

Why a basic income could be a gift to the Right

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Can a guaranteed basic income for everyone provide security in an insecure world? It all depends on what we are expected to give up in return, argues **Nick Dowson**.

With [supporters](#) across the political spectrum, a basic income seems like an idea whose time has come. It could mean that no-one would be forced to work, and it could be simpler and cheaper than current welfare policies, indeed, get rid of 'welfare dependency' altogether.

A basic income, or citizen's income, is a policy whereby every citizen or legal resident receives a minimum income from the state: avoiding the degradation and punitiveness that come with means-testing, and the unemployment benefits trap where strict conditions often prevent the unemployed from volunteering or taking part in training.

Goodbye social state

It would allow people to go in and out of short-term jobs, knowing they had something to fall back on; give unpaid carers a guaranteed income; and make people less vulnerable to unscrupulous employers.

But can it live up to expectations? Or, like shortcuts everywhere, is this a route fraught with pitfalls and dangers? Is it easier to argue for 'free' cash than for the messy business of collectively providing healthcare, housing and other essentials?

Free-marketeers see it as the perfect excuse for their wet dream of an anti-social state; introduce a basic income in place of public services, and abandon the rest to the market.

Milton Friedman, the influential 'free market' ideologue and economist, supported a guaranteed income as a way for the state to fulfil social obligations without interfering with the market, arguing that it 'should replace the ragbag of specific welfare programs'.¹

Business website FastCoExist suggests, 'A basic income could replace multiple types of public assistance – from healthcare to earned tax credits – with a single payment.'² One of the largest trials of a basic income to date is the \$22.4-million experiment planned by the rightwing Finnish government – who are also cutting health, education and welfare.³

Increased [talk of a basic income](#) comes at a time of the voucherization, marketization and decimation of public services. Sweden, Chile and New Orleans have introduced schemes where parents are given vouchers to pay for either state or private schooling.⁴ In England, 'personal health budgets' and large-scale outsourcing are being forced on the health service, while Spain has introduced 'co-charges' for healthcare.⁵

The policy could give the Right the justification it wants to eviscerate the social state further, and would make it harder to argue for an expansion of public services. The payment could easily be eaten up by the cost of paying for previously public services, and as, depending on the implementation, the basic income does not necessarily [redistribute more money](#) to the poorest, a rightwing programme that introduced a basic income amid cuts could leave many worse off. In Britain, the cost of a degree – previously fully funded – would take several decades of basic income to repay at the level proposed in 2013 by the Citizen's Income Trust.⁶

Many services are best provided collectively. For example, in Britain, the National Health Service has provided excellent comprehensive healthcare, free at the point of use, for many decades. It provides a better service at a lower cost than many insurance-based systems, and at around half of the cost of the disastrous free-wheeling market that is US healthcare.⁷

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The same goes for housing. Public investment can provide good quality housing in [much larger quantities than the private sector](#).⁸ Subsidizing accommodation in the private rental sector is more expensive than providing state housing and encourages private landlords to inflate their rents. A 'basic income' risks a similar effect.⁹ And, crucially, in an unregulated private market there is little security for most people in that vital thing – home.

More than just crumbs

We must argue for something bolder. Meeting people's needs does not mean giving everyone money, and leaving the market to join the invisible dots that turn cash into the essentials that people need for a good life.

Many basic income supporters implicitly accept rightwing assumptions around freedom and the free market and, by implication, that once people are given money, the market will sort out the rest. More individualized market 'choice' in public services is often meaningless, but with it comes less choice about what sort of society we want to live in. Privatized healthcare may give us a choice between different companies, but we lose the option of going to a local hospital where the staff can put patients above profits.

The extension of the market's reach into all aspects of our lives has a pernicious effect, subordinating wider values to the pursuit of profit, and replacing genuine options with the veneer of individual brand choice.

Let's start by turning back the tide of privatization in health, education and housing – and by organizing for good quality public transport and public utilities, provided cheaply or for free, giving everyone genuine opportunities while cutting living expenses. We can also put money in people's pockets by reforming hidden regressive taxes and charges such as taxes on goods (VAT/GST).

This is also a question of justice.

Silicon Valley's rich, believing they are going to make most of us unemployed through artificial intelligence, are lobbying for a basic income to ensure social and economic stability while they monopolize fantastic wealth.

But, as technology writer Ben Tarnoff argues, 'If the robots ever arrive, their arrival will be bankrolled by our taxes, our attention, our data. Under these circumstances, a basic income would be the crumbs left by the bully who steals your sandwich.'¹⁰

A basic income in this context becomes just a small part of what would be needed to compensate people for the 'enclosure' of land and public resources – which should arguably belong to all of us – as private property.

We cannot accept rightwing assumptions and language to campaign for a basic income. If the Left is to support a basic income, it must be clearly placed as part of a programme for reversing the rush towards neoliberal states; a programme that starts by improving and expanding public services in which workers and the public are fully involved in decision-making. It must not be, as currently, part of a shift from services being provided collectively according to need, to them being provided privately according to ability to pay.

Let's not be lured by a regular cash transfer into limiting our vision of what we can do with our surroundings, our science and our society.

Nick Dowson is a writer and NHS campaigner.

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