

Cut Through, March 20, 2026: **Rick Morton unpacks the NACC robodebt report**
All timestamps are approximate

Crystal Andrews (00:00)

Hello and welcome to Cut Through, Crikey's spin-free analysis of Australian news, politics and power. I'm your host, Crystal Andrews. And if you care about independent media as much as we do, please remember to subscribe to the podcast on YouTube or any of the platforms that you're listening to us on.

Share this episode with a friend, it all helps Crikey to grow and keep independent journalism in Australia alive. For today's episode, we are talking about the latest chapter in the robodebt tragedy with Rick Morton, Crikey's correspondent at large. Rick, welcome to Cut Through.

Rick Morton (00:35)

Hey Crystal, how you going? Thanks for having me.

Crystal Andrews (00:38)

Thank you for joining us from ~ beautiful Milan tonight and to talk about.

Rick Morton (00:43)

It feels

very decadent, doesn't it?

Crystal Andrews (00:47)

It is, it's a very decadent

setting for, you know, a very big conversation that we're going to get into. It does feel a little bit, you know, actually it feels almost impossible to sum up robodebt at this point. I'm sure everybody listening to or watching this podcast knows exactly what I'm talking about, but just in case there's anyone joining us for the first time brand new to this, to this topic of conversation right now, robodebt of course was the automated

debt assessment and recovery scheme that ran between 2016 and 2020 devised under a Liberal government that was responsible for 470,000 wrongly issued debts to people receiving welfare payments. To this point, robodebt has been investigated by the Commonwealth Ombudsman, two Senate inquiries, a royal commission, the Australian Public Service Commission, and most recently the National Anti-Corruption Commission, which just last week handed down its final report.

into this whole sorry saga. And that's what we're going to get into today. But it's clear that from its very conception that this scheme, this program was unlawful, various class action settlements and legal challenges will see the federal government pay around \$2.4 billion in

redress and financial compensation to the victims. And Rick, I think it's only right that we maybe start this conversation talking about the victims experiences. You spent

a very long time forensically examining reporting on robodebt, most notably in your award winning book, Main Streak. And there was a comment that you'd made, I think, in accepting the Prime Minister's Literary Award that stood out to me that I want to ask you about. You said that reporting on robodebt radicalized you and it changed sort of a youthful, naive view that you had had up until that point about how government worked. Was there a specific

know, person's story who had been caught up in all of this that really, you know, stuck out and stayed with you as you were writing the book and reporting on everything that has come since.

Rick Morton (02:52)

Yeah, it's a really good question. I think, I mean, Rhys Cauzzo those mom, Jenny Miller, well, someone I became really close to throughout this process. And she, a sense, has been the poster woman for the harm that robodebt did because her son isn't with us anymore. He killed himself because of robodebt explicitly because of it. There was no questions around, was it something else? was the debt that he had that he couldn't pay back that he didn't owe.

but he didn't know how to prove that was what led to him taking his life. But beyond that, think there were people I discovered throughout the Royal Commission process who gave voice to things that I had felt in going through the evidence and looking at the ways that mostly public servants were behaving, ~ where they were talking about these, at the time they were levying or doing 866,000 reviews. And the people that came up with this scheme,

literally told the regulatory teams that are supposed to do regulatory impact statements when they do new policy proposals for the government at the time under Tony Abbott's government. They said, oh, we don't have to do a regulatory impact statement for this because all 866,000 people are deviant. They're non-compliant and therefore they don't attract the sympathetic lens of giving them the better for the doubt. And then seeing those real life stories, there's a woman, Mandy, who was

a heroin addict who was fighting, ~ you know, she'd been clean a decade. And at the same time that she relapsed into addiction because of other life forces, she gets this debt, this robo debt. ~ I remember talking to her parents in their house in Melbourne, and they don't, you know, they don't blame robodebt for her relapsing. But what they do acknowledge is that while she was trying to get clean,

The thing that could have helped her was to escape the circumstances in which she was in and she couldn't do it because she had this debt, which we now know she didn't owe. And she died of an overdose ~ very shortly after ~ getting these debt letters. The most important thing about her case is that that was at the very end of robo debt. ~ It was after the federal government through the Department of Human Services had received preliminary, but

Crystal Andrews (05:08)

Hmm.

