

Three Waves of Basic Income Support¹

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<1>Introduction

Although ideas something like Basic Income can be traced back as far as ancient Greece, and perhaps into prehistory, the history of fully developed proposals for Basic Income, or of incomes with some similarities to it, does not begin until the 1790s, and even then proposals were extremely scattered and discussion did not seem to catch on anywhere for over a century.

But since the early twentieth century, Basic Income and similar mechanisms have experienced three distinct waves of support, each one larger than the last. Basic Income experienced a small wave of support between 1910 and 1940, followed by a down period in the 1940s and 1950s. A second and larger wave of support happened in the 1960s and 1970s, followed by another down period in most countries until the early 2000s. Basic Income's third, and by far its largest, wave of support so far began to take off around 2010, has increased every year since then, and shows no signs of dissipating.

Any effort to identify waves of something as complex as international political support is necessarily a simplification. One can argue that the same international wave hit

¹ This chapter draws heavily on an earlier work (Widerquist 2017).

some countries before others, or that separate waves hit different countries with little interaction. The simplification does not need to be perfect to avoid oversimplification. The point of this chapter is to recount this part of the history while drawing lessons from when and where the discussion tends to have come and gone.

Pessimists might think that the current wave will inevitably subside, just like the first two waves. History, however, seldom sticks to simple patterns. The history of the Basic Income movement suggests that there are important fundamental reasons why support for Basic Income has been trending upwards for a century despite occasional ups and downs. This chapter attempts to understand today's Basic Income movement in the context of that history. Although the future is always uncertain, the chapter argues that there is good reason for optimism.

<2>Before the first wave

Some writers trace the history of Basic Income back to Thomas More's *Utopia* (Van Parijs & Vanderborght 2017: 51), but More's vision was conditional on work, and is more accurately described as the beginning of the modern social welfare movement. Others might trace the beginning of the Basic Income debate to ancient Athens, which used revenue from a city-owned mine to distribute a small cash income to Athenian Citizens. This institution sounds like a Basic Income except that 'citizens' had a very different meaning in Athens from its meaning today. Citizens were a small, elite portion of the population. Noncitizens, such as slaves, women, and free non-citizen males, were the bulk of the population and virtually all of its labour force. A Basic Income for the elite is no Basic Income at all.

One could trace the beginnings of Basic Income into prehistory because many observed 'prehistoric' (in the sense of non-literate) societies have two ways of doing things that might be considered forms of Basic Income (Widerquist & McCall 2017). First,

nomadic, hunting-and-gathering societies of less than a hundred persons tend to treat all land as a 'commons', meaning that everyone could hunt and gather on it but no one could own it. Although this practice is seldom witnessed in communities with larger-scale more integrated economies, a similar right to use land can be seen in small-scale agrarian communities right up to the enclosure movement, which was not complete in Europe until the 1800s. The connection between common land and Basic Income is that both institutions allow every individual to have access to the resources they need to survive without conditions imposed by others. Second, if anyone brought back to camp more food than they and their immediate family could eat in one meal, they had to share it with everyone in the camp, including people who rarely or never brought back food for the community. The food shared around camp could be seen as a specifically 'basic' income.

Although our understanding of these practices comes from observations of modern small-scale hunter-gatherers, who cannot be assumed to exhibit the same practices as people in the deep past living in similar conditions, ethnoarchaeologists can offer significant corroborating evidence to suggest that these two practices might be tens or hundreds of thousands of years old (Widerquist & McCall 2017).

The modern definition of Basic Income either stipulates or assumes that the grant must be in cash, and because small-scale hunter-gatherers or agrarian communities do not have cash economies, they did not have Basic Incomes. What the two ancient practices show is that the values that motivate much of the modern Basic Income movement are not new to politics but have been recognised and practiced by societies for a very long time.

Proposals that begin to fit the modern definition of Basic Income begin in the 1790s with two writers, Thomas Paine (2012) and Thomas Spence (2000). Paine's famous pamphlet, *Agrarian Justice*, argued that because private ownership of the land had deprived people of the right to hunt, gather, fish, or farm on their own account, they were owed

compensation out of taxes on land rents. He suggested this this compensation should be paid in the form of a large cash grant at maturity plus a regular cash pension at retirement age: nearly a Basic Income, but not quite. Spence, however, responded to Paine's pamphlet with one of his own, carrying the argument a little farther to argue for higher taxes on land and a regular, unconditional cash income: the oldest Basic Income proposal that we know.

