

The Politics of Unconditional Basic Income: Bringing Bureaucracy Back In

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We challenge the view, typically assumed by advocates of unconditional basic income (UBI), that its administration is uncontroversial. We identify three essential tasks which, from the point of view of the administrative cybernetics literature, any income maintenance policy must accomplish: defining criteria of eligibility, determining who meets such criteria and disbursing payments to those found to be eligible. Building on the work of Christopher Hood, we contrast two alternative ways in which the design of a UBI might apply the principle of 'using bureaucracy sparingly' to the performance of each of these three tasks. Relating these alternative designs to the politics of basic income, we show a correspondence between contrasting senses of using bureaucracy sparingly and 'redistributive' and 'aggregative' UBI models.

Keywords: basic income; bureaucratic efficiency; cadasterability; unconditional welfare; welfare administration

In *Agrarian Justice* (1797), Thomas Paine advanced two radical proposals to mitigate the extreme poverty of his time:

To create a national fund, out of which there shall be paid to every person, when arrived at the age of twenty-one years, the sum of fifteen pounds sterling, as a compensation in part, for the loss of his or her natural inheritance, by the introduction of the system of landed property: And also, the sum of ten pounds per annum, during life, to every person now living, of the age of fifty years, and to all others as they shall arrive at that age ... It is proposed that the payments, as already stated, be made to every person, rich or poor (Paine, 1997 [1797], pp. 326–7).

Since Paine, many political thinkers have endorsed the idea of an unconditional basic income (UBI), as the proposal in its modern form has become known (Cunliffe and Erreygers, 2004). UBI, 'an income unconditionally paid to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement' (Van Parijs, 1992, p. 3), is a unique type of income maintenance programme in modern welfare societies: it is *universal* rather than targeted or categorical, paid to the *individual* as opposed to households, and above all *unconditional* in contrast to the vast majority of welfare programmes that require means and work testing as conditions for eligibility. In recent years, basic income has gained considerable traction among scholars who claim positive effects on income security, unemployment, social exclusion, 'discretionary time' and flexibility across the life cycle, and even gender equality among the scheme's many virtues (Birnbaum, 2012; Groot, 2004; Haagh, 2011; McKay, 2001; Offe, 2008; Standing, 1999; 2002; Van Parijs, 1992; 1995; 2004; Wright, 2004; 2006).

While the scholarly fascination with UBI has yet to translate into widespread policy development, advocates can point to the Alaska Permanent Fund, which has paid each resident an unconditional annual grant of around \$1,200 since 1982 (Widerquist and

Howard, 2012). Additionally, in January 2004 Brazilian President Lula da Silva signed Bill n. 10.835 into law, putting legislation in place to transform conditional cash grants schemes such as the *Bolsa Família* into an unconditional Citizens Basic Income (Suplicy, 2005). Similar proposals have been considered by governments in Ireland, the Netherlands, South Africa and the US, while UBI policies are today on the policy agenda in countries as diverse as Germany, Mongolia and Iran (Caputo, 2012). While there has been little explicit acceptance of the basic income principle in the UK, Bill Jordan argues that a first step towards the establishment of a UBI lies ‘concealed within a load of cuts, conditionality and means-testing’ of the current coalition government’s proposals for administrative simplification of the tax–benefit system (Jordan, 2012, p. 1).¹

In this article we focus on what Bernard Schaffer (1973) calls ‘the administrative factor’, typically (and regrettably) ignored in most discussion of basic income. Elsewhere we have addressed a number of ways in which administrative analysis sheds light on debates over UBI, including the administrative efficiency of basic income compared with selective welfare policies (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2011) and the specific implementation challenges of UBI (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2012). In this article, we instead focus on the close link between administrative analysis and the political feasibility of UBI. The politics of UBI is a complex matter that requires in-depth analysis of agenda setting, coalition building, legitimacy and popular support, and institutional design (De Wispelaere and Noguera, 2012). It is our view that administrative analysis is essential to all these and that the administrability of UBI itself constitutes a *first-order political problem*. To neglect administration is to ignore a core dimension of politics.

Basic Income Administration as Politics

While some justifications for UBI are of a more ‘principled’ nature and others distinctively ‘pragmatic’ (Barry, 1996b), all presuppose that certain substantive effects will materialise. For instance, universalism implies not merely that no-one is formally excluded from a programme, but demands that mechanisms are put in place to ensure that eligible recipients effectively receive their entitlement (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2011). In this regard, Brian Barry’s (2001, p. 63) feline simile is spot on. When basic income advocates think of differences between varieties of UBI, they typically do so in terms of broad design features: for instance, whether the scheme is fully unconditional or instead resembles a participation income (Atkinson, 1996; De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2007). While this is a central design choice, it can easily obscure two important features. On the one hand, the canonical definition of UBI as universal, individual and unconditional abstracts from a number of dimensions – such as uniformity, adequacy, frequency or modality of payment (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2004) – which must be developed in some detail to understand fully the design and real-world effects of particular proposals. On the other hand, the general definition of UBI tells us little about the broader policy context in which it is meant to operate, including the administrative context of implementation. Since the insights that can be gained from considering only the broad contours of a radical idea are quickly exhausted, we should focus instead on the detailed design choices that present themselves in implementation. According to Brian Barry, it is these that determine whether a UBI in practice turns out to be a ‘tabby’ or a ‘tiger’:

Asking about the pros or cons of basic income as such is rather like asking about the pros and cons of keeping a feline as a pet without distinguishing between a tiger and a tabby (Barry, 2001, p. 63).

