

Australian Robodebt coverup deepens: No one held accountable

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More than a decade after Australia's notorious Robodebt regime was launched in 2015—causing immense suffering to about 450,000 welfare recipients by falsely accusing them of owing the government huge debts—every official inquiry has ended with all those responsible going scot-free.

In fact, in its final report last week the Albanese government's National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) went even further than Labor's 2023 royal commission into the scheme by totally exonerating the former Liberal-National Coalition government leader most directly involved in Robodebt—ex-Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

In addition, not a single government minister or official will be prosecuted. Instead, two former relatively senior public service executives were named as “corrupt” for allegedly misleading the Coalition government's cabinet or the federal Ombudsman over the legality of the scheme, with no prosecutions recommended on the grounds that no admissible evidence exists.

This has caused shock and outrage among the victims and their families, some of whom have campaigned for years for some kind of justice. Among them is Jenny Miller, whose son, Rhys Cauzzo, took his own life in January 2017 while being pursued for a false debt of up to \$28,000.

Miller told the *Guardian*: “It's hard to describe because I feel like I've put aside nine years of my life and gotten nothing out of it at all. Like, no accountability, no justice, no nothing. It really needs to go in front of a judge and jury and for them to be found guilty or not guilty.”

Felicity de Somerville, a Robodebt victim who had \$11,500 drained by the government's Centrelink welfare agency from her bank account without warning under the scheme in 2017, told the Australian Associated Press that the NACC decision not to propose a single criminal prosecution was “grossly disappointing but not surprising.” She commented: “I don't think any Australian should be surprised they're not going to take accountability for this.”

The NACC report has also effectively given a green light to the continuation of such abuses by similar punitive measures against the unemployed and disabled and aged pensioners. That follows revelations that the Labor government is inflicting financially crippling penalties on unemployed workers and teenagers through a “Targeted Compliance Framework,” which can cancel a person's sub-poverty payments for four weeks or more.

The automated Robodebt process was based on “income-

averaged” data from the Australian Tax Office that distorted the meagre incomes of victims who took often-irregular casual or part-time work because they could not survive on the welfare payments.

After receiving computer-generated letters declaring that they owed the government thousands of dollars, the victims were threatened with jail terms unless they paid the demanded amounts or produced documents, going back up to seven years, to disprove alleged over-payments.

Robodebt was deliberately designed to slash billions of dollars from social spending—in fact, nearly \$2 billion was directly stripped from recipients—and to cut off welfare payments, coercing recipients into seeking low-paid work, all for the benefit of the corporate ruling class.

In January 2015, Morrison, then a newly-appointed social services minister, foreshadowed the Robodebt assault. In a media interview he boasted that he would be a “strong welfare cop on the beat.”

Robodebt caused immeasurable grief, stress, financial suffering, trauma and, inevitably, suicide among some of the most vulnerable members of the working class—including those suffering homelessness, medical conditions, mental ill-health, family and domestic violence, or facing crisis situations or caring responsibilities.

No reliable statistics exist on the number of suicides that resulted. In 2018, however, the Senate was given figures showing that, from July 2016 to October 2018, some 2,030 people had died after receiving a Robodebt notice.

As the royal commission report confirmed, Morrison and other ministers in the Liberal-National government knew by late 2016 that the regime was unlawful—even infringing the draconian provisions of the Social Security Act. Media reports, including on the *World Socialist Web Site*, had already exposed its arbitrary and false methodology and shocking personal toll on distressed welfare recipients.

From 2015 to late 2019, when immense public outcry finally forced a halt to it, the brutal automated system set relentless private debt collectors on wrongly accused welfare recipients, arbitrarily cut benefits or garnisheed income tax returns, and deliberately blocked all objections except via an online site that many welfare dependents had neither the means nor the ability to negotiate.

When Robodebt victims, including the loved ones of those who

had committed suicide, publicly objected to their persecution, government ministers unlawfully released selected confidential information from their welfare files to corporate media outlets, such as the *Australian*, in efforts to blacken their names and intimidate other victims.

Labor's royal commission report described how public servants at all levels were placed under intense and threatening pressure by the government ministers, and any reservations were quashed, to implement the Robodebt scheme to meet welfare-cutting targets. The former ministers most criticised in the report were Morrison and fellow former social security ministers Alan Tudge, Christian Porter and Stuart Robert.

