

Transcript extract

AIHW CEO Connect livestream – 12 July 2023

Time: 10m30s-13m39s

Context: Rob Heferen was asked anonymously by an AIHW staff member via the livestream chat function; “With the Robodebt Report being handed down, what impact will this have on our institute, and the operation of Government entities more broadly?”

Rob’s response:

“I don't think it'll have much direct impact, except for the fact that I'm sure there'll be a much sharper gaze on appropriate behaviour.

Now, one of my interesting, well maybe it's not interesting, one of my reflections on reading this – so I've read the Royal Commissioner's report, read it quickly online and I've got a, given my age, I've got a paper copy that I'm going through in more detail – and I think I want to be careful how I say this. I mean, it's a very detailed, very detailed work and forensic, absolutely forensic, the way she's [the Commissioner] gone through the, you know, the evidence and come to conclusions.

But the downside of Royal Commissions is [they're] typically conducted by a judge, assisted by council assisting, who are typically very well qualified barristers. And it tends to be about the issue at hand. Whereas we think about what happened, Robodebt, there was, you know, there was the kind of personal failures of individuals involved that the Commissioner at some time, you know, goes through in some detail. Of course, there's this sealed section that, you know, one day will be unsealed and we'll see what actually has to happen to various people. But I think there was this institutional failure.

So the system of the public service doesn't rely on individual departments or individual agencies reporting to their minister and that being all there is, there's very much the role of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in terms of overall policy coordination and functional coordination. There's the role of the [Australian] Public Service Commission looking at appropriate behaviour and there is the role of Department of Finance, which is the key costing agency. And it does seem to me that something went missing.

Now, I don't know precisely what, I don't know when, but I think that's the thing where the [Australian] Public Service Commission and hopefully [the Department of] Prime Minister and Cabinet look at the overall thing [the Report] and say, ‘something went astray here, and what do we need to do to actually repair that?’ That I think will have some reflections on us. Not the institute as the institute, the institute as a group of public servants.

But I do think whatever happens out of this will be positive. It'll reinforce [what] the [Australian] Public Service Commissioner Gordon de Brouwer came and spoke to the [AIHW] SES and EL2 day out and just reinforce the importance of people in leadership positions exhibiting proper behaviour. So it's not just about what's being delivered, it's about how people are treated while that's being delivered, both people internal to the organization and external to the organization. And that will be a big focus.”