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A wider lens: an analysis of Kesselman's view of a basic income

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In his article in *Inroads* entitled "A dubious antipoverty strategy: Guaranteeing incomes for the poor is politically unfeasible and financially unsustainable" (Winter/Spring 2014, pp. 33-43) <http://inroadsjournal.ca/a-dubious-antipoverty-strategy/>, Jonathan Rhys Kesselman argues not only against fairly generous forms of a basic income but also concludes that no further direct cash support should be provided to working-age Canadians, with the exception of adults who are severely disabled. His proposals to address poverty focus on services and in-kind support.

There certainly are challenges in turning the basic income *idea* into workable *policy*, and there is much in the article that I can agree with to some extent, but I find it greatly exaggerates the problems he sees with a basic income, such as the effect of marginal tax rates, and it minimizes, or fails to address, the severity of the problems with the current social assistance model. More critically I think, its perspective is too narrowly economic and both morally and practically problematic in its view of Canadians who find themselves facing hardship and poverty, whom he describes as "the poor".

The matter of basic income is not just about economics but also about democracy and governance. In the reality of ever more precarious work, technological unemployment, and discord and violence that can accompany massive income, wealth and opportunity gaps, the matter of how a society treats its citizens and distributes its resources is of utmost importance to our future.

Kesselman has a point that basic income proponents in Canada need to do more rigorous policy thinking, including to address different views within the basic income movement. Jurgen De Wispelaere analyzes the many faces of basic income in "An Income of One's Own? The Political Analysis of Universal Basic Income" published by Tampere University Press in Finland. He examines the experience of a range of countries and programs and demonstrates the kind of work that must be done more specifically to find what is most feasible in the Canadian context. Both works have spurred me to write this analysis.

To begin, I've identified a number of Kesselman's statements that I agree with, and that I believe most advocates of some form of basic income guarantee for Canada would agree with as well. I add to each statement, taking a wider view of these issues. More detailed discussion of some of these and other ideas follows.

Shared Views, and More

Eliminating poverty purely by cash transfers is problematic. His emphasis on a perceived desire by basic income proponents for an "all-cash" solution to poverty does not, I believe, reflect the

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views of most basic income supporters in Canada, who see improved income security within a larger framework that includes public services and other supports, such as labour market regulation.

Complexity is unavoidable...better to face reality than deny it. I would add that human lives are infinitely more complex than his economic framework allows and that this reality must also be faced.

There are extreme disincentives in welfare programs. He is speaking about people considered 'employable' but there are disincentives for people who are not deemed employable as well. In addition, by virtue of the acknowledged extreme nature of the disincentives, this suggests a very different approach is required rather than tinkering around the edges.

A dollar earned is better than a dollar of transfer income. Basic income proponents certainly want people to have earned income and to gain from it, as they are able, but his example from the United States does not reflect the importance of differences in *how* income is transferred, which has huge significance to the recipient. If stigma and bureaucratic hoops are attached to the payment as with welfare, it is damaging in ways that are distinct from its being a transfer like children's benefits and Old Age Security in Canada. His example also primarily involves mothers, and in this regard, it is also critical to raise the issue of what is meant by 'work', and the problem that continues to plague women when non-market work raising children is devalued and the only dollar considered properly 'earned' is one that someone else pays for in the market.

Mothers' work and income is especially important for children. This may be a reason why child benefits in Canada are particularly effective because this form of basic income usually goes to the mother. It is also why we need better child care and maternity/parental benefits in order to support both market and non-market work, not overwork moms and ensure they get access to educational opportunities as well.

Education matters. One of the extreme perversities of most social assistance regimes, however, is that they do not enable adults to keep benefits and get student loans, which effectively cuts off most real educational opportunities (this was not always the case). An autonomous basic income would better support the longer-term education and training that many people need to improve their earning capacity or change direction in employment with labour market shifts.

Loss of in-kind benefits is an issue. If in-kind benefits, such as access to dental services or prescription medications, are tied to the receipt of welfare, they could potentially be lost for people receiving a basic income. This issue was recognized with the advent of child benefits and provincial and territorial jurisdictions moved towards gearing support to income level rather than source of income. With a basic income, further work in this direction would likely be needed.

