Fear of Freedom: A Barrier to Putting BI on the Political Agenda

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Introduction

The cause of getting Basic Income (BI) onto the political agenda should have been substantially advanced by a December 1996 OECD ‘Forum for the Future’ that identified “a universal citizen’s income” as one of four innovative approaches to finding “the balance between economic flexibility and societal cohesion” (OECD 1997). The OECD’s endorsement of the BI concept is compelling evidence that fundamental changes in the nature of work, driven by the twin engines of economic globalization and rapid technological change, require serious attention.

Yet it remains difficult to press political decision makers, increasingly constrained by the corporatist agenda, into serious discussions of BI as a way of ensuring basic economic security and meaningful societal participation to citizens of the rapidly-globalizing ‘just-in-time’ world. Perhaps that is because BI is centrally about power and freedom. Just as domination of some by others is as old as human history, so too is the desire to control one’s own life and work. BI represents an important step forward in that quest for ‘real freedom’--but it is, paradoxically, a step that threatens many people whom it would help to free.

On the one hand, because BI undermines existing wage-labour power structures by giving workers more choice and freedom from coercion, those who benefit from the status quo--and also have influential political and media links--are strongly motivated to denigrate
and defeat any serious consideration of providing even a partial secure livelihood to all, especially any BI without specific work requirements. The arguments we must make to the power holders concern exactly the OECD perception: that basic economic security is necessary to maintain social order and cohesion in the face of the insecurity engendered by the move to a ‘flexible workforce (Huws 1997).

But many if not most people who sell their labour in exchange for a livelihood also reject the BI concept, often vehemently. We who advocate BI need to learn more about the fears and resentments behind this rejection if we hope to gain serious public and political consideration for BI programs in our varied societies. In addition to ongoing philosophical and economic research, I believe more study of public perceptions and concerns about the BI concept and various BI options is needed. I have begun to wonder what we might learn about rejection of BI from the work of Erich Fromm and others who have studied the fear of freedom and the politics of resentment..

At this moment in history, BI is necessary, it is just and it can be liberating. Our challenges are: to make the case for why it is just and necessary, to learn how to overcome people’s rejection of BI by better understanding their fears and resentments, and to give substance to our visions of a better quality of life with BI. These challenges are the focus of this paper.

**Background**

I want first to examine briefly the context for public discussion in North America of the concept of BI in its many variations--citizen’s income, social wage, participation income and so forth. I won’t dwell on the nature of the fundamental economic and technological changes that are occurring globally, because these have been extensively documented and
discussed. Over the past two decades, policy makers in Canada, as well as in Britain and New Zealand, have moved away from 'European-style' social democratic initiatives that supported investment in community well-being--and the universality that made this politically acceptable--toward increasing infatuation with the 'tougher' U.S. stance. The U.S. model has favoured targeted social spending, yet has widened the gap between rich and poor while holding down official unemployment figures by proliferating low-wage McJobs and prison sentences (Salutin 1998).

Where this model is finding some favour, as in Canada, middle and low-income families have been losing ground because more jobs are part-time, low-paid and precarious. The rich grow wealthier, a few obscenely so, while anxiety about insecure employment prevails among much of the rest of the population. Re-engineering, downsizing, 'rightsizing' in all their versions continue to create unacceptable numbers of underemployed, insecurely employed and unemployed (Reid 1996; The National Forum on Family Security 1993).

Youth unemployment is publicly discussed as the most urgent problem in Canada, yet “for every unemployed young person under 30, there are now almost two unemployed older workers” (Foot 1997).

While there is still strong public resistance in Canada to abandoning the vulnerable and less fortunate in society, there has been an unrelenting effort in the corporate media to 'manufacture consent' for substantial reductions in a wide range of provincial and federal social expenditures, and for the implementation of ‘workfare’ programs to ‘motivate’ the unemployed.

Politicians promote training as the ultimate panacea for unemployment and poverty. They refuse to question whether there will be jobs for all who want and need them. Although upgrading basic literacy and numeracy can be viewed with more favour than specific

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1 See, for example: Duffy, Glenday and Pupo 1997; Wolman and Colamosca 1997; Greider 1997; Reid 1996; Korten 1995; Rifkin 1995; Simai 1995; Barnet and Cavanagh 1994; Aronowitz and Difazio 1994; Freeman and Soete 1994; Lerner 1994; Lipietz 1992; Reich 1992.
training for jobs that may disappear or never materialize, there should be concerns about raising the hopes for employment without some certainty that secure, adequately-waged jobs will be available for those who complete training programs. No one can say what those 'good' jobs might be, since it is forecast that only about 20 per cent of North Americans will be needed for highly paid “symbolic-analyst” positions (Reich 1992). More recently, the spread of high-end knowledge skills around the globe calls into question the job and pay security of even that sector (Wolman and Colamosca 1997). Any low-skilled repetitive work that stays in North America and other developed countries will gradually be automated, leaving a large number of those in the labour force with the options of low-paid “person-to-person” service jobs in the health care, tourism, and hospitality sectors and/or being perpetually on call for 'just-in time' stints at the pleasure of employers who insist on a 'flexible' workforce.