A focus on administration and implementation is essential to the appreciation of one incontrovertibly political issue: the reality of basic income implementation forces policy makers to choose between specific UBI schemes that end up conferring benefits upon different sets of stakeholders. The resulting *hard choices* only become fully apparent once we think through the administrative challenges of basic income implementation. As we illustrate in detail below, a large part of instituting a particular UBI scheme is to decide between different solutions to implementation challenges, each of which will likely attract support from different factions within a UBI coalition. It is sometimes held as an advantage that UBI attracts support across the political divide (Barry, 1996a). But such agreement, based on a shared abstract ideal, may be illusory if implementation drives a wedge between different factions of any enacting coalition (De Wispelaere, forthcoming).

When proponents argue that instituting a UBI would solve many of the intricate problems faced by mature welfare states in developed countries, as well as emerging forms of social assistance in developing countries, such advantages are not expected to be restricted to small groups of 'net' recipients. On the contrary, UBI is assumed to offer direct and indirect benefits for many social groups, including the all-important middle classes. This would suggest that there is strong potential for building a robust political coalition around the UBI proposal through educating political entrepreneurs and citizens on the gains to be had from introducing basic income. But this line of reasoning fails to grasp how concrete UBI models, differentiated along design features and practical administration, benefit distinct groups. In other words, UBI is not necessarily a 'win-win': even where different factions in a UBI coalition share an interest in bringing about *a* basic income, they may not share an interest in instituting *the same* basic income. For instance, advocates who regard UBI as an explicitly *redistributive scheme* will aim to resolve hard choices in design and implementation consistently in favour of the worst off. We can contrast the former with those who favour an *aggregative scheme*, in which the priority is to keep overall costs to a minimum and distribute benefits widely across the population.² In the face of such divergent views on how to resolve implementation challenges, building a robust coalition against selective programmes may literally be hampered by a strong 'residual' disagreement about which precise universal scheme to promote. Our view of UBI administration as politics maintains that administrative solutions to unavoidable implementation challenges directly feed back into politics, affecting the robustness of an enduring UBI coalition by cementing coalitions or causing internal division. The next sections substantiate these general remarks through a detailed examination of the administrability of basic income and its implications for the politics of UBI.

Bringing Bureaucracy Back In

In this section, we present a conceptual framework that emphasises two dimensions: first, we identify three essential administrative tasks that *any* practical basic income scheme must perform; second, applying a distinction made by Christopher Hood (1983; see also Hood

and Margetts, 2007, pp. 152–66), we distinguish two opposing senses in which a UBI could be said to use bureaucracy sparingly. We believe that there is no first-best UBI design that simultaneously maximises both senses across all tasks. UBI advocates are thus confronted with a number of difficult choices concerning which type of basic income scheme they wish to endorse, taking into account several trade-offs at the level of implementation.

Three Essential Administrative Tasks

Building on De Wispelaere and Stirton (2007), we argue that *any* income maintenance scheme must perform three essential administrative tasks, corresponding to the essential features of a control system identified in the administrative cybernetics literature (Dunsire, 1978; Hood and Margetts, 2007):

- (1) Standards and rules must be enacted which establish the operational criteria that define the intended beneficiaries.
- (2) Information must be gathered so that those who satisfy eligibility conditions can be identified and properly distinguished from those who are not eligible.
- (3) Payments must be disbursed to those identified as proper beneficiaries of a grant – and only to those so identified.

The first task, standard setting, includes establishing the conditions under which an individual becomes eligible to receive a grant, how much they ought to receive, with what frequency the grant is to be paid, and so on. While political philosophers would naturally approach the evaluation of rules of eligibility from a strictly normative point of view (who ‘ought’ to receive a grant), the practical design of such rules is as much a technical challenge as a moral one. A considerable literature has been produced on the strategic rule choices administrators must make (e.g. Diver, 1983). For example, how far could or should a grant be based on ‘welfare entitlements’ and what role (if any) does this leave for the discretion of welfare bureaucrats (Brodkin, 1997; Brodkin and Majmundar, 2010; Titmuss, 1971)? Should payments be based on narrow, technical rules, or should legislators enact broad principles, leaving the details of their interpretation and application to bureaucrats, courts or even to citizens’ own assessment of their obligations and entitlements? Should standards defining entitlement be over-inclusive, ‘erring on the side of kindness’, as Robert Goodin (1985) puts it. Or should we instead prefer an under-inclusive formulation, even if this requires that alternative mechanisms remain in place to provide aid to those not caught by a primary means of support?³ Colin Diver (1983) shows how trade-offs between the different desiderata of administrative rules are inevitable and how the failure to make intelligent decisions about these often lies behind the failure of public policies to achieve their intended objectives.

