

When will the BIG wheel turn? Basic Income in Australia.

Abstract

In this paper I shall attempt to describe the Australian system of “social security/ social insecurity” in relation to universal income guarantees and look at likely outcomes in the near future. Drawing on the Australian experience, I shall argue that there is a pressing need to narrow the concept of universal basic income to a specific form which no longer includes policies which aim replace elaborate welfare states with ones which provide a minimalist income support base. Such limiting policies aim to reduce the totality of social policies which are needed to complement an income guarantee in an advanced social state.

A potted history

Australia looked seriously at introducing a guaranteed minimum income in 1975, but the Governor General dismissed the Labor Government before it could act on such a widespread reform of our means-tested categorical income support system.

Following that period of intense activity there have been several attempts in my country to revive the idea of introducing more generalised income guarantees but all have failed. Since 2002 a group of us has been active in promoting the idea of a universal basic income. We formed the Basic Income Guarantee Australia (BIGA) which has been a BIEN affiliate since 2008.

In more recent times the basic income debate in Australia has heated up, and in 2016:

- A group of mainly computer entrepreneurs had a couple of meetings in Sydney, involving 50 people, attempting to promote the concept of universal income to place an income floor under software developers and others engaged in the gig economy.
- In midyear the New South Wales Fabians held a well-attended seminar on the topic of basic income addressed by two academics and a leading trade unionist.
- The Victorian Fabians held a number of seminars on the future of work and I was invited to address one of them on the issue of universal basic incomes in November.
- The Australian chapter of the Royal Society of the Arts, following the lead of their British counterpart, held a seminar in Brisbane in late 2016 at which Jenni Mays and Greg Marston from BIGA spoke.
- There were two half hour programs broadcast on the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s, Radio National, which investigated basic income.
- Tim Dunlop produced a book entitled *Why the Future is Workless* which devoted considerable space to basic income.
- Earlier in 2016 Jenni Mays, Greg Marston and myself had edited a Palgrave Macmillian collection entitled *Basic Income in Australia and*

New Zealand: Perspectives from the Neoliberal Frontier. This book brought together 10 academics to look at aspects of basic income in the antipodes. Guy Standing wrote the preface.

- Don Arthur from the Australian Federal Parliamentary Library produced a lengthy paper discussing the pros and cons of basic income in November.
- Also in November Greg Marston, Keith Rankin (New Zealand), Louise Tarrant and Peter Martin joined a panel discussion about basic income at the Australian Council of Social Service National Conference in Sydney.
- As the year drew to a close journalist Mike Secombe wrote an equivocating piece on basic income and the future shortage of jobs quoting some *unnamed* “*very credible welfare policy expert*” saying
For one thing, it would require a massive restructuring of the tax and welfare system, involving punitively high marginal rates on some people to fund the payments. For another, the idea of giving people money for nothing would not go well with people who still had jobs.

He went on to say that in Australia:

“with one of the world’s best-targeted welfare systems, ... (the basic income)... is widely seen by experts as an inferior safety net....(the Shadow Assistant Treasurer) ... calls the concept ‘un-Australian’ for that reason.”

- In mid-December, Emeritus Professor of Economics, Frank Stilwell, from the University of Sydney weighed in with a paper for the Greens political party arguing for a universal basic income. His was one of ten papers discussing universal basic income and a shorter working week. Others arguing the case for basic income included: Elsie Klein, Ben Spies-Butcher, Clare Ozich, Eva Cox, Jon Altman and Greg Marston.
- This was followed at the end of December by a scathing contribution by an economist Associate Professor Gigi Foster from the School of Business at the University of New South Wales suggesting that a universal basic income was a dangerous idea.

This paper will review the likelihood of Australia introducing a basic income in the near future and survey some of the probable machinations along the way. Rather than continuing to document the ongoing ups and downs of the basic income debate in 2017 I will concentrate upon the 2016 contributions as they seem to contain the breadth of arguments which has been present in Australia for most of this century.