The possibility of a future that even slightly resembles these scenarios for significant numbers of people underscores the need for immediate innovative planning to ensure the maintenance of social cohesion in communities, and in nations. So far, the most daunting barrier to such planning in North America has been the almost total refusal by government policy makers to acknowledge publicly the reality and nature of the current ‘great transformation’ that requires them serve the interests of corporations, which are in turn ‘disciplined’ by global financial interests. At the 1996 BIEN Conference it was suggested that the most realistic BI goal for the near future would be a below-the-social-minimum ‘citizen’s income’ based on the principle of the right of all citizens to a portion of the social inheritance. Progress toward this goal appears to have been minimal, primarily because there is no strong public demand for elected leaders and corporate councils to consider innovative initiatives such as BI. This lack of political pressure, in the face of growing inequality in both the U.S. and Canada, raises fundamental questions about the adequacy of public understanding of what is happening as well as about people’s perceptions and insecurities related to proposed BI alternatives.
Basic Income: the necessary foundation

How can people best look after their interests in this post-Fordist era of new technologies and a globalizing economy? The concept of BI as an alternative continues to evolve and persuade. Unsurprisingly, Europeans have in the past related to it more positively than have North Americans. Claus Offe, professor of social policy at Berlin’s Humboldt University, has stated the case clearly:

As long as most wage earners contribute to the production of wealth, the problem of distributing wealth is solved by each individual’s employment contract and the family support and social security arrangements tied to it. Once this ceases to be the case and this supposedly ‘normal’ condition...has disappeared for good, the problem of distribution can be solved only by establishing specific economic rights that all citizens grant each other as a component of their citizenship. The central idea of a ‘citizens’ income’ consists in the right to sufficient income not conditional upon gainful employment... (1996:129).

And in his most recent work, French analyst Andre Gorz advocates “the universal and unconditional allocation of a basic income [sufficient to live on] that can be topped up by labour income [as] the best lever to distribute as widely as possible both paid and unpaid activities” (1997:140-141). Yet it appears that getting BI on the European political agenda has become more, not less, difficult in the past several years.

To overcome public apathy and resistance, advocates of BI need to promote widespread reasoned discussion of the concept and of alternative versions of BI...an evolving discussion addressing uncertainties, proposing innovations, constantly raising questions--BI for whom, how can it become politically acceptable? There is no lack of BI design options. These must now become the subject of public consultation and decision making, as must approaches to financing a BI.

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3 Deciding how to finance a basic income will be a central component of public debate about the concept. The question has been considered in a number of countries as well as here, and current ideas focus on a range of possibilities: savings from collapsing most of the social service bureaucracy, a ‘Tobin tax’ on currency speculation (ul Haq et al, 1996), a very small ‘bit tax’ on all electronic transactions (Cordell and...
Moving BI onto the political agenda

A politically-acceptable BI must be embedded in a broad kind of social compact that provides the supports necessary to ensure positive BI outcomes. Ian Ritchie, a leading New Zealand proponent of BI, puts it this way: "The provision of health services, educational opportunities, housing support for the least well off and the provision of other public services I call the social contract--what we have in return for our taxes...The inclusion of a universal basic income, the cash component...is the key piece in the jigsaw...giving the measure of security required for people to feel they have real choices" (1996). The nature of that broader social context and the extent of resources required to put its elements in place particularly require discussion and debate, probably in the form of comprehensive societal goal-setting processes initially implemented at the local level.

As part of this goal-setting, then, how best might a positive version of BI be put on the mainstream political agenda in North America and Europe, in New Zealand and Brazil? In preparing the soil, perhaps the greatest challenge is winning minds and hearts to the idea of BI, initially by arousing people's sense of justice in the context of the injustices and absurdities of recent and current political attacks on what most of us consider the social compacts that we have with those we allow to govern us. In Canada, for example, we were told that “there is no alternative” to draconian cuts in social programs, that reducing government deficits must take precedence over every other concern, the same phrases repeated constantly by the obedient media. We were denied democratic participation in decisions such as signing the North American Free Trade Agreement. While private and public sector jobs are being stripped from almost every community, Ide, 1997), a variety of changes to income and corporate taxes, user-pay charges on use of non-renewable resources. It is hard to imagine that the ingenious armies of economists and accountants will fail to come up with a feasible means, once the desired end result is specified. The Irish are showing the way with a recently-completed set of financing plans for a national basic income (Clark and Healy 1997).
people who exhaust their unemployment insurance are labelled ‘welfare bums’ by those same media. Other countries have their own tales of injustice and absurdity.

