

No. 095/2020

27th February 2020

Dear Colleagues

POST OFFICE: HORIZON SCANDAL – PRIME MINISTER RESPONDS POSITIVELY TO A CALL FOR AN INDEPENDENT INQUIRY

Further to LTB 719/19 dated 23rd December 2019. Branches will be aware that following the Judge's decision to rule in favour of the Postmaster claimants last December, the Union has been calling for a public inquiry to ensure scrutiny and accountability of the actions of the Post Office and the National Federation of SubPostmasters (NFSP). The Union stated in December:

"In view of the seriousness of this matter, the Union is now calling for a public inquiry into the whole Horizon debacle. In this regard, we will be writing to the Minister for Postal Affairs to outline our grave concerns in relation to the appalling treatment of Postmasters by Post Office management and will call for a comprehensive investigation in the form of a public inquiry."

This inquiry should also investigate the actions of the National Federation of SubPostmasters (NFSP) who have done absolutely nothing to support their members in relation to the outrageous treatment they have suffered due to the Horizon system which has proven to be not fit for purpose."

There is no doubt this appalling situation amounts to a national scandal. How can a government-owned organisation treat so many people so badly for so long? (the Group Litigation claim involved 557 former Postmasters). There are exceptionally serious questions to ask of the Post Office leadership and indeed government for that matter. Whilst the legal process may have come to a conclusion with the out of court settlement, this shouldn't in any way detract from public scrutiny of what has gone wrong here, especially as £58m of public money was set aside to resolve the various court cases. The Post Office Board and Paula Vennells, its former Chief Executive, have to be accountable for their actions and the way they sought, unsuccessfully in the end, to defend themselves in court. The outcry for justice is not going to go away.

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) – Wednesday 26th February

Given the background above, I am pleased to inform Branches that the Prime Minister confirmed yesterday during PMQs that there will indeed be an independent inquiry into the Horizon scandal. The question, which was raised by Kate Osborne, Labour MP for Jarrow and the subsequent answer from the Prime Minister was as follows:

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab)

Q4. Like many other sub-postmasters, my constituent Chris Head was victim to the Post Office Horizon IT system scandal. These errors have resulted in bankruptcies, imprisonment and even suicide. Will the Prime Minister today assure Chris and others that he will commit to launching an independent inquiry?

The Prime Minister

I am indeed aware of the scandal to which the hon. Lady alludes and the disaster that has befallen many Post Office workers—I have met some of them myself. I am happy to commit to getting to the bottom of the matter in the way that she recommends.

Recently there has been significant parliamentary debate surrounding this national scandal. Indeed, on Tuesday 25th February, there was a debate in the House of Lords – *"Responding to the judgement in Bates vs Post Office (2019) EWHC 3408: and taking action against the directors responsible for the Horizon Accounting System."* The link to the debate is as follows:

<https://parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/c8ca3555-a8e9-4ce2-a648-08114cdc3684>

In this debate, many peers were extremely critical of the Post Office's actions and were calling for full accountability, particularly as the Post Office is owned by government and BEIS has a representative on the Post Office Board. Lord McNicol, Labour, asked the government the following question:

"We must also consider the government's role in this ordeal and their responsibility to help. The CWU's Branch Secretary for subpostmasters has pointed out that a government representative sits on the Board of the Post Office and that they presumably took part in those Board meetings that made decisions on the litigation, including the attempt to recuse the Judge. Would the Minister care to comment on that?"

There will also be a House of Lords oral question on Thursday 5th March from Lord Arbutnot of Edrom as follows:

"Level of compensation received by sub-postmasters as a result of the Horizon accounting system litigation as compared to the losses those sub-postmasters incurred due to Post Office Ltd's policies"

Parliamentary Question to BEIS

Kevan Jones, Labour MP, asked the Secretary of State BEIS – *"what steps Post Office Ltd is taking to identify former subpostmasters that repaid monies in relation to unproven allegations of financial discrepancies."*

Paul Scully, the new Post Office Minister answered on 27th February as follows:

"Post Office Ltd will announce a scheme in the near future which will address historic shortfalls for Postmasters who were not part of the Group Litigation. Post Office Ltd are actively considering how best to reach all relevant Postmasters both past and present as part of this process".

Cross-Party Support for an Inquiry

Following the Prime Ministers' response at PMQs, a number of politicians have tweeted their support for an inquiry:

Tweet from Gill Furniss, Labour MP, Chair of the APPG for Post Offices

"Glad the Prime Minister has agreed to a public inquiry on the Post Office #HorizonScandal. This is a testament to the hard fought campaign of hundreds of subpostmasters and members of the APPG on Post Offices from all parties."

Tweet from Lucy Allan, Conservative MP

"There is a ground swell of support building in parliament for Govt to take steps to help clear the names of Post Office workers wrongly convicted of theft based on the Post Office's flawed Horizon computer system"

Computer Weekly Article

Computer Weekly has been following and reporting on this matter for many years and yesterday published a further story following Boris Johnson's commitment to the independent inquiry. The link to this interesting article is as follows:

https://www.computerweekly.com/news/252479176/Boris-Johnson-commits-to-getting-to-the-bottom-of-Post-Office-Horizon-IT-scandal?amp=1&_twitter_impression=true

Clearly we are making progress on this issue now that the Prime Minister has responded positively and acknowledged the need for an inquiry. Our activities in the coming days will be to push for the inquiry to happen without delay and for an independent chair to be appointed, who must have powers to fully investigate and compel witnesses to be examined and give evidence.

We will be carefully monitoring this situation whilst doing all that is necessary to ensure this matter is not swept under the carpet, Postmasters do get justice and fair recompense and those guilty parties who inflicted so much pain on innocent and hard-working people are brought to account.

Further developments will be reported.

Yours sincerely

Andy Furey
Assistant Secretary