

# When Basic Income Meets Professor Pangloss: Ignoring Public Administration and Its Perils

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## Abstract

Basic income advocates propose a model that they believe will dramatically improve on current welfare programmes by alleviating poverty, reducing involuntary unemployment and social exclusion, redistributing care work, achieving a better work–life balance, and so on. Whether these expected social effects materialise in practice critically depends on how the model is implemented, but on this topic the basic income debate remains largely silent. Few advocates explicitly consider questions of implementation, and those that do are typically dismissive of the administrative challenges of implementing a basic income and critical (even overtly hostile) towards bureaucracy. In this contribution we briefly examine (and rebut) several reasons that have led basic income advocates to ignore administration. The main peril of such neglect, we argue, is that it misleads basic income advocates into a form of Panglossian optimism that risks causing basic income advocacy to become self-defeating.

**Keywords:** basic income, bureaucracy, implementation, Panglossian optimism

IN VOLTAIRE'S 1759 satire *Candide*, the young protagonist initially lives a life in accordance with the doctrine of 'Liebnizian optimism', fuelled by the teachings of his mentor Professor Pangloss. Believing that all must be well in the best of possible worlds, Candide slowly awakens to life's harsh reality through witnessing and experiencing severe adversity, leading him to abandon Panglossian wishful thinking in favour of a more pragmatic attitude to life. In our view, many basic income advocates take a decidedly Panglossian view of the policy process, assuming that basic income is invulnerable to the constraints and challenges involved in instituting social support programmes in most jurisdictions.

The Panglossian view is about to be sorely tested. 2015 and 2016 were great years for basic income advocates, and 2017 looks set to be an even better one. Basic income, until quite recently dismissed by policy-makers, is now becoming the idea *du jour* in the battle over reinvigorating the welfare state. Finland became the undisputed frontrunner when Juha Sipilä's centre-right coalition commissioned a research team to explore the possibility of conducting the first ever large-scale

national basic income pilot in early 2017. But the Finns are closely followed by the Dutch: the municipalities of Utrecht, Wageningen, Tilburg and Groningen are negotiating the possibility of conducting local basic income-inspired experiments with the State Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment. In Canada, too, things are moving fast at the provincial level: the 2016 Ontario Budget made explicit mention of the possibility of basic income pilots and over the summer the Ontario government carefully examined different modalities, while in Québec the Minister of Employment (and long-time basic income advocate), François Blais, has been given the brief of exploring concrete options. Canadian basic income advocates, dug into deep trenches during the Harper years, are coming out in droves, expressing a level of hope and excitement not witnessed for decades. In France, finally, a recent Senate *ad hoc* committee report strongly recommended testing a basic income through three-year pilot schemes involving up to 30,000 citizens. But optimism, however fitting, should not detract basic income advocates from asking the hard questions that come with moving an idea along the policy process.

In the UK the debate has taken off as well, somewhat surprisingly. While the official government position remains ‘thanks, but no thanks’, keeping a clear focus on Universal Credit as its flagship welfare programme, basic income has certainly entered the public policy debate in the United Kingdom. The Citizen’s Income Trust, a long-standing advocacy group for basic income, has produced a number of costed proposals aimed at demonstrating the feasibility of remodelling UK benefits along basic income lines. The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) published its own basic income model in a 2015 pamphlet entitled *Creative Citizen, Creative State: The Principled and Pragmatic Case for a Universal Basic Income*, which was well received in British media and policy circles. More recently, Compass agreed that universal basic income was indeed an idea whose time had come (at least in their proposed modified version)—a position greeted with a note of caution in recent reports published by the Fabian Society and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

Even more promising for (some) basic income advocates is that in addition to the long-standing support of the Greens, the Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, and his Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, have come out in support of basic income. MPs debated universal basic income on Wednesday 14 September 2016 in Westminster Hall and the Work and Pensions Select Committee is to hold a one-off evidence session on citizens’ income in Birmingham on 12 January 2017. And even the trade unions—often ardent opponents of basic income—are coming around to the idea: following earlier support from Unite, the latest TUC Congress in Brighton adopted a motion in favour of basic income.<sup>2</sup> While we do not necessarily expect any immediate policy development in the UK, given the obvious resistance from the government of the day, basic income is slowly but surely establishing itself within the mainstream of debate on welfare reform. In short, careful reflection on the practicalities of basic income implementation is warranted.