The administration of income maintenance also faces a considerable task of gathering information on, and monitoring behaviour of, eligible beneficiaries. Efficiently accomplishing such information gathering and monitoring on a large scale requires that the relevant criteria are *cadasterable*. Cadasterability is defined by Hood (1985, p. 24) for the purposes of tax administration as ‘the property of being applicable to a readily identifiable population of taxable units’, and we can easily, for present purposes, extend the concept to ‘creditable units’. One of the key challenges in welfare administration is to obtain an

accurate and relatively stable list (or ‘cadaster’) of all those who satisfy whatever criteria we deem appropriate. This is necessary not only for the purposes of excluding ineligible applications, but also for ensuring that all those who *are* eligible for a grant are correctly identified. This second reason for the cadasterability requirement is particularly important when a programme is explicitly inclusive, requiring the ‘recruitment’ of applicants on to the register. Evidently, the more inclusive the coverage of a programme, the more demanding is the task of building an accurate, encompassing cadaster (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2012).

A second aspect of this task is that of monitoring compliance with standards. In practice, not everyone listed in the relevant cadaster of recipients will be (or remain) compliant with eligibility criteria (such as family status or residence) or with relevant criteria relating to claimants’ behaviour. In an age when citizens rapidly move from one administrative category to another, monitoring formal criteria requires considerable administrative effort and capability (Goodin, 1992). The literature is replete with examples and explanations of why monitoring may have distortional effects. Canice Prendergast (2007) argues that bureaucrats take account of clients’ complaints, but that such ‘fire-alarm’ monitoring has systematically distorting effects, since only claimants who fail to receive their entitlements will complain, while those who erroneously receive benefits will tend to stay silent. Centralised ‘police patrol’-type monitoring avoids this source of bias, but is resource intensive and could be expected to rise linearly with the size of the programme (Lupia and McCubbins, 2004). Moreover, the sheer difficulty of compliance monitoring in welfare programmes may lead welfare bureaucrats to overemphasise this task, displacing concern for the overall programme goals (Ricciuti *et al.*, 2004).

Finally, without an effective payment mechanism, an income maintenance scheme cannot accomplish its stated objective, or will do so only with very poor target efficiency (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2012). Hood’s work on tax administration again offers theoretical inspiration for our attempt to provide a framework for the administrative analysis of welfare schemes. Hood (1985, p. 24; 1986, p. 77) identifies the criterion of *conduitability* as ‘the property of being assessable and collectable through a relatively small number of surveillable channels or “bottlenecks” at which oversight can be economically applied’. Adapting this criterion to the payment of welfare benefits, we can say that an administrable income support grant is one whose payment channels are readily capable of reaching all intended beneficiaries.

Unfortunately, this cannot be taken for granted. In the UK, for example, it is estimated that in 2007/8 some 690,000 households, comprising 890,000 individuals, had no access to a basic transactional bank account (Financial Inclusion Taskforce, 2009). Moreover, these were overwhelmingly concentrated at the lower end of the income distribution. Even where individuals and households have access to basic banking services, many – again, including many of the poor – live in areas with no bank or building society, and no access to a free cash machine. While in extreme cases this might prove an insurmountable barrier to hard-to-reach groups such as the homeless or those without adequate proof of address, even in other cases it amounts to a significant transaction cost (a bus fare into town, or the payment of commission to a local fee-charging cash machine). Alternative payment systems, such as the cashing of benefit cheques in a local Post Office, face similar limitations (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2012).

This would at first sight seem to pose a greater challenge to universal schemes, since by definition such schemes target a broader population of beneficiaries. It is, then, particularly regrettable that while Philippe Van Parijs admits that ‘there are administrative costs’, he peremptorily dismisses further administrative analysis, stating that ‘assuming a computerised and efficient tax-collection and transfer-payment technology, these are likely to be lower under a universal, *ex ante* scheme than under a means-tested, *ex post* one, at least for a given level of effectiveness at reaching the poor’ (Van Parijs, 2004, p. 20). Even if true, this misses the point, at least as far as the redistributive case for a basic income is concerned. The arguments for such a scheme typically appeal to UBI’s ambition to promote greater substantive (as opposed to nominal) universalism, rather than its ability to achieve outcomes as good as selective schemes at lower cost (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2011).

Using Bureaucracy Sparingly

A belief in a politically neutral administrative design of a UBI would be tenable, provided it is possible to identify a first-best design with respect to each of the three tasks identified above. As it turns out, matters are a little more complicated, for the apparently simple canon of using bureaucracy sparingly can give rise to potentially conflicting interpretations (Hood, 1983). Adapting Hood’s approach to our specific context, we can distinguish two important ways in which UBI seeks to use bureaucracy sparingly.

In its first sense, using bureaucracy sparingly could be taken to imply administering an income support scheme using *minimal (governmental) resources*. On this interpretation, the best way of implementing an income maintenance policy is that which is least demanding of bureaucratic resources, for any acceptable level of performance. The concern here is specifically with the transaction costs faced by governments of defining, monitoring and disbursing a grant, not with the overall programme costs of a UBI (Offe, 2005).⁴ What makes administration costly is, on this view, the *collective* opportunity cost of government resources spent on implementing policy.

