrongly convicted in the **scandal**, but I cannot tell the House that all of those prosecuted were innocent or even that it was 90%, or 80%, or 70%. Without retrying every case, we cannot know. The risk is that instead of unjust convictions, we end up with unjust acquittals, and we just would not know how many. The only way we could tell would be to put all cases through the courts, further dragging out the distress for many innocent people.

Mr Speaker >

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Order. This is a very important issue, so I will allow the Minister to continue, but that means the time of the Opposition spokesperson will also increase, as does Sir David's. It is too important an issue to curtail the Minister, but officials ought to be aware that when they provide speeches, they are for three minutes. However, I want the Minister finish his speech, because the issue is far too important.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I apologise, Mr Speaker, for the length of this response to the urgent question, but the matter is, as you say, of vital importance.

We have been faced with a dilemma: either accept the present problem of many people carrying the unjustified slur of conviction, or accept that an unknown number of people who have genuinely stolen from their post office will be exonerated and perhaps even compensated. I can therefore announce that we intend to bring forward legislation as soon as we can to overturn the convictions of all those convicted in England or Wales on the basis of Post Office evidence given during the **Horizon scandal**. The Government will in the coming days consider whether to include the small number of cases that have already been considered by the appeal courts and had convictions upheld.

We recognise that this is an exceptional step, but these are exceptional circumstances. As the House knows, people with convictions that have been overturned are offered a choice between having their compensation individually assessed or settling on an up-front offer of £600,000. As far as possible, we want to avoid guilty people walking away with hundreds of thousands of pounds of public

money, but we cannot make the provision of compensation subject to a detailed examination of guilt. We have concluded that to ask the court to do that again would be unfair to individuals.

We cannot turn this into an administrative exercise. All we ask is that as part of their claims for compensation, postmasters sign a statement to the effect that they did not commit the crimes of which they are accused. Anyone subsequently found to have signed such a statement untruthfully will be putting themselves at risk of prosecution for fraud. I do not pretend to the House that that is a foolproof device, but it is a proportionate one that respects the ordeal that these people have already suffered. It means that an honest postmaster will have his or her conviction overturned and, just by signing one document, can secure compensation.

No one should take our decision as a criticism of the judiciary. The original decisions were taken in good faith in the understanding that prosecutions were properly conducted and that assertions about the robustness of the **Horizon** system were true. But, as I said earlier, these are exceptional circumstances and we need to act quickly and decisively. Time is one thing that we and the convicted postmasters do not have. Our arrangement will apply to all those convicted in England and Wales based on Post Office investigations, including those prosecuted by other bodies who relied on the product of those investigations; the fruit of a poisoned tree.

We have plenty more work to do on the solution. We need to prepare the legislation, and I want to discuss our solution with the advisory board, which I am meeting later this afternoon. Some prosecutions have been undertaken in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where justice is devolved. We are, of course, engaging with the Scottish and Northern Irish Administrations in respect of wrongful convictions in their jurisdictions. We will do those things as quickly as we can and keep the House informed.

The House will have heard that we are well aware of the imperfections of the solution. I am sure that that will attract some critics, but when they criticise I invite them to say what they would do otherwise. Would they leave many people suffering under the burden of unjust convictions for many years—perhaps forever—with no access to compensation, or would they create some administrative process for deciding innocence, which would be more onerous for the victims? I very much hope that the whole House will stand with the Government to deliver rapid justice to convicted postmasters who have been waiting much, much too long.

Mr Speaker >

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I will extend the time. It was so important to get all of that on the record. I believe that the Minister wanted to make a statement but was overruled. At least we have certainly had that statement now.

Sir David Davis >

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As the Minister said, earlier this week many of us across the Chamber called for this appalling injustice to be solved in months, not years. It looks as though the Government have responded correctly to that call, ensuring swift justice. But there are undoubtedly difficult constitutional and legal issues involved, as he laid out in detail.

Some of the victims that I have spoken to say they need an individual exoneration rather than a grand pardon because they are understandably concerned about being bracketed with the very small number of people who will actually not be innocent. Will the Minister undertake to continue looking into this matter and address the quite proper concerns of the legitimate victims?

I would also welcome further elaboration on compensation. Fujitsu, which has played a central role in the **scandal**, is still at the heart of Government IT systems. Will Fujitsu will be required to meet some of the costs of the undoubtedly enormously expensive compensation that we are paying out? Finally, will the Government accelerate the investigations to convict those who are really guilty of causing the **scandal** by perverting the course of justice?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my right hon. Friend for the urgent question and for his collaboration with us on these matters. We have looked carefully at the issue of individual exonérations and did not see any way possible to do that without an exhaustive and time-consuming administrative process, which would add further burdens to those that people have already suffered.

The other issue is getting people to come forward again, which has been one of the major problems in getting people to appeal their convictions. We see the solution that we have adopted as very much the lesser of two evils. Nevertheless, we are keen to discuss mitigations and safeguards with other Members of the House. I set out one earlier on—the requirement to sign a statement of innocence—and I am keen to work with him to look at other mechanisms that we can use to ensure that those people who get their convictions overturned and access compensation are actually innocent of the charges.

My right hon. Friend made the important point about Fujitsu, which has been raised many times. As he knows, part of what the Government did was to put in place a statutory inquiry, chaired by Sir Wyn Williams. It is due to complete by the end of the year, and, hopefully, it will report soon after. At that point in time, we will be able to assess more clearly who is actually responsible. Many people may have already formed a view on that, but we think it right that we follow a process to identify individuals or organisations who are responsible for the **scandal**. Of course, we would expect those organisations to financially contribute. There are financial and legal measures that we can take.

As regards individuals, it may be that there is sufficient evidence for the authorities to take forward individual prosecutions, and I think many in the House would welcome that.

Mr Speaker >

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I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jonathan Reynolds >

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

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Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question; I congratulate the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) on securing it. This issue has rightly left the public outraged at the scale and shocking details of this injustice. As I said on Monday, Labour believes the **Horizon scandal** to be one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in British history, where people lost their livelihoods, liberty and their lives; then, when trying to find justice, they were delayed at every turn.

It is unconscionable that, despite the landmark legal rulings, several years on people have still not been able to access the compensation that they are entitled to. We are all united in this House in wanting the sub-postmasters to be exonerated in full—it is important to say exoneration and not a pardon, because a pardon implies guilt that is forgiven—and for them to receive compensation with urgency. We recognise that that is not straightforward and the result may be imperfect, but this is an unprecedented **scandal** that requires an unprecedented response. The alternative of not acting is even less desirable. Labour stands ready to work with the Government to deliver a solution that achieves that long-awaited justice and compensation at pace.

May I thank the Minister for the ongoing conversations we have been having on this matter? Can he guarantee that compensation payments will immediately follow any exonerations under the terms of the compensation schemes as they stand today? Could he indicate a timescale for that? I know he appreciates that victims cannot continue to wait years for payments.

Given what the Minister said about the implications of a blanket exoneration, we will need to consider what safeguards might be necessary, to ensure that, as best as possible, public money does not flow into the pockets of those who are not entitled to it. He mentioned that people may be asked to sign a statement. Will that be drawn up consistently with the work of the advisory board?

