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### **"Ask for More Time": Big Data Chronopolitics in the Australian Welfare Bureaucracy**

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Since 2016, welfare recipients in Australia have been subject to the Online Compliance Intervention (OCI), implemented through the national income support agency, Centrelink. This is a big data initiative, matching reported income to tax records to recoup welfare overpayments. The OCI proved controversial, notably for a "reverse onus," requiring that claimants disprove debts, and for data-matching design leading frequently to incorrect debts. As algorithmic governance, the OCI directs attention to the chronopolitics of contemporary welfare bureaucracies. It outsources labor previously conducted by Centrelink to clients, compelling them to submit documentation lest debts be raised against them. It imposes an active wait against a deadline on those issued debt notifications. Belying government rhetoric about the accessibility of the digital state, the OCI demonstrates how automation exacerbates punitive welfare agendas, through transfers of time, money, and labor whose combined effects are such as to occupy the time of people experiencing poverty.

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# **“Ask for More Time”: Big Data Chronopolitics in the Australian Welfare Bureaucracy**

Andrew Whelan

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## **Abstract**

Since 2016, welfare recipients in Australia have been subject to the Online Compliance Intervention (OCI), implemented through the national income support agency, Centrelink. This is a big data initiative, matching reported income to tax records to recoup welfare overpayments. The OCI proved controversial, notably for a “reverse onus”, requiring claimants disprove debts, and for data matching design leading frequently to incorrect debts. As algorithmic governance, the OCI directs attention to the chronopolitics of contemporary welfare bureaucracies. It outsources labor previously conducted by Centrelink to clients, compelling them to submit documentation lest debts be raised against them. It imposes an active wait against a deadline on those issued debt notifications. Belying government rhetoric about the accessibility of the digital state, the OCI demonstrates how automation exacerbates punitive welfare agendas, through transfers of time, money and labor whose combined effects are such as to occupy the time of people experiencing poverty.

## **Keywords**

sociology, debt, time, social welfare, algorithmic governance, bureaucracy, big data, robo-debt

## **Introduction**

In July of 2016, the Department of Human Services (DHS) in Australia rolled out an automated debt recovery scheme, the Online Compliance Intervention. This scheme is implemented through Centrelink, the DHS agency responsible for social security payments. The Online Compliance Intervention (OCI) is an element in a much larger process of digital transformation for the Australian state. It has received academic interest, as an algorithmic automation of decision processes at the national level (Henman, 2017a; Hogan-Doran, 2017), exhibiting a novel approach to the legal responsibility to prove a debt (Carney, 2019). The OCI is discussed here in the hope of advancing analysis regarding how contemporary welfare bureaucracies organize time for their clients. Waiting and administrative seizure of time are topics of longstanding interest to scholars of bureaucracy (Auyero, 2012; Comfort, 2008; Prottas, 1979; Seefeldt, 2017; Zerubavel, 1987).

The OCI is an illuminating example of the shift to online provision for welfare bureaucracies. “Big data” techniques, digital documentation and online service provision have particular implications for welfare claimants’ time. The OCI has its own peculiarities, but the temporal appropriation it involves is alluded to in research on bureaucratic waiting and on consumptive labor. The OCI process illustrates how algorithmic governance in the contemporary welfare state can come to *occupy* the client’s time.

The first section below contextualizes this proposition, through a brief, necessarily selective discussion of relevant research on time and bureaucracy. This discussion situates the phrase “occupied time”, used here to highlight the temporal effects of the OCI, by contrast to recent accounts of “dereliction” (Hoag, 2014) and the “weaponisation of time” (Power, 2012). The second section provides context on the rollout and reception of the OCI. The third details the exchange of time and labor between the client and the DHS under the OCI, and the features of the OCI leading to the recovery of false and incorrect debts. The fourth describes active “sub-waits”, such as calling Centrelink, providing an illustration of wait “orbits” and showing how the time costs they assign demonstrate governmental priorities. The final section and conclusion describe the economic consequences of the OCI for clients and the government, and present closing remarks on occupied time in the post-welfare state.

