

The Struggle for Strategy: On the Politics of the Basic Income Proposal

Jurgen De Wispelaere

McGill University

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Policy interest in the basic income (BI) proposal is booming, but remarkably little attention is spent on systematically examining political strategies to build robust enabling coalitions in favour of BI. This article reviews two thorny problems that affect the coalition-building efforts of BI advocates: the *problem of cheap political support* suggests most BI support may be of little value to further its implementation, while the *problem of persistent political division* argues superficial agreement among committed BI advocates may mask persistent disagreement on which precise model to adopt. The article discusses the relevance of each of these problems for BI politics, employing both analytical arguments and brief illustrations taken from debates in various countries.

Keywords: basic income; coalition building; political disagreement; political strategy; political support

Introduction

The proposal to grant each individual citizen a right to a substantial income, without insisting on either a means test or a work requirement (Van Parijs, 1995 and 2004), has gained considerable momentum in the last decades. The basic income (BI) proposal has witnessed a remarkable surge in media and policy attention following the passing of a Citizen's Initiative in Switzerland in October 2013 proposing to give each adult citizen a monthly stipend of €2800.¹ Its passing commits the Swiss government to holding a referendum on BI, which has since become the subject of extensive political debate across Europe and beyond. A European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) ran from April 2012 to January 2014, and collected more than 285,000 signatures from EU citizens in 28 countries. While the ECI failed to meet its goal of one million votes, as required by the European Commission, the resulting mobilisation and media attention nevertheless raised the visibility of BI.² Outside of Europe, researchers associated with the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) have just completed a large pilot project in Madhya Pradesh (India). Funded by UNICEF and with support from the regional government, this project is the first large-scale empirical examination of universal cash grants since the Negative Income Tax (NIT) experiments in the late 1970s (Davala et al., 2014).

These three recent examples represent high-profile events, but political discussions about BI have taken place in the past decades in countries as diverse as Ireland, Spain, Brazil, Germany, South Africa, Iran, Finland and Japan (Caputo, 2012; Murray and Pateman, 2012). BI is enthusiastically embraced by social activists as a key component for emancipatory social change along 'real utopian' lines (Standing, 2014; Van Parijs, 2013; Wright, 2010). Its advocates claim positive effects on income security, unemployment, social inclusion, '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 and 2002; Van Parijs, 1992, 1995 and 2004; Widerquist et al., 2013; Wright, 2004 and 2006). The current financial crisis has done little to dampen this enthusiasm; on the contrary, many social critics believe the BI model to be part of the solution in combating the devastating effects brought on by the collapse of financial institutions and the resulting economic depression (Standing, 2011a and 2011b).

This surge in academic and advocacy interest notwithstanding, BI thus far has not been implemented on a large scale. With the notable exception of Alaska, where since 1982 the Permanent Dividend Fund pays each resident around US\$1,000 per annum (Goldsmith, 2005; Widerquist and Howard, 2012), the international experience illustrates the widespread failure to build robust political coalitions capable of and willing to enact BI (Caputo, 2012).³ This mismatch between growing interest in the BI model and any real advancement on the ground raises deep questions about the politics of BI, and specifically about the political strategies required to build a robust enabling coalition. Unfortunately, BI political research has not kept up with the debate in the trenches. Descriptive case studies aside, our systematic political understanding of the various political constraints facing BI enactment and implementation, and the political strategies required to overcome these, remains seriously lacking (De Wispelaere and Noguera, 2012).

This article is an effort to contribute to our understanding of the politics of BI by reviewing two thorny problems that affect the coalition-building efforts of BI advocates. The *problem of cheap political support* argues many expressions of BI support may be of little real value in terms of moving basic income up on the policy agenda, and at times may even prove counterproductive. The *problem of persistent political division* insists superficial agreement among committed BI advocates masks considerable fundamental disagreement on which precise BI model to adopt, which hampers the process of building a lasting political coalition. The article briefly introduces each of these problems and discusses its relevance for the politics of BI. The goal is not to argue the merits (or lack thereof) of BI, but to draw attention to the political difficulties that even its staunchest supports must overcome.