Crucially, we discussed on Monday the cases that have now been identified from the pre-**Horizon** pilot scheme, which are identical to those coming out of **Horizon**. Will those cases be covered by any proposals that the Government bring forward? Any plan that does not cover all convictions will rightly not command the full support of the House.

As the sub-postmasters—they must surely get the credit for these extraordinary measures—have repeatedly said, what matters now is getting compensation to people swiftly. The whole House is united in its determination to deliver the justice, truth and compensation that has been denied and delayed time and time again.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Gentleman for his response to my remarks. I appreciate his offer to work with us and to stand with us to deliver compensation and the overturning of convictions. The first step will be legislation; again, we are happy to work with him on that. That may take some weeks to deliver, but the sooner, the better. The introduction and passing of that legislation will be a matter for both Houses, but our intention is to get on with that very quickly.

From there, it should be a simple process: a statement needs to be signed, as the hon. Gentleman and I both referred to. We will work with the advisory board to ensure that the statement is appropriate. Following the signing of that statement, if people choose the detailed assessment route, that will be more complex because it will look at not just financial loss but personal impacts, such as on health or on other livelihoods, and consequential losses. If people choose the fixed sum award route of £600,000, that process can be very quick, which is one of the reasons why we have managed to complete 30 full and final settlements already, many using the fixed sum route.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of people using the pilot version of **Horizon**, of which we are cognisant. Every postmaster around the country has been written to and should be aware that the compensation scheme is available. We believe that these schemes cover that pilot period for **Horizon**. I am very happy to work with him and the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) to ensure that the people they have identified have already been contacted. The good news is that, following the excellent ITV dramatisation, we have seen a good number of new cases come to light. We are keen for people to come forward, whether they have suffered convictions or financial detriment through shortfalls. We are keen to ensure that those people get access to compensation as quickly as possible.

Paul Scully >

(Sutton and Cheam) (Con)

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I thank the Minister and the Lord Chancellor for their work. It has been longer in the making than the drama series, but they met their promise over two days by coming up with the first stage of the solution. Too many victims want nothing to do with the British justice system, the Post Office or Government. They have had enough. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is no perfect solution? The best we can aim for is one that is fast and provides life-changing money to restore these people's lives as best we can.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for the sterling work he did as my predecessor in this job. Many people recognise the incredible work he did following the outcome of the court case with the compensation schemes that he instigated. He is right that there is no perfect solution, but we have worked across Government to try to find the best possible one. If we want a fast solution that, as he said, provides life-changing compensation to people who have been deprived of that in recent years, we believe that this is the best one.

Mr Speaker >

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I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Marion Fellows >

(Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

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I thank the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) for securing this very important urgent question. I am sorry that it was not a statement, because then I would have had prior sight of what the Minister was going to say.

When we stood here on Tuesday, I asked how long “some time” would be, and I am glad that things are progressing quickly, although with a note of caution—I totally understand the hesitation to introduce any kind of blanket Bill or whatever. We need to move things forward and keep up the momentum from the ITV series in the press, here and everywhere.

We also still need to listen to the victims. Only this morning, some of the postmasters said that we should all stop referring to compensation, but refer instead to financial redress. This is not compensation but money due to them, and we need to get it to them as quickly as possible. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) said that some people do not want to go anywhere near justice or the Post Office. We must encourage people to come forward. I am meeting constituents who were involved who have not officially approached me yet, and I am sure that many others across the House will be in exactly the same position.

Scottish law is different, as the Minister is well aware. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice made a statement yesterday, and said that the Scottish Government were looking at Fujitsu contracts, which is really important. I cannot speak for the Scottish Government, but I know there will be no hesitation in moving things forward. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices, I will write to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service in Scotland.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Lady for her question and, once again, for her work in the all-party parliamentary group for post offices. I am sorry that I was not able to share a statement with her, and I appreciate her welcoming what we have done today.

I am very happy to term this “redress”; it is only about putting people back where they would have been, and trying to make good what has happened to them. I understand what she says about compensation, but this is there to compensate people financially for losses and impacts on their lives.

I could not agree more that, as well as delivering compensation more quickly and fairly, the No. 1 thing we would like to happen is for more people to come forward. A simplified process that does not require postmasters themselves to file an appeal will mean that this is done more quickly. The routes to compensation have been simplified, and we very much hope that people will come forward. That seems to be our experience right now. We will continue to engage with the devolved Administrations to ensure that they have everything they need, as they may want to adopt similar measures.

Duncan Baker >

(North Norfolk) (Con)

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I welcome this legislation, and I thank the Minister for the amount of work he has done at such great speed. We are still at a midway point in the journey. There are still criminal prosecutions to come. One question that has never been answered is just how much money was taken unlawfully from thousands of innocent men and women. The Post Office took that money, and we have never known that figure. Even the most basic accountant knows that it will run into hundreds of millions of pounds. Could the Minister force the Post Office to publish the grand scale of the money it stole from people?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my hon. Friend for contributing to these important debates in the House once again. He brings first-hand experience, as the only postmaster serving in the House. He is quite right to say that money was taken, and someone must have noticed it. One would think that the finance departments or auditors would have noticed it, as it would have appeared in some kind of suspense account and was presumably transferred out at some point. I will endeavour to find out the number, as I do not have it. We do know that prior to Horizon being installed in the post office network, there were around five prosecutions a year. That suddenly jumped to about 60 a year. We know that there were significant numbers of prosecutions, and the fact that there are around 3,500 postmasters in the various compensation schemes illustrates the scale of the problem. I will endeavour to find out a number for him.

Mr Kevan Jones >

(North Durham) (Lab)

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I thank the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) for securing this UQ. I know the Minister wanted to make a statement but was overruled by No. 10 so that the Prime Minister got the glory of making the announcement. A serious point is that had we not got this UQ, there would have been no debate today, which is a disgrace.

The Minister knows that the advisory board has been tied in a Gordian knot for quite a few months, which is why we wrote our letter to the Justice Secretary before Christmas. He is right that this will be messy whichever way we do it, but it needs to be done, because people are still out there with convictions that need overturning. I welcome the advisory board having discussions later this afternoon and in the next few weeks on how things should take place, but I urge the Minister—I know he will—to engage with all political parties in this House. If we can get all parties' support for the proposal, that will make it a lot stronger.

The point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) about the pre-Horizon schemes is important. I welcome the changes to the compensation, as they will speed things up for some victims, but in the case of those who have died whose convictions are overturned, will their estates be able to access compensation?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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Once again, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for all his work on this campaign over many years and for his work on the advisory board, which has been an essential part of seeking a resolution. I will of course continue to work cross-party, as I have done all the way through on this matter, from the Back Benches and now from the Front Bench. I appreciate the support and engagement we have had from all political parties in this area, both Front Benchers and Back Benchers.

Yes, we are cognisant of the pre-Horizon pilot scheme, and we will keep working to make sure the people involved are included in compensation. Yes, if people have sadly passed away—over 60 have passed away waiting for compensation and justice—the compensation will go to their estate and therefore to their family. That is an assurance I can give him.