## Chronopolitics and Occupied Time

The standard justification for bureaucratic organization is that it is the most efficient means of coordinating action across time and space. Simultaneously, vernacular narratives around bureaucracy, across the political spectrum, suggest it takes up undue time, slowing and impeding action. As Schwartz observed:

The precondition of bureaucratization, as we may recall from Weber’s discussion of the subject, is the qualitative and quantitative increase in tasks; ... the speed and efficiency with which it performs them. Now, if speed and efficiency are calculated by equations containing terms for time, as they obviously must, then the temporal dimension must be central to the description and analysis of bureaucracy. (Schwartz, 1978: 3)

“Time-efficient *for whom?*” is thus a fundamental question, highlighting how time and tasks are allocated within organizations and between organizations and clients. Waiting arises from and is a measure of relative scarcity. Time as a basic asset is spent in pursuit of another asset, in a context where availability and/or access is limited. In the absence of price mechanisms for social services, wait time is a proxy indicator of how, as access to the service is restricted, its cost to the user increases. Some of the cost of the service is “hidden” in the wait, as both time and opportunity cost. Wait time increases the cost of accessing the service, while decreasing its value or utility (Schwartz, 1974: 844). Waiting also has a pedagogical value. It can attrit or, in Goffman’s sense, “cool out” the client (1952). Wait time cements the asymmetric relationship between client and organization, facilitating the former’s compliance. Long waits are a deterrent, increasing transaction costs to the point that they outweigh the benefits of access (or at least, render attempted access less appealing than available alternatives).

Time spent waiting is thus both a function of social processes, and a medium of them. Like other resources, time is allocated differentially across social groups. Some people wait; others are waited upon. Whole populations can be shown to be waiting: often simply for something to happen (Jeffrey, 2008). Bureaucratic waiting is legible in terms of structural force, hierarchy, domination, and submission.

The OCI triggers an *active* wait against the clock. This can be elaborated by contrast to the description of waiting in Hoag's work on the South African Department of Home Affairs (DHA). Hoag describes the experience of time for applicants and frontline staff at the DHA, renowned in South Africa for its Kafkaesque inefficiency. He is interested in the limbo experience of waiting, which he calls "dereliction":

a liminal state between the policy and the practice of that policy. The concept describes those moments when hopeful observers (e.g., clients, anthropologists, bureaucrats) of bureaucratic processes become skeptical: when their prospective perspective on the paperwork not yet arrived slips into a retrospective perspective on bureaucratic failure. (2014: 411-412)

Dereliction marks the transition, from confidence that an application will soon be approved, to uncertainty about its status, and finally to the dismaying realization that "the system" is not working as hoped. Time is cyclic here, in that even in failure and abandonment, process (foreseeing and transcending its own limit) tethers the applicant again into prospective waiting. Thus Hoag describes Form 20, the document issued when a temporary residence permit application is declared lost:

By officially certifying the application as lost, however, the application paradoxically is recuperated, and, along with it the applicant, reconnected for now to the South African state, to legitimate residency, to his application. The applicant's retrospection is reoriented toward prospection once again and the status quo has been reinstated. We have gone forward in time and yet come full circle. In a sense, then, certified dereliction is impossible: to confirm dereliction is also to bury or suppress it by reinserting the application into a relationship of care. (Hoag, 2014: 423)

Form 20 and the OCI are examples of "temporal domination": the exercise of social power through time (Reid, 2013: 743). The "heavy" or intense wait under the OCI, though, is not the circular wait of Form 20, which seems to unspool and yo-yo in a dreamlike way. The panic inertia of the imposed and structuring deadline is largely absent from Hoag's description of dereliction. Residency applications are doubtless entangled with other time-sensitive administrative imperatives (employment, family remittances or relocation, tenancy, healthcare, debt and so on). The indefinite suspension Hoag describes must be synchronized to the relative intensities of other waits. Hoag sequesters the wait at the DHA, emphasizing the interminable, renewable delay, rather than the abrupt threat of the deadline. This gives the bureaucracy as a durational imposition the flavor of tragic absurdity rather than dread.

Time is the medium of shared social life. The implications of this, in Sarah Sharma's terminology, are "chronopolitical" (2014: 6 and *passim*). The limits to freedom or liberty are marked by the extent to which demands are successfully made on people's time. Political power, according to this line of thinking, is manifested through the seizure of

time; the redirection of bodies and their energies in time. As Benjamin Franklin famously noted in 1748, time is money.

At the other end of the continuum from Hoag's description of dereliction, Power discusses "weaponization of time":

As anyone who has ever awaited trial or been sent to prison knows, the weaponization of time is an extremely powerful force. The centralization of personal debt as a form of material and existential constraint has been an ongoing project for several decades, tying individuals not only to their particular "sum" at any given time but also to their finitude – will the debt be paid off before I'm gone? (Power, 2012)

In a general sense, Power uses "weaponization of time" to refer to the effects of financialization and inequality. In a more specific sense, she uses it to refer to criminal justice, where defendants wait, for and through courtroom rituals and their associated documentation, to learn whether they will be subjected to the more radical wait of "doing time". Criminal justice forcibly enacts temporal conceptions of justice.

