



Special Issue: A Basic Income for a Complex Society

A basic income for a complex society: Introduction

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Abstract

Proposals for a Universal Basic Income (UBI) have a long history, but a surge of interest since the global financial crisis suggests a connection to growing inequality and insecurity. The pandemic intensified interest through the global explosion in the use of cash transfers. This special issue arose from pre-pandemic debates among Australian sociologists connecting global interest around UBI to emerging patterns of inequality and insecurity stemming from Australia's precarious labour market and expensive housing market. Those discussions broadened to reflect on Australia's colonial history and patriarchal economy, and the potential to recognise more diverse contributions and values. Evolving through the Covid crisis, the issue now incorporates the remarkable alternatives that were, briefly, made possible. The articles reflect both scepticism and optimism towards UBI, but all reveal how basic income can provide a useful lens for Australian sociology – a simple tool responding to an increasingly complex society.

Keywords

basic income, economic insecurity, housing, social welfare, work

Basic income for a complex society?

Crisis and inequality have driven an upsurge of interest in Universal Basic Income (UBI) globally. From automation to the global financial crisis (GFC) and, more recently, the pandemic, the instability of global capitalism, and the insecurities it increasingly produces, have shaped new critiques. As work has become less secure

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and incomes less equal, a reliable and unconditional source of income becomes more appealing. The policy also offers an unusual combination of simplicity and radicalism, perhaps helping to explain the very different ideological bedfellows who support it, from Friedman's (1966) 'negative income tax proposal' to the progressive Australian Greens party's call for a UBI trial in regional New South Wales (NSW Greens, 2019). In Australia, public support has been more consistently progressive (Carroll & Engel, 2021) and has grown in recent years. Several polls, including in one reported in this volume, have shown majority public support for a basic income (Azize, 2021; Hutchens, 2020; Patulny & Spies-Butcher, 2023). However, as with international debates, policy progress has proven far harder to achieve than media attention. Reflecting on how efforts towards basic income respond to global challenges, and how those efforts are refracted through Australia's institutions and history can help us think through our complex society.

The GFC was a watershed moment. Instead of embracing the calls of protesters to rethink the dominance of financial capital, governments instead enforced austerity. Against this, progressive thinkers positioned basic income as a form of 'practical' or 'real' Utopia (Bregman, 2018; Standing, 2014; Wright, 2013). It was potentially the kind of reform that, while radical, was at least imaginable, and might open more transformative possibilities. In Australia the impacts of the great recession were initially muted, partly because of the swift action to send cash payments to households. But over time wages began to stagnate (Stewart et al., 2022) as house prices continued to rise (Adkins et al., 2021), fostering very similar conditions to those driving basic income interest elsewhere.

The GFC marked a shift in elite economic opinion too, as international institutions began to decry inequality (OECD, 2011). While less political, this helped fuel technocratic interest in basic income. The experiences of cash payments in the Global South (see Peck & Theodore, 2015) informed social entrepreneurs in aid and development to explore individual cash payments as an alternative to more structured – and politicised – aid programs (see GiveDirectly, n.d.). Northern governments, too, often driven by the desire to be seen as innovative, began trials and pilots. Nowhere was basic income implemented as such, but a plethora of experiments (re-)started from Finland (Kangas et al., 2019) to India (Davala, 2019). More slowly, social pressure also began to grow. A referendum was held in Switzerland (see Liu, 2020). A presidential candidate gained surprising support in the USA (Wu, 2020). Post-austerity social movements campaigned in Spain (see Noguera, 2019).

The basic income debate is difficult to pin down. It has been conceptualised through lenses both utopian and technocratic; left and right; techno-futurist and degrowth. And while popular interest has been strong, policy achievements have been more modest (Chrisp & De Wispelaere, 2022). The combination of passionate enthusiasm and limited impact reflects an ongoing disconnect between basic income as an idea and the organised interests of politics. Unions have generally been resistant (Henderson & Quiggin, 2019; Vanderborght, 2006). Few major political parties have embraced it. And while some social movements support basic income, it is hard to find a significant movement with basic income at its core. Even where it has advanced, it has generally taken on diverse forms, rather than a

universal model. Diversity reflects the importance of local context and history, of the policy institutions it seeks to complement and the interests that defend them. But everywhere its advance is linked to crisis and insecurity.

