

NABIG, New York, June 2017

Panel Discussion on

**Dignity or Degradation**  
**What should be the value base for building**  
**a benefit system?**

**Introductory Remarks - Sheila Regehr**

**General intro**

It is generally understood that there are both moral and practical reasons for a basic income. This panel is about the moral dimensions - but it is not abstract or impractical.

It's also about building and sustaining a co-operative basic income movement large enough to generate social and political will for governments to act. And to ensure that they act to change the current degrading paradigm of many income security systems to one that respects human dignity and the common good as its underlying value base.

We panelists bring very different perspectives. Father Damien who could not be here today was going to talk about the origins of what is now called the BII - Basic Income Initiative. I am going to relay some of his reflections and Hector will cover others. Barb is going to dig deeper into some of the moral issues that I will just touch on ..... and Hector offers a perspective from a younger generation focused on a return to principles and values as well as different forms of activism that we can learn from.

**The origins of the BII (Father Damien)**

*Perhaps you know already that Toronto is numbered among the most ethnically diverse cities in the world. When spoken of by foreign visitors it generally receives a good review but we remain a work in progress. One of the stepping stones in creating that progress is the introduction of a basic income for Canadians. It has been maturing in the minds of interfaith leaders in Toronto, where because of our diverse ethnicity, we have available all the major interfaith players and then some.*

*The interfaith environment in Toronto is thus one of the strongest and most well-developed in North America. Perhaps a contributing factor to this is that Canada prides itself in being a multi-cultural nation. Due especially to immigration, Roman Catholics represent the largest Christian faith group with Anglican or Episcopalians second, the United Church of Canada third,*

*Pentecostals, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Baptist comprise smaller numbers of the groups. Other faiths in descending order of numbers, include Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and Buddhists.*

*It was over two years ago that faith leaders from these diverse groups, came together to look at what was most needed to truly make the progress needed in our society. Drawing on one another's faith values we were able to erect a strong consensus around the common acceptance of the moral value of raising the human dignity of persons by supporting a basic annual income.*

## **The Bill Going Forward**

The Basic Income Initiative is now expanded beyond Toronto and into a growing consortium of people from diverse faiths and traditions, including Indigenous, as well as secular and multi-sector interests. Among them are:

BICN, Christian Jewish Dialogue Toronto, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese, the United Church, the Toronto Board of Rabbis, the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, the Anglican Church, the Canadian farmers Union, Ontario Public Health Agencies, academics in many fields from economics and health to food insecurity and social work, and individuals across the income spectrum who are front line workers, policy analysts, business people, union members, politicians and other public servants, and members of arts and LGBTQ communities.

Going forward we are working to engage existing networks to raise awareness, build knowledge and foster constructive conversation about the importance of a basic income as good public policy. This means bringing together people who are not necessarily traditional allies and doing it in an environment where there is a tendency towards a kind of protectionist, tribal hunkering down in the face of anxiety and an unpredictable future.

## **Joining in the middle - my part**

My part in this Initiative starts not at the beginning but in the middle. I am one of those whom Hector would describe as 'allergic to religion'. My skeptical nature extends to a distinct unbelief in an economic system that purports to work by invisible hand-waving in the market. I am a policy wonk, analytical, I like evidence and logic and working out design details. My arguments for a basic income were primarily practical - poverty's downstream consequences cost too much, for example.

I am out of my comfort zone, in a way, working on this project - and that is, in very large measure, the point. I'm in it because there are a number of reasons why I think the moral dimensions of basic income are increasingly important.

EO Wilson in his introduction to Jeffrey Sachs' *Common Wealth* comments that **"We exist in a bizarre combination of stone age emotions, medieval beliefs and god-like technology."** I think this plays out acutely in the basic income conversation so this is my taking off point.

### Stone-age emotions:

- In any basic income discussion, questions such as why people should get something for nothing always come up. Emotionally, some people think that doesn't seem **fair**. Evidence holds very little weight for some people if it is at odds with what they feel. The extent to which a sense of morality is hard-wired into us is detailed by Joshua Greene in *Moral Tribes* - Barb is going to talk more about that.
- Margaret Atwood in a wonderful non-fiction book called *Debt*, even goes back to our pre-human primate ancestors to show just how innate concepts like fairness and their emotional manifestations are. Monkeys taught to trade pebbles for cucumber slices rebelled when some started receiving a more valuable grape for their pebble. Some even stopped eating in protest. In ancient human mythology, there were specific deities of justice (and retribution). As an interesting aside - notably they were all female and if you go into a courthouse today and see a figure carrying the scales of justice, it is still female.
- More recent, scientific study in psychology, neurobiology and behavioural economics reinforces the lessons of the monkey experiments. Humans are social beings. We can't survive on our own, so we are hard-wired to cooperate - and to want to punish non-cooperation. Homo sapiens has higher brain functions that override our prehistoric emotions (for example, to consider evidence or another's perspective) but it takes work.
- To help increase public understanding of basic income as public policy for the common good, we need to better acknowledge emotional response and be prepared for the effort needed to get beyond it.

