



THE GREAT
**WELFARE
HIJACK**

Nick Costello

WARNING - CHALLENGING CONTENT

How did it happen? How does it ever happen? How does insecurity give rise to prejudice, and how does that prejudice mutate into systemic segregation and genocide? We have seen it happen throughout history, and we know what's behind it, yet we continue to turn a blind-eye to **it** for the same reason our ancestors did; We insist on keeping **it** in the shadows so we can maintain a degree of plausible-deniability and avoid responsibility for the part we play in **it**; We can pass judgement on the way **it** plays out in other cultures and different nations, yet we fall silent when questions are raised about **it** in our own; We can distract ourselves with high ideals and moral quests in our own lives, yet still ignore injustice in our own communities; We can see the lines **it** draws between us, yet never express concern about them until they hurt us directly; We know our political leaders use **it**, but we rarely dig deeply enough through the spin to see how **it** works; We don't seem to even want to see politics for what it is when politics is nothing more than the art of getting what you want, and many of us seem to think we will keep getting what we want through passive compliance.

How does **it** work, what does **it** look like, and how can we take control of **it**? The clues are all around us, but many are hidden and make little sense on their own. It is only when we step back and look at the bigger picture that we can see how the process works, and one place we can see **it** clearly is in our response to global industrial change. Social-engineers have been using **it** for generations to protect the mainstream economy from collapse, and they have been doing so by segregating disadvantage from affluence through a deliberate process of keeping poor people in poverty. **It** is their major tool, and it is our love of **it** that gives them the power to separate us from each other and rob us of justice.

If you haven't guessed yet, **it** is **expediency**; some people might prefer to use the word "**easy**". **It** has always been the greatest obstacle to justice, and it remains powerful only as long as it is hidden. That is why I have spent some time following **it's** footprints to help you understand how **it** works and how **it** can be used to benefit one group at the expense of another. **It** is often hard to track down because **it** often hides in unwritten-law and dishonest behaviour, but **it** is not so easily hidden when things must be written down. That is why a good place to look for **it** is in government documents and media reports, and the secret to finding **it** lies, not just in looking closely at what is said, but also in taking notice of the holes that are left when things are omitted. One place where **it** is particularly noticeable is the area of welfare-politics, not only in the language used, but also in the corrupted philosophy of processes and programs that have caused harm to innocent people. That is why the time has come to lay **it** bare for all to see.

Talking about **it** has always been difficult owing to the secrecy surrounding **it**; that is why I have given **it** a name for the sake of this discussion – **the Golden Lie**. All of us have been touched by the Golden Lie in one way or another. For some of us it has been a benefit, while for others, it has been a curse. For me, it has been an education. Once you have seen it, you can't unsee it, and opening other people's eyes to it is the key to taking back control of your own life and restoring justice to our society.



This is a story forty years in the making. It began with a young man trying to find a place to belong in a rapidly changing world, and follows him on a journey of discovery. It's not a pretty story, but it's an important story because it comes with a warning about a monster we all know, yet fear to speak of. This monster has no face, and defies our efforts to understand it, yet it is powerful enough to tear communities apart and banish human hearts to an exile of condemnation and destitution.



INTRODUCTION

I have a confession to make:- I have an attitude-problem, and it has haunted me for much of my life. I have tried to let go of it many times, but it keeps coming back. I have picked at it, and looked at it many times to find out what drives it, but I have been told many times to just let it go.

That's easy when you're an obsessive optimist. The country we live in has way too much sunshine for us to dwell on gloom and doom, yet each year when Australia Day rolls round, I find myself wondering what we are celebrating. Is it our freedom in a democratic society, our comfortable lifestyle, our ability to drink beer and burn sausages on a barbecue? Is it about mateship and the fair go, or is it about our shared pursuit of the Australian Dream – a secure job, a home of our own, a family and a clear vision of the future? But who are "we"? Are Indigenous Australians included? Are unemployed and homeless people included? What does it take to be a member of the Australian family?

Why should it matter? You see, I grew up with expectations, that we lived in a free society, guided by Christian-democratic ideals and the idea that everybody should be treated fairly; I grew up believing that anything was possible with hard work, determination and access to resources, and that if any problem cropped up, the best way to deal with it was to think it through, talk it through, and work it through. I took reassurance from the fact that I was living in "the Lucky Country", where anybody who was prepared to work hard could get ahead, and the opportunity to live a productive and rewarding life was a birthright.

What I hadn't understood back then was that events were in train that would lead to a global redistribution of work and wealth, and that the society I thought I understood would not respond well to the changes that came with it. Where I expected to see analysis, I found only silence; Where I expected to find concern, I found only blind-optimism; When I asked questions, I was met with hostility, and when I persisted in seeking answers, I was attacked in the media.

It didn't take long for me to work out that people in high places were hiding something, and when I dug deeper, I found glaring inconsistencies in Federal Government welfare policy. For a while, I thought I was looking at a conspiracy, yet the fact that ordinary people also seemed anxious when I spoke out in defense of unemployed people made me think I might be witnessing a social phenomenon. Then it occurred to me that the unspoken-law-of-the-pack was at work, and a process of social-exclusion was underway. At first, I thought it might be an aberration that would be noticed and resolved, but when a pattern of bias and omission began to appear in government policies and documents, it became clear to me that the problem had seeped into the very fabric of our institutions.

More recently, developments in the Federal Government's ongoing program of welfare reform have revealed the presence of a long-term-strategy aimed at eroding the rights and spending-power of income-support-recipients, and that program looks set to culminate in a back-door-attempt to hijack and privatise the payments-system and force disadvantaged Australians into a system of what can best be described as economic apartheid.

These things have been creeping up on us across decades, but they also echo a historic pattern that should not be ignored. Such systemic acts of separation have led to monstrous crimes against humanity in the past, and I fear such things could happen in our own country if we choose to ignore the warning signs. At first glance, you might think the things I describe here are incidental, and that nobody is responsible, but that would be a mistake. Once the Golden Lie is factored-in, the process can be seen as anything but an accident, and the guilty parties can no longer avoid accountability. This book explains how they did it.







HOW DID WE GET HERE ?

A SHIFT IN VALUES

Where does evil come from? Somewhere else? Someone else? We should have known better than to believe that; we had seen it all before, in the slave-trade that led to the American Civil War, in the Nazi purges of 1930's Germany, in the starvation-purges of Stalin's Russia, in the Ku Klux Klan's reign-of-terror in the deep south of the United States, on Cambodia's killing-fields, in Zaire and the Balkans, and more recently in Myanmar, Afghanistan and Yemen. We always told ourselves it could never happen here. We were living in the "Lucky Country"; we had democracy and freedom; there was plenty of opportunity and employment to go round, and anybody who wanted to advance themselves through hard work could do so.

So, what happened? How could a nation famous for mateship and the "fair go" become so divided, and how could prejudice and paternalistic-control come to dominate Federal Government policy aimed at our most vulnerable citizens? As it happens, the process is quite straightforward, and the motivations are the same as they have been elsewhere in history:- People find security in prosperity and the constancy of time-honoured-institutions; Whenever uncomfortable change comes, they cling to the status quo and construct a vision of collective-interest with a combination of nostalgia and tribal identity; People who aren't the same as them, or don't share their values, are seen as "the other", to be shunned and persecuted.

That is clearly what has been happening in this country for some time, but many people still don't see it. That's probably because much of the change we have experienced in recent history, though profound, has been hidden, and it has been hidden for a long time.

In the years following World War Two, western nations went through a period of reconstruction and recovery. In Australia, people were doing their best to regain the sense-of-normality they felt before the shooting started, but change was already taking place. Some of the women who had worked in factories during the war weren't very keen on going back to their traditional role as housewives, and with the advent of birth-control, their choices expanded.

At the same time, everybody's choices increased with the huge expansion in manufacturing and the consumerism that went with it. As wages rose, and disposable-income turned survival into aspiration, workers began to realise that they had more choices than before, and that some of the old ways of doing business weren't so good after all. With those greater choices came disillusion with old ideas and outdated institutions. A mass-exodus away from Christian churches led to a spiritual void that was swiftly filled with consumerism. Power-shopping became a popular source of recreation, and pursuit of the Australian Dream became our new national religion.

Through the 1980's and 90's, we fell in love with Market Capitalism. Those of us who weren't buying consumer-goods were travelling overseas, or investing in the share-market. More people than ever before had access to plastic-money and lines-of-credit, and home-ownership became the dream of everyone who had secure employment. The idea that individuals could build personal wealth while generating revenue through employment became the glue that held our society together. No matter where in the world a person came from, no matter what their race, religion or cultural background was, if they took up the challenge to work for the Australian dream, they would be made welcome.



For a while, life for the majority of Australians would be sweet, but a seismic-shift was just around the corner. Industrial change was generating a major redistribution work and wealth across the globe. For some businesses in Australia, operating-costs became so high that many decided to move their operations offshore to countries where wages were lower and industrial-standards more relaxed. At the same time, technological advancements led to the automation of assembly-lines and less need for large workforces.

One of the major drivers of all this was the United Nations Lima Declaration, which called on western nations to relax tariff-barriers and provide assistance to developing nations to build their industries and rise out of poverty. As noble as this request was, it had a sting in its tail. It provided a green-light to cashed-up-investors in western nations to line their pockets by investing offshore while manufacturing in their own countries was left to rot. The result was twofold:- The flow of investment-capital out of the country damaged local productivity and destroyed the livelihoods of blue-collar-workers; and the flow of profits into the pockets of Australians who had invested offshore widened the gap between rich and poor people at home.

In the long term, this would have consequences, but for a while, the economic news was all good. As well as booming profits from mining and agriculture, our nation's economic-managers were raking in the proceeds of PAYE taxation from a slowly dwindling workforce while, at the same time, gathering rich pickings through taxation on share-dividends. People with money were making more money while workers lacking specialist skills at the bottom end of the labour-market were being left behind. Our political-leaders must have known this would led to problems further down the track, but the easy-money-option was too tempting to ignore.

Exactly how many of them might have benefited directly through such things was anybody's guess. At one point, Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett was suspected of having investments in the Chinese city of Qunjong, yet he managed to deflect suggestions of impropriety by explaining that the shares were in his wife's name. For philosophical Australians, what was lost on the swings could be gained on the roundabouts, but those who had the advantage of eh loophole stood to gain a lot more ground.

The emergence of a gap between rich and poor did not go unnoticed. It had been anticipated as early as the mid-1970's, when the Lima Declaration had been signed. Our political leaders knew there would be a decline in employment-opportunities, yet they were very reluctant to admit it. They feared that, if the truth was known, public-confidence in investment might crumble, and we might see a repeat of the Great Depression of the 1930's. That fear probably prompted them to create NAIRU (the Non-Accelerating Rate of Unemployment). This is a theoretical measurement by which it is possible to sustain the lowest possible rate of unemployment without causing an increase in wage-growth or inflation. NAIRU can't be measured directly, yet its use can create an image of full employment while as much as 5 percent of the workforce remains jobless.

With NAIRU, economic managers had a safety-valve; a "get-out-of-jail-free-card", but it came with a sting in the tail. It only worked when unemployment remained within manageable parameters. When it started to exceed those parameters, it became necessary to tweak the numbers.



THE STAIRCASE OF OPPORTUNITY



INVESTMENT CAPITAL FLOWS OFFSHORE



WORKERS STRUGGLE TO MAKE ENDS MEET



LOCAL MANUFACTURING CRUMBLES



PROFITS FLOW BACK TO INVESTORS



NOBODY'S TALKING

IN 1969, THE ENTIRE SOCIAL SECURITY CASELOAD FOR THE WESTERNPORT REGION WAS ADMINISTERED FROM TWO DESKS IN AN OFFICE ABOVE THE COMMONWEALTH EMPLOYMENT SERVICE IN DANDENONG...

WITHIN A DECADE, THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SECURITY HAD BECOME AN EMPIRE WITH LARGE OFFICES IN MANY SUBURBS AND REGIONAL TOWNS IN THE AREA



IN 1997, John Howard encouraged us to invest money in China. Then he explained that his government had no power to interfere with BHP's decision to take operations offshore. Now he claims that poor literacy and numeracy are major reasons for youth unemployment. He's serious. That's scary.
Nick Costello, Boronia



COULD someone please explain to me how our Prime Minister can "congratulate the men and women of Australian business who have invested" in China's "extraordinary economic phenomenon" and then turn around and demand that 900,000 unemployed Australians seek work that does not exist in order to qualify for income support?
Nick Costello, Boronia

Tony Abbott once explained this in an oblique way during an interview on Channel Nine's Sunday program when he said: *"The government has two fundamental tasks: First, to try and ensure that the economy is as buoyant as possible, and second, to try to ensure that we have structures in place so that, at any given level, unemployment is lower than it would otherwise be, and that's where policies like mutual obligation and work for the dole are so important"*.

That desire to keep unemployment low on paper provided a strong incentive to cook the books, yet direct proof of doctoring was hard to come by. In 1999, Treasurer Peter Costello, conceded that the level of joblessness at the time would not drop below 7.5 per cent in the immediate future. It seemed to me that he was confirming earlier criticism from the Council of Small Business Organizations that: *"... Treasury analysts appeared to have quietly increased the level of structural unemployment deemed acceptable for the purposes of Budget projections from 5.5 per cent to about 7.5 per cent, leading to 'an unmandated level of complacency."* (The Age 2-3-98)

As time went by, the filtering tricks for jobless data became more sophisticated. The Australian Bureau of Statistics no longer took its jobless figures from other government agencies, but from its own survey of the general population. The survey covered about 60,000 people (26,000 households, or 0.32 per cent of the population) per month. Then, additional layers were added with various filters, such as the "participation-rate", "seasonal adjustment", "underutilisation", use of the word "jobless" instead of "unemployed", and by applying the "one hour rule", by which a person needed to work only one hour during the survey period to be classified as "employed". According to one source, the unemployment rate in November 2013 was 5.8 per cent, yet the underemployment rate for the same month was 7.6 per cent and the underutilisation rate was 13.4 per cent.

Arriving at a definitive figure was also elusive. According to one definition the unemployment rate could be defined as *"the number of people actively looking for a job divided by the labour force"*, but when variables such as underemployment entered the equation the goalposts moved yet again and the numbers could be further distorted. Each filter was brought into play when required to smooth out the picture and ease public disquiet, and over the years the unemployment-rate has remained relatively constant in spite of fluctuations in the nation's economic fortunes.

Unfortunately, this solution proved to be a double-edged-sword. While the economy could chug along nicely, unemployment continued to rise in real terms. At the same time, investors were given a free hand, economic-activity grew, and inflation inevitably followed. The gap between rich and poor grew, but those snuggled in the comfortable Mainstream scarcely noticed it. Their own experience reinforced their vision of Australia as a land of opportunity, and in that belief, they decided that those who had fallen through the cracks were simply lazy.

This gave rise to some ironic situations. In 1997, John Howard accompanied a business delegation to China. While there, he was interviewed by a television news crew and said: *"I would like to congratulate the men and women of Australia who have invested in this extraordinary economic phenomenon."* At the same time, he was complaining that youth unemployment in Australia was a product of poor literacy and numeracy in schools.

TURNING ONE JOB INTO THREE

Across the years since then, the belief that secure, well-paid employment existed for anybody who wanted it has persisted, in spite of the fact that even the most conservative statistics have shown that job-applicants have outnumbered job-vacancies many times over. All the while, dole-bludger-propaganda was thrown around like confetti to hide the inability of our political leaders to show us where the jobs really were.

More recently, the lies about unemployment have focused on job numbers because changes in the labour-market have made jobs more numerous. Government Ministers have regularly taken credit for having created "1 million jobs in 5 years". Numbers like that might sound impressive, but they're really just spin.

One of the major labour-market-trends of recent years has been the breaking down of traditional long-term-jobs into smaller units. Given that many manufacturers operate on a seasonal basis where production-schedules are quiet at certain times of the year, it makes little sense to employ a full compliment of staff all year if some are not needed. Consequently, some employees are hired on a short-term-basis, with a 3-month-stint being common, so there's a good chance that wherever a standard, long-term-job is broken down into 3 units of 3 months each, there will be an increase in "new jobs"

Each of these jobs will run from 9 to 5, Monday to Friday, and therefore be classified as "full-time", each will be classified as a "new" job every time the 3-month-stint is over and replaced by another unit, and each will be added to the tally. In this way, 1 traditional job becomes three in a twelve-month-period, representing a 300 percent increase for that 1 position. Over time, the same job-unit might be churned through the labour-market multiple times and be counted as "new" each time it is readvertised. In this way, it becomes possible to create 1 million "new, full-time jobs" in 5 years from a base of just 60,000.

This trend has led to a marked increase in turnover in the labour-market, and while it might suggest jobs-growth, it actually represents a neutral-gain-situation. The employer is saving money by not hiring unneeded staff during lean times, but the absence of the worker does not represent a loss because no work would have been done in that time. As a result, we can see a statistical gain in jobs for a nil increase in productivity. At the same time, the increased activity at the temp-agencies means that members of the established pool of short-term-workers are most likely to pick up the "new" jobs while unemployed people largely miss out.

