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Post Office: GLO Compensation Scheme

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Mr Speaker >

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I wish to make a short statement about the sub judge resolution. I have been advised that there are relevant active legal proceedings in the Court of Appeal. I am exercising the discretion given to the Chair in respect of matters sub judge to allow reference to those proceedings, as they concern issues of national importance. 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.

 1.14pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy >

(Grant Shapps)

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With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement about Horizon and Post Office group litigation compensation.

The Horizon scandal is nothing short of a travesty. Today, I turn to those who lost everything—those who were driven to bankruptcy and lost the savings for which they worked all their lives; those who were falsely accused and lost their good name in our country's courts; those who were falsely convicted and lost their freedom in our country's prisons; and all those who, having lost everything possible, then took their own lives—to say that we should not be here and it should not have happened. It should have been said years ago, and I want to say it today: I am sorry. I am sorry for those years of pain, of hurt and of anguish. I apologise unreservedly for any part that my Department has played, historically, in this miscarriage of justice.

The Post Office is a public institution. It exists to serve the British people. That the best of us, our postmasters, could be subject to such intolerable injustice does not bear thinking about. This is a wrong that can never be put right, but I hope that the steps that we are taking today will be of some comfort to those who have fought and who continue tirelessly to fight for justice. We want the postmasters who exposed the scandal through the High Court group litigation order case to receive similar compensation to that available to their peers. That is what is right, and it is what is fair.

On 2 September, my predecessor at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), wrote to those in the group litigation order case to ask their views on whether the Department or the Post Office should administer the scheme, which will deliver additional compensation to those postmasters who originally brought the case to court, and what form they would like it to take. The majority view was that BEIS should deliver an alternative dispute resolution approach, using the information prepared for the GLO case, so that is the route that we will now follow. Over the past three months, a great deal of work has been done to develop the details of the scheme, drawing on comments made in the consultation. I am writing to members of the group litigation today with further information about how it will work.

For too long, our postmasters have been left to endure devastating financial hardship. I am therefore pleased to say that all Post Office and Horizon-related compensation payments will be disregarded for benefits purposes. Once the disregard is in place, payments received by postmasters will no longer count towards the capital limit for means-tested benefits and pension credits, and

will therefore not affect their eligibility to claim for them. The Government will legislate to put that disregard in place at the earliest opportunity.

We are now asking claimants to work with their representatives on their claims. In parallel, we are working to engage alternative dispute resolution specialists and lawyers to deliver the scheme. Those experts should be on board in the early spring, at which point full claims can start to be submitted and assessed. I hope that compensation will start to flow before the summer and that most cases can be resolved before the end of 2023.

We have already announced that we will meet postmasters' reasonable legal costs in claiming under the scheme, and to ensure that lawyers can get to work on preparing claims, we are announcing details today of the funding available to enable postmasters to access initial legal support. We will shortly be inviting claimants' lawyers to make proposals for commissioning the expert evidence that they will need. I have placed a copy of my letter to GLO postmasters, together with a number of supporting documents, in the Library of this House and on the Department's website today.

Finally, we will create an independent advisory board for the scheme, chaired by Professor Chris Hodges, an expert in alternative dispute resolution. Alongside Professor Hodges, the membership of that board will include Lord Arbuthnot and the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who are recognised by Members on both sides of the House for their many years of outstanding campaigning for the wronged postmasters.

We are honoured to have members of the GLO group with us here today, but I know that nothing we do now will ever put right the decades of wrong. There are so many who cannot be here today, some because they are no longer with us and never lived to see their dignity returned to them by those who stole it. To all of you, I say that I am sorry for these past historic injustices that you should never have suffered.

I commend my statement to the House.

🕒 1.20pm

Chi Onwurah >

(Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab)

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I welcome today's statement and apology, which represent an important step forward in the delivery of justice following what may well be the largest miscarriage of justice in our country's history. There have been 900 prosecutions. All the postmasters involved have their own stories of dreams crushed, careers ruined, families destroyed, reputations smashed, and lives lost. Innocent people have been bankrupted and imprisoned.

Let me start by paying tribute to the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance, the campaigning group, and to the hundreds of sub-postmasters whom no monetary amount can compensate for the injustice that they have suffered. This has been a long walk towards justice, and Members in all parts of the House have stood and spoken out in solidarity with the postmasters. I want to recognise, in particular, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and Lord Arbuthnot, who are rightly to be members of the independent advisory board.