At least one person reinvented the idea of Basic Income during the 1800s: a follower of Charles Fourier named Joseph Charlier – but Basic Income proposals remained thin and widely separated until Basic Income experienced its first small wave of support in the early 1900s (Cunliffe & Erreygers 2001).

<3>The first wave

Basic Income dates back more than two hundred years, but enough people were discussing it in the early twentieth century to constitute a wave – or at least a ripple – of support. The idea was still new enough that most advocates had little knowledge of each other, and they all tended to give their versions of the programme a different name.

Some supporters of Henry George's land tax suggested that part of the proceeds from a land tax could be distributed in cash. In the United Kingdom, Bertrand Russell (1918) and Virginia Woolf (2016) both praised the idea in their writings without naming it. In 1918, Dennis and E. Mabel Milner started the short-lived 'State Bonus League'; and, in 1920, Dennis Milner published what was probably the first full-length book on Basic Income, *Higher production by a bonus on national output* (Cunliffe & Erreygers 2001; Cunliffe, Erreygers and Van Trier 2003; D. Milner 1920; E. M. Milner and D. Milner 1918).

In 1934, the Louisiana senator Huey Long debuted his 'share the wealth' programme. He seems to have come up with the idea on his own, as there is no evidence that he was influenced by the ideas spreading around the United Kingdom in those years. The plan might

have served as the basis for a presidential run in 1936 had Long not been assassinated in 1935 (Amenta, Dunleavy, & Bernstein 1994).

Several economists and social policy analysts, especially in Britain, discussed Basic Income, often under the name ‘social dividend’, in the 1930s and early 1940s. These included James Meade, Lady Juliet Rhys Williams, Abba Lerner, Friedrich Von Hayek, Oskar Lange, and G.D.H. Cole, who apparently coined the term ‘Basic Income in 1935 (Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017: 78–82). Major C. H. Douglas wrote about Basic Income extensively under the name ‘national dividend’, and included it in a wider package of reforms which he called ‘Social Credit’ (Van Trier 1995).

These early Basic Income advocates achieved little direct influence on legislation. In 1935, the Social Credit Party of Canada took power in Alberta, but did not move to implement Douglas’s proposed dividend. As the Second World War drew to a close, most Western democracies built up their welfare systems on a conditional model, typified by the famous Beveridge report for the British government (Beveridge 1942). Although the conditional model varies enormously from country to country, it always provides assistance to those who fit into some category of need, such as old age, disability, unemployment, single-parenthood, absence of market income, and so on, and it usually works in combination with macro- or microeconomic policies that are supposed to move the national labour market towards full employment. Truly universal programmes were few and small in most mid-century welfare systems. Discussion of a full Basic Income programme largely fell out of mainstream political discussion for more than two decades.

<4>The second wave

Discussion of Basic Income was kept alive between the first and second waves largely by economists who increasingly discussed the idea as an interesting theoretical alternative to the existing welfare systems even as the idea dropped out of the mainstream discussion.

Technically speaking the second wave was a wave of support for Negative Income Tax (NIT: see chapter 14 of this volume) and for a Minimum Income Guarantee, and not for Basic Income, and a genuine Basic Income played only a small part in the discussion. (On the meanings of ‘Basic Income’, ‘Negative Income Tax’ and ‘Minimum Income Guarantee’, see the note on terminology at the beginning of this volume.) Although NIT and Basic Income have substantial differences in design and effects, the second wave was extremely important in directing international attention towards the idea of creating a world in which everyone would have an above-poverty-level income.

The second wave took off in the early-to-mid 1960s. At that time, at least three groups in the United States and Canada began promoting the idea. Welfare rights activists, including Martin Luther King (1967), mobilised people frustrated by inadequate and often demeaning conditional programmes. Futurists, such as Robert Theobald (1966) and Buckminster Fuller, saw Negative Income Tax as a way to protect workers from disruptions to the labour market caused by the computer revolution. Finally, many prominent economists—such as James Tobin, Milton Friedman, and John Kenneth Galbraith – agreed that a Negative Income Tax would represent a more effective approach to poverty than existing programmes that were conditional on work tests (Friedman 1968; Tobin 1968; Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017: 89). Negative Income Tax would have been an attempt to simplify and streamline the welfare system while also making it more comprehensive.

