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## Hansard

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# Horizon: Sub-Postmaster Convictions

## Volume 677: debated on Wednesday 10 June 2020

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🕒 12.43pm

**Chi Onwurah** >

(Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab)

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*(Urgent Question):* To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy what steps the Government are taking to support sub-postmasters wrongly convicted in the **Post Office** Horizon scandal.

I wish you a very **GRO** Speaker, and many happy returns.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy** >

(Paul Scully)

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**GRO** Mr Speaker.

I have listened to a number of postmasters' stories personally, and I saw the recent "Panorama" programme. It is impossible to ignore the negative impact that the Horizon dispute and court case have had on affected postmasters' lives, livelihoods, financial situations, reputations and, for some, as we know, their physical and mental health.

Convicted claimants seeking to overturn their convictions are going through a further process with the Criminal Cases Review Commission, which has the power to refer cases to the Court of Appeal to consider whether any of the convictions are unsafe. As the hon. Lady will appreciate, it is important that the Government do not seek to influence this process or comment on any individual cases. I can confirm, though, that the **Post Office** is co-operating with the CCRC to the fullest extent and the Government are monitoring this. Forty-seven of the 61 CCRC cases have now been referred to the Court of Appeal, and it is for the courts to decide whether the convictions are unsafe.

Let me acknowledge the strength of feeling on this matter on both sides of the House, which was evident in the debates I participated in earlier this year and in the correspondence I have had from many Members. That is why the Government are committed to establishing an independent review to consider whether the **Post Office** has learned the necessary lessons from the Horizon dispute and court case, and to provide an independent and external assessment of its work to rebuild its relationship with its postmasters. Full details of the terms of reference for that independent review are set out in a written ministerial statement that I laid in the House this morning. We are keen to see that review launched as soon as possible, and we are in the process of identifying a chair to lead the work of the review.

**Chi Onwurah** >

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The **Post Office** Horizon scandal may well be the largest miscarriage of justice in our history: 900 prosecutions, each one its own story of dreams crushed, careers ruined, families destroyed, reputations smashed and lives lost—innocent people bankrupted and imprisoned. Does the Minister agree that Monday’s “Panorama” adds to the sense of a cover-up on a grand scale in the **Post Office**, a trusted national institution—and all because of the failings in the **Post Office** Horizon system?

For over a decade, the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance campaigned to get at the truth, but the **Post Office** denied all wrongdoing, imposing huge lawyers’ fees on the claimants. Mr Justice Fraser’s High Court ruling in December paved the way finally for justice for some, but the mediated settlement means the truth remains hidden. Does the Minister agree that there can be no justice without truth?

So many questions remain unanswered. When did the **Post Office** know that the Horizon system could cause money to disappear, and what responsibility did the developer, Fujitsu, have? What did Ministers, to whom the **Post Office** is accountable, do, and what did they know? Who was responsible for innocent people going to jail? Have they been held accountable? Will all the victims be properly compensated?

Three months ago, the Prime Minister committed to a public inquiry, but we now hear that that is to consider whether the **Post Office** has learned the necessary lessons. We need an inquiry not simply to learn lessons but to get to the truth. Only a judge-led inquiry can do that, with the **Post Office** compelled to co-operate. Will the Minister now agree to the judge-led inquiry we need? It is the very least the victims deserve.

We need answers, not more delay. We will not rest until we get that and justice for all those wronged in this scandal.

**Paul Scully** >

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I welcome the hon. Lady to her place, and I appreciate her comments. A public inquiry, according to Jason Beer QC, one of the leading experts on this, talks about what happened, why it happened and who is to blame, and what can be done to prevent it from happening again. This independent review, chaired by someone independent of both the Government and the **Post Office**, will indeed look to do that—to understand and acknowledge what went wrong in relation to the Horizon system by drawing on the evidence of those people who, as we have discussed, have been wronged in this situation, using both Mr Justice Fraser’s judgment and words and his own evidence that he will call upon.

The Government want to be fully assured—I want to be fully assured—that the right lessons are learned for the future and concrete changes have taken place at **Post Office** Ltd to ensure that this is not repeated. We want to be sure that, through this review, there is a public summary of the failings that occurred at **Post Office** Ltd, drawing on the judgments and, as I say, listening to those who have been most affected. That is the purpose of the independent review we are in the process of setting up.

**Scott Mann** >

(North Cornwall) (Con)

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It is absolutely right that we acknowledge the injustices that were done at the time. I have spent a bit of time in post offices in my time, and I remember having conversations with sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses in which they acknowledged to me that they could not get their books to balance at the end of particular days. They were really worried about it at the time. It is worth

remembering that the **post office** network is made up of sub-postmasters, and they need our support at this moment in time. What can the Department do to ensure that our sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses who are working around the country have the ability to continue while the Horizon scandal is taking place?

**Paul Scully** >

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I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. The Government provided nearly £2 billion for the period 2010-18 and are investing a further £370 million in 2018-21 in the transformation of the business. A negotiated agreement was secured with all 28 UK banks in 2019 and took effect in 2020. That has resulted in a significant increase in the overall fees received by the **Post Office** from the banks, and that will rise further if transaction volumes continue to grow. We have also encouraged the **Post Office** to strengthen its relationship with postmasters and postmaster training to foster a stronger commercial partnership. We recently put in place personalised support for postmasters. If we are going to get the future relationship with postmasters right, we have to tackle the injustices that have happened in the past, but we also have to rebuild, with the new management in the **Post Office**, trust and training and respect for the sub-postmasters of the future.

**Mr Speaker** >

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We now come to the Scottish National party spokesperson, Patricia Gibson, who has one minute.

**Patricia Gibson** >

(North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)

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We can all agree with the Minister that the reputations, mental health and lives of the victims of this scandal have been ruined. Alan Bates, the former sub-postmaster who led the legal case against the **Post Office**, has been clear that the **Post Office** has not changed. It is six months since judges found major issues, including an excessive culture of secrecy and confidentiality generally in the **Post Office**, but specifically relating to Horizon, so can the Minister explain why we still are not getting a public inquiry into the scandal? The Prime Minister told the House on 26 February that such an inquiry would be established, but the proposals set out by the Minister today fall short of that. We welcome the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee inquiry into this issue, but we really need a full independent public inquiry.