Introduction

Throughout my teens and early adult life, conservative governments held sway. By the time I was 25 I began to despair that I would live to see a progressive government elected in Australia. A relative who had lived through the Depression, the Second World War and had seen a series of Labor governments prior to the conservatives’ ascendancy impressed me. He

kept assuring me that “the big wheel turns”. By which he meant that the political complexion of governments eventually changes.

Many times in recent years I have encountered plays on words about “BIG” used as a shorthand version of a **B**asic **I**ncome **G**uarantee. Hence the title of this paper: “When will the BIG wheel turn?”

A brief history of income guarantees and the rise of neoliberalism

The road to a universal basic income has been a long one, but in recent years I have come to believe it will soon end in success:

- There were the early European thinkers of the 15th century (Cunliffe and Erreygers (2004).
- It is 500 years since Thomas More’s *Utopia*.
- Thomas Paine published his 1797 pamphlet “Agrarian Justice”.
- Denis Milner (1920) and his fellow Quakers - his wife Mabel and Bertram Pickard in the period 1918-1920 – fought the good fight with their National Bonus Scheme in England.
- Then in 1943, Lady Rhys Williams’ book *Something to Look Forward to* was published.
- President Nixon’s attempted to introduce a negative income tax in the United States in 1970s (Moynihan 1973).
- The early 1970s abounded with examples of guaranteed minimum income pilot studies and or commissions in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

By the end of the 1970s that flurry of activity died away only to be replaced in the English speaking world with a newfound enthusiasm for pre-Keynesian economics. Many were dazzled by:

- supply-side economics,
- Laffer curves,
- trickle down distribution,
- rising tides lifting all boats,
- level playing fields
- monetarism,
- neo-liberal economics, which in Australia we were silly enough to call “economic rationalism”,
- the infallibility of market mechanisms, and so forth,
- some even claimed to have seen the invisible hand of the market.

Commensurate with excessive belief in all things economic came:

- downward envy: a belief that the poor were *undeservedly* getting things that their more affluent neighbours weren’t (Tomlinson 1999),
- a “greed is good” mentality,
- “work for the dole” and other workfare programs,
- state imposed obligations on social security recipients,
- a retreat from universal provision, and a meanness of spirit worthy of the charity system of the Elizabethan poor laws.

The essence of neoliberal economic thought involves a rejection of government intervention, demands for low levels of taxation, promotion of untrammelled market forces and private enterprise, self-provision coupled with minimalist public welfare assistance. The only roles envisaged for the state is to diminish the power of organised labour and to constrain the disenchanted. Any welfare assistance that is provided is enmeshed with obligations to be job ready, take whatever work is on offer (at whatever rate), and in the absence of employment to force the unemployed to work without pay for enterprises willing to engage them. The desire of neoliberal ideologues is to have a highly deregulated mode of production but a highly regulated mode of distribution.

Ideologies and Income Guarantees

The ideological underpinnings of supporters of a universal basic income are not unidimensional. If one were to include all supporters of introducing generalised income guarantees, then it would be a very broad church indeed. It would include supporters of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and all those who want to replace the welfare state with a minimalist income support base. The Atkinsons and Casses of the world who argue for a participation income would be represented. It would extend to those like Phillippe van Parijs who see a basic income as a capitalist road to communism. And there would be many people in between these opposed and opposing ideological positions.

I think it makes more sense to put to one side all who march to the Hayek drum, and their fellow-travelling participation income advocates, and those enamoured with tax credits and negative taxes - in fact all who would impose any obligation on those who receive the income guarantee. We should leave behind those who wish to diminish the generosity of publicly provided social welfare provisions and income guarantees.

We should regard basic income proponents as *only those* who would provide the income guarantee as a right of citizenship/permanent residency to every individual at the same level, irrespective of whether they work, are willing to labour, have assets or are impecunious, irrespective of whether they live alone or with others and disregarding any other social status.

There may have been a time when it was in the interests of those who wanted to see the introduction of non-presumptuous income support systems (Goodin 1992) to claim that people from a wide variety of ideological positions supported the concept of general income guarantees. *But those times have past.* We need to clearly state our exact aims.

