

Dr. Malcolm Torry on Basic Income: History, Feasibility, and Societal Impact

Dr. Malcolm Torry, a British academic, has been a leading researcher on basic income for more than 40 years. As Director of the Citizen's Basic Income Trust (CBIT) from 2001 to 2020, and General Manager and then Treasurer of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) from 2016 to 2024, he played a key role in policy discussions and economic research. In this interview, he discusses basic income's history, feasibility, and societal impact, addressing its effects on employment, automation, welfare policy, and human dignity. He argues that basic income does not disincentivize work, can be a stabilizing force, and requires proper pilot projects in developed economies to measure its full effects.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Today, we are with Malcolm Torry, a British academic and researcher who specializes in basic income and the management of religious organizations. He holds multiple advanced degrees in psychology, economics, and social policy, though we do not necessarily need to list them all. If it runs through the journal, it gets fact-checked—the journal is live.

Dr. Torry served as Director of the Citizen's Basic Income Trust (CBIT) from 2001 to 2020, where he played a crucial role in developing and promoting basic income research. His extensive work includes publications such as *Basic Income: A History* and *Citizen's Basic Income: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. His research has significantly contributed to welfare policy discussions and religious institution management, influencing academic circles and public policy debates. He has recently had an interest in Continental Philosophy.

So, thank you very much for joining me today. I appreciate you taking the time out of your day for a little Canadian me. Now, in 1985, basic income came into your world. How? Why?

Dr. Malcolm Torry: It entered my world much earlier—back in 1982.

1976, I worked for two years administering means-tested benefits in South London. Those who worked in the office knew how flawed the system was. Our favorite benefit was child benefit, which was entirely unconditional. We could not understand why more of the system was also not unconditional. That was back in 1976 when I was working in a local office.

In 1982, when I was a priest at Elephant and Castle, I was somewhat unexpectedly invited to attend the Department for Social Security's summer school. There, we engaged in significant discussions about alternatives to the existing welfare system, and basic income was one of the concepts that emerged as a serious alternative.

By 1984–85, a group of us had founded the Basic Income Research Group, the first modern organization dedicated to facilitating the systematic debate on basic income. That organization later evolved into what is now known as the Citizens' Basic Income Trust.

Jacobsen: One of the most common arguments against basic income is that it discourages work. Given your extensive experience organizing religious institutions, analyzing public policy, and studying economic models, do you believe this argument is valid or invalid based on the evidence?

Torry: The evidence so far suggests that there is no disincentive effect and that it can actually have an incentive effect. The reason for that is fairly obvious. If you take households off means-tested benefits by giving them an unconditional income, then any additional pound they earn will

be worth more to them because it will not be withdrawn due to means-tested benefit rules, which is what happens under the current system. As a result, individuals are more likely to be incentivized to seek additional earned income. That is the logic of the argument.

There are also natural experiments that support this conclusion. You'll find several of them in my books, which suggest that basic income incentivizes increased employment activity. One particularly interesting case was the Finland experiment. While it was not strictly a basic income, it functioned similarly—unemployment benefits were unconditional for 2,000 randomly selected individuals nationwide.

During the second year of the experiment, employment activity increased. What is most important is that it did not fall, as critics had predicted. So far, the evidence suggests that basic income has no negative impact on employment levels, but we still need genuine basic income experiments in developed economies.

In Namibia and India, pilot projects showed considerable increases in employment activity, particularly among those who were paid the least. Plenty of evidence supports basic income's positive effects in less developed economies, but we still lack sufficient data in highly developed economies. The challenge is that conducting a genuine basic income pilot project in a developed country is extremely difficult.

Many experiments that claim to be basic income trials are not truly basic income experiments. They are not pilot projects and do not provide a real measure of how a nationwide basic income system would work. A true basic income pilot project would require providing an unconditional income to everyone in a community, and for it to qualify as a pilot project, it must be something that could realistically be rolled out nationwide.

That presents another challenge. Implementing basic income in a more developed economy would require restructuring tax and benefit systems, which is difficult to do in one single community—in fact, it is almost impossible. Therefore, we need what I would call proxy pilot projects, but none have been done yet, and we are still waiting for proper research to be conducted.

Jacobsen: What does a religious institution bring, in terms of wisdom, to the debate around implementing basic income?

Torry: Many religious traditions—particularly within Christianity—have unconditionality at their core. In the Christian tradition, the concept of grace means that God's love is unconditional. An unconditional income would reflect that same reality. Religious institutions, therefore, have a theological and ethical foundation that supports the idea of providing a basic income to all, regardless of economic status or social position. That is the heart of it. You can find similar provisions in other religious traditions as well.

