



# **Basic Income in Belgium and the Netherlands: Implementation Through the Back Door?**

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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s),  
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## 1. Introduction

Regarding the prospects of a transformation of income-security programmes into a universal and unconditional minimum income scheme, Belgium and the Netherlands are of particular interest. Since the eighties, one can find in the “low countries” some of the most prominent proponents of a basic income (BI). In no other advanced welfare state the BI debate has been so broad and lively than in the Netherlands. Since 1975, the idea of a *basisinkomen* has been discussed within many Dutch political parties, trade unions, social organizations, and even at the governmental level. Belgian political actors have always been more reluctant to it, with the noteworthy exception of the two green parties but the academic discussion has been very extensive. The founding congress and second international conference of the Basic Income European Network (BIEN) were held in Belgium, respectively in 1986 and 1988. In 1999, a Belgian political formation *Vivant* was launched as the first European single-issue party entirely focused on BI.

In this chapter, I will scrutinise the political chances of BI in the Low Countries and the probability of incremental steps into that direction. In the first section, I will briefly review the main social assistance programmes of both countries. I shall try to demonstrate that a paradigm shift is under way which may at first sight seriously undermine the progress to more universal and unconditional income-security schemes. The second section will be devoted to an account of more than twenty-five years of BI debate in both countries. In Belgium as in the Netherlands, the numerous BI advocates always failed to gain long-lasting political support for their proposal. However, in addressing questions of universality and conditionality, they managed to have an influence on the terms of the welfare reform discussions. Based on the elements collected in the second section, the third component of this chapter will focus on the very reasons of this failure to gain political support, which are of paramount importance for the future prospects of unconditional minimum income schemes. Finally, in the conclusion I shall try to clarify why, given the obstacles and objections they encountered, most

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Dutch and BI proponents have adopted an incremental strategy, which may prove to be far more promising.

## 2. A paradigm shift in welfare

Both Belgian and Dutch welfare states are among the most generous within the OECD. In his path-breaking study, Esping-Andersen attributes high scores of decommodification to both countries, and concludes that they are falling close to the Scandinavian cluster (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 51). In 2000, Belgium and the Netherlands still devoted respectively [24.3 per cent] and [25.1 per cent] of their gross domestic product to social expenditures, which was above the OECD average of [...]. They belong among the states with a middle-range poverty rate: 8.1 per cent of the Dutch population and 8.2 per cent of the Belgian population can be defined as poor (see table 1 *infra*). In the literature on welfare, both Belgium and the Netherlands are also generally classified as corporatist or continental welfare states<sup>1</sup>. In both countries, trade unions and employers - the so-called “social partners” - play an important role in the shaping and administration of social security. Most benefits are insurance-based and financed through payroll contributions. Tax expenditures play only a modest role in the field of social policy, mainly in the form of tax allowances for children, even though things have been changing in the late nineties - in particular in the Netherlands. To sketch the broad context of the basic income discussion, this section will briefly consider the main characteristics of both welfare states and will focus on minimum income schemes as well as recent trends in social assistance.

### 2.1 Dutch “miracle” and Belgian “status quo”

Since the mid-nineties, many scholars have expressed admiration at what has come to be called “the Dutch Miracle” (Visser and Hemerijck, 1997). During the eighties the Netherlands had been stigmatized as an exemplary case of “welfare

<sup>1</sup> The corporatist character of the Belgian system is very pronounced. Unions are powerful and relatively centralized. The Dutch case is actually more difficult to classify precisely (see Cox, 1993, especially pp. 3-26).

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without work”, and the Dutch themselves were moaning over the “Dutch disease”. In the second-half of the nineties, instead, the Netherlands became a model for European decision makers. The economy seems to have fully recovered: the real GDP growth was nearly 4 per cent on average over the 1997-2000 period.<sup>2</sup> Above all, the standardized unemployment rate has dropped from a peak of almost 10 per cent in 1983 to 2.4 per cent in 2001 (OECD, 2002). According to the usual interpretation, the 1982 Wassenaar Agreement between unions and employers inaugurated a long period of wage moderation and working time reduction, which in turn resulted in the creation of many jobs. Activation policies also helped people on welfare to enter the labour market. Thanks to renewed corporatism, including strong but indirect governmental influence on collective agreements, the vicious circle was surprisingly broken (Hemerijck and van Kersbergen, 1997; Hemerijck, Unger and Visser, 2000). However, this view has been challenged, and some authors have qualified this picture (see for instance Becker, 2000; Delsen, 2000, pp. 47-75). The full-time employment rate remains quite low, since most of the newly created jobs are only part-time.<sup>3</sup> According to Becker (2000, p. 233), what has happened in the Netherlands is less an extraordinary process of job-creation than a redistribution of working-time. If one takes a broad definition of unemployment, including alternative forms of non-employment like the overcrowded disability scheme, Dutch unemployment has only slightly declined since the mid-eighties. Moreover, even if the level of income inequality remains relatively low, it has significantly increased since the early eighties.<sup>4</sup> Long-term poverty did not decrease, since the dramatic job growth mainly benefited women whose partner was already at work.

<sup>2</sup> However, according to OECD calculations, the outlook for the coming years is “highly uncertain and rather gloomy” (OECD, 2002, p. 9). Real GDP growth has fallen at 1.5 per cent in 2001.

<sup>3</sup> The Netherlands has, by far, the highest percentage of part-time work in the OECD area (see the illustrative Figure 19 in OECD, 2002, p. 68).

<sup>4</sup> According to Smeeding (2000), the rise in income inequality was around 10 per cent in the Netherlands over the period 1975-2000. Comparatively, the rise was very modest in Belgium (around 1 per cent). Belgium has, with Sweden and Finland, one of the smallest Gini coefficients among industrialised countries.

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Despite the qualifications, it is clear that policy adjustment within corporatist institutions has made change and adaptation possible in the Netherlands. Compared to the Dutch transformations, Belgium is sometimes said to have been stuck in a kind of “status quo” (Hemerijck, Unger and Visser, 2000, pp. 230-251). Unlike the Dutch ones, Belgian unions and employers have not been able to strike a deal at the national level during the eighties, and failed again to do so in the mid-nineties. The discretionary power of the federal state in industrial relations has therefore increased, but has proven to be more efficient in neutralising the social partners than in combating unemployment (Vilrocx and Van Leemput, 1998, p. 342). From about 10 per cent in the mid-nineties, the standardized unemployment rate dropped to 8.5 per cent in 2000, still far above the Dutch level (OECD, 2001). Thus, compared to the Dutch figures, this is indeed a “status quo”. Part-time work is not considered as a viable alternative by unions, and has never been fostered by the government. Moreover, contrary to the Netherlands, many social rights do not apply to jobs below a certain threshold of hours. The main way of clearing the labour market remains the generous early retirement scheme, which is increasingly seen as weighting down public finances. Hemerijck, Unger and Visser harshly conclude, “there is no other country where governments have designed so many pacts, proposals, plans, and schemes to coax unions into accepting wage restraint and employers into creating jobs, and with so little success” (2000, p. 248). One must nevertheless stress that Belgium has a very specific industrial profile. It specialized in the production of coal and steel, whose profitability began to decline in the sixties. The slow shift to services has mainly benefited to Flanders, whose economic situation is far better than Wallonia. Even if speaking of a “status quo” in terms of outcomes at the national level is correct, one should consequently pay attention to the regional differences. In fact, whereas in 1999 the unemployment rate in Flanders was 7.5 per cent, it was above 17 per cent in Wallonia (OECD, 2001, pp. 61-63).

## **2.2 Minimum income schemes**

The core transfer programmes of the Belgian and Dutch welfare states are earnings-related. Social insurance, financed through social contributions of workers and employers, provide various benefits covering such social risks as



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unemployment, sickness, and disability. In the case of unemployment, workers are expected to register as unemployed and stay available for work. Whereas benefit duration is dependent on work history in the Netherlands, they are theoretically payable without time limit in Belgium. However, an unemployed person can be denied the right to benefit if she is in an “abnormally long period of unemployment”, i.e. if this period is as twice as long as the regional average for the same sex and age category (Arcq and Blaise, 1998, p. 671).

Both countries already have universal scheme, which are nevertheless far removed from a true basic income for all, as they are restricted to specific age categories. Family allowances are flat rate, and granted without means - or income-test. In Belgium, the amount for each child depends of the ‘rank’ of the child (higher for the second than for the first, and higher for the subsequent children than for the second) whereas this factor is not taken into consideration in the Netherlands. The Dutch family allowances are comparatively much lower than the Belgian (see Table 1). Furthermore, the first tier of the Dutch pension system is made of a universal non-means tested basic pension, financed through general taxation. Since it guarantees every citizen aged over 65 years, a flat-rate basic income of euro 869 monthly (for a single person), it has sometimes been described as a first step towards a comprehensive basic income scheme for all. BI proponents often use it as a good example of unconditional programmes, which produce some of the consequences expected from a universal BI: when someone is assured that she will benefit from a basic income as she reaches the age of 65, she will more easily enlarge one’s horizons and choices during his active life - which is precisely one of the core arguments in favour of a comprehensive basic income scheme.

Finally, a residual tier provides social assistance for those who cannot benefit from the other two tiers. This mainly takes the form of a minimum income guarantee. Here I will focus on the two general baseline systems of income support: the Belgian *minimex* and the Dutch *ABW*.<sup>5</sup> It is important to stress that

<sup>5</sup> For a more general but nevertheless detailed overview, see OECD, 1998, and Eardley et al., 1996.

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since the early eighties onwards there was a sharp increase in the number of social assistance recipients in Belgium, whereas the Dutch figures show a decreasing trend since the early nineties. The number of Belgian social assistance recipients accelerated to a growth rate of 11 per cent for the years 1994 and 1995, and then to 13 per cent in 1996. By contrast, the number of Dutch claimants has been gradually declining since 1988 (OECD, 1998, pp. 25-26).<sup>6</sup>

The Belgian “subsistence minimum income” guarantee (*minimex* in French, *bestaansminimum* in Dutch) was created in 1974. Financed through general taxation, it is designed to provide a firm safety net for those who have lost other entitlements or have no other means of subsistence. The administration of the *minimex* is typical of the so-called “negotiated regulation” of poverty, as defined by Paugam (1999, pp. 23-25). While the federal legislator establishes the amount and the target, local authorities are in charge of the implementation of the right to the minimum income. The *minimex* is only financed half by the federal state, the remaining 50 per cent being financed by the municipalities. However, the federal share is brought up to 60 per cent or 65 per cent in cities with a greater proportion of recipients. The “Public Centres for Social Assistance” (CPAS in French - OCMW in Dutch), created in 1976 and administered by the municipalities, handle each case individually. This personalized service leads to a significant responsabilization of the recipients, which has increased with the passing years (Vranken, 1999, pp. 172-173). The availability for work, which was already part of the initial 1974 law, is now becoming a central component of the new legislation that should take effect in 2002 (see *infra*).

People aged more than 18 whose resources are below the prescribed limit are entitled to the *minimex*. The amount is adjusted according to the means of the beneficiaries, and as a function of the resources of possible cohabiting partners. These means include other social benefits as well as income from savings and from property. The *minimex* is a “make-up scheme”, i.e. which makes up the difference between these resources and the prescribed maximal amount. On

<sup>6</sup> These figures should be carefully interpreted. For the increase in recipients can be due to an increase in the system’s efficiency, and depict improvements in social assistance take-up.

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January 1st, 2002, this maximum was established at euro 583.66 monthly for a single person, and euro 778.21 for a couple. It is calculated without any reference to the average disposable income, but is linked to the retail prices index. According to the Antwerp-based Centre for Social Policy, the lack of a true mechanism linking the *minimex* to general welfare has caused a significant deterioration of many beneficiaries' conditions of living (Cantillon et al., 2001).

The Dutch minimum income guarantee (*Algemeen Bijstand Wet* – ABW) was created in 1963, ten years before the Belgian *minimex*. From the very beginning, a specific regime (RWW) was aimed at the unemployed whose rights to unemployment insurance benefits were exhausted. The scheme was similar to the ABW and was merged with the general social assistance programme in 1996. Like the *minimex*, the ABW is financed through general taxation and administered under the “negotiated regulation” model: its amount is fixed at the central level, but its practical implementation is a matter for municipalities. The move to decentralization has been marked since the late eighties. The cost sharing is nevertheless very different from the Belgian case, since only 10 per cent of the total amount is borne by local authorities. This way of financing the scheme induces far more redistribution between rich and poor municipalities than in Belgium. Another crucial difference lies in the fact that the ABW level is fixed as a proportion of the legal net minimum wage (*Wet Minimumloon* - WML). This explains why its level is much higher than the level of the Belgian *minimex* (UNIOPSS, 2001, p. 208). A single person is entitled to 70 per cent of the net minimum wage, single parents to 90 per cent, and a couple to 100 per cent. According to some observers, this high level is too close to the minimum wage and therefore induces significant welfare traps, as low-skilled recipients could only enter the labour market through part-time and low-paid jobs.