If the impacts of post-GFC austerity gave an initial impetus to basic income proposals, the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to hyper-charge the debate. Across the world, cash payments became the policy tool of choice. An astonishing 17% of humanity received a pandemic related cash payment, the most common social policy response globally (Gentilini et al., 2022). Only a few payments, such as those in Korea and Tuvalu, were genuinely universal. But many had elements of an ‘Emergency Basic Income’ (De Wispelaere & Morales, 2021). In Europe, conventional social insurance proved more capable of managing the crisis with less policy novelty. Universality was most common in the Asia-Pacific (Gentilini et al., 2022). In Australia, a pair of relatively generous, relatively long-lasting payments (so-named ‘JobKeeper’ and ‘JobSeeker’) temporarily replaced the cruel ‘poverty machine’ of conditional workfare (O’Connell, 2022). Unlike previous crises, social policy not only mitigated impacts on the poor – poverty actually fell (Davidson, 2022).

These events form the backdrop and inspiration for this special issue. It first emerged in 2019 from discussions in The Australian Sociological Association’s (TASA) Thematic Group on Work, Labour and Economy, which Fabian Cannizzo convened. It reflected growing interest in basic income in Australia and plans to host the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) World Congress in Brisbane. Framed at that time against concerns over rising inequality and insecurity, the discussion focused primarily on the relationship between basic income and work.

Initial drafts of four papers by Lauren Kelly, Troy Henderson, Andrew Clarke and Zoe Staines were presented to a workshop funded by TASA, held in November of 2020. All the papers brought together global themes with local circumstances. They asked how Australia’s traditions of unionism and labourism shaped debates on work, how our expensive and insecure housing shaped the relationship between income and homelessness and how Australia’s settler colonial project shaped the early experiments with basic income within Indigenous communities, and how those experiments were being rethought by communities today.

The workshop was greatly aided by several experienced discussants, including Greg Marston, Alison Pennington, Hal Pawson, Nicholas Smith, Loriana Luccioni, Jon Altman and two others who later became contributors, Ben Spies-Butcher and Elise Klein. By design, not all supported basic income. Rather, we saw basic income as a useful lens through which to debate shared interests in inequality, work, economic security and policy. Following the workshop we issued a call for papers for this edition. Alongside Australian perspectives we added the international perspective of Jurgen De Wispelaere and Joe Chrisp, reflecting on the crisis conditions of the pandemic.

Alongside our efforts, interest in and the infrastructure around basic income proposals were growing. An older, nascent basic income movement, largely organised as the Australian wing of BIEN, began to expand from the mid-2010s. In 2016 the Greens Institute, led by Tim Hollo, published a discussion paper on basic income (Hollo, 2016), coinciding with a shift to embrace the policy within the Australian

Greens. In 2017 the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA) funded a workshop, led by Jon Altman and Elise Klein, exploring basic income in Australia. The papers were later published as *Implementing a Basic Income in Australia*, by Palgrave (Klein et al., 2019), just as our discussions through TASA were taking shape.

During this time, sociological and policy researchers were exploring the application of a UBI to a range of social issues and testing the political will for such a policy initiative. Issues that a UBI has been proposed to address include rising social inequality (Spies-Butcher et al., 2020), poverty and insecurity (Standing, 2017), technological disruption of workforces (Arthur, 2016), some injustices arising from colonisation (Altman & Klein, 2018), and patriarchal domination (Schulz, 2017). While popular appeal and a growing body of research suggests that there is utility in developing and trialling basic income schemes to address global and local social issues, political resistance to UBI policies persists. In 2021, an announcement of a Welsh basic income pilot by First Minister Mark Drakeford was met by scorn from the Conservatives, saying that Wales should not be ‘a petri dish for failed left-wing policies’ (Standing, 2021). The success of more than 20 pilots of UBI across nations (see Standing, 2017, 2020) has not overcome inertia towards an ‘expensive’ intervention or mitigated politicisation towards UBI as a policy idea, posing challenges to sociological engagement with the construct beyond the progressive/reactionary framing.