Jacobsen: There is ongoing debate around “the future of work,” particularly concerning the rise of automation and artificial intelligence. As these technologies are integrated into national and international economies, how does basic income become more relevant when large numbers of people see their jobs replaced by machines?

Torry: First, we do not know exactly what will happen to the employment market as we undergo these extreme technological shifts. Every major technological advancement in history has destroyed some jobs while creating new ones.

Take a simple example: steam trains. When they were introduced, they put many horses out of work—which meant that horse owners lost their livelihoods, and those who cleaned up after the horses also lost their jobs. However, at the same time, railway jobs exploded. The same pattern has played out with every major innovation—old roles disappear, but new industries emerge.

A contemporary example is our youngest son, who researches artificial intelligence and software development for climate modelling. That job did not even exist fifteen years ago. We will see many jobs disappear, change, and invent many jobs. Nobody can predict exactly how everything will balance out.

That is the most important thing to acknowledge: we do not know. But what we do know is that there will be turbulence—that is obvious. Whenever there is a major technological shift, there is economic disruption.

The virtue of basic income is that it provides a secure financial foundation. It will never be enough for people to live on entirely—that is a utopian idea, and it will not happen. My research has shown that. However, what we can establish is a significant, stable layer of income that helps people navigate economic turbulence.

Jacobsen: So, when the market experiences volatility—whether due to geopolitics, international economic fluctuations, or personal crises like an injury or a death in the family—basic income would serve as a stabilizing force at multiple levels?

Torry: Exactly. It would act as a stabilizing mechanism, providing financial security when people experience unexpected challenges. However, it will never be enough for someone to live on entirely unless they have exceptionally low expenses.

We will always need additional social provisions. Some suggest—mainly in the United States—that a basic income could replace aspects of the welfare state, such as healthcare. That is not possible, and nobody should attempt it.

The reason is that different social programs have different types of unconditionality, which should never be confused.

A basic income is unconditionally provided—meaning everyone receives the same amount. However, public healthcare, such as the UK's National Health Service (NHS)—and similar systems in Canada—is unconditional with a different unconditionality. It provides care based on need, meaning you receive treatment when you require it and receive as much care as necessary.

These are fundamentally different models of social support, and basic income should never be seen as a replacement for essential public services such as healthcare.

If you don't need it, you don't get it. That is why universal healthcare is fundamentally different from basic income. Healthcare is based on unconditional access, not unconditional provision.

You cannot replace a needs-based system like healthcare with a fixed-income payment because different people require vastly different levels of care throughout their lives. Some people need very little, while others need extensive medical interventions. You cannot replace that variation with a single uniform income, as it would never adequately cover the costs of those who require more.

So, yes, we will still need a variety of social provisions. What basic income does is simple—it provides a secure, unconditional layer of financial stability. That is all it does. It does not replace

healthcare, it does not replace social services, and it does not do anything beyond ensuring a base level of income security.

Jacobsen: In public policy debates, particularly political ones, discussions are inherently adversarial. Politics is unlike the United Nations, where the focus is on building consensus and cooperation—at least not most of the time. Occasionally, there may be efforts at compromise, but the dominant political discourse is oppositional. So, how do you make the case for basic income across political divides? How do you present it in a way that resonates across ideological lines?

Torry: Some of the research I conducted at the London School of Economics shows that any major political ideologies can support basic income. People from across the political spectrum have argued strongly about basic income. Interestingly, objections to basic income do not belong to any single ideology—they are generic concerns that arise across all political perspectives. Similarly, support for basic income can be found across the entire ideological spectrum.

What is unique about basic income is that it does not belong to any political position. It is not inherently left-wing or right-wing, nor does it fit neatly into centrist or libertarian frameworks. Instead, people from all sides of the political divide can find reasons to support and oppose it.

Of course, in partisan politics, policies often become political footballs. If one major political party were to endorse basic income, other parties would likely oppose it—not necessarily on merit, but simply because that is how party politics operates. Even within the same party, you will often find divided opinions on basic income, but as soon as one party champions it, opposition parties feel compelled to attack it. That is simply the nature of adversarial politics.

We know this is certainly the case in the United Kingdom. Some years ago, we conducted a survey of Parliament to assess attitudes toward basic income, and the results showed significant diversity of opinion across all political parties. The support and opposition did not correlate strongly with party affiliation. This is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a strength that anyone can support. On the other hand, it is also a weakness—because if some people endorse it, others will oppose it purely for political reasons.

A bigger political challenge, however, is what we call path dependency. In politics, it is much easier to propose incremental changes to existing policies than to argue for a complete shift in how things are done. Basic income is structural reform, and structural reforms are always harder to implement because they challenge entrenched systems.

This is one reason why many political discussions about basic income end up focusing on small experiments or limited policy trials rather than full-scale implementation. It is simply easier to modify the existing welfare system than to push for a comprehensive transformation. That is one of the biggest obstacles we face.