Does the Minister understand the anger and disappointment at the length of time it is taking to get the truth about one of the largest miscarriages of justice in the UK's history, amidst very serious allegations of perjury levelled against employees of Fujitsu, the company behind the system, and will he apologise to the hundreds of postmasters whose lives have been ruined—who have lost their homes, their livelihoods and their reputations as a result of inaction by this Government?

**Paul Scully** >

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I am grateful to the hon. Lady for those questions. The review that we are putting in train covers the areas that a public inquiry would achieve. We want to find out exactly what is going on. We do not want to duplicate the effort, and we already have a number of words from Mr Justice Fraser that point to exactly where the chairman of the independent review needs to look.

This situation has been going on for some 20-odd years. It is disgraceful that it has taken this time for Alan Bates and his fellow group-litigants to actually get to a settlement and that so many people have had to suffer as a result. What I am keen to do now—my tenure in this role has been brief—is push on and make sure that they can get the answers that they need.

**Mary Robinson** >

(Cheadle) (Con)

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It is clear that the **Post Office** concealed evidence that would have cleared sub-postmasters who were convicted and have had their lives ruined. A major part of the evidence came from a Fujitsu whistleblower, who revealed that **Post Office** accounts could be changed remotely from Fujitsu offices. Sub-postmasters now have the opportunity to sue the **Post Office** for malicious prosecution, but while those who were subject to criminal proceedings are able to make claims, people who brought civil claims that have been settled cannot. This was clearly not the intention of the courts, so how can such a disparity in outcome be justified?

**Paul Scully** >

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In terms of the whistleblower, Justice Fraser recommended a number of individuals to the criminal prosecution service, and that will follow its train accordingly. In terms of the group litigation, the settlement was agreed with the **Post Office** and that included legal and all other costs. In those circumstances, the Government cannot accept any further requests for payments, but for postmasters who have been convicted and had their convictions overturned there is a process in place for them to receive compensation, if appropriate.

**Darren Jones** >

(Bristol North West) (Lab)

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The Minister will know that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which I chair, is undertaking an inquiry on the **Post Office** Horizon scandal, and it is a matter of regret that we were unable to take oral evidence from Mr Read, the current chief executive officer of the **Post Office**, Ms Vennells, the former CEO, and Fujitsu as planned on 24 March, because of the lockdown. The sub-postmasters who have suffered such a depth of injustice, such a wide range of harm, will no doubt welcome the news today of the Minister's inquiry, but will he confirm to the House that that inquiry will have sufficient power to compel the disclosure of documentary evidence and to compel witnesses to come before it to give evidence in public?

**Paul Scully** >

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I am sorry that, for the same reason, I was unable to attend that session, but I hope in future to engage fully with the Select Committee. The key point is that the **Post Office** has said that it will disclose everything, and I will ensure that it does, to the best of my ability. I saw the same "Panorama" programme as the hon. Gentleman did, in which there was a big discussion and a long piece about non-disclosure. That cannot happen again. We have to draw a line and make sure that we get answers. The chairman of the independent review will push for that and so will I, to ensure that the **Post Office** complies appropriately.

**John Redwood** >

(Wokingham) (Con)

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Most MPs want the **Post Office** to apologise to all those it has wronged and pay generous compensation to them in the circumstances. Will the Minister add the Government's voice to that and make it a demand of the **Post Office**?

**Paul Scully** >

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The **Post Office** has acknowledged mistakes in the settlement and the case that we have had. I am glad that both parties to the group litigation were able to reach a settlement. Other sub-postmasters who suffered a shortfall will be able to take advantage of the historical shortfall scheme that the **Post Office** has launched. They will be able to come forward and have their case investigated, and hopefully those wrongs will be righted.

**Mr Kevan Jones** >

(North Durham) (Lab)

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I, the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) and Lord Arbuthnot have been campaigning on this for over seven years. People have been imprisoned; they have been ruined, both financially and mentally. As I have said on the record previously, they have been treated in a way a totalitarian state would treat people. The fact is that only a judge-led inquiry will get to the bottom of what is needed. Over the past seven years, I have cross-examined many of the Minister's predecessors; today, I urge him to insist on that, because without it we will not get to the truth.

The **Post Office** is not the only one to blame; the Government are to blame as well, because Government Ministers have shareholder representation on the **Post Office** board and they have sat back and done absolutely nothing. Last year, they allowed the **Post Office** to spend nearly £100 million of public money on trying to bankrupt the Justice For Subpostmasters Alliance. That disgrace also needs to be exposed.

**Paul Scully** >

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I acknowledge the right hon. Gentleman's long campaign on behalf of the Horizon postmasters, which is to be welcomed. I have been shocked and surprised by the revelations I saw when I took over and continue to see. The terms of reference of the review are the same as those for a public inquiry. It is to work out: who is to blame, can it happen again, how can we prevent it from happening again, what wrongs were done, and how can we right them? The chairman will be independent of both the **Post Office** and Government.

On the Government's role as a shareholder, clearly the **Post Office** has operational independence, but numerous attempts have been made over the years to resolve the dispute, including an independent investigation in 2013 and a mediation scheme in 2015, which was supported by **Post Office** Ltd and Ministers. All those attempts failed to resolve the issues, leaving the court as the only way to provide the independent review that all sides needed.

**Shaun Bailey** >

(West Bromwich West) (Con)

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I am sure we all agree that sub-postmasters are at the heart of our communities, none more than the communities I represent in Wednesbury, Oldbury and Tipton. It is right that the **Post Office** is able to compete in challenging times, but may I ask my hon. Friend to reassure sub-postmasters in my constituency that the Government will continue to review the **Post Office's** relationship with sub-postmasters and make sure that they are given the protection and respect they are entitled to and deserve?