The general picture in Australia: first the critics

As in other disciplines it is not possible to separate the struggles about income guarantees from other social welfare policies, industrial adjudications, political persuasions of the major parties, general economic policy and so forth. In Australia those who argue for the introduction of an above-the-poverty-line

basic income have had to confront a neoliberal gale which emerged in the mid-1970s, gained in strength during the next 8 years of conservative Coalition rule, before solidifying under Labor's governance from 1983-1996. The Howard Coalition Government, in place from then until 2007, prided itself on being socially conservative and ardently economically neoliberal. It was eventually dislodged by Labor's Kevin Rudd who sold himself to the voters as a safe "economic" manager. Rudd, with the exception of some classical Keynesian pump-priming to ward off recession during the global financial crisis, did little to rock the neoliberal boat. In 2013, Labor was eventually booted out of office by an arch-conservative neoliberal Tony Abbott. His treasurer warmed to the austerity message sweeping Europe and much of the world by constantly reiterating his "The Age of Entitlement is over" message. Even when Abbott made such a mess of governing that he was replaced, in September 2015, by a very rich ex-merchant banker little changed. The Coalition Government has since essentially operated along the Abbott neoliberal austerity line.

In 2017, Labor and Coalition parties are in lockstep in relation to Indigenous policies, asylum seekers arriving by boat, foreign policy, anti-terror policies and defence more generally, and general economic policy. Major points of disjunction between the two are tax policies and health, disability, education and social services. The Coalition is desperately attempting to get business tax cuts worth \$50 billion, in the forward estimates, through the Parliament. Labor and the Greens oppose these business tax cuts. Labor and the Greens are fighting cuts to Medicare, education, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and some social services cuts advocated by the Coalition. This provides the back drop against which we can assess the prospects of basic income becoming a reality in Australia in the near future.

Where is the income guarantee debate in Australia going in the light of 2016 discussions? Again first the critics.

Like many opposed to universal basic incomes, the first hoary chestnut Foster raises is "can we afford it?" before going on to claim that a basic income of \$20,000 per year would double the "Cost" of the present welfare system. To come to this position, she does not adequately take account of the tax clawback from the well-off which is part and parcel of every proposal I have ever seen suggested in Australia. She then goes on to acknowledge that economic editor of *The Age* (1), Peter Martin, suggests that abolishing the tax free threshold for all tax payers would pay for the basic income. Foster counters that there are complexities in simply abolishing the tax free threshold before claiming "but one thing is sure: the income tax bill of most if not all earners would have to rise in order to fund a UBI." She initially fails to acknowledge that as well as paying tax people would receive an extra \$20,000 basic income from the government under her proposal.

Foster then examines what would happen to someone on \$80,000 per annum and finds they would end up being ahead if the tax free threshold were to be abolished and they got a basic income of \$20,000. She claims that therefore there would be insufficient money to pay the basic income. She does not allow for

different rates of tax on earned income or other possible changes to goods and services or other taxes.

Her next problem is that she claims not to have “seen a reliable cost estimate for Australia of the disincentivising effects of the claw-back of social security and welfare payments.” She scoffs at the suggestion:

that the way our present system compensates people in insecure work is inadequate. Yet a social support model like a UBI that makes it even easier for people to be precariously attached to the workplace carries the implication that the workplace is not good for them.

Before going on to warn:

People receiving unconditional handouts every year may feel less pressure to get and keep a job. Secondly, if the UBI were funded by the abolition of the tax-free threshold and/or increases to income tax rates, then people would be more strongly penalised for working additional hours and might hence work less.

For her *piece de resistance* she offers this insight:

A proposal to throw money at people, while wrapping that proposal in the flags of “equality” and “basic rights”, can be argued to be the lazy man’s face-saving response to the complex, entrenched problems of poverty. The poor arguably lack access and/or skills as much as or more than they lack money.

What’s more, the present Australian social security and welfare system can be viewed as a UBI scheme with exceptions for people who don’t need it.