This phenomenon is also responsible for an increase in underemployment. For several years, I was among the people who survived on a mixed diet of short-term-employment and government-income-support-payments. While I never experienced difficulty with overpayments, I can understand how people working in jobs with shorter turn-around-times might have regularly experienced difficulty reporting their incomes to Centrelink. Many of the people who suffered at the hands of Robodebt were victims of these circumstances. Robodebt worked on a theoretical calculation of how much a worker might have earned in a



A STANDARD LONG-TERM, FULL-TIME JOB



ORIGINAL JOB REDUCED TO FOUR SHORT-TERM-JOBS WITH LOADINGS REMOVED



OWING TO THE SEASONAL NATURE OF MANUFACTURING, FEWER WORKERS ARE REQUIRED IN QUIET TIMES, SO ONE UNIT IS TAKEN OUT

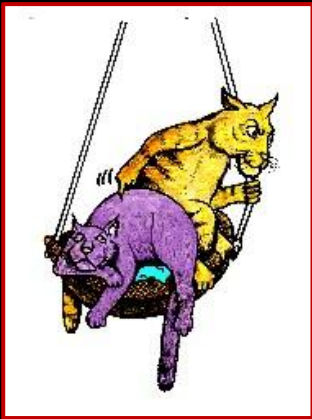


AS EACH OF THESE JOBS IS SHORT-TERM, AND EMPLOYER CAN HIRE PEOPLE FOR A FEW MONTHS AT A TIME. AND READVERTISE WHAT IS EFFECTIVELY THE SAME POSITION MANYTIMES OVER



IN THIS SINGLE EXAMPLE, ONE OLD JOB CAN BECOME 3 IN 12 MONTHS, AND COUNTED AS 15 "NEW JOBS" IN A FIVE YEAR PERIOD.

GIVEN THAT THIS IS PROBABLY HAPPENING IN MANY THOUSANDS OF FACTORIES, MANY MORE JOBS CAN BE CREATED WITH NO INCREASE IN PRODUCTIVITY OR JOB-SECURITY



given period, but when these periods fluctuated it was very hard to report earnings within the rigid time-frames set by the bureaucracy. When these jobs involved contract or sub-contract work, reportage could be even more complicated and fragmented, and the difference between theory and reality even more stark.

These problems have grown out of an earlier anomaly. The "Work Test" was used to determine an applicant's eligibility for support based on having demonstrated a desire to seek work by applying for positions that were often beyond reach. Personally, I found this system unrealistic and unfair, particularly when it was clear our political leaders were lying about unemployment. During periods in which I found myself unemployed, I protested about this several times.

During 1996, I seldom saw an advertisement for a job for which I was qualified, so when Job-Seeker-Diaries loomed on the horizon, I wrote a letter which I attached to my fortnightly application-form. After that, I was lodging my form every two weeks with an attached message. It read: *"I am unable to provide you with details of employers I have contacted because I am unable to find work for which I am qualified."*

What followed was a protracted standoff involving letters, interviews and threats. I explained my concerns about the rigid nature of the Work Test, and provided names of employers I had spoken to where I could, but that wasn't enough. I was expected to provide details of employers or face suspension under sections 513 and 522 of the Social Security Act.

The game went on for 7 weeks, and in the final meeting I was told something strange. Apparently, I was "not yet in default", but if I didn't provide the required details I would be suspended, have to wait 3 months to reapply, and then be given a Jobseeker Diary. All I would be required to do was provide details of two employer each fortnight, so that was what I did - rocket scientist, nuclear physicist, it didn't seem to matter.

Several years later, in October 2001, I started working on a casual, on-call basis for a display company through a temp agency. Work was on-demand and infrequent, so I continued to lodge my fortnightly form. As I was working, I was unable to personally lodge the form, so I sent it by mail, explaining my situation and asking for advice. Having notified Centrelink of my circumstances, I thought nothing of it when I heard nothing more and received no payment for that fortnight. However, I was surprised when I didn't receive a Newstart form for my next fortnightly lodgement. As I was receiving wages on a regular basis, I wasn't too worried about this, but I was surprised when I received a letter in the post informing me that my Newstart Allowance had been cancelled. The cancellation itself didn't surprise me, but the stated reason for cancellation - failure to lodge a renewal form - did.

When I telephoned to find out what was going on, I was told that my form had not been returned, so I explained that I had posted it. The woman I was speaking to agreed that my form had been received, but "couldn't be processed" because I had given no details of how much I had earned. This had been difficult because the form was due for return before I had been paid for my first week's work. Apparently, somebody had attempted to contact me by phone, but couldn't get in touch. I didn't know why nobody sent a "please explain" letter, nor could I understand why nobody saw fit to answer the questions I asked in the note accompanying my Newstart form.

During this telephone conversation, I was told that I could visit the Centrelink office to fix things up, but as I was on-call and getting paid, I didn't worry about it. However, when the flow of work dried up in the last few weeks of December I grew concerned that I might be left without money over Christmas, so I reapplied for Newstart Allowance.



I filled out all the forms, and eventually got paid one fortnightly payment, but that was all I received. The hoops I had to jump through to qualify for income support were ridiculous: Getting two employers to sign a form stating that you had attended an interview, that they were genuinely offering work, and that, in their opinion, you really wanted a job. I was also given a dole diary and told I had to register with several jobs network providers.

I decided against continuing with the charade, so I returned my form when it was due without including details of employers I had contacted, and without the form which should have been signed by the employers I was supposed to have visited.

This exercise was farcical. As I couldn't find any work for which I was qualified, I would have had to apply for jobs that I couldn't realistically hope to get. Therefore, when it came to the bit where the employer was supposed to state whether or not I wanted the job, he would be forced to ask why I should apply for work for which I wasn't qualified. The fact that virtually no jobs existed within my reach was irrelevant, because my stating the truth about job shortage had long been considered an excuse used by people who weren't trying hard enough to find employment.

Knowing that the lack of information about employers would not satisfy Centrelink, and my Newstart Allowance would be terminated anyway, I wrote something on the form. It read: *"I'll never convince you that work for me is practically non-existent. Your aim is to cut down on applicants, so this one shouldn't be too hard. I'll have no income, but I can't go on playing your silly games to prove I'm not a cheat."*

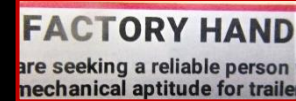
Not surprisingly, I received no payment and no renewal form in the post that week. Instead, I received a Notification of Termination letter. Once again, the stated reason for termination was: "form was not returned."

When I inquired about this, I was told I had "left the form at the counter". I explained that I handed it to the person standing behind the counter, but the woman I was speaking to told me the form couldn't be processed because I had not provided evidence of my efforts to find work. I insisted that the form was processed, because my benefits were terminated.

The message I was being given was that when a form was handed in without the necessary information on it, it's receipt was not manually entered into the computer, and the computer automatically registered a "non-lodgement"

This procedure might have been useful from an administrative point-of-view, but it presented a serious threat in the area of potential abuse. Centrelink staff probably welcomed it because it spared them the anguish of being forced to make a judgement on an applicant's honesty, but it also proved to be an effective tool in concealing administrative anomalies or rebellion by recipients because it arbitrarily imposed breaches on recipients - breaches that could not be challenged. I accepted the verdict, but I wasn't happy with the process, so I lodged a complaint. I knew it wouldn't make any difference, but at least it was on the record, not that that would have made any difference. As things turned out, it hadn't made any difference, because in 2009, I was back playing the same ridiculous game.

Once again, it followed a period of casual employment. I reapplied for Newstart Allowance and was given a Jobseekers Diary to fill out. I was required to apply for ten jobs per week between January and March. However, I was unable to find enough jobs and listed only forty for the period instead of the required 120. Of course, I had found many more job-listings in my search, but they were jobs for which I was not qualified.





When the desk-clerk discovered that I had not provided the required number of job applications per fortnight, she refused to accept the form or the diary. She suggested that I visit my Jobs Network provider, fill out the blank spots, and hand it in before 5.00 pm. I asked how I could insert currently-listed vacancies together with those listed two months ago in all honesty, and she didn't see any problem with doing so. I insisted that would be dishonest, and said I wanted to hand my form in as it was. I accepted that failing to provide the required information would result in a penalty, but each time I attempted to hand the diary over, the clerk repeatedly refused to take it.

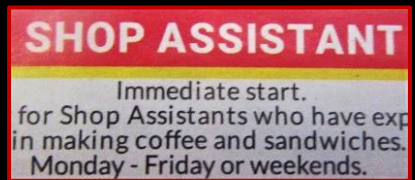


I pressed the matter, insisting that she take the diary as it was. I acknowledged that this would lead to suspension of my payments, but explained that I thought the reason for that suspension should be the lack of information in the diary rather than just the stock-response of "form not returned". It became a stand-off, and when the situation threatened to escalate into a heated argument, I decided to leave.

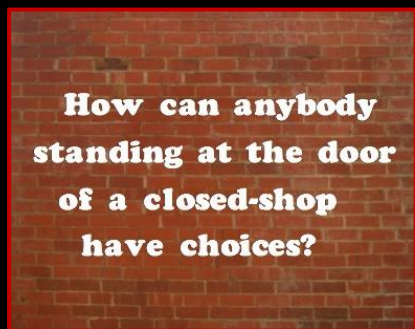


Soon afterwards I received official notification of suspension of my Newstart Allowance. The stated reason for suspension was "Form not returned".

This situation pointed, once again, to the basic flaw in the welfare-system. Whenever politicians want to sell morally-questionable welfare-policies they claim they want to "send a message" to the people they have targeted, yet the real message is that applicants should falsify information to satisfy unrealistic requirements and meet quotas.



Not only was this approach inappropriate, but it also demonstrated how little these people knew about the experience of living on welfare. When a person lost their work, their comforts, their place in society, many of their friends, and the promise of a secure future, one of the few things that person had to call their own as their word. An assault on that by someone who sought to steal from them is an assassination of their very spirit. In my book, it was no different to a case of rape or abuse in which the perpetrator demanded that the victim remain silent.



This came as no real surprise to me because the Federal Government's intentions had been clearly stated in the mid-1990's when it dismantled the Commonwealth Employment Service and passed the task of helping jobless people find work to the hands of the private sector. That was a logical step to take, given the fact that jobs were in short supply. After all, how could Government Ministers insist there was plenty of work to go round when the government organisation tasked with finding it – the C.E.S. – couldn't? The only way they could maintain their lies about "plentiful work" was to distance themselves from a potentially embarrassing situation and continue to punish "dole-bludgers" who failed to go along with their game.

The pattern was clear:- Deception was acceptable in the maintenance of an illusion of prosperity – a Golden Lie.

A WALL OF SILENCE


The presence of this Golden Lie makes it clear that Australia's economic-settings have been rigged in favour of investors, yet the truth of this is something you won't hear about in everyday conversation because the mere mention of it is likely to expose uncomfortable facts that shake public-confidence and trigger an economic-collapse. Wrapped up in all this is the preservation of low interest-rates in the housing-industry, and with the Australian Dream having been elevated to sacred-cow-status, inconvenient facts cannot be allowed to rain on the parade.

For many, the choice to block out the truth is a subconscious one. It is tied up with a real phenomena called cognitive dissonance. When an inconvenient fact conflicts with a person's chosen values-system, that fact can be dismissed out-of-hand.

You can explain this to a person in denial, and your words might not even register. I can remember having asked questions about this at times, with the response from those asked having been similar to that of a rabbit caught in a car's headlights at night. Denial was as impossible as acknowledgement, so standing there with the pause-button on seemed to be the only option for these people – that is the power of the Golden Lie.

This is where we find the first step in the process of separation between those who are favoured and those who are shunned. The mere presence of unemployed people who couldn't find jobs raised questions about where those jobs may or may not be found. Given that many did not exist, and given that the truth of that could not be divulged, another reason for their joblessness had to be found, and the most convenient excuse lay in the myth of the dole-bludger – that they were simply too lazy or too fussy to seek employment. Of course, the accusation would never be investigated because it could easily be disproven, so the innuendo simmered in the background.

All this leads us to another observation about our changing values. The open discussion of disadvantage is an exercise in democratic process, yet that discussion had been shut down for economic reasons. That meant that a choice had been made between fairness and economic-expediency. In our silence, we had chosen market-capitalism over objective analysis, and we compensated for it by ensuring that displaced workers were able to survive by maintaining a welfare-safety-net. The trouble was, it wasn't designed as a long-term-solution to their plight, but a short-term supplement until they could find work and get back on their feet. In effect, all we were doing was providing benevolent assistance out of a sense-of-duty to the concept of Christian charity we were not yet willing to abandon. Perhaps that was why we couldn't look on disadvantaged people as equals, but rather as sinners who needed to redeem themselves before their status as equals could be returned to them. In the absence of real opportunities for many of these people, the welfare system was doing little more than isolating them from the mainstream economy. That should have been seen as a warning-sign, yet nobody appeared to take much notice,



GIVE A MAN A FISH
AND HE EATS FOR A DAY

TEACH HIM TO FISH
AND HE EATS FOR A
LIFETIME

SELL HIS NETS TO SOMEONE ELSE
AND YOU MAKE HIM A BEGGAR

CALL HIM A POOR FISHERMAN
WHEN YOU KNOW THE TRUTH
AND YOU MAKE YOURSELF A CHEAT

A SQUARE PEG

HOLY FAMILY
CHURCH



**LOCAL DRUG
USAGE
CAUSING
CONCERN**



When I left school in the 1970's, I was already behind the eight-ball. My family had immigrated to Australia in 1963, lured by the promise that we would be able to buy a home of our own without too much trouble. Unfortunately, the information my parents were given at Australia House in London was a misleading sales-pitch that led us into a financial-trap, abandon the house we had built in Knoxfield and find ourselves dumped in public-housing in Doveton. Growing up a Catholic in Doveton wasn't much fun.. Brutal nuns and the creeping malevolence of paedophile priests in primary school, followed by emotionally-damaged Christian brothers, class-distinction and bullying in secondary school crippled my ability to learn very much, and the limited skills I entered the workforce with led to a succession of low-paid-jobs that led nowhere.

Ironically, my Christian upbringing instilled a strong sense of social-justice in me, and having witnessed the social unrest of the 1960's, the Civil-Rights-Movement in the United States, the inspiring lives of John and Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and the monstrous way their voices were silenced, apartheid in South Africa, Indigenous protests in Australia, and the global movement of opposition to the Vietnam War, I clung to the idea that social-justice-activism was important.

In my own community, crime and drug-use were constant problems, and services for young people had been in short supply for a long time. I joined with other concerned folks and tried to push for improvements. Doveton had originally been constructed as a dormitory-suburb for the factories that had been built nearby Dandenong, but as the spectre of global industrial change began to rear its head, people began to lose their jobs and conditions in Doveton deteriorated. A measure of the change could be seen in the increased need for government services. In 1969, the Social Security needs of the entire Westernport Region were administered from two desks in an office above the Commonwealth Employment Service in Dandenong, yet by the 1980s, Social Security offices had sprung up in many suburbs and regional towns in the area, each with rapidly-growing case-loads.

At one point, I spoke out about the local drug-problem and a lack of support-services. When my name appeared in a local newspaper, a former school-friend whose father worked in law-enforcement approached me and told me to *"be careful what you say, because if you don't, your name will be written down in lots of books in lots of places and you will find it hard to get a job"*. I can't say for sure if my actions led to a black-ban of some kind, or if my lack of job-search-success at the time was just due to a slump in the labour-market, but I certainly struggled for a while.

Through the next few years, I endured a long period of unemployment and marginalisation. My experience in the community and my considerable artistic skill was of no use to me without formal qualifications, and it wasn't until 1984, through involvement in one of the Hawke Government's Commonwealth Employment Programs that I was finally able to put a little disposable-income away, buy a car and find longer-term-work. I stayed at the same factory for almost ten years, but when events in my personal life went pear-shaped, I drifted back into unemployment. I slipped into depression, but held onto my spirit. I can say with some pride that I have never been more than a social-drinker, have never used drugs or engaged in anti-social-behaviour. Still, I had plenty to be angry about, especially the way politicians and economists routinely lied about unemployment and persecuted unemployed people.

From 1994 onwards, I became increasingly vocal about the injustice I saw in welfare-politics. I began writing letters to newspapers, media-groups, reporters and politicians. I also became involved in social-activism and spoke publicly against programs like work-for-the-dole. For a while, I was a token unemployed person in an organisation formed by a loose alliance of NGOs and advocate-groups that called itself the National Coalition Against Poverty. I participated in activities organised by members of this group, speaking during Anti-Poverty-Week and attending an ACCOSS conference in Melbourne. Sadly, this experience did little more than reinforce my belief that the Golden Lie had long tentacles, and that many of the people who should have been standing up for disadvantaged Australians had, instead, chosen to bite their tongues and stay under the radar. This had always seemed to me to be cowardice, but it didn't take long for me to discover the real power driving the silence, although it would take me considerably longer to articulate it.

All I really knew back then was that a lot of people were reluctant to grapple with difficult questions. The idea of challenging unemployment statistics remained a serious sticking-point, so public discussion of related issues became difficult. Shunning was a real thing, and people from certain postcodes had always found it harder to get work than their counterparts from other areas. Prejudice played its part here, yet prejudice was never considered relevant, especially when politicians wanted to launch some new, punitive program that revealed their own deep biases. The formula was often the same:- Throw around a few negative stereotypes, add a little innuendo, promote the new program in a media-story loaded with negative images and misrepresented case-studies, and leave it to the latent fear and suspicion of the community to do the rest. Across the last two decades of "welfare reform" in this country, there have been many instances where defamatory language has been used to bolster the Golden Lie, and you don't need to look far to find them.

