

Debating Basic Income

10th June 2019

Large Lecture Room, Nuffield College, Oxford

10:30 – 12:30

Marc Fleurbaey (Princeton) –
'Basic Income as a Component of Social Progress'

Jonathan Wolff (Oxford) –
'Is There a Path to Basic Income?'

Tania Burchardt (LSE) –
'Funding Social Protection'

Louise Haagh (York) –
'Basic Income and Human Development'

12:30 – 14:00

Lunch

14:00 – 15:30

Peter Sloman (Cambridge) –
'Basic Income in British Politics: Reflections on a Century of Campaigning'

Stuart White (Oxford) & Mark Bryan (Sheffield) –
'Getting to Basic Income: Citizens' Wealth Funds and Basic Income Experiments'

Ed Miliband MP *tbv*

15:30 – 15:45

Coffee Break

15:45 – 17:15

Martin O'Neill (York) –
'Of Tigers and Tabby Cats: On the Risks and Costs of a UBI'

Julie Rose (Dartmouth) –
'Effective Freedom and Some Limits of an Income-Focused Approach'

Phillippe Van Parijs (UCLouvain) –
'Taking Stock ... and Some Personal Reflections'

17:15 – 18:00

Reception –
Launch of the International Panel of Social Progress report (Marc Fleurbaey)

19:00

Dinner

Titles and Abstracts

Tania Burchardt (LSE)

Title: Funding social protection

Abstract: Debates about a basic income often focus mainly on what will be paid to whom and the possible beneficial effects. Less attention is given to how the payments will be financed, but of course the two questions are intimately linked, and the distributional, incentive and political impacts of payouts cannot be considered in isolation from the impacts of different forms of revenue generation. This lop-sided consideration is not confined to basic income; the same could be said of much discussion about social protection.

In this talk, I will give an account of why the design of pay-outs such as a basic income scheme needs to be integrated with the design of pay-ins. I will then review some of the challenges to raising revenue for social protection in low (and middle) income countries, including the role of international financial organisations, donor programmes, state capacity, and the informal labour market. Finally, I will turn to the rich country context and reflect on the apparently limited scope for changing the public debate about progressive taxation, including the taxation of wealth. I close with the thought that this is principally a problem for sociologists, psychologists and political scientists to grapple with rather than a problem of economics.

Marc Fleurbaey (Princeton)

Title: Basic income as a component of social progress

Abstract: Tony Atkinson proposed a form of basic income along 14 other proposals as a package for curbing inequalities. Similarly, the International Panel on Social Progress considers a variety of institutional reforms, including the basic income. Relying on the IPSP report, I propose to put the basic income in perspective, arguing that it is needed but far from sufficient to achieve any significant progress toward social justice.

Julie Rose (Dartmouth)

Title: Effective Freedom and Some Limits of an Income-Focused Approach

Abstract: While a UBI may advance the aim of expanding people's genuine opportunities, a focus on providing people with the highest possible incomes is not necessarily a reliable or fair means to do so. I here highlight some limits of an income-focused approach; in particular, that people's effective freedom to exercise their liberties and pursue their ends depends on having a broader array of resources and social conditions, that income is not perfectly fungible with these other resources and social conditions, and that improvements on these other dimensions may better enhance people's opportunities than higher incomes. A well-instituted UBI that is designed and implemented so that it complements other social policies may effectively address these limitations. But if a society faces tradeoffs, whether in terms of policy or politics, between improving other resources and social conditions and instituting or increasing a UBI, the former may better serve the aim of expanding people's genuine opportunities.

