

Statement about Policy and Strategy for Basic Income Canada Network

Tim Rourke racoon@bell.net February 14, 2013

Introduction

I have been involved in Basic Income and Anti-Poverty groups and debates for a long time. I have seen how various groups fail and occasionally have some success. I know what I am talking about. I usually have trouble being taken seriously but people should if they want to establish an effective movement for an Unconditional Adequate Income. (UAI)

There is no agreement on an accurate and concise term for describing what we are talking about. I will use "Unconditional, Adequate Income "(UAI) in this piece.

It is important right at the start to get clear about what you are advocating and exactly why. Trying to encompass every possible viewpoint is a very big mistake. Leadership in the group must be kept small and limited to people who have talents the organization needs.

This group must develop a strategy that recognizes the reality within which it will be operating. It must recognize that it will have enemies. These enemies will not engage in polite debate. What we propose is a challenge to power and will be treated as a threat to power and will be under attack from power servers with the aim of neutralizing our threat. Such people will be willing to do whatever they can get away with. Therefore, the security and privacy of members of the organization must be a primary consideration.

Understanding the Terrains of Discussion

There are three bad terrains for debating a UAI, which lead people to promote ideas which seem superficially similar to UAI, but which go in a completely different direction.

It is important to carefully work through an idea before accepting it. There are also three good terrains of debate, coming from an understanding of the actual needs of people and societies in the present world.

The Bad Terrains

libertarianism

The idea of Libertarianism is that government is always the problem, it is always a restriction on freedom, and should be severely limited or even abolished altogether. This is ridiculous; there is no instance in all history of people being able to sustain a civilization without an extensive system of government. This idea is massively promoted by interests who want to bring about a collapse of society in order to impose their own form of government.

The libertarian response to UAI is to spin it as either a tax scheme or as a replacement for all social programs. The tax scheme is a flat tax, resource tax, a "one tax" or anything that puts the cost of government on the poor and middle classes instead of the wealthy, drastically reducing revenues available to government. In tandem with this is the idea that the UAI will replace the need for all other social spending; education, health care, etc.

The more flakey or dishonest libertarians will talk about various ways of funding a UAI through "money printing". Often this is phrased as a "social dividend" or similar terms. It is said that printing new money will not cause inflation as long as there is unused productive capacity in the economy. This is correct in a strict technical sense. However, a UAI should be based on objective needs, not on some subjective idea of the performance of the economy. Full employment under previously existing conditions would not be desirable. Finally, extra money put into circulation does not disappear after it is used once; it accumulates somewhere and will have a destabilizing social as well as economic effect.

welfarism

The idea of welfarism is that people are not capable of managing their own lives. Its advocates are sometimes called "the authoritarian left" or "the social engineers". They believe that cadres of social workers are needed to administer social programs directly to people in order to regulate and direct the behavior of impoverished people; to "improve" them.

These people are as much a hazard to impoverished and socially subordinated people as are the liberals and libertarians. They are either hostile to the idea of UAI or will insist on attaching intrusive conditions to it.

liberalism

This is the ideology of capitalism; which takes it as a given that there is such a thing as true free markets and a "market mechanism", that private business is always more efficient than government, and so government should be kept to the minimum which meets the needs of private business. It is served by the libertarian campaign to restrict government and by the welfarist pacification of working people and their redirection back into the labor market.

In its own right, Liberalism often wants to turn a UAI into a wage top up system which only those who are working can access, so that low wage employers can get even cheaper labor.

As capitalism depends on generating interest from investments, it requires constant growth to create the means to pay the interest, even when there is no basis for further growth in human needs or in available resources. There is no infinite expansion in a finite world; yet liberals often look for ways to create artificial demand and may see a UAI as suiting that purpose. Demand must conform to real needs and available resources.

The Good Terrains

Freedom

The first object of UAI is to allow real personal freedom by getting the economic gun away from people's heads. No one should be forced to submit to someone else in order to earn a living. If people have the right to live at all they have the right to a means of living. There is no reciprocal obligation because there is no objective and fair way of deciding what the obligation is and who should administer it.

Stability

Since there can be no infinite growth, and inequality leads to endless conflict, at some point any economy must reach a condition of stasis. This is anathema to liberals, who thrive in an environment of competition. Competition must give way to cooperation to prevent depletion and destruction of the natural environment, as well as cyclical wars and societal collapses. The only way to get people to accept limited competition and reasonably equitable distribution is to guarantee an adequate standard of living to all.

Democracy

The only form of economic and political governance that has ever been shown to work in the interests of all is cooperation, implying a direct, participatory, and locally based democracy. In order for this to work, people must have the free time and the means with which to participate in the governance of their community and their work places. The only good way to supply this is through a UAI.

Strategy

Actually achieving a UAI in Canada will require establishing an effective organization which can create and carry out an effective strategy for building an effective social movement for it. This requires a realistic understanding of the social and political environment it must operate in.

enemies

Enemies of a UAI movement are, of course, the establishment which benefits by the present system and the inequality it creates. It is important to understand that this will include much of the union movement, social agency apparatchiks, and the authoritarian left generally. The far left (Marxist) and the far right (libertarian) will all hate this because it does not fit into their ideological frameworks, but creates an alternative definition and solution for their issues.

It must be realized that these elements are not going to engage in polite debate with us about a UAI. They will seek to shut down debate. Many of these groups actually brag about their expertise in infiltrating and shutting down or coopting organizations.

allies

The most important allies will be local and provincial governments which want to get out from under the expense and difficulty of administering complex welfare programs. Religious organizations will be strong supporters. Also environmental, cooperative, and democracy groups. Some more intelligent sections of the labor movement, who can think in terms of reduced work times and increased worker control, will support.

It is important to understand that allies and funders are important, but they are not the end all. To achieve UAI, it is critical to build a large following with a strong attachment to key principles, and who can be mobilized.

structure

While the largest possible following must be built up, boards must be kept small, and made up of people who are seriously committed, able to put some time in, and who have the talents the organization needs. Conflicts of interest must be avoided.

As for internal democracy, we must remember that we are not a government or a mock parliament or some sort of group therapy. The public will vote for the organization with their time and money according to whether it does what people want to see done but cannot do by themselves. People are invited onto boards and committees according to the talents they bring.

short term

A small core group must be brought together who can build the organization. The organization must be incorporated and basic resources with which to work must be obtained. An office in the national capital must be acquired and at least one full time staff person, well qualified for the job.

intermediate term

Media must be developed which explain the UAI concept clearly. A campaign must build up a member/donor base and form chapters in every major center.

long term

If a system of proportional representation is established, the network should be turned into a political party.

Otherwise, a campaign must seek to get all viable political parties to commit to establishing a commission to study the implementation of a UAI.