Make the disability credit refundable. This is a great example of the way in which Canada already has the kind of mechanisms that move us towards a basic income. The GST credit is refundable and there are similar provincial provisions as well. There are other credits, however, such as those for lone parents that can't be fully utilized by those with low incomes because they are currently non-refundable.

Welfare benefits for employables need to be increased. Without doubt rates for single people considered employable are miserly but rates are not the only problem because the rules and stigma of welfare remain damaging.

Depending on design most Canadians would be beneficiaries and taxpayers simultaneously. Kesselman sees this as a problem with a basic income that is gradually reduced as other income climbs but from another perspective it is quite positive, because it confirms that we're all part of the same system where we pay in and we all get something--greater security--out of it. OAS works this way. Over the life course, the same people may be net beneficiaries at some points and net contributors at others. Without the fear and actual peril of reaching a level of destitution that welfare requires, people are more able to steadily improve income and rebound from setbacks to become net lifetime contributors.

Lastly, Kesselman outlines what he sees as three forms of basic income and concludes that two, the universal demogrant and the fill the gap model are not likely a good fit in Canada. I tend to agree but there may be some divergence of view among basic income supporters on this. In any case, the middle option is not really just one option, because it allows a great deal of room for different design details to be explored and thus provides a great deal of opportunity for policy development. It is also worth mentioning here that another sense of filling the gaps is part of discussion among basic income proponents. While some advocate for a new basic income to cover everyone, increasingly in Canada there is some convergence around the idea that in our policy context we need not overhaul everything but rather keep seniors' and children's benefits structures intact and focus basic income plans on filling the gap faced by the working-age population with the least security and support.

The wider lens

The following analysis focuses on key areas of concern for me in the Kesselman article and provides a wider range of perspective, expertise and actual Canadian basic income experience to the discussion.

“All-Cash”

The idea that basic income advocates in Canada are calling for an “all-cash” solution to poverty does not reflect what I believe is the case. From the outset at BICN we have stressed the need for a basic income to be situated in a larger framework that includes public services, especially including child care, and labour force supports. Further, few people at this point are calling for the scrapping or folding in of programs that work relatively well, such as child and senior benefits, or programs that serve other purposes, such as Employment Insurance. The one program people do want truly replaced is social assistance, in terms of its delivery of money and policing of behaviour; there may be other social services that would be retained or adapted but they would be available to people as clients, not supplicants who must trade their dignity for money.

The second concern is that the article does not address the full benefit of a basic income beyond the cash value of the transfer; if it were only money at issue, then augmenting welfare might be a logical step as he suggests (although over its entire history, social assistance has far more often gone backwards when reforms have been brought in and otherwise ignored while inflation eats away at already meagre pickings so I have not much faith in this idea). An autonomous cash transfer is an entirely different thing. First, it offers security (welfare is so full of rules, restrictions and potential for error that it can produce more anxiety than security). A participant at a recent roundtable, in describing the difference between security and adequacy, commented that security is what enables you to sleep at night, adequacy is what you deal with in the morning. Lack of security is a major stressor in people's lives so improving security improves wellbeing. A basic income also provides freedom and flexibility to meet daily needs in

changing circumstances; that is the beauty of money that we deny to people by forcing them to rely on in-kind help that might or might not be suitable for their own complex needs at a given moment. And no one knows complexity like people living on low income. The psychological benefits of autonomous income that enable individuals to control their money and make their own decisions are essential to human beings and enable better coping with struggles and greater success in family, school and employment.

I want to add a note here on Barbara Bergmann, who is cited as a feminist economist whose critique applies to all-cash proposals. She compares Sweden and the United States and argues that it would be better to advocate a Swedish style welfare state based on merit goods/public services than to promote a basic income, which she sees as not having positive gender equality effects. I have several concerns with this. First, her concept of gender equality tends to focus on enabling women to have work force patterns more like men in order to increase their income, while many others, myself included, have a less male-centric view of gender equality that recognizes and values market and non-market work, such as raising children or caring for the frail elderly. Her comparison of Sweden and the US lays out almost polar opposites on the social policy spectrum and she concludes that countries can't afford cash supports and services so one must choose one or the other. Had she included Canada in her assessment she would have discovered that we do have a mix of both. Given that the US is far behind much of the rest of the world in public health care, maternity provisions etc, it is hard for me to imagine that a move towards the Swedish model would get very far in the States.