I also pay tribute to the Minister who was previously formerly responsible for the Post Office, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully). I do not do so lightly, but after successive Conservative Governments had sat on the scandal, he was the first to take hold of it and eventually—following much campaigning by Members of Parliament and members of the Labour party—to establish a statutory inquiry. Finally, I want to thank the journalist Nick Wallis, whose BBC Radio 4 series “The Great Post Office Trial” did much to bring this scandal to general attention.

While I am pleased that some kind of acceptable outcome for the postmasters seems finally to be in sight, I have some questions to ask. The press release refers to a compensation scheme for postmasters who helped to expose the scandal, but I remind the Secretary of State that it was his Government who spent years aiding and abetting the Post Office in targeting those self-same postmasters who were looking for justice. Nearly £100 million was spent by the Post Office to defend the indefensible as part of a campaign of intimidation and deceit. The Government are the only shareholder in the Post Office, so it is right for the Secretary of State to take responsibility.

At the core of this unforgivable scandal is the belief that workers were dishonest and technology infallible. Perhaps that is not surprising, given the Government's track record on defending the rights of working people. Decent, honest people have had their lives torn apart, have been put in prison, and have been made to wait years for justice. Will the Secretary of State tell us how long he expects it will take for this scheme, and the other schemes, to pay the appropriate compensation, and whether the aim of these schemes is to return people to what would have been their original position had it not been for their involvement in Horizon? Will he also tell us which legal firm will be involved in the administration of this scheme, and whether that firm has previously advised either the Government or the Post Office on this matter?

Value for taxpayers' money is a key consideration on this side of the House, even if the Government like to waste it. Having wasted tens of millions of pounds on persecuting postmasters, can the Secretary of State tell us where the money for the scheme will come from as we face a cost of living crisis made in Downing Street? Will post office services suffer, or will other budgets be cut? The press release does not mention the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance or Alan Bates, who led its efforts. Does the scheme have their full support?

I hope the Secretary of State agrees that those who were involved in this injustice should not benefit from their involvement. Will he tell us how he intends to hold Fujitsu to account, and whether it is still being given Government contracts? Will he also tell us whether he supports the continued retention of the CBE that was awarded to Paula Vennells—who oversaw the Horizon scandal—for services to the Post Office?

The Post Office is a national institution. It is part of so many of our lives. Its reputation has been hugely tarnished by this scandal, and I hope the Secretary of State will tell us how he intends to ensure that this never happens again and that the sub-postmasters receive justice as soon as possible.

Grant Shapps >

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I am grateful for the hon. Lady's comments, although I rather hoped the House would come together today and debate this matter in a non-political, cross-party way, and she sought to make a number of, I think, somewhat inappropriate political points. I should gently point out that it was her party that was in power for the first 11 years of this scandal. I am pleased that we have worked across parties to fix it, and I think we should leave it there.

Earlier today I spoke to Alan Bates, the founder and leader of the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance, who is sitting in the Public Gallery. Obviously the members of the JFSA will speak for themselves, as they always have, about the extent to which they are satisfied with today's statement, but we have been working closely together. The Minister for Enterprise, Markets and Small Business, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), has been meeting them as well, and will be keeping a close eye on the operation of the scheme.

I reiterate the hon. Lady's comments in thanking not just the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) —as I did earlier—but my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), Lord Arbuthnot, and others who have campaigned endlessly on this issue, including the BBC journalist Nick Wallis, who has played an important role in this long battle.

The hon. Lady asked about timescales. As I said in my statement, we aim to complete this part of the scheme by the end of 2023, or, I hope, sooner. The large number of documents that we are putting online this morning will enable people to get on with processing their applications before making formal applications early next year. Sir Wyn Williams, who is conducting the formal inquiry, will, I hope, be able to shed significant light on what went wrong and provide a set of recommendations to prevent it from happening again. I have no doubt that Members, certainly on this side of the House, will be anxiously awaiting those recommendations.

Dr Julian Lewis >

(New Forest East) (Con)

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Will the inquiry which I gather is still under way ever reveal to the public how it was possible—in a modern constitutional democracy, with the presumption of innocence operating in our justice system—for hundreds of people with unblemished personal records to be prosecuted, tried and convicted because it was deemed that a computer programme could not be wrong?

Grant Shapps >

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The simple answer is yes, and that is the purpose of Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry. I should remind the House that it could lead to individuals' taking specific responsibility on the basis of his recommendations, and to the legal process that might consequently unfold.

