

Submission to the Australian Parliament, Senate Inquiry: Design, scope, cost-benefit analysis, contracts awarded and implementation associated with the Better Management of the Social Welfare System initiative

I am angry and frightened but I'll keep it short.

I am devastated that Australian government can come to this.

I consider Robo-debt displays a tendency to obstinacy and ultimately to authoritarianism (not a word I use lightly) and I fear for my children. We've watched the change over time. The Australian government was once a model litigant: it was seen as a function of good and responsible government. That is now lost.

Not so gradually, we have seen more fear, more secrecy, more intrusion from government. This has mainly come under LNP governments, for terrorism responses and the like. We can think back to Fraser for "dole bludger" claims. Ever since, we have had cuts and attacks on the unemployed or otherwise receivers of welfare (some of this from Labor, vide, Single parents). And it's not as if there are jobs for all. Even the BCA calls for increases to welfare. And what is the outcome? An underclass with no hope and greater cost?

All this as the effectiveness of government and the authority of its pronouncements wilt, vide, climate change, terrorism scares, and money is spent willy-nilly, carelessly, for political purposes, vide, subs, a failing NBN, now a "brain-fart" Snowy Scheme 2. (Rejected 20 years ago as too expensive, but out-of-the-blue announced without consultation, without investigation. It may be worthy as times are now different, but what an obvious political play and how poorly to execute major public policy).

Robo-debt just plumbs further depths:

- using unreasonable measures (dividing tax/26 for a unreliable measure of fortnightly income)
- removing human review from the system without recognising its safety measures
- blaming Labor who may have implemented this computer system but with human protections
- demanding responses in short time with details many will be unlikely or unable to provide
- essentially assuming guilt despite all the above
- being uncaring and not acknowledging the difficulty of correction or contact
- placing private debt recovery process in train, renowned as it is for unsavoury processes

I expect there's more, but the ignorance of process, the pigheaded readiness to make unreasonable demands and stubbornness against corrections, from all including the Minister and Head of Department, indicate a stunning and frightening distance from real issues of other Australians. Citizens who you are supposed to represent under representative democracy.

All this against a backdrop of bank corruption that you refuse to investigate with a Royal Commission, abuse of politicians' privileges that you excuse at minimal cost, all the rest of the class- and culture-war battles that go on in right-wing circles, not least newspapers, radio and presumably the party room.

Robo-debt is just the latest, perhaps most obvious, extreme and frightening indicator of a political class, and especially a political party, that has lost its way.

It's a common quote, but I ask the committee to stop and consider that it was a billionaire who said this: "There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning"

And then demand immediate suspension and very major changes to the arbitrary, unreasonably demanding and often incorrect system that is Robo-debt.