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Where is Compassion and Concern for Dignity in the Centrelink Debt Collection Debacle?

Kasy Chambers ABC Religion and Ethics 19 Jan 2017



We need a more compassionate approach to providing welfare where it is needed, an approach which values the most important biblical principal of human dignity, regardless of circumstance. CREDIT: MATT

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In the social services sector, religious voices are significant because faith-based organisations tend to be informed by values of justice, thus informing our choice of vocation.

While we might not always use explicit language about our faith traditions in efforts to be inclusive of all, the recent [Centrelink Automated Debt Collection debacle](#) has strongly reminded us of some of the biblical stories underpinning our advocacy.

Since the end of last year, 20,000 people a week have been sent letters by Centrelink requiring them to confirm expenditure and wages, with many being asked to pay back alleged debts, some of which have accrued over a six-year period.

Some of those who have chosen to investigate these debts have discovered huge inaccuracies, yet are struggling to prove these errors due to near impossible reporting requirements.

In the Bible, there are hundreds of passages, psalms, Gospel stories and references to debt, justice, the poor and the underdog. The most vulnerable are the favoured ones in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Matthew 25: 33-36 gives a particularly visual illustration to the human call to justice:

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

The Gospel of the Australian Government, needless to say, seems rather different.

Now, Anglicare Australia is not simply a naive service provider that doesn't understand how the economy works. While we wouldn't expect the government of a secular democracy to necessarily pay heed to Gospel values, the current system seems to actually be the antithesis of what Matthew 25 and other stories from ours and other traditions try to communicate.

Let me give an example. Last week, one of our member agencies relayed a story of a man who is currently in prison. Like many Australians, he received one of the Centrelink missives. Distressed by this, he is having difficulty working it out. Obviously, it's hard to access records where he is and he firmly believes the debt is a mistake, but his capacity to access online services, records and payslips from the last six years has been significantly diminished.

Stories abound from other agencies which show all manner of circumstances. There are lots of hungry, sick, disabled and incarcerated people who are receiving these letters.

The problems around the Centrelink data matching project were known well ahead of the government's automated roll out around Christmas. If there is any time of the year when the poor are doing it tough, Christmas is usually that time. Christmas is also the time that some charity and advocacy groups shut down, adding an extra layer to the stress experienced as a result.

In essence, it is the failure to take the impact of these processes seriously which concerns us.

While we certainly believe that people should pay the tax they owe, and get income support and other government allowances as they need and are entitled to, we would expect government and its agents to treat the people affected with respect.

We acknowledge that mistakes will be made in these as in all complex systems. However, it reflects poorly on Government Ministers who reject out of hand the evidence of complexity, inaccuracy and distress that are the result of the adoption of this clumsy automated approach.

The most worrying aspect of this system is the difficulty to follow-up with an actual person by means of the Centrelink website or phone system. Some people have spent hours on hold attempting to resolve these issues, and they tell us that often all that happens is that they are referred to Lifeline. Quite simply, there is no government agency cleaning up the mess that they have created.

To us, this seems as though the Government does not want to take responsibility for an impossible burden. To use another biblical analogy, the Government is taking the splinter out of the eyes of vulnerable people while it ignores the log in its own.

During the same month that politicians' benefits are being investigated, it seems quite farcical to be asking the most vulnerable to pay back alleged debts, while the most privileged decision makers in the country are unwilling to disclose their own spending.

We are not advocating that people should not have to pay back money that is genuinely owed, but rather, we are asking for a conversation about the way in which this is done. We would also humbly suggest a more compassionate approach to providing welfare where it is needed, an approach which values the most important biblical principal of human dignity - regardless of circumstance or background.

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