She ignores Robert Goodin and Julian Le Grand’s 1987 *Not only the Poor* analysis which demonstrated that state provided universal income provision is far more effective in abolishing poverty than categorical systems because no-one misses out and there is far greater public support for such a system. We will return to Foster’s analysis after looking at what is actually happening in the Australian income maintenance system.

The minister responsible for income support for unemployed people Christian Porter recently said in a National Press Club Address that the fact that people were finding it impossible to subsist on the social security unemployment payment meant that the system is “working okay because the encouragement is there to move off those payments quickly” cited in the Editorial of *The Saturday Paper*, p.14, 24-30 September 2016. Peter Martin notes that in November 2016, “Social Services Minister Christian Porter revealed ...that in the past year 3000 Newstart recipients had turned down offers of employment – that’s 3000, out of roughly half a million.” Presumably the entire 3,000 unemployed people were breached. Martin points out that whilst a basic income of \$12,000 per year is “not enough to live on, but a fall-back that would enable hard-up jobseekers to turn down potentially dangerous or illegal jobs such as prostitution.”

Racism is present in the mindset of a majority of Australians. The British colonies were established by way of invasion and dispossession of the Indigenous inhabitants. The first Act passed in the Federal Parliament was The Immigration

Restriction Act 1901 which limited “coloured” immigration to Australia and formed the basis of the White Australia policy which sought to exclude all non-Europeans from Australia. Asian residents were not paid social security until the 1940s. Aborigines were largely confined on missions and government settlements or indentured to pastoralists. They were not paid social services in most circumstances until the 1960s and Aborigines living in rural and remote areas were not paid until the 1970s. Aboriginal ex-service personnel from both the First and Second World Wars were seldom granted returned service payments or land grants received by other ex-service people. Writing in the official Australian War Memorial magazine, Professor Mick Dodson and Dr Siobhan McDonnell (2016) note that governments handed over land from some Aboriginal reserves to white ex-service personnel whilst at the same time evicting Indigenous ex-service people from land they had lived on all their lives and denying them any other form of land tenure pp.10-16.

The White Australia policy began to be watered down in the mid-1960s during the last years of Robert Menzies and the procession of Coalition Prime Ministers who followed him. This policy was officially ended by the Whitlam Labor Government in 1973 when overseas posts were instructed to disregard race when assessing applications to migrate. The current Coalition Government and Labor Opposition are in lockstep on policies of shipping asylum seekers arriving by boat to remote Pacific islands where they are effectively incarcerated. Such policies are driven by a combination of racism, xenophobia and islamophobia the intensity of such attitudes is increased by a disproportionate fear of terrorism.

The continuing racism directed towards Indigenous Australians particularly those living in rural and remote Australia should shame the nation but both the government and opposition deliberately ignore Indigenous agency preferring to heed the advice of right wing think tanks (Altman and Hinkson 2007, Tomlinson 2011).

The present conservative Coalition Government has two main forms of work for the dole: one is for city dwellers (which is the least invasive); the other is applied in rural and remote Australia and overwhelmingly applies to Indigenous Australians. The bush “work for the dole” system requires that people must work 5 hours per day 5 days of the week to receive the unemployment benefit. Kate Wild (2016) interviewed an Australian National University researcher, Lisa Fowkes, pointed out that of the 35,000 people involved between July and December 6,000 people had received suspensions from payment of 8 weeks. The interviewer went on to note:

Ms Fowkes said more penalties had been applied to the 5 per cent of Australians on work for the dole in remote Australia than to the remaining 95 per cent of unemployed people in the program across the country.

Dan Conifer reporting for the *Australian Broadcasting Commission News* on the 23rd of December 2016 noted that:

- More than 20,000 participants were fined last financial year
- About 90 per cent of those found to have breached the program were Indigenous

- People were fined on 146,654 separate occasions.
- The Northern Territory recorded more penalties than every other jurisdiction combined.

Whilst some Indigenous Australians are wealthy the overwhelming majority of the first Australians live in poverty. Indigenous Australians die 10 to 20 years younger than other Australians depending on where they live. The incarceration rate for Indigenous adults is many times that of other Australians. At 30 June, 2016

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners accounted for just over a quarter (27%) of the total Australian prisoner population. The total Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population aged 18 years and over in 2016 was approximately 2% of the Australian population aged 18 years and over.