As I said to the GLO group earlier today, anyone who has observed this from afar, watching and listening to coverage from Nick Wallis and others over the years, must feel their blood boil at the sheer injustice of a computer programme being placed ahead of people's lives. I think that makes all of us shudder. I am only pleased that in this particular case, because of a group of people who undertook the most proactive work to try to get to the truth, we are now able to ensure that their compensation matches everyone else's.

Mr Deputy Speaker >

(Mr Nigel Evans)

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I call the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

Darren Jones >

(Bristol North West) (Lab)

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rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker >

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Oh, I am sorry, Darren. I forgot; it is Marion Fellows first.

Marion Fellows >

(Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

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I do not mind being forgotten, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I am glad to be called. I hope this is not being added to my two minutes.

I want to thank the Minister for giving me advance sight of his statement. I particularly want to thank the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance, and especially Alan Bates, who I have had the pleasure of speaking to at the all-party parliamentary group on post offices. I also stand here to say thank you so much to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and to Lord Arbuthnot. Who would have thought I would be thanking a Lord in the other place?

I stand here in the shoes of giants. I take advice from everyone as chair of the APPG, but one thing I am sure of is that there are people right across this Chamber who will be watching the progress of this new scheme carefully. We welcome it—it is long overdue—but people will be watching to make sure that it runs properly. I want to thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) and also the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who invited me along to a meeting on this subject. It is important that people are watching, it is important that the scheme works and it is very important indeed that those who have suffered, and those who are left behind, are adequately recompensed.

Grant Shapps >

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I add my thanks to the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices for all the work she has done with colleagues over this considerable period of time. I absolutely agree with her about the importance of making sure that this all now happens. She is right to say that Members across the House will be watching that closely, and none more so than the small business Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton, I can assure her.

Lucy Allan >

(Telford) (Con)

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I welcome the tone and nature of the statement that the Secretary of State has just made; I am delighted to hear his approach to this. I am also pleased to see at his side the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton, who I know will keep postmasters front and centre of everything he does. Post Office workers rightly deserve compensation, but they also deserve justice, and to get justice they need those responsible for the suffering they endured for so many years to be held to account. It is possible that, within the Secretary of State's Department, there are officials who were potentially responsible for what happened. What can he say to those sub-postmasters who are going to engage in this compensation scheme with an open mind to give them confidence that BEIS will act properly, fairly and promptly in all its dealings with them?

Grant Shapps >[Share](#)

I can absolutely give my hon. Friend the assurance that, under my tenure, there will be no stone left unturned when it comes to this. I want to pay tribute to her for her work on bringing justice to this important cause; I know that she has had had a number of constituency cases in Telford. I can absolutely reassure her that, whether it is in the Post Office or anywhere else, we will make sure that no stone is left unturned.

Mr Deputy Speaker >[Share](#)

Take two: I call Darren Jones.

Darren Jones >[Share](#)

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I welcome the announcements made today, which were recommended in my Committee's interim report on compensation and by many others, and I welcome the appointments of my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and Lord Arbuthnot in the other place. In respect of the benefit disregards, can the Secretary of state confirm when the statutory instrument will be tabled? It will not take long to do, and it should be done quickly. Can he also confirm that while we are waiting for the benefit disregards to come into force, the victims who suffer loss as a consequence of that will be given additional compensation to cover the deductions from their benefits and pension payments?

Grant Shapps >[Share](#)

I am just taking advice from my hon. Friend the small business Minister on the interim payments, and I think the answer is yes. On the scheduling of the SI, it will be done as quickly as possible in terms of parliamentary business, but that will not hold anything up because the payments have to be made first. They will be well in advance of that, and the commitment is in the statement today to lay the SI. Finally, I pay tribute to and thank the Chair of the BEIS Committee for all his and his members' work on the subject.

Andrew Bridgen >

(North West Leicestershire) (Con)

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I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and I also thank his Department for allowing Back-Bench colleagues from across the House with a long-term interest in this topic to be involved in the formulation of the compensation scheme. Will he commit to keeping the House updated on the progress of the compensation scheme? Let us all hope that sometime in the near future he will be able to come to the Dispatch Box and tell us that all the compensation has been paid to the recipients.

Grant Shapps > [Share](#)

I thank my hon. Friend, and yes, we will certainly keep the House fully informed. My hon. Friend the small business Minister will be providing updates as well. I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) for his work on, I think, at least one case in his constituency, where he has helped to keep this subject high on the agenda.

