

Basic Income; what is there to talk about?

I am starting an ongoing face to face discussion group in Toronto, about the Basic Income concept. This is because there is an obvious need for one. There is a growing interest in the idea of getting more money into people's pockets in a way that does not depend on the job market.

However, there is no place for people to get together and talk about the concept, really understand it, and decide if they want to become active in a movement for an income guarantee. There is no real movement for one in Canada, except perhaps in Quebec. There is a growing movement in many countries.

There is a group called Basic Income Canada Network (BICN) which is affiliated with an international group, Basic Income Earth Network. (BIEN) These groups have an academic orientation and the problems that go with that. Mainly, a tendency to talk only with each other in an abstract way, a disdain for outreach to a broader public, and an inability to establish a clear position about the subject.

Much of this group has the idea that it is a great thing that people from the far left to the far right can express support for a Basic Income. This is not an indication of broad support, but of incoherence. People are using the same words to talk about different things.

What the sudden rise of interest in a Guaranteed Basic Income has shown is that as soon as we get down to actually discussing what an income guarantee would look like, consensus evaporates. So does the idea that there will be any kind of an Income Guarantee Scheme that will be implemented without any struggle. Hopefully this leads the Basic Income people to back up and think through what it is they are proposing, what problem it is supposed to solve, and how it will come about.

There are now local Basic Income groups in all the major cities of Ontario, and across much of Canada. They are struggling with the problem of a lack of clear understanding of BI. They are all confused about the provincial Basic Income pilot project.

In Toronto, there are several informal groups discussing BI in various ways. There was an initiative to establish an affiliate of BICN in Toronto, but it has stopped holding meetings. As anyone familiar with the activist scene in Toronto knows, this is typical.

However, as anyone who has studied how to create effective organizations knows, it takes persistence to get one going. The best plan is to do what I am doing; keep holding regular meetings at frequent intervals until a core of committed people develops, who are all on the same page. From there, the next challenge is to begin building this group into a serious organization and finally to link it with other similar groups to create a powerful movement.

This process takes a long time, but there is really no other way. If there is going to be something like a Basic Income Guarantee, it is going to have to be won by a powerful grassroots movement, just like every other real social reform in history. But the start is to make clear exactly what we are and are not advocating for.

This has been the big problem with what I would call the “BIEN movement” since it started 30 years ago. They have never worked out the problem they are trying to solve with a Basic Income. They have never understood that there can be bad as well as good forms of an income guarantee.

They started out with a basic definition of a Basic Income; it is universal, adequate, and unconditional. That is, for everybody, without any conditions like a “job search” or “community service”, and enough to live on. Yet in their discussions they keep going away from this.

The Income Guarantees idea has been around for a long time and has been given different names; BI is currently fashionable. But it has always been an intellectual discussion. The ordinary working people who would be effected by it are never part of the discussion.

This is why some attempts to start a BI in the past, which seemed likely to succeed, have failed. There was no real public buy-in. It was about elite groups trying to solve economic or administrative problems. Often, it was merely about a way to cancel other social programs.

To be able to get the modern precariate on board with an income guarantee, you have to explain to them how it will really benefit them. To do that you have to define the problem for which the BI is the solution. Most BI advocates have some trouble with this because they are interested in it mostly in a philosophical way.

As well, most people still see the present economic crisis in terms of the thinking that created it. Some people think about it in terms of “post” ideas; post modern, post industrial, post capitalism, etc. The best thinkers understand that we are in a kind of “interregnum”. The old order has fallen apart and there is nothing to replace it yet. We are not “post” something, we are “pre” something.

Most economic thinkers in the Marxist or “critical theory” traditions have predicted that capitalism will collapse once it reaches the limits of expansion. We will progress into a true socialist society or far back into a new form of Feudalism. A lot of people are talking about “neo-feudalism” these days. Unfortunately, socialism has become a confused and debased concept.

Despite all the babble of people trying to convince themselves and others otherwise, we are at the limits of growth. We cannot use up any more of the earth’s resources than we are now using. In fact, we have to scale back. Automation is now bringing the labor component needed to make what we need close to zero.

Fifty years ago the best thinkers predicted a fifteen hour work week by now. They were part right. We only need a fifteen hour work week. But that would lead to a breakdown of capitalism and the class system. So far the way of staving off this collapse has been the rise of make work jobs. Some call it “the age of bullshit employment”. But that can only work for so long.

I could go on about the evidence of living in a “pre something new” world. What I assert is that the struggle for a BI is about what kind of future we and our descendants will live in. BI is not a necessarily good idea. It could turn into a really awful system of social control. The key is to give people real freedom and control over their lives.

Once people do have the freedom that has been dreamed of down the centuries, we get to two other topics which are being talked about in relation to the current political and economic crises. That is, a real democracy and a “degrowth” or “steady state” economy. I think a Guaranteed Living Income will have to come first, but these other two topics are closely linked to it.

A Guaranteed Living Income or GLI is what I really like to call the BI or income guarantee. It makes it clear what I am talking about. That is, something aiming toward a socialist society in the proper meaning of the term; an economy organized to provide for human needs.

This is the good version of BI, as opposed to the bad and ugly versions of it. The bad is the Liberal version, the “welfare plus” idea; that we can make welfare, management of the poor, more “efficient”. Oh, yes, and more “humane”. The ugly version is the Libertarian or “coupon capitalist” idea, that giving everyone a small “dividend” will make all other social programs unnecessary.

So you can see, there is a lot to talk about, about a BI. There is also a lot to not talk about. I think that the point of public discourse is not to try to find “good ideas”. The good ideas are always there. The problem is in getting rid of bad ideas.

Thus, the key to having successful discussions about BI is for people to not come dragging all the same old bad ideas with them. My hope is that people will come who are interested in the idea of a BI/GLI in itself, and not just as a lead in to some other idea, some hobby horse they want to ride around on.

I have been talking about, and sporadically doing work for, a Basic Income for almost forty years. I run into the same problem over and over; people use the idea as a platform for things that have nothing directly to do with BI/GLI. Then the general public gets the idea that this is what BI is all about and they understandably want nothing to do with it.

I have long understood that any worthwhile discussion requires some rules, boundaries, and a moderator who can enforce these. You may notice that the lack of these is what is wrong with most internet discussions. People need to see each other face to face. A topic has to finally come to a conclusion and move on from it.

I hope I can get this to happen in my Salon. As for the word "salon" it did not used to mean a place where people came to get their hair done. It once meant discussions about social and philosophical issues held in people's homes.

Often these were wealthy people who could afford large homes. But the ideas that came out of them were eventually taken up by the general public and eventually led to the social process of the last two centuries.

I want to get together with like minded people in an amiable atmosphere and see if we can agree on a Guaranteed Living Income as the path to a future worth living in. Then, to see what we can do to help bring it about.

There is plenty to talk about.