At the same time, we must articulate clearly and compellingly the major arguments for the justness of a BI and for seriously considering its early introduction. These are familiar to most at this conference. A BI represents a citizen’s fair share of the earth's riches, our common inheritance. Similarly, Rifkin (1995), Alperovitz (1994) and others see a BI as a sharing of the increased productivity created by our common cultural inheritance via new technologies. The OECD highlights BI’s suitability for maintaining cohesion and encouraging enterprise, creativity and self-employment as a ‘flexible’ labour force is created. A BI would let paid and unpaid work be distributed more fairly and open up employment for the low-skilled while giving them sufficient income to participate in society. A BI would mean more real choice of jobs, and higher pay for the most unpleasant jobs in society. Poverty traps could be avoided and consumer spending maintained among people most likely to contribute to local economies. Adequate time, energy and resources for child rearing by both parents would be an option.

None of this is rocket science. Most urgently, the idea of a basic income needs to be compellingly presented as a near-term necessity in view of the fundamental changes in the nature and security of work, and as a rightful dividend for citizens’ social investment in health, law and order, education, research and development, and infrastructure over many decades—social investment that has made possible the current technology-based prosperity enjoyed by the private sector. But we will not be heard unless we can effectively speak to the fears and resentments called up for many by the idea of a BI.

**Fear of Freedom and the Politics of Resentment**

Without over-psychologizing the widespread rejection of the BI concept, I want to suggest that it would be worthwhile to study the role played in that rejection by what can
be called a fear of freedom. In his influential book, *Escape from Freedom* (1941, 1960), Erich Fromm examined modern individuals’ overwhelming needs for meaning and direction in their lives, tracing the historical path from an ordered, communal (if stifling) medieval society to the gradual individuation of people begun in the emerging capitalism of the later Middle Ages and culminating for many Northern Europeans in the Protestant Reformation. He summarizes thus:

> It has been the thesis of this book that freedom has a twofold meaning for modern man (sic): that he has been freed from traditional authorities and has become an “individual”, but at the same time he has become isolated, powerless and an instrument of purposes outside of himself, alienated from himself and others; furthermore, that this state undermines his self, weakens and frightens him, and makes him ready for submission to new kinds of bondage. Positive freedom on the other hand is identical with the full realization of the individual’s potentialities, together with his ability to live actively and spontaneously (270).

Fromm notes that to meet physiological needs, the human being must work under whatever economic system prevails in society and that this system becomes “the primary factor in determining his (sic) whole character structure because the imperative need for self-preservation forces him to accept the conditions under which he has to live...” (18). An equally compelling need, Fromm argues, is “the need to be related to the world outside oneself, the need to avoid aloneness” (19). From here it is a short step to actual fear of real freedom

Without detailing Fromm’s historical analysis of the development and role in this equation of the ‘work ethic’ (i.e. the internally-held feeling that working is good *per se*, regardless of its content, and that the individual who is not working is valueless), suffice it to say that he believed it had its origins in the individual’s need for reassurance of salvation in the face of the anxiety and feelings of powerlessness produced by Calvinism and Lutheranism, and As such, it was confined largely to Northern Europe, travelling later to the North American colonies. From the same population he drew his generalizations about the hostility and resentment felt by conservative self-sacrificing lower-middle classes who envy the rich but, hoping to emulate them, displace their
hostility, often in the form of moral indignation, onto the poor and other vulnerable groups.

These ideas are relevant to contemporary widespread rejection of the BI concept because they help us to understand how the possibility of increased ‘real freedom’ through institution of a BI could be seen as lonely and frightening to people accustomed to accepting an employer’s purposes as their own for the better part of their waking hours. The concept of resentment as moral indignation also illuminates the need that many anxious middle- and working-class people have to sharply distinguish themselves from and denigrate ‘others’, whom they often suspect of free riding at the expense of the hard-working. In the US in particular (Reich 1998), but throughout the world as well, growing resentment of any aid to the ‘undeserving’ poor on the part of the comfortable but anxious majority is placing stress on social compacts, especially to the extent that it exacerbates racial tensions.

