

A BIGGER PICTURE

COMMENTARY ON THE CRUELTY OF ROBODEBT

17 July 2023

In the wake of the Royal Commission into Robodebt, there has been much talk about the cruelty of the scheme and its illegality. However, one specific element is being overlooked; the deliberate demonisation of the unemployed.

There is sadly a long Australian tradition of bashing the unemployed, single mothers, the homeless, and other vulnerable people as *dole bludgers*.

Robodebt was premised on an attitude that those on social security were unworthy. At different points in the Robodebt era, the Australian Federal Police, Australian Tax Office and Centrelink all worked together. If welfare recipients had taken one dollar of taxpayer's money that they did not deserve, they would be made to pay. And pay they did.

The costs as we now know, are tragic. Commissioner Catherine Holmes concluded that Robodebt had been 'responsible for heartbreak and harm to family members of those who took their own lives because of the despair the scheme caused them.' However, none of these deaths prompted 'a substantive or systemic review of the problem of illegal, inaccurate or unfair debt-raising.'

Throughout the four years of its operation (2015-2019) it did not matter that there were consistent concerns about illegality and about the method of income averaging used to calculate debts, what mattered was that the unworthy were being held to account. This is the most troubling aspect of Robodebt, it lays bare that the dignity of vulnerable people is of little importance. This attitude needs to change.

As an advocate for those without a voice and on behalf of the victims of Robodebt, the Society expects the full force of the law to be brought against those responsible. Parliamentarians are not above the law. This is an important first step in reconstructing the meaning of human dignity in our polity.

As noted by Pope Francis, how a society treats its poor and vulnerable is a better way to measure 'economic success.' He also notes that the 'unemployed, underemployed, and low-paid employees deserve special attention.' The dignity of the poor, the vulnerable, the homeless and the unemployed should never be denied. When dignity is denied to these people, we are all diminished.

Stigmatising our vulnerable citizens is an easy political tactic. It deliberately peddles false narratives about social security. In 2019, a four-year University of Queensland research project found that unemployed people spent vast amounts of time seeking work. The recent Royal Commission concluded that instances of welfare fraud were 'miniscule.' The narrative of lazy dole bludgers rorting the system from top to bottom is simply not true.

In the wake of the Royal Commission, concrete steps must be taken to uphold the dignity of vulnerable people in the social security system. The entire political language used to discuss unemployment and social security needs to change. As noted, most unemployed people are seeking work. Fraud, as noted by Commissioner Catherine Holmes, is miniscule.

These facts need to become more widely understood in the community. If we are interested in decreasing levels of persistent poverty in this country, we should boost the payment levels of JobSeeker etc. which are not enough to manage day to day expenses, let alone during a cost-of-living crisis. We should declare a moratorium on all ongoing social security debt collection actions until better safeguards are put in place to deal more fairly with potential overpayments. We should never charge interest on these debts.

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia has more than 45,000 members and volunteers, who work hard to assist people in need and combat social injustice across Australia. Internationally, the Society operates in 153 countries and has over 800,000 members.

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We all should oppose any social security system that stigmatises, victimises, and denies those in most need of help their dignity. The St. Vincent de Paul Society is routinely seeing the impact of the current cost-of-living crisis, of the housing crisis, and homelessness all over the country. Charities throughout the country all aim to assist all those who come to them for help with empathy and compassion. It is time that our politicians and bureaucrats started to do the same.

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