The client thus waits in uncertainty through derelict time, periodically looped back into the wait when it ends in failure. Through weaponized time, by contrast, the client is locked into an abrupt, pointed and immobilizing wait. Dereliction emphasizes hope and disappointment and the passage between them; weaponized time emphasizes anxiety and fear about the future generally, and about particular consequential future events. This distinction provides a grounding on which to formulate an account of how processes like the OCI *occupy* people's time. Occupied time can be located conceptually as a critical development of dereliction and weaponization of time as follows.

The occupation of time does not impose all wait or all action. The looped procedural time of dereliction contains wheels within wheels: expanses of chronic flat waiting, punctuated by sub-waits barreling at consequential deadlines. These extreme or "thick" waits may or may not be experienced as weaponized. To the extent that they are experienced as *occupied*, though, they involve frenetic assembly of documents, fruitless exchanges in offices and lengthy, harried interactions with inscrutable government websites and interactive voice response phone systems. As empirical phenomena, neither this administrative labor, nor its tight relationship with structuring time through deadlines, are foregrounded in dereliction or weaponized time.

For analytical purposes two senses can be distinguished in which "occupation" is productive in describing active waits. Firstly, the OCI requires work: securing benefits becomes itself a kind of occupation. Standing refers to this as "work-in-waiting", linked to "work-for-state":

all the tasks undertaken to satisfy demands made on individuals by the state, for instance, to claim benefits. Its unpleasantness is compounded by what might be called a work-for-state deficit, in that many people are never able to do enough to succeed or gain security. Much of the work imposed on supplicants is deliberate, designed to dissuade those entitled to state benefits from applying for them, thereby "saving" public funds, so-called taxpayers' money. (Standing, 2013: 12-13)

Secondly, the occupation of time denotes seizure, colonization, or dispossession of time. To have one's time occupied in this sense is to encounter the bureaucracy as an invasive,

threatening force. Occupied time requires the client defer or cancel other plans and activities: comply with administrative demands, or face untenable consequences. Via deadlines, time is used *against* the client, whilst and through being occupied with administrative labor. The experience of these two features as seamless and unitary is key to an understanding of occupied time.

The structural significance of this administrative labor can be underscored by reference to “consumptive labor”:

*consumers who perform consumptive labor engage in productive activities that help employers to increase surplus value and tighten organizational control over the labor process.* In attempting to extract maximum surplus, organizations structure interactions and manage power relations to exercise control over the labor process, controlling not only workers but also consumers. (Koeber, 2011: 220, emphasis in original).

Koeber discusses commercial contexts, but as will become evident below, the OCI involves work transfer, requiring the client, among other things, to act as (unpaid) quasi-employee (thereby reducing DHS labor costs), and as quasi-supervisor (to the extent that pressure from clients is used to control Centrelink and call center staff). Digital technologies are designed and deployed to enlist the client into the welfare administration labor process. Occupied time is evidence of how the neoliberal welfare state deploys managerial strategies with long histories in the capitalist firm (Braverman, 1998). In an effort to minimize administrative expenditure (and maximize administrative time), occupied time, running short before the deadline, is expropriated from the client by the bureaucratic process. In the following section, a description of the OCI is presented, to demonstrate that it is an instance of such a process.

## The Online Compliance Intervention

Initiatives like the OCI are consistently described by the government as the best means to target welfare fraud. In a representative example:

Australia has a generous social safety net reflective of our fundamental belief in a fair go. While the majority of people do the right thing, there are those who set out to deliberately defraud the system, robbing Australian families in the process. The Coalition Government is committed to ensuring integrity and fairness in the welfare system. We have zero tolerance to anyone who defrauds the system. (Keenan, 2018)

While the “dole bludger” is a longstanding figure in Australian media and political discourse, fraud rates are difficult to determine. In the 2006-2009 period, 15.7 percent of Centrelink eligibility reviews led to adjustments to payments. Of those, 0.5 percent were prosecuted for fraud: 0.04 percent of the Centrelink client base (Prenzler, 2011: 3). Rates of prosecution have fallen further since that time: DHS compliance staff have moved from a target-based system to one directed to prosecution of serious fraud (Wilcock, 2018). Accidental overpayments are more common, and often framed by state representatives as coterminous with fraud, as when the DHS promises to “continue its

data-matching programs for an additional year to reduce welfare overpayments and maintain the integrity of the welfare system” (Keenan and Tehan, 2018).