Mr Kevan Jones >

(North Durham) (Lab)

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I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I also thank the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). It is nice to see a poacher turned gamekeeper in the Department. Can I also put on record my thanks to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully)? In a long list of useless and indifferent Ministers over the years, he was the only one who actually got it and was determined to sort it out. I would also like to give my personal thanks to Alan Bates and the Justice for the Subpostmasters Alliance, because without them the truth would not have come out, and that happened in spite of the Post Office throwing a tsunami of cash—£100 million—at them to stop the truth coming out.

This is the only scandal I have seen where cover-up and lies ran to the top, not only of the Post Office but, I have to say, of the right hon. Gentleman's Department. Today represents a move forward, and I welcome what is being done. Does the Secretary of State agree that what we need next, following the public inquiry, is for those individuals who were responsible for ruining people's lives—in some cases people took their own lives; others who were innocent went to prison—to be held to account? It has to be a determination for the Department to ensure that those individuals—whether they are in the Post Office or in his Department—face the day of reckoning that should be coming to them in a court of law.

Grant Shapps > [Share](#)

I again pay tribute, as I think the whole House does, to the right hon. Gentleman's extraordinary work on this issue. He is right not only to highlight my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam, who I have engaged with this morning over this, but to pay tribute to Alan Bates and all the work that he and his team have done. I was talking to him earlier. It was not until he got going in 2009 that this really started to unravel for the Post Office.

To the right hon. Gentleman's main point, he is absolutely right to say that we cannot allow an injustice such as this to not meet justice. Of course, we have a free legal system in this country, and Alan and his colleagues were saying to me earlier that if it were not for democracy and the freedom of our courts, we would never have got this far. To really get to the nub of the right hon. Gentleman's point: I agree with him, and we will not allow any process or shyness of what it might uncover to prevent the legal process from being able to run its full course.

Richard Graham >

(Gloucester) (Con)

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As a former chair of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices, I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, the compensation scheme announcements—particularly on the benefits disregard—and the comments on the timing of what will happen, but I think there are going to be some shocking lessons from all this that we will need to learn. These revolve around who knew what, and when, and what the role of the Federation of SubPostmasters was in standing up or not standing up for its members during this crisis. I hope the Secretary of State will agree that when the inquiry is finished there should be another debate in this House to make sure that we really do learn those lessons, including, as two or three Members have said, the crucial point about how technology cannot be wrong.

Grant Shapps > [Share](#)

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I had not realised that he was a former chair of the APPG, so I thank him for his work on this issue. On his central point, the lessons absolutely have to be learned. As I said earlier, anyone who has watched this just as a bystander, not having had their life turned upside down, can still feel their blood boiling, but what it was like to be involved in this must have been unimaginable. I hope this will be a salutary lesson for the idea that a computer can never be programmed in an incorrect way, or have a loophole or a problem, not just with regard to the Post Office or even Government procurement but for every walk of life and everything that computers are now involved with.

Karl Turner >

(Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab)

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I thank the Secretary of State for his work in coming up with the scheme in such a short time. As he knows, I was instructed to defend one of these sub-postmasters in criminal proceedings. She should never have been investigated, let alone prosecuted. If the Post Office had done what it needed to do to comply with the disclosure rules, she would never have been convicted.

People at the very top must have made decisions to block defence lawyers getting information that was incredibly important to the defendants' defences. Those victims—those men and women in the Public Galley—and their families will not feel they have had justice until every single person responsible is criminally investigated, potentially prosecuted and, if convicted, sent to prison for a very long time. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that is his intention?

Grant Shapps >

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The hon. Gentleman is, as ever, a very powerful campaigner on this and many other issues. I know of his involvement in this subject.

Following what Mr Speaker said, I do not want to stray too far into the judicial area, other than to say, as I mentioned before, that when Sir Wyn Williams completes his inquiry and makes his recommendations, this Government will take every single proposal very seriously. Everyone, not just those directly involved but the country at large, must know and see that the overall system, both the democratic part and the courts, got to the truth in the end. Even when that happens, it will not mean the sub-postmasters get what they lost, given the misery it has caused, but it will at least demonstrate that the system can be made to work for justice in the end.

Jason McCartney >

(Colne Valley) (Con)

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I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and, in particular, the apology.

Like many colleagues in this Chamber, I have got to know my constituent Maria and many others who have been impacted by this awful scandal. My right hon. Friend is right that this wrong cannot be put right, but I welcome the details provided today. Will he and the Department continue to work tirelessly not only for justice but for compensation for all the victims?