**Paul Scully** >

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One of the first things I said to the chief executive was to acknowledge the fact that we need to build the relationship with postmasters and give them the support they need in the future, and we need to make sure that we right the wrongs of the past. The chief executive has assured me, and his background supports this, that he is used to working with sub-postmasters as stakeholders, and I think that is what they need to be.

**Stephanie Peacock** >

(Barnsley East) (Lab)

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Postmasters across the country have been fired, gone bankrupt and, in some cases, gone to prison. Given the scale of this injustice, with over 550 postmasters' families left in financial ruin, does the Minister agree that the current compensation, which fails to cover their legal costs, is neither fair nor just?

**Paul Scully** >

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I agree that so many people have suffered. Indeed, some people have taken their lives, as well as losing their livelihoods; that is not to be forgotten. I was pleased that a settlement was reached by both sides of this agreement and, as I say, sub-postmasters caught within shortfalls in the past who were not part of that agreement are able to claim under the historical shortfall scheme.

**Jerome Mayhew** >  
(Broadland) (Con)

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One of the great frustrations to date has been the refusal of the former senior management of the **Post Office** to answer detailed questions on this issue and to be held to account. That is the least that is owed to those who have been wrongly convicted, including my constituent Siobhan Sayer. Will my hon. Friend confirm that individual culpability of senior management figures within the **Post Office** will be part of this review?

**Paul Scully** >

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I totally empathise with the suffering of my hon. Friend's constituent, Siobhan Sayer. The chairman, who is independent of the **Post Office**, and the Government need to look at exactly what went wrong, which will by necessity mean looking at who took what decisions when. It will be complicated, because this happened over a period of 20 years, but none the less, they must get to the bottom of it.

**Marion Fellows** >  
(Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]

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**GRO** Mr Speaker.

**Post Office** Ltd has been allowed to destabilise the **post office** network by its underhand and legally dubious actions. This Government must take up their responsibilities as a special shareholder in **Post Office** Ltd and commission a judge-led inquiry—I make no apology for repeating that. Nothing less will do. Will this Government help to compensate those postmasters who have been so wrongly convicted and help shore up the finances of **Post Office** Ltd?

**Paul Scully** >

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In terms of the finances, the Government continue to work with the **Post Office** on its needs and to ensure that, although it is an independent company, it can work within its service obligations. In terms of the review, we recognise the hugely negative impact that the Horizon dispute had on postmasters. The financial settlement was a major step towards resolving some of those grievances, but there is more to be done. That is why we have launched the independent review, to ensure that the lessons are learned and that they can never be repeated.

**Dr Julian Lewis** >  
(New Forest East) (Con)

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This is one of the worst disasters in public life since the contaminated blood scandal. Does the Minister agree that, if it is proven that **Post Office** executives were aware of the software faults but allowed innocent people to rot in jail, they were guilty of criminal negligence and possibly criminal conspiracy and therefore ought to be brought to justice? Will the proposed inquiry allow that to be done?

**Paul Scully** >

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I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question. The Horizon IT system was put in place in 1999, with the first issues being raised in the early 2000s, so this was over a long period. Mr Justice Fraser considered what happened over that period and set out his findings in considerable detail and, as I said, he has referred some individuals to the Crown Prosecution Service. Post Office Ltd is now working to implement all the vital changes to which it has committed under the leadership of its new CEO, to reset the relationship with its postmasters.

**Karl Turner** >

(Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab)

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Many hundreds of postmasters were forced to pay back many thousands of pounds to the Post Office—moneys that were never in fact owed or, indeed, missing. That in itself should trigger a criminal investigation. How much of that money went to pay the previous chief executive's £5 million salary, and why can the Minister not accept that only a judge will get to the bottom of this miscarriage of justice?

**Paul Scully** >

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I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's part not only in campaigning on the plight of the sub-postmasters since coming to this place, but in his previous work representing some of them in the court case. As I said, the important thing about the review is: does it find out what went wrong and who made what decisions when, does it listen to the evidence of those who were wronged and get those voices out there, complementing what Justice Fraser said, and does it make sure it can never happen again? Those are the terms of the inquiry and review. The independent chair will get to the bottom of that while being independent of Government and the Post Office.

**Martin Vickers** >

(Cleethorpes) (Con)

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I cannot understand why the Government want to prolong the agony on this with the halfway house of an independent review. I add my calls for a judge-led review that progresses speedily. Does the Minister share my amazement at the behaviour of the Post Office, which had employed these postmasters and postmistresses for years and realised they were decent, hard-working people? They did not suddenly all become criminals. Did no one ask the questions? Can we please get on with this and get the full judge-led inquiry now?

**Paul Scully** >

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It is for that very reason that we have announced an independent review. Of all the judge-led inquiries in the last 30 years, the shortest lasted 45 days—that was one Minister dealing with two people, whereas this is an incredibly complicated case—and the longest lasted 13 years. In the last 30 years, inquiries have cost £600 million. We need something reasonable in its timing and extensive in its remit so that we can get to the bottom of this as quickly as possible.

**Mohammad Yasin** >

(Bedford) (Lab) [V]

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The covid crisis has revealed what should have been obvious: that key workers, including postmasters, are essential workers and should have been treated with respect, not suspicion. Why did the Minister's Department fail to protect workers from a corporate governance failure of this magnitude, and how will it prevent such a failure from happening again?

**Paul Scully** >

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The Government have challenged it over the years, especially in recent years—the Horizon situation has come about over 20 years, but as I have said, recently there have been independent reviews in 2013 and investigations in 2015. It is because we have been unable to get a result that we have had to resort to the courts. We need to get to the bottom of this so that we can right the wrongs done to the postmasters of the past and ensure the respect of future postmasters, who must feel secure in their positive relationship with the **Post Office**.

**Kevin Hollinrake** >

(Thirsk and Malton) (Con)

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I fear the cover-up could continue. The **Post Office** has decided to bring in Herbert Smith Freehills to oversee historic cases. This is the practice that contributed to the cover-up of a fraud at Lloyds HBOS over seven years and oversaw the establishment and operation of the Lloyds bank customer review, which was described by the Financial Conduct Authority's review of that scheme as discriminatory, flawed and an unacceptable denial of responsibility, and that review is now having to be done again. Does the Minister think the **Post Office** should reconsider that decision?