Priti Patel >

(Witham) (Con)

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The Minister has announced that approximately one third of the 555 individuals involved in the group litigation will benefit from the up-front payment of £75,000. What other support will there be for those in that group litigation who suffered losses way in excess of that £75,000? How will the Government assess not just the financial losses but the reputational damage they suffered, the health impacts and the family breakdowns that many endured? How will it work in practice? As the Minister outlined, time is pressing. This is very difficult and there is no one-size-fits-all answer, but individuals need recompense sooner rather than later and to feel that justice for this institutional state failure will actually act in their favour.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and for the number of times she has raised this particular issue and set out her thoughts, which have proved very useful. We think that 30% of people from the group litigation order scheme have chosen the £75,000 fixed sum award route. Clearly, that is an estimate. We at least have some evidence from the other scheme on how effective that is.

If people choose not to go down that route, and if they believe their losses are in excess of that, they can go down the full assessment route. We are trying to make that as rapid as possible. It is a process of alternative dispute resolution. Potentially, things can happen very quickly, but if that cannot be agreed then it goes to an independent panel for assessment. There is independence at every part of the process. People going down that route can get interim payments if they are needed, so that they do not suffer financial hardship. We are keen to make sure not only that people get a fair amount, but that it is also seen to be fair. Independence is an essential part of that process.

Christine Jardine >

(Edinburgh West) (LD)

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I thank the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) for securing the urgent question, and I thank the Minister for the swiftness with which he has acted, and particularly for his recognition of the need to talk to the devolved Administrations and of the fact that the situation in Scotland is slightly different, as the Post Office was not able to prosecute there

and that was done through the official Crown services. With that in mind, and given the need he expressed to encourage people to come forward—in Scotland, it is very much more difficult to gauge how many people were affected—it is not just enough for us to say, “Please come forward.” We need a proactive campaign to encourage people to come forward and reassure them that they will not face the same sort of delays that the victims of Hillsborough and the infected blood **scandal** have faced, but that this will be acted on swiftly.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks. Although they were prosecuted under different authorities in Scotland and Northern Ireland, the cases were generally prepared by the Post Office itself, so I do not think we have any greater confidence about the status of those convictions than we have in those in the rest of the UK. We are therefore very keen to engage with the Scottish Administration on what we are doing. Hopefully, there will be a consistent scheme across the UK.

I agree entirely with the hon. Lady that we need to be proactive in our message to people about coming forward, and in our message from the House that we are working together and that this process is now much more streamlined. It will not even necessarily require sub-postmasters to make an application for their conviction to be overturned. That will happen much more quickly, and any access routes we have now for compensation will be made swifter and more rapid. I think those things alone will mean more people come forward. As I said, we have seen a good number of new people come forward. Hudgell, one of the solicitors involved in claims for some of the victims, have had, I think, 130 new people contact them on the basis of the TV programme and possibly because of the new actions we are taking to make sure compensation is more smoothly and easily available.

Sir Robert Neill >

(Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con)

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The Minister, and indeed all of us in this House, will recognise the desire to get the swiftest possible redress for the victims of this appalling injustice, but does he also accept that legislating to overturn convictions that were imposed by our independent courts is constitutionally quite exceptional? Therefore, in justifying that, will he set out in full what consideration was given to the practicality of going down the normal route of referring those convictions to the Court of Appeal before the legislative route was decided upon? What discussions were there with the senior judiciary about its practicality? Given the novel and constitutional nature of the legislation, will he seriously consider committing to the Committee stage of any Bill being taken on the Floor of the House and, because it is novel and constitutional, will he consider that it is appropriate for a draft Bill to be given swift pre-legislative scrutiny?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his willingness to work with us. He and I have discussed the matter in the past few days, and I appreciate his expertise and advice. Yes, absolutely; this is a very significant step and not one that we would take lightly. We fully respect the independence of the courts. We set out very clearly the reasons why this is different—that is important. We are setting a precedent, but it is clear why we are doing so. The involvement of private prosecutions is very relevant, and that also relates to work that he has done on the Justice Committee. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice has engaged with the people he refers to in the judiciary, to ensure that they understood what we were doing and why we were doing it. Those conversations were constructive, rather than resisted, but I am very happy to take up my hon. Friend's offer to continue that engagement and to discuss the draft Bill with him.

Mr Speaker >

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I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

Liam Byrne >

(Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab)

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I thank the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) for securing the urgent question. I am very much looking forward to cross-examining the Minister when he comes before the Business and Trade Committee next Tuesday, when we will be hearing evidence from Mr Bates and his colleagues. We will also be putting questions to Fujitsu. Can I push the Minister on the point I made on Monday night? Three years after the landmark case, 85% of convictions have not been overturned, only 4% of the cases have resulted in a full and final settlement, and we have heard evidence from victims this week already that even when settlements have been made, the cash has not yet been handed over. Can I ask the Minister again what his target is? What is his goal, approximate or otherwise? When will those wrongfully prosecuted have their full and final settlement delivered, in cash?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

I am very much looking forward to appearing before the right hon. Gentleman's Select Committee and hearing some challenging questions, which I would welcome. To be clear, 64% of all those affected by the **scandal** have received full and final compensation. He talks about the smaller cohort who have come forward in relation to convictions. Only 95 have had convictions overturned. In order to try to expedite the payment of compensation to those people, we have introduced the fixed-sum award route, which is proving very successful. I am not aware of his point about people not actually receiving the cash, but I am very happy to engage with him on that, because there is every intention that once a decision has been taken to go down the fixed-sum award route, the sum is paid pretty much instantly. I am very happy to find out what exactly is happening in those cases. Where people have gone down a full assessment route, that is understandably more complex, as various considerations about loss, financial forensic information, health and reputational loss—a key facet in most of these cases—will be taken into account.

The right hon. Gentleman asked for a date. We have always intended to deliver all the compensation by August this year, and that is still the case. We would like to do it more rapidly, and for many people we will do it more rapidly, but not everything within the timescales is in our gift, because people are required to go down a full assessment route in order to compile a claim to which we can then respond. However, we have set ourselves some criteria relating to time and service levels to enable us to respond to claims in a timely fashion.

Sir Oliver Heald >

(North East Hertfordshire) (Con)

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I thank the Minister for engaging with the concept of trying something innovative in order to move this process on. I think it right for the senior judiciary to be consulted, but I also think it is probably the only way to make the process move speedily. I also thank him for meeting me to discuss my constituent Mrs Jasvinder Barang, whom I have been talking about for a long time. She was one of the first to have a conviction overturned, more than three years ago, but she is still waiting for her full, individually assessed compensation. Can anything more be done to enable her case finally to be dealt with, such as providing extra legal resources or assessors, and can the Minister give me any sort of timescale?

Kevin Hollinrake >[Share](#)

It was a pleasure to meet my right hon. and learned Friend yesterday, and on other occasions, to talk about Mrs Jasvinder Barang. As he is aware, people whose convictions have been overturned can choose between two routes: the individual assessment of claim or the fixed-sum award, the latter being a much more rapid route because individual assessments can be complicated. While I cannot speak about the point that a specific case has reached, I will be happy to return to my right hon. and learned Friend on the issue.