Grant Shapps >

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To my hon. Friend's constituent Maria, and to everybody else involved, the answer is yes.

Mr Alistair Carmichael >

(Orkney and Shetland) (LD)

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We are not quite at the end of the road, but there is a sense today that perhaps the end of the road is in sight. I echo colleagues in taking a great deal of comfort from the participation of the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and Lord Arbuthnot in future proceedings.

One of the lessons we have to learn is that it is all too easy for people in Government and people in public bodies to use taxpayers' money to defend situations where they have made mistakes. This is, by far and away, the most egregious example, but it is not the only example. As well as being involved in this issue for some time, I have been helping constituents who were defrauded by Midas Financial Solutions. They had to take the Competition and Markets Authority to court, and they eventually received compensation, but those who took the case are still out of pocket to the tune of £2 million. That is exactly the same situation in which the sub-postmasters find themselves. Why should they be treated differently?

Grant Shapps >

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Again, it is a dangerous and sometimes potent mixture to have the backing of essentially endless taxpayers' money in a battle of David and Goliath. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, Ministers always have to be careful to weigh the advice to make sure that, when we wield the power of the state, we do so in the interest of society as a whole and not, as has clearly happened in this case, in a manner detrimental to individual citizens—in this case postmasters and sub-postmasters. His point is well made.

Siobhan Baillie >

(Stroud) (Con)

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I pay tribute to my constituent Nichola Arch and hundreds like her who have campaigned tirelessly and constructively, despite their lives being torn apart by this scandal. There are adult children of postmasters and postmistresses who have only known their parents' battle. It is right that the compensation scheme is generous and provides the necessary uplift to reflect the trauma of prosecution, and it is right that it is sensitively handled, but what we have seen with past Government compensation schemes, where the legal fees are covered, is that ambulance-chasing third-party organisations get involved and prey on the vulnerable, who are already exhausted. The upshot is often that the compensation is reduced to pay these third-party organisations. Will my right hon. Friend tell the postmasters and postmistresses from the Dispatch Box that the scheme has been designed so they do not need to rely on ambulance-chasing organisations and that all compensation should go into their pockets?

Grant Shapps >

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My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. As the right hon. Member for North Durham has also said, we do not want to see a complex and expensive legal process that costs a fortune for those who should have been compensated long ago. That is why this is going through an alternative dispute resolution process. We will also provide assistance in pulling the papers together so that people can make their applications as easily as possible.

Clive Efford >

(Eltham) (Lab)

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I also pay tribute to Lord Arbuthnot, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and the former Minister, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), for their tireless work on this issue.

May I press the Secretary of State a little further on getting justice for those who used the state to defend an indefensible position, which ended up putting people in prison and wrecking people's lives, with some committing suicide? His Department was clearly involved in this. Will he guarantee full disclosure of any documents required for any future legal proceedings?

The problem is that the postmasters lack the means, and those who have been defending their position have untold means, because they are using taxpayers' money. The Secretary of State says justice has to be done, but how does he see that being pursued? Will these people have to fund legal action again, or will the state fund criminal proceedings?

Grant Shapps >

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Again, I do not want to stray too much into the legal process, other than to say that Sir Wyn Williams will report and his inquiry will make a series of recommendations, and I can reveal that we are likely to look very kindly on what he has to say.

We put a number of steps in place after speaking to Alan Bates and those impacted by the group litigation, but we have not, for example, handled this stage of the process through the Post Office. Instead, there is the extra reassurance of an independent panel, which includes the right hon. Member for North Durham and Lord Arbuthnot, to make sure the same errors cannot be repeated.

The key point is about ensuring there is not a large cost. As I mentioned to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie), there will not be a large cost in this part of the process. We then get into what will happen with prosecutions. I am probably leaping a little too far, but this significant injustice has caused misery to people's lives, not only those who were wrongly convicted—I said in my opening remarks that some are not here to see this moment of partial justice—but the families who have been ripped apart and will never be brought back together. This damage and harm will last generations, and I very much hope our legal system will take all that into account.

Dean Russell >

(Watford) (Con)

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I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment today and his statement. He is right to use the word “travesty”, as this was a scandal probably unequalled in government over many decades. I am grateful for his words today and the work he is doing, and I am pleased to hear that Alan Bates is in the Gallery to hear this, given the work he has done.

My question is about what will happen with this long-term commitment on communications. One thing I have heard often during this is that a lack of communication can, of itself, cause additional stress and anxiety. So will my right hon. Friend agree to ensure that there are regular communications from the Government on this, both in the House and outside?

