

The case for a royal commission into robodebt — institutionalised cruelty of historic proportions

Justice for the victims, assurance that this won't happen again and accountability for the powerful — all call for the whole sorry saga of robodebt to be brought to light.



Robodebt is a dystopian enough word, but the program's official name — the Online Compliance Intervention — would have conveyed its sinister intent more effectively. Remember that other “intervention”? Perhaps it's Coalition secret code for punishing the unworthy.

Robodebt was introduced in 2016 with the promise of using artificial intelligence to save the taxpayers \$3.7 billion by clawing back undeserved welfare payments. It ended this week with \$2.1 billion going the other way.

It was supposed to use automated data-matching between Centrelink and the Australian Tax Office, to identify who was being overpaid. Robodebt would then issue invoices and the money would come back, all without the inefficiency of human intervention.

It worked as well as you'd expect. Somewhere north of 400,000 welfare recipients were the victims of robodebt overpayment notices that had no proper basis in law or fact but might as well have been produced by a random number generator.

Following an investigation by the Ombudsman, two Senate inquiries, multiple successful challenges in the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT), an AAT ruling that the entire scheme was unlawful, and a class action, the final bill to the Morrison government amounts to \$1.2 billion: \$720 million in refunds, \$400 million in forgone claims, and \$112 million in damages to be shared between the victims and their lawyers.

Then there are the lawyers' and consultants' fees, IT costs, PR spinning and wasted resources expended by the government over four years defending this dog with fleas. That will add up to hundreds of millions more.

The human cost cannot be calculated. Over 2000 people died after receiving robodebt notices. How many of them took their own lives is disputed, but it's not zero. What cannot be denied is the trauma inflicted on the most vulnerable part of the population by this "intervention", as soulless and incapable of empathy or understanding as the Terminator.

Robodebt took Australian society several steps further down the path of what the Coalition likes to call "good economic management" but is really the institutionalisation of cruelty.

By any measure, a clusterfuck of historic proportions. The government's last-minute capitulation to a record class action settlement on a no-admissions basis, reflects the obviousness of both its incompetent handling of the debacle and the further embarrassments that were otherwise about to be revealed.

Apart from the catastrophic failure of robodebt's creators to appreciate that what they were doing was illegal, there is the over-arching question of ministerial responsibility. And guess who we find on that conga line? Scott Morrison, Christian Porter, Alan Tudge and Stuart Robert. The wonder boys.

Ah, ministerial responsibility. Remember that quaint notion? Tudge alone has racked up at least five separate offences for which he should be under pressure to leave, but one thing we know for sure these days is that a Coalition minister could strangle his grandmother at the Public Bar in Manuka on a Wednesday night, and the prime minister's only response would be a demand that the media show some respect for the dead.

What all this adds up to is that Bill Shorten, by happy coincidence, is right: we need a royal commission into robodebt.

I don't say that lightly; there have been way too many royal commissions in recent years, deployed mostly as an alternative to actual governing. Did we need yet another aged care inquiry when the preceding 19 had been ignored, or a commission to tell us that last summer's bushfires were the result of climate change?

And lest we forget Tony Abbott's royal commissions into pink batts and Julia Gillard's home renovations.

A royal commission, like a federal anti-corruption commission (not Porter's fake one, a real one), has one purpose: to root out truths that the powerful would rather we didn't learn.

The case for a royal commission into robodebt is unanswerable. Of course Morrison doesn't want it to happen, for the same reason that his government paid \$70 million in 2017 to the men detained on Manus Island rather than allow their negligence case to be heard in court. There is no amount of our money that this government will not pay to avoid scrutiny, when all of its other standard techniques have failed.

That, of course, is all the more reason to do it. But the government's innate shadiness need not be taken into account; even the most honest, diligent and caring government would have to submit itself to a full and transparent reckoning if it stuffed something up as badly as robodebt.

Justice for the victims, assurance that this won't happen again, and accountability for those invested with the power to uplift or destroy lives, all call for the whole sorry saga of robodebt to be brought to light.

Royal commission. Now.

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