On January 1st, 2002, the maximal ABW monthly amount was euro 769.87 for a single person and euro 1099.81 for a couple. Just as in Belgium, individuals aged more than 18 years are entitled to the minimum income, provided the claimant's resources do not exceed the maximal amount. Although availability for work is in principle required, and the ABW aimed at promoting social integration, the primary stated objective of the scheme is to provide income security (Eardley

et al., 1996, p. 273). The work requirement was not enforced for the *ABW* recipients until the new legislation was voted in 1996. In fact, work requirements were much stricter under the *RWW* scheme. Prescribed sanctions were applied, though with certain discretion from local authorities (Eardley et al., 1996, pp. 275-276). In 1996 reform, which merged the two schemes, work requirements were introduced for *ABW* to bring them in line with those existing from the beginning for *RWW*. The handling of *ABW* cases is individualized, but the claimants benefit from a supplementary protection which does not exist in Belgium: since 1998, local authorities are obliged to set up a “council of recipients”, which make the users partners in the development and implementation of administrative rules (UNIOPSS, 2001, p. 202).

Table 1. Selected indicators

	Belgium	The Netherlands
Social assistance as % of all social security expenditure (1)		
Unemployment rate (2)	2.4 (2001)	8.5 (2000)
Percent poverty for total population (3)	8.2 (1997)	8.1 (1994)
Minimum income	583.66 (single)	769.87 (single)
(Maximal monthly amount in euro)	778.21 (single parent)	989.83 (single parent)
(4)	778.21 (couple)	1099.81 (couple)
Child Benefits	72.61 (first child)	56.29 (< 5)
(Basic monthly amount in euro)	134.35 (second child)	68.35 (6-11)
(5)	200.59 (subsequent children)	80.42 (12-17)
Basic pension (in euro) (6)	—	869.24 (single person)

Sources: [...] (2): Standardized unemployment rate. Belgium: OECD, 2001; the Netherlands: OECD, 2002; (3): Jesuit and Smeeding (2002, p. 12), poverty line defined as 50 per cent of the median disposable income. The average for 13 EU countries, Greece and Portugal excluded, is 8.9 during the nineties; (4) and (5) Belgium, *Ministère fédéral des Affaires sociales, de la Santé publique et de l'environnement*, January 2002 ; The Netherlands, *Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid*, January 2002; (6) *Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid*, January 2002.

### 2.3 The paradigm shift: from social protection to active policies

Since the mid-nineties, new developments in social policy are changing the face of the Belgian and Dutch income security programmes. In both countries, like in many other European states, the old political discourse on “benefit

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dependency” has gained increasing credibility. It seems to have spread into all spheres of discussion on social policies, across the whole political spectrum. In particular, unemployment benefits and minimum income schemes are being targeted. Those programmes are said to discourage “self-sufficiency”, and therefore would have to be transformed by actively linking benefits to work requirements. Ambitious reforms have already been implemented. Slowly but surely, a new balance between rights and duties comes into being, at the expense of the former. New obligations are imposed on beneficiaries, whereas eligibility criteria have been tightened. In this respect, one can argue that both countries are in the incremental process of a paradigm shift in welfare.

As it was convincingly argued by Dutch scholars, “ideological developments are as important as economic circumstances in understanding this specific strand of welfare reform” (Spies and Van Berkel, 2000, p. 107). Frank Vandebroucke, the socialist Minister of Social Affairs in Belgium, is probably the policy maker who voiced most explicitly the normative core of the new conception of social rights in the Belgo-Dutch context. On the occasion of an official speech he gave in the Netherlands in June 1999, he explained in detail his vision of the role of a reformed welfare system, which he called “the active welfare state”. In his view, contemporary social security programmes should not only provide income security, but also “increase opportunities to participate in social life, so that the number of active persons in society is increased (...). It would be proper to suppress or correct, as much as possible, the current social security system mechanisms which discourage people instead of giving them incentives to be active” (Vandebroucke, 1999). Of course, the concern about perverse disincentives is in some way related to straightforward budgetary constraints: a high level of employment is one of the conditions of a sustainable welfare system within the context of tax competition at the international level (Genschel, 2000). But it is only part of the story. For the cost of an effective “active welfare state”, which would match Vandebroucke’s ambitions, could easily exceed the benefits. In actual fact, a more fundamental motive lies in the idea that the best way to combat social exclusion is through providing job opportunities to people on benefit. A productive contribution, in the broad sense, to the wealth of a given

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society constitutes an invaluable source of self-respect. The role of the “active welfare state” should then essentially consist in fostering participation, in various ways. As stated by Vandebroucke himself in a more academic article, “active participation in society should be included in any individual’s option set” (Vandebroucke and Van Puyenbroeck, 2000, p. 87).

On the one hand, it would be by far an exaggeration to assert that Vandebroucke supports United States-like welfare schemes, including work enforcement. In his view, social-democratic activation policies should be aimed at dealing with exclusion, not at stigmatizing beneficiaries. On the other hand, he is nevertheless clearly in favour of an individualized approach to social welfare, meaning that individuals could possibly be held responsible for staying out of the labour market. The “active welfare state”, he writes, “is bound to address questions of individual responsibility” (Vandebroucke and Van Puyenbroeck, 2000, p. 87). In this sense, his conception of welfare is part of the same ideological family as British third-wayism or even American welfare. Within this framework, the importance attached to individual responsibility increases, whereas emphasis on collective responsibility - which forms the historical core of social security - loses its importance, differences between policy tools being only a matter of degree.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the two main justifications for active social policies, namely preventing social exclusion (e.g. Vandebroucke) or combating benefit dependency (e.g. Mead, 1992), are not mutually exclusive (Lødemel and Trickey, 2000, p. 16). Depending on the main emphasis being put on the first or second justification, the effective policy would be significantly different. But both “refer to the end points of a continuum of goals” (Gough, 2000, p. 52). Vandebroucke’s views have exercised considerable influence over the Belgian social policy debate. As such, they were the first explicit formulation of a diffuse political climate, which had also impregnated the Dutch public debate. The notion of an active welfare state was prominent in the new Belgian coalition’s governmental agreement, published in July 1999 [reference]. But it was already

<sup>7</sup> For a stimulating normative discussion of this issue, see Schmitz and Goodin (1998).

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underlying new initiatives in the field of social assistance and unemployment policy since the late eighties, in Belgium as in the Netherlands.

Three common features of all types of activation policies seem to emerge in the real world of Belgian and Dutch welfare. Firstly, activation policies generally reduce the notion of participation to participation in paid work on the labour market; secondly, participation in that sense is not part of an “option set”, since the unemployed and social assistance beneficiaries are obliged to actively search for paid work, and can be sanctioned in case of refusal; finally, in the absence of “suitable work”, some training or job counselling, can be imposed in exchange for benefits.

In theory, four types of instruments can be used by the government to increase labour participation (van Oorschot and Engelfriet, 1999, p. 5). At the macro level, it can influence the institutional context by means of national investment policies, wage policy, budget policy (demand side) or by way of education policy, child care facilities, early retirement schemes etc. (supply side). At the micro level, it can try to influence individual choices and qualifications by means of tax benefits and wage subsidies (demand) but also by training, guidance, work requirements or even work enforcement (supply). Activation policies are of the micro-level type. In Belgium and the Netherlands, although they are a “recent discovery” (Hemerijck et al., p. 186), those policies are fast expanding. Wage subsidies have already become widespread, while tax reforms have introduced embryonic tax credits. In the case of social assistance, reforms mainly focus on the supply side: claiming benefits has been made more difficult, and work requirements have been reinforced.

According to social policy expert Jan Vranken, the shift from passive to active assistance policies is one of the most important developments of the nineties in Belgian social security reform (Vranken, 1999, p. 181). A social right to reintegration through work or training has progressively replaced the social right to an income in case of need. Before the nineties, the link between work and the *minimex* was very loose (Arcq and Blaise, 1998, p. 656). It was subsequently



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reinforced by various activation measures.<sup>8</sup> This development reached a provisional end point in the new legislation on minimum income, which replaces the 1974 law and will take effect in 2002. Often opposed by many social movements, including the main trade unions,<sup>9</sup> it perfectly conveys the government's ambitions in terms of active social policy. Whereas the initial legislation's first article guaranteed the needy a right to means of subsistence in the form of a minimum income, the new law subtly stipulate that everyone has "the right to social integration" (Belgium, 2001a). As it clearly appears in the text, social integration will preferably take the form of paid work. The right to a minimum income remains, but the expression *minimex* - which was referring to the right to subsistence - becomes "integration income", a means whose final goal is clearly contained in the label itself. Be it through the very name or be it through the new modes of enforcement, the integration income is much more linked to work than was the case before. To be entitled, the claimant will possibly be enrolled in an "individualized integration project", which consists in training and job counselling. For recipients under 25 years, it is compulsory and must lead to a job contract within a fixed term.<sup>10</sup> The new right to social integration then becomes an explicit "right to social integration through employment" (article 6). New incentives are implemented to encourage CPAS's to set beneficiaries to work on the labour market, or to provide them with specific jobs within the framework of their integration project. In the preamble including the grounds for

<sup>8</sup> For a general overview of activation policies in the Belgian case, see Bodart (2000), and Van Berkel and De Schampheleire (2001).

<sup>9</sup> See for example the following article, published in one of the Christian-democratic Union CSC journals: Van Keirsbilck, Felipe (2001), "Pauvres, oisifs, dangereux... Les sombres dessous du projet de réforme du *minimex*", *Le Droit de l'employé*, 11 (1), November 2001, 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> The compulsory integration contract for people under 25 was already implemented in 1992. It involved job-seeking activity, training and counselling by social workers. However, it has not proven to be very successful, in part because of the lack of supplementary financial support for CPAS's. Sanctions in case of non-compliance were very few (Eardley et al., 1996, p. 64). Even if the new law stipulates that financial support to the CPAS's will increase, it seems doubtful that such contracts will become successful if they function as they previously did. Compulsion is often counterproductive, whereas voluntary programmes are more successful in terms of social or professional integration. "(...) coercion is itself demotivating; those who are forced to take work or courses they would not choose are unlikely to perform well. Even a few such participants can be disruptive and reduce the productivity of others" (Jordan, 1996, p. 208).



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the adoption of the new bill, it is the unavoidable connection between social rights and the labour market, which emerges the most obviously, integration through paid work being presented as the norm *par excellence*. Social policies, it is said in the document, “have to develop from strictly financial assistance to social action”. “Everyone should be able to find its own place in our society, to jointly contribute to its development and should benefit from the guarantee of the right to personal emancipation” (Belgium, 2001b, p. 2).

In the Netherlands, even if activation policies are also a « recent discovery » (Hemerijck, Unger and Visser, 2000, p. 186), the shift to active social assistance appears more powerful and radical than in Belgium (Kempermans and Vissers, 1999). When the first “purple” coalition [D66, PvdA, VVD] came into power in 1994, the unambiguous leitmotiv was “work, work, work”. In a way, the slogan was - similarly to Vandebroucke’s interventions - the explicit formulation of an approach, which had already been in progress since the late eighties. But in the field of social assistance, it was foretelling an unprecedented turning point. As in the Belgian initial law on *minimex*, the Dutch legislation on ABW had established a right to the minimum income, which was only based on need. The link with the labour market was quite minimal: the recipients were supposed to stay available for work. In 1996, the new General Social Assistance Act (nABW) has introduced various work-related conditions into the social assistance scheme. One of the most controversial of these elements is the introduction of a work requirement for single mothers with children of school age, i.e. more than five. The employment rate of single mothers is actually similar to the employment rate of mothers with partners (i.e. 40 per cent), but the latter category is not considered as a social problem whether the first one is. Within the context of a new philosophy of welfare, being on social assistance imposes specific duties to some mothers, which are of no relevance for others. According to Knijn and van Well (2001), this particular reform constitutes an “enormous ideological shift”, rather than a useful tool for helping lone mothers to get off welfare. In fact, due to various obstacles, which were not taken into account by the Dutch parliament, the new law appears to be totally ineffective. Other aspects of the new law also contribute to the dramatic shift (van Oorschot and Engelfriet, 1999, pp. 15-16). Like in

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Belgium, individual integration plans have been implemented. Young people under 21 are obliged to take part in the Youth Work Guarantee scheme (*Jeugd Werk Garantie* - JGW), in the framework of which they have to work in the private sector or in the non-profit sector. They are no longer entitled to a minimum income, but rather to “minimum job rights” (Spies and van Berkel, 2000, p. 105). While the notion of “suitable work” has been broadened, all categories of beneficiaries must actively search for a job. In October 2001, the Dutch Minister of Social Affairs Vermeend firmly stated in an official order that possible exemptions from this obligation had to be granted very carefully (Vermeend, 2001).