The OCI automates data matching of previous welfare payments to tax office records, determining at scale what might be owed to the Department in accidental overpayment, and intervening to recoup those funds. It was developed by the government’s financial intelligence agency, AUSTRAC (the Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre), which also conducts counter-terrorism and money laundering financial monitoring.

The OCI was initially implemented in July, the beginning of the Australian financial year, of 2016. Dubbed “robo-debt”, it began to receive national media coverage in early November of that year, seven weeks before Christmas. Financial stress for families on the poverty line at Christmas drew criticism to the government. Current and former welfare recipients who were found by the OCI to have discrepancies between benefits received and income declared to the Australian Tax Office (ATO) in previous years were sent letters by post:

We have received information from the Australian Tax Office about your employment income. This shows that the amount reported to them is different to the amount you told us. To make sure you have been paid correctly, we need you to confirm your employment income information.

**What you need to do**

Please check the enclosed employment income information

Confirm your employment income information online **before [xx date]**

You can do this by going to [my.gov.au](http://my.gov.au) and signing in to access your Centrelink online account. If you do not have a myGov account, you can create one and link it to your Centrelink online account.

**What you need to know**

If you do not confirm your employment income online by **[xx date]**, we will update your details using the enclosed employment income information.

If the employment income you told us is not correct, this may result in a debt that you will need to repay. A 10% recovery fee may be added to the debt amount. You will be advised of the outcome in writing.

Out of the first wave of three hundred thousand letters, six thousand five hundred did not receive the initial notification: they had moved or did not get it for some other reason. A significant proportion of those people ended up paying, because they learned of the discrepancies after the time period within which to address them had elapsed. The initial letters had a twenty-one-day time frame (from the date on the letter, not the date posted or received). If recipients took no action, they got a reminder fourteen days later. If they still took no action, a debt was raised against them. No phone number was listed on the first wave of letters sent. These letters did not indicate how the debt had arisen or been calculated or whether it could be contested.

The controversy over the scheme led to the establishment of an Ombudsman’s investigation in January, 2017. At that point the Department was issuing twenty thousand



debt notices a week, raising debts amounting to four and a half million Australian dollars every day (Minister for Human Services, 2016). The rate of incorrect debt notices was estimated at between 20 and 38 percent, with the former figure acknowledged by the Department. The DHS prefers not to describe this as an “error rate”: it calls the notices “initial clarification letters”, where, in 20 percent of cases, clarification shows no monies are owed. Over ten thousand people receiving debt notices in the 2016/17 financial year subsequently had their debt reduced to zero. By mid-2018, one third of the 416 contested debts decided by the Administrative Appeals Tribunal had been set aside (McLean, 2018). The number or amount of wrongly recovered incorrect debts is not known, and cannot be derived from the number of successful appeals.

A Senate Inquiry began on February 8th, 2017. Over February 13th-24th 2017, Community and Public Sector Union members working at Centrelink went on strike, partly in response to the OCI, and partly due to lack of progress on enterprise bargaining. Centrelink staff had at that time gone three years without a pay rise, in addition to having staff numbers cut (with around five thousand positions going across 2010-2016). Centrelink staff reported to the media that they were instructed not to correct obvious OCI errors in the database, and to attend only to errors pointed out by complainants. Where staff had access to records disproving debts, they were not permitted to provide those records to clients (Henman, 2017a: 3). Frontline staff were also directed not to resolve OCI issues in person, but instead to refer clients to the online portal. Initial changes were made to the OCI process (in February 2017), with a phone number added to the letters, and access indicated directly to the OCI system replacing direction to the my.gov.au portal. The initial letters were sent thereafter by registered post, and the response timeframe extended to twenty-eight days. The Department also recalled the outstanding OCI debts that had been referred to debt collection agencies up to that point (presumably because they didn’t know whether those were “real” debts, and the debt collection agencies have no way to tell, though they are required to be able to do so by law). The Ombudsman’s report was released in April 2017, and the Senate report in June; the latter recommending the OCI be put on hold. In September 2017, the Government rejected that recommendation and stated its intention to continue with and expand the program, as it has in fact done. Under Tranche III of the Welfare Payment Infrastructure Transformation (WPIT) Programme, the OCI is being extended “to those claiming age, disability, and job seeker pensions, as well as carer payments” (Reichert, 2018).

## Time Swap and Debt Generation in the OCI

The OCI is designed to recover overpayments from welfare recipients. It does so by rendering tax and employment records from the past freshly consequential, in a limited present (the period before the deadline), for the recipient as a newly culpable delegate. However, the possibility of raising revenue from welfare recipients is, in terms of an appreciation of how contemporary welfare bureaucracies work through time, only part of the story of how the OCI generates value.