One of the greatest exponents of the craft was Tony Abbott. He defended questions about the government's ability to deliver employment opportunities by calling unemployed people "job snobs", is alleged to have defended inaction on homelessness by saying "some people choose to be homeless", and explained-away the presence of a class of people known as the "working-poor" on a Four Corners program by saying *"We can't eliminate poverty, because poverty is, in part, a function of individual behaviour. We can't stop people drinking; we can't stop people gambling; we can't stop people from having substance-problems; we can't stop people making mistakes that they might not otherwise make. We cannot eliminate poverty without also eliminating freedom, and that's the last thing any government should do."*

Abbott didn't explain what he meant when he said "in part", and in associating poverty with a threat to freedom, he implied that welfare recipients were enemies of the state. When he implied that poor people were drug, alcohol and gambling addicts, he was laying the foundations for the logic that would later go on to underpin the back-door-introduction of the cashless-debit-card. The connection is now clear, yet even today, few people seem willing to recognise it, perhaps due to the what has appeared to be the collusive role of media-groups. The fact that various newspapers and television current affairs programs have launched attacks on unemployed people at times when Federal Government Ministers have launched punitive programs aimed at disadvantaged Australians is more than a coincidence. At these times, critics of government policy have been demonised in an effort to silence them. I have particular reason to believe this because I have been a victim of it.

Welfare war

TONY ABBOTT has fired the first clear shot in the Government's pre-Budget propaganda war on welfare recipients. His opinion piece (5/3) would make Goebbels proud.

Most of the babble in this article conforms with the Coalition's time-honoured strategy of isolating the victims of industrial change from the social and economic context in which they exist.

Almost every statement here is an attempt to blame the nation's unemployment tragedy on the individual choices of people who, in reality, have no choices at all.

What I find most disturbing about this line of argument is that it ignores the statistically proven reality of job shortage to promote a narrow political agenda.

The Howard Government's demonisation of welfare recipients is so calculated and protracted that it makes the recent children-in-the-water fiasco look like a mere slip of the tongue.

Take a look at the Government's own documents. The stated aim of the "Australians Working Together" package is the elimination of welfare dependency through mutual obligation, yet the ingredient that is essential to its success — dialogue — isn't even part of the process, and welfare recipients aren't listed as members of its proposed "social coalition".

This isn't mutual obligation — it's social exclusion.

In coming weeks we are likely to be subjected to a barrage of information about welfare reform. Don't believe everything you hear.

Nick Costello
Boronia, Vic

Let the debate begin

IN September, Family and Community Services Minister Jocelyn Newman gave the green light for a public debate on what she described as "welfare-dependency" in Australia.

At the time she announced a government reference group to help develop initiatives.

Submissions were invited from the community.

At last, the chance was here for open discussion about our most widespread social problem. Finally, a chance to measure the impact of automation and globalisation on local manufacturing.

We could ask how Australian investment capital can flow offshore while unemployed people chase non-existent jobs to qualify for government income-support.

We had a chance to explore ways to provide chances for more Australians to take part in building our economic future.

But these things remain in the shadows while the dole-bludger mythology dominates.

If you haven't picked up the whisper yet, it seems that unemployment is a lifestyle choice instead of a national crisis.

Casual observers might be forgiven for thinking jobs are available for those who want them, but that's not what the

figures tell us. At least a half a million people simply can't find work.

Next March, Senator Newman will present a preliminary paper to Parliament.

If we are supposed to be having a public debate about welfare before then, when is it going to begin?

Nick Costello,
Boronia

Back in 2000, just 12 months after Jocelyn Newman announced the Howard Government's intention to establish a program of welfare-reform, not much appeared to have happened. That was when I decided to write another letter to the newspapers. I had become a regular contributor to the major dailies, and on this occasion, a letter I had written stirred the interest of Channel Nine's A Current Affair program. I received a telephone call from ACA produce Hugh Naylan, who offered me an opportunity to present my views. I agreed, reluctantly. I knew that the Australian community needed to get welfare reform right the first time, and was glad of the chance to help bring a little balance to the public debate. As things turned out, I should have known better.

Martin King came out to my home and we talked for well over an hour. The first thing he asked me was "Are you a dole-bludger?" and it quickly became clear what he wanted. A good many things were discussed during the interview, but when the story aired on June 23rd, all the effort I had put into it had been reduced to a couple of very brief comments and lashings of voice-over-innuendo. Other people who had been interviewed for the story lowered the tone even further, and an appointed expert named Doctor Lucy Sullivan threw in a bit of moralism for good measure. That was when it became clear to me that I had been drawn into what was probably a government-sponsored story that had been specifically designed to promote a punitive agenda by discrediting anyone who might ask inconvenient questions.

The next morning, Sydney radio shock-jock, Stan Zemanek wanted his pound of flesh. He called me a dole-bludger and threw some of the misleading statistics that the ACA report had put up, suggesting that the government was paying me \$600.00 a week. I told him to get his fact right, and we argued for about 20 minutes, with a few insults flying back and forth. I was tempted to hang up several times, but I toughed it out, and in the end it was Zemanek who hung up.

I didn't like the beating I copped, but I had to take it on the chin. What could I do? Legal action would have been nice, but it would have been my word against Channel Nine's, and I could never hope to counter the legal muscle that the members of the Packer Press commanded.

I did what I could. I contacted Media Watch, and the response was positive. I sent them detailed information about what had happened, and I understood when they told me that they would have to defer the presentation of my story for a while. They anticipated that more negative coverage of unemployment would come to light when the McClure Report was published, but unfortunately, the Government postponed any decision about the report's findings until the release of the 2001-2002 Budget, so any hope I had of getting a fair hearing evaporated.

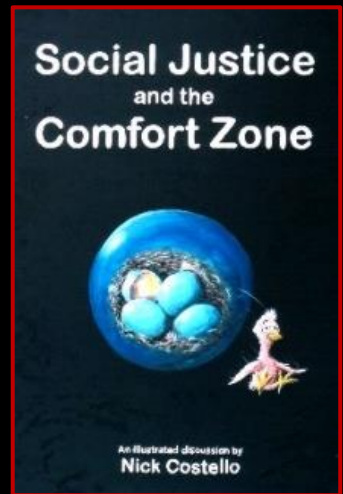
I also contacted ACOSS, as that organisation had published a media-release that questioned the misleading figures about the ACA story, and I had been involved in anti-poverty-actions as an associate of the National Coalition Against Poverty a short time earlier. I had been hoping that such an advocacy organisation would be more supportive of my situation, but I got the distinct impression that the people I spoke to were more interested in keeping their distance. That was when I started to suspect that, even here, all was not right.

What do you do when your world comes tumbling down? Where do you take a broken heart when the foundations of your life are torn out from under you? What can you place your faith in when the very values you thought would carry you through the darkest adversity turn you into a pariah in your own community? How do you pick up the pieces, and rediscover faith and trust? I didn't know what to do, and for a while, I doubted myself, but in the end, I just kept doing what I had been doing:- seeking employment where I could find it and asking questions whenever I saw anomalies.

Much of what I observed was not easily quantifiable because the engineers of welfare reform had replaced quantitative data with qualitative data, anecdotes, innuendo and moralistic pronouncements. To make matters worse, genuine analysis was made more difficult through deliberate omission. Avoidance of any commitment to reciprocity in the application of the Mutual Obligation program was an obvious case-in-point. It was about then that it occurred to me that my focus should not have been on defending disadvantaged Australians, but shining a light on the huge holes that existed in Federal Government policy. The Golden Lie had grown so powerful because it had never been measured or defined. When something remains abstract, we can never hope to fully grasp it or manage it, but if people were made to see it, they could not then unsee it, and once that had happened, their decision to accept the social injustices that went along with it would be a conscious one that they could no longer hide from.

My first step in this direction came with the help of a man who was my job-service-provider at the time, and later became one of my most supportive friends. He was moving into some new offices where the previous occupants had left a number of framed prints hanging on the walls, which he had no use for. He gave them to me, and I painted new images on the boards, returned them to the frames, and used the pictures as the basis for an art-exhibition I put together titled "Social Justice and the Comfort Zone". In it, I used a blue sphere as a symbol to represent the comfort-zone Australia's mainstream community hid within to protect itself from harm while, at the same time, banishing "the other" to poverty.

The exhibition itself was moderately successful, although I never considered the possibility that any of the paintings were actually saleable. The point of the exercise had not been to raise money, but to raise awareness. Later, with help from friend in the community sector, I was able to display several of the works in Melbourne during Anti-Poverty-Week, but after that, I had no way of transporting them or storing them, so they ended up in the same place that some of my other artworks went, the rubbish-tip. That sort of thing was a reality I got used to, but I couldn't let such things stop me from trying. Some years, later, I painted more pictures for this series, but only one strong supporter and one family member ever paid a reasonable price for the work I had put into them. Such is life.



SUPPORT OR REFUTE

The power of the Golden Lie rests in the secrecy surrounding it. If it remains an obscure phenomenon, discussion of how it works is impossible, and those responsible for the damage it does can escape all accountability. That was a serious issue for a government plan that was supposedly based on reciprocity.

It seemed to me that if we were to have a social coalition based on the principle of mutual obligation, we needed dialogue. The first step in that dialogue was to come to an agreement on the basic assumptions underlying the conversation. Consensus about the true availability of work and the power of the recipient to influence welfare dependency was required; an appreciation of the impacts of globalisation on the local labour market was needed; all parties needed to understand about consolidated advantage in one part of the labour-market and an opportunities-gap in another. So, what was the hold-up? Why, after so many years, of lip-service about "*the most serious problem that we have*," was serious discussion of the issues nowhere to be seen in the public arena?

The continuing silence of politicians hardly seemed fair. Every fortnightly dole-form I received carried a warning that penalties existed for providing false or misleading information, yet Cabinet Members were free to avoid basic questions whenever it suited them. Where was the mutual obligation in that?

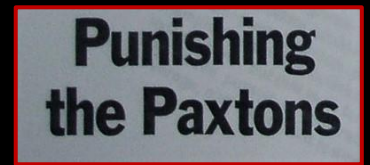
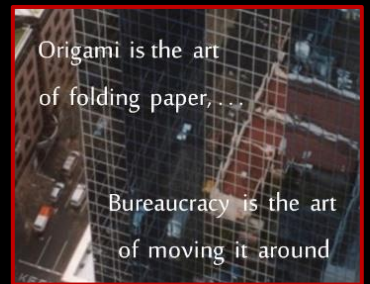
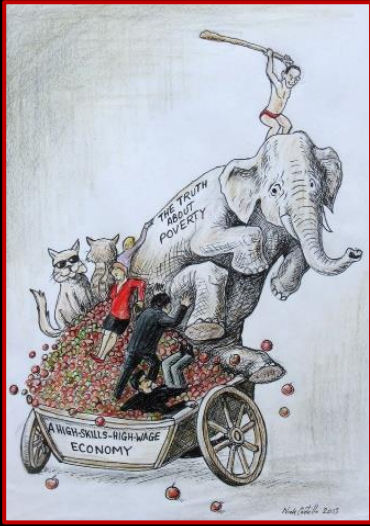
In October 2000, I attempted to get an answer straight from the horse's mouth. I sent emails to various politicians, and asked a specific question. I didn't really believe that any of them would give me a straight answer, but I felt obliged to ask anyway. The question read as follows: "*Given that employment is the main alternative to reliance on income-support; and given that Bureau of Statistics figures show that unemployed people outnumber job vacancies several times over; and given that automation and globalisation have led to job-losses - particularly in the manufacturing and rural sectors: by what criteria has the government decided that "welfare-dependency" is the chosen lifestyle of income-support recipients? In short, how can dole-bludger innuendo form the basis of government welfare policy?"*"

I sent letters containing this question to: Minister for Family and Community Services, Jocelyn Newman; the Minister for Community Services, Larry Anthony; the Minister for Employment Services, Tony Abbott; the Shadow Minister for Employment Services, Cheryl Kernot and Mark Latham. The only reply I received came from the Department of Family and Community Services (dated 15-11-2000). It was from David Kalisch, Executive Director of Social and Economic Participation, who wrote on behalf of the Minister for Family and Community Services and the Minister for Community Services. It read:

"Dear Mr Costello,

The Minister for Family and Community Services and the Minister for Community Services have asked me to reply to your email of 22 October 2000 about the Government's welfare reform program.

The OECD had found, and it is now well accepted, that the best route out of poverty is through employment. Australia, like many other countries, has moved towards approaches that are active rather than passive, including support and encouragement to build people's skills and help them to move back into the workforce, where they are able to do so.



"The Government is committed to maintaining a sustainable and adequate safety-net for people who are genuinely in need. However, the Government also recognises that it is necessary to do more to link people more actively to opportunities for social and economic participation. The Final report of the reference group on Welfare Reform provides a framework for long-term reform aimed at reducing economic and social disadvantage over time and encouraging increased economic and social participation, depending on capacity. The Reference Group's recommendations are consistent with the Government's social policy agenda and built on some of the changes that the government has already put in place. The Government will respond formally to the Report before the end of this year. Thank you for writing. I hope my comments are of assistance".

So, there it was: the government's revolutionary, whiz-bang welfare reform program for the new millennium was so comprehensive that it failed to address the most basic question. What was more, it seemed that the establishment of a reference-group may have been a mere formality in the first place.

I couldn't understand why Mr Kalisch had said *"the Reference Group's recommendations are consistent with the Government's social policy agenda and built on some of the changes that this Government has already put in place,"* unless the Government hadn't been serious about the consultation process from the outset. Why didn't he say that the Government's social policy agenda was consistent with some of the Reference Group's recommendations? I couldn't help wondering if *"some of the changes the government"* had *"already put in place"* had been implemented between September 1999 and December 2000 - a period when the Reference Group was consulting with the community and compiling its report. Looking back with hindsight, I would say the fix was in from the very beginning.

An interesting footnote to this little exercise came in the form of an unexpected telephone call I received one day. The woman at the other end of the line said she was Tony Abbott's assistant, and that a letter I had sent had been found behind a filing-cabinet during a move to another office and another portfolio. The contents of the letter weren't discussed, but she asked me if I had any message to pass on to him. I asked her to tell him that his attacks on unemployed people were unfair, and that he should leave them alone.

This was a cunning move on the part of Abbott. Having an assistant contact me by telephone enabled him to fulfil his obligations regarding responses to inquiries without engaging with me directly and without leaving a paper-trail.

In all my conversations with politicians, I never got a straight answer from anyone, and over time, I figured out why. As long as they could pretend they didn't know what you were talking about, they could maintain a position of "plausible deniability" from which they didn't have to explain anything. All the while, unemployed people were constantly on the back-foot, justifying their every move to stave off the constant attacks to their integrity delivered in the never-ending barrage of dole-bludger-mythology.

That sort of behaviour was common, and there was a reason for it. Denialism was more than just a character-trait: When it was linked to issues like unemployment, global-warming and anti-vaccination-campaigns, it became a weapon. In the United States, it was rusted-on to the Republican ideal of "Manifest Destiny" that convinced market-capitalists that their way of doing business was the only one that matters. At the same time, Donald Trump's dedication to Norman Vincent Peel's idea that self-belief could carry you through all obstacles, apparently even truth, emboldened them further. That put denialism in the same zone as the Goebbels' insistence that telling the same lie over and over will eventually convince people that it is true. Many a child would step forward to tell us the emperor had no clothes on, only to be demonised and dismissed by shadowy attackers - that was how they operated.

WHY DO WE KEEP DENYING THE SIMPLE FACT THAT JOB-SEEKERS OUTNUMBER JOB-VACANCIES MANY TIMES OVER?



Seeking justice in the field of welfare politics was a bit like playing poker against someone with deep pockets who continued to raise the stakes beyond the point at which you could call them to turn their cards over. When you compared the facts we had in our possession with the lies the Federal Government, used, it was clear our hand would have won, but the government's ability to constantly up the ante whenever we called them to show their cards robbed us of justice every time. All our political leaders had to do was wait, and sooner or later, their critics would just give up and go away.



THE WELFARE WAREHOUSE



Blaming the poor
for the crimes
of the greedy

IS EVIL



"Just get a job" - That was the mantra, and that formed the basis of welfare reform in this country for three decades. Government Ministers liked to remind us that "the best form of welfare is a job", but they had never been so big on where the jobs were supposed to come from. In spite of the fact that unemployed people had consistently outnumbered job-vacancies many times over, the welfare-focus in regard to joblessness was one of ensuring that job-seekers were job-ready and actively seeking work rather than ensuring that work actually existed for them.

Of course, that was logical enough given they were trying to maintain public-confidence in investment. People with money to spend always took precedence over those who had yet to reach break-even-point, and that was why little was invested in people who were considered industrially-irrelevant, and therefore unworthy of significant support.

Within this dynamic, it was hard to understand exactly what income-support for jobless people should have looked like. It was clear that disadvantaged people needed to be able to survive, and have enough money to meet their basic needs. That much was provided by law; and it was clear that abject poverty would lead to increased crime, public-health-problems, mental illness and suicide, not to mention a general decline in economic prosperity and property-values. For individuals experiencing difficulty, income-support, and ongoing contact with support-systems, provided engagement with the community and helped to nurture a sense-of-belonging-and-purpose. A social-safety-net was a very necessary part of a progressive society and economy.

However, any attempt to deliver such support was doomed to encounter a serious obstacle:- the Golden Lie. Owing to the ongoing concealment of the true extent of unemployment, many taxpayers clung to the belief that jobless people were not truly disadvantaged, and as such, were not entitled to money from the public-purse. That was why jobless people were treated like errant teenagers who needed to have their allowances cut and be sent to their rooms to consider the error of their ways. Regardless of the wording of Social Security Legislation, that was the sentiment that forged the philosophy of welfare-policy in Australia.