Turning to the three essential tasks, using bureaucracy sparingly in this sense might indicate a preference for a (nominally) unconditional scheme because it economises on the bureaucratic effort required to draft rules with adequate precision, and dispenses with the various tests identified by Claus Offe (2005). This, in turn, minimises deadweight loss and generally ensures that more of the resources earmarked for a programme end up with the recipients as opposed to being absorbed by the bureaucratic machinery. Using bureaucracy sparingly in the minimal resources sense is thus said to promote the *programme efficiency* of a policy. At the same time, however, applying this interpretation might put limits on the justifiable level of administrative effort in identifying or making payments to hard-to-reach beneficiaries, if the additional cost of doing so is judged to be excessive. When policy makers pragmatically trade off fulfilling policy objectives with the administrative and political costs of doing so, programme efficiency might conflict with *target efficiency* – the extent of coverage a particular programme achieves. What we deem justifiable depends, of course, on one’s normative perspective, and particularly on the priority one gives to administrative savings over the achievement of other policy goals, but this reality characterises the hard choices decision makers face when adopting the minimal resources approach to using bureaucracy sparingly.

A second sense of using bureaucracy sparingly requires that a basic income scheme is implemented with *minimal (personal) intrusion*. Hood (1983, p. 198) invokes Adam Smith's principle of public finance: taxes ought to be collected by imposing the least 'trouble, vexation and oppression' on the population. While much of the relevant debate focuses on intrusion in a strict sense, we adopt a more expansive notion that also includes the minimisation of inconvenience. Minimal intrusion thus not only captures the extent to which administration intrudes into the personal lives of claimants, but also the myriad of 'vexations' that often present themselves when individuals try to access a grant. These include navigating the complexity of the system, obtaining relevant information, and the effort at negotiating various stages of the application process (Van Oorschot, 1991; 1998). The minimal intrusion sense of using bureaucracy sparingly shares an affinity with Goodin's (1992) 'minimally presumptuous' approach to UBI. According to Goodin, simply allocating a grant without having actively to intrude or pry into claimants' lives and avoiding unnecessary complexities in the application process has a major impact on the target efficiency of basic income schemes. Like the minimal resources interpretation, this sense of using bureaucracy sparingly condemns highly selective schemes that require a high level of intrusion and are associated with a significant loss of privacy, which claimants consider demeaning and debasing (Handler, 2004; Van Oorschot, 2002).

Both senses of using bureaucracy sparingly are relevant for evaluating income support schemes. Each offers a clear perspective on why income maintenance policies ought to economise on administration, and provides an important criterion by which to evaluate the advantages of alternative UBI designs. However, as a guide to the design of income support schemes, the two senses frequently point in different directions, most obviously in cases in which removing barriers to access and take-up of a scheme can be accomplished only at the cost of expending considerable administrative effort or other resources. The *minimal governmental resources* approach to UBI would be satisfied with the removal of formal barriers and conditions for eligibility, even if beneficiaries found the application process intrusive and burdensome. The *minimal intrusion approach*, by contrast, would justify going to great bureaucratic lengths to achieve a truly universal scheme, provided such universalism could be accomplished by relatively unobtrusive means.

An Administrative Analysis of Basic Income

In this section, we undertake a systematic administrative analysis of UBI. Our discussion is arranged according to the three essential tasks outlined above, comparing the features of a UBI design that would most effectively satisfy each sense of using bureaucracy sparingly.

Setting Operational Standards

Offe (2005, pp. 71–2) expresses the prevailing belief that a UBI paid at the level of subsistence dispenses with four of the five key tests of conventional welfare policy – the means test, the needs test, the family test and the employment or employability test – leaving only nationality and residence tests. This, however, ignores the surrounding policy context, especially the need for such tests for the administration of other policies (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2011). For example, means and family tests are customarily required to assess an

individual's tax liability. Furthermore, a UBI must be sufficient for recipients to lead a decent life without the need for additional income maintenance programmes that themselves require means or needs testing, for those tests to become redundant. Such a generous grant is hard to contemplate politically and most advocates insist on other income support programmes remaining in place (Haagh, 2011; Van Parijs, 2004). For most realistic proposals, therefore, *some* element of means and needs testing would have to remain.

Means, needs and work tests notwithstanding, the remaining nationality or residence tests still raise a number of issues. Nationality tests rely on the various mechanisms that determine and regulate citizenship in modern states, and would therefore seem to be preferable in terms of minimising governmental resources. For a residency test, on the other hand, 'the operational criteria may be, for non-citizens, a minimum length of past residency, or it may simply be provided by the conditions which currently define residence for tax purposes, or some combination of both' (Van Parijs, 2004, p. 7). Ironically, in an era of globalisation and regionalisation, the dismantling of the administrative apparatus for monitoring entry and exit from national territories (exemplified since 1985 by the Schengen Area of the European Union) may make a residency test increasingly difficult to administer. Just as the current move away from progressive income taxes is sometimes attributed to globalisation (Genschel, 2002; Hood, 1994, ch. 6), we might anticipate increased mobility to hinder the administration of universal benefits.

The latter point suggests that nationality outperforms residence in terms of practically defining eligibility for UBI. A nationality test would clearly economise on both the social costs of government resources and the private costs of personal inconvenience. But the question of congruence with underlying policy objectives also arises because different tests will typically produce different outcomes. Some countries have significant expatriate populations who, while satisfying the nationality requirement, may not be the intended beneficiaries of a national basic income scheme. Conversely, residency tests may lead to the sort of welfare migration discussed at length in comparative political economy (Borjas, 1999; Schram *et al.*, 1998). Such factors may impose prohibitive financial and political costs on the long-term feasibility of UBI proposals, and therefore selection of the 'correct' administrative measure is crucial.