Young Indigenous people are locked up in juvenile remand facilities at grossly disproportionate rates when compared to other Australians (to put these figures into context see Tomlinson 2005).

So how does one account for the fact that the poorest community, the one which encounters the worst health and the most disabilities is the one which is most discriminated against by the social security system and the health and welfare systems generally unless it is recognised that it is the result of widespread racism. Jon Altman (2016) argues that basic income makes basic sense for remote Indigenous people in Australia.

The social security system also discriminates against young people (particularly those who are unemployed), against many with disabilities particularly those with personality disorders, mental health, drug and alcohol difficulties.

Yet we still have economists like Gigi Foster arguing “The poor arguably lack access and/or skills as much as or more than they lack money” and senior journalists like Mike Secombe who happily suggest that Australia has “one of the world’s best-targeted welfare systems”. Foster claims “What’s more, the present Australian social security and welfare system can be viewed as a UBI scheme with exceptions for people who don’t need it.” Friedrich Hayek would be proud.

Eva Cox (2016), long-time campaigner for the rights of women and children states “it is clear that a universal basic income, if implemented appropriately, could help address historic gender, race and material inequities.

In Australia in early January 2017, *The Guardian* newspaper brought together Foster and a PhD student from the University of Sydney, Troy Henderson. Foster reiterated her arguments from *The Conversation* of December 2016 which have been discussed at length above. Henderson made the point that:

The progressive case for a universal basic income in Australia means providing an unconditional income to all Australians alongside – not as a replacement for – the welfare state... (rests on basic income’s) potential to reduce inequality, improve social security and enhance personal

freedom through the introduction of a new universal right. Later he notes that a basic income would free up staff: to focus on helping people address those multiple layers of disadvantage Gigi (Foster) mentions instead of surveilling clients within a punitive workfare system.

Henderson suggests a progressive trial in the state of Tasmania, which is also our largest island (Tasmania has similarities to Prince Edward Island in Canada and which is considering introducing a basic income). He says we could: pay every working age Tasmanian (330,000 people) a \$15,000 UBI for the next five years? That's about the same as the maximum unemployment payment and would cost around \$5bn a year. That's easily affordable when you consider that the super(annuation) tax concessions that disproportionately benefit the well-off cost the federal budget over \$30bn in 2016-2017.

In November 2016, Gideon Haige in a meandering article entitled "A basic income for all: A 500-year-old idea whose time has come?" Correctly notes that currently:

Most of the (Social Security) bill is absorbed not by the dole but by the aged pension, even if no tabloid has ever sent reporters to scour those opulent retirement homes and bingo halls in search of the sponging workshy elderly.

After recounting much of the history of income guarantees from Thomas More to the present Haige goes on to quote Tim Lyons from a left leaning think-tank who when asked about the welfare nostrums of the current conservative Coalition Government says:

What this mob has returned to is a view that it's necessary to punish people who are unemployed, ... It's a recurrent right-wing fantasy of the last 25 years that there's this vast imaginary army of malingerers and a ton of money to be saved in welfare.

Haige warns basic income enthusiasts that:

Welfare in Australia long ago sheered away from a social insurance model; it has traditionally been targeted, generally been niggardly. The idea of money for nothing would go against a deeply grained idea of a reciprocal bond between state and citizen – embedded in our national anthem, of course, is the notion of "wealth for toil".

Australia in 2017

Australia at present has a "social security" system which is mean-minded, means-tested, highly targeted categorical system which frequently fails to supply benefits to those in poverty, others with severe disabilities, those who are experiencing ill-health, those without housing, others without work or income, victims of domestic violence and others in financial need. It is an anathema to suggest the existing welfare system is anything other than a way of controlling the impoverished, belittling them in the process, criminalising those in poverty who refuse to submit to the dictates of "their betters", and forcing many into a life of crime or prostitution.