**Paul Scully** >

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My hon. Friend and I spoke about this earlier. As he says, the **Post Office** decides its own legal advisers. As far as I understand it, the **Post Office** changed its advisers to Herbert Smith Freehills in the latter stages of the litigation, which resulted in the settlement, good progress in resolving outstanding claimant issues and a successful launch of the historical shortfall scheme.

**Alyn Smith** >

(Stirling) (SNP) [V]

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**GRO** from me also, Mr Speaker.

We have seen some movement today from the Government, and I do welcome that as far as it goes, but like the Equitable Life scandal, this is an ongoing deep injustice, as is the plight of people currently suffering under the loan charge. There is a consensus across the House that this just does not go far enough. Could I urge the Minister to build on the progress he has announced today and accept the will of the House that we need a judge-led inquiry to properly ventilate all the issues?

**Paul Scully** >

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As I have said, the terms of reference of this review are deep enough to get to the bottom of exactly what has happened. The fact that the chairman, who will be appointed, is independent of Government, is independent of **Post Office** Ltd, and will have the freedom to be able to go and find evidence to complement the evidence that has already been published by Mr Justice Fraser in his judgment means that there will be plenty to draw on in order to come to conclusions and recommendations.

**John Howell** >

(Henley) (Con)

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Does the Minister not accept that this is as big a scandal as that of the Guildford Four? Although the settlement was reached by mediation, which I approve of, much of that settlement was taken away in cash for lawyers. Can we not do something to ensure that the settlement justifies the indignities that many of these people have had to suffer?

**Paul Scully** >

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With regard to the scale of the issue, I agree with my hon. Friend that this has gone on for so long and has involved so many people who have suffered as a result, some with their lives, as we have heard. The point is that the mediated settlement was between the **Post Office** and the sub-postmasters who took out that group litigation. I am pleased that it came to a conclusion, but, as a result of that, the Government cannot enter into a new discussion with the **Post Office** on that basis.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** >  
(Orkney and Shetland) (LD)

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It is noble of the Minister to offer himself up as a human shield for the **Post Office** in this way, but I hope that, when he returns to the Department today, he will tell his officials, who, I fear, have perhaps not briefed him as well as they might have done, and **Post Office** senior management that this review will just not cut it. He says that this is a complex case spanning a long period of time, and he is absolutely right about that. That is why it requires a judge-led inquiry. That is what will happen eventually, so why not just cut to the chase and do it now?

**Paul Scully** >

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I keep hearing that. I keep hearing the words “judge-led inquiry” and then I keep hearing that we need to move this on as quickly as possible. The point is that the terms of reference within this review are the same as a judge-led inquiry.

**Patricia Gibson** >

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Why not just have one?

**Paul Scully** >

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Because I do not want an inquiry that will last 13 years, with sub-postmasters coming back time and again with no justice. I have been pushing on this from the moment that I found out the details about it as postal affairs Minister. That is why I will drive this through to make sure that the answers are heard and that the independent chairman, who is independent of Government and independent of the **Post Office**, gets to the bottom of the case and gets some answers.

**Richard Graham** >  
(Gloucester) (Con)

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In 2015, **Post Office** Ltd closed its own review of Horizon IT by saying that there were “no system-wide problems with our computer systems”. Nothing could have been further from the truth. We have all been let down, and many sub-postmasters have been badly treated. I urge the Minister to start the independent review as soon as possible to discover precisely who knew what and when in Fujitsu, **Post Office** Ltd, and the National Federation of SubPostmasters. Does he agree that nothing should be ruled out, including criminal prosecution, if justified?

**Paul Scully** >

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I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, as the criminal proceedings continue, those wrongly convicted continue as well, and that will sit along with Justice Fraser’s findings. I do want to move this on as quickly as possible—not to rush anything, but to make sure that those postmasters can get answers and bring the injustice to an end.

**Andrew Gwynne** >

(Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]

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I add my support for a proper judge-led inquiry, too. Della Robinson was sub-postmaster at Dukinfield **post office**. She lost her business, the building the **post office** was in, her rental property, her job, and almost her home. It is just wrong. Can the Minister confirm that the Government are re-evaluating any public positions held by current or former senior employees at the **Post Office** who were intimately involved in decisions that victimised sub-postmasters?

**Paul Scully** >[Share](#)

I am aware that a former chief executive of the **Post Office** took up a role as a non-executive director at the Cabinet Office until she stood down. I am also aware that the Care Quality Commission has written to Imperial following a fit-and-proper-persons referral. The CQC is considering this. Lord Callanan wrote to the Department of Health and Social Care on 18 May to draw the Department's attention to the strength of feeling about the position in the NHS of the former chief executive of the **Post Office**.

**Andrew Jones** >

(Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con)

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Post offices are at the heart of our communities, yet the sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses have been so badly let down. I share the clear anger felt across the House on this issue, but to keep the network open and viable it must be attractive to take on a **Post Office** franchise. To do that there is the critical question of rebuilding trust. As the Minister holds the **Post Office** to account, will he hold it to account on how it is rebuilding trust with all sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses right across the network?

**Paul Scully** >[Share](#)

I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That is why some of my first conversations with Nick Read, the current chief executive of the **Post Office**, have been to ensure that he can do exactly that. We need to draw a line and right the wrongs of the past to give respect and trust, as well as support, for future postmasters to make sure they are valued stakeholders.

**Kim Johnson** >

(Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab)

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Many innocent sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses have been bankrupted, imprisoned and wrongly accused of theft due to the **Post Office's** heavy-handed approach, when accountancy issues with Horizon reported financial irregularities. Sadly, one of my constituents tragically took his own life after being falsely accused of financial impropriety, leaving his family destitute and without their business. It is too late for an apology or compensation for that family. What new procedures have the **Post Office** introduced to protect sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses as a consequence of this scandal? What protections has the **Post Office** put in place to ensure accountancy software is fit for purpose? What action will be taken against those in positions of leadership in the **Post Office** during the scandal? And does the Minister agree that actions speak much louder than words?