**Overcoming Resistance**

First, if the idea of a BI is to take root in the face of this fear and resentment, reasonable questions must be addressed. The issues of universality and unconditionality need a great deal of public discussion to move people beyond knee-jerk reactions against the idea of a BI. What about universality--a BI for every individual, including children and young people? This centrally controversial issue separates supporters of BI from those who continue to believe that targeted help for the ‘deserving’ disadvantaged is the only efficient and legitimate way to give aid. Supporters maintain that universality would bolster political support for a BI as well as eliminate the poverty trap created by targeting. They argue that if some people eventually chose to live on BI income and devote their time to a range of unpaid activities--well and good, since there are not enough paid jobs to go around anyway
What about conditionality--should the BI require some type of socially-useful work in return? Again, this question sharply divides opinion. Many believe, and I am among them, that changing how we educate children and what we reward in our societies will gradually produce a citizenry that blends paid work, community service, parenting and self-development into a richer way of life than one based centrally on paid work. Others, of course, fear free riders and a deterioration of people into couch potatoes. Yet workfare--forcing people to work or to train in exchange for support--has many problems, including downgrading volunteer activities, pushing employed people out of jobs and--not least--violation of human rights. Both of these issues can be effectively addressed by characterizing BI as a social inheritance which people have by right. But selling that idea will be a tough slog where private property is considered sacred. It would be useful in this connection to probe public attitudes toward unearned income in the form of inherited wealth.

Second, it is important to try to understand contemporary fear of freedom as a product of socialization and habituation. Ever since the Industrial Revolution, most people have served the economy by learning--first at school, then on the job--to follow orders, stifle impulse, ask few questions, make no waves. Survival through adaptation has been the human advantage. So people have come to need and depend on their jobs not only for self-esteem but for their very identities; and on their job routines to give their lives form and, if not always meaning, at least some justification. Having no paid job--unemployment--means for most people shame, guilt, empty days, sometimes mental breakdown. So when we advocate a BI, it’s not only the few with vested interests in the wage-labour control system who oppose it, who predict a slide into degeneracy if people get ‘something for nothing’. Polls have shown that a majority of the general population in a number of countries find themselves unable to accept the idea of a BI. We need to understand why.

The reasons are no doubt many and complex, including the feeling that 'others' would take unfair advantage of this as a 'free ride' as well as many people’s inability to imagine a
less consumerist lifestyle. But I also suspect that many people cannot envision, and so are apprehensive about, a life where they would be much freer to decide what they would do with their time--where gender roles are more fluid and identity less tied to employment, where there would be more time for involvement with their children, with the community, with the many other activities that humans find challenging, intriguing and satisfying.

Most of us have grown up in societies where our entire lives from childhood on through to retirement have largely been programmed for us by others. And we have been taught that this is fine, this is what life is, this is what security is. Most of us have come to depend on our working lives for both a livelihood and an identity. So it is not puzzling that people resist the idea of 'real freedom' that the BI represents. Public rejection of the concept of a BI cannot be successfully overcome unless we understand what social norms it threatens and what fears it raises.

Third, we need to respond directly to these concerns with clear exposition of the positive life alternatives a BI could offer. Real freedom is embraced, Fromm suggests, when it offers productive non-coerced work and non-commodified personal relations. What is the needed societal mix of reassurance and challenge to produce a positive BI society? Certainly assured access to adequate affordable food, housing, health care, education and recreation is key to people welcoming a BI. Meeting basic needs in the face of insecure and diminished paid employment opportunities requires more than a monthly check in the mail. Equally important, people need complete information about the options that BI could open up to them--more time for parenting, community service, music and art, environmental projects, assisting teachers, the possibilities are nearly infinite--as well as the opportunity to participate in decisions about what investments in community life and well-being should be made. Before they will accept a BI, people need reassurance that they, and others, would still be able to stay connected, engaged, rewarded, able to find meaning and self-esteem in a life that might not revolve around a nine-to-five paid job.
People need to be reminded that BI doesn’t require unemployment—full-time employment would still be an option, perhaps with shorter work times. Many critics of BI maintain that what should be guaranteed is paid work rather than an unconditional income. They often underestimate the costs and difficulties of providing suitable paid work for all who want it, and they invariably neglect to mention that a well-designed BI program would ensure better distribution of both paid and unpaid work, as well as make possible the humane creation of the much-praised ‘flexible’ workforce. Advocates of BI need to address the fact that

...at least at this point in history, work is held to be morally important by the vast majority of people. The evidence is overwhelming that most people prefer to work in the paid labor force, are willing to work even at poor jobs, and want the independence and sense of contribution that come from paid employment....Transfer payments perpetuate the historic separation of the welfare poor and the working poor, thus subjecting the former to moral condemnation” (Handler and Hasenfeld 1997:216).