Rick Morton (05:16)

pretty alarming legal advice from the Australian government solicitor saying, actually these federal court cases that you've got going on, Madeleine Masterson's case, you might not win that. And this is after years of controversy around this scheme. And this scheme should have ended many, it should never have began, but it should have ended much before this and this woman died in Penury.

of an overdose that she might've been able to defeat if she could have actually accessed the treatment she needed. And I think that to this day, that really kills me.

Crystal Andrews (05:48)

Yeah, you know, all of the different types of investigations that I ran through, know, those started from as early as I think 2017. Like it wasn't particularly long into this scheme running that, you know, and as you cover in your book as well, that the alarm was being raised, that this was not what it seemed to be. You know, the great like savings boon that they expected it to be and to continue for so long while these questions were being raised and you know, these very

Rick Morton (05:52)

Okay.

Crystal Andrews (06:18)

real painful stories from people were coming out is almost unbelievable.

Rick Morton (06:25)

Yeah, and I think when I talk about it radicalizing me, that is one of the things that it radicalized me on is that it's literally unbelievable and yet it happened. And I still to this day cannot wrap my mind around that. Like how could these people with all of the warning signs, you know, we're talking about public investigations from 2017, but internally they had access to the trials and the pilots and the data was telling them one thing, people are not responding and you're levying these automatic

~ averaging assessments at a massive scale in circumstances when you thought you, according to your evidence before the Royal Commission and for some people before the Anti-Corruption Commission, you thought you only doing it as a last resort. That was never true, never true. And despite all of that, here we are.

Crystal Andrews (07:16)

Indeed, here we are with the final NAC report and the sealed chapter from the Royal commission being released last week. Many of the victims and also advocates who have been really pushing this cause and trying to bring accountability and transparency to this along the

way came out to say how disappointed that they were and frustrated and just felt. ~ I think the word I kept saying was people feeling really let down that this

seems to be the conclusion to all of this, conclusion to this story. The report found that two people engaged in serious corrupt conduct, those being public servants, Mark Whittnall and Serena Wilson, but it did not refer them to the Commonwealth DPP for criminal investigation.

The NAC report also cleared the four remaining people who it was investigating, them being Scott Morrison, who at the time was the Minister for Social Services, Catherine Campbell, the former secretary of the Department of Human Services, Catherine Halbert, the group manager of the Payments Policy Group at the Department of Social Services, and Annette Mussolino, the chief counsel for the Department of Human Services.

bit of a mouthful with all of the titles there, but I think it's important for people to understand, you know, what positions, you know, everybody was sitting in and the different angles that this was being ~ implemented from. Rick, in your opinion, what is the key kind of lesson for the rest of us, you know, like the general public lay person to take away from the NAC report? Because I think, realistically, most people are just not going to be able to get into the weeds of who said what, who did what, like you have been able to. ~

Rick Morton (08:27)

I'm

Crystal Andrews (08:55)

But it's clear, I think from reading your article for Crikey that I'll link in the episode description so that everybody can read your review of the report. It's clear that you think that it tells us something kind of important and core to the nature of the public service and the way that it works that, you know, the rest of us should understand.

Rick Morton (09:15)

Yeah, I mean, it's fair to say that I was maybe not ~ surprised by the NAC report, but I was shocked by it. I think I was shocked by the arguments behind it more than anything else. I didn't necessarily expect every single person referred to be found to be corrupt, although I do think the definition of corruption in the NAC Act is very broad. It's, you know, and the ones that they focused on, the ones that they should have focused on, which is a breach of public trust in public office. ~

Crystal Andrews (09:32)

Yeah.

Rick Morton (09:44)

But they only found two public servants and not Scott Morrison, the minister, nor Catherine Campbell, the secretary of DHS, who were both the two most prominent people at the very beginning of this scheme when it was kind of briefed between the two of them at a December

30, 2014 meeting between Catherine Campbell and Scott Morrison. So I was surprised, not surprised, but very shocked. more importantly, I think, you know,

I'm troubled by the reasoning in the NAC report, but, you know, for the most part, the findings that they made against Serena Wilson and Mark Whithnell of serious corrupt conduct were absolutely the correct findings. Serena Wilson, I had some sympathy for during the Royal Commission, but not enough to say that she, you know, was badly done by. She was the deputy secretary who engaged, according to now the Royal Commission and the NAC, engaged in a concerted campaign to deceive.

Crystal Andrews (10:14)

Mm.