The problem of cheap political support

When challenged about the political feasibility of BI, its advocates typically refer to numerous instances of individual politicians, political parties, social movements or interest groups (e.g. trade unions) who are on record as being supportive of BI. This response takes the form of a simple numbers game, in which the level of support for BI can be read off more-or-less directly from the instances of expressed support elicited from such individuals or organisations.

The idea that an increase in expressed support for a BI from a variety of social and political actors is directly conducive to building a sustained political coalition is flawed, however. The reason is that not all instances of expressed support for a policy imply a sustained commitment to promoting this policy.⁴ It is one thing for a social or political agent to express a sincere preference in favour of BI, but quite a different matter to actively canvass support among constituents, party members or like-minded associations and groups, build a shared platform across political factions, utilise scarce political resources (money, time and, above all, political capital) to further the cause, bargain and possibly compromise on other political goals, and so on. Expressed support without either the *commitment* or the

capacity to engage in the necessary political action to build a sustainable coalition around the policy of granting each citizen an unconditional BI is 'cheap' in the sense that it seems of little practical value to BI supporters.

Thus, we find much support for BI in individuals or associations that are often marginally positioned in terms of their ability to influence policy. For instance, Green politicians and parties across Europe typically support BI – it often features prominently in their election manifestos – but, leaving aside one or two exceptions, European Greens are small protest parties comfortably nestled on the political sidelines, opposing governing coalitions with little or no direct policy responsibility. Irrespective of the strong correspondence between BI and green values (Birnbaum, 2009; Van Parijs, 2009), political support from Green political parties offers BI advocates precious little as a genuine political platform to boost their cause. Occasional support for BI among certain trade unions (Vanderborght, 2006) faces similar obstacles. Here, too, it appears that those unions who support BI are either comparatively small in terms of membership (and thus political leverage) or else operate in a political system in which their policy influence is otherwise constrained; by contrast, larger unions who wield genuine power to engage in policy formation through a variety of corporatist mechanisms appear not to support BI. Trade union support for BI seems to bring BI advocates precious little bang for their proverbial buck. In short, counting instances of expressed support might boost the morale of those advocating BI, but it remains to be seen whether it produces any immediate effect beyond that.

One might object to this overly pessimistic analysis on the grounds that expressed support from currently marginalised individuals or groups should not be so lightly dismissed. For one thing, they keep the issue alive in the public imagination – a point I am happy to concede. In addition, those groups may one day be in a position to genuinely bring about policy influence, at which point BI support starts paying off in real terms. However, this argument hinges on the view that political support is 'sticky', whereby political factions that have once expressly supported BI would continue doing so when their power position improves. Unfortunately, there is little reason to think that groups who move up on the political ladder will necessarily sustain their support for BI. After all, in the absence of policy responsibility one's support for BI is 'cheap' in a second critical sense: there are few political costs associated with supporting BI in an environment in which one is never put in the position of having to defend one's support against a sceptical – at times even hostile – political base (Steensland, 2006). This is even more so when we consider that furthering the case for BI means precious political capital must be spent at the expense of other political objectives. The political opportunity cost of supporting BI once one has achieved a position of policy responsibility may simply prove too high to be politically sustainable.⁵

We can reasonably expect to find the very same parties or politicians who support BI while in opposition suddenly ditching their support when achieving office, whether as a majority government or as part of a governing coalition.⁶ We can find a poignant illustration of this dynamic in the recent controversy surrounding the newly minted radical Spanish party Podemos, which after only a year has surged in the opinion polls and is heading towards an electoral victory in the upcoming elections.⁷ Right from the very start, when the party burst onto the political scene, the leadership declared itself in favour of BI, but much to the consternation of its popular base, the economic policy document released late November 2014 downgraded BI to a long-term aspiration. A simple explanation is that the Podemos leadership, while being sincere in its appreciation of BI, is exceedingly aware of the need to reach

beyond its grassroots support to secure a firmer voting base. In this sense, dropping BI from its electoral manifesto constitutes a classic Downsian electoral move.⁸