**Paul Scully** >[Share](#)

I sympathise with the hon. Lady's constituent who sadly took his life. That is one of many tragic stories. The fact is that we have now got the **Post Office** to accept its wrong position and the fact that the Horizon software could make mistakes—things were being changed there. That is why it is important to get that acknowledgment. It is also important that we continue to build trust with sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses in their relationship with the **Post Office**. That is why every time I speak to the chief executive, I make sure that that is at the top of our agenda.

**Mr Steve Baker** >  
(Wycombe) (Con)

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If the Government accept that software can never be thought infallible, will the Minister take steps to ensure that the law and policy making reflect the truth that all software has bugs?

**Paul Scully** >

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We will, of course, review that and keep it in our mind.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** >  
(Slough) (Lab)

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**GRO** Mr Speaker.

The **Post Office** Horizon scandal prompts the question: why did the **Post Office** not believe its own sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses, many of whom had given decades of loyal service, even after evidence was presented to them that the Horizon system was most likely faulty? Can the Secretary of State give a cast-iron guarantee, as other hon. and right hon. Members have requested, to all sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses and their families whose lives have been ruined, that there will be a judge-led inquiry, not merely a review, so we can ascertain how this happened, who is responsible and what steps can be taken to ensure that this never happens again?

**Paul Scully** >

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I thank the hon. Gentleman for that promotion to Secretary of State. He raises some really important points. The point is that, whether we call it a review or an inquiry, the terms of reference are exactly as he describes. We want to make sure we can get to the bottom of this to find out who made what decisions and how they were made, and ensure they can never happen again. That is exactly why I have pushed to make this happen as soon as possible.

**Simon Fell** >  
(Barrow and Furness) (Con)

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Isabella Wall was a sub-postmistress in Barrow. She ran a thriving shop and let flats above the property. As a result of the scandal, she lost everything. She was the very first person to come and see me at a surgery as a newly elected MP and I carry with me the anger she brought to that meeting. Does my hon. Friend accept that while the **Post Office** has accepted it got things wrong, there is a long, long way to go for people like Ms Wall before they are properly compensated for the financial and emotional losses they faced? Will he confirm that the Government will give weight to fair compensation being paid to wronged sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses?

**Paul Scully** >

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Isabella Wall is one of far too many constituents of ours who have suffered in this. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) was right when he said that the **Post Office** should have had more faith and trust in its sub-postmasters. Of course we will make sure we can get to the bottom of this to get some justice for Isabella Wall. On the group litigation, I am glad that they have reached a settlement. As for sub-postmasters who have not yet been part of a case but may have suffered a shortfall, I encourage them to come forward to take advantage of the historical shortfall scheme the **Post Office** has launched.

**Neil Gray >**

(Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]

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Many happy returns, Mr Speaker.

There is no doubt that many grave injustices have been served upon sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses, some of whom have gone to jail and lost everything. I know that my constituents will want two things. The first is to see justice done and the full facts brought out in a public inquiry, which is why a judge-led public inquiry is so important. They will also want to see their local post office network protected, ensuring it is shielded from the potential ramifications arising from the actions of management. So what plan does the Minister have to ensure both?

**Paul Scully >**[Share](#)

On the inquiry, I have set out the fact that the terms of reference are wide and deep enough. The judge has already reviewed this situation; Mr Justice Fraser has already come up with many, many pages of a response about what happened when and what went wrong. We need to make sure we can build on that evidence, we listen carefully to those who have been wronged and we make sure it can never happen again.

**Bob Blackman >**

(Harrow East) (Con) [V]

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Mr Speaker.

We are all aware that victims of this scandal have lost their livelihoods, savings and reputations, and that some have lost their liberty, as a result of a faulty computer system. I know that my hon. Friend understands the financial and emotional suffering that the Horizon litigation has brought on the victims, but does he agree that the only right and just situation will be to restore those victims to exactly the financial position they would have been in had this faulty system not occurred? I am talking about full compensation and an apology, and, equally, about the real criminals being brought to justice.

**Paul Scully >**[Share](#)

I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The point he raises shows why it took a court to get to the bottom of this, to break the deadlock that had been happening over so many years, which should have been settled so much earlier. That is why in December 2019 both parties in the group litigation agreed a settlement, following several days of mediation—it was a financial settlement totalling £57.75 million. Convicted claimants can still go through a further process; processes are in place for them to receive compensation, if appropriate.

**Dave Doogan >**

(Angus) (SNP) [V]

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The Post Office was not slow in dragging hard-working, honest sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses before the courts on the basis of spurious data from a flawed IT system, one that it knew to be flawed, thereby depriving good people at the centre of their communities of their reputations, businesses and personal assets, in some instances their liberty and, tragically, for some their lives. Does the Minister accept that a judge-led public inquiry, not a review, is required now, without delay, and that anything less is a further assault on the welfare of Horizon victims?

**Paul Scully >**[Share](#)

The findings outlined during the Horizon case provided extensive insight into what went wrong with the **Post Office**—this includes the independent judicial review of the facts that all sides have been looking for. However, the serious impacts of this case mean more needs to be done. We want to be assured that the right lessons are learned, and that is the purpose of the independent review that we are in the process of setting up.

**Joy Morrissey** >  
(Beaconsfield) (Con)

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Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the postmasters in Beaconsfield and Bucks and across the country who have tirelessly carried on throughout covid-19? Will he also join me in paying tribute to Mr Patel, who passed away from covid-19 and served the people of Hedgerley loyally? He was lovingly known as CD to many of the customers. Will the Minister please not only demand an apology but demand justice for the countless men and women who served and have suffered at the hands of the **Post Office**, and who see no justice? I hope that he will have the courage to deliver that for them.

**Paul Scully** >

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Justice is exactly what I want and what I want to be seen to be done. I would go further to extend my sympathy to the family of Mr Patel as well, because we must not forget, in all of this, at this particular moment in time, postmasters up and down the country are doing an incredible job for the most vulnerable people in society.