One of the benefits of the fixed-sum award route is that those who choose it do not need either the resources required for their own legal representation or the resources to be used on our side, or the Post Office side, for the assessment of claims. I am happy to continue to work with my right hon. and learned Friend and with the advisory board to try to make the whole process more streamlined and more rapid, which is a challenge that we will go on trying to meet whenever we can.

Andrew Bridgen >

(North West Leicestershire) (Ind)

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I welcome the announcement that all convictions of sub-postmasters based on the flawed Horizon evidence will be overturned, but given that the material facts of these cases have not changed—and many have been known for over a decade—may I ask why the Minister thinks it has taken the airing of a TV docu-drama and the public outcry associated with it to force the Government, and indeed the whole House, to belatedly do the right thing for innocent victims of a huge miscarriage of justice? What does that say about our democracy and about our judicial system, and can the Minister think of any other issues that might benefit from the same level of media scrutiny?

Kevin Hollinrake > [Share](#)

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work; he has been a constant campaigner on behalf of his constituents, and has contributed to every debate I have seen on this issue. However, I think his challenge is a little unfair. As he knows, I worked on the issue as a Back Bencher, and as a Minister I have made it my No.1 priority for the past 15 months. This is not something that we have just picked up, and he can see how much we have done.

Of course, during this process we have learnt things, and things have happened that we did not expect. We did not expect it to be so difficult for people to overturn convictions after the overturning of the first convictions, and we did not expect it to be so difficult to assess the damages and losses. We have tried at every point to accelerate compensation. We introduced the fixed-sum award last November, long before the TV series was broadcast, and before then there were measures involving tax treatments. We also started to look at different ways of overturning convictions long before the TV series was aired. So it is not the case that the series, excellent though it is, has resulted in these changes.

I think it is fair to say that the whole House and the whole country were shocked by what they saw on television, and that has made it easier to push certain developments forward more quickly, but I believe that we would have arrived at this position in any event. Nevertheless, I am glad we are here today moving things forward at this pace.

Sir Robert Buckland >

(South Swindon) (Con)

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I warmly welcome the statements from the Prime Minister and from my hon. Friend. I thank my hon. Friend for his hard work, and I am also grateful for the work of other Ministers, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), in pursuing and dealing with this injustice.

The key point to bear in mind is that, owing to the number of people who have refused to come forward, Parliament has an obligation to act. In the case of existing appeals, the matter can be dealt with by the Court of Appeal in respect of the quashing of any convictions, pursuant to an Act of Parliament, but the key challenge lies in all the people who are not in the court system. Will my hon. Friend work with me and others to ensure that the system he envisages—I think he is talking about statutory declarations, which would perhaps come under section 5 of the Perjury Act 1911—is got right in order to avoid further disincentives for innocent people to clear their names and, in the words of judges up and down the country, “walk from the court without a stain on their character”?

Kevin Hollinrake > [Share](#)

I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his work and for his advice over recent days. As he has said while we have been trying to resolve this issue, there is no perfect solution and there are going to be compromises. We are keen to reach out to the people he has identified who have not entered the system because they are deterred by the processes that they would have to go through in order to gain access to compensation. I am keen to continue to work with him on all the measures that we will need to put in place over the next few weeks to ensure that we get this right, and get it right first time.

Sir George Howarth >
(Knowsley) (Lab)

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I join others in thanking the Minister for his statement, during the course of which he acknowledged that people would worry about the possibility that good intentions would not be backed by action. To counter that, would he consider publishing some target dates by which both the legal and the administrative matters ought to be concluded, so that people might gain some reassurance that this is not going to drag on for a very long time like, for instance, the Hillsborough and contaminated blood scandals?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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We hope to complete all the legal and administrative aspects of the compensation payments by August, while Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry is due to conclude by the end of the year. We should see the conclusions of that inquiry very rapidly and hope to publish them as soon as possible, given that it is a statutory inquiry. Following that, the authorities may well decide that there are grounds for prosecution. We are certainly taking a keen interest in who else might pick up the cost of the compensation, which is significant and is currently being borne by the taxpayer. Where we can identify others who are responsible, we are keen for them to pay for their wrongdoing.

Mr Mark Francois >
(Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)

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I commend the Minister, the Justice Secretary and those who have advised them for having to exercise the judgment of Solomon but, none the less, coming up with a practical and, importantly, rapid solution.

Fujitsu is a multimillion-dollar company with numerous Government contracts, including a number with the Ministry of Defence. It has persistently, for years, been reluctant to admit to the weakness in its system. Does the Minister agree that Fujitsu now has a moral duty, if not a directly legal one, to put right that wrong? Should we not review all its Government contracts, and if it will not do the right thing—which it should—should we not consider suspending them?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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We do see this solution as being practical and rapid, as my right hon. Friend has described it. As for his point about Fujitsu, which he has often raised, he is right to say that it has significant Government contracts with, among others, the Ministry of Defence and, I believe, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. It is right that we let the process take its course, and that the inquiry looks at who was responsible for what between the Post Office and Fujitsu, and who told who to do what. It is therefore right to have a process whereby we set criteria and parameters for who can access Government contracts. We should have those conversations when we have identified exactly who was responsible. We will not be able to do that for some months, but we are keen to do it as soon as possible.

Ian Paisley >
(North Antrim) (DUP)

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This was an appalling travesty, which impacted the lives of so many innocent people in all four corners of this kingdom. Our hearts go out to them, and I welcome the swift action that the Government are now taking to resolve the problem. I hope it goes some way towards helping those people through a terrible time.

Will the Minister assure me that he will not allow any delay in implementing the proposals in Northern Ireland? Excuses are made all the time, for example, that there is no devolved Assembly in Northern Ireland. No devolved Minister had a role in this, therefore there is no role for them with regard to the victims. Will the Minister sort things out for them as quickly as possible?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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That is exactly our intention. We are keen to make the scheme UK wide so that everybody knows exactly where they stand. As I have said, despite the fact that the legal system is different in Northern Ireland, the assembly of the vast majority of cases was done by the Post Office, so the same issues apply. We do not want any delay. We are keen to engage with the Northern Ireland authorities as quickly as possible.

Dame Maria Miller >
(Basingstoke) (Con)

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I welcome the announcement. The evidence is clear that hundreds of victims have lost trust in the criminal justice system, so we need an exceptional process that ensures that every miscarriage of justice can be put right. However, the **scandal** involves more than financial redress. There are reports that the Post Office insisted on non-disclosure agreements, which silenced victims. In particular, the family of former postmaster Martin Griffiths felt forced to sign a settlement with the Post Office, with a non-disclosure agreement, which hid events around Martin taking his own life for almost a decade. Will my hon. Friend urgently reconsider calls that I and others have made to ban the use of non-disclosure agreements in all severance agreements? I am glad to see the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) on the Front Bench. I think that both Ministers share my concern and want action.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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That is a well-timed question, given that my right hon. Friend the Justice Minister is sitting next to me. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) is right to say that this is an exceptional process. As she knows, non-disclosure agreements cannot prevent somebody from going to the police—

Dame Maria Miller >

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That was not my point.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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That was not the point my right hon. Friend was making. I understand her point. She wants to ensure that non-disclosure agreements are not used for the purpose she described or for other purposes, such as sexual harassment and bullying. She is running a fantastic campaign and we have heard what she has said. We will continue to work with her.