We can see examples of cheap support also in the coalition politics of parties already in government. After persistent lobbying efforts from pro-BI groups such as CORI (Conference of the Religious in Ireland), the Irish government in 2002 committed itself to releasing a Green Paper on basic income, only to have it comprehensively sidelined soon afterwards (Healy and Reynolds, 2000). This strategy enabled the government, which at the height of the Celtic Tiger was constrained by social partnership agreements, to have its cake and eat it too by simultaneously assuaging some of its partners in favour of BI (if only temporarily), while nevertheless not having to face up to any of the costs associated with promoting the scheme in earnest. Another poignant example is the case of Brazil (Suplicy, 2005). Despite having enacted BI legislation a decade ago (Law 10.835 or *Lei de Renda Básica de Cidadania*, enacted in January 2004), a provision stipulating that implementation remains the budgetary prerogative of the federal executive branch effectively rendered the legislation moot (Lavinás, 2013). Here, too, the split between legislation and policy allows government to bypass any political costs associated with implementing BI, leading critics such as Lena Lavinás (2013) to aptly label it the 'lost road' to BI.

The fact that cheap political support for BI may not be sufficiently robust to survive a move by its supporters into a position of policy responsibility is not the only problem, however. Worse still, some instances of political support for BI may even be counterproductive as support from one particular faction may prevent others from endorsing the same policy. Because political factions often use identification with policy positions as an instrument to differentiate themselves from their (internal or external) political competitors (Cox and McCubbins, 2005), support for BI from Faction X may prevent Faction Y from endorsing a policy that would otherwise naturally fit their political profile. There may exist a 'first mover disadvantage' to BI that is associated with a political faction that is unable to move BI up on the policy agenda, when precisely this association prevents more powerful individuals or groups from offering valuable support. In this case, express support is 'noxious' to the case for BI. In some countries (e.g. Ireland, Namibia) BI is promoted by groups with a strong religious affiliation, which may well prevent non-confessional social movements or associations from expressing support. Similarly, BI advocates who adopt an entrepreneurial perspective may find it difficult to curry favour with factions endorsing strong socialist values. Both the entrepreneur Roland Duchâtelet, billionaire founder of the Belgian political party Vivant, and Götz Werner, the German owner of the DM-Drogerie Markt drugstore chain, are staunch promoters of BI (Liebermann, 2012; Vanderborght, 2000). However, advancing the cause from within a distinctive liberal economic perspective, both have faced repeated opposition from the progressive corners of the BI movement.⁹ Initial effects of the identification of BI with one specific faction, combined with the 'reactive reluctance' of other factions to support the policy because of such political identification, may produce a form of path dependency that causes BI to be *marginalised by association*.

The problem of cheap support, as outlined in this section, poses something of an impasse for BI advocates intent on building a robust political coalition. On the one hand, many (if not most) current instances of expressed support may be of little practical use, and in some circumstances could turn 'noxious' when support by some factions leads others to oppose BI. On the other hand, future support of any impact is unlikely in a political environment reluctant to spend political capital on a policy that remains highly divisive, both internally and

externally. This makes it difficult to ascertain whose support to seek, and – lest we forget – at what price. The underlying concern is that the very reason why political support is relatively easy to come by from ‘marginal’ political individuals or groups is also the reason why such support is of little value to BI advocates. For advocates intent on building a robust BI coalition, the main challenge is to find ways to get powerful political agents to express support and simultaneously ensure that such support is no longer cheap in either sense discussed above. This, in turn, implies political support should be accompanied by real political action to further BI, and for ‘reversals’ of BI support to incur political costs sufficiently high so as to make their political commitment to the cause more robust and reliable over time (Horn, 1995).¹⁰

The problem of persistent political division

A second challenge for BI advocates keen to establish a robust enabling coalition – an ‘ad hoc issue coalition’, in Mahoney’s (2007) words – follows from the deep and persistent moral and political tensions surrounding the BI proposal. Proponents make much of the fact that BI appears to gather support across the political divide (e.g. Barry, 1996; Torry, 2013), suggesting that progressives and conservatives may find substantial agreement on the basic idea of a BI despite their deep disagreement on general matters of principle and policy. In terms of building a stable coalition around the BI proposal, however, this apparent agreement across the divides is much less promising than BI advocates think.