In Belgium and the Netherlands, a paradigm shift in welfare is under way. A new balance between rights and duties of social assistance recipients is incrementally built up, which is above all based on a thick conception of reciprocity.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis is put on individual responsibility, and the right to a minimum income is increasingly linked to work requirements. This link, which rests on a moral, and not a logical, connection (Cox, 1998, p. 12), was strikingly theorised by the Belgian Social Democrat Minister Frank Vandenbroucke. It assigns a new role to the social security system, which has never been - to date - its central purpose. It is obviously not a coincidence that Bea Cantillon, one of the most prominent social policy experts in Belgium, has firmly reasserted that income security must remain “the first-rank goal of social security” (Cantillon, 2001, p. 13). “With the extension of social security to other goals”, she argued, “one take the risk of overloading the system with expectations it can not fulfil”.

In any case, these reforms - in Belgium as in the Netherlands - are constructing a new framework within which any chance of a promising and dispassionate debate on basic income appears at first sight to be jeopardized. How could one imagine that the idea of an unconditional minimum income could be taken seriously, while conditionalities in social assistance are strongly tightened in both countries? Whereas in the eighties the basic income debate was

<sup>11</sup> For a review of arguments, including reciprocity, in favour of activation and workfare, see Standing, 1999, pp. 317-334.

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comparatively broad and lively, at least in the Netherlands, the proposal now seems to have entirely dropped from the public attention, in both countries.

### **3. The basic income debate<sup>12</sup>**

#### **3.1 Belgium: from Green Parties to businessmen**

If in Belgium the idea of a comprehensive negative income tax system was discussed in detail during the seventies (Vleminckx, 1978), the concept of universal basic income only arose in the mid-eighties, almost ten years later than in the Netherlands (see *infra*). From the very beginning, it has always been in some way related to the green movement. In January 1983, Philippe Van Parijs, a philosopher from the University of Louvain and member of the Francophone green party *Ecolo*, had suggested that the party should endorse the idea of a “universal allowance” (*allocation universelle*). In his view, this measure could help foster autonomous activities and make it easier to redistribute working-time. It would also have been more efficient in combating poverty than the existing battery of selective benefits (Van Parijs, 1984). At the time he wrote the first versions of his proposal, Van Parijs did not know that the idea had already been discussed in many countries, including the nearby Netherlands, under the label *basisinkomen*. In 1986 however, he organized in Louvain-la-Neuve the founding congress of BIEN, of which he was from the very beginning one on of the main organizers.<sup>13</sup> The second BIEN conference was also held in Belgium (Antwerp), two years later.

##### **3.1.1 1985 as a starting point**

The Belgian debate, which had already been opened within *Ecolo* and the Flemish green party *Agalev*, broadened to the public sphere in October 1984. A prize of the renowned King Baudouin Foundation then rewarded an essay which

<sup>12</sup> Interviews in the Netherlands have been made with the collaboration of François Blais (Laval University, Quebec, Canada).

<sup>13</sup> For an account of the first BIEN congress, see Van Parijs, 1987.

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was very similar to the one discussed by the Francophone greens. It had been submitted to the Foundation by the so-called Charles Fourier Collective, a short-lived informal group based at the Francophone University of Louvain. The group included, among others, Philippe Van Parijs and the economist Philippe Defeyt, later to become a prominent figure of *Ecolo*. In April 1985, the collective edited a special issue of the Christian-democratic monthly *La Revue Nouvelle*, which had a considerable influence on the Belgian and, more broadly, French-speaking debates in subsequent years. For the first time, the expression *allocation universelle* was launched in the public discussion. Van Parijs had coined it in reference to the notion of universal suffrage, suggesting that the social right to an unconditional income was the next revolution to come. Nowadays, the expression is still commonly used to refer to BI, not only in the French-speaking parts of Belgium but also in France, Quebec or Francophone Switzerland.<sup>14</sup> In Flanders, however, the Dutch term *basisinkomen* (basic income) remains the usual formulation.

The King Baudouin Foundation prize and the special issue of *La Revue Nouvelle* were not only crucial for semantic reasons. In fact, they gave rise to numerous reactions in social and political circles. Part of the space in the *Revue Nouvelle* issue itself was allocated to the critics, which were often very fierce. In the following months, many articles dealing with the proposal were published in newspapers and magazines, in all parts of Belgium. Part of the severity of many commentators was undoubtedly due to the provocative nature of the initial proposal. In the opening article of the *Revue Nouvelle*, the members of the Fourier Collective had designed a radical implementation programme for their BI.<sup>15</sup>

Suppress unemployment benefits, public pensions, the *minimex*, family allowances, tax exemptions and tax credits, student grants (...), public

<sup>14</sup> Significant examples are: in France, Ferry, 1995; in Quebec: Blais, 2001; [in Switzerland: *Revue Suisse de Science politique*]. The French version of BIEN 9th Congress' programme (Geneva, September 2002) referred to the *allocation universelle* concept, and yet the literal translation of "basic income" is *revenu de base*.

<sup>15</sup> This opening article had already been published by the King Baudouin Foundation in October 1984. See FRB-KBS (Ed.) (1984), *Le Travail dans l'avenir*, Brussels: King Baudouin Foundation.

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subsidies to restructuring companies. But grant every citizen a [unconditional] monthly allowance, sufficient to cover the basic needs of an individual living on his own (...). Simultaneously, deregulate the labour market. Abolish all the legislation imposing a minimum wage or a maximum working-time. Suppress all the administrative obstacles to part-time work. Lower the school age. Suppress the obligation to retire at a prescribed age. Just do it. And then, see what happens. (...) (Collectif Charles Fourier, 1985, p. 345).

Needless to say, this way of presenting the idea, despite the more sober arguments developed in the following pages of the journal, aroused considerable opposition from the left, to which the Fourier Collective claimed to belong. In a sense, it also negatively influenced the debate on a long-term basis, creating obstacles, which have proven difficult to remove afterwards (see section 3 *infra*). On the other hand, the strong impact of the “universal allowance” proposal and the very success of the label were clearly due to this very innovative and radical way of tackling the issue of social policy reform.

In any case, whether in the *Revue Nouvelle* special issue or in subsequent articles published elsewhere, most critics focused on the liberal side of the proposal and argued that, if implemented, basic income would represent a “major social regression” (Lecleir, 1985). If some, including among the employers (e.g. Roegiers, 1985), lent a sympathetic ear to the idea, and others were willing to discuss it, a vast majority of commentators unambiguously rejected the Fourier Collective’s proposal. One could say that this situation lasted during the whole period 1985-2002, independently of the new formulations of the idea, in Flanders as well as in the French-speaking part of Belgium.

In Flanders, the debate had naturally been influenced by the Dutch discussion, which was already launched since the mid-seventies. The right-liberal PVV was then in favour of a negative income tax system, which had also been discussed within the Flemish employer’s organization VEV. The Flemish green party *Agalev* endorsed the idea of a partial basic income in 1984; at the time *Ecolo* was discussing it through the impetus given by Van Parijs. But it was the Fourier Collective’s proposal that contributed the most to boost, be it very briefly, the

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Flemish debate on the topic. A few months after the King Baudouin Foundation prize was given to the group, and at the time the *Revue Nouvelle* issued its special edition, the Flemish left-wing journal *Komma* published a comprehensive analysis of basic income as a way of “decoupling work and income” (Abicht, 1985). The issue included a review of Belgian and Dutch debates, as well as a discussion of pros and cons of the idea. However, apart from *Komma* and a few newspapers’ articles referring to the “universal allowance”,<sup>16</sup> the BI discussion remained quite marginal. This characteristic has actually always been an essential feature of the Belgian debate. From its very start in the mid-eighties to the late nineties, it remained almost entirely confined to few academic circles and the two green parties.

### **3.1.2 Arguments and simulations: academics feeding the debate**

Within Flemish universities, the basic income debate has mainly been fostered by social scientists Jacques Vilrocx (Flemish University of Brussels) and Walter Van Trier (University of Leuven). Vilrocx, a well-known specialist of Belgian industrial relations, has defended the idea in many articles and interviews. He argues that traditional employment policies are counterproductive in promoting social integration. In the context of jobless growth, full citizenship “is only possible provided the link with the labour market is not a condition” (Vilrocx, 1993, p. 205). Van Trier wrote an impressive PhD thesis on the prehistory of the current debate on basic income, in which he scrutinized the British debates on the “state bonus”, “social credit”, and “social dividend” (Van Trier, 1995b). He is one of the founding members of BIEN. In 1995, he had a strained debate on the merits of basic income with Belgian Minister of Social Affairs (at the time) Vande Lanotte, who is at the origin of the new legislation on the *minimex* (see *supra*). At that time, Vande Lanotte’s position was already clear-cut as he was speaking of basic social rights: “we should eventually stop the discussion on basic income and opt for a discussion on the guarantee of a basic job. (...) A discussion on basic income is, fortunately in my view, all in the past

<sup>16</sup> See for instance “Universele uitkering schaft werkloosheid af”, *De Standaard*, 1 November 1984.

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now” (Vande Lanotte, 1995). Vande Lanotte, who is from the Flemish socialist party as Frank Vandenbroucke, did not change his mind in spite of Van Trier’s efforts in heated exchanges through newspaper articles.<sup>17</sup>

On the other side of the linguistic border, two philosophers are stimulating the debate. Philippe Van Parijs, who initiated the discussion in the eighties, is since 1991, Head of the Hoover Chair in Economics and Social Ethics of the University of Louvain, where scholars and researchers interested in the topic often meet. BIEN’s archives are located at the Chair. Van Parijs wrote numerous articles on basic income, and edited a collective volume on ethical justifications of the proposal (Van Parijs, 1992).<sup>18</sup> His masterpiece, entitled “Real Freedom for All”, is largely devoted to a left-libertarian argument in favour of the highest sustainable BI (Van Parijs, 1995), and has been said to be “the most sophisticated case on its behalf yet made” (Gough, 2000, p.26). However, it got more coverage in Anglo-Saxon academic circles than in Belgian ones. Jean-Marc Ferry, a French philosopher teaching at the Francophone University of Brussels, is another tenacious proponent of a citizen’s income. He considers it as a way of offering everyone the positive freedom of taking new initiatives outside of the labour market (Ferry, 1995). In 2000, he published a plea for a European social constitution, which in his view should necessary include a right to a BI (Ferry, 2000).

Among these four main academic figures, only Van Trier and Van Parijs have worked on economic simulations of the cost and impact of a basic income in Belgium. In a theoretical analysis of the effects of BI on the labour market, Van Trier and his colleagues showed that [...]. Van Parijs and Gilain designed a static model exploring the impacts of a partial basic income fixed at 200 euros/month. They suggested three budget-neutral scenarios of implementation, each implying new adjustments of income taxes and existing social benefits. Having carefully

<sup>17</sup> Van Trier also wrote a chapter on BI in one of the most comprehensive books on the Belgian social security system (Van Trier, 1995a).

<sup>18</sup> See also [What’s wrong with a free lunch?]

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analyzed the redistributive effects of these alternatives, they concluded that [...] (Van Parijs and Gilain, 1996). Aside from these studies, very few simulations have been made. Noteworthy exception is the work of Christophe Joyeux and Isabelle Terraz (Francophone University of Brussels). In a micro-simulation of the distributive effects of a BI of euros 300 per month, implying adjustments in taxes and transfers, they showed that poor households could be made better off provided the progressiveness of the tax system was maintained (Joyeux and Terraz, 1998).

### 3.1.3 The Green Parties

In Belgium, the only genuine political forces, which have explicitly and somewhat continuously supported BI, are the two green parties *Agalev* and *Ecolo*.<sup>19</sup> Despite the many personal and institutional links existing between both parties, this support has nevertheless never been part of a common strategy or platform. According to Philippe Defeyt, former member of the Fourier Collective and Federal Secretary of *Ecolo* since 1999, it was never discussed in meetings gathering members of *Agalev* and *Ecolo*.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the idea has only been debated *within* each party, since the mid-eighties. Created respectively in [...], the two green parties were still very small political formations at the time the discussion on BI was launched by Van Parijs within *Ecolo*. However, they quickly became an integral part of the Belgian political landscape. Following a strong progress in votes during the nineties, particularly at the June 1999 general elections, they took part in the first “rainbow coalition” comprising socialists, right-liberals, and greens. But none of the portfolios they were given at the federal level included a direct link with social policies.

*Agalev* already officially adopted the idea of a modest negative income tax in 1984, as one of the components of the “green economy”. Even if the initial amount considered was small - around 250 euros at the time, it was nevertheless

<sup>19</sup> In 1993, however, the left-liberal Flemish party *Volksunie* briefly supported the idea (see Anciaux, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Defeyt, Philippe, interview, Namur (B), December 2001.



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expected to rise with economic growth (Raes, 1985). In following years, a comprehensive BI has tended to be firmly promoted as a medium-term objective, more explicitly than it was ever the case for *Ecolo*. As was the case for *Ecolo*, however, the idea was somewhat put aside in the late eighties and early nineties.<sup>21</sup> In 1995, it resurfaced in *Agalev*'s electoral platform, which stated that BI had to be "the very basis of the social benefits of the future" (Agalev, 1995). As in subsequent documents on the topic, BI now appeared to be conceived as a long-term objective, as an analytical tool to be used in thinking about social security reforms. In this way, according to *Agalev*, many incremental or even more comprehensive adjustments can be seen as steps towards a true BI for all. Family allowances, for instance, should become an equal right for each child, and their amount fixed irrespective of rank or age. A universal basic pension should be established, as it exists in the Netherlands. While the notion of "abnormally long period of unemployment" (see *supra*) should be scrapped, the right to a minimum income should be made unconditional for the needy (Agalev, 2001).