**Kate Osborne** >  
(Jarrow) (Lab)

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**GRO** Mr Speaker.

At Prime Minister's questions on 24 February, the Prime Minister agreed with my request to commit to hold an independent inquiry into this horrific scandal. I followed that question up with a letter to the Prime Minister. Three months later, only this week, I received a response from the Minister. I welcome the Government's commitment to a review of mishandlings, but this cannot just be a review of past mistakes. With a background of many years in the postal industry, I know many whose lives have been destroyed by this scandal, including sub- postmasters and sub-postmistresses in my constituency of Jarrow. So I ask the Minister again, and make absolutely no apology for doing so: will he commit to having a judge-led review as quickly as possible that will take action against those responsible for the scandal, and ensure that each individual case is assessed and proper compensation is paid to all those affected?

**Paul Scully** >

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I thank the hon. Lady for the work that she has done on this matter. Given her background, I can understand her motivation. As I have said, it is important to know that the terms of reference of this independent review are wide enough and deep enough to get to the bottom of what happened. An independent judge has already looked at this and built up a body of evidence and other views, which will be then be looked at as a complement to the review. Do not forget that public inquiries cannot determine criminal or civil guilt in themselves; that is reserved for a court.

**Mr Gagan Mohindra** >  
(South West Hertfordshire) (Con)

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Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

Many colleagues in the House have alluded to the importance of sub-postmasters during this global pandemic. What reassurance can my hon. Friend give that **Post Office** Ltd has understood that there needs to be fundamental cultural and organisational change to ensure that sub-postmasters come forward and that therefore the critical network of post offices remains in our communities for years to come?

**Paul Scully** >

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I think that that lesson has definitely been learned by the new chief executive. Certainly, the Government have worked, as shareholders, on a new framework for the **Post Office** to make sure that we can build a solid, confident relationship with future sub-postmasters. Nick Read's background working with independent convenience stores suggests that he is used to working with people as stakeholders rather than as simple employees or instruments of a large company.

**Clive Efford** >

(Eltham) (Lab)

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**GRO**

Mr Speaker.

The Minister has said several times that the victims of this situation need to be heard and their cases listened to, so can he name any one of them who is in agreement with his position and is not calling for an independent judge-led inquiry?

**Paul Scully** >

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The sub-postmasters who have been wronged by this want some justice and they want it quickly. What I do not want to happen is a public inquiry that may take many, many years and cost them a lot of money to get more legal representation in. When people have the chance to study the terms of reference, they will realise that the chair will be independent of Government and independent of the **Post Office**, and that he or she will listen to them to make sure that their stories are told—not just listen to them but make sure that those stories are actually there to feed into making sure that this can never happen again. Then, I hope, they will see that justice can be done.

**Caroline Nokes** >

(Romsey and Southampton North) (Con)

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I thank my hon. Friend for his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), but one of the stumbling blocks to a judge-led inquiry is cost. Does he agree that it is absolutely imperative that the honest, decent sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses across the whole country, and indeed specifically in Romsey and Southampton North, should not have a price put on lifting the stain on their characters?

**Paul Scully** >

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Sub-postmasters who have been wronged, including in Romsey, need to ensure that their voices can be heard quickly, with no cost. They need to be sure that this can never happen again, and get the acknowledgement that there have been severe mistakes that have caused misery for so many.

**Martyn Day** >

(Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]

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This scandal represents a massive failure of accountability and oversight, not just by **Post Office** Ltd, but by the Government. Will the Minister apologise to those whose lives have been ruined? What assurances can he provide that the losses arising from the Horizon case will not affect postmasters' pay and unfairly penalise even more postmasters and sub-postmasters?

**Paul Scully** >


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There have been numerous attempts over the years to try to resolve the dispute. The fact is that the **Post Office** has independent operational control. However, facts have come to light through the litigation, revealing that the advice that the Government and the shareholders received over that period was flawed. That is why the Government will be monitoring closely the progress of the **Post Office** in delivering the programme of commitments following the settlement, including through the review. We have also reviewed the mechanisms that we have in place to maintain oversight of the **Post Office**, by increasing the frequency of shareholder meetings, establishing a **Post Office** policy team within the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and publishing a framework document to govern the relationship between BEIS, UK Government Investments and the **Post Office**.

**Amy Callaghan** >

(East Dunbartonshire) (SNP) [V]

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 Mr Speaker.

This Government have had six months to enact an inquiry—six months to seek justice for the damage, disruption and loss of livelihood caused by this scandal, not just to see whether the **Post Office** has learnt lessons. The Minister has said that he pushed for the independent review, but what about listening to the sub-postmasters who have been left destitute by this scandal and providing them with the judge-led inquiry they so desperately want? Will the Minister stop stalling with reviews and commit today to a judge-led inquiry?

**Paul Scully** >

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We can talk about semantics, but what we actually need are the terms of reference that get people what they want. Whether we call it a review or an inquiry, the fact is that it will understand and acknowledge what went wrong in relation to Horizon by drawing on the evidence. It will assess whether the **Post Office** has learnt its lessons, whether the commitments made by the **Post Office** in the mediation settlement have been properly delivered, and whether the processes and information provided by post offices to postmasters are sufficient. It will also examine the governance and whistleblowing controls now in place at **Post Office** Ltd. That is what we need to ensure that we get answers in as timely a fashion as possible. I am sorry that it has taken six months. These things are complicated; I would love to have announced the review that following day. However, I am glad that we now have terms of reference that are deep and wide enough to get the answers that we need and for which sub-postmasters have desperately been waiting.

**Mr Andrew Mitchell** >

(Sutton Coldfield) (Con)

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My hon. Friend the Minister is quite right to emphasise the need for speed, but people have taken their own lives, and have been wrongly convicted and imprisoned. It does not get much more serious than that. This House is here to defend the liberties of our constituents. Will he bear in mind that the Prime Minister confirmed on 26 February that there would indeed be an inquiry, and, following this urgent question, will he discuss with his colleagues in the Government whether the will of the House may be different on this point from the will of the Government?