Identifying Beneficiaries and Monitoring Compliance

In relation to the second task of welfare administration – gathering relevant information in order to identify beneficiaries and monitor compliance with the relevant standards and rules – again the accepted wisdom is that a UBI poses few administrative challenges because of its universal application across the population. However, UBI scholars often conflate a crucial administrative distinction: the fact that a universal grant does not require monitoring to *exclude* individuals from receiving the benefit does not solve the problem of producing a register of those to be *included* in the scheme.

Because it is intended to be universal, a UBI will typically require a cadaster of practically the whole population of the territory in which it applies. For countries that operate a national identity register or similar this will be relatively easy to accomplish (e.g. Belgium or Spain). But in many other countries the implementation of a UBI would have to rely on less encompassing, and typically less reliable, cadasters such as voter registers or social

security databases. These are often not nearly as universal as one might assume, and are therefore of only limited use for the task at hand. The voting register, for instance, typically excludes whole categories of people who would presumably be eligible for a UBI. Electoral rolls that depend on voters personally registering before an election would typically be inadequate for a substantively universal UBI.

In those circumstances it would appear that we have three available strategies. First, one could set up a cadaster from scratch, effectively registering every eligible individual in a population. This strategy faces immense implementation costs as well as high incidences of error. In particular, we may not easily be able to discover and correct false negatives. A second strategy would be to combine several extant cadasters in the hope that they will overlap sufficiently to achieve close to universal coverage. Besides familiar problems of joining up different administrative systems, the problem again is that there is no real way of knowing how much universal coverage is achieved. Furthermore, this approach suffers from a particular type of common-mode failure in that those most likely not to appear on any of the common cadasters are precisely those individuals or groups that UBI specifically targets – the homeless, for instance.

This last point also works against the third option, which is to use the most universal cadaster we have – say, a voting register – as a proxy, and accept that false negatives are inevitable. We could combine this approach with an option for individuals who find themselves not included to sign up actively to the register, a solution that externalises ‘cadasterability by proxy’. Of course, individuals who become eligible for a UBI have every incentive to inform the relevant authorities of their eligibility, and to provide the relevant evidence; but the reverse holds for those no longer eligible for a UBI (perhaps because they are no longer residents). Effective standard setting requires a means to remove such individuals from the relevant cadasters. More importantly, however, incentives as such do not guarantee that eligible individuals also have the relevant information to pursue their best option. Comparative policy research has demonstrated the negative effect on take-up rates of information barriers, particularly for vulnerable or marginalised social groups (Van Oorschot, 1991; 1998). To summarise, creating and maintaining a cadaster of all beneficiaries of a basic income scheme is a key challenge to UBI implementation (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2012).

Disbursing Payments

The aim of a UBI disbursement mechanism is to ensure that *each* eligible person receives the grant to which he or she is entitled. Let us begin by examining a number of options for disbursing a UBI. One is the use of the tax–benefit system: UBIs are distributed as tax deductions with some reimbursement scheme for those with low tax liabilities (*a refundable tax credit*). This option raises a number of important questions, the most obvious being how we deal with those who do not work in the formal economy, or who otherwise may not have payroll tax deductions made to their salaries. More generally, given that most states assess taxes (and tax reimbursements) annually, policy makers must decide whether the UBI will be provided on a yearly basis (as is the case for Alaska’s Permanent Fund Dividend), after an assessment of tax liabilities, or whether to institute some advance payment mechanism with any overpayments clawed back through the tax system.⁵

The downside of the first option – an annual grant, disbursed after all tax liabilities are accounted for – is that it may impose significant burdens on those who most depend on a UBI. One very appealing argument in favour of UBI is precisely that it offers a secure floor throughout one's life, particularly for those at the bottom of the income distribution. This argument would strongly suggest that a UBI be disbursed in small regular instalments, rather than larger, less frequent payments. For those living at or near the poverty line, equal *monetary* value simply does not imply equal *practical* value.

A further problem with annual payments is that the precise amount of net UBI one receives after tax may be uncertain, as it depends on alternative sources of income (which could vary considerably for those in flexible or precarious employment) and one's overall tax liability, which is only settled at the end of the tax year. Those living at or near the poverty line may respond to such uncertainty by deferring part of their consumption for fear of not being able to afford it. This not only undermines the goal of income security, but also imposes constraints on the use of UBI that most advocates would find intolerable: preventing use of the grant as security for a loan, for instance.⁶ While the more serious problem is that poor people might defer spending on essential goods such as medicine, heat or nutrition, the opposite problem might also arise. Instead of deferring consumption, some individuals might consume on credit in anticipation of receiving a substantial UBI, which then could initiate a spiralling debt problem when the expected grant does not materialise.

The problem with the second solution – a regular income stream clawed back through the tax system – is that of 'churning', the pointless shifting of resources between different accounts (Offe, 2008). Churning not only incurs high administration costs but is also prone to error and frustration for UBI recipients. Of course one can conceive of compromise solutions. One example is Michael Opielka's proposal to grant every citizen a UBI entitlement, but one that only gets 'activated' after a person who thinks their income is insufficient to cover their needs puts in a formal application (cited in Offe, 2008). If at the end of the fiscal year it turns out that his or her income was higher than a previously agreed-upon threshold, part or all of the transfer must be paid back (see also Block, 2001, p. 87). But while the Opielka proposal prevents churning in a strict sense, it does not strike us as a good solution in so far as administrative costs are likely to remain excessive: the scheme requires close monitoring of those who have applied for the scheme to ensure that the terms of the scheme are complied with, which imputes considerable resource costs to both administrators and recipients as well as further intrusion costs on recipients. At the margin, this reduces the target efficiency of the UBI, notably with respect to those most in need of having the grant administered effectively.