Rick Morton (10:40)

the Commonwealth Ombudsman during that critical early 2017 investigation. And Mark Withnell, who was the general manager of customer compliance at the Department of Human Services, was one of the most senior guys. The other most senior person, Malisa Golightly, the deputy secretary, is now deceased. But had she been alive, she absolutely would have been referred to the NAC. But Mark Withnell was the next person below her and he was correctly found to have engaged in ~

a deception of the Department of Social Services officers while they were collaborating on bringing together this new policy proposal for ropadebt. It's a really complicated story. I won't get into the weeds about what he knew and when, but the NAC kind of prevaricates on some instances, but also finds that he knew at that point in time that he absolutely was misleading DSS, but then also found that later on he genuinely came to the view, the mistaken view based on the

incorrect advice of his juniors, Scott Britton and Jason Ryman, that they were legally sound. So he kind of just believed them. ~ More importantly, I think the broader view here is that the public service, ~ I mean, to zoom out, not just from the NAC findings, but the Royal Commission findings, really, I think what it shows us is that there is very little accountability ~ between these

very senior, very well paid people who have a great deal of responsibility in their jobs. I remember talking to someone in Canberra when I was working on the book, who was a senior public servant himself. And he's like, you know, if there's some little silo happening here and they see someone in another team from another silo, literally the word, the expression was, know, if so-and-so saw a colleague shoot his grandma, they would say, well, that's for their team to sort out. That's not my problem.

Crystal Andrews (12:31)

Jesus.

Okay.

Rick Morton (12:32)

Yeah,

it's an extreme example of what we have seen. I say this all the time, but robodebt was not one single failure. was a myriad ~ failures. It was a mosaic of failure and there was self-reinforcing. In one instance, you might have a mid-ranking public servant who otherwise had a pretty solid, pretty decent career, who in one critical moment saw something wrong, didn't say anything.

Crystal Andrews (12:48)

Mm.

Rick Morton (13:02)

all covered for their team in not saying something to someone else. And you see that everywhere. It's like this kind of shattered, you know, spider web cracks in the glass of failure that ironically, what we get out of this is Serena Wilson, the deputy secretary at DSS, the most senior person now with a corruption charge against her, was one of the most senior people at the department that hated Roe Pettit. And they gave the original legal advice that said you cannot do this to DHS.

Crystal Andrews (13:26)

Hmm.

Rick Morton (13:31)

Where robodebt was actually conceived, where it was actually delivered, where it was designed, written, implemented all under the Department of Human Services, all at their gung-ho. Mark Whithnell was the guy in the department who was like, we know boats. That was his motto. You know, we know what we're doing. DSS, the nerds in policy, technically the senior department, sure, but they weren't running this. They were not running this at all. But Serena Wilson is the one with the most, you know, the most senior person with the corruption.

fighting against her now because she ended up two years later in order to, according to the NAACP, according to the Royal commission, to cover up for the original sin of her failure to stop roving it two years before engaged in this high deception of the Commonwealth Ombudsman. And it's just careerism. It's a narrow lane focus where literally they put the blinkers on and they don't want to see what's going on over here because either they're too scared to speak up in their own team.

Crystal Andrews (14:17)

Mmm.

Rick Morton (14:26)

because you've got someone like Malisa Golightly who was a bully and a vicious one at that, scared to bring it up. And fine, those things are real concerns. But I know that there were

468,000 other scared people in Australia and they didn't have the power or the protection of the public service bond.

Crystal Andrews (14:46)

know whether it's a gap in what the public expects the public service to be like and how they operate or actually it is validating maybe some of the things that the public thinks. I keep going back and forth on whether it's so shocking because we really deep down in our heart of hearts expect it to be different and when there is a group of people, there's so many people involved, we like to reassure ourselves.

there's a lot of people involved in this surely, you know, someone, a good person, the right person will speak up and say, Hey, this is wrong. We should stop this or I don't think this is right. Can we look at this again? Um, and I think what it is about this, this whole saga, it just goes to show that even when people do pipe up and there were some people, you know, who, did pipe up along the way and say, I don't think this is right. The, the motion of the whole thing almost steamrolls any descent.

Rick Morton (15:27)

Hmm.

Hmm.

Crystal Andrews (15:44)

flat and it just keeps going. And that is what I think has been so stark about all of all of these findings to me at least.