What concerns me most, however, is that it is important to consider gender equality issues seriously in the basic income conversation and I don't think Bergmann offers much to help in the Canadian context. Several other noted feminists see positive potential in a basic income, such as Almaz Zelleke (as do organizations in Canada who work with survivors of violence against women and know the impact of women's economic vulnerability only too well). There is reason for caution in the design specifics given a gendered division of labour that has women still doing the majority of unpaid work and where significant time away from paid work has life-long economic consequences (Kathleen Lahey at Queen's is an important voice in this regard). In my own work on basic income and gender equality in the Canadian policy context http://www.basicincome.org/bien/pdf/montreal2014/BIEN2014_Regehr.pdf, I find good potential for a well designed basic income, accompanied by child care and other labour force supports, that can work well to give women more economic autonomy and control, enable their economic situation to improve and provide balanced support for market and non-market work for both women and men.

Services

The article advocates putting greater priority on the use of services and in-kind supports. Child care and work-supportive services make sense, as may many others. However, if services are being created to fix problems that are preventable, or they are the wrong service for the wrong need then they do not make sense. I have had the valuable opportunity in my career to listen to people living in poverty who often provided interesting answers to questions those of us who are more privileged would never have thought to ask. I cannot stress strongly enough that poverty, insecurity and above all the social assistance model, damage people. If we stop damaging people, we reduce the need for services to treat or 'fix' them, in some cases in vain as permanent damage has been done.

Services, in some cases, can just complicate already complicated lives, add to the time burden of overburdened people and can force limited choices on people who don't have income autonomy or flexibility that people with sufficient income take for granted (e.g., having to take

the time to go to the food bank and accept whatever is available because a wider range of healthy food choices in stores is not affordable). There will never be enough services and they will always be very costly if the underlying problems of lack of money, security, autonomy, dignity and inclusion are left to fester. In India, the recent large basic income pilot, documented by Guy Standing and Renana Jhabvala, had a much greater positive effect in enabling people to meet individual, family and community-wide needs than the vast array of targeted services and other programs that were not addressing the right needs, suffered from poor take up, tried to compel certain behaviours and had marked perverse effects.

In Canada, I have seen various special programs offered over the years; they helped some and failed others miserably. The more finely you target, the more you box people into artificial categories that do not reflect the reality of their lives--and the more likely you are to miss. There are many reasons why accessing a service is not always easy. One program designed to help black youth was subject to some bureaucratic geographical boundary changes mid-stream and all at once the classrooms were mostly white. Some people qualified for a training program that expected public transportation to get them there, except there was none as they lived in a rural area and the program would not cover gas and parking costs. Many programs sound good politically but realistically are able to handle only a fraction of the need and that leaves many other people angry and embittered or further shamed and excluded. The social assistance system is not always very supportive of client efforts to access programs and is not immune to racial and other forms of discrimination that continue to exist in Canadian society that can serve to effectively deter clients.

Health care services are of particular note here, because as many medical professionals know well, people who cannot meet their basic needs and have high-stress lives cannot maintain good health or manage minor illnesses well. Our hospitals then are left to provide expensive care for more acute conditions, sometimes irreversible, and after excellent care then return patients to the same conditions that brought them to the hospital in the first place. One study showed a high rate of depression among lone mothers with low-income and treatment for this would have been lengthy and expensive, not to mention the stigma of mental illness and all that carries. It was discovered, however, that the women were not psychologically impaired, they actually lived depressing lives and that what they needed most was a break from the enormous responsibility of parenting round the clock. Far less expensive recreational opportunities for their children were a better response.

