



SECURITY, STABILITY AND DIGNITY FOR ALL CANADIANS

Introduction

Community Development Halton (CDH) and the Social Planning Network of Ontario (SPNO) have addressed as core concerns the issues of poverty, inequality and income security. Once again emergent conversations about a basic income or guaranteed income are reverberating across communities. I share with you an opinion piece recently published in the Hamilton Spectator on the impact of basic income on economic and social inclusion. It is written by myself and Peter Clutterbuck, Senior Community Planning Consultant with SPNO.

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The Occupy Movement put poverty and income inequality on the public agenda in 2011, and since then public debate on a number of policy fronts has emerged with living and minimum wage campaigns, renewed poverty reduction plans, and a basic income guarantee (BIG) for everyone. On the basic income idea, the Ontario Government has committed to pilot test a “mincome project”.

Reducing both poverty and inequality is a complex undertaking, and creating a coherent policy package out of the mix of proposals under consideration is a daunting challenge. As critical as it is, testing only basic income may discount the importance of other considerations in creating a more equitable, just and inclusive society.

It is best to start with the desirable outcomes of restructuring our social and economic security system. We would argue that these outcomes are security, stability, and dignity for all Canadians. While an adequate basic income guarantee would contribute to these ends, the emphasis on the role of this income transfer to individuals tends to overshadow the critical importance of other pillars of a supportive policy framework.

Certainly, an income guarantee above the poverty line offers a measure of security to individuals and families, especially with respect to having sufficient food and shelter. Ensuring the availability of affordable housing stock, however, will demand additional public policy intervention (e.g. rent control, inclusionary zoning, decent social housing).

Maintaining stability through varying life circumstances (e.g. disability, poor health) and major life stages and transitions (e.g. raising families, moving into the workforce, retraining) require forms of support beyond only an income transfer. Tax supported human services and care produce not only relative stability through our life paths but also social cohesion and inclusion.

Making a universal basic income model the primary form of social protection may risk leaving the provision of essential human services to the marketplace. Would a basic income program just become another convenient route for government to offload its

responsibilities for social provision to individuals and families?

In terms of dignity, basic income advocates argue compellingly that a universal income guarantee would eliminate the stigma of means testing. Further, decoupling income from “labour force attachment” will free people up to offer their skills and talents to personally chosen areas of endeavour and contribution to society.

Doubtless true for some, but this reasoning absolves governments from any serious commitment to a strong labour market policy to create decent employment for all in the economy of the future. Many at the margins without education or entrepreneurial inclinations may well end up hovering around the poverty line for their entire lives.

Why not the same public policy guarantees to the meaning and value of work in the construction of human dignity and the creation of a common good? While the traditional economy flags in job creation, there is no lack of work needed to build and strengthen our social and civic infrastructure. Re-balancing our economy from one tilted heavily towards private wealth creation to one of collective stewardship of our human and financial resources offers shared opportunity for all.

We suggest that an Ontario pilot should test more than only the impact of a basic income guarantee. A more flexible experiment focusing on certain population groups rather

than on one or two geographic areas could also show how income programs, adaptive human service supports, and employment in the civic and nonprofit sectors might combine in mutually reinforcing ways to respond to the varying life circumstances and conditions of different groups.

How could adequate income support and transitional services make the path from education to the labour force smooth for young people? A Youth Income Benefit for young people would enable “debt free” learning and training supports for transition into work in the new economy.

Given the socially and environmentally useful work to be done, why not guarantee working age adults both training and civic employment at living wages in the non-profit and local public services sectors?

Going further, a pilot could test a flexible mix of income benefits, full and part-time employment options and accommodating individualized service supports for persons with physical, intellectual and mental health conditions. This would engage and liberate a vastly untapped human resource for community benefit.

Testing only basic income models may be short-sighted. A policy package combining income security with stabilizing public services and dignifying work would better reflect a vision of an equitable, inclusive and socially just future for all Canadians.



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