Karl Turner >
(Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab)

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Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question.

I thank the Minister for the heavy lifting he has done in the 15 months he has held his post. I also commend the Lord Chancellor for his work behind the scenes. He will have taken advice and guidance from the Lady Chief Justice. Will the Minister say what her guidance was? It is an exceptional process, which we all support, but we would like to know what her guidance was.

In 2006, I was instructed as a defence lawyer. We must never again get ourselves into a situation whereby an organisation such as the Post Office brings private prosecutions, and is the complainant, the criminal investigator and, indeed, the prosecutor. Will the Minister make a statement about when the Government intend to prevent the Post Office from prosecuting any matter ever again?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work. I am aware of his involvement on behalf of his constituents. I also put on record my thanks to my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor—and, indeed, the Prime Minister—who cleared his diary on several occasions to deal with these issues. Conversations took place with the Lady Chief Justice, but I am not at liberty to reveal their content. I was not at the meeting anyway, but we do not tend to publish legal advice. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there are quite a few lawyers in both Houses. They do not necessarily share the same position on legal matters, and I have no doubt that legal opinions will be made clear. However, this case is exceptional. It is an exceptional situation, so we have done the exceptional.

We want to ensure that this never happens again, and the hon. Gentleman is right that private prosecutions played a part. He asked for a statement and I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor will make one at some point. My right hon. and learned Friend has expressed an interest in, and some concerns about, private prosecutions in the UK, as has the Justice Committee. I am therefore sure that he will come back to the House on that at some point.

George Freeman >
(Mid Norfolk) (Con)

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I thank the Minister, the Lord Chancellor and the Prime Minister for gripping the matter as quickly as they have. I know that the Minister and the Lord Chancellor were advocates on this matter when they were Back Benchers. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who gripped the matter after his election in 2015 and in his role as a Minister.

I was never Minister for the Post Office, but I remember being asked, as a Minister in the Department, to cover for an absent Minister. I refused to just read out the speech I had been given and asked for a day of proper briefings from officials. When I asked to meet Paula Vennells, I was told that she refused to meet me without her lawyer.

The saga raises important issues about scrutiny, accountability and responsibility in public office and public administration. They are difficult questions that the House must tackle. Will the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Lord Chancellor and the Cabinet Office therefore look at the wider lessons from this appalling **scandal** about the failures of accountability and scrutiny in our system of government, and about this House's ultimate responsibility to the people of this country to ensure that the Government serve the people, not the other way round?

On the point that my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) made, how much money was stolen from the postmasters? Will the Minister consider some sort of corporate fraud action to get the money back? The money was taken off them and us, and we should get it back from the company that took it.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks and his question. I am pleased that Paula Vennells has handed back her CBE. It was absolutely the right thing to do. As part of the inquiry, at some point we will of course identify who was responsible—individuals and organisations. In terms of corporate fraud, the beneficiary to some extent was the Post Office. Of course, the Post Office had to be funded by the Government to make the payments, so it is difficult to see how we would get the money back from the Post Office. There are other organisations, such as Fujitsu. I have talked about that previously, and we will look at that once the inquiry has concluded.

On scrutiny, many Ministers and officials will ask themselves questions about what happened. It is our job to ask the key questions at the right time and not necessarily to take the first answer we are given. We should push back and ensure that we get to the bottom of the issue. There is no question but that there were failures. I will not identify who failed, but many people will be asking themselves serious questions. The inquiry may well identify where we could have done things better.

Liz Saville Roberts >
(Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC)

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Former Plaid Cymru councillor Noel Thomas's 16-year quest for justice has had enormous repercussions for him and his family. He faced imprisonment, bankruptcy and the loss of his home. He describes his nine months in prison as "hell on earth". Noel's story has also had repercussions throughout north-west Wales. I know of people who will not work on post office counters. That has meant that some communities have lost their post offices. Not only have individuals suffered agony, but communities have lost essential facilities. What assessment has the Minister made of the loss of post offices following the **scandal**, and the effect on communities, particularly rural communities?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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On behalf of the Government and the Post Office, I apologise for what happened to Mr Thomas, who obviously featured very heavily in the programme. It was such a moving story, and anybody watching would have been moved to tears by what happened to him and others.

Individual sub-postmasters lost their reputation, and they can get compensation for that, but the right hon. Lady is right to say that the post office network itself may have suffered some loss of reputation. I still believe that our post office network is hugely valued, and that citizens and constituents hold it in very high regard. To make sure that we have suitable post office provision around the country, the key thing is to ensure that post offices are financially viable and sustainable. We are working very hard on that. For example, we are encouraging the Post Office to take a firmer line in negotiations on the banking framework, which is a significant revenue opportunity for the network, and on parcel hubs. We see a bright future for the network, but it is vital that we draw a line under this **scandal** before we secure that future.

Dean Russell >

(Watford) (Con)

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I pay tribute to the Minister for his work to bring this to the Chamber with such speed. My first question is on mental health. The victims of the Post Office's awful **Horizon scandal**—and they were victims—have been traumatised. We have heard awful stories of individuals who sadly took their life through suicide, and I am sure many others likely came close to that. I want to make sure that the compensation schemes take into account the distress and mental health pressures these people experienced over many, many years, and still experience today.

My second question looks to the future. How do we stop this happening again? I am very conscious of the big increase in the use of artificial intelligence. It is possible to go back to the **Horizon** system and see where these, in some cases, malicious incidents took place but, with artificial intelligence, it will be much harder to do that. Can the Minister assure me that checks will be made in any Government systems, especially those using artificial intelligence, to ensure that humans are not unjustly blamed for artificial intelligence errors that could lead to a similar **scandal** in future?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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My hon. Friend is one of my predecessors, and I thank him for the job he did. His tenure was all too short, but he did a great job. I know he raised this matter when he looked after this part of the brief.

We are discussing mental health support for individuals and, potentially, families with the advisory board. The compensation schemes very much take mental health into account, and assessing those impacts is one of the reasons why it takes a while to make sure people receive proper redress.

My hon. Friend raises an interesting point about AI, in which I know he is keenly interested. We should look carefully at the use of AI in prosecutions, and I am sure my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor is doing so.

Clive Efford >

(Eltham) (Lab)

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I commend the Minister again for his excellent work. This is an unprecedented situation that requires the solution he suggests. May I ask him again about “no public interest” cases, including my constituent’s case? The situation has changed since I asked him about it on Monday, and new cases have come forward. The Post Office must have a list somewhere. It must know who was held to be in breach by the Horizon accounting system.