*Ecolo* from the very start of the Belgian discussion has already adopted this incremental approach. It always considered BI to be more a guiding principle than an urgent claim. While the party officially but cautiously endorsed the idea at its first Socio-economic Congress in 1985, it hastened to stress that BI "could not be directly implemented".<sup>22</sup> The idea has long been a bone of contention between its members, but since the early nineties there seems to be a consensus around this approach of BI as a long-term objective. For instance Thierry Detienne, the Green Minister for Social Affairs of the Walloon region, who felt worried about the radical and unpredictable effects of the decoupling of work and income, agrees that the BI idea is interesting because it can give "guiding principles". In his opinion, *Ecolo*'s priority should consist in acting so that those

<sup>21</sup> BI was not discussed at *Agalev*'s second economic conference, which was held in 1990 (Agalev, 1990).

<sup>22</sup> "Rester 'purs' ou enfoncer un coin dans le système ? Le dilemme d'Ecolo", *Le Soir*, 2 September 1985.

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principles, including universality and individualization of social rights, go forward.<sup>23</sup>

In any case, *Agalev* and *Ecolo* always failed to get the idea itself onto the social policy agenda. Or, given their hesitations on the timeliness of the reform, they never really tried. BI, be it as a long-term objective, is not mentioned in the federal government's agreement they co-signed in 1999. If both parties opposed the new legislation on minimum income, they have not yet managed to reverse the shift to more conditionality in social benefits. The new integration income, if implemented, would be in tension with the green commitment to an unconditional minimum income, be it a very cautious one.

### **3.1.4 A single-issue party focused on basic income: "Vivant"**

One could not round off this brief survey of the Belgian BI debate without mentioning the very special case of *Vivant*. For it is probably a unique case of a party whose platform is almost entirely focused on the claim of a full BI.<sup>24</sup> Even compared to the green parties, however, *Vivant* is a tiny player in the Belgian electoral game. Founded in 1997 by high-tech businessman and member of BIEN Roland Duchâtelet, the party took part at the general elections of June 1999 for the first time. On average, its results varied between 2 and 2.4 per cent. Although these percentages were small, they made *Vivant* the most successful among the parties not represented in the Federal parliament. But this experiment was particularly instructive because of the public visibility it gave to the idea of an unconditional income. Through huge posters in the main Belgian cities and massive doses of leaflets, *Vivant* had been very successful in attracting attention on its central proposal during the 1999 electoral campaign. "You will receive an income at the age of 18", "Free yourselves with the basic income", "Choose your liberty with basic income", were some of the eye-catching slogans used by the

<sup>23</sup> Detienne, Thierry, interview, Namur (B), December 2001.

<sup>24</sup> For a more detailed account of the *Vivant* experiment, see Vanderborght, 2000.

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party. With *Vivant*, BI was making a controversial entrance into Belgium's broad public debate, going well beyond the usual academic and Green circles.

*Vivant*'s programme, even if well documented, appeared to be somewhat unrealistic on a short-term basis. It was structured around three main claims:

- § introduction of a Basic Income for every citizen, at a level varying with the recipient's age (the proposed amount for an adult aged between 25 and 64 was Euro 500 per month);
- § abolition of the income tax on earnings lower than Euro 1,250 per month, and of social security contributions, both aimed at strongly reducing labour costs. A flat tax of 50 per cent would apply to earnings above Euro 1,250;
- § compensatory increase of Value Added Tax, offsetting the decrease in labour cost so that retail prices remain the same on average.<sup>25</sup>

Ever since the birth of the party, newspapers have been paying attention to the newcomer's proposals, although some were very critical. In many articles of the Francophone press, the BI-based programme was described as "simplistic" and "ultra-liberal", whereas Flemish newspapers were explaining to their readership that BI was a "complicated" message.<sup>26</sup> In general, the approach was more positive in Flanders than in the French-speaking part of the country, where businessmen taking to politics arouse more suspicion. But even more enlightening with regard to the political acceptability of BI in Belgium is the attitude of the political world, which was filled with scorn for *Vivant*. The think tank of the Francophone Christian-Democratic Party (*PSC*), for instance, analysed its programme and concluded that it had to be quickly forgotten. In a way, the radical profile of *Vivant*'s platform could even have weakened the proponents of BI

<sup>25</sup> For a more complete overview of this programme, see among others *Le Vivant*, 5, October / November / December 1998.

<sup>26</sup> See for instance 'Le paysage politique s'enrichit d'une vieille utopie', *Le Soir*, 15 June 1998 and 'Vivant, met hulp van positieve boodschap en vele miljoenen', *De Morgen*, 31 May 1999.

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within other formations, in particular within the green parties. At the very start of *Vivant* Duchâtelet was in contact with *Agalev*, but the Flemish greens promptly broke off communications with him. In their new statement on BI edited in 2001, they unambiguously dismissed *Vivant*'s proposals, arguing that its platform was totally “unfeasible” (Agalev, 2001). According to *Ecolo* Minister Detienne, *Vivant* was a very illustrative example of the danger BI can possibly represent if it is to be considered as a global alternative to the existing social security mechanisms.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, even if the emergence of *Vivant* on the political scene has contributed to the spreading of the idea, it cannot be said to have boosted Belgium's discussions. Since the 1999 elections, the party has dropped out of the public attention. In January 2002 however, it organized a big conference on BI with the participation of some prominent figures of the European debate. Francophone newspapers grabbed the opportunity to make fun of the party with paragraphs entitled “*Vivant* is not dead”.<sup>28</sup>

### **3.2 The Netherlands: basic income (was) on the agenda**

As in the Belgian case, the understanding of the mechanisms and dynamics of the Dutch political discussions on BI requires to briefly look back at the historical progression of the idea. However, summarising the Dutch debate is a far more difficult challenge than giving an overview of the Belgian one. For there is no other country where, as in the Netherlands, so many actors were involved in the BI debate, to a greater or lesser degree. After having given a succinct account of more than twenty-five years of intense discussion,<sup>29</sup> I will then focus on political forces in the stricter sense, including the government.

<sup>27</sup> Detienne, Thierry, interview, Namur (B), December 2001.

<sup>28</sup> In French, *Vivant* actually means ‘Alive’. See ‘Vivant n'est pas mort’, *La Libre Belgique*, 7 janvier 2002.

<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed account, readers should refer to the excellent article by Groot and van der Veen (2000).

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### 3.2.1 *Welfare without work, but with a basic income?*

The Dutch discussion on BI has strongly varied with the ups and downs of the unemployment rate (Groot and van der Veen, 2000, pp. 197-200). It started in the mid-seventies, as the forewarnings of the economic crisis were emerging, and reached a summit of intensity in the mid-eighties, as 10 per cent of the active population was unemployed. Between 1985 and 1993 - the unemployment rate was decreasing significantly - BI formed the subject of scientific studies. It came back in the forefront in 1992 owing to a new report published by a governmental agency. Partly due to unfavourable unemployment figures, the discussion was again more intense between 1992 and 1995. Since the mid-nineties and the surprising “Dutch miracle” (see *supra*), BI remains essentially confined to academic and intellectual circles; on the political scene, it became at best an internal debate within some parties. In September 1998, the Seventh BIEN Congress was held in Amsterdam. In 2002, while the unemployment rate had dropped under the 3 per cent the idea seemed, at first sight, far removed from the institutional agenda.

This parallel evolution of unemployment rate and BI discussion is partly due to the arguments used by the Dutch BI proponents. In particular during the eighties, as the fatalistic approach to unemployment was spreading among observers, BI was often presented as an elegant way of giving up full employment while reforming the costly welfare system, without neglecting the preservation of a safety net. When more favourable times followed austerity periods, this fatalistic flavour may have harmed the proposal, explaining its relative discredit. On the other hand, one should not forget that the discussion was still alive in the periods 1985-1992 and 1996-2002. The existence of various groupings defending BI explains the fact that it remained present, be it in the background, in important debates on social security reforms. In other words, the economic crisis was only working as an impetus for an extension of the discussion. With the emergence of the so-called “Dutch miracle”, BI proponents have tended to promote it as a way of tackling social exclusion rather than decoupling work and income.

The Dutch debate was launched in the mid-seventies, when professor of social medicine J.P. Kuiper (University of Amsterdam) wrote a few articles on the

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links between work and human life. In his view, a separation between work and income was made necessary by the de-humanising character of traditional labour. Even though Kuiper was not explicit as far as the implementation and financing of his proposal was concerned, he clearly pleaded for a guaranteed income covering basic needs (Kuiper, 1976). He is the father of the Dutch debate. In 1977, the small Radicals' Political Party (PPR), then part of the governmental coalition, officially takes up BI into its electoral platform. In doing so, the PPR actually launched the discussion in political circles. In the following years, while the unemployment rate was rapidly increasing, various organizations called for the introduction of a form of BI. This was the case of the union of food workers (*Voedingbond FNV*) affiliated to the powerful Federation of Dutch Unions (FNV). At the time, it was the main organized group officially in favour of the idea. It published various eye-catching leaflets explaining the ins and outs of BI (see for instance Voedingsbond, 1981), and often restated its commitment during the eighties. While in 1981 the PPR edited a new platform including BI again (PPR, 1981), a heated debate took place within the Labour Party (PvdA) on the same topic, and different versions of the proposal were considered. However, the strong and structured minority in favour of the idea - which included the former president of the European Commission S. Mansholt and the Nobel laureate Jan Tinbergen - did not manage to get it into an official programme. Similar developments affected other parties, such as the left-liberal Democrats 66 (D66) and the Pacifist Socialist Party (PSP).<sup>30</sup> Finally, a few social movements were also interested in BI. The claim of a guaranteed income was seen as a unifying factor by some of the unemployed organizations, which were emerging at the time. It was discussed at length within the National Organization of Social Beneficiaries (LBU), which published in 1986 a vigorous plea in favour of BI (LBU, 1986).<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See for instance D66, 1983.

<sup>31</sup> In this document, it clearly appears that BI is considered to be a unifying factor for the social movements: "most of the time, the various groups representing the social benefits recipients have different views and act separately (...). Therefore, a more general and unifying perspective is urgently needed. The idea of an universal basic income, set at the level of subsistence, is one of the key-components of this unifying perspective" (LBU, 1986: 10-11).

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But the most intense period of discussion was a direct consequence of the publication in October 1985, by the renowned and influential Scientific Council for Governmental Policy (WRR), of a bulky report significantly entitled *Guarantees for Security: Perspectives for a New Social Security System* (WRR, 1985). This document was part of an ongoing reflection on the future and cost of the welfare state in the context of economic recession.<sup>32</sup> The report insisted on the necessity to guarantee income security independently of the variations in economic circumstances: “the guarantee of minimum social benefits has to be the most important goal of social security” (p.7). While suggesting a profound reform of the Dutch welfare state, the suppression of the minimum wage and a reduction in employer’s social contributions, the WRR called for the implementation of a partial BI of 200 euro/month, “given without any work requirement” (pp.8-9). The reactions to the report were almost unanimously negative, which is hardly ever the case for a WRR publication. The traditional proponents of BI, as the *Voedingsbond* FNV and the PPR, attacked the idea of a partial BI of which the amount was far below the poverty level. Unions and the Labour Party denounced the trend towards more flexibility on the labour market, and the government found the measures too radical, laying the report aside (see *infra*).

This failure had a considerable impact on the discussion. BI was almost dropped out of the political debate until 1992. Between 1986 and 1992, it mainly became a subject for academic research, whether in economics or sociology. In 1987 however, various groups committed to the idea launched the association Workshop on Basic Income, aimed at facilitating co-ordination of the BI proponents’ activities.<sup>33</sup> At the 1989 elections, the PPR united with three other small political formations - including the PSP - to form the new party *GroenLinks* (Green Left - GL). The first electoral platform of GL included a plea for BI, inspired by prior documents published by the PPR.

<sup>32</sup> In some of its prior reports, the WRR already discussed BI.

<sup>33</sup> In 1991, it became the *Association Basic Income*. At the end of 2000, it had almost 250 members, mainly coming from political parties - a majority of them being members of the *PvdA* (Boerlage, Saar and Schäfer, Emiel, interview, Amsterdam (NL), May 2000). Website: <http://www.basisinkomen.nl>

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In May 1990, the Minister for Social Affairs and Employment published a very detailed study of BI, which it had commissioned from two academics. Having proposed an account of the Dutch debate, the authors insisted that the idea of an unconditional income was less controversial than in the mid-eighties. They even asserted “if there is one European country where BI makes a chance to be on the agenda, in the short or medium term, this country should be the Netherlands” (Roebroek and Hogenboom, 1990, p. 195). The period 1992-1996 proved they were at least partially right.

