

# Alternative facts in the Centrelink debacle

Kasy Chambers | 02 February 2017

**Over Christmas 2016 and the early weeks of 2017, Centrelink's new policy of automated online debt collection has been subject to conflicting reports, making us wonder what version of truth we might best believe.**



The Minister and the department head are sticking to the assertion that everything is working fine. It would be surprising if these assertions were deliberate lies.

Yet there is another version of the truth, and it is compelling. It is seen in the growing list of people talking publicly about the distress caused to them by being falsely targeted. The journalists who are prosecuting this side of the argument are not fools, and it is hard to see that the Commonwealth Ombudsman would start an investigation if there weren't some reasonably sonorous alarm bells.

The outcome will no doubt be that there is truth on both sides. And we should say straight up that, ignoring the dismally low level of most benefits, we believe that where a person has received money they are not entitled to, that needs to be recovered.

However that still leaves the problem of the manner in which these debt notices were sent out, the timing, and the tone in which citizens have been addressed by their government.

No doubt we will trawl through the adequacies (or otherwise) of the planning and thinking put into setting up this automated system. Anyone that has tried to interact with Centrelink knows the difficulties in the bureaucratic nature of the beast.

If you have income cycles which differ to its reporting periods, if you are moving in and out of work (very common when you are trying to get a job), if your children reach certain milestones or you meet a partner, difficulties will be created in your relationship with Centrelink.

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Until now humans have raised the debt notice after looking at the individual situation of each case. Automatic systems to date have been good at repetitive and routine decision making, leaving the humans to the more complex and individualised cases. The irony is not lost on us in the social services sector that the Department of Human Services is one of the first to step so far into automation.

Another difficulty with the process is that the adversarial manner that it set up is unlikely to allow Centrelink to learn from the cases it reviews.

A 2008 study by Anglicare Tasmania explored the experiences of people who found themselves in debt to Centrelink. Their stories were analysed and their community legal centre files reviewed. The research revealed a pattern of overpayments, poor communication by Centrelink and a lack of assistance to deal with the problem of Centrelink debt.

Yet most people, at some stage in their life, will benefit from the public purse. This could be through education, vaccination or health, not to mention the fact that most of us will get some form of welfare benefit at some stage of our lives, aged pensions and family tax benefits being the mainstream ones.

Many people caught in this current debt recovery process are now working. They thought they had ended their connection with Centrelink years ago.

It may be that Centrelink has tried to run before it could walk in terms of technology and system design. It may be that in this culture of never admitting a mistake it will be difficult to back down and build a better process. Those facts and alternative facts will wash out in the next few weeks as Parliament returns, as Senate Inquiries are called, and as the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman publishes its findings.

In the meantime we are left with a fracture in the way we treat each other in this country and a lack of respect from a government to its citizens. And yet there is a swing in public sympathy towards those caught up in the mess: that offers some cause for optimism in what we can expect of our communities.



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