There may be people out there who are frightened to come forward because they have signed non-disclosure agreements. Is it possible for us to tell the Post Office, “Come on, cough up. Let us know who has not been contacted”? Letters could then be written to those people, perhaps by the advisory board, to invite and encourage them to come forward. We need to give them the confidence to do so, because they might be frightened about being approached by the Post Office. I am sure that anyone who signs one of the agreements that the Minister mentioned will want an assurance that they will never again be pursued by the Post Office.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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The hon. Gentleman has been a regular contributor on this issue. We are keen to include “no public interest” cases within the scope. They are currently treated slightly differently in terms of compensation. Not everybody has the same route to compensation, but the advisory board has been very keen to make sure that there is a single way forward for people who have suffered from convictions.

Some people are nervous about coming forward. Various bodies, including the Criminal Cases Review Commission, have written to people with convictions. There is work to ensure that anybody who might have suffered as a result of this **scandal** is properly communicated with by someone they trust. I am very happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman and the advisory board about whether we have done enough and whether we could do more.

Bob Blackman >

(Harrow East) (Con)

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Hundreds of individuals have been wrongly convicted of crimes they did not commit. I commend my hon. Friend for his work. In his statement, he mentioned the malevolence that took place during these prosecutions. How is it right that individuals who gave false evidence are potentially still in post? Why are Post Office managers still in post when they knew what was happening? Should they not be brought to account and lose their livelihoods and pensions, rather than those who were wrongly convicted?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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The short answer is yes; people who are guilty of offences—ones that can be prosecuted—should be brought to account. All kinds of different routes might be available to make sure they suffer as a result of their actions. We are keen to make sure that happens.

We think the inquiry is the right route to expose the evidence. Of course, our prosecutors can look at the evidence before the inquiry at any point. Anybody can see what is happening in the inquiry. We hope that the inquiry identifies those responsible, and that suitable action is taken against those people and organisations.

Nick Smith >

(Blaenau Gwent) (Lab)

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What a sorry tale this is. I am glad that a solution to this **scandal** has been brought forward today, but the Post Office is owned by the UK Government, who have a shareholder—usually a senior civil servant—on the board. What did those Government shareholders tell Ministers about this issue over the years? Does the Minister think this arrangement provided sufficient scrutiny of the Post Office for Parliament and the sub-postmasters?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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It is fair to say that the answer is no, because this **scandal** has occurred and there must have been a systemic failure in the relationship, either in the Post Office or in different parts of Government. We currently do not know where it failed, but we are all keen to see the outcome of the inquiry, which should conclude by the end of this year. A report will follow, and we are all keen to see its conclusions. We can then identify who is responsible and decide what might be done.

The Department for Business and Trade has learned lessons from what happened, and I think there is now a much better oversight and governance relationship between the Department and the Post Office. That is too late for many people, of course, but it is not too late to find the answers that the hon. Gentleman is looking for.

Mr David Jones >

(Clwyd West) (Con)

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The entire House will welcome today's announcement. The Government have made exactly the correct decision, given the balance of mischief. Can my hon. Friend say whether the convictions to be quashed under the process he has announced today will include not only those prosecuted by the Post Office itself but those prosecuted by the Crown Prosecution Service? On the latter, will the Ministry of Justice review the decision-making process prior to the decision to prosecute?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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Yes, absolutely, we believe that the overturning of convictions would happen in respect of cases prosecuted by the Crown Prosecution Service too, not least because, as we understand it, the files were compiled by the Post Office, based on its evidence. That would seem right and proper if the evidence was not correct, and we know that to have been the case because of what has happened with **Horizon** and because of the behaviour of some individuals in the Post Office team—those responsible for investigations. Clearly, there was inappropriate behaviour. The answer to my right hon. Friend's question is yes, and it is only right that we look at what happened. As I say, the Lord Chancellor is looking at the whole issue of private prosecutions and how those cases were put together and prosecuted.

Vicky Foxcroft >

(Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab)

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Many Members across the House have mentioned the ITV drama and it may interest them to know that the director of “Mr Bates vs The Post Office” is in the Gallery. He has been watching Prime Minister's questions and this urgent question closely, hoping for some positive news. It is welcome that we have had some positive news, but he has a few questions for me to ask the Minister. He really wants to know: what are the timeframes for overturning the convictions? I know that we have heard some answers on that, but a bit more detail would be helpful. When will people finally receive the full compensation they deserve? When will those responsible finally be held to account?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I was not aware that the director is with us today, but may I just put on record the fantastic job that he has done in bringing this to the public consciousness and raising consciousness of this matter within this House? One thing that that has resulted in is today's statement; we would probably have got here at some point in any case, but it is good to be here today, earlier than we would have been had that dramatisation not been aired.

The hon. Lady is right to challenge us on the timeframes. The timeframe for passing legislation in this House is always somewhat uncertain, because that is not all within the Government's gift, as legislation passes through both Houses. We are keen to legislate as quickly as possible, but it is likely to take a matter of weeks, because there is some work we need to do to make sure that that legislation is in the right place. As for timescales for full and final compensation across all schemes, we are hoping to do that by August. Again, we are not in charge of all those timescales, because the process requires people who want to go through the full

assessment route to compile and submit their claim. We will then be able to respond to it as quickly as possible. As for the answers she is looking for, which we all want to see, the inquiry is due to conclude by the end of the year and we would expect it to report shortly after—that should give us those answers.

Robin Millar >
(Aberconwy) (Con)

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I am grateful to the Prime Minister for his announcement and I welcome this response from the Minister. I know that a lot of work has gone into this issue, but the energy and attention he brings is well received across the House. This is the right thing to do.

Notwithstanding the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), it occurs to me that important information has emerged in evidence during the process of prosecutions so far. The Minister, if I understood his response correctly, referred to “malevolence” in behaviour. Will he ensure that whatever process unfolds will contain a mechanism by which information that would be useful for consideration in further action will be gathered and collated, given that people will not necessarily have the mechanism of a court case and a legal testing of their situation?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I am keen to engage with my hon. Friend to make sure that we get what he needs. Malevolence is the right word in this respect and it is important that we learn the lessons from that, in terms of both private prosecutions and the wider inquiry. We are very keen to do that, but of course I am happy to engage with him to make sure that we address any lessons he thinks we need to learn. This is not just a lessons-learned exercise; we want to hold people to account, but there are also lessons we can learn. It is important that we learn them, and I am happy to talk to him about what he thinks we should do, in addition to what we have set out already.

Joanna Cherry >
(Edinburgh South West) (SNP)

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No one, particularly nobody in public life, should get away with perjury, perverting the course of justice or attempting or conspiring to do that. I am therefore glad to hear the Minister say today, as he did in response to me earlier this week, that the question of further prosecutions arising out of this **scandal** should be carefully looked at.

On financial redress, does the Minister agree that it is important that those who have been convicted should get legal advice? If, as I suspect, those prosecutions were malicious ones, the damages to which those people are entitled could be very hefty and they would be unwise to accept an offer from the Minister, generous as it might be, before they had received legal advice about what they would be entitled to if they could prove that the prosecutions were malicious.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. and learned Lady again for her remarks. Yes, I would like to see prosecutions flow from this. The inquiry will help with that of course, and other investigations by prosecution authorities will be ongoing. Legal advice is hugely important and the compensation schemes we are running do provide legal advice to individuals thinking of taking an offer. That should be carefully considered before people choose one route or another. We are trying to make sure that the choice is as easy as possible, and that where people have made that choice the compensation is delivered as quickly as possible.