First, the Central Planning Office (CPB), an important governmental forecasting institution, published at the end of 1992 a report including - among others - a BI scenario for the future of the Dutch economy. This scenario, called “Balanced Growth”, involved the introduction of a partial BI in the form of a negative income tax, designed to deal with unemployment traps and high marginal tax rates for the low-paid (CPB, 1992). In the long-term (twenty-five years), the objective was to implement “a negative income tax of which the level equals the minimum income for a single person” (CPB, 1993, pp. 55-56). This report undoubtedly lent new credibility to BI among economists close to the political circles.

Second, the formation in 1994 of an unprecedented socialist-liberal government coalition raised “high hopes for basic income”, though only for a short period (Groot and van der Veen, 2000, p. 208). In December 1994, the Minister for Economic Affairs Hans Wijers stated in a newspaper’s interview that the Netherlands was “inevitably moving towards something resembling a basic income”.<sup>34</sup> In another interview, the liberal Minister of Finances Gerrit Zalm made similar remarks a few days later. These statements triggered off harsh reactions. The socialist Minister of Social Affairs and Employment Ad Melkert expressed his deep disagreement with his colleagues. In the House of Representatives, the leaders of the different groups were also very negative, and

<sup>34</sup> “We moeten het ontstaan van een onderklasse voorkomen”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 17 December 1994.



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decided that the idea was fit “for the dustbin”.<sup>35</sup> However, Wijers’ party D66, which had already advocated the idea in the past, seemed more inclined to welcome the idea. BI constituted the main item discussed at its February 1995 Congress. One year later, D66’s research department published a leaflet on the topic, which was aimed at widening the debate launched by Wijers. But BI was already far removed from the governmental agenda, and D66’s initiative proved to be short-lived.

Since the mid-nineties, as was mentioned in the previous section, a shift in welfare paradigm has been under way in the Netherlands. There seems to be no room left for a discussion on BI. It has even been dropped out of GroenLink’s platform for the May 2002 general elections. Yet, as in Belgium, the greens were the only genuine political force still officially endorsing the idea, be it in a very modest form.

### **3.2.2 A zoom on political parties**

This brief chronological overview of the Dutch BI debate suffices to indicate how exceptionally broad and lively this debate has been, relative to other countries. I will now turn to a more systematic analysis of the political forces involved in this discussion.

As mentioned above, the first official commitment of a political party to the idea goes back to 1977, when the PPR included BI into its electoral platform. The PPR kept defending the proposal during the eighties, while scrutinising it more thoroughly in various publications (see Van Ojik, 1985). When GroenLinks was founded in 1989, the PPR’s studies strongly inspired the new party’s strategy on income security. Its first programme stated that “every human being has the right to a decent income, whether he works or not (...)”. Green Left then called for “a large and carefully organized public debate on basic income” (GL, 1989). In 1990, GL’s research department published a booklet specifically focused on the idea (GL, 1990). In subsequent years, the party gradually adopted a more

<sup>35</sup> “Kamer wijst plan basisinkomen af”, *De Telegraaf*, 19 December 1994.

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pragmatic approach, suggesting the introduction of a modest negative income tax, which would be easier to merge into the existing welfare system. The maximal monthly amount of the proposed “foot income” (*Voetinkomen*) was set between 225 and 275 euro, i.e. two-thirds of the minimum income for a single person. This proposal was still part of the platform for the May 1998 elections, of which GL was one of the big winners since it almost doubled its seats at the House of Representatives. However, the following platform for the period 2002-2006 did not include any explicit reference to BI. However, in the section devoted to income redistribution, GL suggested the transformation of the existing general tax credit (see conclusion, *infra*) into a negative income tax, without further explanations (GroenLinks, 2002).

The PPR, followed by GroenLinks into which it merged, is the only Dutch political formation, which maintained BI in its programmes during more than twenty years. However, the claim made by the PPR was comparatively more specific than GL's. Two reasons account for that difference. First, during the eighties the high unemployment rate constituted a catalyst for the reflections on the decoupling of work and income. It was at the time the main argument by the PPR: “it becomes ever clearer that the current economic system no longer provide a job to all the people who would like to carry on paid work for covering their basic needs” (Van Ojik, 1985,p. 4). Second, the PPR was a relatively small and unified political formation, of which the members had been able to converge on a controversial proposal. When GL was founded, these two conditions were no longer satisfied: economic circumstances were more favourable and, above all, the combination of four components with divergent views imposed many concessions to each of them.

Thus, according to GroenLinks European deputy Alexander de Roo, “the ‘foot income’ proposal, which is actually a partial BI, [was] the result of a compromise” between the different components of the party.<sup>36</sup> Kees Vendrik, a GL deputy in the Dutch House of Representatives, confirms de Roo's view and

<sup>36</sup> de Roo, Alexander, interview, Amsterdam (NL), May 2000.

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asserts, “Divergences on the basic income question came to light at the very start of Green Left”.<sup>37</sup> In 1990, for instance, one of the four parties forming GL had published a leaflet in which the arguments against BI were spelled out (Klappe, 1990). Vendrik also points out that “each time [GL] has to write the electoral platform, proponents and opponents are bitterly discussing the advantages and disadvantages of BI”. Taking side with the opponents, he insists that GL “is not officially in favour of BI, but rather of a modest negative income tax”» in the framework of a more general reform of the Dutch welfare system.<sup>38</sup> During the 2002 electoral campaign, tensions were high again within GL, and the party’s BI proponents considered the absence of any firm statement on BI in the platform as a true capitulation (see Groot, 2002).

This division was an essential feature of the BI debates within other Dutch political parties, at least until the mid-nineties. In each case, individuals or movements in favour of the idea constituted an influential minority, which sometimes managed to launch an open debate on the topic. Most exemplary is the case of D66, which had decided to “carry out a basic inquiry” on the topic in the aftermath of its February 1995 Congress.<sup>39</sup> Already debated in the eighties, the idea had gained in popularity within the party after Minister Wijers’ declarations in 1994 (see *supra*). However, despite its research department efforts to stimulate a thorough discussion of the pros and cons of BI (“an internal debate on basic income can be very positive for the party”, wrote D66 research department’s director Christiaan de Vries in the booklet he edited in 1996 (De Vries, 1996, p. 33), the idea was shelved. The main explanation lies in the fact that, as was the case for GL, the party was sharply divided on the BI question. Facing Wijers and the BI proponents, some D66 deputies were strongly opposed to the prospect of a

<sup>37</sup> Vendrik, Kees, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

<sup>38</sup> However, one should notice that an investigation showed that 74 per cent of the participants at Green Left November 1995 congress agreed with the following statement: “a basic income should be introduced in the following ten years” (Lucardie et al., 1999: 168).

<sup>39</sup> de Vries, Christiaan, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

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BI-based programme. They “refused to adopt the approach launched by the research department”, and the internal debate died out.<sup>40</sup>

Similar developments also affected the powerful Labour Party (PvdA). Since the early eighties, BI had been discussed within the party. According to Paul de Beer, one of the instigators of this reflection, at the time it was launched “the circumstances were such that many thought it was impossible to reach full-employment ever again”.<sup>41</sup> This somewhat fatalistic observation was at the root of the PvdA Working Group on Basic Income, which was launched in June 1985 and coordinated by Paul de Beer, then working at the *Wardi de Beckman Stichting*, the party’s official think tank. Its stated objective was unambiguous: “to talk the PvdA members into adopting a favourable view of BI, which will have to be part of the 1986-1990 electoral platform”.<sup>42</sup> The group failed on the latter point - since the PvdA took no official stand - but managed to feed a discussion, which provoked serious tensions within the party. “The party leaders”, Paul de Beer says, “were strongly opposing BI. They were asserting that it would be dangerous for the party’s future to endorse such a proposal. ‘We are a labour party’, they said; ‘with BI we would be implying that we don’t believe we are still able to find a job for all’”.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, since the PvdA leaders did not want their party to look defeatist, the idea was rejected. However, BI reappeared on several occasions during the nineties. In 1992, a PvdA commission published a booklet in which the justifications and advantages of BI were detailed. Nonetheless the conclusion was cautious - to put it mildly: “the proposal of introducing a BI, though interesting and stimulating as utopia, must be put aside” (*Commissie Wolfson*, 1992). The 1994-1998 electoral platforms qualified this somewhat, stating, “local experiments on basic income should not be excluded” (PvdA, 1994, p. 42).

<sup>40</sup> de Vries, Christiaan, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

<sup>41</sup> de Beer, Paul, interview, Diemen (NL), May 2000.

<sup>42</sup> “Manifest ‘Werkgroep PvdA Voor Basisinkomen’”, June 1985, quoted in *Werkgroep PvdA Voor Basisinkomen*, 1, September 1985, p.2. See also “De *i* en het basisinkomen”, *Intermediair*, 7 February 1986.

<sup>43</sup> de Beer, Paul, interview, Diemen (NL), May 2000.

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One could add the examples of the Liberal (VVD) and the Christian-Democratic (CDA) parties to show that the idea of an unconditional income has raised some tensions within all main political formations. Within the VVD, a discussion on the negative income tax was already launched in the seventies. In the early nineties, a minority had explicitly suggested the introduction of a BI. On the other hand, the leader of the VVD group in the House of Representatives, vigorously opposed the idea in 1994.<sup>44</sup> At the end of the very same year, VVD Minister of Finance Gerrit Zalm made a strong plea in favour of the negative income tax. Similarly, some of the most prominent figures of the Dutch BI debate are members of the CDA. Nico Douben, for instance, directed the WRR commission, which came out in 1985; Herman Wijffels, an economist and former director of the CDA research department, has been elected president of the Social and Economic Council - which gives advice to the government on social policies - in March 1999. He expressed on many occasions his positive feelings about BI.<sup>45</sup> In the late eighties, the CDA section of Rotterdam explicitly argued in favour of a full BI.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, in each of the main Dutch parties, a significant minority has been openly advocating the idea. Hence, even if these minorities always failed to get BI into electoral platforms on a long-term basis, one can assert that the BI discussion has been far less marginal than in Belgium. Whereas in the Belgian case the idea has only been thoroughly discussed within the green parties *Ecolo* and *Agalev* – *Vivant* being a very specific phenomenon - in the Netherlands it has been considered by each party as an alternative worthy of discussion. It was also seriously considered once at the governmental level, namely at the beginning of the first social-liberal coalition in 1994, which probably represents a unique case in Europe.

<sup>44</sup> See “Groep VVD’ers pleit voor basisinkomen”, *De Volkskrant*, 28 July 1990, and “Dit kabinet mist een gevoel van urgentie”, *De Volkskrant*, 29 janvier 1994.

<sup>45</sup> See “Bankier bepleit gedeeltelijk basisinkomen”, *De Volkskrant*, 16 November 1988.

<sup>46</sup> “CDA Rotterdam bepleit basisinkomen voor iedereen”, *Trouw*, 7 December 1988.

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### 3.2.3 *Basic income on the governmental agenda*

In the period 1994-1995, BI was taken into consideration as one credible element of the welfare reform package in welfare at the highest political level, i.e. the government. It firstly constituted “one of the serious alternatives to the existing social security system”<sup>47</sup> that were scrutinized in the summer of 1994, during the formation of the first ‘purple’ coalition under the direction of PvdA leader Wim Kok. Representatives of the three parties “had agreed on the principle of a BI, but not yet on the amount”.<sup>48</sup> Secondly, BI was again in the front-page news in December 1994, when two prominent ministers of the same coalition but from different parties, Hans Wijers and Gerrit Zalm, stated that a BI or a negative income tax were indeed alternatives to be investigated in detail.

This last episode constitutes a perfect illustration of the Dutch BI debate dynamics, this time led at a decisional level. In the December 1994 interview already mentioned, Minister of Economic Affairs Wijers actually showed himself quite cautious, asserting, “in so far as the coalition supports the [BI] plan, we can only move very gradually towards such a system”. Minister of Finance Zalm also stressed “the negative income tax, which is a form of basic income (...) is an alternative we will have to investigate on a long-term basis, when the time comes to talk about social security reform”.<sup>49</sup> However, the impact of these careful declarations was considerable, partly because they were as usual taken up by newspapers under simplifying titles. The influential *NRC Handelsblad*, for instance, ran as a headline: “Wijers wants to implement a basic income”.<sup>50</sup> The reactions were instantaneous and often harsh. BI proponents and opponents from all political parties confronted each other through repeated opinion columns and passionate interviews, reviving latent tensions within their own formations.

<sup>47</sup> “Basisinkomen was serieus alternatief tijdens formatie”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 December 1994.

<sup>48</sup> “Basisinkomen was serieus alternatief tijdens formatie”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 December 1994.

<sup>49</sup> “Zalm: ‘Zo gaat werken weer lonen’”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 December 1994.

<sup>50</sup> “Wijers wil invoering van basisinkomen”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 17 December 1994.