The first and perhaps most important of the OCI’s accomplishments is saving time and money for the Department by outsourcing the process of checking ATO records against DHS records to welfare recipients. This cross-referencing has been legally possible since the *Data-matching Program (Assistance and Tax) Act 1990*. The DHS have been data-

matching with ATO records for twenty years. Prior to the introduction of the OCI, however, these were manual checks, which did not assume a debt. They occurred only in a small proportion of cases, under the reasoning that the costs of systematic efforts at recovery would outweigh the funds recovered (Carney, 2018: 10). In cases with discrepancies, Centrelink staff formerly inquired with clients (by letter and phone), and then (if clients could not produce records) with employers. Under the OCI, clients become “self-governing”: they are directed to the [my.gov.au](http://my.gov.au) portal to update their own information. The time and money costs of data-matching are transferred from the DHS to the client. The “freed time” coincided with a massive increase in the number of income discrepancy investigation notices: from twenty thousand a year in 2015, to twenty thousand a week in 2017. This implies time occupied across populations, as many more people find their time and energy directed to OCI investigations.

This is a straight swap: consumptive labor for time. The Department takes time from welfare recipients, giving them administrative work it used to do. Along with the work, the DHS passes along a requirement to prove a negative. The onus is shifted from the DHS, to demonstrate that the client owes them money, to the client, to demonstrate that they do *not*. The assumption is that the client does indeed owe money. Numerous contributors at the [#notmydebt](https://www.notmydebt.com.au/) website refer to this as “guilty until proven innocent”. The DHS no longer demonstrates that it is owed money. This is partially obscured by how the debt notifications are phrased as requests, asking the client to provide information. They ask the client to do so, within a specific timeframe, *or else* (a debt will automatically be raised). Failure to disprove a debt, however, is not proof the debt exists. As a government agency, under Australian law the DHS is in a singularly powerful position. Unlike a private company, it does not need to be able to demonstrate to a court that a debt is owed to begin recovering funds. Even those who lodge appeals are required to start paying while awaiting the appeal outcome.

This new time-labor exchange between welfare recipients and the DHS is of a piece with the removal of manual oversight and the introduction of the algorithm automating the data-matching. Strictly speaking, the Department does not become more time efficient through algorithmic automation (which rather dramatically enhances *scale* and, in assuming rather than proving debts, *yield*). It becomes more time efficient by shifting the costs of manual verification out. The debts recovered are not the only savings generated through the OCI.

Without manual verification, the OCI dispatches discrepancy notices and raises debts with a high rate of error. This is a consequence of how the algorithm compares ATO and DHS data. There are several distinct features giving rise to errors. The data matching generates some false debts because the information originally provided to Centrelink by the claimant included the name of the employing business (also rendering divergent spelling across individual instances for the same claimant as though these were distinct employers), while the ATO data provides the ABN (Australian Business Number) of that business. Estimated income was often doubled or otherwise increased through multiple occurrences of the same employer under different identifiers. Centrelink also overestimated earned income by bundling payment types, including non-assessable income such as paid parental leave, lump sum termination payments, stipends for uniforms and the like.

The key design features of the OCI leading to the raising and recovery of false debts, however, relate to how (and by whom) records of prior employment are managed and made to do work in the present. With respect to generating debts, they are flattening by estimate, and with respect to compelling repayment, reach or extension in required documentation. The former is an algorithmic design feature; the latter a change in administrative rules regarding what kinds of evidence is required to disprove a debt, and from how far back.

Firstly, in terms of the understanding of past employment time, the DHS algorithm flattens it by averaging as follows. The DHS has one set of figures: total fortnightly income amounts reported to Centrelink over a period of time for which benefit claims were made. This information was originally provided to Centrelink by a claimant so the Department could determine how much income support they should receive on a fortnightly basis, based on the government estimate of the minimum adequate standard of living (that estimate is, incidentally, significantly less than half the legal minimum wage, in a country noted for low wages against the OECD average). They match these figures, based on claimants' reported earned income, to a second figure. This second figure is arrived at by averaging total annual earned employment income (from whatever period of the year where an income was received and reported on), as reported by the ATO, across twenty-six fortnights. This latter maneuver can appear to retrospectively change eligibility for the time in that year when income support was received.

This is the primary driver for false and higher than actual debts, and the most contentious feature of the OCI. It is known to the ATO, and the DHS, that just over 50 percent of the records from employers which the ATO provides to the Department are of "part-year employment": pertaining to people who worked for that employer for less than the whole of that year. For the purposes of the OCI, however, the DHS can be said to assume that position was held over the duration of the year. The implication is that, for 50 percent of prospective cases, error is knowingly designed in to the system.