Rick Morton (15:52)

You know, I think that's true. I mean, I can't speak for anyone else, but going into this, I was very naive. Like I thought that generally speaking, not all governments, but I thought the Australian government, as much as they, you know, told fibs and they, you know, massaged information and they, you know, put out their spin in press releases and all the rest of it. I thought the machinery of government was pretty honest. I really did. ~ And I don't know whether when I talk about being radicalised, it's certainly robodebt has

Crystal Andrews (15:59)

Mm.

Rick Morton (16:22)

woken me up to things that I, it's not a case of being a hammer and seeing a nail everywhere, but I now see the same types of behavior in my reporting, not just in DSS, not just in services Australia, but at the national disability insurance agency, the department of employment, where we're talking about job services and employment services. see it everywhere. it's not, boggles my mind because A, I don't think we've learned anything from this.

But B, it's like, this is the stuff that led to robodebt. There's been a few prominent critics of the Australian Public Service Commission findings, which I think are pretty wrongheaded. Not the findings, but the criticism of the APSC. Some of it's valid, but most of it's wrongheaded. ~ But really what I think a lot of that criticism is aimed at is that protecting a certain type of public servant. And the point of this is not to say that these people are...

terrible people or anything like that. But there are very few heroes in this story and certainly not the ones who are trying to make themselves out to be the real heroes, whether the people like Colleen Taylor, the APS4, APS6 people who were all in compliance, knew, they knew Robodet wasn't right. And yet somehow the further up the tree you went, the less people were so sure. They were like, maybe, maybe we can get away with it. Like, it just doesn't make any sense to me.

I'm still trying to figure it out in my mind, as you can tell.

Crystal Andrews (17:43)

Mm.

Yeah, when

you say that you don't think that we've learnt anything from it, what do you mean by that?

Rick Morton (17:51)

Well, mean, for example, like, I remember doing some talks to a bunch of public servants and they were like, well, what are we meant to do in a situation like that where we're, you know, worried about getting in trouble? And like, it's absolutely true that the government does not like to receive bad advice. We just suspiciously lost the secretary of the department of employment. ~ Only the second one since the, or certainly the second one since the secretary of the department of agriculture when Barnaby Joyce was the minister under

weird circumstances, let's put it that way. Certainly it was the government that ended their job, right? Now, why? Why? ~ There are chains of command where people are worried to hand up problematic advice because it's going to be a problem for someone else and that person above them, their boss, doesn't want to deal with that problem. So they tell everyone not to put anything in writing. And ~ the irony of reading the NAC findings about some of these individuals who were referred is that, there was no written evidence, there was no evidence that they did X, Y, Z, so therefore it didn't happen. It's like, well,

No, that's partly because they didn't write anything down by design. Yeah. And like the absence of written evidence is not evidence of something that didn't happen. It's evidence that perhaps something happened and didn't write. It didn't enter the documentary record, but it's not evidence that it didn't happen. ~ And we know that because, know, Melissa Golliley, again, now deceased, frequently gave commands to her subordinates. Do not, don't you dare put that in writing.

Crystal Andrews (18:52)

That's why, actually.

Rick Morton (19:15)

I will end your career if you put that in writing. And this thing is still alive in the public service.

Crystal Andrews (19:20)

So the other interesting thing about the NAC reports findings, and we've sort of been talking about this a little bit already, but it does seem to contradict a lot of the work that was done by Catherine Holmes for the Royal Commission. And it does seem to contradict a lot of the journalistic work that you have done and some of the conclusions that both your work and the Royal Commission have drawn are quite different to some of the conclusions that the NAC report has drawn. ~

Rick Morton (19:43)

Mm-hmm.

Crystal Andrews (19:46)

Were you surprised that it was so different based on everything that you had learned up until the report came out or was that kind, were you expecting it to go that way?

Rick Morton (19:56)

No, I mean, I think what I was expecting was for them to kind of not want to issue corruption findings, to do it, you know, vaguely within the realm of the facts that had been found by the Royal Commission. I was astonished to read some of the findings, particularly some of the arguments about why those findings were made by the NAC, not only in declining to press, you know, the allegation of corruption, but in why they decided that.

Crystal Andrews (20:02)

Mm-hmm.

Mm.

Rick Morton (20:23)

was essentially to come up with a completely different version of events to the Royal Commission, which by the way is allowed. People are free to find their own facts, particularly from another institution charged with investigating these things. They were referred by the Royal Commission to do just that. But frankly, I find the reasoning flimsy. And in fact, in some cases, I find it.

