

Synopsis for regrounding the movement for a Universal Basic Income in Canada

Livinggrant paper #2, September 2017 www.livinggrant.ca please circulate widely

This item assumes that the reader is familiar with the general idea of a Universal Basic Income and recent initiatives of governments and political parties regarding it. There is a 'Basic Income Canada Network' BICN which was founded in 2008 and has held congresses in Canada about every two years. Various local and regional organizations have come up and some have disappeared. This creates a kind of movement for a UBI.

The basic flaw

The big problem with these groups is they tend to be secretive for unknown reasons. It is hard to determine what sort of UBI they propose. They seem to make no effort to present clear positions and guide public discussion, build up a member/donor base, or create any kind of organization.

Into the vacuum come a number of bloggers who do not understand the history and core concepts of a BI, and who are often pushing their own social theories in relation to a UBI. We also have some opportunist types, clearly hoping to use the issue to create a job for themselves. However, discussion of UBI is really being guided at present by government officials who are considering a form of UBI as a solution to their problems with welfare administration.

There is a fundamental flaw with the BICN group, which it inherits from its parent organization, Basic Income Earth Network. BIEN was founded in Europe in 1986 and has since grown into a worldwide organization with over 30 national affiliates. They minted the term 'Basic Income'. It is something created by people with a basically academic orientation.

The consequence of this beginning is that it is made up of people who have little interest in anything but the philosophical and theoretical aspects of the UBI concept. They are oriented to getting together every two years at a university to read their academic papers to each other. They slap down any idea of organizing or of promoting the BI concept to the general public.

BIEN is very non democratic in structure. The writings of many key members of BIEN show a serious disconnection from reality. BICN has similar problems and is also very secretive. Both groups seem committed to a form of the fallacy of the middle way; that if they

try to accommodate every possible view of a UBI, from far left to far right, they will get the greatest possible support and that all these ideologies will eventually coalesce around one version of a BI. This approach can lead only to confusion, incoherence, and breakdown.

On a sound basis

The big concern about BICN is that it seems to have become committed to a Negative Income Tax (NIT) which is not actually a BI at all. To achieve the original goal of a BI, to create a more humane society, entailing eliminating poverty and insecurity, the income must come as a flat grant to everyone, sufficient to cover the normal costs of living. This is usually called a Demogrant.

While supporting government social service systems which want to create a form of NIT, BICN and many people affiliated with it sell the BI concept as though they are talking about a Demogrant. This is why many of the critics of government BI plans call it a "bait and switch"; because the way BICN supports it, that is what it is. The concern is that as more people start to realize that the NIT 'pilot' plans will not be good for low income people, they may reject the BI concept outright without realizing that this is only one, highly flawed, model of delivering a BI.

Thus, the need to rethink and reground the present amorphous BI movement in Canada. This will be a difficult task. However, social movements toward needed reforms always take a long time to coalesce and become powerful. The people who could form a core are often lacking experience and confidence. In Canada, it is especially hard for them to find each other and to acquire the basic resources with which to work.

It is important to clearly define the problem for which a BI is the solution. This enables us to clearly define the basic principles which must be adhered to. Those who do not accept these principles need to remove themselves. They need to be challenged if they continue claiming to be working for a BI.

We do need a nation wide network run in a truly democratic, but not anarchic, way. We need to take seriously building a member base, a funding base,

and getting to the 'takeoff point'. That is, where we can support an office and paid staff. This is absolutely essential if we are going to be able to present ourselves to government and the media, and form relationships with compoing organizations.

Back to basics

We need to relearn the original principles of Robert Theobald and the committee on the Triple Revolution, back in 1962. This is where the modern idea of a guaranteed minimum income, as it was called then, began. The three revolutions were the arms revolution, threatening human survival, the cybernetic revolution, bringing on automation and the declining quality of employment, and the human rights revolution coming from the United Nations resolutions of that time, responding to the horrors of the world wars.

The predictions of this committee were accurate, but ahead of their time. Now these problems are starting to become urgent. We need to remove the power of a ruling class whose efforts to remain in control and keep making profits is increasingly threatening the survival of the planet.

We need to forget about the idea of 'jobs' as a means of providing incomes. That was always unjust and is now becoming unworkable. All this is tied together by the need to establish the right of everyone to a dignified and humane existence, free from fear and want.

Here is the problem for which a BI is the solution. In order to achieve real personal freedom and a humane society, economic independence must be extended to everybody. The way to do that is through a BI.

Getting to home base

For the BI to be effective it must be Universal, Unconditional, and Adequate; for everyone who needs it, without any requirements of any kind, and enough to live on. Realistically, the only way to raise enough money for this is through taxes on wealth. Such taxes are going to become necessary anyway, to curb the excessive economic power of the wealthy classes and to get all this 'dead money' back into the economy.

Taking on and disempowering the ruling class will be a very hard political struggle. People who are not interested in this kind of conflict do not belong in a BI

movement. Much of the appeal of harmful forms of a BI seems to come from an unwillingness to engage in this struggle.

Thus, ideas about a BI have coalesced around three models. The only legitimate one is the human rights approach. Then there is the libertarian model, in which the real idea is to replace all social services with a small BI in order to 'reduce government'. This is as foolish and unworkable as every other part of the Libertarian corpus, and so no real threat.

The adherents of the liberal, 'welfare plus' model like to say that they do not support the libertarian model. Yet they are supporting the Negative Income Tax model which originates with the neoliberals of the 1960s as a diversion from the real thing, the direct grant to all, the Demogrant. An NIT cannot provide enough money and would be at its best no net improvement for impoverished people.

A BI movement in Canada must be based on a Liberating, Human Rights, Demogrant based approach. To bring this about may require a new, 'mother ship' type of organization. Or, the present BICN may be successfully challenged and opened up as to a more democratic structure.

Lets start out right

The challenge now is to draw together an effective network of activists with an orientation to such an approach. They will come as followers of BICN and the bloggers start to think through the BI issue more clearly. But also, as people involved in 'poverty reduction' see the inadequacy of that approach.

As well, people interested in human rights and human liberation are coming to see the failure of 'The Left' as due mainly to 'last century' thinking. Especially, a fetishization of 'jobs' and rising incomes.

The best of union activists are noticing that the 'good jobs' were mostly in the last century and only benefited those who could take them.

One of the things in twenty first century Canada with huge 'growth potential' is a BI movement. First, it must be put on a solid basis. Then it becomes the most important tool for transforming society on a humane and liberating basis.