An entirely different approach to disbursement is to provide every eligible individual with a 'basic income debit card', periodically topped up by the state and which the individual can use like any normal debit card to pay for transactions or withdraw cash (Standing, 1999, p. 369). This innovative scheme makes the delivery of a UBI to *all* publicly visible, and explicitly conforms to the ideal of nominal universalism outlined above. In addition, it would appear to avoid the sort of problems that might occur with tax-benefit integration. Although scoring high in terms of convenience, a basic income debit card would likely be very costly in terms of government resources, a fact conveniently ignored by those who advocate such a measure.⁷

Moreover, the lack of robust oversight mechanisms to ensure that all eligible beneficiaries *effectively* receive their UBI is a major concern from a public administration perspective: the inclination of UBI advocates to rely on the mere removal of barriers as the main pathway to achieving substantive universalism is seriously flawed as it fails to appreciate the extent of error that is part and parcel of implementation systems. There are two reasons to think the UBI faces considerable challenges (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2012). On the one hand, monitoring the effective disbursement of a grant scheme that encompasses the whole population requires considerable administrative capacity and effort. Paradoxically, universal schemes may thus require *more* administrative effort than selective ones. On the other hand, because basic income does not imply repeated monitoring of eligibility conditions it has lost an important instrument to ‘cross-check’ whether payments are effectively received by beneficiaries (Hood, 1985, p. 25).

The choice between tax–benefit integration and a basic income debit card is instructive for illustrating the design choices surrounding the disbursement of a UBI. Consider further the choice between a single, universally accessible mechanism of disbursement, intended to cover all recipients, and employing a set of partially overlapping mechanisms each catering to different target groups. Which of these provides the most robust universal coverage is contingent on several aspects of the practical design, but some general considerations apply. One obvious concern is that of *complexity*, which always faces a risk of decreased target efficiency because error on both the supply and demand side is more likely: administrators and claimants alike are more prone to making mistakes (National Audit Office, 2005). But an equally important principle is that of *redundancy*, which allows for one system’s failure to be ‘backed up’ by another and thus prevents recipients from falling through the proverbial cracks. Where single systems perform well in terms of low complexity, multiple mechanisms benefit from improved redundancy and oversight, aiding disbursement to hard-to-reach groups. The evaluation of either scheme in terms of using bureaucracy sparingly is a complicated matter, but these insights reveal that when it comes to resolving this particular ‘bottleneck’, implementation of UBI again presents some hard administrative choices (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2012).

The Limits of Administration and Basic Income Politics

The discussion of the previous section has shown that the well-known limits of administration familiar in existing programmes – including the control losses, diminishing returns and dilemmas discussed by Hood (2010) – also apply to the administration of UBI. At this juncture many would protest its relevance, since the limits of administration apply even more to selective welfare (or workfare) programmes. We do not generally dispute this assertion (but see De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2011, for some important qualifications), but maintain that a failure to address these limits means that advocates cannot fully appreciate the constraints on implementing a UBI congruent with the reasons for instituting basic income in the first place. The way in which UBI design contends with these limits of administration fundamentally affects its overall political character. UBI administration is not simply a matter of addressing the residual technical questions in a politically neutral fashion, for the choice of a specific programme design impacts differentially on the set of winners and losers.

These distributive effects of UBI administration map closely on to the alternative senses of using bureaucracy sparingly discussed in the previous sections. On the one hand, the governmental resources expended in the administration of a UBI fall across the whole political community, in proportion to their contribution in taxes. On the other hand, the inconvenience and intrusion, *in extremis* the inability to secure a grant to which the claimant is in principle entitled, are likely to fall quite asymmetrically on the worst off. Not only are the barriers to accessing a grant typically more problematic for the worst off (the unbanked, the homeless, those in irregular employment or otherwise having difficulty demonstrating eligibility status), but the consequences of failure to receive a grant are far more severe. The design of a basic income scheme can often ameliorate or even remove such barriers, but at the cost of increasing bureaucratic resource demands. In these cases the design issues elaborated in the previous sections become *hard political choices* (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2011).

It should come as no surprise that those who argue for UBI from different ideological positions end up supporting competing practical designs. Consider first the design of a UBI guided by a political principle that prioritises the position of the worst off in society. Such a design advances a clear *redistributive perspective* and garners support from many progressive UBI advocates, including Birnbaum (2012), Offe (2005; 2008), Standing (1999; 2002), Van Parijs (1992; 1995; 2004) and Wright (2004; 2006). Adopting such a position implies giving greater priority to using bureaucracy sparingly in its minimal intrusion sense since the relevant forms of intrusion and inconvenience fall disproportionately on the most disadvantaged claimants. This preference for minimal intrusion as the dominant design principle will be limited only by considerations about the sustainability of a scheme. The cost of adopting this position is that advocates of UBI need to give up on their ambition of achieving significant savings in the bureaucratic expense of a UBI (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2011).⁸

We can contrast such a redistributivist UBI design with an approach that seeks the best possible balance of overall costs and benefits, with minimal direct consideration of distributive impact. This *aggregative model* is congenial to a broad range of non-distributivist UBI advocates, including utilitarians, libertarians and conservatives (Buchanan, 1997; Kliemt, 1993; Murray, 2006). While advocates of such a position might be expected to give *some* weight to the inconvenience or intrusion associated with a grant, individual difficulties or even outright failure by tolerably small groups to access their entitlements is easily outweighed by overall savings in the costs of bureaucracy benefiting the whole population. The aggregative model views diminishing returns from extra bureaucratic effort as one important limit of administration (Hood, 2010, pp. 530–1). We can illustrate the divergent political trajectories of the redistributive and aggregative basic income models in more detail by examining how they respond to administrative challenges in each of the three tasks analysed above.