The mainstream media first noticed Negative Income Tax around the time Lyndon B. Johnson declared a ‘war on poverty’. Politicians and policy advisors began to take up the idea, and the Canadian government released several favourable reports on the ‘guaranteed

annual income' idea in the 1970s. For a short time, many saw some kind of Minimum Income Guarantee as an inevitable next step in social policy: a compromise that everyone could live with. People on the left viewed it as the culmination of the welfare system that would fill in the remaining cracks. Centrists, conservatives, and people from the burgeoning libertarian movement, saw it as a way to make the social safety net more cost-effective.

In 1971, the US House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed a bill introducing a watered-down version of NIT. It missed becoming law by only ten votes in the Senate. The next year, presidential nominees from both major parties endorsed a variety of similar proposals: Richard Nixon supported NIT, and George McGovern a proper Basic Income under the name of a 'demogrant'. Interestingly, the fact that both nominees held such similar positions made such reforms less of an issue in the campaign than they might have been (Widerquist and Sheahen 2012).

Although Nixon won the 1972 election, the NIT never got another vote. It died partly because it had no groundswell of support outside the welfare rights movement. None of its proponents made a serious effort to sell the proposal to the public at large. Even supporters viewed Nixon's version with scepticism, seeing it as too small and watered-down to truly fit the model. Letting it die cost the politicians who backed it very little, so they allowed the idea to fade from public discourse (Widerquist & Sheahen 2012).

Although the second wave was most visible in the United States and Canada, the discussion spilled over into Europe, even as the second wave waned in North America. A high-level government report in France focused on NIT in 1973. At about the same time, Bill Jordan and James Meade managed to draw attention to the idea in the United Kingdom. In 1977, *Politieke Parij Radicalen*, a small party in the Netherlands, became the first party with representation in parliament to endorse Basic Income (Van Parijs and Vanderborgh 2017:

95–97). The next year, Niels I. Meyer's book, *Revolt from the centre*, launched a substantial wave of support in Denmark (Meyer 1981).

While neither the United States nor Canada introduced full NIT or Minimum Income Guarantee programmes, the second wave of support for incomes similar to Basic Income had some major successes. Both countries conducted implementation trials (see chapter 15 of this volume), and the United States created or expanded several programmes that can be seen as small steps in the direction of Basic Income. These included Food Stamps, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and the Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend. These policies not only helped a lot of people, but also their relative success provided convincing evidence that helped to push social programmes toward universality (Widerquist and Howard 2012a; 2012b; Widerquist and Sheahan 2012).

Politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher dramatically changed the conversation around the welfare state in the early 1980s. They successfully vilified virtually all recipients as frauds. As a result, many people stopped talking about how to expand or improve the welfare system and started talking about whether and how to cut it. The left largely went on the defensive in response, and stopped criticising the existing, conditional model. Any suggestion that the model might be replaced by something better could at that time be seen as lending support to people who wanted to cut existing programmes and replace them with nothing.

In 1980 the United States and Canada cancelled the last of their implementation trials, and Canada stopped analysing the data that it had spent years and millions of dollars collecting. Fortunately, the results of those trials eventually re-emerged as important evidence for Basic Income's potential.

For the next thirty years, with a few notable exceptions, mainstream politics in most countries included virtually no discussion of any form of Basic Income, Negative Income

Tax, or Minimum Income Guarantee (Widerquist and Howard 2012a; 2012b; Widerquist and Sheahen 2012).

<5>Between the waves

During the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, various Basic Income and similar proposals briefly gained traction in different countries, including substantial interest in post-apartheid South Africa in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Standing and Samson 2003). But for the most part, discussion of Basic Income took place outside the political mainstream, where the very gradual upward trend in interest attracted little notice from mainstream media or mainstream political parties. The two places where Basic Income discussion was steadily growing in this period was in the United Kingdom and in academic journals. Juliet Rhys Williams' son, Brandon Rhys Williams, presented a Basic Income proposal to a British parliamentary committee in 1982: an event that inspired the formation of the Basic Income Research Group (BIRG) in 1984 (now the Citizen's Basic Income Trust). Also in 1982, the Belgian philosopher Philippe Van Parijs reinvented Basic Income in 1982 with no prior knowledge of the previous waves. He eventually connected with other supporters, including Guy Standing, Claus Offe, Robert van der Veen, and a number of members of BIRG, including Annie Miller, Hermione Parker, and Bill Jordan, and together they established the Basic Income European Network (BIEN) and convened the first BIEN Congress on 4–6 September 1986 (Basic Income Earth Network 2019b). From this point on, Basic Income, rather than NIT, dominated the political discussion benefit system reform.