The problem of persistent political division arises because the idea of a BI in its most abstract form, represented in the by-now classic definition of ‘an income granted by right without a means test or work requirement’ (Van Parijs, 1992), masks persistent disagreement by ignoring policy detail. The standard definition excludes many operational dimensions of the BI idea that need to be explicated and decided in full before moving from the general idea to an actual policy proposal. For instance, the choice of paying a BI on a monthly basis as part of a refundable tax credit, or once a year after the assessment of one’s tax liability has been conducted, is likely to impact differently on distinct groups of beneficiaries (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2011). And different political factions are likely to take contrasting positions on this matter, as argued in De Wispelaere and Stirton (2013). Or take the important question of the level of the BI grant, which Van Parijs (1995) emphatically insists *may* (but does not *have* to) match the poverty line. This is as straightforward a political issue as they come, in Harold Lasswell’s (1950) classic definition of politics as ‘who gets what, when and how’, and inevitably requires the political resolution of strongly opposing views.

These two considerations no doubt cause friction among the different political factions within a BI coalition, but even more serious opposition will arise when considering which programmes will have to be sacrificed in return for a broad commitment to support BI. Left-wing BI advocates (e.g. Raventós, 2007; Wright, 2006) will promote a larger level of BI as well as resist the rolling back of many support programmes, while supporters from the political right (e.g. Buchanan, 1997; Murray, 2006) are likely to insist on a smaller grant combined with a more extensive ‘recalibrating’ (i.e. abolition) of the existing welfare state. Turning our gaze away from the general idea of a BI and onto its policy detail shines a bright light on the deep ideological tensions inherent in different BI models. The resulting problem of persistent political division eats into the shared basis for building a stable and lasting coalition of progressive and conservative BI advocates.¹¹

Progressive BI advocates in particular seem attracted to this idea of a 'grand BI coalition' that includes both progressive and conservative supporters, in large part because they believe the progressive form would eventually emerge from the ensuing conflict over policy detail (Barry, 2001; Van Parijs, 2004). The strategy seems to rely on something like the 'veil of vagueness' (Gibson and Goodin, 1999), in which we deliberately hide policy detail to reach agreement at a higher level of generality – in this case, BI in its abstract form. Under a veil of vagueness we purposefully leave the detailed operational decisions to the next stage of political negotiation, possibly to be dealt with through administrative discretion (Huber and Shipan, 2002; Riccucci et al., 2004). The advantage of this strategy appears straightforward: by locking the idea of a BI in place, we have committed the different political factions of the grand coalition to a path that will likely deliver the full progressive version over time. This might be thought of as one form of the so-called 'backdoor strategy' to introducing BI, hailed by many advocates as the most realistic road to achieving a BI in the short or medium run (Jordan, 2012; Vanderborgh, 2005).

But what motivates such a strong faith in this strategy? After all, one can imagine many ways in which the process could be halted midway or even reversed in subtle ways (Jacobs and Weaver, 2014; Patashnik, 2008; Pierson, 2004). Consider the argument that a grand coalition in support of a participation income (Atkinson, 1996) will lead to a full BI over time as the complications of administering this close cousin of BI become apparent – a pathway explicitly considered by Brian Barry (2001) and Philippe Van Parijs (2004). Many BI advocates assume that, facing administrative complexity, policy makers will relax monitoring conditions surrounding the participation requirement such that over time a full BI comes into being. But an equally plausible scenario would be one in which participation requirements are restricted to those that fit existing bureaucratic capabilities, reducing the scope of the participation income to easily administered activities such as employment, full-time education or the formal care of a registered dependent (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2007). Instead of regarding what happens after initial agreement behind the veil of vagueness as something akin to the inevitable unfolding of history, we should remain aware that the operational detail of the BI proposal necessarily entails political negotiations in which the deep and persistent tensions between the different factions will re-emerge with a vengeance.