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While Minister Zalm was trying hard to defend his views, a deputy of his own party who considered BI as an inherently “unfair” proposal attacked him.<sup>51</sup> A similar discussion involved members of the CDA, a party that had just been relegated to the parliamentary opposition. Whereas CDA deputy de Jong argued that “basic income means the end of solidarity”, another prominent figure of the party replied with an extensive inventory of the advantages of BI over other alternatives.<sup>52</sup> The discussion within the PvdA involved among others two of the party’s most important figures. Minister of Social Affairs Ad Melkert rejected the idea, asserting that it was either unfair - if the benefit was set below the level of subsistence - or impossible to finance - BI would cost “billions” if it was implemented at the minimum income level. The Dutch Prime Minister and PvdA leader Wim Kok, on the contrary, declared that BI should not be dismissed in a long-term perspective, and asserted that he had been surprised by “such hasty negative reactions”.<sup>53</sup>

Given the extreme caution to which a ruling Prime Minister is constrained, this latter element is particularly instructive. It indicates that the Prime Minister himself considered BI a worthwhile alternative. “I am not against carefully examining what we can do, on a long-term basis, with that idea”, he said, while adding that he would advise “all the people who are passing judgements on Wijers and Zalm to consider the subject in a more balanced way”.<sup>54</sup> As rightly noticed by one observer, the BI discussion, which was before “in the margins of policy-making” suddenly, became an item for “the ministerial level”.<sup>55</sup> However, BI

<sup>51</sup> “De Korte: ‘Het is niet rechtvaardig’”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 December 1994.

<sup>52</sup> See respectively DE JONG, Gerrit (1994), “Het basisinkomen betekent het einde van de solidariteit”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 24 December 1994, and FABER, Sytze (1994), “Basisinkomen sluit aan bij CDA”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 29 December 1994.

<sup>53</sup> See respectively “Kamer voelt niets voor invoering basisinkomen. Zalm en Wijers krijgen ook geen steun in kabinet”, *De Volkskrant*, 19 December 1994, and “Premier Kok sluit basisinkomen op lange termijn niet uit”, *De Volkskrant*, 20 December 1994.

<sup>54</sup> “Premier Kok : basisinkomen bespreekbaar”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 December 1994.

<sup>55</sup> Van Gelder, Harry (1994), “Praten over basisinkomen is voorschot op toekomst”, *De Volkskrant*, 19 December 1994.



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quickly dropped out of the agenda onto which it had just been propelled. For it had not only proven to be at the source of internal party divisions, it also became a bone of contention within the recently formed government. Moreover, Wijers and Zalm did not receive any official support from their own political sides. Consequently, the BI debate faded away once again.

It is worth contrasting this episode with the preceding peak of the Dutch BI debate. As previously mentioned, the publication of the WRR report in 1985 also provoked a heated discussion. But at the time the BI plan had never really been considered as an alternative at the governmental level. The only member of the government who reacted publicly to the report immediately after its publication was the Secretary of State for Social Affairs, who even called it “a disastrous and socially unacceptable plan”.<sup>56</sup> A tough verdict, which summarized most of the declarations that followed the report’s publication, as well as the government’s official position. Furthermore, whereas during the Wijers-Zalm controversy the BI proponents seized the opportunity to argue in its favour, they did not take advantage of the WRR publication. On the contrary, they split on the standpoint to be adopted. For some, a partial BI was not the right way forward: since it was not enough for a living, it had to be supplemented with conditional benefits whose all perverse effects would all be maintained. This was the stand taken by the PPR and the *Voedingsbond FNV*.<sup>57</sup> For others, such a reform was a necessary step towards a full BI, and the WRR plan was therefore a most welcome contribution. Paul de Beer, a prominent figure of the PvdA’s Working Group on Basic Income, was already resolutely in favour of this incremental approach, but an exception on his own side.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> “Kabinet acht voorstellen sociale zekerheid voorlopig onuitvoerbaar. Plan WRR voor basisinkomen ‘funest and onacceptabel’”, *De Volkskrant*, 19 June 1985.

<sup>57</sup> According to the Voedingsbond FNV, the WRR [“prend ouvertement parti en faveur des forces politiques de droite”] (‘Vakbeweging en werkgevers laten weinig heel van voorstel WRR. Voedingsbond FNV spreekt van “gemiste kans”’, *De Volkskrant*, 19 June 1985.) The PPR [accuse le WRR de vouloir “créer une société à deux vitesses”] (*Radikalenkrant PPR*, septembre 1985).

<sup>58</sup> de Beer, Paul, interview, Diemen (NL), May 2000.



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The WRR episode brought for the first time to light the crucial fact that Dutch BI proponents are not only spread over the whole political spectrum, but also divided along ideological lines. They have always had different conceptions of the role of the welfare state and, hence, of the optimal policy package in which BI should be integrated. In other words, it is not enough for them to unite and go beyond partisanship through groups like the *Vereniging Basisinkomen* (Association Basic Income) at the Dutch level, or BIEN on a European scale. They still have different views on the best strategy and the desirable final outcome. This constitutes one of the possible obstacles to the progress of BI, on which I shall now focus in the third section.

#### **4. Four obstacles in the way of basic income**

The Dutch debate on BI has been very lively and intense over the period 1975-1995. The idea was discussed within all political parties of any importance, within several trade unions and social movements, and even at the governmental level. The arguments used in its favour were numerous, ranging from ethical justifications related to individual autonomy and social esteem to the call for a flexible and deregulated labour market. In Belgium, by contrast the discussion has remained far more narrowly confined to academic circles. On the political scene, the green plea for BI made by *Agalev* and, to a lesser extent, by *Ecolo*, has become, if anything, more timid with the passing of years. The emergence of the highly idiosyncratic party *Vivant*, and its huge posters on BI in Belgian cities, did not contribute to making BI a plausible alternative in established political circles - indeed arguably made things worse in this respect.

It is not easy to account for this considerable difference between the two countries. One explanation may lie in the role played by the Unions. Belgian trade unions are far more powerful than their Dutch counterparts, and that they had, at least until the mid-nineties, closer links with governing political parties. 72 per cent of the Belgian workers are affiliated to a union, a percentage that is similar to the Nordic countries, whereas only 38 per cent of the Dutch workforce is (Huber and Stephens, 2001, p. 116). For various reasons, most European trade unions

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have strongly opposed the idea of decoupling work and income.<sup>59</sup> In welfare states where they take part in the administration of social security - as it is the case in Belgium - they might see BI as a threat to their position, for in some scenarios the unconditional minimum income would replace a number of existing social insurance mechanisms - as in the scenario imagined by the Charles Fourier Collective. Moreover, it would make part-time and flexible work easier, a perspective that Belgian unions, in contrast with the Dutch ones, have never really accepted. Arguably, a BI would tend to give individual workers more power to negotiate on their working conditions. This, again, might be perceived as a threat to the traditional role of unions in collective agreements. From the very start of the discussion, Belgian unions have been very critical on BI. After the *Revue Nouvelle* special issue, the Christian Unions Confederation (CSC) - Belgium's main trade union - attacked in its newsletter the "silly and worrying utopia" of the Fourier Collective (CSC, 1985, p. 4). Some union officials are still among the most uncompromising opponents to BI.<sup>60</sup> The preparatory report of the Flemish section of CSC congress on "The just income" which was published in January 2002 included a section entitled "No basic income".<sup>61</sup>

Since the unions' influence on the very design of a specific social policy process is actually difficult to evaluate, it seems that another explanation is also needed. Aside from very general factors, like the well-known innovative character of Dutch decision-makers, or from very contextual ones, like the 'Dutch disease' period, which stimulated the search for new policies, Walter Van Trier has suggested an attractive explanation. In his view the difference between Belgium

<sup>59</sup> This view should probably be somewhat qualified. The case of the Dutch *Voedingsbond FNV* is a good counter-example; even its commitment to BI was related to the specific context of the "welfare without work" period. In any case, Van Berkel (1994) rightly points out that the *Voedingsbond's* statement on BI was an "exception to the rule". In Ireland, the *SIPTU* [...] has also been a proponent of BI. Nevertheless, examples of European trade unions in favour of BI remain very few. For a possible explanation, see the model designed by Loek Groot (1999).

<sup>60</sup> For an extreme example, see Palsterman (1996).

<sup>61</sup> The proposal was rejected for two reasons. First, paid work is still the main source of self-development and social integration; second, if BI was implemented, the State and employers would feel exempted of keeping combating unemployment and fostering the improvement of working conditions, since everyone would be able to earn a living without working (ACV, 2002).

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and the Netherlands, with regard to the receptivity of political circles to BI, is mainly due to the fact that a strong link exists between Dutch intellectuals and politicians. In his view, “the debate on the welfare state, and more broadly on policy reform proposals, is much more professionalized in the Netherlands than in Belgium”.<sup>62</sup> In both countries the discussion indeed started from academic circles: Kuiper in the Netherlands and Van Parijs in Belgium undoubtedly gave the impetus. Subsequently BI was thoroughly examined by many social scientists and philosophers, in particular in the Netherlands. But only the Dutch academics were able to instil BI into political debates - with the exception of *Agalev* and *Ecolo* in Belgium. Accordingly, even if Van Trier’s hypothesis would need further research with regard to its general assumption, it accounts good for the Dutch debate on BI. However, the same reason why BI has been more discussed in the Netherlands than anywhere else might also, somewhat paradoxically, explain the failure of BI proponents to get long-lasting political support. For among the four obstacles that I will now scrutinize, lies the fact that BI has been perceived as an idea that mainly appeals... to intellectuals.

#### **4.1 Too radical!**

Be it in Kuiper’s writings, in the Collective Charles Fourier’s proposal, in the WRR report or in CPB’s scenarios, BI has most of the time been presented as the core element of possible substantial reforms of the welfare state. Furthermore, during the eighties most of the Belgian and Dutch BI proponents were claiming for the implementation of a full BI, set at the level of the existing minimum income schemes. These two factors have contributed to giving BI the reputation of being a very radical measure, which has obviously represented a considerable advantage for its success in stimulating academic discussions, but a damaging drawback for the sake of guiding the reform of highly resilient welfare states. Although at the end of the nineties most proposals were structured round partial

<sup>62</sup> Van Trier, Walter, interview, Leuven (B), December 2001.

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benefits, to be implemented gradually, this reputation still persists in both countries. According to Dutch MP Kees Vendrik (Green Left), who favours higher benefits targeted at the disadvantaged over an universal minimum income, BI would indeed be far too much of “large-scale solution, and therefore would not be suited to a well-located problem [i.e. social exclusion]”.<sup>63</sup>

The publication of the WRR report in 1985 - a report, which subsequently remained a central point of reference in the Dutch discussion - had provoked many negative reactions going in the same direction as Vendrik’s assertion. The NRC *Handelsblad* editorial called the WRR plan “a revolution in social security ». And five years later, the lesson drawn by *De Volkskrant* was still that “the break suggested [by the 1985 WRR plan] was far too radical”.<sup>64</sup> This argument was used by the government itself as a justification for the rejection of the whole WRR plan. In this respect, the official government’s reply delivered to the WRR Commission in October 1985 was significantly unambiguous: “the council [WRR] has weakened his own position in suggesting, on the basis of its studies, a global project aimed at implementing a totally unprecedented system” (The Netherlands, 1985, p. 28). *A fortiori*, many observers made similar comments after the *Revue Nouvelle* special issue on the “universal allowance”, which launched the Belgian debate two months before the publication of the WRR report. The fear that such a big bang in social security would undermine the traditional welfare state’s mechanisms, and thereby contribute to dismantling it, was widespread.<sup>65</sup>

Needless to say, the fact that an overwhelming majority of actors involved in social policies consider BI as being too radical, and therefore burdened with unpredictable effects, undermine its political chances as a medium-term

<sup>63</sup> Vendrik, Kees, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

<sup>64</sup> Respectively: ‘Revolutie in de sociale zekerheid’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 18 June 1985, and ‘De zoete wraak van Douben’, *De Volkskrant*, 16 June 1990.

<sup>65</sup> See for instance the standpoint of the Christian-democratic Party (Lecleir, 1985) which stated that the *Fourier Collective*’s radical proposals were going to give neo-liberals weapons against the welfare state. The same argument also lies at the core of CSC, 1985.

