

# **BIG Push Meeting**

**April 30, 2014 at the offices of United Way in Burlington**

## **Foreword**

These notes form an informal account of the meeting. A formal report on the meeting will follow. The notes set out here are impressionistic, summarizing the experience of Robyn Peterson, who attended the meeting in full.

## **Representation**

The meeting went well. About 18 people from different areas and organizations were in attendance. A detailed list of those who attended should follow in the formal report.

People were attending from Halton–Peel, Niagara Region, Kitchener, Toronto and Orillia, as well as Ottawa.

## **The Basic Income Guarantee**

The "BIG" in BIG Push stands for "basic income guarantee". This was the term used in the Senate report, "In From the Margins" back in 2009, although I don't think that was the reason it was chosen. Rob noted that the BIG might also be called a "citizen's income" or a "guaranteed annual income". He said the exact terminology was not important.

## **Money for the push**

Rob noted the need for money to support the BIG Push effort. He said we were at the initial stages of fund raising. I think he mentioned a figure of \$300,000 (my hearing isn't the best these days). Rob himself will be leaving the BIG Push campaign to take up a post with the Green Party in Ottawa. No word on who will replace him with the BIG Push.

## **How long has the idea been around?**

At one point we had a sharp discussion about how long this guaranteed income question had been around. I pointed out that it had been called for in the Croll Report of 1971 and that the Mincome experiment in Dauphin, Manitoba, had been the pilot for the concept. Senator Segal, of course, has made regular statements of support. Then too, Milton Friedman said, back in the 1970s, that it would be a necessary adjunct to his monetarist reforms.

## **Many different groups are at work**

We did agree that there has been too much compartmentalization, with different groups pursuing their own agendas without an overall cohesive theme. The meeting agreed that we needed a "Big Idea" as something we could

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coalesce around and help society in general understand. We need transformative change, not incremental steps.

### **Need to lobby politicians**

Most of the people present agreed that politicians of all stripes needed to be lobbied about the desirability of a guaranteed income. I noted that Senator Hugh Segal was a staunch supporter, and he remained a Conservative. It seemed reasonable that lobbying could readily cross party lines. In fact, we wanted to be sure that the concept was not seen as something only lefties supported. Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, after all, had supported the idea, even saying it was necessary in a neoliberal society.

### **Implementation**

We did have a fair bit of discussion on exactly how it would work. In a somewhat bureaucratic fashion, John Stapleton laid out the possibilities, including the possible use of a negative income tax. Further elaboration on the exact implementation approach seemed advisable.

### **Dealing with the cost**

The group agreed also that we needed to be able to show how much money would be saved in health, crime reduction, and so forth as offsets to the costs of a GAI program. Essentially, the GAI should work out as a good investment for our society. In fact, it could end up costing less than our present proliferation of different programs in different provinces.

### **Piloting with the GIS**

One person suggested that the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) for seniors already gave us a working model of a guaranteed income program. Other programs existed already as well. So the general thought was that we could build on what we already have and make this a feature to explain the concept in tangible terms.

### **Obtaining middle class support**

At one point there was a fair emphasis about how to convince middle class people of the need for a guaranteed income. I think John Stapleton emphasized this point. Many people have existing negative perceptions about the poor and these perceptions would have to shift in order to get them on board. John Kenneth Galbraith, of course, highlighted the existence of the "contented" in our society in his book, *The Culture of Contentment*. People do tend to vote against things if they think their taxes will rise. Feelings about the "undeserving poor" do abound.

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I was uncomfortable with some of John's points. He seemed to say that we needed to bring all middle class people along. This seems a bit dubious given the fact that 1–3% of the population are psychopaths. Further, Daniel Goleman, the man who brought us the concept of “emotional intelligence”, wrote a piece in the New York Times last year in which he noted that many people increase their selfishness as their incomes rise. Such people would not likely be convinced, even by the best arguments.

### **A poll for us**

Rob told us that he had some contacts in the polling industry and that it might be possible for us to commission a poll at no cost to dig into public attitudes related to a guaranteed annual income. That might be helpful as we seek to develop an effective communication strategy.

### **Bringing on the money**

I heard no discussion about the use of money directly created by government as in the public banking concept Ellen Brown has so well laid out. We keep getting this horrible phrase, “taxpayer money”, showing up, which distorts the picture of public funds. Trish Hennessey at CCPA has said we should ban this term. She said it was “filth”, and I agree with her.

### **Pilot project first?**

Considerable discussion arose concerning setting up a pilot project first and then pushing for a complete program. Generally, this was seen as a means of delay. The sense of the group appeared to be that we needed to go for the whole thing without a pilot. Some discussion occurred on this point related to PEI. Premier Ghiz had talked of an income guarantee program for that province. If that came about, it would, de facto, be a pilot for the entire country. People generally agreed that Ghiz should be supported in his efforts.

### **We've got to communicate!**

It was agreed that communication was a vital component of continuing activities. There is a need to get ideas and information out to bring society in general along. To this end it seems that a website is either now operating or in the offing. Then too I think some Facebook activity is ongoing.

### **Advocacy or activism**

Some felt we needed to emphasize advocacy and not activism. I suggested we might focus on “active advocacy”. In general, there was a strong feeling that we needed to get the message out.

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### **Produce a charter!**

Many in the group felt that we needed to put together a charter for our big idea. Something we could give out to the world. I noted that the Toronto Charter of 2003 had set out key items for a good society based on the social determinants of health. This charter came out of a conference at York University at the end of 2002. Apparently, it was unknown to the meeting.

### **Official account of our meeting**

We will be receiving an "official" report of the meeting in due course. I hope to see more of the specifics then.

### **Final thoughts**

I wasn't left with a clear idea of "where to next". But I think it will be a question of further meetings and the formation of some sort of team to engage in follow through. We had some sense that "big names" such as John Ralston Saul, would be contacted.

All in all, we had a good group of concerned people who were in general agreement about getting something meaningful happening when it comes to a guaranteed annual income. At the moment, though, it appears that the substance of support, particularly "money", is a problem. We'll certainly have to be alert to what tangible actions may happen next.

I guess my own basic reaction is one of cautious optimism.