One further worry is that the policy that materialises after the general idea of a BI is agreed in principle may turn out to be even less desirable than the *status quo*. For instance, the institution of a BI at a level falling short of the poverty line, combined with the dismantling of assistance to the poor and vulnerable, is an outcome at odds with the progressive case for BI.¹² The proposal of Charles Murray (2006) would, for that reason, be entirely unacceptable to anyone supporting BI on progressive grounds. Progressives relying on conservative support for introducing a BI, while hoping to get away with any conservative 'by-products' by agreeing on the basic idea behind a veil of vagueness, are in fact buying into a high-risk strategy. For there exists an important asymmetry of power between progressives and conservatives that is highly relevant to the political strategy of starting a BI at a modest level and building up from there in a piecemeal fashion. In such cases, at each phase of the development towards a full BI, progressives must negotiate and possibly compromise on several aspects with their conservative partners. Conservatives, on the other hand, merely need to hold out, and at each point retain the power of vetoing the next step. The latter is an example of policy drift, a powerful mechanism by which deliberate non-decision allows political factions to exert policy change significantly over time (Hacker, 2004 and 2005; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010).

In sum, where political division is rife and persistent, building a grand coalition that combines the support of opposing ideological factions is a risky strategy with considerable political costs attached. Perhaps these costs are worth a fair chance of getting at the coveted price, but the risks should be carefully analysed.

The struggle for strategy – where next?

Policy advocates always face a struggle to pick the right political allies. In this article, two thorny problems have been reviewed that have a direct bearing on this ‘struggle for strategy’ for those working towards advancing BI. The first problem consists of the fact that much express support in favour of BI may end being cheap in at least two senses: on the one hand, it may be worthless (even counterproductive) in terms of its capacity to further the objective of instituting a BI; on the other hand, it may not amount to a genuine political commitment in the first place. It is suggested that these two senses are often related in a particularly problematic way: BI secures strong support from political agents that face few political costs in committing to a BI, but this lack of political cost is correlated to an ineffectiveness to deliver policy, and thus the support itself has little value.

The second problem arises when BI advocates are tempted to get into bed with those who are situated at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum. That is to say, advocates of a particular BI model (be it progressive or conservative) may attempt to curry the favour of those who otherwise share only the flimsiest of views on matters of principle and policy, apart from a common perspective in favour of BI. However, it would be a serious mistake not to recognise the persistent political division underlying an apparent agreement behind a veil of vagueness, or not to appreciate the hard political negotiations required at each step of the development of a BI from idea to operational policy. There are good reasons to think the conservative factions in a grand BI coalition will resist the moves necessary to achieve a full progressive BI. Moreover, the structural constraints of the backdoor strategy for implementing BI appear to favour the bargaining position of the conservative factions, which means progressives would face an uphill battle to achieve anything like the BI model they are fighting for by adopting this strategy.

Where does this leave the political prospects for achieving a BI? Let me start by emphatically stating that none of what has been said here implies that BI is a radical utopia, a figment of the progressive imagination with zero chances of ever making it off the drawing board. True, BI is a proposal that radically challenges current orthodoxy in welfare policy and social security, and if implemented would reverse the direction taken in most welfare regimes in the last decennia. If only for these reasons, it is entirely to be expected that BI faces serious political hurdles (De Wispelaere and Noguera, 2012), but the existence of such challenges does not mean that they cannot be overcome. A key distinction between a radical utopia and what Erik Olin Wright (2010) calls a ‘realistic utopia’ is that the latter takes the practical conditions for its existence into account when formulating the ideal. In the context of BI, Philippe Van Parijs (2013, p. 173) has recently cautioned: ‘Utopian thinking is not to be confused with wishful thinking. It requires tough disciplining by a demanding, multidisciplinary scientific community in order to dissuade us from believing and asserting what we would like to be true but is not.’ This article argues in a similar vein that the eventual implementation of BI depends on its advocates taking politics more seriously and particularly on adopting a critical approach to discovering which strategies would be most effective in furthering their cause.