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alternative. At the time of the Wijers-Zalm controversy in December 1994, a Dutch BI proponent pointed this out very lucidly: “it is absolutely justified that nobody wants the introduction of a BI in the short term. For nobody can anticipate the social and economic consequences of such a radical change in the social security and tax system. This may be the most important disadvantage of the proposal”.<sup>66</sup> As noted by Paul de Beer, BI opponents from all political sides can easily and tirelessly argue, “There are other and less radical ways of reaching the same goal”.<sup>67</sup> This observation has incited most of the Belgian or Dutch BI proponents to modify the strategy, which was prevailing in the eighties. Instead of calling for an unconditional right to the minimum income and claiming that redistributive mechanisms should be thoroughly transformed, they adopted a more pragmatic position. At the end of the nineties, all green parties (*Agalev*, *Ecolo* and *Groenlinks*) were arguing for a very gradual implementation, in which BI was seen as a long-term objective. *Vivant* represents the only exception to the success of the incremental strategy among organized BI proponents.<sup>68</sup>

#### 4.2 “It appeals to intellectuals”<sup>69</sup>

The links between academics and political circles are obviously stronger in the Netherlands than in Belgium. Through various institutions as the WRR, the Social and Cultural Planning Office, or the research departments of political parties, scientific work directly feed the public debate on social policies. Accordingly, Van Trier’s hypothesis (see *supra*) explains at least partly why BI was far much discussed in the Netherlands. However, in that specific case this has proven to be a double-edged sword. BI has indeed often been considered as an alternative paradigm fabricated by intellectuals, which were disconnected from

<sup>66</sup> POLK, Steffen (1995), ‘Basisinkomen roept onredelijke angsten op’, *De Volkskrant*, 2 January 1995.

<sup>67</sup> de Beer, Paul, interview, Diemen (NL), May 2000.

<sup>68</sup> In 2000 the chairwoman of the Dutch *Association Basic Income* Saar Boerlage argued that she still was in favour of a full BI as a short-term objective. She nevertheless admitted that this view was not shared by most association’s members (Boerlage, Saar, interview, Amsterdam (NL), May 2000).

<sup>69</sup> Besseling, Paul, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

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social realities. Hence, even if Dutch academics interested in BI were more successful than Belgian in attracting political and media attention, they were almost even unsuccessful in getting BI on the agenda.

To give substance to these general observations, one may first notice that scientific reports aimed at contributing to government decision in social policy were at the origin of major discussions on BI. This was for instance the case in 1985 with the WRR report on social security, as well as with the CPB report at the end of 1992. Secondly, within most of the Dutch parties in which BI was discussed, the research department had launched the debate. It was the case of the PPR, the PvdA, Green Left and D66. In the latter case, it clearly accounts for the quick ejection of the proposal: “the debate was far too dependent upon the research department”, asserts its director Christiaan de Vries.<sup>70</sup> But the fact that academics were stimulating the debate appears with the utmost clarity in the Wijers-Zalm case. For the two ministers were “intellectuals, academics, economists which were freely thinking of alternatives; they thought it was possible to think freely and in an innovative way of socially unacceptable proposals”.<sup>71</sup> Zalm, for instance, was only conveying ideas, which he developed when he was a professor in economics and - above all - a director of the CPB. It was under his impetus that a BI scenario had been included in the 1992 CPB report. His 1994 statements as a Minister of Finance formed a sharp contrast with the negative feelings of most politicians with respect to BI, including his colleagues within the government.

Regarding the social movements, the *Voedingsbond FNV* represents the most illustrative example of the possible negative effects to that cleavage. During the eighties, its strong support for BI was of course, in some way, related to the very composition of its membership. Most of the *Voedingsbond FNV* affiliated members were unemployed or low-paid workers, and they could therefore be seen as net beneficiaries from the possible implementation of an unconditional

<sup>70</sup> de Vries, Christiaan, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

<sup>71</sup> de Beer, Paul, interview, Diemen (NL), May 2000.

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minimum income. However, a closer look at the history of BI within the *Voedingsbond FNV* learns that the influence of well-educated staff members was decisive in the choice of the BI strategy.<sup>72</sup> Neither the very didactic leaflets on BI edited by the union, nor the workshops, which were organized in some localities, nor the training projects aimed at the members were sufficient to maintain the interest in the idea. The debate got out of steam and stopped altogether in the early nineties. According to Van Berkel et al., who made an in-depth analysis of this episode of the *Voedingsbond*'s history, one of the main reasons lies in the fact that it was a “top-down” debate (Van Berkel et al., 1993, p. 22). As the leaders themselves were conceding afterwards, “it proved difficult to mobilize members on such an abstract and long-term objective as BI”; this very abstract perspective, mainly supported by the executive, was contradicting “the more concrete members’ interests that they were experiencing in the daily life” (Van Berkel et al., 1993, p. 22-24).<sup>73</sup>

In Belgium too, academics have been at the origin of the BI debate, which may not have been started without their initiative. But again the academic origin of the idea may at the same time have undermined its political chances. From the very beginning, the Fourier Collective’s “universal allowance” has been described by some of its critics as a dangerous utopia, disconnected from the social dimensions of politics.<sup>74</sup> Walter Van Trier thinks that widespread anti-intellectual feelings within Belgian unions partly accounts for the proposal’s rejection. Within *Ecolo*, BI was indeed often dismissed as an idea, which was not sufficiently rooted in social movements. *Ecolo* Minister Thierry Detienne cautious approach to BI originates in the fact that it constitutes a proposal “which does not always take ongoing social debates and power struggles into account”.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> This fact was confirmed by Paul de Beer (de Beer, Paul, interview, Diemen (NL), May 2000).

<sup>73</sup> For an account in English, see Van Berkel, 1994.

<sup>74</sup> See for instance CSC, 1983, and ‘L’allocation universelle: du rêve à la réalité’, *En Marche*, 20 June 1985.

<sup>75</sup> Detienne, Thierry, interview, Namur (B), December 2001.

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### 4.3 The scattering of BI proponents

In the Netherlands and, to a lesser extent, in Belgium, BI proponents were scattered over the whole political spectrum. Hence, they formed at best an active minority within their own formations, with all the consequences in terms of internal splits already mentioned. This scattering of small groups has not increased the political chances of the idea. For BI proponents were not only unable to get the proposal in their respective party's programme, they were also unable to create a strong trend in its favour across the partisan cleavages. Coming from different political persuasions, giving different justifications of BI, "they [had] no interest in working together".<sup>76</sup> According to MP Kees Vendrik, this constitutes a fundamental defect of BI, which only offers a very "weak electoral strategy". In his view, BI is like "a washing powder that can be used in any washing machine", from the left to the right.<sup>77</sup>

Dutch observers have often stressed the scattering of BI proponents. After the WRR report publication in 1985, the popular weekly magazine *Groene Amsterdammer* questioned whether a coalition in favour of BI could ever be possible: "BI does not seem to be advocated by only one political side, but by many people coming from all political sides". In early 1993, soon after the CPB had published its scenarios for the Dutch economy, another commentator noted how since the early eighties the idea "threw people into confusion, from the left to the right". At the time of the Wijers-Zalm controversy, a *NRC Handelsblad* journalist made similar remarks in his editorial entitled "The debate crosses political cleavages".<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> de Beer, Paul, interview, Diemen (NL), May 2000.

<sup>77</sup> Vendrik, Kees, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

<sup>78</sup> See respectively "De triomfantelijke terugkeer van het basisinkomen", *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 19 June 1985; "Het 'Linkse' basisinkomen kan 'Rechtse' problemen oplossen", *NRC Handelsblad*, 7 January 1993; "Debat dwars door politieke lijnen", *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 December 1994.



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The scattering also partly accounts for the splits within parties. When the idea is suggested on the left, some argue that it is a right-wing idea, referring to the most liberal versions of BI and its “Friedmanian” inspiration. [...].

However, one could argue that the fact that BI advocates are spread over the political spectrum constitutes a considerable advantage for the proposal’s feasibility. In the case of Belgium and the Netherlands, which are consociation democracies (Lijphart, 1968), BI could in fact become the unifying factor of many types of coalitions. Even if many actors of the BI debate and the people I interviewed described the scattering as an obstacle, it should therefore not be considered as decisive. This may be true for the two first obstacles too. The radical flavour of the idea was a more important obstacle when BI was presented as a short-term alternative. If it is considered to be a long-term objective, to be reached through gradual reforms, the obstacle can be circumvented.<sup>79</sup> It is the strategy already adopted by most Belgian and Dutch BI proponents, with the noteworthy exception of *Vivant*. Perhaps some significant steps in the direction of BI have actually already been undertaken (see conclusion, *infra*). The other critique, which consists in dismissing BI as being disconnected from social realities, should not be under-estimated. In both countries, it has negatively influenced the BI debate in a significant way. But again, this does not mean that it constitutes a decisive impediment. The question of the role intellectuals can play in the shaping of policy reforms, which is of course crucial in political science, will not be treated here. Let us simply assume that, in one way or another, many social policy reforms are related to scientific work, be it empirical or not. Academics can indirectly inspire reforms or even act as policy entrepreneurs, designing alternatives and pushing for them in governmental circles.<sup>80</sup> The fact

<sup>79</sup> Of course, few politicians are interested in long-term objectives. But the point is that most of them could be interested in short-term steps.

<sup>80</sup> On the role of academics in the agenda-setting process, see for instance Kingdon (1995: 53-55): “After interest groups, the collection of academics, researchers, and consultants is the next most important set of nongovernmental actors”. Kingdon rightly points out, however, that one should carefully distinguish between inventors and entrepreneurs (see p.183). In the case of the BI debate in Belgium and the Netherlands, many academics or researchers have been inventors *and* entrepreneurs; Van Parijs and de Beer are illustrative examples.

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that social movements did not claim BI does not mean that it offers no answers to some of their specific claims, or to broader social problems as exclusion and unemployment which authorities have to deal with. Accordingly, the fact that BI as an alternative to existing patterns of social policy was designed and advocated by academics does not make a significant difference with many other reform proposals. It should therefore not be considered an insurmountable obstacle.

Hence, the major obstacle is probably of another type. It is a moral obstacle, which in a certain way underlies other minor obstacles. It consists in the rejection of an unconditional right to the minimum income. It lies at the basis of many clashes within parties, as BI seems to appeal to a conception of justice distinct from the majority's views; and it would represent a radical break with centuries of conditional policies aimed at the needy.

#### **4.4 Why pay for the lazy?**

Belgium and the Netherlands already have universal family allowances. Moreover, all Dutch citizens aged more than 65 have the right to a basic pension, which is neither work-tested nor earnings-related. The basic pension is “enormously popular” among the Dutch population (Goodin et al., 1999, p. 64), and its calling into question by the CDA was at the origin of an unprecedented defeat at the 1994 elections. This massive support and the existence of universal and unconditional minimum incomes at both end of the life course could imply that a universal BI for all would easily gain popular support, in particular in the Netherlands. Dutch BI advocates often argued that, in this sense, a BI is already in place. However, a fundamental and obvious difference explains that the strong support for a basic pension is perfectly compatible with the unpopularity of BI.<sup>81</sup> As was stressed by Paul Besseling (CPB), “retirees are not required to work anymore”, whereas the majority of possible BI recipients would be able-bodied,

<sup>81</sup> A public opinion survey conducted in 1993 in the Netherlands shows that only 19 per cent of the Dutch population would support a partial BI as suggested by the WRR in 1985 (Survey conducted by the Social and Cultural Planning Office, quoted in Groot and van der Veen, 2000: 222).

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thus naturally required to contribute to the common wealth.<sup>82</sup> Consequently, the moral objection to BI arises from a largely shared conception of justice, which states that every able-bodied person should work to cover her basic needs.

Unconditionality with respect to work is no doubt the most controversial feature of BI. It has been the subject of numerous discussions among philosophers. For a great deal, Van Parijs' philosophical enterprise is aimed at dealing with this objection. Whereas he argues that the introduction of the highest sustainable BI would reduce injustice (Van Parijs, 1995), some critics have tried to show that it would increase it. Among them, the Dutch philosopher van Donselaar argues that BI would generate exploitation, since the lazy would be better off than in the absence of such a scheme (van Donselaar, 1997). In the seventies, Kuiper already came up against the very same objection, which he tried to defuse in restating, "everyone has the duty to work according to her capacities" (Kuiper, 1976, p. 507). But he did not go into the details of practical consequences for his own BI plan. Moreover, he also acknowledged that it was probably impossible to find a "no nonsense way of sanctioning refusal to work". Afterwards, this delicate question kept underlying all discussions on BI, be it in Belgium or in the Netherlands.

To take a single example, the moral objection was raised on several occasions in 1994-1995 after the statements of Ministers Wijers and Zalm on BI.<sup>83</sup> "BI is controversial, but not for financial or economic reasons", an editorial writer noted after days of heated debate; "it is an ideological debate, which relates to the fact that the link between work and income is broken: citizens have the right to an income without obligation to search for work. The majority of the Dutch population is repelled by the perspective of this 'money for nothing'".<sup>84</sup> The work

<sup>82</sup> Besseling, Paul, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

<sup>83</sup> For good examples during the eighties, see "Inkomen los van arbeid roept hevige emoties op", *NRC Handelsblad*, 5 June 1980, and DE BEER, Paul (1985), "Bezwaren tegen basisinkomen zijn niet onoverkomelijk", *De Volkskrant*, 10 June 1985.

<sup>84</sup> VAN EMPEL, Frank (1994), "Basisinkomen in veel soorten. Invoering stuit vooral op ideologische problemen", *NRC Handelsblad*, 23 December 1994.