**Paul Scully** >

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We have looked at the different options. I do not want something that is long, drawn out and costly for sub-postmasters, and which does not necessarily get any answers for years and years to come, if ever. Someone used to say to me, "Less haste, more speed." Yes, we need to ensure that we can do this in a timely fashion, but that does not mean that we need to rush through the detail as the review is going ahead. We need to listen to the views of the sub-postmasters who have been wronged and put that alongside the findings of Justice Fraser to ensure that such things will never happen again.

**Rachael Maskell** >

(York Central) (Lab/Co-op)

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**GRO**

Mr Speaker.

The Government speak as if there is nothing that they could have done as a special shareholder. Well, of course they could have done something. This situation has left communities in York, such as Clifton, bereft of a **post office**. The fact is that the Government sat on their hands and did not use their powers, and sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses were thrown into jail and made bankrupt, and some took their lives. Do the Government not want a full, judge-led inquiry with the powers necessary to investigate and dig deep because a review does not hold those powers and will not expose their failings in this matter?

**Paul Scully** >

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The **Post Office** has said that it will comply fully with this review. I will push fully for that compliance, and I am sure that the independent chair will want to get right to the bottom of things, however long that takes. We need to get on with the review and get it started now.

On the Government's actions over the past few years, this issue happened over 20 years, and with hindsight facts have come to light in the litigation that some of the advice received was flawed. However, we have pushed for many years to make sure that we can get a settlement, and I am glad that we are at the point at which we can start to get some answers.

**Miss Sarah Dines** >

(Derbyshire Dales) (Con)

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As a barrister of more than 30 years' experience, I have witnessed at first hand the sheer devastation that a wrong conviction, or even a false accusation, can bring to a family. This is the United Kingdom. This is an injustice. Will the Minister reassure me that following the review there will be real sanctions, because this injustice has effectively destroyed a much-loved public institution?

**Paul Scully** >

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I thank my hon. Friend for that question. She is right about its being a much-loved institution. What we must not lose is the amazing work of post offices and sub-postmasters up and down the country. We must make sure that their reputations are not tarnished by what happened over a 20-year period. We need answers as quickly as possible, so that I, the Government and all of us can see the recommendations that the chairman will bring forward from that review.

**Dr Rupa Huq** >

(Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)

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Many happy returns, Mr Speaker.

For the Patels, moving from being managers of Acton Crown **post office** for more than three decades to their own sub-postmaster role in the country was meant to be a dream come true, but it turned into a nightmare when they lost not only substantial sums of money but their mental and physical health and their reputations. Mr Patel ended up with a criminal electronic tag—the humiliation of it. They want to know why in Acton, for more than 20 years, they were seen as upstanding pillars of the community—they handled

multi-million pound sums and had a safe key—but suddenly in Oxfordshire they were falsely branded as criminals. Why did it take the Criminal Cases Review Commission to say that there had been a miscarriage of justice? Where was the oversight? Finally, can the Minister make good on the promise that Paula Vennells gave me in 2018 that Acton Crown **post office** will reopen? It closed on her watch, and she has since done a runner.

**Paul Scully** >

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We have had the most stable network of post offices for a number of years now, on which—obviously, covid-19 notwithstanding—we need to make sure we can build. I also want answers to why the three Patels—her constituents, who were fine, upstanding members of the community—were seen in that way because of the actions of the **Post Office**. That is why we need to get this review done and why we need to get the independent chairman's recommendations out, so that we can see justice done.

**Gerald Jones** >

(Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab)

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Many happy returns of the day, Mr Speaker.

The scale of this scandal demands no less than a judge-led inquiry that has appropriate power. Why can the Minister not accept that that is the only way to examine fully and get answers on how this sorry saga went on for so long and caused so much misery and heartache to my constituents and thousands more across the country?

**Paul Scully** >

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We have 1,000 pages of Justice Fraser's findings to build on. Reviews are going through to over- turn and look at a number of convictions. We have this review to build on all of that. I hope and believe that all that body of work will find the answers that sub-postmasters are after about when decisions were taken, who took those decisions, how they went wrong and how they were allowed to go wrong. The fact is that we must get some answers so that it can never happen again.

**Tracey Crouch** >

(Chatham and Aylesford) (Con)

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I think the Minister is doing an excellent job, and I have been in his position, when I announced a review but was not allowed to call it a review. I appreciate that he might think the difference between a review and an inquiry is just semantics, but for many people those semantics really matter. I share colleagues' views about the need for an independent inquiry. I would also like to know what the Minister will do about financial compensation. He has said that there are limits to what the Government can do, but it is really important that he looks at this again and sees what steps can be taken to ensure that those affected are fully and fairly compensated.

**Paul Scully** >

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In terms of compensation, the mediation that took place allowed a settlement to be reached by the members of that group litigation. Other sub-postmasters who have been found to be wrongly convicted will be able to go through other procedures to get compensation, and any postmasters who were not part of that litigation but suffered a shortfall as a result of the **Post Office** will be able to apply to the historical scheme. I believe that this review will be able to get to the answers and build on the body of evidence that Justice Fraser has built up through the findings of his court case. There will be a lot of answers and recommendations there to secure the future trust and relationship between postmasters and the **Post Office**.

**Douglas Chapman** >

(Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP) [V]

[Share](#)**GRO** Mr Speaker.

Following this case being taken to the High Court, I have read that some Fujitsu employees are being investigated for perjury, which is a big deal. What discussions has the Minister had with the Attorney General and the Ministry of Justice on this issue, and when will he announce a judge-led inquiry into this whole sorry debacle?

**Paul Scully** >[Share](#)

My understanding is that Mr Justice Fraser has referred a number of people to the Crown Prosecution Service.

**Derek Thomas** >

(St Ives) (Con)

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I hope that all the time taken to wish you a happy birthday has not delayed any celebration you might have planned for later, Mr Speaker.