How do I say this? I find it almost absurd. ~ For example, Serena Wilson, Deputy Secretary. You know, there's a line in the NAC report from, you know, the Deputy Commissioner, who, by the way, is the only person who could do this investigation because everyone else was tainted by

the Commissioner's failure to properly manage his conflicts of interest with Catherine Campbell.

~

Crystal Andrews (20:52)

Mm.

Rick Morton (21:13)

And because the other ones were involved in that investigation, they couldn't do this. It was left to one solitary deputy commissioner to do this, by the way. And so Serena Wilson, there's a line in there where the NAC says, yeah, look, she was busy ~ and she had a lot of things on her plate, but she's a deputy secretary and I'm sure she, they're wording, we're sure that she had these protocols and processes in place to correctly elevate serious communications that need her attention. Fine, true.

Crystal Andrews (21:18)

Hmm.

Rick Morton (21:41)

That is exactly what we want of our highly paid public servants. But when it comes to Catherine Campbell, who was found not to have engaged in serious corruption by the NAC, suddenly we've got, oh God, she was very busy. she had, the thing that really rankled me was that there were statements in the NAC report that could only have come. In fact, we know they only came from a certain individual's testimony. In one case, Catherine Campbell, who

at the Royal Commission and at the NAC has said, well, you know, at the time that Roeberdett was being developed as a new policy proposal, I had something like 40 major policy proposals in that budget. ~ And the NAC report doesn't quote her, it just states as a fact, her attention was focused on the welfare program integration, WIPPET, I forgot the exact acronym, but this boondoggle. Yeah, according to her testimony.

Crystal Andrews (22:30)

~ According to her own, you know, her own statement.

Rick Morton (22:36)

There is no way to say that as a fact. There is no way to say that. Her attention was focused elsewhere. Well, okay, how, where and why? There's nothing, nothing. it's just, there's examples like that all through this report.

Crystal Andrews (22:48)

It leaves, you know, these, particularly the four people who ~ have been, I don't know if cleared is the right, I don't know what the right word is to use for where, and that's really the question, right? Like reputation is everything, not just, I think people understand that for elected politicians like Scott Morrison, like of course, reputation is incredibly important as to whether you'll be able

to continue in that career and continue your job, but it is equally as important at these very senior levels of the public service.

Rick Morton (23:01)

Hmm.

Crystal Andrews (23:17)

And this kind of leaves them in a weird limbo now because you have on one hand a report that is more damning and on the other hand, a report that is sort of saying it was okay and this is, you you behaved as expected and that's the chapter closed. And it kind of leaves them caught between to me. I mean, in your opinion, like,

Rick Morton (23:40)

Mm-hmm.

Crystal Andrews (23:43)

Where does that leave them? What is a reputation that's caught between this rock and a hard place?

Rick Morton (23:45)

I'm into this.

mean, the ultimate irony is that ~ it's kind of recreated the same scenario that existed between DSS and DHS when robodebt was born, which allowed robodebt to be born because there was this big gap in the middle of these two departments who were antagonistic, and who didn't agree and who had completely different ideas about how to do policy. ~ And yet somehow now in retrospect, we're all told that it was DSS's problem. And that's why, you know, they should have done their job. I mean, it was entirely DHS, right? But

We had limbo for robodebt, we've got limbo for the people involved. You know, I think the deputy commissioner of the NAC who made the report, you know, makes the fairly belated suggestion at the end of her report saying, you know, just because we've not made findings of corruption does not mean that their behavior was good or that even in some cases it wasn't reprehensible or less than ideal. But I think, you know, one of the arguments when originally the NAC decided to

even investigate any of the six, ~ which of course was overturned. It's kind of like the most Rube Goldberg machine way to get a corruption report. Like it took forever and every possible kind of nook and cranny was dead end. It was like a labyrinth. ~ But one of the reasons why they declined in the first place was we're like, well, what are we going to do? The most we can do, I found this so funny at the time, not funny, but darkly funny. They're like, what are we going to do? The most we can do is

make a finding of corruption. It's like, that is your job. Like that is, that is literally the only thing you can do. And yeah, there's a normative effect to this, right? And I know for the reason, literally the reason I wrote the book in the end was because there was a view, I knew for a fact that the people who were associated with robodebt hated being associated with it. They were more than happy to be associated with it for years. They were crowing about it. They were like, I did that. I did robodebt. Like, you know, this great policy initiative. And then suddenly they're like,

Crystal Andrews (25:20)

It is what the people, what the people want.