Nowhere is the Panglossian optimism more apparent than in basic income advocates’ attitude towards bureaucracy, welfare administration and implementation more

generally. Invariably, those who propose a universal and unconditional basic income to complement existing welfare programmes, or to replace those that fail to deliver on desired social goals, appear untroubled by what Bernard Schaffer has called ‘the administrative factor’. On this view, a simple, individually and unconditionally allocated basic income grant can without difficulty bypass the sluggish, biased, overly costly and highly intrusive bureaucratic machinery of the modern welfare state.<sup>3</sup> The Panglossian perspective reveals itself in the implicit (and on occasion explicitly stated) claim that, in the best of all worlds, a basic income scheme requires little administration, and only the bare bones of a bureaucracy.

We have challenged this view elsewhere, arguing that basic income faces its own distinct implementation challenges.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, solutions to any of these challenges are inherently political, and to ignore implementation is simply to turn a blind eye to a key part of the policy process. To the political scientist or policy analyst, the argument that administration matters for basic income design and implementation may seem like a truism, but it faces surprising resistance among those advocating for basic income. There may be several explanations for this general reluctance to embrace administrative analysis. Our purpose here is to survey what we believe to be the main reasons at play, and to explain why none of these warrants the pervasive neglect of administration in basic income research and advocacy. Just as *Candide* over time came to understand the limits of the Panglossian worldview, so too must basic income advocates wake up to the fact that administrative wishful thinking is unhelpful if a policy proposal is to move from academic discussion and advocacy to practical implementation.

## Controlling bureaucracy?

Basic income advocates customarily adopt a perspective in which administration necessarily takes the form of a ‘controlling bureaucracy’, where welfare clients are compelled to submit to invasive and degrading people-processing procedures in order to receive the support to which they are entitled.<sup>5</sup> It is unfortunately a hallmark of most

targeted or selective policies that bureaucratic interactions—including face-to-face interactions with street-level bureaucrats—reduce the role of claimants to a passive and subservient one, in which they face distrust and suspicion at every turn and their agency, dignity and self-esteem is hampered by the very system that is meant to assist them.<sup>6</sup>

The effects of a controlling bureaucracy include not only the well-known negative effects on target efficiency, but also a persistent distrust of government and a decline in political participation.<sup>7</sup> A considerable literature reveals bureaucratic disenfranchisement to be a predictable side-effect of a system that prioritises people-processing in line with a dominant eligibility-compliance culture, and in many cases even a deliberate strategy for the state to exercise control.<sup>8</sup> For basic income advocates, the obvious solution is to combat bureaucratic discretion and paternalism by drastically reducing the scope of administrative intervention. This perspective views basic income as an essential tool to ‘unclog the bureaucratic pipes’.<sup>9</sup>

We are sympathetic towards advocates’ distrust of a controlling bureaucracy. However, we need deny neither the fact of administrative overreach—the pervasive extent of bureaucratic interference in welfare clients’ lives—nor its disastrous effects individually or in the aggregate to observe several problems with this one-dimensional perspective on public administration. First, while much of social assistance is organised in a controlling fashion, many other support programmes are not. In most countries there is a marked difference between the manners of administration of entitlement programmes, such as pensions or social security, and programmes that embrace bureaucratic discretion, such as social assistance. It follows that reforming administrative processes, rather than simply reducing administration as such, is a plausible—albeit a politically controversial and operationally difficult—alternative. This is of course partly what motivates interest in the Universal Credit scheme, even among some basic income proponents, who see a first step towards the establishment of a universal basic income ‘concealed within a load of cuts, conditionality and means-testing’.<sup>10</sup> However, it is

precisely the insistence on keeping cuts, conditionality and means-testing at the forefront that plagues the practical implementation of Universal Credit and other reforms along those lines.

This, in turn, points at a second weakness: laying the blame for controlling clients by intrusive measures solely on administrative systems and bureaucrats, and ignoring the extent to which the latter operate within a political climate that is exceedingly hostile to providing income security for those without strong ties to the labour market. In the end, it is the political process that guides the selection of the goals that administrators must aim towards, as well as providing the tools and resources by which to achieve them. To think that the problem of controlling bureaucracy merely requires getting rid of bureaucracy is to misdiagnose the real issue, namely a pro-activation and anti-welfare political climate—recently exacerbated by the era of austerity politics—that shapes and constrains administrative procedures and practices.