Following the pandemic, interest in UBI policies and basic income more generally widened again (for example, the push for a basic income for artists; Caust, 2022). In 2021 the Australian Basic Income Lab was launched by Sydney, Macquarie and the Australian National universities, initiated by three of our contributors – Troy, Ben and Elise. About the same time, one of the nation’s largest non-profit social service organisations, Anglicare Australia, published *Valuing Every Contribution: What a Basic Income Would Mean for Australians* (Azize, 2021). Anglicare’s national advocacy strengthened a growing grassroots campaign against Australia’s cruel, stingy and conditional welfare system led by the Australian Unemployed Workers Union and the Anti-Poverty Centre. The organisers of this emerging movement met alongside many of our contributors at a rescheduled BIEN World Congress in Brisbane in September 2022, and undoubtedly informed many of these papers.

As this history suggests, basic income has been a more uniformly progressive project in Australia than in many other countries (see also Carroll & Engel, 2021). While significant scepticism remains within the union movement and the Labor Party, there are some modest signs of a broader embrace. Key to the evolving debate is unwinding the ‘poverty machine’ that has taken over the social security system, and the insecurities of Australia’s financialised housing system – both key themes of this volume. The contributions do not agree on basic income as the best – or even a ‘good’ – response to such challenges. However, we believe reflecting on basic income can help us clarify underlying challenges – of ensuring secure incomes and work, of recognising diverse contributions, and of mitigating financial insecurity. In an era of seemingly perpetual crisis, even polycrisis, basic income can help us rethink Australian capitalism.

Contributions to this special issue on basic income

The first three contributions in this special issue address the meaning of ‘work’ in social policy and basic income proposals. The first contribution, ‘Work and wellbeing in remote Australia: Moving beyond punitive “workfare”’ by Zoe Staines, considers the utility of a basic income as an alternative to current employment policies and social security provisions for remote Australians. Approximately 80% of participants of the Community Development Program (CDP), a ‘workfare’ scheme that makes lump-sum grants equivalent to unemployment benefits distributed as wages for locally useful work, are First Nations Peoples. The conclusion of the CDP in 2023 has sparked policy discussions about what forms of governance and social welfare reform might replace it. Staines explores three current proposals: applying the wage-subsidy component of the Remote Development and Employment Scheme exclusively to remote Australia; a job guarantee; and a liveable income guarantee. While each of these programs has advantages and limitations for improving the wellbeing of remote-living First Nations Peoples and addressing gendered labour-market inequalities, a UBI would further enable community and regional autonomy.

In Lauren Kelly’s contribution, ‘Re-politicising the future of work: Automation anxieties, Universal Basic Income, and the end of techno-optimism’, the techno-optimism that has guided narratives that automation and AI will transform the world of work is challenged through a survey of recent empirical work. While automation has come to enhance capitalist logics of extraction and control, this has not come alongside the ‘liberation’ of workers from the dangers and drudgery of manual work. Kelly points to the political economy of automation as an explanation for why technological innovation has not achieved the techno-optimistic vision of workplace technologies that serve the broader public good. Given this political economy of workplace technologies, Kelly argues that the assumptions shaping a UBI policy will need to be equally attendant to the political economy of policy. Instead of techno-Utopianism, Kelly looks to the experiences of actually existing workplace automation to call for a re-politicisation of the future of work debates and responses.

In ‘Basic income and the work problem – The fear of exodus and the freedom to leave’, Troy Henderson continues the discussion of the technological displacement of labour in exploring the structural barriers to implementing a basic income. Henderson echoes Kelly’s scepticism of the techno-optimistic vision of automation replacing work as a rationale for implementing a UBI. Instead, he argues that the problems around work should be partially disentangled from proposals for a basic income. Pointing to the historical resistance of employers to policies that relieve workers of dependence on employment for the satisfaction of basic needs (i.e. collective bargaining, unemployment benefits), he asserts that a UBI policy will face similar resistance due to the structural interests of employers. The political success of UBI is therefore bound up with diminishing the cultural power of the ‘work ethic’ and the distinction between the ‘deserving and undeserving poor’. That is, basic income must be understood as a ‘universal social right’ rather than a policy solution to a technocratic problem.