So, the answer here is that income and services are both needed and they both work most effectively and economically when they complement each other, expand the range of choice and control available to people, and are developed with input from the people they are intended to serve. For example, doctors can better treat minor illness and prevent bigger problems if people can eat well and access basic OTC (purchased) and prescription medications (pharmacare). Schools can be better places of learning if students are less stressed at home. Parents are better able to combine employment and family responsibilities if income support during maternity/parental leave periods is available to those who need it most but are least likely to qualify for EI; if quality, affordable child care is available, and; if workplaces have flexible, family friendly employment policies for moms and dads. Again, however, without sufficient basic income the difficulty of daily living is a barrier to accessing services.

All-Economics

If basic income is critiqued as the all-cash approach, I am concerned about the all-economics approach that dominates Kesselman's article (and he is not alone), particularly in reducing human motivation to the goal of shirking work and avoiding taxes. The assumption

seems to be made that once a person has a poverty line income, there will be no motivation for any further effort, such as to seek a promotion, or accept overtime. It is hard to fathom this. Why doesn't Donald Trump stop working? Why do so many people pursue promotions? Why are retired people often busier than when they were employed?

There is a large body of research, much of it multi-disciplinary, in fields of medicine, biology, neuroscience, psychology, culture studies and more that helps explain why people routinely defy traditional economic 'rational' models. We need to be informed by this wider range of knowledge and expertise. Human beings are complex, social animals and we are driven by many things that have nothing to do with money or our marginal effective tax rates, such as belonging, respect, freedom, and care for children, family, friends and neighbours. Kesselman's concern about the effects of high METRs seems extreme to me from this perspective. The welfare system is creating the conditions for people to fail utterly. Surely we would all be better off by enabling people to maintain attachment to the labour force and to be as productive as possible, even if they are not able to meet all their needs that way and even if they decide that they need more time with their family members rather than doing overtime? When did we decide that everyone needs to do overtime? And by what rationale does one argue that we need to keep some people severely impoverished so that they will accept undesirable jobs?

'The Poor'

This is a term I take pains to avoid because it sounds like a caste, a defined, immutable population with shared characteristics that distinguish it from other populations. And those characteristics are often pejoratively described and discriminatory. I sense that in this article and it makes me very uncomfortable. The distinctions between people with disabilities and those deemed 'employable' are a clear indication of a sense of deserving and undeserving poor, the undeserving having somehow caused their poverty, giving us the right without due process to punish them and demand they change their behaviour. If we applied this value system in our health care system, then we would turn away many, if not most, people at the door - the driven executive with a heart attack who didn't take time to go to the gym as his doctor recommended, or the public servant who broke a leg skydiving, when it was known to be a dangerous pastime, or people who picked up diseases abroad where conditions are not as sanitary.

The focus on shirking work, the discouraging effect of METRs and the need for services directed at behaviour sounds like concerns about the character of 'the poor' just as in different places and times we've stereotyped Blacks, the Irish and women. Yes, human nature has its downsides; some people will try to scam the system, people with lots of money also try to do deals under the table and do whatever they can to hide their money offshore and avoid tax. This is not a particular characteristic of people living in poverty. And it is not a reason to deny a majority of people sufficient income to meet basic needs.

Further, the results of basic income pilots and experience, including almost 20 years of child benefits here, have been consistently showing that people do not stop working. In India, the energy, initiative and community-level cooperation to use a basic income to establish ongoing income-generating businesses was remarkable. Some people work more while for others, small reductions in paid work are generally for the purpose of trading off for more time in other forms of valuable work outside the market, such as caring for children or other positive activity like education and training. The Canada and Quebec Pension Plans recognize that within the span of 'working' life there are reasons for periods of time where earnings are reduced; the general and child-rearing drop outs ensure that people are not penalized for those periods. It is consistent that we recognize the importance of this during working life, not just in

retirement. The fear of people not wanting to work seems to be psychological and rooted perhaps in fear of 'the poor' as someone 'other' than the rest of us.

The more real concern, I believe, is the fact that too many jobs now are rather terrible with low pay, poor working conditions, no benefits or security. The precariousness of employment also extends well into middle- and upper-income groups as the march of technology takes over an increasing number of low- and high-skill jobs (the January 18 issue of MacLean's suggests pharmacist jobs may be next). The need for human labour is waning and we cannot design policy for the future based on the fantasy that there is a full-employment economy and jobs are widely available to whoever wants one. More and more people will have breaks in employment, not just between jobs but almost reinventing themselves with each change. Greater support is therefore required to smooth these transitions. For women, these breaks plus breaks related to maternity, child birth and child-rearing make their ability to earn employment income in the early years of family formation even more challenging.