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ethic is still strongly present in Dutch society. Empirical research has for instance demonstrated that in Europe the Dutch people are the most restrictive towards the unemployed. Friedberg and Ploug (2000) constructed an “average score of restrictiveness”, including among other indicators the extent to which people insist on the duty to work when one is unemployed, and endorse the obligation to accept jobs which do not match one’s qualifications or experience. They concluded that in 1992 the Dutch reached the highest score of all seven European countries they analysed in their study.<sup>85</sup>

Within this context, suggesting the introduction of an unconditional minimum income appears to be electorally very risky. Obviously, activation policies and reinforcement of work requirements are much more politically profitable in both countries. Accordingly, Philippe Defeyt admits he would oppose any explicit reference to the radical unconditionality of BI in *Ecolo*’s programme.<sup>86</sup> In Belgium and in the Netherlands it seems that politicians who want to bid for power cannot openly defend BI. But might there not be a way of introducing a basic income without relying on such open advocacy, “through the back door” as it were? This will be the subject of my concluding remarks.

## **5. Conclusion: two possible back doors**

In the first section of this chapter, the strong trend towards activation in social assistance was described as a “paradigm shift” in Belgian and Dutch welfare. At first sight this transformation, which obviously represents a new political version of the work ethic just referred to in the Dutch case, offers few opportunities to BI proponents. As the overview of Belgian and Dutch debates shows, the radical unconditionality of BI with regard to work requirements constitutes the feature that most contributes to making it impossible to sell. How

<sup>85</sup> Countries included in the survey: Denmark, Germany, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands and United Kingdom. The average score of restrictiveness for all seven countries is 2.5, the Dutch score being 3 (Fridberg and Ploug, 2000, p. 343).

<sup>86</sup> Defeyt, Philippe, interview, Namur (B), December 2001.

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could BI be openly defended within the framework of the new balance between rights and duties of social assistance recipients and the unemployed? How could it fit into the thick conception of reciprocity, which lies at the basis of the emerging “active welfare state”? It seems that if significant steps are to be undertaken in the move from targeted poverty alleviation programmes to a universal and individualized minimum income scheme, they will only be indirect and incremental. Hence, a possible implementation through the back door should not be excluded.

The new emphasis on the activation of benefits and beneficiaries is ambiguous. Admittedly, the very notion of “activity” cannot be reduced to paid work in its stricter sense. Unpaid activities like caring, training or voluntary work should be included in its broad definition. For many people they also represent a way of contributing to the common wealth. In other words, “it is not hard to show that having a job and making a social contribution may or may not coincide” (Young, 2000, p. 28). Consequently, if the purpose of the so-called “active welfare state” is to foster active participation in social life, as Belgian Minister of Social Affairs Frank Vandebroucke stated it, then it should to a certain extent also value activities outside of the labour market. Vandebroucke himself challenged the assumption that paid work is the only valuable social contribution. In his 1999 Den Uyl lecture in Amsterdam (see *supra*), he called for a maximization of the possibilities of active participation, while stressing that “one should not reduce this plea to participation in the labour market” (Vandebroucke, 1999, p. 11). In Belgium to date this view has not been translated into concrete social policies. In fact, as it appears in its preamble, the new law on minimum income is quite restrictive: “participation in social life can take various forms; nevertheless the access to paid employment remains one of the most secure ways of achieving autonomy” (Belgium, 2001b, p. 3). The newly created “integration income” is not yet aimed at valuing unpaid activities, and recipients are still required to enter the labour market as quickly as possible. But, as Vandebroucke’s assertion shows, there seems to be some room left for a public discussion on the very meaning of “activity”. In 2000, for instance, the King Baudouin Foundation published a report entitled “Work and Activity: Towards

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the Full Participation”, which called for a relaxed conception of participation. According to the authors, the unemployment benefit should be transformed into” participation insurance”, aimed at fostering unpaid activities (FRB-KBS, 2000). However, regarding the broadening of the scope of activities to be valued, the Netherlands seems comparatively ahead. For, despite the effective paradigm shift in welfare and the renewed emphasis on work requirements, the restructuring of the social assistance system allows for new experiments in social activation. Since 1996, municipalities have the possibility of implementing projects aimed at fostering the inclusion of the long-term unemployed through unpaid activities. Some already broadened the target group to people who refuse to enter the labour market. Recipients who take part in these non-compulsory programmes can be exempted from the work requirements. In Rotterdam, one of Netherlands’ largest cities, “participation in social activation is voluntary, and the project is not primarily aimed at re-inclusion within the labour market” (Van Berkel et al., 1999, p. 103). Moreover, in 1999 the Dutch government introduced an innovative scheme aimed at helping the artists on benefit. Within the framework of the Income-Security Law for Artists (WIK), some of them can be exempted from all work requirements during a maximum of four years. Although the WIK benefits are inferior to the ABW level, they are similar to the Belgian *minimex*.<sup>87</sup>

Thus, some contradictory trends are at work in both countries, which could offer new opportunities to BI proponents. In fact, one common argument in favour of BI consists in asserting that a universal minimum income would help at valuing useful and non-market activities, which are not yet recognized. Following the advice of the British economist and BI advocate Anthony Atkinson, they could therefore compromise and promote the idea of a “participation income”. Atkinson believes that “a major reason for opposition to basic income lies in its lack of

<sup>87</sup> In the official presentation of WIK, the Dutch government significantly acknowledges that work requirements can make it extremely difficult to “create works of art and to gain a reputation in artistic circles”. However, WIK benefits are not totally unconditional. As in the ABW case, they are means-tested. Furthermore, to become entitled one must be a holder of an artistic diploma or be officially recognised as an artist by the independent organism *Kunstenaars and CO*. One of the criteria is the revenues from artistic activity, which must be superior to euro 1,089 yearly. The monthly amount for a single person was euro 538.91 for a single person and euro 758.87 for single parents in January 2002. (*Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid* - URL: <http://home.szw.nl>, section ‘uitkeringen’).

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conditionality”); therefore, he argues that “in order to secure political support, it may be necessary for the proponents of basic income to compromise - not on the principle of no test of means, nor on the principle of independence, but on the unconditional payment”. In his view, they should support a BI conditional on participation, in the broad sense (Atkinson, 1988, pp. 147-148). Within the framework of Belgian and Dutch “active welfare states”, and given the strength of the moral objection to an unconditional income, the incremental transformation of the minimum income scheme into a modest participation income seems one of the only feasible steps towards a true BI. The Dutch experiments in social activation show that this option should not be excluded. A participation income would be a more coherent way of giving benefits than the existing programmes, which implies numerous discretionary exemptions. Even if this option seems less plausible in the Belgian case, it is worth mentioning that Frank Vandebroucke, now Belgium’s Minister of Social Affairs, commented quite sympathetically Atkinson’s proposal, which he called « perhaps the road of political wisdom » (Vandebroucke, 1997, p. 165).<sup>88</sup> Consequently, in both countries the participation income could represent a significant step towards BI. It would not contradict the reciprocity rhetoric, while simultaneously giving BI a decisive boost. For in a further stage “one may well realise that paying controllers to try to catch the few really work-shy would cost more, and create more resentment all over than just giving this modest floor income to all, no questions asked” (Van Parijs, 2000). A form of participation income is therefore one of the most plausible ways of implementing a BI through the back door in Belgium and the Netherlands.

However, a second type of incremental and indirect strategy could possibly lead to effective results too. The Belgian and Dutch governments are searching for new instruments to deal with the so-called “welfare traps”, i.e. the fact that benefits are withdrawn at a 100 per cent tax rate as the recipient enter the labour market. In both countries, refundable tax credits have already been implemented

<sup>88</sup> On the relations between paid work, valuable contribution to the society’s wealth and basic income, see Kildal, 1998 and 1999.



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with the explicit aim of “making work pay”. If in Belgium it remains modest and targeted at low-paid workers, the Dutch system clearly goes in the direction of a more universal benefit. Before the 2001 comprehensive tax reform, all Dutch taxpayers benefited from a general tax exemption on part of their taxable income. The non-earning partner had to transfer this exemption to the working partner, which means that the former’s financial incentive to enter the labour market was reduced. Due to the transferability mechanism, “the implicit marginal tax rate on income earned by the dependent partner [was equal] to the marginal tax rate of the breadwinner” (Groot and van der Veen, 2000, p. 216). Of course, this exemption scheme mainly benefited the well-off households subjected to higher marginal tax rates. Since January 2001, this tax allowance has disappeared and has been replaced by a new individual “general tax credit”, which is a discount on the amount to pay. Contrary to the previous scheme, the credit does not reduce the total taxable income and is therefore independent of the marginal tax rates. Consequently, it benefits all households equally. More important still for our purpose, the credit is made refundable. The worker’s non-working partners are entitled to the full amount of the credit (about euro 1,500 annually), which can be directly paid onto their bank account. They keep this entitlement as they enter the labour market, but it then takes the form of a discount on the income tax to pay, supplemented by an additional “employment rebate” of about Euro 800. As a consequence, non-working partners should “find it more attractive to seek paid employment” (The Netherlands, 2000, p. 11).

In other words, since January 2001 Dutch citizens who are not doing paid work are entitled to a modest negative income tax, provided they have a working partner paying a positive income tax. If its level was gradually increased, and its payment not restricted to working families, this refundable tax credit would provide an unconditional and individual minimum income floor to all Dutch citizens. It would, in other words, provide the missing element between universal child benefits and the basic pension. Therefore, it can be said to represent a big step in the direction of a BI. However, it is not an explicit move, since the stated objective is to launch an active tax policy, which gives incentives to enter the labour market. But this has also been one of the stated objectives of BI from the



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start. Again, like in the case of a hypothetical participation income, this possible implementation “through the back door” would thus be made thanks to the “active welfare state” rhetoric.

The transformation of the general tax exemption into a tax credit has long been proposed by Dutch BI advocates.<sup>89</sup> According to Euro-MP Alexander de Roo (GL), this has proven to be a successful strategy: “it will quickly become clear that the amount of the credit is not high enough to have positive effects on the labour market (...). One will then realize that a true universal and unconditional income is a better alternative”.<sup>90</sup> Interestingly, the Minister of Finance Gerrit Zalm, one of the instigators of the 2001 fiscal reform, expressly denied this. Answering the green groups questions during a parliamentary session, he asserted, “the individual and refundable tax credit cannot be considered to constitute a small step towards the implementation of a basic income” (Zalm and Vermeend, 2000). Of course, this is a matter of interpretation. But the very fact that Minister Zalm took the trouble to make such a statement could paradoxically reveal that BI remains a possible option. This cautious statement would then only be a way of defusing a renewed discussion on the subject, in order to avoid splits within the governing coalition. Actually at the time he was a director of the CPB, Zalm himself argued for a gradual implementation of BI and clearly described the very first step: “one should start with the suppression of the general tax exemption’s transferability mechanism...”.<sup>91</sup> Political effectiveness does not always sit easily with intellectual consistency.

<sup>89</sup> For instance, the PPR stated in its 1981 electoral platform “it is technically possible to get closer from a basic income by means of the integration and individualization of the tax exemption” (PPR, 1981, p. 22). In 1994, as it was again thinking of basic income as a long-term alternative, the PvdA argued for the “replacement of the tax exemption by a tax credit”, which would subsequently become a “negative income tax” (PvdA, 1994, p. 42). In 1999, *GroenLinks* also asserted “the first step towards a basic income consists in the transformation of the existing tax exemption into a general tax credit” (Van Gent et al., 1999).

<sup>90</sup> de Roo, Alexander, interview, Amsterdam (NL), May 2000.

<sup>91</sup> “CPB - directeur Prof. G. Zalm verwacht veel van het geleidelijk invoeren van het basisinkomen”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 7 January 1993.

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[Regarding tax credits, the Belgian tax reform was far less ambitious, more of the Earned income Tax Credit than of the Negative Income Tax type. *Ecolo* leader Philippe Defeyt acknowledged that the tax reform represents a wasted opportunity for Belgian BI proponents. With a true refundable tax credit of the Dutch type, it was possible to make a step in the direction of a better integration of the tax and benefit system. While designed by people who had looked closely and sympathetically at BI proposals, the version that was eventually proposed and approved was much more watered-down.]

Despite numerous obstacles and a strong moral objection to BI, the idea of an unconditional minimum income is not totally out of the hidden agenda in Belgium and the Netherlands. The activation rhetoric, which underlies current welfare state reforms paradoxically, offers new opportunities for advocating a (partial) decoupling of work and income. New incremental developments in Dutch fiscal and social policies tend to prove it. In a working paper they wrote some years ago on the BI debate in the Netherlands, Roebroek and Berben were rightly speaking of an “incremental paradox”. Having analysed years of heated discussions on Dutch income security programmes, they concluded that a radical reform such as BI could not be explicitly implemented, but that no major social or political force would oppose an incremental process in the same direction (Roebroek and Berben, 1988). The back door strategy lacks the grandness of the front gate. But if there are good reasons to believe that the front gate will remain tightly locked, it might make some sense for BI supporters to keep knocking - but not at the expense of neglecting the exploration of less pretentious accesses to the mansion, starting, perhaps, with the two I have identified.

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