Of course, basic income advocates do not really believe we need no administration at all; rather, they merely hope for a policy that involves fewer rules, less regulation, less monitoring and consequently less general bureaucratic interference in people’s lives. However, it is a fallacy to think that implementation without controlling bureaucracy—which basic income advocates rightly abhor—equates to basic income without significant administrative challenges. The fundamental mistake here is to reduce all implementation problems to what goes wrong when bureaucracies exert excessive and arbitrary control over the lives of welfare recipients. In reality, public administration encompasses numerous other aspects of the implementation process, many directly affecting the performance of whichever basic income model is instituted.

### **Faulty transmission? ‘Staging’ the policy process**

Several other reasons combine with the perception of a controlling bureaucracy to explain the reluctance to take the administrative factor seriously. For instance, basic income advocates may be buying into a version of the ‘transmission-belt’ model of

public administration, in which implementation is understood as a mechanical activity concerned with giving effect to political decisions that have already been made, allowing a clear distinction between politics and administration to be drawn. The basic income version of the transmission belt model maintains that fundamental questions arise in discussing the ethics, economics and politics of the basic income guarantee; by contrast, implementation concerns are entirely instrumental, technical and presumptively apolitical.

The transmission-belt model has long been discredited in public administration, and so too should its basic income variant be. It is simply untrue that administrative challenges are merely technical matters that present no hard political choices. On the contrary, hard choices are an intrinsic feature of substantial policy reforms such as basic income, for the simple reason that implementation costs and implementation errors are unavoidable, with the consequence that the resulting burdens are unequally allocated across different 'target populations' and available solutions compete politically (in the sense that each comes with a different distribution of benefits and burdens compared to the status quo ante).<sup>11</sup> Paradoxically, it is the presence of multiple solutions, each available but differing in important respects in how they allocate benefits and burdens, that explains the political nature of public administration. In the UK proposals by CIT, RSA and Compass, which are predominantly about costing alternative basic income schemes, this issue plays out in finding an acceptable solution to the trade-off between basic income models that minimise costs for the poor compared to the status quo and those that minimise the overall costs. These kinds of hard choices, as we have argued elsewhere, are part and parcel of concrete basic income design. Ditching the transmission-belt model implies that public administration scholars should be given a prominent place alongside philosophers and social scientists in the basic income debate.

A related view to which many basic income advocates ascribe maintains that, with the rise of the information society, implementation problems have diminished or disappeared altogether. Basic income advocates often refer to technological

advances to dismiss any lingering doubts about the scheme's implementation. Philippe Van Parijs, for instance, insists that, 'assuming a computerized and efficient tax-collection and transfer-payment technology', administrative costs are likely to be 'lower under a universal, ex ante scheme than under a means-tested, ex post one'.<sup>12</sup> While this may be true up to a point, the assumption of efficient technology operating in the background of implementation is nevertheless a flawed starting point for policy analysis. In fact, the issue is rather familiar in the UK context. The roll-out of Universal Credit is premised on constructing a massive new ICT environment that turns benefit administration 'digital by default'. Rather than resolving issues, technology dependence has in fact proved to be responsible for extended delay and excessive costs, leading to the programme being flagged at amber-red status (the category designating a project as in danger of failing) and even listed as 'reset' in the 2014 Infrastructure and Projects Authority Review. Universal Credit is rapidly joining the list of British policy fiascos for just this reason.

Meanwhile, the very idea of 'digital by default' may end up introducing a barrier to accessing entitlements that basic income advocates, committed as they are to an inclusive welfare state, must avoid. The difficulties some people face with regard to digital access is poignantly illustrated in Ken Loach's latest film, *I, Daniel Blake*. Modern information technology may have increased the list of tools we have at our disposal to address implementation problems, and the temptation to think this means we have little to worry about on that score is understandable. Nevertheless, the emergence of new ICTs 'does not mean that new policy problems have appeared or old ones disappeared'; rather, 'they present themselves in new ways'.<sup>13</sup> The lesson is clear: appeal to some 'technological fix' is no way to make an argument about (or against the need for careful consideration of) the implementation of basic income.