Of course, we still had an obligation to look after those who were clearly unable to fend for themselves. That was why we had no problem with Aged Pensioners, who had paid taxes all their lives, and visibly disabled people. People in either of these groups could show that they deserved to be helped, so it stood to reason that jobless people would have to prove that they deserved to be helped as well. The Golden Lie had already made it impossible for them to claim that work did not exist for them, so a different focus was developed.

That was why the "Work Test" was created. The test was applied to able-bodied jobless people of workforce age who were experiencing demonstrable financial hardship. Given that it was necessary for them to look for work if they were ever to find it, it made sense to make payment conditional on this task

This idea worked well for some time, but after a while it grew clear that secure, long-term-employment was becoming more elusive. That was when the "Activities Test" was adopted, with an applicant's ongoing eligibility to income-support becoming dependent on the performance of specific tasks, such as job-search, training-programs, work-for-the-dole, and later, volunteering-for-the-dole.

These new activities were promoted as a way to help jobless people engage with the community, but in reality, they were aimed at satisfying taxpayers that people who should be working were physically engaged in activities that looked like work. In this way, authorities were able to create an illusion of activity where there was really very little. This still satisfied a misinformed public because it created the impression that "dole bludgers" would not be paid to do nothing. For most participants, these activities were little more than hamster-wheel-exercises.

The idea was locked-in. With the belief that many income-support-recipients were malingeringers, the idea that "you've got to have a go to get a go" took hold. That was understandable because the idea of "having a go" was deeply ingrained in our national psyche, but when opportunities to have a go were hard to find, proving one's willingness to have a go was not so easy. As far back as 1975, the Henderson Royal Commission into poverty found that *"willingness to work cannot be proven by offering a person a job"*, yet demonstrations of willingness continued to be used as a measure of entitlement to income-support.

The big problem with that is that the process failed to recognise the real boundary between success and failure:- break-even-point. That was the point at which a person's income grew sufficiently large that a little extra money was left over after all the bills were paid. In the mainstream community, that was known as "disposable income", and much of that had provided the seeding-finance for investors to make themselves rich. As aspirational Australians climbed their own ladders of success, people trapped below the poverty-line remained trapped. Devotees of the Australian Dream continued to believe that all a poor person needed to do was work for a while, build a small nest-egg, and climb out of the hole. What they failed to realise was that the inflationary forces that were delivering them profits were also raising the barrier between rich and poor Australians.

Politicians continued to hide the truth about unemployment, and in much the same way we had replaced Christian-democracy with consumerism, we filled the information-vacuum that remained with moral pronouncements about fighting the evils of laziness. This was the point when prejudice replaced logic in the formulation of welfare policy. Media-reports attacking the credibility of welfare recipients grew more intense, especially at times when the Federal Government launched morally-questionable welfare-programs. It didn't take a genius to work out that this wasn't an accidental process. The language and the timing revealed a degree of cold, deliberate intent.





COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS

The fix was in, and as the wider community bought into the carefully-woven-propaganda, the social-engineers moved forward with their plans to further isolate disadvantaged people from the mainstream economy. That was when the term "community expectations" began to crop up in government documents, I always cringed a bit when I saw it. To me, it sounded like code for "we have no research to support our claim", so we will just throw a few stereotypes and misinformation into the mix to make people think we know what we're talking about". That was a recipe for bad policy.

Among the documents that have been put forward as part of the welfare "reform" process started by Patrick McClure is one titled *"A Better System, Better Employment Outcomes, and Better Social Outcomes"*. The authors of this publication defend the welfare "reform" process by stating:-*"the system is out of step with today's labour market realities and community expectations"*. As is often the case, the double-barrelled nature of the statement makes analysis difficult. The suggestion that the system is out of step with today's labour market realities seems quite accurate, but given that the Welfare to Work agenda operates in denial of labour market realities, it's hard to know what the point is here. Also, how is the system "out of step with community expectations"? Do the community expectations here involve the Federal Government's inability to satisfy community expectations about providing unemployed people with jobs, or are the community expectations more about a demand for punitive action and paternalistic control? That certainly seems to be what has been delivered.

Another problem with the term "community expectations" was that community expectations were changing. Membership in the new economy had come to be determined by individual income-levels. If a person managed to pay all their bills and have some leftover cash, they could be said to have passed "break-even-point", but if all their incomes went into paying living-costs, they could never get ahead. The more disposable-income a person was able to accumulate and grow through investment, the more highly-thought-of they were. The richer people became, the more they tended to believe that opportunities existed for everybody. In their eyes, anyone who worked hard could buy a home, raise a family and live a comfortable life, and over the years, their idea of how comfortable that life could be also changed. In the 1960's, a camping-holiday at Christmas was commonplace, yet by the 1990's, overseas holidays and ocean-cruises had been raised from luxury-treats to regular experiences, and, as such, came to be expected.

By the turn of the new millennium, investment in real-estate had become a popular pursuit, and while many affluent people found themselves living in McMansions on Easy Street, life on the margins was growing more desperate. Members of the mainstream community clung like limpets to their comfortable lifestyles under the protection of the same easy-money-logic that gave permission to get rich by investing in offshore-industries while our own manufacturing-sector was left to rot; the same easy-money-logic that sent jobless people fruit-picking for low wages while subsidized imports flooded our supermarkets; the same easy-money-logic that allowed rich investors to purchase multiple dwellings while low-income-earners fell into homelessness; the same easy-money-logic that allowed governments to fill their coffers with revenue from PAYE taxation, GST, taxation on share dividends, taxation on mining and gambling, and taxation on all manner of other things, including superannuation. It was a nice little profit-loop, and it all relied on the Golden Lie.

A HISTORIC PATTERN

All this might seem fairly innocuous at face-value, but when viewed through the prism of history, this move to separate jobless people from the economic life of the community is a first step along a dark path to a cull. Before you dismiss this suggestion as ridiculous, consider a few things:- Culling is loosely defined as a process of controlling the size of animal populations through the removal of surplus, unproductive or problematic individuals; History shows that culling has been a chosen means of removing unwelcome human beings from communities. When they have been culled on the basis of race, the process is defined as "genocide", yet when the process is driven by religious differences, as was the case with Catholics and Protestants in Tudor and Elizabethan times, it has been described as "persecution". Race and religion have been used to justify the torture and murder of many minorities. The same process that drove the Ku Klux Klan to lynch African-Americans in the 1960's also operates today in the Amazon jungle, where indigenous protests against incursions of white loggers and farmers are met with a similar response. In all these cases, a pattern of separation, containment and disposal of "undesirables" has applied.

Chances are, the culling-process has been hard-wired into our collective psyche. It can be linked to the blood-sacrifices through which the Celts, Vikings and the Mayans sought favour with their gods; It even features in the Bible in the story of the scapegoat. The process is described in Leviticus 16:20:- *"After he hath cleansed the sanctuary, and the altar, then let him offer the living goat, and putting both hands upon its head, let him confess all the inequities of the children of Israel, and all their offences and sins: and praying that they might light on its head, he shall turn him out ... into the desert"*.

Today, the same logic has been used to sacrifice those who have been left behind on the altar of market-capitalism. In the eyes of economic-planners who believe in maximising profits from the lowest possible investment-base, they have become a liability, and in the face of an artificially-inflated housing-market insistent that homes must constantly increase in value, they have become an obstacle. In order for the Golden Lie to be successful, the truth of their plight must remain hidden. That is the cold nuts-and-bolts-logic of it, and that is why every attempt to expose the deception is met with aggression. The strategy of separation, containment and disposal applies here as much as it applied in Nazi Germany. Right now, we find ourselves in the second phase, and because the process creeps along in hidden places, we might soon find ourselves facing the third phase before we know it.

We can't do much to change the dark side of human nature, but when the darkness creeps into our institutions, especially government structures, we have a moral obligation to weed it out. The best way to do that is to dig deep in the places where it has taken root. When we do, we sometimes discover that the origins of our deepest prejudices can come from surprising places. In our response to rising unemployment and poverty, we have compensated for our need to hide the truth about unemployment by providing the victims of our choices with assistance at arm's-length – benevolent-assistance - and we have side-stepped any need to treat disadvantaged people as equals by appointing charitable organisations as proxies to dole out that assistance.





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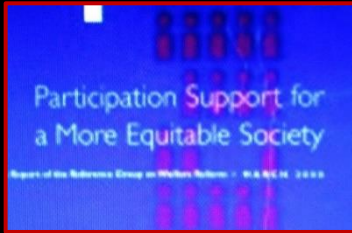
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THE TWISTED LOGIC OF WELFARE REFORM

WINNERS AND LOSERS IN THE WELFARE WAREHOUSE



When the world gives you lemons, make lemonade – that was the basic logic of the welfare reform process. In the presence of profound change, disadvantage in the Lucky Country became something in need of management, and a good way to do that was to recruit as many public servants and charitable organisations as possible to the cause. With disadvantage becoming a drain on the economy, it made sense to construct an unexpensive mechanism to handle it. Of course, nobody really knew how to do that, so a working-party was formed, and the rest is history. Sadly, whatever good intentions may have been enshrined in those early discussions, they paved a road to welfare hell. What emerged from the drawing-board was a privatised service-industry that trained people for non-existent-jobs, churned them through short-term-employment, exploited their labour under the guise of volunteerism, and turned them into cash-cows that funded a growing corporate juggernaut.

On the other end of the equation, disadvantaged Australians were losing their grip on any kind of personal fulfilment. Fulfilling life? Everybody needs security on a physical, emotional and spiritual level, and this requires each of us to feel a sense-of-belonging-and-purpose in the communities within which we live.. A major element in our relationship with the people around us is a sense-of-engagement, but when when selected groups were shut out of the conversation they found their own personal sovereignty denied.

The Golden Lie presented us with a huge moral dilemma –how could we maintain our own security and keep faith with our moral foundations at the same time? We wanted to be fair and we wanted to be financially successful, but due to our need to hide the truth, we needed to find a compromise. We sensed that we couldn't make too many concessions to those who had been left behind, so we did our best to make sure they were looked after in a way that wouldn't threaten our own success.

Our political leaders had been trapped in the same logic-loop ever since the 1970's. If they acknowledged the truth about unemployment, they risked undermining public-confidence in the economy, yet if they did nothing, they risked the destruction of the Christian-democratic values that underpinned our freedom. By way of compromise, they poured billions of dollars into the creation of a welfare-warehouse in which redundant citizens could be stored until our economic fortunes changed. The trouble was, our economic fortunes did not change, and the ongoing success of the mainstream economy came to rely on the further sidelining of disadvantaged Australians.

Even before the Howard Government's welfare reform agenda was established, language used by Federal Government Ministers set the tone. In a speech at the National Press Club in 1999, in which the government's plan was outlined, then Social Security Minister Jocelyn Newman identified a major problem to be addressed as "welfare dependency". She went to pains to reassure her audience that a modern safety-net is "not about blaming the victim," before implying several times that welfare dependency was a lifestyle choice. She also said "the system doesn't do enough yet to discourage welfare dependency", insisting that "more can be done to encourage individual responsibility", and "work for the dole has started to change the expectations among young people that the taxpayer owes them something for nothing". At one point, she acknowledged the reality of globalisation, yet still insisted that "It's neither fair nor moral to expect the hard-working men and women of this country to underwrite what can only be described as a destructive and self-indulgent welfare mentality."

During her speech, she also described Mutual Obligation as "...a much broader and comprehensive concept than some of the more superficial analyses would have people believe..." but she failed to qualify her statement or even hint that income-support-recipients would play any active in a process that demanded dialogue.

The question of mutual obligation would become a sticking-point. In theory, mutual obligation should have been about reciprocity, with a key ingredient being dialogue. However, that was not the case with the Federal Government's version of how it should work. The McClure papers made no significant mention of it, while a later paper titled *"The Future of Welfare in the 21st Century - Unemployed People on Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance,"* the section headed: *"What is the Mutual Obligation initiative ?"* explained that: *"The Mutual Obligation Initiative puts the broad principles of mutual obligation into practice,"* but made no attempt to explain what "mutual obligation" actually was. The mechanics of the Mutual Obligation Initiative were outlined, but nothing was revealed about its philosophical foundation or aims. It appeared that the Government didn't want to be pinned down to a definition.

Soon afterwards, extra salt was added to this wound when the Howard Government's welfare-reform paper *"Australians Working Together"* was released and listed the members of a proposed "Social Coalition". These included "government departments, business organizations, community groups, welfare organizations and individuals". At no point were welfare-recipients mentioned, because genuine Mutual Obligation was never extended to these people as a group. The inference here was that unemployed people were lesser beings in an unequal relationship, and that made nonsense of any suggestion that welfare reform was about anything other than the showering of breadcrumbs upon the great unwashed from on high.

That fitted with the logic of Christian superiority that dwelled within our European heritage. Throughout centuries of global exploration and colonisation, our forefathers relied on the Christian Bible to provide them with a God-given-right to subdue the world and take possession of any new lands they entered. Any doubt about the moral right or wrong of their actions was quashed by the divine right of true believers to fulfil their destiny as chosen people. Their descendants found themselves living in the "Lucky Country".. and in the boom years following World War Two, they came to view opportunity as a birthright, and embrace material comfort and with missionary zeal.

As the idea of "aspiration" in the Lucky Country took root, the presence of those who had not been blessed with the same good fortune came to be seen as alien to our values. Then as the local impacts of global industrial change started to bite, we turned a blind-eye to what was happening down the road and around the corner, and took refuge on the moral-high-ground we had built around the work-ethic. We convinced ourselves that anybody with the physical ability to work should work, regardless of their claims that employment did not exist for them.

Soon, we began to view disadvantaged people as lesser beings, arguing that unemployed people were too lazy to work, that homeless people chose to be homeless, and that single mothers were women of loose morals. For each situation, the image of a righteous, tax-paying, mortgage-holding family was held up as a beacon of moral superiority. Underpinning it all was a desperate need for the Christian-democratic values that had protected us for so long to endure in a competitive, consumer marketplace. We wanted the best of both worlds, and basically made a deal with the devil to achieve that goal.



SUBMISSIONS

1999 –Welfare in the Spin Cycle
Welfare Reform Working Party;

2001- Response to Australians
Working Together report;

2003 - Senate Inquiry into
Poverty and Disadvantage in
Australia;

2014 –Honour and the
Manipulation of Outcomes

2020 – Newstart – Survival in a
Smoke Screen - Senate Inquiry –
Adequacy of Newstart and
related payments and
alternative mechanisms to
determine the level of income
support payments in Australia

VIDEOS

Give a Man a Fish

The Other Side of Struggle
Street

The Great Welfare Hijack

We clung to our belief that hard work was the solution to our problems, and measured the efforts of others in their ability to carry their own loads. For aspirational Australians, passing break-even-point in the survival-stakes became a right-of-passage, while anybody who found themselves on the wrong side of it became an unofficial enemy of the state. That simple logic would go on to form the foundation of the welfare-reform-process and the “streamlined” payment-system that grew out of it. The idea of need was replaced with “deservence”, and the determination of eligibility for income-support-payments shifted from individual circumstances to the performance of prescribed tasks. In a very real sense, being disadvantaged became a job for which the Federal Government provided a de-facto-wage, yet acknowledgement of that fact would never come because of the Golden Lie.

This complicated what should have been a very simple arrangement. Maintaining a strong social-safety-net was valuable on many levels, including in the prevention of crime and public-health-problems, as well as the preservation of human dignity, yet our need to provide benevolent-assistance to lesser beings did away with much of that. From the very beginning, documents associated with the welfare reform process carried a language of prescriptive assistance. At the same time, it didn't take a genius to work out that the machine under construction was designed more for the benefit of the service-providers than for those they claimed to be helping. Central to that task was the maintenance of the power-balance between saints and sinners. The idea that “the fallen” should be allowed to share the same status as their benefactors was unconscionable.

My own attempts to discuss this imbalance in several submissions to government inquiries over the years, but nothing came of any of it. A wall-of-silence appeared to surround this issue, and I strongly suspected that a similar type of cognitive dissonance to that which accompanied the concealment of the crimes of paedophile priests is entrenched in the philosophy of the overall welfare-reform process. It is also worth pointing out that arguments about the unemployment situation often involved the substitution of morality in places where facts should have been. For example, any suggestion that jobs were in short supply was regularly swept aside by the claim that jobless people lacked character if they did not constantly look for work. In the process, “should” replaced “can”, and aspiration rode rough-shot over actuality. The die had been cast.

As joblessness became a state-of-permanent-existence for many people, the welfare response remained entangled in the Golden Lie, and concealment became part of the program. The old “Work Test” became the “Activities Test”, and revolving-door-training-schemes, work-for-the-dole and volunteering-for-the-dole became tasks to be performed in exchange for support. In the absence of real employment opportunities, these activities created an illusion of activity where there was little.

Spiritual-vacuums and logic-loops were everywhere. In the blossoming world of Christian-consumerism, materialism morphed from a vice to a virtue and power-shopping became an expression of faith, with some church-leaders encouraging their congregations to consider success a reward for their faith. That left them to assume that non-members who failed to reach break-even-point experienced difficulty simply because they weren't believers. In the logic of these narrow churches, that meant they were not much better than sinners, and deserving of nothing much more than the giving of alms. In that context, the giving of alms was not so much for the benefit of the “sinners” as for the salvation of the souls of those giving the alms. That played right into the hands of the welfare-reformers.

When charities began to work in concert with government agencies, and when government funding-assistance became available to those charities for programs, a new social dynamic was born. Over time, submission-writing became reliant on an applicant-group's ability to demonstrate need, and that gave rise to the need for a pool of disadvantaged people. As the brief could never involve genuine systemic change, the nature of assistance provided to those people would always be limited largely to training and the development of resilience in individuals. This inevitably led to the growth of a larger pool of isolated people and an increased need for the provision of assistance.