The academic debate grew substantially between the mid-1980s and the mid-2000s, especially in the fields of politics, philosophy, and sociology. By the time BIEN changed its name to the Basic Income *Earth* Network twenty years later, national groups existed in at least two dozen different countries (Basic Income Earth Network 2019a). Yet Basic Income

stayed mostly outside the political mainstream. For those of us taking part in Basic Income events, it felt less like a movement and more like a discussion. Even the activist contingent with the Basic Income networks concentrated more on discussion than action, believing (probably correctly) that they had to increase public awareness before they could gather enough supporters to make political action viable. Isolation from mainstream politics distracted supporters from how much their movement had grown. But as supporters would learn only in retrospect, the groundwork had been laid for a take-off.

<6>The third wave takes off

The third wave of Basic Income activity hit the mainstream in 2015 or 2016, but volunteers at *Basic Income News* had been noticing substantial increases in media attention since at least 2011.² In some places, the crossover began even earlier than that, and almost certainly the mainstream take-off of Basic Income was at least partly the result of efforts supporters had been making for decades.

In 2006, at the BIEN Congress in South Africa, Zephania Kameeta, then the Lutheran Archbishop of Namibia, slammed his fist on the podium and announced, ‘Words, words, words!’ Basic Income conferences had seen many passionate calls for action, but they were almost always accompanied by appeals for *someone else* to take action. This time, the speaker already had an action plan under way: the Namibian Basic Income Grant Coalition was raising funds to finance a two-year implementation trial (Haarmann, Haarmann, Jauch, Shindondola-Mote, Natrass, van Niekerk and Samson 2009). This project coincided with a smaller one in Brazil, and a much larger one followed in India in 2010. These tests attracted substantial media attention and helped to inspire the privately and publicly funded

² Much of this section is written on the basis of the author’s own personal experience.

experiments now under discussion or underway in Finland, Scotland, Canada, the United States, Kenya, and several other countries.

At about the same time that Kameeta spoke in Cape Town, a national Basic Income wave was beginning to swell in Germany. Prominent people from across the political spectrum – Katja Kipping, Götz W. Werner, Susanne Wiest, and Dieter Althaus – all began to push different proposals in a very public way (Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017: 192–193, 207–208). Unlike most previous waves of support, this one inspired broad activism, which has only grown. In 2008, Basic Income networks in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria jointly organised the first International Basic Income Week, which has subsequently grown to become a worldwide event with actions taking place as far away as Australia and South America (International Basic Income Week 2019). The financial meltdown and subsequent Great Recession had sparked a new climate of activism. Public attention had turned to poverty, unemployment, and inequality, and Basic Income supporters suddenly had a much more welcoming environment for their activity.

Citizens' initiatives got under way in both Switzerland and the European Union (EU) in the early 2010s. In the former, Daniel Häni and Enno Schmidt successfully collected enough signatures to trigger a national vote. The EU movement eventually recruited across Europe. Although neither ultimately won, they had between them built an infrastructure to support activism across Europe and had brought a tremendous amount of attention to the issue, which in turn sparked additional activity and attracted more support (Bashirova 2014; De Wispelaere 2016). One of the contemporary movement's most important strengths is its diversity: support comes from many different places and from people who do not usually work together, follow similar strategies, or adhere to the same ideology. Indeed, today's Basic Income supporters are motivated by a number of different issues and sources.

Many developing countries had been moving towards Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) for some years. These programmes, though still conditional, streamlined and eased the conditions for eligibility. At least one CCT programme, Brazil's *Bolsa Familia*, inspired by the Senator and Basic Income supporter Eduardo Suplicy, was introduced specifically as a step toward Basic Income. Although most others were not, the positive results from easing conditions bolstered support for further steps toward Basic Income (Hanlon, Barrientos and Hulme 2010).