That work has moral meaning for people is well-documented (e.g. Wolfe 1997). It can therefore be argued that without a BI program embedded in a supportive civil society that engages people in meaningful activity, the gradual disappearance of adequately-waged secure employment will inevitably be experienced as downward mobility and disgrace by those affected, and that what can follow is resentment, anger and the search for scapegoats and saviors.

But we must acknowledge that other needs met for people through their employment, while less dramatic, are equally genuine: needs for friendship, socializing, bolstering self-esteem and developing new skills. Even people who say they ‘hate’ their jobs often say they would miss the people they work with. People need to be reassured about how they would meet these needs in a BI society. Most of all, in this respect, it needs to be reiterated that a BI program would serve to distribute paid work more widely, with more real freedom for the individual to create a satisfying work life

To surmount fear of freedom as a barrier to public willingness to consider a BI, advocates must be able to discuss knowledgably the long-term societal commitments that
will be needed if a BI program is to promote positive changes in peoples lives and communities. In addition to access to health care, housing, education, and child care—all of which offer not only basic security but also worthwhile opportunities for community engagement—ensuring positive BI outcomes will require education for such engagement and for self-development. Beginning in early childhood, in addition to education basics, emphasis would be on ‘doing and being’ through useful work as well as the arts, music and other forms of expression. Teachers of the youngest children, and then of the older, would learn to encourage questioning, exploration, problem solving, community service, individual initiative and cooperative skills.

With more varied daily life possible because of the BI, people can gradually make engagement in useful and stimulating activities a family way of life. It is not too utopian to imagine that gardening, environmental restoration, community projects, service to children and seniors, and myriad other active rather than passive activities will largely replace TV and video games as sources of enjoyment for people less exhausted by the ‘rat race’.

Those who choose to live simply with less income in a BI society will find many models. The phenomenal success of the book, Your Money or Your Life (Dominguez and Robin 1992) and other guides to ‘voluntary simplicity’ suggest that a substantial minority of people in affluent societies are ready for this change now. Such current rediscoveries as co-housing, barter groups, bicycling, community gardens, local computer access, consumer co-ops, recycling clothes and building materials—all testify to the possibility of better living through less materialism and more sharing. Education has been and will be key to this change—the idea of ‘sustainable communities’ (e.g. Lerner et al 1996) has travelled and found advocates. With it has come the vision of more self-reliance—for people and their communities: more home-grown food and locally-produced products; more self-maintained health through prevention; sports and entertainment involving local people rather than packaged for them; communities putting their capital to work to realize community goals. Every successful initiative encourages more people to think about
alternatives to the status quo. It is relatively easy to show how BI can contribute to and, eventually, underpin the transition to more socially and environmentally-sustainable communities.

This is the context in which we need to present BI to skeptics: there are alternatives and people need such encouragement to realize that they can choose them. Most people sincerely believe that the only path to a bright future lies in trying to return to a time of traditional ‘full employment’. They argue that the private sector will create jobs if more tax breaks and other incentives appear, that the public sector could become the employer of last resort, that a 32-hour work week would spread existing employment around, that well-designed training can deliver skilled workers to suitable jobs, and that a more entrepreneurial culture would spawn myriad small businesses to create abundant employment for everyone. Undoubtedly there is some truth in each of these claims. But there are also difficulties with each in terms of implementation, long-term effectiveness, or political acceptability. None of these societal strategies--alone or even in combination--can be considered fully adequate to deal with the problems associated with massive long-term structural unemployment (Ekins 1986; Robertson 1989). Neither can the traditional short-term social safety net that was designed for a traditional full-employment society. There is really no turning back to older welfare-state models, as tempting as that may be.

But to ensure that BI programs will yield the positive freedom that we believe they will, rather than the negative outcomes feared by critics, cheerleading is not enough. We also need (1) a carefully-designed program of research to provide data on how people view the future of work and what apprehensions they have about BI as a response, and (2) pilot projects to give us better understanding of people’s responses to variations in BI programs and social support contexts. There is much to do.

In the last analysis, if there are not going to be enough secure, full-time, adequately-waged jobs in the future, both justice and societal interest dictate that we not continue to penalize and stigmatize people who cannot find such positions or families who cannot
cobble together a living from several sub-standard jobs or contingent serial contracts. All people should have the means to live decently, and beyond that it is in the societal interest that everyone be able and motivated to participate fully and positively in community life.

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