**The Basic Income Guarantee: Making the Case on the Street**

This NABIG congress brings together people with a range of expertise on how a Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) might work in Canada. A complex issue like this needs to be addressed from the perspectives of public health, economics, social science, social services, and policy development. I look forward to learning from the various presentations, because I have no expertise in any of those areas. The role I've carved out for myself is making the case to the general public. Why is this important? Because political will depends on public support; and the better-informed the public, the better-designed the program is likely to be

We're at a pivotal point in determining if a Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) will become an ongoing feature of Canada's social safety net. Federal and provincial politicians seem poised to implement a pilot project or two but -- depending on the design and the level of public support -- that initiative could fizzle out and the whole idea abandoned, or even worse, it could benefit the already-advantaged, while harming many others.

I try never to miss an opportunity to spread the word, and my job affords me plenty of opportunity to do that. I'm a letter carrier, with 385 points of call on Point Pleasant, at the west end of Kingston, Ontario. It's a leafy neighbourhood, with no through traffic, lots of parkland, and a mixed-income population. Over the five years I've been delivering mail there, I've gradually become acquainted with many of the residents and their various concerns.

Some letter carriers -- the hedge-hoppers -- fly through their workday, rarely engaging beyond a brief salutation. At 70, I'm too old for that kind of pace, and besides, I'm intrigued by the people on my walk. So we have little chats from time to time, and it's often not difficult to connect their concerns to the Basic income Guarantee and the difference it could make.

I've observed what piques their interest and what makes their eyes glaze over. Usually their level of interest depends on how they, or their family members, might be affected. For example, a retired physics professor could see how a Basic Income Guarantee might benefit one of his two adult children. Both have PhDs, but only the son has a steady job, with salary, benefits, and pension. The daughter works from contract to contract, often with gaps in between.

A public health nurse on my walk has no trouble speculating on the difference a Basic Income Guarantee might have on the health and well-being of the people she encounters in her work. Moreover, she has a son, who recently received his Master's degree in nanotechnology and is now having difficulty finding that first job, because employers want someone with work experience.

A year or so ago, when I first started talking to people about the Basic Income Guarantee, few were acquainted with the concept. So I'd explain what a huge difference it would make to those among us living in poverty -- perhaps on social assistance or a disability pension, or possibly underemployed or working for minimum wage. The listener would nod agreeably, but poverty and its implications clearly didn't loom large in their minds. Even if they actually knew someone living in poverty, they might not realize that they did. For instance, they have a neighbour, a gentle-natured soul who lives in a tiny basement apartment and supplements her meagre income as a personal care worker by looking after her neighbours cats and dogs, when the people go away on business, or for a holiday. Meanwhile, her own beloved cat died, because she couldn't afford to take it to the vet. But her neighbours are unlikely to realize just how bleak her financial circumstances are, because she's careful not to let on. Anyway, I soon discovered that combatting poverty is ***not*** the hook that draws most people to support a Basic Income Guarantee.

So I switched to talking about the increasing precariousness of work, when even people with PhDs face an uncertain future, cobbling together sessional lectureships or consulting contracts. I'd ask the people on my walk how many new hires are offered decent wages, extended health insurance, paid vacations, and defined-benefit pensions? We're facing the Uberization of the workforce, I tell them, where people are paid by the task. That catches people's attention, because most of them know someone in that situation -- often their own children.

What ***also*** carries weight is mentioning that a Basic Income Guarantee would help anyone needing to take time away from work to care for others -- young children, an ailing spouse, an elderly parent.

One family on my walk particularly likes the idea that a Basic Income Guarantee would give entrepreneurs and artists an adequate level of security, while they develop -- not just their products and creations -- but also essential networks and markets. In that family, the dad and one of the sons are both jazz guitarists and composers; one son is a stunt cyclist, who has performed with Cirque de Soleil; another son is a photography student at Ryerson; and the mom is a freelance editor.

**A**ccording to the Conference Board, in 2007 the cultural sector produced $25 billion in taxes for the three levels of government. This figure is three times higher than government spending on culture that year ($8.2 billion).

Appealing to people's sense of fairness can be an effective strategy, too, especially where children are concerned. After all, nobody chooses to be born into poverty, and end up being deprived of secure housing and a nutritious diet. I call up a vision of what life might be like for children whose parents are exhausted and ill-tempered from slogging away at several part-time, minimum-wage jobs, while still being unable to meet basic expenses. It's not hard to imagine that kind of parental stress resulting in children suffering psychological, and perhaps even physical abuse.

My favourite way of convincing people that children would be the biggest beneficiaries of income security is to cite one particular study. Twenty years ago, researchers began tracking the personalities of 1,420 low-income children in North Carolina. Four years into that study, about a quarter of those children's families saw a dramatic increase in annual income. They were members of the Eastern band of the Cherokee nation, and a new casino on the reserve was paying every tribal citizen a share of the profits -- about $4,000 a year, boosting household incomes by almost 20 per cent.

Here's how that money altered those children's lives. Their parents drank less and fought less. A more harmonious family environment reduced emotional and behavioural disorders among the children, and boosted two key personality traits that make for a brighter future -- conscientiousness and agreeableness. Most people can understand how that would be a credible outcome.

There are a lot of very nice waterfront houses on my walk -- many of them occupied by MDs. So I've made a point of soliciting their opinions on the fact that the Canadian Medical Association and the Association of Local Public Health Agencies have endorsed the Basic Income Guarantee. Most were unaware of that development, but were curious to hear more. Now, with all the publicity the BIG has been getting, I find people more inclined to ***initiate*** conversations on the subject.

The more questions people ask, the more I've felt the need to understand better how a Basic Income Guarantee might actually become a reality. For example, it seems only fair to give people some idea of how much (or ***how*** ***little***) it might cost them to ensure that everyone has enough that everyone has enough income to meet their most basic expenses.

Fortunately, our Kingston Action Group includes public finance economist Robin Boadway, an emeritus professor at Queen's University. He would like to see the federal government expand the use of refundable tax credits, so all low-income persons are covered -- not just the elderly, families with children and, to a limited extent, the working poor. He has an MA student doing what he calls "some serious simulations" on possible designs of the program, and he'll be presenting a paper on the subject at a conference in September.

In the meantime, I like to think that while a national BIG would be ***unprecedented*** in Canada, the taxation rate required to sustain it need ***not*** be -- not if we revert to the levels that prevailed four or five decades ago. Perhaps the government could restore previous levels of taxation on corporations.