First, concerning the choice of standards there is perhaps little real difference between schemes prioritising minimal resources over minimal intrusion: with some qualifications, we accept the force of Offe's (2005) argument that a UBI at subsistence level would require little in the way of governmental resources to administer and would also be minimally intrusive. It would appear that on pure administrability grounds, both senses of using

bureaucracy sparingly would favour the use of nationality over residency criteria, albeit for different reasons. But implementation must also take account of policy congruence, the extent to which the administration of a policy scheme matches its stated and implied goals (Diver, 1983). A commitment to an expansive basic income scheme that also covers long-standing permanent residents might justify more resources being spent on ensuring that eligible residents robustly benefit from the income security provided by the scheme, while equally accepting some level of inconvenience (perhaps even intrusion) as a necessary cost to achieve this goal. Inevitably, the conflict between both senses of using bureaucracy sparingly reappears as soon as we are faced with a choice between a more intrusive but cheaper process of determining appropriate residency: for instance, by requiring eligible non-national residents to carry all the costs of determining their entitlement status. Trade-offs between the minimising bureaucratic resources approach and the minimal intrusion perspective imply a political choice, with 'redistributive' and 'aggregative' UBI supporters seemingly committed to opposing positions.

In terms of information gathering and monitoring, our two senses of using bureaucracy sparingly start to push more clearly in different directions. The minimum resources approach would likely favour the use of existing cadasters, for this would incur few extra resource demands. The minimal intrusion approach would tend to argue for the establishment of new systems and databases where there is no adequate existing cadaster, provided this could be done with minimal intrusion. The choice implied by this position would be to adopt an approach whereby the state proactively registers all citizens, and ideally maintains a process of oversight to ensure that the resulting cadaster is accurate and reliable, or to opt for a mechanism of self-registration whereby citizens themselves are given the responsibility for ensuring they are listed on the relevant cadaster. Either system might work, but they might be expected to distribute the cost of administration, including the *reliability* of effectively receiving a UBI, in different directions. Considerations of cadasterability suggest that administrative choices are decidedly political, not merely technical, and here again 'redistributive' and 'aggregative' UBI supporters may part ways.

Similar considerations apply when we look at the third task of selecting robust disbursement mechanisms. For instance, while most people have a bank account, and can receive electronic payments, individuals who face financial exclusion are likely to be most in need of the income security that a UBI would provide. The two senses of using bureaucracy sparingly again point in different directions when it comes to how much effort a scheme should devote to make sure that all eligible individuals receive their entitlement. Advocates of the minimal governmental resources approach might be content as long as beneficiaries in principle have access to a grant, leaving individuals to negotiate for themselves the complexities of accessing a grant paid in the form most convenient to them. Those who argue for a UBI on the grounds of administrative savings to government presumably prefer payments to take the form of tax-benefit integration, even if this limits the practical value of the grant to individuals for the reasons of uncertainty discussed above. Supporters arguing for a UBI from the perspective of minimal intrusion are more likely to stomach the administrative costs of establishing a basic income debit card system, including additional efforts to ensure full and easy access to such a scheme.

Where the minimal resources approach attempts to save on administration by cutting redundant disbursement mechanisms, the minimal intrusion approach more likely favours a multiple-conduits approach, allowing individuals to choose between a bank transfer, a basic income debit card or a payment from the local Post Office or benefit office. On the other hand, when it comes to ensuring that eligible recipients have effectively received their grant we have argued above that a system of 'cross-checking' or 'reinforceability' (Hood, 1985, p. 25) may well be required along with retaining multiple conduits of payment disbursement. Here the minimal intrusion approach faces some particularly difficult decisions, as the most efficient system for cross-checking payments may resemble those already present in contemporary welfare states. Paradoxically, this would imply holding on to a sizeable part of the 'controlling bureaucracy', aversion to which attracts many advocates to a UBI. As with cadasterability, considerations of conduitability too necessitate political reflection to negotiate a number of hard choices.

As well as attracting support from differing ideological camps, the distribution of costs and benefits of alternative administrative design relates to the politics of UBI in one further important sense. Since Lowi (1964), an important line of thinking in public policy and administration has been concerned with elaborating how different constellations of support and opposition crystallise around different *types* of policy. Building on earlier work by Olson (1965) and Stigler (1971), James Q. Wilson (1980) argued that the level of concentration or diffusion of the costs and benefits of a policy is a key variable in determining the politics of different public policies. Applying this line of thinking, we can hypothesise that the success of an 'aggregative' UBI design is a matter of majoritarian politics, while the success of a 'redistributivist' UBI (entailing in comparison concentrated benefits and diffuse, but higher, costs) would depend to a far greater extent on policy entrepreneurship. While it is not possible to spell out the implications of this basic insight in detail here, our argument suggests a connection between the administrative design and the types of strategy best employed in advocating for a UBI. In this respect, again, UBI administration is inherently political.