### Medieval beliefs

- I've taken liberties here, this isn't just medieval but it's about the power of belief systems. Yuval Noah Harari in *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus* details how our species has come to dominate the planet, not through competition and survival of the fittest, but through cooperation on a scale unimaginable for other species, due to our capacity for imagination and our ability to create and share fiction.

- To take a very mundane modern example let's look at traffic. With a few laws and signs, billions of people cooperate every day in North America to drive on the right side of the road, to stop at a red light, to get on a bus according to a schedule. There is no physical or biological law demanding this and if enough people stop believing or lose trust in the idea it won't work. New ideas can replace old, however. For many reasons and in different ways, people stopped believing that slavery was acceptable, acted in opposition to it, and legally abolished it.
- For the past few decades, most if not all the world's governments have operated under an economic belief paradigm or narrative based on individual self-interest, the invisible hand of the market and GDP growth as the source of prosperity for everyone. This was created, designed, and setting aside whether it was a deliberate con or just misguided, the promise has not played out in reality for many people. With extreme inequalities, weakened governments, financial crises, household debt, anxiety, climate change, mounting social tensions etc, the narrative is not holding up well.
- The basic income idea, in this context, reflects cracks in the current belief system that have already appeared. At the same time, it further challenges the narrative on which it is built - in particular with regard to notions of work, competition, charity and punishment.
- 'Work' in the current system has become synonymous with employment, encoded in the UN System of National Accounts that specifically excludes work done in the household and in communities as irrelevant. In other words, work is valued only when it is for the market, paid for by someone else, usually to advance someone else's purpose and profit. Employment is the primary, legitimate way to acquire income. Basic income is one way to recognize the value of work outside the market (human and social reproduction, care economy, civic engagement, community). It restores some balance with competition by valuing cooperation, ensuring that everyone is treated with dignity, and is able to exercise agency in the family, market and democratic structures.
- The charitable model and punishment are flip sides of the coin when people don't cooperate according to the rules of the game. The rule for most people in our income security systems is that adults should have a job and show some competitive spirit to get a good one. People who end up in poverty then are treated as deficient in some way, either as at fault or to be pitied. Both charity (providing what you think someone else needs) and punishment (as in austere, humiliating social assistance programs) involve degradation and external control over behaviour. With technological unemployment growing, as just one example, it is becoming harder to maintain this fiction about poverty. But changing belief systems is still hard.

- Everyone interprets information based on what they know from their own life and some have great difficulty putting themselves in another's shoes. Very well-intentioned people can often do harm because they believe they are right, rationale, charitable, or the facts are on their side.
- People also come to the BI issue from different perspectives and often different language, terminology, values and issue constructs. It's sometimes difficult to tell if people are agreeing, disagreeing or even talking about the same thing. Working towards common ground is essential and not easy.

### God-like technology

- This is new and uncomfortable territory for me as well. Reading Martin Ford's *Lights in the Tunnel* and *Rise of the Robots* disturbed my sleep for several nights. Long story short (and I don't know how widely his views are shared in the high tech world or in the business community), but it wasn't technological unemployment that disturbed me. It was rather the idea that in a world where robots can *produce* everything, human worth gets reduced to being *consumers* who need income to fulfill that role.
- His perspective offers insight, for example in recognizing that only governments can solve the problems we're facing, not the market, but it still sounds backwards, that humans need to adjust to technology and the economy rather than making them work for humans. It seems like a degraded life, one overflowing with 'stuff' but without thought of what gives human life meaning.
- But another book, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, takes what I think is a more constructive approach, by building a *common adherence to a **desirable vision of a different world** involving a negotiation of differences and particularisms... to seek a common language and programme... not by flattening differences but by the interplay of difference ..... it emerges out of ...a diverse array of groups, agents and organizations within society.*

**All of these factors, to me, argue strongly that we all need to get out of our comfort zone, talk with each other and create a narrative for a more human paradigm that can work better for all of us.**

**We have inherited a straightjacket of thinking and we must break through these confines of what we are allowed to imagine.**