At some point along the way, the social-engineers driving the welfare reform process decided that many a career could be made off the back of the new herds of cash-cows, so they set about building a poverty-industry. They knew they would encounter little opposition from members of the wider community. Anyone who had already bowed to the power of the Golden Lie found reassurance in the knowledge that the people who had been swept into poverty by the economic policies that had protected them so well should be compensated. It was Terra nullius and the Aboriginal Protection Act all over again, with the dispossessed forced to settle for crumbs and paternalistic-control.

This left the "community sector" with a crisis-of-conscience. Faced with such a disturbing trend, individual people working in the sector might be forgiven for deciding to compromise. They could easily argue that complaining about the deeper issues would only raise the ire of those in government who were providing the financial support, and even if they knew they were being blackmailed by those same people to keep their mouths shut, they might still have concluded that it was better to provide what little help they could, while also taking home a pay-check, than sabotage a finely-tuned-arrangement. Sadly, what they couldn't have known back then was what their "poverty industry" might become, and what monsters might emerge as the twisted logic of welfare reform unfolded. They were too busy hiding the truth, and some of the tactics were nasty.

A common ploy was to avoid questions by going on the attack. The authors of John Howard's Welfare to Work agenda took every opportunity to distract attention away from the inadequacies of programs by attempting to place the onus-of-responsibility for problems and solutions on the shoulders of income-support-recipients. One of the earliest examples came to light during Jocelyn Newman's 1999 National Press Club address when she said *"Many people with a significant capacity to work, needlessly stay on disability payments for a long time. ...for some people at least, access to the Disability Pension is seen as a better alternative to unemployment benefits and the Activity Test that goes with it"*. On another occasion, she used the term *"capacity to benefit"* to imply that any failure of a particular program would be the fault of the participant rather than the efficacy of the program itself. This echoed the already established notion that a person's individual circumstances were insufficient in the determination of their eligibility for income-support, and that the primary measure should be based on their performance of assigned tasks. Looking back from where we now stand, it's clear that the emerging "streamlined" system was on the cards before the advertised planning-stage ever began.

They never had any interest in the deep sense of betrayal I felt every day as I watched Federal Government Ministers hide behind innuendo and misinformation to promote draconian policies while media-groups and advocates turned a blind-eye. They would also ignore any attempt made by disadvantaged people to explain their limitations they faced. Any attempt to humanise disadvantaged Australians would undermine the value of dole-bludger-mythology, so they would never be taken seriously. In spite of that, ACOSS and others continued to encourage income-support-recipients to explain themselves in public campaigns, perhaps in an attempt to counter the attacks.

Tougher
dole for
'shirkers'



A doctor who treats gaping wounds with band-aids in the name of economy is no doctor at all;

A government that responds to social problems such as unemployment, homelessness, poverty, physical disability, mental-illness, domestic-violence and social-displacement by building industries around them is no government at all;

Anybody who treats a human casualty as a cash-cow is a parasite.





THE URGENT NEED FOR DIALOGUE

How could they keep ignoring the facts? How could the realities of life on the ground for disadvantaged people be so routinely factored-out of the welfare-equation? In my world, dialogue had always been the best way to resolve problems and find solutions, yet the Golden Lie murdered dialogue as a matter of routine.

When these people killed dialogue, they negated the value of the lived-experiences of disadvantaged people.

When they called me a "client", they ignored the vast depth of my work-history – my various jobs, my underemployment, my self-employment and the lessons I have learned through my unemployment;

When they killed dialogue, they ignored the considerable non-bankable-skills I have in a labour-market that requires me to provide the most basic utilitarian functions;

When they killed dialogue, they ignored the intense burden of undeserved "dole-bludger-guilt" I have been forced to carry by politicians who insist on lying about unemployment to protect a flawed economy;

When they killed dialogue, they ignored the process by which a compounded sense of hopelessness and deep depression might lead jobless people to abandon themselves and consider suicide;

When they killed dialogue, they ignored the insult of turning me into a cash-cow for service-providers in the job-search-and-training-industry and expecting me to apply their revolving-door-training-programs to the labour-market, the futility of expecting me to achieve self-employment through SYTP without seeding-finance to pay for materials and business-costs before break-even-point; the futility of expecting me to benefit from work-for-the-dole and volunteering-for-the-dole programs that led nowhere;

When they killed dialogue, they ignored the heartache I felt on experiencing homelessness and seeing Australia's national obsession with the Australian Dream turn shelter into a commodity that drove marginalised people deeper into homelessness;

When they killed dialogue, they ignored my efforts to draw attention to anomalies, inconsistencies and outright bigotry in Federal Government welfare-policy through the many letters I sent to newspapers, politicians and media-groups, as well as in submissions to various Federal Government inquiries.

When they killed dialogue, they ignored my understanding of the role played by global industrial change in the creation of welfare-dependency and the fact that they had labelled me an enemy-of-the-state because I made no secret of the fact that politicians lied about unemployment;

Was ACOSS aware of the fact that the Golden Lie was so firmly entrenched that any attempt by “welfare-recipients” to explain their situations would be interpreted by the mainstream community as making excuses for their own “failures”. Such a defence could never be mounted without explaining the role of labour-market-change, the truth about unemployment and the ways in which the system itself was rigged against them. Without those basic truths in the arsenal, they were left with the unrealistic expectation that going to politicians and media, cap-in-hand like Oliver Twist, would somehow yield results. Unless they got off the back-foot and took a more aggressive stance, they would always be left begging, and given the collective experience of ACOSS staff and members, I would have thought they knew that. Even Blind Freddy would have seen that doing the same thing over and over again for the same result was a fool’s errand.

In 2003, I tried, once more, to break through. The Labor Party had seen many expressions of concern about poverty in the media, so with Mark Latham at the helm, the party called for a Senate Inquiry. I was among the many groups and individuals who lodged submissions, and, once again, I reiterated what I had already said in *Welfare in the Spin Cycle* back in 1999, adding more of what I had learned since then. I waited for long months for the committee to go hold hearing, read all the submissions and publish its findings, but when the thick document came out, it contained a lot of graphs and comments from prominent organisations, but not one whisper of what I had been concerned about.

As if to add insult to injury, the Labor Party stormed into the first week of its 2004 election campaign with both guns blazing on poverty, only to have done a huge U-turn halfway through the second week and returning to safer territory. I’m sure I wasn’t alone in feeling a deep sense of betrayal.

That was the first of several times Labor showed its true colours. Another came a few years later, in the first week of the “Kevin ‘07” campaign. By pure coincidence, I went down to the local shopping-strip to buy a newspaper and found a gaggle of reporters crowded around Kevin Rudd and an aid as they walked along the footpath in front of the shops. Seeing an open space ahead of him, I rushed in and leaned up against a shop window in his path to avoid being jostled out of the way by security. As he passed, I said “*Excuse me Kevin*”. He paused to face me, and I said “*You have been pretty vocal about ‘working families’, but what about everybody else?*” I then went on to explain a few of my concerns about the ways income-support-recipients have been routinely left out of the conversation, and he responded, first by referring my inquiry to Julia Gillard, and then by referring me to the Labor Party website. At no point did he address my question directly, and seemed more interested in speaking to the window behind me than actually looking at my face. He then shook my hand and went on his way. As he left, I called to the media pack and pointed out to them that the same people always get left out. A couple of reporters took my name, and a distant shot of me talking to Rudd appeared for a few seconds on an evening news report. Of course, none of my concerns were aired, and I was left disappointed yet again.

Once again, I sank into cynicism, and the years leading up to 2010 were a jumbled mix of unemployment, casual work, and chasing my tail for Centrelink. This formed the pattern of my life for a long time, and even when my elderly parents began to grow infirm, I was forced to divide my weeks between caring for them, taking them to medical appointments, and performing prescribed duties in exchange for Newstart payments. I was unable to qualify for Carer Payment at the time because neither of my parents were deemed to be sufficiently infirm to warrant it.

Charity gag

What’s the big deal about Government threats to cut tax breaks to charities that question Government policy (*The Age*, 31/7)? With the Senate poverty inquiry about to present its report to Parliament, it’s logical to expect the Howard camp to bury the findings and gag people who might draw attention to them.

Nick Costello, Boronia



WHAT could the Government possibly gain by threatening to remove tax breaks for charities that lobby to influence government policy?

Given that the Senate poverty committee will soon table its report in parliament, and that the Government will do its best to bury the findings, such tactics are logical.

Nick Costello
Boronia, Vic



Never-ending-piles of stuff



Sweat-soiled pillows



A rusty barbecue



Rain-soaked mattress



Then came five years of volunteering-for-the dole. My choices were extremely limited, so I elected to sort donations at a local Salvos store. Throughout those five years, I provided the charity with a lot of free labour, painted a mural in the kitchen, and processed a lot of rubbish. While some people were very generous, the vast majority of the people I encountered were either scroungers sifting through the donations when nobody was looking or folks attempting to dump their unwanted rubbish. We had to deal with Christmas trees in January, huge weekend dumps during holidays, sweat-covered pillows hidden in black plastic bags, broken furniture, bed-mattresses and lounge suites that had been left out in the rain, broken glassware, bags of dirty and worn clothes, and once even a cardboard-box filled with dog faeces. Some of what they tried to dump astounded me, and I hated going there. After all, I was just a surplus human being forced to process other people's surplus goods in what was basically a pointless exercise designed to prove my worthiness. It was all very depressing. The only positive thing to come out of it for me was an invitation from the manager to paint a mural on the kitchen walls. That allowed me to walk away with some small sense of having done something worthwhile.

Still, small gains like that paled to insignificance against the wasted years below break-even-point. For so many years, gainful employment had eluded me, and my investment in social-justice-activism had come to nothing. I was more than bitterly disappointed – I was heartbroken.

How could it have possibly turned out any other way? The fix was in, and the Golden Lie was winning. For a while, I walked away and tried to cobble together some kind of life for myself, casual-work, painting, writing, donating my skills to the community, but it was no use. The employment was sporadic, and my efforts to make money from my artwork did little more than reinforce the idea that almost everybody in the community wanted something for nothing.

Then, in 2013, when the second tranche of single parents was moved to Newstart, it became clear that the erosion of the rights and spending-power of disadvantaged people was no longer accidental, but systemic. That was when I knew I couldn't walk away. I started to speak out in support of single parents, attending rallies, speaking at some, and making my presence felt on Facebook. Social-media became a useful tool for networking and sharing ideas, especially when I was forced to spend much of my time at home caring for my parents.

Then came the time of the March Movement. It began with a national-day-of-action organised mainly by university students and promoted as the "March in March", and an opportunity for disparate voices to come together and express their displeasure with the Federal Government. Marches conducted in state capitals and regional centres were well-attended. I went to the march in Melbourne, along with about 20,000 other people, and attended another several months later. Sadly, the momentum didn't last. I guessed that many of the young people who had expressed so much enthusiasm at first had enjoyed their moment in the sun and now chose to move on. I should have known that few of them would have known or cared about the Golden Lie with environmental issues, asylum-seekers and university-fees to worry about. When it came to questions about economic-exclusion in our own country, the door remained firmly shut.



The mural I painted on the kitchen wall while volunteering at the charity-shop. I hid a message in the scene I painted on the opposite wall. Some people could see it while others couldn't. Can you see it?

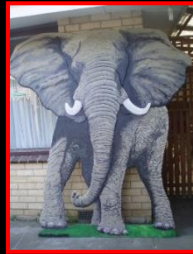


DON'T CALL ME LAZY

In my life I have had many different jobs; I have also been self-employed, engaged volunteer-work and wildlife-research, and have always had a passionate desire to encourage positive-thinking and self-determination. The three books I have created for this series proves that.

Another example of my desire to promote the value of "having a go" was Jumbo. Jumbo was a flat-prop I made to take to my market-stall when selling my art-work. This image of an African elephant was a metaphor for hopes and dreams that seem out-of-reach. I attached a note to Jumbo explaining that the only reason people could see him was because I had taken the trouble to make him and put him there. I also asked "What might exist in your life if you could find a way to make it real. Never stop believing in yourself".

Of course, there were still many people who said "you can't eat art", and would complain that I have not been loyal to the *Australian Dream*, and have not done enough to generate revenue to keep their gravy-train rolling along. Given the reality of global industrial change, and the arrogant nature of people such as these, I have done well to do as much as I have, and I have nothing to apologise for. The greatest obstacle to advancement for many people is not personal laziness, but a lack of opportunity and resources.





HOW ON EARTH ???

How on earth can we achieve positive change in a world where even popular protests don't get much traction? What does it take to get a message across when media-groups are so tied to the Golden Lie that public discussion of serious social-issues becomes impossible? With radical views and extreme behaviour dominating the protest-movement, where is there room for serious debate? We need a forum.



EASY MONEY AND BAD INVESTMENTS - THE HOUSING BUBBLE



Australia's housing-industry was "the goose that laid the golden egg", it was the most sacred of sacred cows, and it was the foundation of the "Australian Dream" and a major driver of the Golden Lie. Politicians and economists had been guarding it for decades, and elections had been lost and won on their ability to protect the investments of mortgage-holders.

The Howard Government nailed its colours to the mast in its support of investors over the needs of disadvantaged Australians. In 2004, when then -Federal-Treasurer Peter Costello stood up in Parliament and boasted that Australia had the highest rate of private-share-ownership in the world, a welfare reform process aimed at sidelining countless disadvantaged citizens was quietly underway. At the same time, ongoing support for the housing-industry that almost collapsed in the late 1980s helped cashed-up Baby Boomers get rich and filled government coffers with a taxation bonus.

The industry was rigged in three main ways: Firstly, through an auction-process in which the highest-bidder set the pace; secondly by limiting the number of low-cost-dwelling under construction at any one time to maintain a high-median-price for real-estate; and thirdly, through negative-gearing, where cashed-up-investors received tax-breaks to buy themselves more houses than most of them needed. These things produced an artificially-inflated industry that benefited the easy-money-culture of economic-planners, but actively discriminated against low-income-earners, including welfare-recipients, driving many into homelessness.

This was much the same process that had been used to hide unemployment years earlier. Just as "dole-bludger-mythology" had been used to conceal the lies, the high-visibility of people with substance-issues and mental-illnesses sleeping on the streets made it easy to associate the homeless problem with personal dysfunction. Tony Abbott's *famous* "You can't stop people being homeless if that's their choice" comment stands as a prime example of the prejudice involved.

Such bias wasn't limited to politicians. If you searched for a definition of homelessness on the Australian Bureau of Statistics website, you may have been surprised by what you found. The document "*Information paper - A statistical definition of homelessness*" was 62 pages long, and read more like a discussion-paper than a policy-document.

The document drew a distinction between "homelessness" and "rooflessness", yet made no effort to link homeless people with the housing-market itself, or the big-picture-economic-processes that lead to homelessness. In the Glossary, the basic "counting unit" for homelessness-estimates was the person, with reference to their "personal characteristics" and their "living situation". That same Glossary contained entries for "household-income", "education", and "rent", yet no mention was made of a "housing-market" or "living-costs".

At one point, the definition stated that: "*Cultural views of homelessness evolve over time*", which, to me, suggested that this definition was based on public-opinion as much as scientific analysis. Once again, I had to ask if perceptions of homelessness were based on solid information or smoke-screens.

"We won't be putting upward pressure on interest-rates."

John Howard

A HOMELESS CRISIS ... >>> IF THAT'S THEIR CHOICE

The painting on the right shows the low-cost houses of the "El Cheapo" housing estate burning to provide hot air, and buoyancy, for the high-end-market, leaving countless thousands of people without shelter. Supporters of the predatory marketplace hide from any responsibility to justice they might have by claiming that some people choose to be homeless.



Nick Costello Joe Hockey's comments about access to housing have stirred up a hornet's nest because Australia's housing-market, as well as its labour-market, has become shrouded in a maze of smoke-and-mirrors that seems designed to discriminate against low-income-ea... See More
Like Reply 499 · 6 hrs
48 Replies · 11 mins



Pumpkins and Promises shows the downside of the Australian Dream. A rainbow carries investment-capital to Asia in a Cinderella carriage, leaving countless displaced workers lining up for pumpkin-soup. A girl with broken fairy-wings stands broken-hearted as her new fairy-godmother waits to lure her into a life of darkness.



A Homeless Crisis ... If That's Their Choice



We seemed to be trapped on a treadmill that refused to stop. Home-buyers were encouraged to pay high prices for shelter because they had been reassured that the value of their investment would not diminish, and that pushed prices up even further. At the same time, developers complained there wasn't enough supply in the real-estate-market, and municipal councils changed building-standards to fit more dwellings onto available land. In some suburbs, a standard quarter-acre-block might have sold for \$1 million before the house standing on it was torn down to make room for as many as 7 units. That was potentially 7 families living in a space that previously held just one.



This situation might have worked well for the market at the time, but future problems were inevitable. If each of those families had just 2 children, that quarter-acre-block would eventually house 28 people. When the children grew older, where would they play; and when they became young adults, where would they park their cars? The nature-strips in many developing suburbs were gradually disappearing, the garden-areas were too small, and parking on the driveway caused access-problems for their neighbours.



Municipal councils might have made a killing on the extra rates they could collect, but the amenity of the neighbourhood was lost. As green-spaces were swallowed up in the feeding-frenzy, where could residents go to escape the congestion? Our love-affair with the Australian Dream had become an addiction, greed was creating ghettos and driving increasing numbers of people into poverty and homelessness. That wasn't just a tragedy, it was a national scandal, and the gravy-train rolled on with a lot of help from media-groups.