And that is why cross-party cooperation is essential. Implementing a genuine basic income scheme would require long-term political commitment spanning multiple parliamentary terms. That means no single party could implement it alone, requiring broad political consensus. This is particularly true in the UK, but the same applies to any democratic system.

This is also why we are unlikely to see a true basic income program in a developed economy anytime soon. What we might see, however, is a genuine basic income initiative in an emerging economy. The largest pilot project to date took place in India, and similar experiments have been conducted elsewhere.

India's federal system grants significant autonomy to its states, though most international news coverage focuses on the national government. What often goes unnoticed is how much policy innovation happens at the state level. It is entirely possible that a single Indian state could decide to implement a basic income system. They could roll it out relatively quickly because India has a comprehensive citizen database—something many other countries lack. For example, we do not have such a system in the UK.

I do not know whether India will be the first country to implement basic income. But once one country adopts it, I predict that others will follow. Governments will see the advantages, and the concept will gain momentum.

Jacobsen: In your more than 40 years working on this issue—well, 49 years, I suppose—what are some of the most subtle forms of skepticism you have encountered about basic income?

Torry: The same objections come up all the time. The most common ones are:

1. "People will stop working."
2. "You shouldn't give people something for nothing."
3. "We can't afford it."

These arguments have been ubiquitous for five decades. The challenge is that these objections are not purely rational—they are deeply ingrained prejudices. They are felt rather than logically argued. Even though the evidence contradicts them, people continue to believe them instinctively.

These ideas go far back into history. No matter how much I have demonstrated—through research at the Microsimulation Unit at the University of Essex—that a basic income scheme is entirely feasible in the UK, I still hear the same objections. We could implement it with minor adjustments to the current tax and benefit system, yet people still claim "we can't afford it," even though that is factually incorrect.

The belief that "we shouldn't give people something for nothing" originates from Elizabethan Poor Laws and has been ingrained in social policy ever since. It is not easy to counter because it is a moral instinct, not a rational calculation. Ironically, giving everyone something for nothing would be the most efficient way to structure welfare. But just because something is efficient does not mean it will happen—unfortunately.

Jacobsen: What about alternative welfare models—such as job guarantees, negative income tax? Are there trade-offs between these approaches and basic income?

Torry: Negative income tax (NIT) is often compared to basic income because the income distribution curve looks similar on a graph. Basic income creates a straight-line relationship between earned income and net income, while a negative income tax can achieve the same outcome mathematically.

In an NIT system, individuals below a certain income threshold receive payments from the government (a negative tax rate), while those above the threshold pay positive taxes. This results in a smooth, continuous income curve.

However, that is where the similarities end. We have never had a negative income tax system in any country because it is impossible to administer effectively. People often tell me, "Surely, we can make it work with modern technology!" But we cannot.

The reason is administrative complexity. Negative income tax requires constant income reporting and adjustments—you would need real-time tracking of every citizen's earnings to calculate payments accurately. This creates massive bureaucratic challenges.

A basic income, by contrast, is simple and efficient—you give it to everyone, and there is no need for means-testing or constant recalculations. That is why basic income is viable and negative income tax is not.

We came close to implementing something resembling a negative income tax in the UK in 1972 when the Conservative Party proposed a similar system. However, it quickly became clear that the administrative burden would be a nightmare, and the proposal was dropped.

The problem is this—collecting tax from people is relatively simple. You can calculate income, and employers can withhold tax at the source. If someone has not paid enough at the end of the year, they receive a bill for the difference. That process is straightforward and has been in place for decades.

However, a negative income tax creates an entirely different challenge. If someone earns below a certain threshold and therefore qualifies for a government payment, what happens if they have two jobs? Their two employers would need to coordinate with each other to ensure the correct payments are made. But how would that work? What if someone has multiple sources of income—for example, a job, self-employment earnings, and investment income? There is no practical way to administer a negative income tax under such conditions.

These are the kinds of administrative realities that think tanks often ignore. They propose negative income tax models but fail to address the fundamental problem of how they would actually be implemented. That is why negative income tax will never happen—it is an impractical idea. We can achieve the same results far more efficiently with a basic income, which is simple to administer and does not require constant recalculations.

In relation to the affordability question: Proposals are sometimes made to pay for a basic income by adding to the money supply. There is a structural gap in most economies, partly because so much income is now concentrated in capital rather than labour. A significant share of wealth flows to large monopolies, such as Amazon and major technology firms, rather than wages and salaries. This creates an imbalance where labour income is not keeping up with the value of goods and services in the economy.