Rick Morton (25:47)

didn't want to be attached to it because it was a bad thing. And so there's a normative kind of role in a corruption investigation, in a corruption finding that is meant to act as a signpost to people not to do this thing. And I think, you know, maybe in a weird way, we still get that because ironically, the people involved who have been referred for this investigation have had more procedural fairness of order to them than anyone ever, ever, ever had who were given a robodebt notice.

Crystal Andrews (25:49)

Mm.

Rick Morton (26:18)

those people were thrown to the wolves. And here we've had lawyers at a thousand paces. There were lawyers at a thousand paces for the Australian Public Service Commission, ~ which is like threatening to sue a wet lettuce. People didn't want to have findings made against them in that instance either. So we know that they didn't want to be dragged through this process, that they ~ hate it and that it has meant something at least to them.

Crystal Andrews (26:20)

Mm.

Rick Morton (26:47)

and their reputation. ~ And I think the limbo is, if we can't get a corruption finding on everyone, then limbo is probably about right because there are people who I think escaped even some more serious sanctions, even through the Royal commission, who I thought probably should have been given a firmer hand because they sucked at their job.

Like, and like, you know, frankly, if we can't sit back and say, you know what, you sucked at your job in any legal sense, then there's no point having any of these institutions. And so right now we've got people who, you know, you know, except for maybe some excuses that were made for ministerial responsibility in the NAC report, we can sit back and say, you know, you kind of sucked at your job and shouldn't be in that position of power ever again.

Crystal Andrews (27:39)

Hmm. The other institution that is now facing, what I would think is, it's like a reputational crisis over all of this is the NAC itself, which, you know, the NAC was established after robo debt was set up after robo debt was exposed. And the public expectations of this institution is that it would bring accountability. would bring transparency. think there was a genuine, ~

optimism, like these optimistically high expectations about what the creation of the NAC would mean for Australian politics, ~ about expectations of how these things would be handled under a Labour government after, you know, the years of a Liberal government where something like this would, you know, would happen in the first place. ~ But now we know after a few years of operations, this institution has just been like plagued by various

conduct scandals. mean, even this investigation itself, as you said, it had to be dragged kicking and screaming to look at this. It was only after like huge public outcry that these six people were even examined by the NAC. ~ And again, know, very heavy criticism of the fact that the hearings were not made public. Like this really fought the National Anti-Corruption Commission. This has been a shambles.

Rick Morton (29:06)

Mm-hmm.

Crystal Andrews (29:07)

But Rick, I wonder if you think that the public's expectations of the NAC were realistic in the first place. were we going to get what we thought we were getting with this institution? And then what does it mean for the NAC now? How does it continue on in its function of what it's supposed to do? And what is its reputation like in the aftermath of this report?

Rick Morton (29:34)

Look, I genuinely like I'm not being dramatic. I genuinely think the NACC needs to be torn to pieces and not just rebuilt, but completely redesigned. Like nothing, nothing from this current NACC should be allowed to remain. Like, I mean, I just, it is beyond poisoned. ~ and it's partly not their fault. It's also very much partly their fault. The people who are running the NACC.

~ Like, you know, if I'd written a fiction, you know, a short story about the way the robodebt NACC investigation came about, we wouldn't believe it. Like, I mean, it's not even a simple case of they declined to investigate and then were told to investigate it. They declined to investigate. There were, you know, conflicts mismanaged and then they were investigated by an independent investigator who told them you've got to reopen the investigation. So they reopened the investigation. They got an independent person, the independent person who's a former high court judge.

Crystal Andrews (30:22)

You

Rick Morton (30:28)

have been a great person to do the investigation, but they're not allowed to. So they have to give the investigation back to the NAC, but everyone else, Stephen Bradbury, out of the way. And so we've left with one deputy commissioner. It's embarrassing. ~ But beyond that, we've had, you know, the commissioner, ~ apparently, I'm going to be a little bit ~ hyperbolic here, but you know, six or seven times, ~ keeps saying that he's declared all his conflicts. And then every Senate estimates hearing or Senate committee hearing, there's a new conflict that

we learned that he knew about. Yeah, it's just like, how do you, like, do you have a large coat that you're storing all of these in? Like, how is this, how is this happening? Like, we couldn't have designed this worse. the public, you know, I think, I think people should be allowed to dream. Like, we should be allowed to think that we can have a nice thing. I mean, we have, I'm not saying the New South Wales Independent Commission against corruption is perfect, but certainly it's a lot more rigorous and, ~ you know, people in New South Wales are scared of it.