Mirroring the futurism discourse of the 1960s, many advocates point to automation and precariousness as reasons to implement Basic Income schemes. High unemployment, the gig economy, and the pace of automation, threaten large segments of the labour force. Whether or not the need for human labour is decreasing, the labour market has become extremely unstable. Labour leaders, activists, academics, and tech entrepreneurs have all proposed Basic Income in response, making employment market changes one of the prime drivers of recent interest in Basic Income (Bregman 2017; Hughes 2018; Stern 2016; Yang 2018).

For the first time, environmentalism has played a major role in the debate. Two of the most popular proposals for combating climate change are the tax-and-dividend and cap-and-dividend strategies, both of which involve setting a price on carbon emissions and distributing the revenue to all citizens. Other environmental groups, such as 'Degrowth' and Canada's 'Leap Manifesto' see Basic Income as a way to counteract excessive consumption and the depletion of resources (Acosta 2017; Hornborg 2017).

Two additional movements, 'quantitative easing for the people' and 'helicopter money', are pressuring central banks to stop giving money away to private banks and to start giving it directly to every citizen. The movements believe that their proposals would constitute a more equitable and effective economic stimulus programme. Although they do

not always use the term, distributing money directly to the people is essentially a temporary Basic Income (Muellbauer 2014). Some private groups are trying to bypass central banks entirely by creating non-governmental digital currencies, and some of these groups have announced their intentions to provide their users with a Basic Income in the new currency.

At the same time, new evidence has convinced people of Basic Income's radical potential. Evelyn Forget (2011), of the University of Manitoba, received grant funding to analyse the data from Canada's NIT experiment. She released her findings in 2011, just as new implementation trials and citizens' initiatives were getting off the ground. Her positive findings received a great deal of press attention and helped to spark new interest in the programme in Canada and beyond. This increased media attention has built the movement even further. Seemingly every major news outlet has published something about Basic Income. And, in a sure sign of the movement's newfound strength, opponents have started to attack it.

A couple of years ago, it remained unclear whether the third wave would match the size and reach of the second. Now the answer is obvious: grassroots support and international media attention are more extensive than ever, and the third wave represents the first truly global Basic Income movement. According to Philippe Van Parijs (personal correspondence), 'the big difference between the first two waves and the third one is that the third one quickly became international'. The first two did not extend much beyond the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, but the third wave already involves major campaigns on all six inhabited continents.

<7>How far can the third wave go?

The left should recognise that past Basic Income movements entered mainstream conversation when people worried about inequality and unemployment, and then subsided

when public attention turned to other issues, or when other ways of addressing poverty became dominant. The second American wave ended in the United States not in the prosperous economy of the mid-1980s but in the troubling times of the late 1970s, when right-wing politicians convinced large numbers of people that redistributive programmes had become overly generous.

The biggest danger to the third wave appears to be growing nationalism. If politicians can convince voters to blame immigrants and foreign competition for growing inequality, then they can effectively distract people from mobilising around better social policies.

Despite these dangers, Basic Income advocates have good reason to feel encouraged: each wave has been larger than the last. With every resurgence, Basic Income has been represented by more developed proposals than the time before, and supporters have been better prepared to address people's concerns about poverty, inequality, and unemployment. The fact that academics had continued to study, and activists had continued to promote, Basic Income during its unfashionable years gave it recognition as a viable alternative when inequality once again became a dominant policy discussion.

Meanwhile, dissatisfaction with the conditional welfare model has been growing for over a century. This system is based on the idea that everyone who can work should, and only those who can prove that they are unable to work should receive help. All others are declared undeserving. The assumed contract is that if everyone contributed or proved inability, then they would all live a decent life. But the conditional welfare state has never fulfilled its contract. Conditionality has not made the welfare state more generous or less vulnerable to attack. Many who work still live in poverty, as do many who have proved that they are unable to work. Opponents have successfully chipped away at redistributive programmes for more than 40 years, largely by vilifying any group that meets the conditions for need. The conditional system also hurts workers. By making welfare requirements so stringent, the

system makes able-bodied employees dependent on employers. Dependent workers have less power, making it harder to demand good wages and decent working conditions. It is no coincidence that middle-class income has stagnated over the same period that the welfare system has declined. Despite enormous productivity gains, most workers now work more hours for less pay.

Conditional welfare systems are built on paternalistic assumptions that force people to prove their right to survival. Basic Income might not always gain steam as fast as it has in the last few years, but the conditional welfare system's shortcomings will not disappear, and they will continue to provide a strong reason for people to look seriously at Basic Income.

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