## Comparative advantage?

A final reason for the reluctance to directly engage with the administration of basic income reflects the view that basic income

will always outperform selective approaches to income support because it is simple, universal, uniform and unconditional, no matter what challenges arise at the implementation stage. Guy Standing writes that an unconditional basic income 'would save on administration costs because it would simplify the complex schemes, make them more transparent and reduce the amount of intrusive enquiry'. Even more stridently, Claus Offe regards basic income as 'an alternative to welfare policy that radically economizes on the administrative overhead costs of fighting poverty'.<sup>14</sup> The thought here seems to be that basic income administration should be evaluated *comparatively*; that is, against a background of the myriad of implementation problems faced by contemporary selective welfare programmes.

Against this view, we can first point out that the comparative efficiency of basic income over that of selective programmes is assumed rather than argued for, and we should be careful about deriving strong conclusions that can be reliably drawn across all basic income models. Intuitive as it may seem to regard basic income as a single alternative that can be pitched against the cluster of contribution-based and means-tested programmes that make up the traditional welfare state, basic income is itself a label applied to a cluster of policies that can be differentiated along important policy dimensions. For instance, a basic income pitched around the poverty line may accrue important administrative savings that are not present when the level of basic income is substantially less: in that case, other means-tested programmes will pick up the slack, with all attendant administration remaining firmly in place. This is of direct relevance to all the feasible basic income schemes currently being proposed by CIT, RSA or Compass, all of whom, for perfectly understandable pragmatic reasons, insist on instituting a low level of basic income to be complemented by various other schemes (including housing benefits and disability benefits) for those without sufficient income from work.

More importantly, however, the comparative perspective is fundamentally flawed: the 'administrability' of a particular basic income proposal has important implications for its ethical desirability and political feasibility,

independent of how it fares against selective competitors. Consider a leading ethical argument in favour of basic income, to the effect that it protects those most at risk of falling through the cracks of contemporary welfare-state arrangements. This includes a variety of social groups whose contribution to society is not adequately valued in monetary terms (e.g. care workers), the so-called 'precarariat' facing high marginal taxes and associated unemployment traps and, of course, the homeless, who in many cases are entirely excluded from the bulk of support programmes. Adequate protection of these vulnerable groups depends on basic income actually delivering on its promised universal coverage, not on whether it does so better than other schemes. While not all justifications of basic income are vulnerable to this particular charge—for example, Charles Murray's conservative, welfare-dismantling scheme would arguably escape it—those that draw support from the progressive corners of the political spectrum invariably are.<sup>15</sup>

To draw a parallel with Universal Credit, one of the Coalition government's hopes for this scheme was that, by reducing what the government called 'the administrative costs of complexity', the scheme would dramatically reduce levels of fraud and error, including an estimated £1.3 billion in underpayment of benefits and further £260 million in tax credits.<sup>16</sup> But plans for 'digital by default' application (noted above), as well as for payment mainly by BACS transfer (when 5 per cent of UK households, including many of those most dependent on the benefits system, lack a basic transactional bank account), have meant that vulnerable clients are unlikely to be among those who benefit from lower administrative costs of complexity.<sup>17</sup> To this we must add the fact that Universal Credit is far from unconditional, expanding strict conditions from those working no hours to those working few hours and moreover 'extending conditionality not just to all those in work earning less than a certain amount but also for the first time fully to partners with children'.<sup>18</sup> Given what is, by any measure, a flawed implementation, the fact that the scheme had certain 'on paper' administrative advantages over the programmes it replaces is of little help to the most vulnerable.

We can take matters a step further: the comparative perspective gives basic income administration a free ride by largely obscuring the extent to which competing basic income models resolve implementation challenges in radically different ways. This matters because, as we shall see below, the resulting outcomes will benefit different target populations, which in turn directly affects the politics of basic income. This reinforces a critical point made earlier: *basic income administration is inherently political*. Identifying important implementation bottlenecks and their solutions sheds light on competing political commitments and how these inform the underlying reasons for proceeding with basic income reform.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, we can distinguish between the progressive approach to basic income implementation, with commitments to ensuring the protection of the disadvantaged and vulnerable, and the conservative approach, largely focused on the simplification and cost reduction of existing social protection. While each of these approaches may outperform the patchwork of traditional social security and welfare programmes, whatever comparative benefits are achieved are nonetheless allocated very differently in the progressive or conservative variants. This aspect of basic income implementation is relevant not only to the underlying justifications for the scheme, as outlined above, but equally to the enduring stability, robustness and resilience of basic income over time.