Let's look now at the harm that boxes and attitudes do to people for whom this article indicates sympathy--the 'disabled'. There are people with disabilities who can and want to work and do; some have low income, others high and everything in between. There are others who want to and can't get appropriate work, nor help getting work, because they are on the disabled side of the rigid welfare dividing line, not the employable side. Still others take work only to discover that they will be economically far worse off for doing so. Where do we place people who have unpredictable episodic conditions where for many months they are able to work and then can't for a while? What about people who are deemed employable by virtue of doctors not being able to agree on what label to attach to their diagnosis (this is rather more common than might be imagined)? What about people with mental health conditions that under the right circumstances can be managed? They may prefer that people not know of their disability and yet on welfare if the disability is not declared, the condition will surely worsen due to deeper poverty and stress. Where do we place people who are not disabled but face a long and gradual recovery from major surgery or cancer treatment? There are so many ways in which people are differently abled. To try to divide people into disabled and employable categories is, in my opinion, another example of H.L. Mencken's quoted aphorism: "For every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat and wrong."

Where do parents fit along this dividing line? Most welfare systems determine that for a while mothers of babies and young children are not employable yet they are not disabled, far from it they are actually working and under rather arduous conditions. There is wide variation in the time it takes after childbirth (or adoption) for mothers to be physically and otherwise ready to need, want and accept employment, and that readiness can be as much dependent on the child's situation as the mother's. What if the child has a disability or other special needs?

The disabled/employable divide implicitly presumes that every adult is, or should be, either all in or all out of the labour force all the time and that is just too rigid for real life. Different people, for different periods of time, may be partially able to meet their basic needs through employment. If we do not account for this, or worse, if we actively discourage it, then we weaken their ability to engage more fully when they are able. As mentioned earlier, CPP/QPP accounts for some of this variation throughout working adult life in setting retirement benefits but we are not consistent with this actually during working adult life.

Now let's look at the 'employable' side. If ever there was a caste of 'the poor', this is a special one we have created for single adults. The article acknowledges that welfare benefits are "miserly to the point of almost requiring beggary and thievery for bare sustenance". I could not agree more. Thievery might not be the worst option; the thief might land in jail where the food would be better and laundry service available. Not a good deal for the rest of us, however,

as we would have to pay at least 10 times as much as his welfare rate to keep him there. His sentence would also likely be shorter than the one welfare inflicts. When someone is forced to live at a small fraction of the poverty line, it is almost impossible to climb out. If you are in such deep poverty that you can't afford to regularly eat, wash or brush your teeth, the idea that you are designated 'employable' is cruel in the extreme.

But that's not all that can happen to the employable caste. In British Columbia, some women find the sex trade a better option to get money than requesting welfare help because the welfare system threatens to take their children away. In Ontario, I worked in an unemployment office that served several counties. We frequently had residents of one county pleading to hurry up their benefit claims so they would not be subjected to the power of that county's intrusive welfare administrator. This discretion to invade people's lives means the potential for abuse is high (and doesn't preclude people thinking they are being well-meaning in the process). Further, the myriad and ever-changing rules make the likelihood of errors very high and it is the recipients who bear the brunt.

So it is about rates and more. Solutions require a much better understanding of what it is like living in poverty. I find the work of Charles Karelis compelling. He shows how, contrary to traditional economic thinking, if you are in a situation where your basic needs are not yet met, every additional dollar is worth more, not less, as an incentive to go the next distance to get more income. If the goal of getting a job is too far away and there are too many obstacles, it looks hopeless and not worth it. In Ontario, a single mom can have almost her whole welfare cheque go directly to her landlord at the first of the month, leaving her with no money until her child benefits arrive three weeks later. During that time she tries to be as still as possible in order to not get hungry so that what little food is available can go to her children. Newfoundland and Labrador's approach to lone parents that increased welfare benefits to exceed the poverty line and provided support with child care seems to bear out that providing more support helps lone mothers get and keep employment.