Secondly, retrospective reach: under the OCI, current requirements regarding record keeping of prior income become abruptly more extensive. Prior to the OCI, the Department advised people to retain payslips for six months. As of the introduction of the OCI, the Department requires evidence in the form of payslips (though they later came to accept bank statements) going back seven years: further than the five year requirement for record-keeping under tax law. The OCI requested such documentation originally within a time frame of less than twenty-one days (later extended to twenty-eight days). Many debt notice recipients were unable to secure this documentation, because their employer was unable or unwilling to reissue payslips within that timeframe, they or their employer had moved, they were unable to furnish or transfer these records in a format appropriate to the OCI online portal, or for other reasons. These people were therefore required to pay. The accessibility of the administrative biographical record (in the form of payslips etc.) becomes immediately consequential for the former claimant. Failure to retrieve and present evidence from this record is realized as a monetary debt, within a certain number of days.

Obviously, the ATO and the DHS, that is, the government, have access to all of this information. Perhaps paradoxically, big data technologies are utilized in the OCI to selectively abnegate the government's administrative memory. The "hole" so engendered in the government's memory is a snare for welfare recipients. The potentially absent,

outsourced historical record becomes monetizable. The administrative import of the past, represented mnemonically by documents which may or may not be retrievable by the claimant, is changed in the here and now. The OCI, itself instantiated as a wave of administrative correspondence and networked interactions, works to “immediatize” the past, compelling time-sensitive control of the personal historical record.

## Sub-waits

Once a debt is raised, it embeds the claimant in specific, predictable reallocations of time. Administrative efficiency at the DHS is further evidenced in the familiar “zero contact” frontline encounter. Visits to Centrelink offices commonly culminate in clients being directed either to call, or to visit the website (sometimes via phones and terminals situated in the office). Sub-waits of varying intensity, entailing various kinds of activity and incurring other costs, are nested within the OCI process, which is itself for current claimants a cycle within a longer wait (for stable employment; for something else to happen). Perhaps the most obvious of these is the time and money cost of waiting on the phone (before or after accessing the online portal). Often a call to Centrelink goes unanswered, or the caller is put on hold, sometimes for so long that they hang up and call back. On average a call to the OCI number had a 27 percent chance of going unanswered, going up to 50 percent at lunchtime (Senate, 2017: 68). If resolving the issue takes more than one call, the caller has to explain the circumstances from scratch during the next call. The phone plan of the caller and the number they use to get to the OCI have some bearing on how expensive this is.

OCI call wait times are in line with service delivery capacity at Centrelink generally. By its own reporting, Centrelink call wait time has been on a continuous upward trajectory since 2006, with wait times twice as long as those at Medicare (the DHS health care funding agency), and seven times longer than those at the ATO. This is indicative of the selectively imposed scarcity of the state: the allocation of resources imposes on the time of the poor, to the benefit of others. Calls to Centrelink with inquiries about unemployment, disability, or carer payments are usually on hold for around 30 minutes. In the 2015-2016 financial year, around 42 percent of calls to Centrelink were “blocked”: the line was engaged and the call did not get through at all. Of those that did get through, 18 percent were abandoned by the caller before the issue was resolved (Henman, 2017b). It is not known how many calls to Centrelink fail entirely to resolve anything, because once the caller enters the automated system and is placed on hold, either to speak to a human or to go into the self-service system, their call is counted as “handled” irrespective of whether it is resolved or if the caller hangs up. Transferred calls are also counted as handled; in such instances Centrelink’s record of the wait time resets to zero and starts again.

The general deterioration in Centrelink service is attributed variously to constant policy changes (which lead to staff uncertainty about how current policy affects a client’s circumstances, and an increase in calls from clients concerned about how such changes may affect them), funding cuts, casualization, and outsourcing (Centrelink call center work is outsourced to Serco, a British company which also runs private prisons and immigration detention centers for the Australian government).

This waiting on the phone is an “intent” or “directed” active wait. It is a distilled period of engaged time requiring preparation. Callers need various documents at hand, a sense of the relations between these documents salient to their case, and a sense of how to articulate this “live”. This implies additional time upstream, finding these records and checking them against the information provided by Centrelink.