I want to raise a case that is one of many. Susan Knight was a postmistress of 32 years who was dragged before magistrates courts three times and Truro Crown court twice and made to pay over £20,000. This lady's life was made a misery, with her reputation trashed and 32 years of service for the **Post Office** counting for nothing. It is too late for her to rebuild her business. She is basically left with nothing. Can the Minister assure me, my constituents and Susan Knight that she will be adequately compensated in good time without a huge effort to achieve that result?

**Paul Scully** >[Share](#)

My hon. Friend refers to Susan Knight. He has also told me about another constituent of his who was the landlady of a local pub and lost that pub. It was another terrible story, alongside those we have heard from Members on both sides of the House about their constituents. In terms of compensation, members of the group litigation have reached a settlement, and I am pleased that a settlement was reached after many years and that the deadlock was broken. As I said, anybody else who has not claimed can join the historical shortfall scheme, and if people have been wrongly convicted, there will be procedures in place for them to claim compensation.

**Alan Brown** >

(Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)

[Share](#)**GRO** Mr Speaker.

While the **Post Office** was wilfully hiding its own failings, it operated a system where by sub-postmasters were automatically guilty. The **Post Office** then ran its own prosecutions, so in effect, it was judge, jury and executioner. This proves that we need a judge-led public inquiry, with all the powers associated with that, to get full disclosure and a call for evidence. In the meantime, can the Minister tell me what steps the Government have taken to ensure that this abuse of power can never be replicated and that sub-postmasters now have fair and transparent contracts?

**Paul Scully** >[Share](#)

Mr Justice Fraser is that independent judge who has looked into exactly what the hon. Gentleman described, which is why we want to build on those findings in what happens next. The **Post Office** has realised and finally acknowledged that it has done wrong. The fact is that the Government, within our new relationship and new framework as the sole shareholder in the **Post Office**, need to ensure that we can analyse the work that is done to earn trust and rebuild the relationship with future sub-postmasters.

**Chris Loder** >

(West Dorset) (Con)

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The biggest disgrace about all this is that innocent people have been incarcerated and imprisoned. Can the Minister confirm whether there are any sub-postmasters or sub-postmistresses currently in prison? If that is the case, will he commit to expediting immediately a full investigation into those specific cases for their release, if that is appropriate?

**Paul Scully** >

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What we are not going to do with the review is get in the way of the Criminal Cases Review Commission. It is really important that it does actually go through that process as quickly as possible for any number of reasons, not least to lift the conviction of people wrongly convicted. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to decry the fact that people have been put in prison wrongly. Their reputation has suffered, their lives have suffered and, indeed, in certain cases their lives have ended. That is why I want to make sure that we can get on, set up this review and find those answers to move forward.

**Wera Hobhouse** >

(Bath) (LD)

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If the review that the Minister proposes is just as deep and wide-ranging in going into the complexities as a judge-led inquiry, the question is why it should be less time-consuming and more cost-effective than a judge-led inquiry. I understand that the Government always say no before they say yes, so for the last time today, will he commit to a judge-led inquiry?

**Paul Scully** >

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I can give the hon. Member one easy answer as to why it takes so long, and that is lawyers. If we have a public inquiry, we tend to get a lot of expense, with both sides lawyering up, to use the vernacular. That is why £600 million has been spent in the last 30 years on public inquiries. We can either spend a lot of time in working on such a case, or we can get through a review, build on the work of the independent judge who has already looked at this case and has already built up the foundations, and make sure that we add to that by listening to the voices of those people who have gone through absolute hell.

**Karl McCartney** >

(Lincoln) (Con)

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GRO

Mr Speaker.

Throughout the financial and emotional suffering that the Horizon process has caused postmasters and their families across the country, I have been kept informed of developments by the Bailgate **post office** sub-postmaster, Simon Clarke, in my constituency of Lincoln. Can my hon. Friend tell me and the House how many senior managers responsible for the position that the **Post Office** has taken have resigned or been sanctioned or had any bonus payments revoked?

**Paul Scully** >

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I thank my hon. Friend. One of the problems with this case is that it has happened over 20 years, which means that a lot of people have moved on or moved around, and it has been difficult to follow those who have gone through the system in all this time. *[Interruption.]* I hear the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) say from a sedentary position that we gave the former chief executive a CBE. We have followed that up: she went through the independent honours commission, which works on that in a separate process, but we have actually made sure that we have written to the Care Quality Commission to ask if she is a fit and proper person in terms of the position she now holds.

**Lucy Allan** >  
(Telford) (Con)

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Thank you, Mr Speaker, for including me on the call list.

I sympathise with my hon. Friend, and I know that he will have heard what has been said today and will be listening very carefully. A succession of his predecessors have come to that Dispatch Box over years to read out statements from officials who we know have closely connected relationships with **Post Office** management and who knew that an injustice had occurred. What will he do to tackle the network of intertwined vested interests on his doorstep—and I include the Cabinet Office and ex-Fujitsu employees—that led to this shameful and tragic scandal and cover-up?

**Paul Scully** >

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It may be that many Government Ministers have come here, but it is this Government Minister who has actually pushed to make sure that we can have a review and that we can have it independently chaired—separate from the **Post Office**, separate from Government—to come up with those answers. That is what postmasters want. We have made sure in Government that we have come up with a new framework for an increased frequency of shareholder meetings to ensure that we can hold the **Post Office** to account for its actions, but also ensure that the taxpayer gets the most out of the **Post Office**, communities get the most out of the **Post Office** and, importantly, postmasters can feel confident they can build up a trustful relationship as valued stakeholders within the **post office** network.

*Virtual participation in proceedings concluded (Order, 4 June).*

**Mr Speaker** >

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In order to allow the safe exit of hon. Members participating in this item of business and the safe arrival of those participating in the next, I am now suspending the House for three minutes.

 1.49pm

*Sitting suspended.*

*On resuming—*

 1.52pm

Bill Presented

Employment (Reasonable Adjustments for Carers)

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Sir Edward Davey presented a Bill to require employers to make reasonable adjustments to enable employees with caring responsibilities for people with disabilities to provide that care.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on 12 June and to be printed (Bill 134).*

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