Peter Sloman (Cambridge)

Title: Basic income in British politics: Reflections on a century of campaigning

Abstract: John McDonnell's recent announcement that a Labour government would pilot universal basic income represents a major step towards establishing UBI as a mainstream policy option in Britain. This paper will reflect on the significance of Guy Standing's report, 'Basic Income as Common Dividends', in the light of a century of basic income campaigning. It will show how Standing's report draws together two ways of thinking about basic income which have intersected in Britain since the First World War: the socialist vision of a citizen's stake in the 'national dividend' and the liberal vision of a 'national minimum' beyond which no one should be allowed to fall. Although basic income campaigners (such as the Citizen's Basic Income Trust) have drawn support from across the political spectrum since the 1980s, British basic income proposals have often been coloured by a technocratic emphasis on improving work incentives and lifting households above the poverty line. One of the most striking developments of recent years has been the efforts of groups such as Basic Income UK and the Royal Society of Arts to develop a dynamic argument about how basic income security can enable individuals to make more meaningful choices about work, training, creativity, and care responsibilities over time. The growing politicization of UBI is not without its risks, but it may be a lesser evil than allowing the transformative potential of the idea to be trapped within a narrowly technocratic and work-oriented policy paradigm.

Jonathan Wolff (Oxford)

Title: Is There A Path To Basic Income?

Abstract: From the point of view of social equality there are many advantages to a basic income scheme, most notably that it has far less need to impose stigmatising distinctions on citizens in determining whether they qualify for state support. But there are many questions about whether it is possible to get to something resembling an attractive basic income scheme from where we are now in contemporary societies. In this talk I will raise two practical concerns regarding transition to a BI scheme. First, what will happen to public, collective, services in this period, and second will those whose taxes will need to rise to fund the scheme be able to absorb such tax increases?

Louise Haagh (York)

Title: Basic income and Human Development*

Abstract: Basic income can be seen as incompatible with distributions and policy approaches devised within a human development paradigm. The reasoning behind the incompatibility proposition is that basic income is framed within a paradigm of equality, whereas human development promoting policies are framed within a paradigm of equity. In this reasoning, the logic of equality is ultimately strict equality, which contrasts with a logic of equity focussed on ensuring equal outcomes within human development dimensions, such as health. However, I will argue that if we take the full step to consider institutions' justification from the perspective of a human development ethics, the alleged opposition between a case for basic income and for human development-promoting policies and regulatory interventions breaks down. Conceiving of basic income's justification within a human development paradigm changes the terms of contemporary debates about basic income in public policy and democratic development.

* N.B. The arguments in this talk are represented in my book: Haagh, L., 2019, *The Case for Universal Basic Income*, Cambridge: Polity, May.

Martin O'Neill (York)

Title: "Of Tigers and Tabby Cats: on the Risks and Costs of a UBI"

Abstract: Brian Barry famously said that "asking about the pros and cons of basic income as such is rather like asking about the pros and cons of keeping a feline as a pet without distinguishing between a tiger and a tabby." While the idea of a UBI has captured the public imagination now as never before, there are reasons to be cautious about making Universal Basic Income a central policy aim for progressives. If UBI is adopted in the wrong version -- if we welcome a tiger rather than a tabby into our homes -- then it has the capacity to undermine rather than to help to realise social justice. We need to ask with any UBI proposal not only at what level it is to be set, how it is to be funded, and how it is to be secured over time, but also what its opportunity costs might be in terms both of the political effort it requires for its enactment, and the alternative policies it may preclude. My talk will aim to sound a note of caution in assessing some of the political costs and risks of UBI.

Stuart White (Oxford)

Title: Getting to Basic Income: Citizens' Wealth Funds and Basic Income Experiments

Abstract: Getting to a basic income is frequently envisaged as involving new tax and income transfer policies, a redirection and perhaps expansion of existing 'welfare state' public expenditures. However, while the tax-transfer system is undoubtedly important in delivering a basic income, there is also a potential role for Citizens' Wealth Funds (CWFs). Following the Alaskan model (the Permanent Dividend Fund), CWFs offer people modest basic incomes as a 'dividend' on collective investments. The first part of this paper reviews the emergence of the CWF in contemporary UK policy thinking. In the second, we consider how basic income experiments might contribute to evaluating the possible benefits of a CWF-derived basic income as a modest 'top up' to other income. The second part of the paper will draw in particular on the recent and ongoing work of the UBI Lab Sheffield.

Phillippe Van Parijs (UCLouvain)

Title: Taking Stock ... and Some Personal Reflections