The cumbersome and highly constrained myGov portal, which had limited scope to present an account of circumstances (given, e.g., the assumptions made by averaging) was also time-consuming. Where the claimant initially “accepted” the averaged ATO annual income figure, it mapped it over fortnightly periods automatically. There was no straightforward way to add information on fortnightly earned income to the portal (Senate, 2017: 63). There were also time and money costs of travelling to and from Centrelink offices (significant in disadvantaged, rural and remote areas), and the time spent waiting there. Debts referred to collection agencies have another level of complexity. As one former claimant put it:

I would estimate that I have spent probably 100 hours, if not more, gathering payslips from multiple employers; learning my rights about debt collectors, and what debt collectors can and cannot threaten; and learning my legal rights surrounding inaccurate welfare debts. I have spent hours on the phone to Centrelink, with many calls going unanswered and cut off midway. This process has resulted in emotional and physical stress, and increased sick leave from work. (Phoebe, quoted in Senate, 2017: 38)

The active wait is characteristic of the welfare bureaucracy encounter. It becomes pointed under the OCI, in that these are time-consuming waits for clients already under time pressure in the run-up to the deadline: pressure arising from the agency now requiring them to actively wait.

## Turning Time into Money

The OCI targets the precariously employed: people with casual, part-time and irregular work, or inconsistent working hours; people with ill health, with carer’s responsibilities; who are studying, who are single parents, and those with on-again, off-again Centrelink claims due to other circumstances. Precarious employment is also associated with insecure housing, and with higher rates of mental health diagnoses such as depression. People already subject to fluctuating labor market disposals of their time (and refusals of their time, which is to say, restrictions on their access to resources) are further imposed upon. Punitive welfare austerity is a type of time tax. It makes the broader inequality in temporal autonomy visible, and is also a means of intensifying this inequality (Standing, 2013: 15). 40 percent of the people with OCI debts raised against them are current welfare recipients: their time is already structured by Centrelink-imposed cycles of mandatory job-seeking activity and so on. The OCI is a choppy, abrupt “concentration” of the routine temporal cycle of engaging with the welfare system for the un- and underemployed.

For current claimants with OCI debts, the default recovery mode is to reduce payments by 15 percent until the debt is worked off. That is a 15 percent reduction to what the government previously determined to be the minimal payment required to cover food,

shelter, and other life essentials. This is in addition to the 10 percent recovery fee imposed automatically under the OCI, until automatic application was retracted under direction from the Ombudsman. Previously, this fee was imposed only as a penalty to people who were “uncooperative” or had “done the wrong thing” (i.e., fraudulently misrepresented themselves). Recall that the Department does not need to prove the debt to apply these deductions. In April 2018, the DHS also began charging interest on debts owed to it, at a rate of 8.77 percent. The OCI increases material hardship for some of the poorest people in Australia.

Simultaneously, time as a resource is transferred up the socio-economic hierarchy: from welfare recipients, to the Department. In exchange, unpaid administrative labor is shifted down. This consumptive labor is in a sense make-work, but carrying an imminent threat of further straitened circumstances. Welfare recipients must reorient their time and their projects to accommodate this imposition. Under the OCI, the underemployed find themselves working more, for nothing, against a clock, to avoid ending up with less. Time is taken to resolve the discrepancy, (and/) or money will be taken when the discrepancy becomes debt.

Allocations of time cost (and money) also ripple across broader social contexts. Transfers are not only vertical, between Department and client. The time costs of the OCI spread horizontally and laterally, in terms of how help is requested and from whom. The OCI brought a significant increase in volume of requests to community legal and welfare rights centers, though these organizations recently underwent funding cuts. The Administrative Appeals Tribunal also encountered a workload surge. This time cost to other organizations belies a more extensive transfer of labor out from the Department, into the wider community, alongside the transfer of “freed time” in (and reduced cost) to the Department. This is to say nothing of burdens placed on the children, families, friends and communities of those effected. One contributor to the #notmydebt website recounted the experience of the OCI for his partner, describing the grim trap of occupied time succinctly:

... she had received a call today from Centrelink.

It was the culmination of weeks of frantic calls to banks and ex-employers (and accompanied with more tears) to try and track down records of her very modest income whilst studying some 7 years ago.

For weeks she had been providing every record she could find (which proved very difficult 7 years on), and being ever so frustrated at the process and constant back-and-forth with little to no information as to why a discrepancy would even exist.

Precious time intended to be spent with our first child as we prepare for our second, was instead spent on the phone to banks or rifling through storage boxes from the ceiling – no small task for someone entering her third trimester.