Newspapers had long gained huge profits through real-estate-advertising, and some had become so powerful in a corporate sense that they diversified their business-interests to include investment in the industry. This was particularly true of the real-estate-industry, and the links organisations like the Channel Nine/Fairfax consortium had to it. With such a clear interest in Australia's unregulated housing-market, what interest could they possibly have had in homelessness as an issue? If they were wedded to the housing-industry, they were wedded to the Golden Lie, so expecting objectivity from them was a pointless exercise.

Given such conflict-of-interest, where could we go to find accurate information, and how could we make informed-decisions? We were told that the internet was not a reliable source when seeking the truth, but was our mainstream media any better?



Whatever we might have thought of our mass-media as a source of information and entertainment, it was first and foremost, a marketplace. Historically, newspapers had always been money-making, advertising-catalogues first and information-sources second. Media-groups sold products and opinion on a daily basis, and they worked hand-in-glove with advertising agencies that used sophisticated tricks to sell us stuff we often didn't even need. With a huge range of products to choose from, our homes became cluttered with a vast array of gadgets and appliances we might never have even used.

Just two generations earlier, we had no idea that cars, computers and mobile phones would be so readily available, and we had no idea how many handy gadgets we might have access to. Those of us with money to spare have been able to turn shopping into a recreational exercise - "power-shopping", and we often used it to remind ourselves that we had spending-power. The market-engineers understood this process so well that they turned the advertising process into an art-form and recruited media-organisations to turn casual shoppers into addicts.

They did this in a variety of ways, but one that stood out to me involved the cooperation of media-groups. Many of the news-stories we saw every day were high-intensity-doses of horror, mixed with a heavy helping of political theatre. Little detail was usually provided, and many stories vanished into the news-cycle without any real resolution. At the same time, when socially important issues like unemployment got the whitewash-treatment, it should have come as no surprise that disenfranchised people felt abandoned. Whether this was accidental or deliberate, it helped to create what was known in advertising circles as a "sense-of-urgency", which, in turn, left us in a constant state of anxiety that kept us primed and ready to shop. Conspiracy-theory? Perhaps, but was worth thinking about, especially when we consider what the ultimate consumer-product might be.

Given the power of the fear we lived with on a daily basis, and given our need to buy whatever we needed to feel safe, the ultimate power-purchase was not a huge mansion, or a luxury car, or expensive jewelry - the ultimate power-purchase was a gun. In the United States, gun-culture had become welded to the free-enterprise idea of taking one's own destiny into one's own hands, and that stretched the limits of personal power and responsibility into unexplored territory. A similar situation existed in this country prior to the Port Arthur massacre, with issues of fear, power and machismo being as much a part of the need to purchase firearms as the sport of hunting was.

What anchor could we find in our search for truth when media fed us daily on small bites of the most sensational events, advertising, advertorials, contrived episodes of "reality television" filled with stereotypical characters and marketing-opportunities throughout. It often seemed that a major function of media was to dumb-us-down and keep us anxious in order to sell us rubbish, and for a long time, it worked.

But there was a trap. A preference for sensational reporting and personality-politics gave rise to an information-vacuum that conspiracy-theorists queued-up to fill. Without any real objective-analysis of the situation we found ourselves in, the tinfoil-hat-brigade filtered into the political arena, and stirred up mud around issues that had been neglected for years. Disaffection turned to blind-anger as ignorant people saw fit to guide misinformed people towards their own personal versions of the truth.

With the rise in popularity of social media, we saw an increase in on-line-dialogue, but we also saw an explosion of malice, trolling and misinformation. Many mainstream-media-organizations that had taken to using Facebook became upset that Facebook could use their content without paying for it, and an argument developed. After a short period in which Facebook froze their accounts, an undisclosed compromise was reached, and it was around that time that everyday users met with obstacles. Media-pages filtered comments and even closed them down, allegedly to reduce the level of nasty and defamatory comments. The phrase "Comments on this post have been closed because a moderator is no longer available" became common, yet that made it much easier for the host of the page to control the narrative. At the same time, users might complain about excessive violence on a particular post only to be told it "does not breach community standards" yet be penalised for "bullying" when attempting to deal with persistent trolls. One thing I found particularly galling was the fact that posting comments about inconsistencies in Federal Government policy that would previously have received several hundred "likes" (one of my videos had 600 shares), would now earn just a handful. Filters often made much of what I had to say disappear. All this was allegedly to enhance the platform; I guess the question was "Who for?"

60
minutes

A
CURRENT
AFFAIR



ABC
TV

44





A DARK AGENDA

STREAMLINING THE SYSTEM

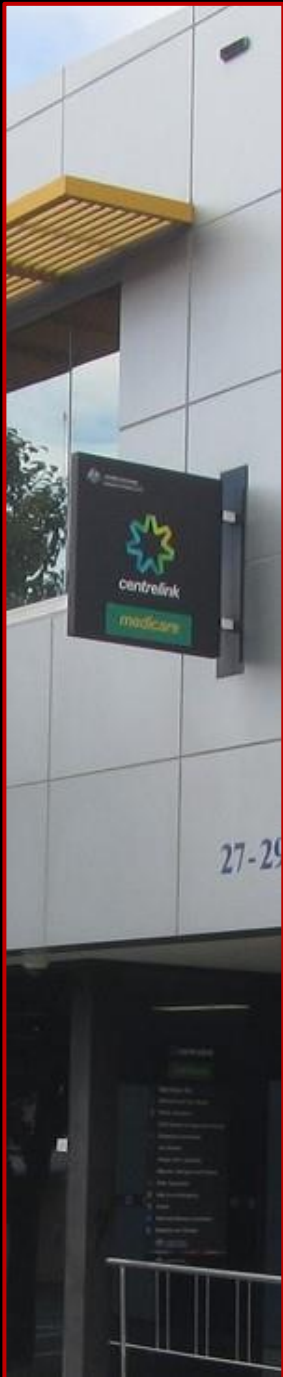
How much does a life cost? How much money should we invest in a human being, and how should we calculate that person's value? That measurement isn't so hard to make when everyone has the opportunity to earn a living and pay taxes, but how do we make that judgement when we know the game is rigged and some people will never be in a position to do so? Politicians are under constant pressure to ensure that income-support-recipients aren't getting something for nothing, but what exactly is the public getting for its investment?

In recent times, advocate-groups have been running a campaign aimed at raising the rate of Newstart/Jobseeker payments, and that has raised questions about the adequacy and effectiveness of the payment. Central to the discussion are questions of efficiency and whether or not the payment-system is fit-for-purpose.

Ever since the Howard Government's "Welfare to Work" agenda took flight in 2000, "streamlining" has been a major focus. Streamlining of payments and services, plus the elimination of "duplication" has seen the shoe-horning of people from different payment-structures to a uniform system. In 2006, the Howard Government moved a large group of single parents from Parenting Payment to Newstart, and in 2013, through a process known as "grandfathering", the Gillard Government moved another large group of single parents in the same way. Not long afterwards, single parents who still qualified for Parenting Payment were informed that they would have to participate in a program called Parents Next. This program was supposedly designed to help them prepare for job-search-activities and employment once their youngest child turned 6, but in reality it was just a way to load the Parenting Payment structure with a prescriptive payment that undermined the needs-based-entitlement formerly implicit in the payment. The computer wasn't programmed to understand what love, or commitment or entrapment were, so it needed a few numbers to play with, such as how many hours a person has performed their "duties" to the system.

This also helped to create jobs in the service-industry. I saw enormous irony in the idea of forcing single parents to abandon their parenting duties to enter into job-search and training activities and seek work that largely did not exist while someone else who had been employed in the child-care-industry looked after their children. I also shook my head in disbelief when a big push to force unemployed people into the disability and aged-care industry was followed by a coincidental wave of patient-abuse in the sector. It seemed as if the bean-counters had seen a surplus of jobless people and a lack of workers in a particular sector of the juggernaut and attempted to even-up the balance-sheet without much real thought.

Later, it was the turn of selected recipients of the Disability Support Pension to be thrown into the "capacity-to-work" mix. With that, people with "invisible illnesses" joined single parents in losing their rights and spending-power when moved onto the lower Newstart/Jobseeker payment and given "able-bodied" status based on their potential "capacity to work". This move was likely to lead to considerable financial savings for the government, yet was far less likely to lead to secure employment for many of the people impacted. At the same time, the entire process might have led some folks to wonder how so many people can be added to the ranks of the unemployed with no significant increase in unemployment. I guess that wasn't so hard when unemployment was calculated on what basically amounted to a survey that had almost no direct relation to the number of people who were actually jobless.



That probably also explained why eligibility for payments was calculated on the performance of prescribed tasks (including job-search and training) rather than need resulting from a lack of opportunity. The fact that many of these people faced greater challenges than unemployed people who could not find work didn't seem to matter. Individual circumstances became meaningless when terms like "capacity to benefit" and capacity to work" shifted the onus-of-responsibility for welfare-dependency away from government policy and onto the shoulders of individuals trapped in situations beyond their control.

Then we have the tasking aspect of work-for-the-dole and volunteering-for-the-dole. While programs in these areas might be positive in the way they assist isolated welfare recipients to engage with and contribute to the community, they also leave participants open to exploitation and abuse. Before my parents became incapacitated enough to enable me to qualify for Carer Payment, I received Newstart Allowance, and was forced to work as a volunteer, sorting donations (code for unwanted rubbish) at a charity-store for 5 years. Considering that I could have used my skills in many far more constructive and rewarding ways if other options had been available, my experience of cleaning up other people's unwanted rubbish reinforced the notion that I had become just another throwaway consumer-item myself. I had just been thrown into a low-paid-job that wasn't a job, being paid a subsistence wage that wasn't technically a wage, simply to preserve an illusion.

Newstart differed from a conventional wage in one major aspect. Where a wage provided a positive incentive of reward for effort, the incentive with Newstart is negative. The threat of suspension of payments for failure to comply with directives amounted to blackmail, and any suggestion that genuine reciprocity (mutual obligation) existed in the transaction was an insult to common logic.

Still, the propaganda continued. In an interview on radio station 891 ABC Adelaide on August 12th 2019 year, Social Services Minister Anne Ruston said of people on Newstart *"...we're investing and focusing strongly on employment as our means and our mechanism to assist these people"*. That was the first time I had heard the term "mechanism" used in relation to Newstart. In this case, employment was cited as a mechanism, yet no details of where that employment might have come from were forthcoming. Surely, she couldn't have been talking about cadetships, traineeships, work-for-the-dole or volunteering-for-the-dole, none of which carry any guarantee of secure employment, could she? How could they be considered real jobs when, by the government's own measures, they didn't pay a wage?

Use of the word "mechanism" in Senator Ruston's quote here might seem innocuous, yet it echoes past examples of how Government Ministers have slipped new terms into the lexicon in an effort to associate them with a particular process. Around the same time Ruston's comment was made, the word "mechanism" was sliding into the conversation as a definition of the Newstart Allowance itself.

At this point, it might be worth reminding ourselves of why the government-income-support-system was established in the first place. Back in 1944, when Unemployment and Sickness Benefits were introduced, Prime Minister Robert Menzies said: *"people should be able to obtain these benefits as a matter of right, with no more loss of their own standards of self-respect than would be involved in collecting from an insurance company the proceeds of an endowment policy on which they have been paying premiums for years"*.



CHANNEL NINE SUNDAY PROGRAM

Laurie Oakes:

"Can income-tax-cuts help someone on welfare? I mean there's not much point in a tax-cut if you don't have income, is there?"

Amanda Vanstone:

".... If you've got income-tax-cuts, and there's more incentive for people to get work because they get to keep more of the dollars they earn, that, in itself, is helpful to people on welfare because it just adds that extra incentive".



centrelink

Golden lie fudges facts

WITH welfare reform on the national agenda, the time has come to ask a tough question: is genuine reform possible in the face of the "golden lie"?

And what is the golden lie? It is the illusion that unemployment is less serious than it really is.

This illusion has been created to protect national economic stability. Because statistical unemployment is an economic indicator — influencing interest rates, currency exchange rates and investments — a government committed to economic stability has good reason to lie about why 2.5 million workforce-age Australians are jobless.

The deception happens in two main ways.

The first involves siphoning some unemployed people away from Newstart Allowance and on to Youth Allowance, Disability Pension and Single Parent Pension.

Evidence of this can be found in the government's recent decision to apply an "activities test" to the latter two groups without re-classifying them as unemployed.

The second involves propaganda suggesting that unemployment is a lifestyle choice — in spite of the fact that official unemployment figures indicate that jobless people outnumber job-vacancies many times over.

Viewed from an economic point-of-view, the golden lie is a practical response to a serious problem, but it has a sinister downside.

If it remains unchallenged for too long, people begin to believe it.

The myth of the dole-bludger becomes accepted as fact, and processes of social exclusion deepen the divide between rich and poor.

While mainstream Australians cling to the myth of the "lucky country", I see visions of 1930s Germany.

Nick Costello,
Boronia

I wonder how well these words would be received today. The idea of drawing from a fund you have been paying into for years would resonate with anyone who had a superannuation fund, but it probably wouldn't be so well-supported when the people doing the receiving had never been in a position contribute to it. I'm sure many taxpayers would expect people taking out without contributing to earn whatever they get, yet it seemed quite okay for the Federal Government to demand that recipients perform a range of tasks in exchange for a sub-poverty-line-income that is not a "wage" - strange arrangement.

What was happening here, and where might streamlining eventually lead us? Just how big the plan might be was anybody's guess, but other developments in the same space suggested the changes fitted into a predetermined timetable. The changes I have already mentioned here accompanied a huge shift from personal-contact to remote-control, with counter-service largely replaced with electronic-engagement through the MyGov site. Government Ministers have praised MyGov as an example of the advances made in service-delivery for the Centrelink system, yet countless people who have attempted to use the system have complained about long delays, indifferent responses, a maze of electronic confusion, and the unpleasant experience of having to listen to shrill on-hold-music for hours while waiting for someone to answer their call. To many, this system seems to have been deliberately designed to present obstacles and discourage "clients" from standing up for their rights. "Sit down, shut up, and take what you're given" springs to mind.

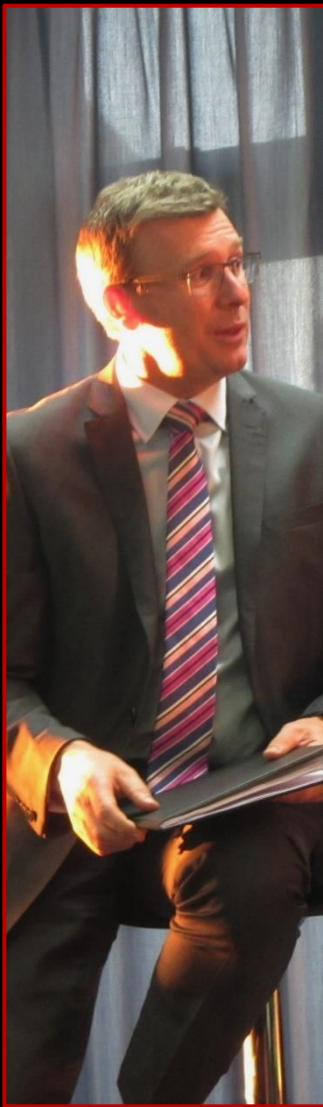
Was there more going on behind the scenes than the Australian public was being told about? Surely, if the Welfare to Work agenda was really about getting disadvantaged people back into the workforce, a more open discussion about the availability of work would have been part of the process. Of course, that might not have been the case if the Federal Government's definition of "work" was focused more on "any work" than on secure, genuinely productive employment. After all, a person needed to work only one hour per week to be considered "employed", so it would seem that much of what passed for policy in government welfare circles was nothing more than semantics.

How could anyone expect real change without presenting a real plan. Much of what had been presented as strategy up to this point had been a mixture of vague statements and obscure targets sprinkled with generous helpings of moralism and innuendo. Surely, a plan as ambitious as the one that had been promised would have had a more solid framework, particularly when it came to converting the old machinery to a more efficient, digitised system. Given that Australian taxpayers were providing the funds for it, the fact that they had no idea what they would be getting, other than an end to "welfare-dependency", was mystifying.

From where I stood, it seemed clear that an undisclosed agenda with a timetable was in place, and the people in the back room were clamouring to cobble the various mechanical elements together as best they could as they neared the deadline. The big problem was, all their efforts had been built upon a false-premise that they would never be able to associate with the democratic principles our political system was supposedly based on. Still, they forged ahead in secret, and as they did so, the monstrosity of what they were doing grew more obvious.



A TROJAN HORSE



In 2016, the Australian Federal Government commenced what it described as an experiment- a trial-program in which the income-support-payments of disadvantaged Australians were quarantined, denying them discretion on how, when and where they could spend 80 percent of the money. According to those assigned to promote the idea, the measure was designed to reduce the dysfunctional behaviour of drug-addicts, perpetrators of domestic-violence and victims of “fiscal illiteracy”.

The mechanism used to administer and control payments would be a cashless-debit-card, with which users could purchase essentials, but not buy alcohol or many other items not listed as permitted purchases. On the face of it, the idea seemed sound enough, but the devil was in the detail.

The card was the brainchild of one of the nation’s richest mining-magnates, “Twiggy” Andrew Forrest. He had established a huge philanthropic organisation called the Mindaroo Foundation, and a range of programs set up by this organisation, and some extremely generous donations bought him a great deal of influence. This card was not the first of its kind to appear on the scene - a similar card called the Basics Card had been in use for close a decade, yet it lacked the scope this new card promised. The trouble was, something seemed to have got lost in translation, because when the card-trial commenced, what was delivered was not what was advertised.