Grant Shapps >

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I pay tribute to and thank my hon. Friend for what he did as Minister responsible in this area to help to bring forward the statement I was able to make today. On his point about communication, that is absolutely our intention, both through myself and through the small business Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton.

Mick Whitley >

(Birkenhead) (Lab)

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I too welcome the Secretary of State's statement. However, the postmaster scandal has exposed the serious dangers inherent in using intrusive surveillance technology to monitor the activities of employees. A growing number of workplaces are adopting surveillance and artificial intelligence-assisted technology, and some employers are even reported to be delegating decisions on recruitment, promotions and even sackings to algorithms. The TUC has warned that worker surveillance is at risk of “spiralling out of control” without greater transparency and stronger regulation to protect workers. Will the Secretary of State now act to make it a statutory duty for employers to consult trade unions before introducing AI and automated decision-making systems in the workplace? Will he also ensure that every worker has the right to a human review of high-risk decisions made by technology?

Grant Shapps >

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The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. We have a lot of new technologies coming along, including things such as AI and generative AI. If the Horizon Post Office scandal demonstrates anything, it is that we have to be very careful about how we implement technology. I love technology. It gives us a great opportunity for productivity, but if we get to a point where it is about, “Computer says no” or, “Computer says yes” and that is what we believe without testing the input to those machines and the way they have been programmed—this will become much more challenging with things such as AI in the future—we will have problems and we will end

up with more of these sorts of scandals. He raises an interesting specific point about how that might be addressed. I would be very interested to hear more from him about it, and perhaps we will organise a meeting, either with myself or with the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton.

Duncan Baker >

(North Norfolk) (Con)

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I believe I am still the only serving MP who used to be a postmaster, many moons ago, in a former life. So I really thank the Government for what they are doing to overturn, or make some reparations for, this injustice. But there is a problem, which gets to the heart of why this situation happened in the first place: the absolute lack of investment in and care for our beloved institution that is the post office network. Every year we lose banks up and down our high street. Last year, we even lost post offices on our high street, and that is not good enough. My community of Cromer is to lose an HSBC bank branch, so I make a plea to the Secretary of State to really invest in the post office network and to pay our postmasters properly. They cannot make a decent living at the moment out of what their payments are. We must make sure we safeguard their future by putting post office networks at the very heart of delivering banking services up and down our high streets. We must do that to safeguard our postmasters and our high streets.

Grant Shapps >

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I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, as someone who has actually been a postmaster and now serves in this House; he knows what he is talking about on this. He is right to say that this comes in the wider context of support for our high streets, the complexities that high streets face these days and the huge changes in the way that mail is sent and communications operate. That is why the Government have put £300 million into assisting the Post Office with running post offices in communities, and I know that there was a 4% tariff uplift most recently. But he raises a series of very good points, and I know that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary and he will be continuing this conversation.

Jim Shannon >

(Strangford) (DUP)

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I thank the Secretary of State very much for his statement. It has truly lifted the hearts of those in the audience, those outside and those across all the constituencies where sub-postmasters found themselves in very difficult positions. May I commend the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones)? I know that many have done so, but he has been incredibly assiduous. Strength of character has pulled this over the line, and I wish to put on record our thanks to him for that as well.

This morning, the media broke the news about the new compensation for victims of the Horizon IT scandal. That is very much welcome, because the cruel accusations of fraud saw sub-postmasters sent to jail, bankrupted and shunned by their communities. In some cases, suicide resulted from the impacts that this caused them, and we really feel the pain of that; the way in which the Secretary of State presented this statement has captured that very well. Will he assure this House and myself that lessons will be learned from the scandal and that accusations will not be made before full inquiries take place, as so many have lost their lives due to what have been false narratives?

Grant Shapps >

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That is absolutely the intention of this Government and Ministers. I hope that the lessons that will be drawn, both from what has happened so far and from Sir Wyn Williams' inquiry when he reports, will be taken to apply not just to the Post Office, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy or Governments, but the whole of society. As I mentioned a few moments ago, the dangers are inherent in the idea that just because the computer says yes or says no, that is a definitive, unchallengeable position. As we saw in this case, not only was it not, but it destroyed lives and families along the way, as well as livelihoods.

Mr Deputy Speaker >

(Mr Nigel Evans)

I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I am sure the heart of the entire House goes out to the people who have had to face such trauma, and their families.

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