Optus report whitewashes Australia's emergency phone breakdowns

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Telecommunications company Optus published a report on December 12 into its Triple Zero outage in September that resulted in at least two deaths after hundreds of people were unable to reach emergency services on the phone. The report was authored by Kerry Schott, an establishment figure long associated with big business and corporate boards.

While it partly reads like a forensic review into the technical and organisational problems that led to the disaster, the report's primary political function is to absolve the company's management of any responsibility for the events of September 18, when some 605 calls to Australia's emergency services numbers (primarily 000, but also 112) failed to connect.

In particular, the report blames employees at Optus. Schott writes that the mistakes she identified can "only be explained by a lack of care about a critical service and a lack of disciplined adherence to procedure."

This is fundamentally no different from the statement by Optus chief executive Stephen Rue in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. He claimed that "human error" was to blame for the breakdown. In other words, the so-called "independent review"—commissioned by Optus itself—reached the same conclusion.

Part of the report identifies the proximate trigger of the outage. A planned firewall/gateway upgrade at Optus' Regency Park exchange left a key gateway "locked" on the night of September 18, with the final step of the upgrade scheduled for the following night.

The gateway in question was a network control point through which emergency call traffic was routed. Locking such a gateway places it into a restricted state, leaving the network exposed for an extended window "without a traffic diversion" and producing a "significant drop in resilience."

The work to upgrade the firewall was split into two nights. "Had the firewall upgrade been done over one night (as all other upgrades in the program had been)," Schott writes, "the gateway would have been locked for a maximum of 6 hours rather than the planned 24 hours or more."

The report states that "the reason why the work was split into two parts and spread across two nights is not clear," but makes no attempt to investigate or probe this. Given that Optus has slashed 3,000 jobs over the past decade, reducing its workforce by a third, this decision may have been the result of cost-cutting, not a technical error. Reduced in-house staffing may have forced staggered execution.

The report admits that there appeared to be "a focus on speed and getting the task done, rather than an emphasis on doing things properly." If that is indeed the case, the critical question is to ask why "speed" was prioritised over "doing things properly."

Any objective investigation would lead to systemic issues such as job cuts, which place higher workloads on existing staff, as well as the underlying privatisation of essential services that prioritises corporate profits over basic safety measures.

The report partially reveals the role played by the effective shutdown of Australia's 3G mobile network. Emergency calling systems are designed, in principle, to be highly redundant: if a call cannot be completed via a carrier's primary network pathway, mobile devices are meant to persist and automatically attempt alternative routes, including connecting to another carrier or falling back to older technologies such as 3G.

During the Optus outage, many devices that failed to establish a 4G or 5G emergency call attempted to search for a 3G connection that no longer existed in practice. As a result, calls either failed entirely or were

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delayed by 40 to 60 seconds before connecting. Such delays are intolerable in life-and-death situations and many callers understandably did not wait.

This is a damning revelation. 3G towers were allowed to be almost universally shut down without ensuring that the necessary fallback measures were in place for older phones to be able to dial 000 in the event of an outage.

Schott recommends “further investigation” of this issue by industry and government. But throughout the 41-page report, the key issue is buried: that critical public infrastructure has been transformed over decades to serve the profit interests of the financial elite.

Moreover, the September 2025 breakdown of the Triple Zero service was far from an isolated occurrence. Previous incidents on a similar scale include a November 2023 Optus outage that lasted 16 hours and resulted in 2,500 people being unable to reach emergency services, and a March 2024 Telstra outage where over 120 callers could not effectively dial 000.

Numerous other incidents have collectively resulted in dozens more cases where emergency services could not be reached by people, including two failures by Optus and Telstra a little over a week after the September 18 outage.

The Albanese Labor government has helped cover up the systemic nature of these failures. Token fines of $12 million and $3 million were issued to Optus and Telstra respectively after the 2023 and 2024 outages. These figures pale in comparison to the revenue these companies extract every year.

A so-called “Triple Zero Custodian” proposed by the Labor government to monitor the emergency system is similarly cosmetic, with no real powers to regulate the companies’ operations.

To avoid any culpability, the Albanese government has sought to solely blame Optus, a subsidiary of the Singapore-based Singtel, for the September 18 breakdown. But it was the decision of the Hawke-Keating Labor government in the 1990s to privatise Optus and Telstra that paved the way for the cost-cutting that resulted in all these failures.

The life-and-death issues raised by a history of 000 failures are not merely technical malfunctions that can be corrected by new procedures. They require a political solution: public ownership, democratic workers’ control and adequate funding of essential services, including telecommunications. Rank and file committees of telecom workers, first responders, such as paramedics and firefighters, and medical professionals must be built to expose the truth about the breakdowns and fight for these demands.

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