Conclusion

Paradoxically, because of their reluctance to engage in administrative analysis, basic income advocates seem to end up implicitly adopting a 'Wilsonian' conception of administration, one that separates the realm of politics from the realm of administration, and which sees the role of the latter as one of neutral execution of policy established by the former (Wilson, 1887). This so-called 'transmission-belt' view of administration has long been regarded as untenable (Stewart, 1988). It is not merely that ignorance of the administrative factor leads UBI advocates to overestimate the administrative efficiencies of basic income (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2011), or to ignore implementation challenges that may uniquely affect universal and unconditional income support schemes (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2012), though these concerns are vital if UBI is ever to make it 'off the drawing board'. Our main argument here is to show that the administration of basic income is inherently political. Specifically, the political feasibility of basic income depends crucially on building a coalition of political support to overcome the almost visceral resistance among the general public and political entrepreneurs who are suspicious of a proposal that appears to give people

something for nothing. To many sympathetic commentators, one key advantage has always been UBI's apparent capacity to garner political support across the political divide (Barry, 1996a; Jordan, 2011; Van Parijs, 1992): by simultaneously speaking to many political constituencies in a way that addresses their respective core concern, UBI advocates apparently hope to advance to a point where its clear advantages overrule any lingering objections.

Administrative analysis of UBI sheds doubt on the likelihood that this political strategy would succeed. Such a strategy assumes shared agreement on the broad contours of the basic income proposal among the different political factions in a UBI coalition. Once we move to the implementation stage, however, broad agreement must be translated into numerous operational details. At this point, administrative challenges appear whose effective resolution often entails making the sort of 'hard political choices' that are part and parcel of policy making. These choices are *hard* because they emerge in a bureaucratic and institutional environment that invariably imposes constraints on the ability of a particular UBI design fully to satisfy all of its objectives. In other words, like any other policy, UBI must learn to live with (and within) the 'limits of administration' (Hood, 2010).

These choices are furthermore *political* for two important reasons. First, both the implementation constraints and the ways in which these can be negotiated imply not only that administrators prioritise which objectives to address, but more importantly that they trade off the interests of one group of beneficiaries against those of another. As we demonstrated in detail throughout this article, the apparently straightforward criterion of 'using bureaucracy sparingly' harbours two competing senses, in most cases forcing administrators either to impose costs on a selective minority (often the most disadvantaged members of society) or to spread (a larger amount) of implementation costs more broadly across the population. Evidently, UBI administrators are engaged in politics in the strict sense by determining who gets what, when and how. The fact that UBI administration entails these trade-offs brings us to the second reason why hard choices are political: depending on which set of objectives UBI bureaucracy prioritises (or which group of beneficiaries it favours), this will advantage one political faction in the UBI coalition over another. Once we adopt a perspective that takes the administrative factor in UBI implementation seriously, it becomes obvious that what looks like broad agreement on the contours of basic income among competing political factions rapidly disintegrates into competition over which *particular* UBI design (and associated implementation choices) to champion. In other words, administrative instability produces political instability. This is the key administrative challenge that UBI advocates must overcome.

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Notes

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- 1 As Jordan (2012) readily acknowledges, the 'low road' to UBI is fraught with many dangers. One goal of the present analysis is to emphasise the severity of these risks.
- 2 The latter group often features advocates who favour UBI because of its ability to harmonise and simplify the complex layers of social assistance that make up the bulk of modern welfare states. In this respect, we might regard the proposed reform of the tax-benefit system by the UK coalition government as a move in the direction of a UBI, although the emphasis on increased conditionality and getting people into work fits ill with the inclusive philosophy of UBI (Jordan, 2012).
- 3 One obvious implication of this strategy is to undermine the more exuberant claims for the administrative efficiency of UBI (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2011).
- 4 Although many advocates of this perspective advocate budget restraint more generally, this is not a requirement of the minimal resources approach.
- 5 Although UBI itself is not liable for tax purposes, for high earners the grant is clawed back through tax liabilities on other sources of wealth or income. This makes UBI a redistributive scheme even when paired with a flat-rate tax (Van Parijs, 1992; 2004).
- 6 The possibility of such restrictions upon use undermines Van Parijs' (2004) argument that basic income and one-off basic capital grants are substantively equivalent.
- 7 In April 2003, as part of the UK government's efforts towards financial inclusion, the Department of Work and Pensions entered a contract (at the cost of more than £1 billion between 2003 and 2010) with the Post Office and J. P. Morgan Europe to provide the 'unbanked' with a Post Office Card Account (POCA). Payment of welfare benefits this way turned out to be one of the most expensive means of disbursements, with 80 per cent of the administration costs of paying benefits spent on less than a quarter of the recipients with POCA accounts (Allen, 2011). Despite the high costs, the services it provided were so limited that many felt access to POCA hardly amounted to 'financial inclusion'.
- 8 Even where administrative savings are not an explicit ambition of UBI advocates, the minimal resources sense operates as a practical constraint that cannot be ignored.

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