This is far more logical than expecting people to do well the more desperate you make them. Science shows that the harder and more stressful things are for people, the less able we are to make decisions--good, bad or otherwise.

Recent work on scarcity by Mullainathan and Shafir is also illuminating. We all face limits and trade-offs and we all make mistakes and bad decisions from time to time, but we may not experience them as such and they don't affect most of us because we have the luxury of slack in our lives. Scarcity, however, creates scarcity. With little slack, there is greater potential to fail and it leads to greater errors. This is both a 'psychological problem and a mathematical fact - living with scarcity makes things logistically harder and the world is computationally more complex'. From this vantage point, no bureaucracy or in-kind support is going to be much help with daily complexity in extreme scarcity. Money with no strings attached, that lets people sleep at night and get up the next morning better able to deal with life, is a prerequisite.

In our current social assistance model, after we strip people's assets and reduce their capacity to make decisions in a logistically more complex world, we then introduce the most byzantine set of rules and regulations anyone could ever imagine, demand they obey, be nice and not get angry and send them out on the only path of escape - finding a job that might or might not be there. It almost makes the "Hunger Games" sound noble in comparison.

Given the much greater knowledge and experience we have today compared to when social assistance systems began, continuing down this path is morally wrong from my perspective and arguably a violation of human rights. But from a policy perspective, it is also pragmatically expensive and counterproductive because it does not and cannot work. I grant

that a basic income is going to be expensive, at least at first (as most investments in doing something well usually are). But it will get a far better result and can generate savings over time.

Design Issues

As mentioned earlier, I am inclined to agree that two of the models Kesselman proposes are likely non-starters in Canada but I find that the middle one offers many possibilities. For example, he uses Friedman's calculation of 50% of the tax threshold (the point where people start paying tax on income) for a refundable credit and finds it wanting as it is generally less than most welfare rates for single employable persons.

I agree that is miserly and offers no improvement, as well as being based on a rather flawed rationale. If, however, we assume that it is legitimate for Canadians generally to need about \$11 or \$12K (the tax threshold, called the personal amount in Canada) to live on before we are obliged to pay taxes, why not extend the same recognition to everyone as a matter of fairness and make the full amount refundable? If there is a legitimate rationale that some people ought to be expected to live on less (and for me that does not include the fear that people won't work) perhaps it could be set at 80 or 90%, enough that it would serve to prevent people from having to resort to welfare at a minimum. As mentioned earlier, security, autonomy and avoiding the threat of loss of scarce resources matter enormously. It is also an option to set a basic income at a level that more fully assures the ability to meet basic needs and to participate in society, an option that will more reliably keep people out of poverty and improve societal wellbeing.

A basic calculation would not preclude the tax system from continuing to recognize disability, for example by making that credit refundable (not because people with disabilities are more deserving but because they have disability-related needs and costs that others do not). Similarly the tax system could continue to recognize the challenges of lone-parenthood, again by making relevant credits refundable. The Working Income Tax Benefit could be rolled into a basic income or as an immediate step, have some conditions removed, making it more available, for example to recent graduates who are having difficulty finding a job. Harvey Stevens in Manitoba, among others, has also looked for tax breaks with questionable rationales and effectiveness that could be reconfigured to help finance a basic income. Income-splitting that benefits wealthy families, various boutique credits and the age credit are examples.

Given Canada's policy history, the odds of seeing a fully developed basic income guarantee introduced right away are probably not as high as many of us would desire, even though a bolder, more fulsome approach at the outset would get better results. Unfortunately, it is more likely that we would begin with modest measures that can mature over time, similar to child benefits that started out lower than recommended but have been increasing. It is especially important, if this must be the case, that the policy be designed well to ensure that it provides the foundation for sustained, positive development. For me that means it must provide a genuine and far better alternative to the social assistance model at the outset (even if there still may be need, for a time, for welfare to deal with residual, emergency cases).