In this context, creating a limited amount of additional money could help fund basic income. However, this would have to be a temporary measure. Once that money is introduced, you must stop creating more, or else you risk inflation. That means that while monetary expansion could be a short-term way to help finance basic income, it would ultimately require a sustainable funding model that does not increase the money supply.

Jacobsen: What about the role of basic income in supporting developing commons, addressing informal labour markets, and strengthening weaker tax infrastructures?

Torry: Context is everything. Take the example of Namibia, where a genuine basic income pilot project was conducted fifteen years ago. The results were strongly positive, particularly in boosting economic activity among the lowest-paid workers.

The pilot project provided a small basic income to an entire community and carefully calculated its financial feasibility. Had it been scaled up nationwide, it would have cost around 4% of

Namibia's GDP. Fortunately, Namibia has natural resource wealth, meaning that finding 4% of GDP to finance a national basic income would have been entirely possible if the government had chosen to do so.

Every country must ask that question—what percentage of GDP would this cost, and where can it be funded? If the answer is feasible, a basic income program becomes a viable policy for that nation.

Now, consider India's incredibly complex welfare system with dozens of overlapping programs. These systems are notoriously inefficient and prone to corruption. For example, India operates government-subsidized food stores, which—while well-intentioned—invite corruption due to the opportunities for intermediaries to siphon off resources.

One of the biggest opponents of India's basic income pilot project was precisely those who benefited from corruption in the existing welfare system. That is one of the key advantages of basic income—it is extremely difficult to corrupt. Since every person receives exactly the same amount, there is no room for manipulation. It is fully transparent—every citizen knows if they are receiving it or not.

Basic income is likely the only type of welfare system that every member of society can fully understand. Its simplicity is part of its strength.

Jacobsen: Let's discuss unpaid care work. The majority of unpaid care work is done by women, though some men do significant amounts of it. This labour makes the world function, yet it is not financially recognized. How would basic income economically empower those engaged in unpaid care work?

Torry: First, everyone performing unpaid care work would receive the same basic income as everyone else. That alone would provide them with a secure financial foundation—something they do not currently have.

However, many caregivers—especially those providing intensive long-term care—would still require additional support. In most developed economies, welfare systems provide some assistance for those engaged in unpaid caregiving, whether through care allowances, tax benefits, or direct support services. Basic income would not replace those provisions but provide a foundational layer of economic security.

Basic income would mean that caregivers who do not receive wages would no longer have zero income—instead, they would always have some level of financial autonomy. That is a huge step forward, particularly for those who might otherwise be financially dependent on a partner or family member.

Ultimately, basic income recognizes that all paid or unpaid labour has value. It ensures that no one is left without financial support, even if their contributions to society do not come with a salary.

For some caregivers, having a secure income would allow them to transition off means-tested benefits and seek employment that aligns with their care responsibilities. They would not need as much government assistance as before, making it easier to regain financial independence.

However, much depends on household circumstances, as always. The impact would not be due to basic income itself but rather to the changes in tax and benefit systems required to fund it. These changes would affect different households differently, meaning there is no universal

answer to how every individual or family would experience basic income. That is why context matters, and it is impossible to provide a single, definitive answer without considering specific policy details.

Jacobsen: One other question—many of the pilot projects have explored different dimensions of basic income. Unfortunately, the current book trend on this topic is a bit weak, but one argument that remains astute is the idea that dignity is found in work. So, does basic income promote human dignity? If so, how? If not, why not?

Torry: First, basic income incentivizes employment, meaning people are likely to find more dignity through work, not less. The real question is, how would a secure income layer impact the employment market?

One possibility is that if people already had a basic income, they might be willing to accept lower wages for meaningful and fulfilling jobs simply because they enjoy doing them. In that scenario, some wage rates could fall for certain satisfying jobs. However, we do not know because this has never been tested at scale.

On the other hand, the existence of a secure income floor could mean that employers offering undesirable or difficult jobs would be forced to increase wages to attract workers. If workers no longer felt forced to take low-paying, exploitative jobs to survive, then the worst jobs—the most physically demanding, unpleasant, or hazardous—might start paying more than they do today. That would be no bad thing.

These labour market effects are exactly why we need genuine, large-scale pilot projects in developed economies. Because basic income has never been properly tested in an advanced economy, we simply do not have the data to answer these questions with certainty.

As I have said, one of the biggest challenges is that it is extremely difficult to modify tax and benefit rules for a single community without disrupting larger economic systems. That is why running a true basic income experiment in a developed country is complicated. We can only answer some of these questions after we see genuine, large-scale pilot projects in developed economies. Until then, we are still in the theoretical phase of the discussion.

Jacobsen: Well, Dr. Torry, thank you for sharing your insights today. I appreciate your expertise and perspective. It was a pleasure speaking with you.

Torry: Nice to meet you as well. Thanks so much.

Jacobsen: Ciao. Bye.