## Against Panglossian thinking in the policy process

While philosophical discussion of basic income has often aimed at using a policy proposal to illuminate the foundational principles of a just society, we take it for granted that for most contemporary advocates of basic income, the goal is neither simply to sharpen philosophical understanding nor to achieve a political commitment to *any* policy that can claim to call itself a basic income, regardless of its real-world effect on people's lives. For such advocates, the main lesson of our article is that none of the reasons we have identified for neglecting the administrative factor truly justifies doing so. Indeed,

for those who advocate basic income as a solution to real problems of poverty, social exclusion or of compulsion in labour markets (or indeed in unpaid domestic labour), failure to take account of the vagaries of administrative reality comes with real risks.

As we try to show above, these risks can take different forms, but the most important one is, arguably, a failure to appreciate the extent to which decisions about basic income implementation always reflect political choices, and in turn produce political effects. Anticipating the ways in which administrative challenges—and their proposed solutions—may affect the prospects of instituting a basic income in a stable and durable manner is a key part of the political analysis of basic income.

A first step is to overcome the complacency regarding the nature of administration, and hence of the administrative challenges posed by the introduction of a basic income. Public administration involves much more than a controlling bureaucracy. Administration is what transforms policies from words on a page to improvements (or the opposite) in people's lives; indeed, a key strand in the modern policy literature addresses how the real-world effects of public policies are different from—indeed, are often the reverse of—their 'on paper' intent. Nor are there any good reasons to suppose that basic income would be immune to such 'reverse effects'. The Panglossian perspective assumes away both implementation challenges and their potential solutions on the assumption that the basic income proposal carries within its universal and unconditional design the seeds for perfect (or as near to perfect as one can get) implementation. Administrative error, unintended side effects or outright opportunism are features of selective social policy design that renders recipients subservient to a class of bureaucratic rule-enforcers. Do away with selectivity, conditionality and eligibility rules more generally, and you preempt the bulk of implementation problems—or so the Panglossian policy-maker would have it.

However, implementation problems are much more endemic than the Panglossian basic income advocate realises. As Robert Goodin writes: 'No system of law or administration is perfect... Try as we might, we

are bound to err.<sup>20</sup> And with error comes the need to decide not only on how best to *reduce* error, but, equally important, in which *direction* to err. Like statistical analysis, policy can err by being under-inclusive or over-inclusive, forcing us to choose between false negatives and false positives. In relation to basic income, this choice is present at many levels of implementation. Should we focus on citizens or long-term residents when deciding on our target population? Should basic income be paid in the form of a refundable tax credit through the tax system, which imposes considerable costs on those precarious workers situated at the margins of the labour market? Or should basic income administration instead invest in separate payment channels that actively seek out vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals and ensure they receive the basic income to which they are entitled? Should basic income, while embracing freedom through unconditionality, nevertheless come with special measures to protect its recipients from making poor choices? The RSA model, for instance, includes a ‘contribution contract’ with the local community (in the form of five ‘witnesses’) as a condition of receipt of the basic income for 18–25-year-olds. And what about oversight? At the individual level, policy error is, for most of us, a simple online complaint away from its resolution, but this does not apply to those who are excluded from the societal mainstream—the homeless, the unbanked or those without access to online services. These and other practical challenges do not go away merely because basic income is universal and unconditional. And, abstracting beyond individual errors, what are the systemic effects of systematic error in one way or another in terms of the sustainability of a basic income—both in terms of affordability and popular legitimacy—as well as in terms of basic income meeting its objectives?

Of course, where the Leibnizian optimism of Professor Pangloss held firm even against the most dire of experiences, the basic income policy advocate may respond immediately to instances of implementation failure by proposing changes to some program features or tinkering with how the scheme interacts with the wider policy environment. But here another important aspect of policy

design kicks in: *size matters*. Policy implementation at a scale as large as introducing a basic income for the whole population may require setting the ‘policy ship’ on a course from which it is hard then to deviate. In its own way, basic income may rapidly prove to be a policy juggernaut: difficult to halt, slow down or indeed change direction once set to go. The sort of policy changes that may be required to bolster a basic income that suffers from some of the aforementioned implementation problems are not of the incremental, tinkering variety. In many cases they would involve system-wide changes that require considerable investment in capacity. Rather than having to canvass the political will to adapt the basic income policy en route, as it were, it would be much more congenial to take the time to carefully think through basic income implementation beforehand. But this means shedding the Panglossian policy perspective sooner rather than later.

## Notes

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