The royal commission report said that once the unlawfulness of Robodebt became obvious, the response of these ministers "was to double down, to go on the attack in the media against those who complained and to maintain the falsehood that in fact the system had not changed at all. The government was, the DHS and DSS ministers maintained, acting righteously to recoup taxpayers' money from the undeserving."

Yet none of these ministers will be held to account. In a sealed 56-page chapter of its report, the royal commission referred a handful of individuals—now known to be five public service officials plus Morrison—for possible criminal or civil action. At the time, Morrison said he was not among them.

Finally released after three years, the sealed chapter reveals that the royal commission referred Morrison to investigation by the NACC, saying he had not made "obvious" inquiries in 2015 with the social services and human services departments about why the income-averaging scheme using tax data did not require changes to the legislation.

"He failed to meet his ministerial responsibility to ensure that cabinet was properly informed about what the proposal actually entailed and to ensure that it was lawful," the sealed chapter said.

The NACC report dismissed even that limited indictment. Turning reality on its head, it said Morrison—the political architect and driver of the scheme—had been entitled to rely on the advice of departmental officials that Robodebt was legal.

"I do not accept that Mr Morrison should have realised the NPP (new policy proposal) was misleading; and, accordingly, I do not consider that his failure to detect the NPP was misleading was in breach of any personal obligation of honesty or good faith," deputy NACC commissioner Kylie Kilgour said in her concluding statement.

Kilgour also rejected other related royal commission findings against Morrison. One of the reasons she gave was that "as a member of parliament and minister of many years standing," Morrison would "almost certainly have foreseen that," if he had been culpable, "there would be a high chance of the deception soon being discovered and of his and his government's subjection to the inevitably adverse political consequences that would follow."

Kilgour ruled that Morrison's conduct did not meet the legal threshold for corrupt conduct under the NACC Act. As a result, Morrison has been largely shielded from "adverse political consequences."

The Labor government happily accepted the outcome. In a joint

statement with other cabinet ministers, Social Services Minister Tanya Plibersek said: "Robodebt was illegal and immoral and nothing like it can be allowed to happen again. I'd like to thank the Commission for their work. We'll keep working to deliver a fairer social security system for all Australians; a system that treats people as human beings."

In reality, like the Liberal-National Coalition and Labor governments before it, the Albanese government pursues similar methods to Robodebt. For example, it enforces a "mutual obligation" regime that compels most welfare recipients to undertake an arbitrary number of job applications, training courses or volunteer activities each month in order to keep their payments.

Last September, the Albanese government attempted to deflect from the ever-more glaring Robodebt whitewash—and avoid legal liability—by agreeing to pay \$475 million in additional compensation to victims. That took the total financial payout to more than \$2.4 billion, but a large chunk of that went to lawyers who ran class actions in the Federal Court.

Nearly a decade after the scheme was introduced, Robodebt has now passed through every stage of Australia's supposed accountability system, including parliamentary hearings, a royal commission, an Ombudsman's investigation, several tribunal and court cases, and, finally, a corruption inquiry. The end result is a damning indictment, from which definite political conclusions need to be drawn.

First of all, Robodebt was not a one-off. It had a long pre-history. It fully automated debt accusations against welfare recipients based on false income-averaging tax data, ramping up a decades-long offensive against alleged welfare "roting." This was pursued aggressively by earlier Labor governments, those of Hawke and Keating from 1983 to 1996, and Rudd and Gillard from 2007 to 2013.

Secondly, over the past four decades, Coalition and Labor governments alike have driven thousands of people off benefits or denied them eligibility in the first place. This has been achieved also through harsher rules for disability pensions, and higher means tests and eligibility requirements for various entitlements, including aged pensions.

Finally, no justice will be obtained through the political and legal channels of the parliamentary establishment and the rest of the capitalist institutions.

The hostility to the Robodebt cruelty, which still exists throughout the working class, needs to be transformed into a conscious struggle, against the entire political and corporate establishment, including the Labor government.

Decent welfare entitlements, on which the recipients, including the jobless, disabled and retired workers can live, are a basic social right. But to achieve that requires a socialist program to totally reorganise society to meet the pressing social needs of the working class, the vast majority, not the private profits of the super-rich.



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