Today one phone call concluded her efforts with the advice that due to computer matching and the inability from her to prove otherwise, she had incurred overpayments back in 2011/2012 and would therefore need to

repay a debt ... our financial plans are now in tatters as we enter the final stages of our second pregnancy. (Anonymous, 2018)

Parallel to this is another set of transfers. As of the end of May 2018, nearly 137,000 OCI debts has been passed to private debt collection agencies, usually working on around 10 percent commission (McLean, 2019). Another time/money transformation takes place here, mobilizing other actors in pursuit of the assets of the purported debtors. The Department provided the Senate with three different responses at different times to the question of how many OCI debts were referred to debt collectors (Senate, 2017: 92). Six thousand five hundred people in the early waves of the OCI initially discovered they owed a debt from debt collectors. These transfers of time, labor and money illustrate how contemporary welfare statecraft works, ultimately, to criminalize those experiencing poverty.

## Conclusion

The OCI was discussed in Australian media coverage in the register of “debacle” and “crisis”, but it was designed and implemented with the foreknowledge that it had the features which give it this aspect. It can therefore be tempting to speculate on whether the OCI should be taken as an indication of callousness or ineptitude on the part of the state. The OCI was intended to generate money for the government. The key performance indicators for the OCI address the quantum of revenue it raises. It has been subject to continual development over the course of its implementation and expansion. The DHS did no prior modelling of the algorithm to evaluate its accuracy (Glenn, 2017: 42). Poor design and communication in implementation were matched by repeated assertions from senior government figures that the system was appropriate and effective. The government is opaque, and not a monolithic or unitary entity, and other state actors describe the OCI differently. Legal teams for the government worked hard to keep the OCI clear of court scrutiny, including dropping debts which may in court have revealed information about the OCI data-matching design. DHS management, the “human face” of the OCI in the media, emphasize that support is available to those requiring assistance. As noted above, frontline Centrelink staff went on strike during the rollout of the OCI. According to Henman:

Robodebt was born as a political actor, but clothed in technical efficiency and objectivity. It was a guise to redesign the administrative principles by which Centrelink operates and enact an abuse of power by a sovereign state over its most vulnerable citizens. (Henman, 2017a: 6)

One way to evaluate the extent to which the OCI represents state vindictiveness is by reference to its success relative to the economic imperatives it enacts. The OCI recovered AU\$500 million up to the end of 2018, but cost \$400 million (Henriques-Gomes, 2019). The government originally hoped to raise \$2 billion in that time period through the OCI (McLean, 2017).

In the short term, this appears shambolic. As a radical experiment in big data techniques, though, the OCI presages the future convergence of increasingly limited welfare services with the techniques and modalities of surveillance and policing. Expanded data matching related to the OCI now links Centrelink to the Australian Federal Police and state and

territory courts. Outstanding arrest warrants or failure to pay court-ordered fines can result in automatic reduction or suspension of payments, including for claimants with dependent children (Australian Government, 2018).

There were doubtless other things that *could have been* done to enhance quality and probity in service provision at the DHS through innovative use of digital records, but the OCI is the thing that *was* done. It aligns predictably with neoliberal logic in how welfare provision is moralized and delivered, but is distinctive for several reasons: the volume, scale and pace facilitated by the crudely designed data-matching algorithm; the indifference to procedural fairness in the raising and recovery of debts; and the occupation of the client's time (unpaid administrative "work-for-welfare-entitlement", meted out against the deadline).

This logic of governance is not universally applied. As numerous commentators pointed out, it is unimaginable that such a system would be implemented to recoup the significantly greater funds lost to corporate tax evasion.

With respect to the chronopolitics of bureaucratic waiting, the OCI is an instructive case study. The vernacular "robo-debt" itself implies an unstoppable, inhuman machine. The algorithm is indeed used to automate or "dehumanize" process, but the deadline is still set by humans at the Department. It is people who design the algorithm; people who decide what documentation is required, in what formats and through what means. The active wait remains a vivid expression of social power and domination.

Contrasting occupied time under the OCI with the indeterminate wait so familiar from anthropological and sociological accounts of the bureaucratic encounter furnishes another distinction. That wait, like the one at the DHA described by Hoag, is ostensibly initiated by the client, in pursuit of a decision in the client's favor (or not). The wait under the OCI is initiated by the bureaucracy, and the best the client can hope for is that things will not deteriorate. The bureaucracy introduces the temporal churn.

There is one final "advance" in how the OCI occupies time worth noting: the moral character of the consumptive labor it demands. Claimants must exhibit the capacity to be their own bureaucrats, maintaining their own administrative archives. They are required to embody a normative ideal of administrative mastery, precisely at the point where the DHS dramatically abandons its own commitments to this ideal. Occupied time under the OCI illustrates how the contemporary post-welfare state evacuates traditional public service norms, while simultaneously demanding clients enact them. It highlights both the structural violence of the administration of poverty, and the invidious morality of algorithmic automation as welfare reform, at and through the same time.

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