Virginia Crosbie >
(Ynys Môn) (Con)

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Noel Thomas, one of my constituents, was a former sub-postmaster who was wrongly convicted. His conviction for false accounting in 2006 was overturned by the Court of Appeal in 2021. How is my hon. Friend ensuring that sub-postmasters such as Noel Thomas, across the UK, are heard, supported, recompensed, recognised and, most importantly, exonerated? Will the Minister meet Noel Thomas, should he wish that to happen?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I would be delighted to meet Noel Thomas. A key part of the excellent dramatisation “Mr Bates vs The Post Office” and of “Mr Bates vs The Post Office: The Real Story”, which sits behind it and which people can also watch, features Mr Thomas. His story was incredibly moving and anybody who saw it would be moved by it, so of course I will meet him. I am keen to ensure that he gets not only the apology he deserves, but the redress he deserves, and I am sure we can discuss that when we meet. The Government are keen to make sure that the compensation schemes work as effectively as possible, to make sure that Mr Thomas gets the compensation he needs and he is able to move on with his life.

Barbara Keeley >

(Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab)

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Following the excellent ITV drama, whose makers I congratulate, there is a clear belief, expressed by my constituents, that sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses must have their names cleared and be fully compensated. There is also a view that those responsible for this appalling miscarriage of justice should be held to account, which is what we need to see unfolding in the next months. One of my constituents has said:

“The whole affair has made me ashamed of the Post Office hierarchy, the Government and the UK legal system.”

What are the Minister and the Government going to do to restore public trust? Will he expand on the timescale of action to ensure that justice and the fullest redress is given to all those affected?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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Having dealt with a number of different redress schemes over the years, including those following some of the banking scandals, my experience with victims—the same applies in respect of the Post Office—is that they want two things: compensation and people being held to account. That is not least because, if people are held to account the chances of the same thing happening again might be reduced, as everyone would know that they will be held to account. That acts as a deterrent, in addition to its being something that people want to see to make sure that justice is served. Of course, the Government are not in charge of prosecutions, which are done by the various people in charge of prosecutions—the police and the CPS. I am sure they are looking closely at the evidence that is already out there and will look at the further evidence that comes to light through the inquiry. It is due to complete by the end of the year and hopes to report soon after. That deals with the inquiry side of things. As for compensation, we are keen to deliver all compensation by August, but we hope to do so sooner.

Jim Shannon >

(Strangford) (DUP)

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I thank the Minister for the clear commitment and perseverance he has shown. He took this on and he clearly wants to have a result. For the many families who have an empty seat at the table, the compensation does not come close to cutting it, as we say in Northern Ireland—they all want justice. What justice can be delivered in terms of software producer Fujitsu, whose software is still being used by Government agencies, to ensure that there is accountability and some form of restitution?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Gentleman for his constant contributions on this subject and many others. It has been a pleasure to do this role, to take on this huge issue, which he and I both spoke about as Back Benchers, and to make the progress we have seen today. We are helping people whose lives have been devastated, so it is my pleasure to do this work. I thank Members from the Opposition parties for their support to that end, and I thank the officials who have done a tremendous job in trying to ensure that we get justice and compensation as quickly as possible.

Yes, we should identify those responsible and hold them to account, be they organisations, like Fujitsu, or individuals. The significant compensation bill is currently funded by the taxpayer, so it seems only right and reasonable that any organisations or companies responsible for the **scandal** will also contribute towards that compensation.

Holly Lynch >
(Halifax) (Lab)

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In my constituency, Mr Robinson ran the Illingworth Road post office. When he had the **Horizon** software installed and could not get the figures to add up he began, out of desperation, and unable to get the Post Office to understand, to move money between the DWP and **Horizon** software. He was then prosecuted by the Department for Work and Pensions. He did not benefit from any of the money it was alleged that he had stolen, but he has not been eligible for compensation for the £43,000 he was forced to pay back, or for the time he spent in prison, all because of the flawed software. If I write to the Minister with the details of Mr Robinson's case, will he look at it and provide advice on how we can finally clear Mr Robinson's name?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I am keen to work with the hon. Lady on that. We are aware of CPS and DWP cases, and I would be keen to find out exactly what happened in that case. It is our intention that anybody who suffered a conviction because of **Horizon** is properly compensated, so I can give her that assurance. The case she raises illustrates some of the complexities around isolating exactly what was responsible for somebody's conviction. When we considered solutions, we looked at how people tried to compensate for a loss suffered in one part of their business, resulting in a conviction in another part of the business. That is how we arrived at the solution to comprehensively overturn convictions.

Daisy Cooper >
(St Albans) (LD)

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We all want to see swift financial redress and justice, and many Members from across the House have talked about accountability. Paula Vennells has, quite rightly, handed back her CBE, but many sub-postmasters are asking why she was given it in the first place and why she was given a role as a director of the Cabinet Office. Will the Minister explain why in 2019, after the High Court judgment was handed down exposing her full involvement in the **Horizon scandal**, she remained in post as a director of the Cabinet Office and was not sacked? If he is unable to explain that today, will he write to me with an explanation of what conversations were had at the time?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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The hon. Lady asks some fair questions and I am happy to take them away. It was right and proper that the former CEO, Paula Vennells, handed back her CBE. I am a former CEO myself, and people cannot expect to be honoured for services to an organisation when that organisation failed so many of its key people. The points the hon. Lady raises relate to a time prior to my being in Government and I do not know the answer to her question. With hindsight, many people would see that appointment as a mistake, but I am happy to take her points away.

Yasmin Qureshi >
(Bolton South East) (Lab)

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I welcome the Minister's response to the urgent question. Several of my constituents have been affected by this **scandal**. One of them has written to me to say that when they successfully appealed as part of the group action in 2019, they were told their costs would be deducted from the compensation, which therefore left a very small amount of money as compensation. I tabled a question and talked to a Minister about this three years ago, but I had, effectively, no response. Will the Minister give an assurance that those people will now be properly compensated and not have their costs deducted?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Lady for her work on this issue. She is right to say that the 555 sub-postmasters in the group litigation were offered a £57 million settlement, £46 million of which was taken by their legal representatives, leaving £11 million, which worked out at around £20,000 each. As a Back Bench member, I was keen to ensure that there was a scheme for those people rather than only for people who had not taken part in that action.

The group litigation order scheme was brought forward by the Government and we have already settled 21 cases, in which people have received full and final compensation. People can also get interim payments through that scheme and, as I announced today, rather than going down the route to full assessment they can choose a fixed-sum award of £75,000. That scheme is available to the hon. Lady's constituent and they can take advantage of it.

Jonathan Edwards >

(Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind)

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The public outcry as a result of the ITV drama clearly indicates the huge support for our sub-postmasters among the public. As part of righting the wrong of the **Horizon scandal**, is it not time to look at the remuneration of current sub-postmasters, including the option of directly employing them, if they so wish, as opposed to the independent contracting system we have at the moment, so that their income reflects their huge contribution to our communities?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that we have to improve the remuneration of sub-postmasters and the businesses they run. We want to ensure we have a viable network going forward. We have 11,700 branches around the country. We have set a minimum number of 11,500, and a minimum of 99% of our population has to be within three miles of a post office, so we have already set access criteria. We are keen to ensure that the network is viable going forward; the hon. Gentleman offers one solution to that.