It is a cheap and nasty way to divide the working classes and the precariat (Standing 2014) and a method of ensuring the mystification of the affluent's hoarding of inordinate wealth at the expense of the rest of us.

In 2016, I compared Guy Standing's *The Corruption of Capitalism* and Tim Dunlop's *Why the Future is Workless*. Their arguments have several things in common. They believe that in the absence of a basic income, income insecurity will affect substantial sections of the less affluent, that the nature of employment is changing rapidly, that casualised precarious employment will come to dominate the labour market and that most of the work available will increasingly become poorly remunerated.

It will only be when we pay a universal basic income, *incapable of being garnished by government or anyone else*, at a level above the Henderson Poverty Line, to each and every permanent resident in their own right, irrespective of their race, gender, wealth, employment status, attitudes to employment and irrespective of whether they live alone or with others that we will have any hope of building a decent non-discriminatory society.

The current conservative neoliberal Coalition Government continues to be obsessed by two things: its austerity drive focussed mainly against the least affluent and by an intense desire to provide business with \$50 billion in tax cuts over the next decade, whilst simultaneously returning to a budget surplus.

In recent years, governments have put huge resources and energy into cross matching a range of government and private databases. Those of the taxation office and social security are two of the main ones, but commercial enterprises are increasingly being drawn into the net with financial enterprises being a frequent focus. In 2015-16 about 20,000 letters were sent out during the year demanding social security clients explain, the reasons for discrepancies between different databases. In the 3 months to December 2016, 20,000 such letters were sent out *each week*. A major explanation for "discrepancies" between the different databases is because the agency responsible for unemployment benefit calculates income on a fortnightly basis, in order to maximise claw-back deductions from those working part-time, whereas the tax office records income annually (for further details see Fergus Hunter 2016).

To add insult to injury this conservative Coalition Government has engaged three private debt-recovery firms to recoup moneys that the Government has decided that people *owe* to the Commonwealth. These private firms are intimidating people by saying that their car driving licences will be suspended if they don't repay "the debt", jacking up the amount of money which people agreed to repay from \$50 a week to \$700. This Government would shame the Australian Bush Ranger Ned Kelly in their arrogant disregard for the welfare of the least affluent.

As of July 2016, the Remuneration Tribunal advises that government ministers receive a base rate yearly salary of \$307,000 and cabinet ministers an additional \$29,000. They have absolutely no understanding of the sense of fear experienced by poorly paid precarious workers, unemployed people, or single parents when,

out of the blue, they are told that they owe the government a thousand dollars, let alone many thousands of dollars. On the 17th January 2017 the Department administering these debt letters belatedly agreed to interview clients before sending them letters of demand for repayment.

Ben Spies-Butcher had in 2016 commented:

Campaigns for a basic income therefore have the potential to re-frame the toxic debate around welfare. While ever welfare reform is focused on the most marginalised it will be difficult to ensure (unemployment payments are) adequate or to abolish expensive and demoralising forms of conditionality and surveillance. A basic income would do those things—but through a debate which focuses on collective problems, collective needs and the nature of life and work. And we know from other evidence it would likely be more effective at supporting paid work than our current policies.

He cautioned that looking to a universal basic income:

as a short cut, to create consensus and avoid opposition, or to substitute for other struggles, will not deliver the kind of reform we want. A UBI capable of doing everything would likely face even more political resistance than campaigns for public services or shorter hours. UBI is part of the answer, but only if it builds on a broader project for social change.

The Australian people await with baited breath to see what will be the next giant step forward in fiscal rectitude conjured up by the conservative Coalition Government. It will probably be something like setting up a taskforce to steal pennies from blind men's cups. There are alternatives. The government could set out to tax multinational and national companies appropriately and to close the multitude of tax loopholes and subsidies provided to the rich and super rich. It would then have sufficient financial liquidity to provide a universal basic income at an above the poverty line level. This will happen but not under the present Australian Government.

Footnotes:

- (1) *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* are leading mainstream newspapers in Victoria and New South Wales respectively. *The Saturday Paper* is a progressive national paper.

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