

# How to redesign a faulty system

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By [Kasy Chambers](#) - posted Friday, 24 March 2017

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22 March, was the final day that the Senate Community Affairs reference committee would take submissions into Centrelink's robo-debt process. This inquiry is also known as the *Better Management of the Social Welfare System Initiative*.

The impetus for better management of the social welfare system has not come from government. In fact, the Government's apparent lack of empathy with those most affected has led to widespread social commentary on sites such as [www.notmydebt.org.au](http://www.notmydebt.org.au), created specifically by community volunteers as a response to the failure of Centrelink's robo-debt process.

Minister Alan Tudge has repeatedly defended the system, using phrases such as "there is nothing wrong with Centrelink's automated debt recovery system" and "The system is working and we will continue with that system."

Slightly more threatening were his comments on December 5, 2016 to *A Current Affair*: "We'll find you, we'll track you down and you will have to repay those debts and you may end up in prison."

In late February, on the ABC's Q & A program, Attorney General George Brandis echoed the same argument: that "the system is working well, and that you can always sort it out by ringing Centrelink".

The very suggestion drew laughs from the audience.

The situation of the robo-debt process has arisen, in part, because of the pressure placed on the Department of Human Services to deliver specific budget savings through the reclamation of over-payments and outstanding debts. This has also been seen in the Omnibus bill, which, after being rejected by the Senate, saw it split in two. Indeed, the Government is clutching at straws to attain a budget surplus.

In a piece last month in *The Saturday Paper* by Martin McKenzie-Murray, the issue was covered in depth, as were the cold-hard facts of the system.

"We know that the government persisted with its program of robo-debt collection in the knowledge that its algorithm was faulty, that it would produce fallacious outcomes. The government itself admits that one in five of the debts it alleges have been calculated in error", wrote McKenzie-Murray.

Anglicare Australia, one of many organisations working with vulnerable people around Australia, has received a number of accounts which have informed our submission to the *Better Management of the Social Welfare System Initiative* inquiry. One woman from the Newcastle area shared the following story:

*Before beginning my childcare Traineeship in April 2016, I was on Centrelink for almost four years while I worked short shifts in a fish market .... Centrelink paid me an "arrears" of around \$1,200. I assumed the money was not mine so I resisted touching it so I could send it straight back to Centrelink. After numerous phone calls and office visits, each time I told them I probably shouldn't have it; they always said "It's definitely yours. I can't see anything in the system that wouldn't make it yours. On our end, you have been paid the correct amount.*

This woman and her partner experienced some financial difficulties, and with the assurance that the money was hers, they used the \$1,200 provided to them.

*About two months had passed since using the last of the money when I received a call from the Centrelink Debt Recovery Office stating that the \$1,200 wasn't mine at all and I was "stupid to use it if [I] had a gut feeling".*

The above story from our network shows us that something isn't working, and that the system needs to be changed.

In a piece in *The Conversation*, Simon Williams, a lecturer in Mathematics from Flinders University wrote on the intrinsic fallibility of automated systems. He essentially argued that using "Big Data" systems will apply broad-brush formulas with a high level of error.

*...As we have seen, downplaying these errors and concentrating only on identifying more and more debtors magnifies the number of this second type of error. Also, expanding the data-matching system and removing the human element from the case-selection process has undermined the system's performance even further.*

But there's something more at play here. We expect Centrelink to provide a customer focussed service. If people are making mistakes then the Department should want to understand why, and how it can make things work better. The evidence we have for people caught up in this fiasco is that correcting the record can be time consuming, frustrating and at times impossible.

Furthermore there are problems at a much deeper level. As argued by Williams, automated systems do not allow for the complexities of people's lives. If someone has insecure work with erratic hours, as is increasingly the case, or if their fortnightly calculations are different to Centrelink's, it is the person alone who is held to account.

Kate Galloway in her piece in *Eureka Street* the other day rightly argued that the Government too must obey the rule of law. Like ours, her argument focussed on the citizens who will most be effected, and the callous way in which debts have been pursued.

So, we would ask: Where is the evidence that the Government is working to create an income support system that connects with the lives of the citizens it serves? Let's put the people at the top of the pyramid, and use the inquiries into this catastrophe to redesign the system so it works.

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