The Enabling Legislation for the trial set out what was planned. Rather than identifying recipients exhibiting dysfunctional behaviour, a new mechanism would be established which identified “Trigger Payments” to be included in the transformation. All payments, with the exception of the Aged Pension would be included, yet the Legislation carried no caveat to restrict the card to dysfunctional groups. When the trial-cards were handed out, almost every recipient in trial-areas was targeted, regardless of their character or behaviour. In effect, a judgement had been made that all income-support-payment-recipients were potentially dysfunctional, and that took the issue into the realms of bigotry.

Another anomaly was a possible conflict-of-interest of a former Howard Government Minister, Larry Anthony, who allegedly had links to Indue, the company administering the card. Questions of how he may or may not have been involved were never canvassed in the public arena, and media-analysis of the irregularities mentioned above remained completely absent from all platforms.



The fact that these things threatened plain justice and democratic-process was clear to anyone who bothered to take a close look at what was happening, yet what was even more disturbing was that they reflected the philosophy of containment and control already evident in the “streamlining” process.



The Hon Alan Tudge MP
Minister for Human Services

MC16-003365

21 APR 2016

Mr Nick Costello
nickcostello@optusnet.com.au

Dear Mr Costello

Thank you for your email of 14 February 2016, regarding the Cashless Debit Card Trial.

Legislative Instruments Act 2003

1 July 2014

Social Security Legislation Amendment (Debit Card Trial) Act 2015

During the trial, certain welfare payments will be divided into restricted and unrestricted portions, with recipients being unable to spend the restricted portions of such payments on alcohol or gambling. The amount of each portion may be varied if a community body gives a direction to the Secretary reflecting an agreement between the community body and the recipient.

The aim of cashless debit card is to test if the trial can reduce the welfare-fuelled alcohol, drug and gambling abuse that affects some communities. This aim has been publically stated numerous times.

person or one family. By ensuring most people in a community who receive a welfare payment are on the trial, we are likely to see a larger reduction across the whole community in expenditure on harmful products.

The Government has announced that the trial will operate in up to three communities, with the trial having commenced in Ceduna, South Australia on 15 March 2016, and commencing in

trigger payment

The Enabling Legislation carries no caveat to limit the card to groups exhibiting specific behaviours. Almost all recipients in trial areas have been targeted, regardless of their character or behaviour. Use of "trigger payments" redefines the real aim of the exercise.

the trial will operate in up to three communities

Successive ministers have abused Legislative Instrument to expand the trial beyond the 3 areas originally specified

local issues and who have requested a stronger tool to address alcohol and gambling problems. There is significant local support for the trials in the communities where the trials are occurring.

The trial will run for 12 months

evaluation will be combined with the findings from other similar programmes, such as income management, to help inform the future of such programmes.

(2) The Minister may, by legislative instrument, specify an area for the purposes of the definition of *trial area*.

Successive ministers have abused Legislative Instrument to arbitrarily extend the trial for 5 years beyond its original expiry-date so far

Yours sincerely

Alan Tudge

A DISCONNECT EXISTS BETWEEN PUBLICITY SURROUNDING THE CARD AND THE REAL INTENT OF THE ENABLING LEGISLATION, WHICH APPEARS TO BE AN ATTEMPTED HIJACK AND PRIVATISATION OF THE MACHINERY OF AUSTRALIA'S INCOME-SUPPORT-PAYMENTS-SYSTEM BY FAIT ACCOMPLI.

(1) The Minister may, by legislative instrument, determine whether a particular trigger payment is to apply:

- (a) both:
 - (i) in respect of a particular class of person; and
 - (ii) in relation to a particular trial area; or
- (b) in relation to a particular trial area.



SILENCE

is a favoured strategy
for people with
something to hide

At the time, I questioned the then Human Services Minister Alan Tudge (my local Member of Parliament) several times. Each time, his responses were evasive and ambiguous. During a public meeting he conducted in Aston about drugs, I asked him why trials originally sold to the public as a way to help drug-alcohol and gambling addicts manage their income-support-payments had been expanded to include all working-age welfare recipients in trial areas, he replied by explaining the need to eliminate what he described as “demand sharing” in Indigenous communities, and then went on to say “*We want to take the cash out of the welfare community*”.


Soon afterwards, I asked him the same question in an email, to which he replied in a letter. Its tone implied that he considered collateral damage acceptable in a war against the dysfunctional element. He also stated that the trial would last 12 months and be limited to 3 locations. That was not how things panned out. When the end-date arrived, the trial was arbitrarily extended, and then expanded. Supporters declared them an overwhelming success, but the promised report that supposedly proved their claim was held back and never released.

Then, another dirty trick was employed. In late January of this year, when parents were busy getting their children ready to go back to school, Channel Nine’s “A Current Affair” program announced that “*From today, thousands of welfare recipients will start to receive payments on a cashless debit card – which some claim will only make their life harder*”. These words appeared on the ACA Facebook page, and the television broadcast said much the same thing. The inference here was that the Federal Government had initiated a process, yet a small article on page 23 of Sunday’s Herald Sun newspaper indicated that the push to expand the card to unemployed people below 35 came from Keith Pitt and the Young Nationals, and implied it was just a suggestion rather than a formal government decision. Soon afterwards, Keith Fletcher got on board and began singing the praises of cashless welfare, but as the community was still in Christmas Holiday mode, there seemed to be nobody on duty to question any of it.


I couldn’t understand the huge leap in logic that turned a trial aimed at drug-addicts into a trial aimed at all unemployed people within a particular age-group. The inference was that they were all potential drug-users, and that added an extra element of prejudice to the process. And this was really lazy politics, the politics of fait accompli. Repeated mention of the card in the press; extensions and expansions of the trial; the subtle shifts in language that took the idea from “druggies” to “bludgers” – all designed to keep the idea in the public-mind for as long as possible so the card would be seen as part of the furniture and more readily accepted when the hammer finally dropped.



Another question that remained moot involved the use of drug-addiction as a trigger for welfare policy responses. The government position held that drug-addiction was a pre-existing-condition. Claims that unemployed people were three times more likely than members of the mainstream population to use methamphetamines had been used to justify drug-trials linked to the cashless-welfare-card. This notion was used as a lever against welfare recipients in the quest to gain support for the card, yet no mention was made of the role of trauma in drug-use, or whether or not long-term-unemployment and persecution amounted to trauma. What came first, the chicken or the egg?

Email exchanges between Alan Tudge and myself before I was blocked from his Facebook page: His comments in regard to the possible national rollout of the card were often ambiguous, and his suggestion that the card "will operate like an ordinary visa debit card but exclude the purchase of alcohol and use at the pokies" is highly misleading.

 **Nick Costello** Thank you for your reply Alan. I have taken your advice and examined recent transcripts regarding this issue, but I couldn't find the information I requested there.

All I am asking for is a clear indication as to the government's intentions regarding... See More


Like ·  1 · July 28 at 12:00am · Edited

 **Alan Tudge MP**  We are just doing a trial and no intention to apply across the nation.

Like · July 28 at 1:02pm






Alan Tudge MP

40 mins · 

After months of engagement, I signed an agreement today for Ceduna SA to be the first trial site for our proposed cashless welfare debit card. It will operate like an ordinary visa debit card but exclude the purchase of alcohol and use at the pokies.

<http://mobile.abc.net.au/.../ceduna-trial-stretches-t.../6674724>

 Like  Comment  Share

16 people like this.

Top Comments ▾



Write a comment...



Nick Costello Hello again Alan. I'm a bit confused. If there is to be a trial of the cashless welfare debit card in Ceduna (and other places), what is the long-term aim for the card?

As you will recall, I recently asked you a question about the card on another post on this page. What I wanted to know was whether the government intends to apply income-management and the cards to all welfare-recipients or only to people who are unable to manage their own finances?"


At the time, you responded to my question by saying "We are just doing a trial and no intention to apply across the nation"

Your response left me disappointed and confused. While you had not really answered my question, you also left me wondering what the point of a trial might be if nationwide use of the card was not intended.

Is there any chance that you might be able to clear up this confusion?

Like · Reply · Just now



Alan Tudge MP  I did not say the comment you suggested.

Like · Reply · 19 mins



A Masterclass in Stealth



IN THROUGH A BACK DOOR

A short time after this, in the lead-up to the 2018 Federal Election, I took another opportunity to question Alan Tudge about the card at a public meeting. When I asked him if the government had plans to expand the card nationally to all working-age welfare recipients, he said *“Absolutely not”*. When I went on to ask why a trial involving unemployed people under the age of 35 (a group not included in the original clutch of drug, alcohol and gambling addicts) were about to be targeted, he reverted to previous arguments about the damage done by drugs and alcohol. He never answered the question.

More recently, the Federal Government’s real intentions have become clearer, with Scott Morrison declaring that the cashless card will help to get Newstart recipients *“off welfare and into a job”*. The use of a drug-testing-program kept the “druggie” bogey-man in play, but the focus was now on “bludgers”. What’s more, the question of where these people were going to find jobs remained unanswered.

Another problem here is a possible repeated abuse of Legislative Instrument by successive Ministers. Legislative Instrument is a tool that Federal Government Ministers have at their disposal to tinker with Acts of Parliament relevant to their portfolios. In theory, Legislative Instrument allows for minor changes that aid in the application of a Legislation at the discretion of the Minister to save the time and effort of having to return the Bill to Parliament for amendment. However, in practice, Legislative Instrument can be used to introduce significant changes to programs through sleight-of-hand.

This might explain how the subject-group of the 2016 trials was inexplicably expanded to include all working-age welfare recipients in the trial areas, and also how the trials had been arbitrarily extended and expanded beyond their end-dates, geographic boundaries and human demographics.

Once again, substitution played a part here. Specific scope for these additional trials did not appear in the original Legislation, but its wording was sufficiently open-ended for such excesses to be considered acceptable in theory. Technically, any changes made using Legislative Instrument should have been documented with reference to the applicable part of the Enabling Legislation they relate to, yet I have so far been unable to find any such documents.

This abuse of process enabled the government to keep the card in play for as long as possible. As the card’s use was still only part of a trial, it was not subject to the same type of legal scrutiny that would have applied to an established program, and this provided room to bend it so far out of shape that it might become quite different in appearance to the original package. In that way, it could be reconfigured to make its final incarnation more acceptable to the public and more easily introduced without opposition.

Social Security (Administration) Amendment (Continuation of Cashless Welfare) Bill 2020

As time went by, pressure to force the card into general use grew. In 2020, the Morrison Government presented a Bill to the House to expand the cashless debit card trial, suggesting that locking the program in place was urgent. One of the reasons given for this was to "encourage continued investment by the financial sector".

Had this Bill been passed, it would have paved the way for what amounted to a hijack of the machinery of the payments system by fait accompli. Fortunately, the Bill failed to gain the support it required, and the situation returned to stalemate.

2020

Entrenching the cashless debit card as an ongoing measure

How The Government's rationale

Under the trial, the Government has made two arguments for entrenching the cashless debit card as an ongoing measure rather than allowing it continue as a trial.

The first is that community leaders in the existing trial sites are asking the Government to 'deliver certainty to participants, stakeholders and the communities by making the trial an ongoing measure.'^[164]

The second is that making the cashless debit card ongoing will 'encourage continued investment by the financial sector to co-design technical solutions to improve user experience for participants and merchants.'^[165] The Minderoo Foundation made this argument in a 2017 report:

Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia



Infosys gets another \$71m for Centrelink calculation engine work



With each passing day, the stealthy hand of the streamlining process was weaving its magic. Much of what was going on behind the scenes continued to escape notice and almost nobody was asking questions about subtle changes that appeared in the lexicon. When a coordinated campaign demanding a raise to the raise of the Newstart Payment began to gain traction, the back-room-brigade moved into action. They bowed to pressure to hold a Senate inquiry, but changed the name of the payment from Newstart to Jobseeker. When the inquiry was mounted, the documents associated with it took on a strange appearance.

Even the loaded title of this inquiry was enough to raise concern. *"Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia"* set the conversation in a predetermined direction from the outset. These words suggested that Newstart was not a payment-designation, but a "mechanism". This came as a surprise to me, because Newstart Allowance had always been the income-support-payment provided to unemployed people as bridging-finance to provide support until secure, full-time-employment could be found. How did it ever become a mechanism, and how could it be used to determine the level of income-support-payments?

At one point, the term "Newstart Mechanism" cropped up. To the outside observer, it wouldn't have meant very much, but when I read it, my thoughts turned instantly to a long-term-plan called the *"Welfare Payments Infrastructure Transformation Program"*. This program had been in place for years, and its main aim had been to digitize the system. Many millions of dollars had been spent on development-programs, but little was known about it in the public arena.

According to an article written by Justin Hendry that appeared in iNews.com.au dated July 21, 2021, a company named Infosys had been developing an Entitlements Calculation Engine (ECE) solution *"to replace an existing solution embedded in Centrelink's legacy income security integrated system (ISIS) used to determine eligibility for welfare recipients and how much to pay them."* The article also stated that Services Australia had commended planning and preparation work for the next phase of the build, and expected this milestone to be completed for mid-2022, and that *"this will establish technological capability that is reusable across government"* that *"will allow ECE to undertake rules simulation to better inform budget costings and the service delivery of future policy changes"*.

It seemed to me that the Senate Inquiry into the adequacy of Newstart payments had been hijacked, and the appearance of another new term appeared to confirm that. What on earth was "rules simulation", and how might it have applied to income-support-payments? Surely, if payments given to disadvantaged people had already been determined by their ability to satisfy eligibility-criteria, why was there any need for rules to vary within an electronic system?

Perhaps this was an extension of the “able-bodied-logic” through which a person’s entitlement to payments was determined by a theoretical measure rather than a circumstantial one. If it was, this would be a case of having a one-size-fits-all system in which all users are forced to fit into a single mold in order to interact with the system.

This shone new light on the idea of defining Newstart as a mechanism, and given that a component of the developing system called the Entitlements Calculation Engine solution was due to be launched in mid-2022, it would also explain why the government had been doing its best to keep the cashless-debit-card-trial in play. Perhaps the card had been part of the plan all along, and perhaps this might have also explained why “advocate-groups” and media had remained silent for so long. Perhaps they had been in the loop all along and unable to say anything publicly; perhaps they also thought too much money had already been spent on the overall program to stop it at the eleventh hour.

Many of the details surrounding the card-trial remained obscure. All throughout the public debate about it, significant details had been omitted from the discussion. One huge anomaly that I persistently attempted to draw attention to was a disconnect between publicity surrounding the trial and the actual aim of the Enabling Legislation behind it. The publicity was firmly focused on reducing dysfunctional behaviour among specific groups, yet the legislation was aimed at making mechanical changes to the nation’s income-support-payment-system that would negatively impact almost everybody receiving a payment. Even advocate-groups who should have made it their business to question this appeared to have turned a blind-eye.

Other anomalies linked to the trial had also been ignored. This became particularly conspicuous during the 2022 Federal Election campaign. In the second week of the campaign, Anthony Albanese relented to pressure from people concerned about the cashless debit card and announced that Labor would scrap the card if it won office. What happened next was curious. Over the next six and a half weeks in the lead-up to polling day, no Labor candidate elaborated on why the card should go, and nobody in media bothered to ask. Even after Labor won victory, and even when the wheels were turning to do present a Bill and stop the card, public dialogue about it was sadly lacking.

In the background, the digital platform slipped slowly into place. “Removal” of the card created the impression that it had been done away with, but that was not the case. The basic mechanism of the program survived in a voluntary program, and with this surviving vestige, the path remained open for the resurrection of the original monster under a later LNP government. I raised this point in a submission when the repeal Bill was presented, but I doubt that anybody took my concerns seriously. Later, when the next phase of the digital plan was launched, “Workforce Australia” came into being. It carried within it the same twisted approach to Mutual Obligation that had caused so much anguish in the past, but on its release, Tony Burke declared that it was too late to change anything.



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foundation of
democracy, . . .

. . . Without it,
fascism is just
a whisper away



ROBODEBT

In the meantime, another monstrous program was causing growing concern. Robodebt, the program designed to calculate the income-support-entitlements of people who topped-up their sporadic casual earnings with government payments, had run out of control. The process of automatically estimating a person's potential earnings, whether they had actually been working or not, led to the raising of many thousands of debt-notices and demands that people surviving on low incomes pay debts that had been falsely imposed.

The impacts of this caused intense anguish, mental stress and an unknown number of suicides. The official estimate was just seven, yet one claim suggested more than a thousand people may have met with a tragic end. Chances are, the true number will never be known.

The Robodebt scheme ran from 2015 to 2019. Through all that time, various people warned that it was morally and wrong and probably illegal. When an Ombudsman's investigation was conducted in 2017, a senior public servant worked together with the Ombudsman to prepare the report.

In November 2019, a group of Representative Applicants, together with Gordon Legal and Bill Shorten, launched a Class Action against the Commonwealth. The first day of the trial was scheduled for November 16th 2020, but the Representative Applicants and the commonwealth agreed to a settlement before proceedings could commence.

For a while, the Morrison government thought it had avoided the embarrassment of a public hearing, but that was not to be the case. On August 18th 2022, a Royal Commission into Robodebt was mounted, and over the ensuing 6 months, a parade of past Ministers, Prime Ministers and senior public servants were called to testify. It didn't take long before the Robodebt program was found to have been illegal. Scott Morrison, Christian Porter, Dan Tehan, Paul Fletcher, Marise Payne, Stuart Robert, Alan Tudge and Michael Keenan all took the stand, and a common mantra from many of them was that they were acting on the advice of others. Stuart Robert actually admitted to having told lies, but defended his actions by claiming he was following the Cabinet-line.