The next two contributions explore the role of basic income in addressing social security and the provision of basic human needs. The fourth article, ‘Can a basic income help

address homelessness? A Titmussian perspective' by Andrew Clarke, considers whether a basic income proposal could transform policies and interventions to address homelessness. Drawing on Richard Titmuss's claim that targeted welfare measures tend to produce 'a stigmatising logic of discrimination', he proposes that a universal income could be part of both a structural reform of welfare policy and a cultural reform by contributing to a sense of social solidarity, as underpins the welfare regimes of some northern European states. By exploring the structural drivers of homelessness, including housing affordability and the inadequacy of incomes of low-income earners, Clarke frames basic income as a means of addressing the income side drivers of homelessness and housing affordability by ensuring income security. However, he qualifies, such a policy would need to be enacted alongside an expansion of social housing to promote supply-side affordability and stability.

In 'Understanding Covid-19 emergency social security measures as a form of basic income: Lessons from Australia', researchers Elise Klein, Kay Cook, Susan Maury and Kelly Bowey explore the impacts of social security and income support measures that were put in place during the Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020. They draw on survey results to investigate how the loosening of conditionality and mutual obligations requirements (which made these schemes more like universal forms of basic income) helped to alleviate poverty and improve wellbeing during the public health crisis. Their work identifies the role of unconditional income support in improving financial security, helping the population meet basic material needs, improving psychological wellbeing, and improving the welfare of children. However, the authors clarify, gendered and economic inequalities did increase during the Covid-19 lockdowns as well, arguing that basic income policies cannot be relied upon as discrete strategies for redressing social inequalities, but must be implemented alongside more radical economic restructuring in order to address those inequalities.

The final two articles explore popular support and public interest in basic income policies. The sixth article, 'Come together? The unusual combination of precariat materialist and educated post-materialist support for an Australian Universal Basic Income' by Roger Patulny and Ben Spies-Butcher, draws on data from the 2019–2020 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes to assess contemporary support for a UBI in Australia. Set against the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the research team identifies a majority (51%) support for a UBI in Australia, as well as higher levels of support among those facing greater material precarity and those holding post-materialist values (such as left-wing voters). In contrast to other countries (such as those within the comparable European Social Survey), Australian support is more closely tied to post-materialist values, especially among those with a university degree. Alternatively, support also reflects the local structures of economic insecurity, particularly among Australia's precarious renters and those in the suburbs. The authors argue that the diversity of sources of public support for a basic income presents challenges and 'potentially contradictory strategies' to basic income advocates.

The final contribution, 'A basic income for every crisis? Towards a political economy framework' by Jurgen De Wispelaere and Joe Chrisp, assesses the emergencies and crises that have given rise to renewed interest in basic income policies. It takes a critical approach to the claim that basic income has become popular because of its use as a


solution to recent crises, instead drawing on a political economy of basic income to argue that support for a basic income is influenced by the characteristics of the crisis – whether cyclical or more structurally permanent. They argue that cyclical economic crises, such as recessions, may produce support for basic income that is ‘both superficial and temporary’, while the support offered through structural change (such as deindustrialisation, automation, or environmental crises) is highly dependent on how that change impacts economic groups. Basic income, the authors argue, is ill-suited as a ‘crisis policy’ for short-term events, as its implementation will need the formation of coalitions of support that cannot be sustained by passing crises.


The recent change in government in Australia, to a centre-progressive Labor government, has seen the scaling back of some workfare schemes (such as shifting ParentsNext from a mandatory workfare program to a voluntary service), the strengthening of industrial relations protections for temporary workers, and the expansion of affordable housing (through the expansion of the National Housing Infrastructure Facility). These interlinked issues of affordability, workfare and precarity are increasingly acknowledged; however, the political strategies being enacted seem unable to effectively address those issues. While this special issue does not promise to create a consensus, even among our contributors, about the merits of a UBI for Australia, it does expand the diversity of viewpoints who have a stake in the UBI debate. Sociologists working in aligned fields are invited to contribute to this conversation and consider how a radical policy departure may impact social life more broadly. The potential for a seemingly simple policy like UBI to shape labour relations, poverty and economic exclusion, gendered inequalities, cultural production, political activism, homelessness, cultural norms and civic values suggests it is a useful lens for thinking through the social. The breadth of these implications no doubt also explains why UBI policies have been subject of lengthy, contentious debates in political spheres. Broadening the sociological debate surrounding UBI in Australia, we hope, can build a growing foundation of systematic research and policy experiments in the field of UBI studies, and inform our understanding of Australian society.

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