The Government already offer significant financing for the Post Office—about £2.5 billion over the last 10 years—in addition to other financial commitments we have made for other matters, such as rebuilding the IT system. We feel that the post office network has a bright future, particularly in areas such as access to cash, the banking framework and parcel hubs, and we see the remuneration opportunity improving in future years.

Michael Shanks >

(Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab)

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On Monday, I asked the Minister how we can ensure that any system is the same across the whole of the UK. In the past few days, before today's announcement, what discussions has he had with the Lord Advocate in Scotland about the decisions? Has he given any consideration to legislative consent motions so that this Parliament could legislate to ensure that the same system is in place across the whole of the UK—something the Scottish Government are reportedly minded to consider? If that is not the case and the Scottish Parliament takes a different approach, how will the Minister ensure that the compensation regime is the same across the whole of the UK, so that people who may not have their convictions changed in Scotland in the same way still have access to the same compensation?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I am very keen to make sure it is a UK-wide scheme, both in terms of compensation and people's access to it. We have already had conversations with the Scottish Administration—I think they happened yesterday evening—so that they fully understand our intentions. Clearly, these matters are devolved in Scotland, so there are different routes to make sure that there is one scheme across the UK. I am keen to continue those conversations and make it as easy as possible for postmasters to overturn convictions or access compensation.

Patricia Gibson >

(North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)

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We all welcome the fact that, at long last, postmasters can finally expect full justice and restitution for the devastation that they and their families have suffered. However, does the Minister share my concern that, notwithstanding restitution and justice for postmasters, the Post Office, once a most trusted brand and institution, has been forever and irreparably tarnished by those who presided over this **scandal** having prosecuted and persecuted so many decent people who were serving their communities?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I do not quite agree with that. Clearly, it has not been the Post Office's finest hour by a long chalk, but the Post Office brand itself is revered around the country. The reputation of Post Office Ltd—the central organisation—has been tarnished, and we are keen to move on and help the Post Office to rebuild that relationship. It has, for example, recruited 100 area managers to try to improve its relationship with sub-postmasters, which I think is helping. But there is work to do to improve the relationship between the centre and the network. As a constituency MP, my experience is that my constituents very much appreciate, value and revere the post offices in their community.

Kate Osborne >

(Jarrow) (Lab)

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I thank the Minister for some of the detail around today's announcement regarding the convictions; it will come as a relief to many.

As highlighted by the ITV show, the 555 worked tirelessly for justice, and that, of course, opened the door for so many others, but they feel they are being penalised for taking this litigation forward, with compensation still not being paid to so many. As well as others, the Post Office needs to be held responsible for the part it has played in this **scandal** at every stage, including the lies and the blocking of justice, yet it is the Post Office and the Government's expensive lawyers who are currently litigating every case. I have to ask whether that is right.

Will the Minister look to remove the Post Office from all the roles that it currently plays in relation to compensation decisions and, instead, put in place a more independent arm's length body that will deliver full and fair compensation to all?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Member for her work. We have engaged with her on this issue regularly, and she works very hard on behalf of her constituents. We are keen to make the compensation available more quickly. As announced today, her constituents, if they were a part of the 555—the GLO—will have access to the fixed-sum award of £75,000, which is a much quicker route. But if they go down the full assessment route, which they have every right to do, we have committed that, once a claim is submitted, the dispute resolution process will respond to that claim within 40 days in 90% of cases.

The hon. Member is wrong to talk about the cases being litigated against; the process is done by dispute resolution with my Department, not with the Post Office. If that cannot be agreed, it is sent to an independent panel, which will then recommend what award should be given. The Post Office is not involved and independence is at the very heart of this process, so I believe that her

constituents will get full and fair outcomes, but we want to make sure that is done as quickly as possible, and we are working on that on a daily basis.

Richard Foord >
(Tiverton and Honiton) (LD)

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Russell Ward-Best from Ottery St Mary was accused of stealing £17,000. He avoided prosecution by resigning, and another sub-postmaster I represent paid the alleged shortfall to avoid prosecution. Russell Ward-Best was declared bankrupt and died before he was found innocent and cleared. Will the Minister comment on financial redress for all sub-postmasters and their families, including those who were not prosecuted?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I am very sorry to hear what happened to Mr Ward-Best. His family should be able to get compensation through the historic shortfall scheme. That scheme is there to put Mr Ward-Best, if he were still with us, back to where he would have been had this detriment not occurred, and that can take into account things such as bankruptcy. That money would then be paid to his estate, which would then flow through to his family. The same compensation is available, despite Mr Ward-Best very sadly no longer being with us.

Alison Thewliss >
(Glasgow Central) (SNP)

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One sinister feature of this **scandal** has been how the Post Office has tried to intimidate and scare people into compliance. While researching this, I read that those receiving an historic shortfall scheme offer had been erroneously told by the Post Office that they were not allowed to talk about the terms of their compensation. The Post Office had no right to do that, but there will be a legacy of people who will be scared to talk out about this, or cause a fuss, because they believe that they are not allowed to do so.

Can the Minister put something on the record to give reassurance to those people who have been deliberately and maliciously misled by the Post Office into silence? The Post Office should not be able to do that, and those affected should be able to have their story told and to get justice.

Kevin Hollinrake >

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I thank the hon. Lady for her point. I am not aware of the particular case to which she refers, but it is certainly our position that we want to work closely with people who have been through that scheme. The advisory board originally just covered the group litigation order claims. We then expanded its remit to cover all three schemes, so that it could ensure that they provided fair outcomes to all those involved. We wanted to give a level of consistency across the three schemes. The hon. Lady may want to contact Lord Arbuthnot or the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) to discuss her concerns. I am happy to discuss the matter with the advisory board to see what might need to be done.

Wera Hobhouse >
(Bath) (LD)

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We can never right the original wrong or undo all the suffering; all we can do is make sure that the misery is not ongoing. For those who do not look for a grand pardon, what rights of appeal exist other than a request to the Criminal Cases Review Commission?

Kevin Hollinrake >

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The hon. Lady is right to say that no amount of final compensation can ever make good what has happened to many of these people, whether it is loss of home, loss of business, loss of livelihood, loss of reputation or loss of life. No amount of money can ever compensate for that, but we are keen to make sure that, wherever we can, people do get compensated across all those different areas. Compensation schemes provide for pecuniary and non-pecuniary losses, which are some of the things that, sadly, have happened to people in their personal lives. That is exactly what we have set out today. We are keen to make sure that, if people are overturning convictions, there is no requirement to go to the CCRC to do that. It is something that we can do through legislation in this place, and we will be setting out exactly how we will deliver that in the coming weeks.

Madam Deputy Speaker >
(Dame Eleanor Laing)

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I thank the Minister for again coming to the House and answering so thoroughly a great many questions. It is very obvious that the House is concerned about this matter.

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