At that point it seemed the guilty parties might finally be forced to atone for their deeds. Christian Porter and Alan Tudge, still trying to fend off accusations of personal impropriety, resigned from Parliament. Chances were, they knew their political wrongdoings might be exposed, and they were getting out to protect their Parliamentary pensions before the full truth was revealed. At the same time, former Human Services Secretary Catherine Campbell laid a "get-out-of-jail-free-card" on the table. During questioning, she claimed that early documents lacked the warning about the potential illegality of the program due to an oversight. She defended her own failure to include the information by saying she "hadn't turned her mind to it". This left Royal Commissioner Catherine Holmes on the horns of a dilemma:- Would she be able to impose penalties by establishing the guilt of those involved, or would the claims of ignorance rob their victims of justice?

In early March the inquiry was wrapped up. Media reports announced that the Commissioner would hand down her report in April. Had the investigation done enough to prove a conspiratorial culture existed in the relationship between Federal Government Ministers and senior Public Servants? Given the experience of past investigations, there was a good chance the offenders would be protected by technicalities under the letter of the law. However, measuring guilt or innocence within the confines of the Robodebt Inquiry alone does not take into account the presence of the same culture that drove Robodebt in other areas of welfare policy. A particular pattern of behaviour can be observed across the welfare system, and that pattern involves a clear intention to impose a regime of containment, entrapment and paternalistic-control. The fact that this intent can be seen in Mutual Obligation, Robodebt and the cashless debit card trial proves that the problem extends far beyond a single program. The consistency of approach exhibited by a long line of Social Security and Human Service Ministers shows they are all singing from the same song-sheet, and Stuart Robert's claim that he had lied in solidarity with his colleagues proves the behaviour is deliberate and premeditated.

The common thread that runs through all of this can be traced back to the 1990s, and the entrenchment of bigotry within the machinery of the system can be found in documents from the establishment of John Howard's "Welfare to Work" agenda at the turn of the 21st century. It remains largely hidden, waiting like some living creature to take its next step towards total control.

What remains to be seen is whether or not the Australian people are content to let this situation continue. If cold, heartless efficiency is what they want, so be it; If life driven by the dictates of unbridled market-capitalism, so be it. I only hope they remember that the efficiency we have here is the same efficiency that swept Jews into the Warsaw Ghetto, shipped them off to death-camps in cattle-trains, and even factored the cost of Zyklon B gas into the budget. How could such things have happened in the name of the Greater Good, and how can the lies and corruption of our own leaders be justified in the same way.? If such things can take place in the name of the Greater Good, then the Greater Good is no more. If this truly is the logic of welfare-reform for the Australia we are living in, then I want no part of it.

Still, all is not lost. The recent Robodebt inquiry has given us an opportunity to make a conscious choice. We still have time to take stock of what is at stake here. When Catherine Holmes releases the final report of the Royal Commission, we will have one chance to fully understand how close we have come to the abyss. I sincerely hope we do not squander that chance. In the meantime, I will devote the last few pages of this story to questions that are likely to become relevant in coming months.





WALL OF SILENCE

A RARE CHANCE FOR CHANGE

WALL OF LIES

THE DECEPTION EXPOSED

26,000 CHEATS 26,000 CHEATS 26,000 CHEATS 26,000 CHEATS 26,000 CHEATS

Make dole cheats pay Make dole cheats pay Make dole cheats pay Make dole cheats pay

130,000 MORE ON WELFARE 130,000 MORE ON WELFARE 130,000 MORE ON WELFARE 130,000 MORE ON WELFARE

A RARE CHANCE FOR CHANGE

The problems within Australia's welfare system have one basic cause:- an obsessive desire to hide from the truth. In the beginning, that desire was aimed at protecting public-confidence in the economy from the truth about unemployment, but over time, layers were added to the original lie. Nobody could speak about the lie because to do so would be to expose it, and in doing so, bring economic growth to a grinding halt. Later, added pressure was applied in the need to hide the fact that innocent people had been turned into scapegoats in an effort to enhance the illusion, to be later still, locked away in a welfare warehouse like criminals.

Of course, many members of the Mainstream community won't see the situation in those terms. That is a measure of how stealthy the tentacles of welfare "reform" have been in a process Father Bob Maguire describes as being "nibbled to death by ducks". Changes have come incrementally over many years, and when we string them all together they form a word we dare not speak - "conspiracy". That is not a word I use lightly, and it is not a word that should be dismissed too quickly when we have come to equate conspiracy-theories with illogical fears. No conspiracy-theory deserves to be taken seriously unless clear evidence of it can be shown. In this case, the evidence is clear.

Still, even now that the Robodebt Inquiry has provided us with a glimpse of the corruption, it's hard to grasp the extent of the intent and planning involved here. When we compare the current situation to the last milestone in the process, little appears to have changed, but the picture soon changes when we go right back to the start.

Back in 1999, Senator Jocelyn Newman paid brief lip-service to the global events that have led to a redistribution of work and wealth, but her reference was so vague that it came across as a side-issue. Her main focus, amidst an elaborate smoke-screen of flighty ideas was her labelling of "welfare dependency" as a scourge in need of elimination. On the surface, her words might have been interpreted as an appeal to save disadvantaged Australians from at trap, yet deeper analysis of her message reveals a darker intent.

DISCUSSION PAPER

THE CHALLENGE OF WELFARE DEPENDENCY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Senator the Hon Jocelyn Newman
Minister for Family and Community Services



DEPARTMENT OF
FAMILY AND
COMMUNITY
SERVICES

Reference Group on Welfare Reform

"Community, Business and Government working together."

Request for Public Submissions

The Federal Government has announced a review of the welfare system to find ways of assisting people who are disadvantaged; that strike a better balance between its ongoing commitment to maintain a strong safety net and its responsibility to develop policies and strategies allowing all Australians to participate fully in the workforce where they are able. The Government is concerned that there is an increasing reliance by Australians on welfare, with around one in five people of workforce age on income support payments.

Six principles have been identified in order to guide the reform required in this area:

- Maintaining equity, simplicity, transparency and sustainability;
- Establishing better incentives for people receiving social security payments, so that work, education and training are rewarded;
- Creating greater opportunities for people to increase self-reliance and capacity-building, rather than merely providing a passive safety net;
- Expecting people on income support to help themselves and contribute to society through increased social and economic participation in a framework of mutual obligation;
- Providing choices and support for individuals and families with more tailored assistance that focuses on prevention and early intervention; and
- Maintaining the Government's disciplined approach to fiscal policy.

To ensure a process of consultation with the community, the Government has established a Reference Group with representatives from the community sector, business, academia and government. The Group will provide advice to enable the Government to develop a comprehensive Green Paper on welfare reform. It has been asked to frame its advice against the following terms of reference:

1. Options for change to income support arrangements aimed at preventing and reducing welfare dependency by those of workforce age;
2. Other options relating to the provision of associated services, including employment, education and training, that would assist in preventing and reducing welfare dependency; and
3. In providing its advice, the Reference Group will give particular consideration to the broader application of mutual obligation; demographic changes; sustainability of the current system; the particular incentive effects associated with the design of social security payments for people of workforce age and international best practice.

The Reference Group is seeking written submissions as well as meeting with representatives of relevant peak organisations.

Further information on the Review, including terms of reference, timeframe and background papers can be found at the web site www.facs.gov.au/welfare_reform, or by calling the freecall hotline on 1800 225 024 or TTY 1800 250 402 (9am - 5pm EST). It is planned to publish submissions on the web site, subject to any claims for confidentiality.

Written submissions for the consideration of the Reference Group in framing its advice should be addressed to "Welfare Reform Review", PO Box 7738, CANBERRA, ACT 2600. All submissions should be received by 17 December 1999. Submissions may be emailed to welfare_reform@facs.gov.au

When the original Welfare Reform Reference Group was established under Patrick McClure in 1999, one of the stated Terms of Reference involved:- "*Options for change to income support arrangements aimed at preventing and reducing welfare dependency by those of workforce age*" mean?

"By" ? Really? How was welfare dependency created by "those of workforce age" if not by selfish sloth? Presumably, the people who created the welfare reform agenda didn't know that welfare dependency was a product of global industrial change and a selfish desire to abandon manufacturing in this country, ... or perhaps they knew very well because they had profited from it. I guess we will never know. When we look at the logic-framework of Robodebt, the idea of people taking income-support when they are "able" to work must have seemed like a punishable offense. Never mind the realities of job-shortage in a shrinking labour-market. They had the Golden Lie, and the Golden Lie took care of that argument.

Another aim in the early documents was to introduce "*A broader application of Mutual Obligation*", yet at that stage, mutual obligation was little more than a vague notion. During her National Press Club speech, Jocelyn Newman described Mutual Obligation as "*...a much broader and comprehensive concept than some of the more superficial analyses would have people believe...*" but she failed to qualify her statement or even hint that income-support-recipients would play any active in a process that demanded dialogue. Curiously, while the aspiration stated here was set down before the public consultation even started, no definition of what mutual obligation actually was could be found.

The McClure papers made no significant mention of it, while a later paper titled "*The Future of Welfare in the 21st Century - Unemployed People on Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance*," the section headed: "*What is the Mutual Obligation initiative ?*" explained that: "*The Mutual Obligation Initiative puts the broad principles of mutual obligation into practice*," but made no attempt to explain what "mutual obligation" actually was. The mechanics of the Mutual Obligation Initiative were outlined, but nothing was revealed about its philosophical foundation or aims. It appeared that the Government didn't want to be pinned down to a definition.

4. The Reference Group has the following terms of reference:

a) Adopting the reform principles established by the Government, provide advice

on:

- i. Options for change to income support arrangements aimed at preventing and reducing welfare dependency by those of workforce age; and
- ii. Other options relating to the provision of associated services, including employment, education and training, that would assist in preventing and reducing welfare dependency.

b) In providing this advice, the Reference Group will give particular consideration

to:

- i. the broader application of Mutual Obligation;
- ii. demographic changes;

Dialogue is the
foundation of
democracy, . . .

. . . Without it,
fascism is just
a whisper away

Then there was the question of helping welfare recipients become more self-reliant. One of the goals set down was expressed in the form of a question:- *"How can we best help recipients improve their capacity for self-reliance so that they can move off welfare more quickly"*. Surely that must have been code for "How can we get rid of these pesky people?"

In amongst all the documents was one titled *"Community Attitudes the Unemployed People of Workforce Age"*. Given that community attitudes to jobless people were largely generated by dole-bludger-propaganda, and politicians and media were active agents in the creation of that propaganda, it seemed obvious to me that use of this kind of data in support of welfare policy was certain to further distort the already twisted view of the problem.

Perhaps the most significant line in the original documents can be found in the call for submissions that appeared in newspapers back in 1999. The advertisement stated that *"six principles have been identified in order to guide the reform required in this area"*, yet the very first of these principles reveals what a mockery the whole exercise was. The first stated goal was: *"Maintaining equity, simplicity, transparency and sustainability"*, yet the passage of reform across the past two decades has produced the complete opposite.

In terms of EQUITY, the welfare reform agenda was never about helping disadvantaged people. It was about pandering to the sensibilities of taxpayers and enhancing a "community, business and government" network. That was why nobody ever complained about the injustice of the Mutual Obligation program. The way the concept of reciprocity was skewed towards one of "we will command and you will obey" fitted well with the needs of an industry that relied on the perpetuation of unemployment and poverty for its survival. In addition, John Howard's "Social Coalition" never made room for anybody outside the circle. Income support recipients were always viewed as lesser beings.

In terms of SIMPLICITY, the system has become infinitely more complicated. Back in 1969, the entire Social Security caseload for Victoria's Westernport Region was administered from two desks on the second floor of the C.E.S. building in Dandenong. Within a decade, the Department had become an empire in its own right with offices in a number of suburbs and regional centres within the region. At the same time, the closure of the C.E.S. and establishment of a many-tentacled job-search and training sector has added to the complexity. In more recent years, the Creation of MyGov, with its maze-like structure, user-hostile-interface and "computer says 'no'" mentality, and there's no way users are going to describe it as anything other than confusing.

In terms of TRANSPARENCY, Even if we accept that a desire for transparency exists (which it doesn't), the mechanics of the system have become so complex that no one person is likely to understand its workings. Few people have even heard of the "Welfare Payments Infrastructure Transformation Program" or the "Entitlement Calculation Engine solution", and many details of programs such as the cashless debit card trial remain hidden. Objective scrutiny has never been a serious consideration.

As for SUSTAINABILITY, any measure of success will depend on the observer's point-of-view. Processes limiting eligibility and access to payments would have been welcome to taxpayers, and turning recipients into cash-cows for service providers would have created cash-flows and job-opportunities in the job-search, training and charity industries. The provision of cheap labour through "voluntary work" and Work for the Dole would have saved money for charities and community groups, yet the exorbitant cost of building and maintaining the infrastructure needed to support a relatively unproductive illusion of activity bordered on the insane.

Measuring the success or failure of two decades of welfare "reform" begs the question of what the aim of it all was in the first place. If the aim had been to create a supportive mechanism that would lift people out of disadvantage and help them advance themselves, it has been an abject failure, yet if the real aim had been to contain disadvantage while hiding the truth about unemployment and poverty, it must be considered a glowing success.

Whatever the case, the Robodebt Inquiry has revealed serious problems requiring further investigation. Hopefully, that investigation will not be a return to the time-honoured process of whitewash, in which a few politicians and public servants are sent into comfortable exile while the welfare machine itself returns to business as usual. Given the gravity of what has been uncovered, a major change in the direction of labour-market-policy, welfare-policy and community dialogue is called for. What is really at stake here are the democratic freedoms many of us claim to believe in.

Of course, the question of how we should deal with the Golden Lie remains moot. Many people will be tempted to keep on pretending it doesn't exist, but that would be very foolish when we consider where keeping that secret almost took us.

- Six principles have been identified in order to guide the reform required in this area:
- Maintaining equity, simplicity, transparency and sustainability;
 - Establishing better incentives for people receiving social security payments, so that work, education and training are rewarded;
 - Creating greater opportunities for people to increase self-reliance and capacity-building, rather than merely providing a passive safety net;
 - Expecting people on income support to help themselves and contribute to society through increased social and economic participation in a framework of mutual obligation;
 - Providing choices and support for individuals and families with more tailored assistance that focuses on prevention and early intervention; and
 - Maintaining the Government's disciplined approach to fiscal policy.

COMPUTER SAYS 'NO'

The pathway to the digital platform is littered with terms and phrases designed to portray recipients in a particular light. Much of the language used is designed to quantify a recipient's entitlement to payments while taking no notice of their personal circumstances or labour-market realities.

The term **WELFARE DEPENDENCY** implies that recipients choose to sponge off the government while systemic disadvantage and personal circumstances are left out of the equation.

The **WORK TEST** was designed to ensure that applicants for income-support were actively seeking work.

The **ACTIVITIES TEST** was created when acute job-shortage made the Work Test irrelevant, and a mechanism to test worthiness was required.

CAPACITY TO BENEFIT was coined to hide shortfalls in assistance programs by making their success reliant on the individual's ability to benefit from them.

FORM NOT RETURNED was the reason stated for suspension of payments when an applicant returned their renewal form without filling it out in the specified way. In this way, procedural disputes were resolved when the desk-clerk taking delivery of the form put it aside rather than logging it into the computer. When the computer failed to see the document, it generated an automatic suspension notice and the issue at the centre of the dispute remained hidden.

MUTUAL OBLIGATION is a program supposedly built on reciprocity, while actually functioning in a "we will command and you will obey" fashion.

CAPACITY TO WORK is a term coined to reclassify income support recipients of workforce age, such as single parents and some disabled people, as physically capable of working, and therefore technically "unemployed". In this way, a theoretical measure of able-bodiedness justifies the assignment of set tasks as eligibility-criteria for income-support while labour-market realities are left out of the equation.

VOLUNTARY WORK is a way of occupying the time and energy of income support recipients who have been locked out of the workforce for a variety of reasons.

MYGOV is the name given to the electronic interface between members of the public and government departments. The system is not user-friendly, and users often complain about unnecessary complexity, maze-like-construction and unexpected drop-outs. The Centrelink telephone service is also notorious for extremely long wait-times and regular line dropouts.

PARENTSNEXT is a program designed to remove the parenting aspect from the last vestige of the Parenting Payment. As with other payments, love, commitment and entrapment can't be measured in a computer algorithm, so the assignment of specific tasks within a set time-frame gives the computer numbers to play with in making calculations.

NEWSTART MECHANISM is a term designed to change the essential nature of an income support payment to a function within a program.

Language use like this is not accidental – it is calculated. When the architects of the **UNIVERSAL PLATFORM** created this vocabulary, they knew exactly what they were doing. Bias has been intentionally built into a system where it should not have been applied.



**Exile in a shoe-box
is not a business-model
that works**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Costello is an artist and writer with a passionate interest in social-justice and the empowerment of the individual. In 2023, he was 69 years old, and living near Melbourne in Victoria, Australia. He has written a variety of books that he hopes to publish in the near future. One series is educational, showcasing the landscapes, flora and fauna, history and animal folklore of Gippsland; Another series showcases his artwork and poetry, while a third focuses on the importance and empowerment of human beings.

The Power of You and *The Power of Us* are companion books designed to provide positive affirmation and open up a conversation about the value of the human spirit and the importance of personal and collective responsibility in our journey through life.