Within this broad real-utopian framework, BI research and advocacy ought to give considerable attention to the politics of coalition-building. In light of the two problems surveyed, this paper offers two important insights. To begin with, it urges caution against adopting a political strategy of indiscriminately embracing any individual or group who appears to support BI. The alternative strategy of carefully seeking out one's political allies may prove more beneficial in the long run, even if it appears to dampen the prospects of instituting a BI in the immediate future. In other words, instead of hopping on any political bandwagon that happens to cross their path, BI advocates need to develop a careful strategy that allows them to grasp real opportunities as they arise, while simultaneously shaping the policy and political environment to promote the emergence of such real opportunities. Furthermore, this article also cautions against indiscriminately endorsing the backdoor strategy to politically promoting BI. While there is a lot to be said for moving ahead in an incremental fashion (but see Goodin, 1982), a clear awareness of the political pitfalls along the road will certainly improve the prospects of arriving at the destination. Here, too, taking a realistic stance is a *condition sine qua non* for furthering the cause of a proposal that many scholars, activists, policy makers and political entrepreneurs regard as the leading alternative for recalibrating a world characterised by insecurity, inequality and exclusion.

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Notes

1 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/04/us-swiss-pay-idUSBRE99300620131004>.

2 <http://basicincome2013.eu/>

3 A second (by all accounts peculiar) variant of basic income is found in Iran, where the government in December 2010 embarked on a five-year programme of reforming its system of price subsidies combined with a universal compensatory cash transfer programme (Tabatabai, 2012).

4 For a sustained analysis of 'the commitment problem' between constituents, legislators and bureaucrats from a transaction-cost approach, see Horn (1995).

5 On the conditions making it advantageous for interest groups to join an alliance, see Salisbury et al. (1987), Hojnacki (1997) and Mahoney (2007).

6 And we may plausibly expect a similar scenario in relation to trade unions who become more powerful over time, particularly given their internal division about BI because of the strong labourist philosophy inherent to most unions. Despite a general decline in traditional labourist values and class-based solidarity, references to 'hard-working families' are rife in European politics and rapidly adopted by the political right (Deeming, 2014).

7 <http://blogs.ft.com/the-world/2014/11/spanish-polls-show-podemos-surge-is-no-aberration/>

8 Recent research in agenda-setting within political parties suggests a more sophisticated explanation. Rigby and Wright (2013) argue that even the policy platforms of parties that explicitly represent the 'have-nots' end up being more responsive to upper-class policy preferences. 'We suspect this differential responsiveness begins very early in the policymaking process – at the point in which political parties aggregate diverse constituent preferences and advance a policy platform on which to run for election' (Rigby and Wright, 2013, p. 552).

9 Progressive opposition takes issue, for instance, with the particular funding method proposed by both Duchâtelet and Werner: a value added tax.

- 10 Within the perspective pioneered by Mancur Olson (1965), one obvious solution would be to employ selective benefits to joining the basic income camp. The main question then becomes what sort of selective benefits a basic income movement could offer to political parties, organisations or movements. The work by Marie Hojnacki (1998) on reputation as a mechanism for countering freeriding within interest groups may point us in the right direction. I am grateful to Joe Soss for bringing Hojnacki's work to my attention.
- 11 The ideological division between conservative and progressive BI advocates is instructive, but of course internal difference or disagreement need not have an ideological basis (Bystydzienski and Schacht, 2001). I am grateful to a referee for this point.
- 12 This is one reason why BI advocates appear loathe to accept the recent reform of British income support through the Universal Credit as a genuine road towards a full basic income (as suggested, for instance, by Jordan, 2011 and 2012), despite sharing some design features.

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About the author

Jurgen De Wispelaere is a Research Fellow at the McGill Institute for Health and Social Policy. An occupational therapist turned political theorist, he previously taught at Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin. Jurgen De Wispelaere is a founding editor of the journal *Basic Income Studies*, and co-editor of several collections on basic income, including recently *Basic Income: An Anthology of Contemporary Research* (Wiley, 2013). His main research interest is in the political theory of social policy and institutional design, with specific application to unconditional basic income, disability, health and parenting. Jurgen De Wispelaere, Institute for Health and Social Policy, McGill University, Charles Meredith House, 1130 Pine Avenue West, Montreal, QC H3A 1A3, Canada. E-mail: jurgen.dewispelaere@gmail.com