Crystal Andrews (30:59)

pops up. Yep.

Rick Morton (31:27)

Not enough, apparently, to still try to avoid carrying around bags of cash in shopping bags. But, you know, more so than because, yeah, because things will come out. ~ And, you know, the fact that, you know, according to the deputy commissioner, these robodebt hearings didn't meet the threshold for public hearings. It's like, I mean, that's the only line we get about it. I consider that they didn't meet the threshold. Why? ~

Crystal Andrews (31:34)

scared, scared in some sense at least, scared enough.

Mm.

Rick Morton (31:57)

because we had a robodebt royal commission finding. I would have believed that if you'd made similar findings, but you rejected half of the major findings of the royal commission. think we deserve to have a right to see how you made that rejection. ~ It's yeah, I just, it just dismantle it. It's no one, mean, I, it takes a long time for me to learn my, lose my trust in something, but when I do, it's gone. And the NACC, I have no faith.

in their processes whatsoever. And I don't think I'm being ~ unfair in that. I think there's a lot of people out there in the public who are lot harsher than I am.

Crystal Andrews (32:35)

Yeah, I certainly do not think that you are alone in that, in that feeling. is, it is such a shame to say that it's a shame is an understatement, but you know, that there are, can feel like there are a few wins that you get in politics where something is created that people are on board and

behind and, know, agreeing that this is a good thing. And it did feel at one time that the NAC was one of those, you know, one of those wins, one of the creation of something that we wanted that would be a, you know, force for

transparency and accountability, these are good things. And to see it sort of crumble in this way is beyond dispiriting. Rick, how are you feeling now that this chapter of your life is closing, is closing the right word? I mean, there is a sense of finality around this report, ~ at least for the big institutional investigations into what happened in robodebt. It does feel like we've come to a natural.

Rick Morton (33:22)

Hehehe.

Crystal Andrews (33:33)

resting place.

Rick Morton (33:34)

Yeah, it really does feel like that. And yet every time I've thought that it's not been the case. You know, I thought that the first time the NACC came out and said we're not investigating. And of course, that wasn't the end of it at all. I mean, I would. Yeah, I don't know. I honestly like I

I have never trusted writers when they talk about working on something that has like broken them. And I've always been like, Oh my God, I've had enough basically, like, it can't be that hard. Yeah, stop being so dramatic. And I'm a Pisces, right? but yeah, my god, I'm sorry for our loss. Yeah. But like, I mean, honestly, the reason why I'm being decadent in Milan, quote unquote,

Crystal Andrews (34:05)

Dramatic.

Me too.

This is a terrible pairing. ~

Rick Morton (34:24)

slash Paris where I now live is because I needed to get out of the country to escape it. Like I just, I can't, you know, they're making a ~ ABC drama about robodebt based on my book. And I just can't even bring myself to talk to the producers about it. Like I just, I just, I, know, the only thing that made me write about the NAC report just gone was just absolute confusion over the state of that report.

that eventually I couldn't let it go. So, know, yeah, it feels weird to leave it on this note, but certainly in terms of major institutional investigation, sure, maybe they're over, but I don't know that it's the end of the story just yet. The findings of corruption against two individuals certainly

leave open the door for more court cases beyond the class action. But yeah, I don't know. It feels weird. It's just one of those things where I'm like, feels like I've gone insane by watching people who

clearly did the wrong thing, just kind of move on with their lives. Anyway.

Crystal Andrews (35:30)

I do not think you are alone in feeling that there are a lot of people out there who did not experience this firsthand themselves were not issued a robo debt, but watching this unfold and the way that it has, has been, I think, yeah, a very radicalizing moment for many and a changing, a changing experience for a lot of us. Rick, thank you so much for, giving me your time today to talk about this and to

drag you all through it again. I really do appreciate it.

Rick Morton (36:02)

look, I mean, it's cheaper than therapy. So thanks, Crystal. I appreciate it.

Crystal Andrews (36:04)

I appreciate it.