As to many other design details, I think we have paid far too little attention to the fact that we have been paying out child benefits for about two decades - but *not* to children. The cheque goes to working age adults. Their other income can fluctuate with a promotion, an increase in part time work, illness, job loss, on welfare, off welfare, etc. Are they rejecting overtime, or refusing to take training, failing to save or to support their children because of their marginal tax rates, as Kesselman suggests would occur? What happens to their own and their children's

wellbeing over time? Are they wasting our tax dollars on bad behaviour? What has happened with the use of services over this time? has it changed? have trips to the hospital for this group changed? People have definitely come off welfare roles with child benefits--was there a large impact on job loss in that sector as a result as people fear with the introduction of a basic income? Mark Stabile's research should reassure us on some counts--that we need not worry about dire work withdrawal, that money is being spent on children and that alcohol and tobacco consumption decreased. The Federal/Provincial/Territorial government evaluations of the child benefit system show similar positive results, with reductions in the incidence and depth of poverty among them.

It is important to know more about the details of the operation of children's benefits to determine what we can learn from answers to these and other questions. One thing that is significant is that the cheque usually goes to mothers so we need to understand if gender dynamics have changed. Maybe this is precisely why this form of basic income seems to work and is well supported. Have men complained? Maybe our reluctance to consider a basic income for people without children and our concern about work disincentives is because we are harbouring a distrust of men, especially younger, single men, that we do not want to admit or face?

Kesselman cites an issue with responsiveness as a failing of child benefits but that too offers experience that can suggest ways it could be improved. Another matter that has been raised by people living in poverty is the question of overpayments (welfare requires monthly reconciliation and mistakes are not uncommon, with repayments often haunting recipients for years, even after they have left welfare and are trying to get on with their lives). It is important to learn if there have been significant problems for child benefit recipients owing taxes they were not expecting or had difficulty paying? If so, how has this been managed? There is a great deal that we stand to learn from many years of experience in order to improve upon and expand what is working.

In the strategy that Kesselman proposes there are a number of good ideas that are underway and warrant greater support, such as child care and pharmaceutical coverage and I agree that we need a strategy to refine and better support 'policy instruments known to improve the lives of people living in poverty in meaningful ways'. I think most Canadians, however, would consider that seniors' and children's benefits are among those providing the most significant improvement, as measured in reducing the incidence, depth and duration of poverty and in improving wellbeing measured in ways that go beyond money. Many of the other policies, and most especially social assistance, have demonstrated little lasting success, with the growth in homelessness, increasing use of foodbanks, and very deep poverty among working-age Canadians living alone among the indicators. The guaranteed incomes delivered through children's and seniors' benefits, therefore, represent a model worth pursuing. He would extend such a guaranteed income to people with disabilities on grounds of fairness, improving their lives by treating them like seniors and taking them off welfare because they are not 'expected' to work. This may be a positive step for some people, ironically providing greater support for people with disabilities to work, but it further entrenches discriminatory treatment of many others by denying employment support and greater security in meeting the most basic of needs without which one cannot work. As long as our current social assistance model prevails, there is scant hope for anyone of working age who does want and need to work. Why should fairness not matter to them too?

We will not get a 'perfect' basic income but we can get a very good one. There may be some hard trade-offs to be made in expanding cash transfers to people of working age, but we can and must do much better than welfare as a system of delivering money. We can reduce the incidence and depth of poverty and restore fairness, dignity, security, control and hope. We can

plan well and ensure sustained progress and refinement as a basic income and other measures work together and mature. We cannot just throw up our hands and say we can't afford to support adults in their efforts to work and contribute. By doing so we will continue to inflict severe damage, give people reason to consider thievery, and make it harder in many ways for them to be productive members of society or to work at all. We can't afford, in human or financial terms, to spend our resources just dealing with the expensive consequences of preventable tragedies.

Many ideas over time that have significantly improved wellbeing, including our iconic medicare system, public pensions and the right of women to vote or to be employed, were initially charged with being unfeasible and worse. Such barriers were overcome through hard work and dedication and we are all the better for it. Basic income is a good idea that is needed now and for our future. Our challenge is to take something desired and *make* it feasible; that demands a proactive and creative approach to basic income and Canada is well-placed to do it.