

BASIC INCOME EARTH NETWORK (BIEN) CONGRESS 2018
CLOSING REFLECTIONS
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I am not just going to give my own reflections of various plenaries or particular parallel sessions of the last four days. It would be pointless. You all have attended them and already have your own reflections.

Since I had the privilege of attending the first BIEN conference in Louvain-La-Neuve in September 1986, I would like to give my reflections on how things have changed over 32 years. I have here a list of mainly theoretical research papers, that were presented in 1986. They covered a fair range of topics. We have a paper on definitions by Philippe Van Parijs, a paper on BI and women by myself. We have two sessions on basic income and different ideologies, in which Jan Otto Andersson's name appears; another session on Political Strategies including Alexander de Roo's name, (as does that of Neils Meyer, co-author of the 1978 *Revolt From The Centre*); a session on aspects of labour, with a paper by Guy Standing; a session on Basic income and the Claimants' Movement, and finally a session on the state of the debate in different countries with contributions from Walter Van Trier and Robert Van De Veen, all of whom (except Neils Meyer) have attended BIEN 2018.

When we compare 2018 with 1986, we see that the basis of the congress is still a broad range of theoretical research papers, but usually in more depth now, and that the topics have extended to include, for instance, BI and ecology, BI and disability, alternative currencies, a world-wide BI, trades unions and the theoretical aspects of BI experiments. I would like to see more papers about constitutional safeguards for BI systems, and legal protections for recipients – from debt-collectors, for instance.

In addition to the continuing adverse effects of climate change, globalization and the financial crisis of 2008, there has been growing concern about the increasing effects of artificial intelligence and new technologies on wages and unemployment. While some have pointed out that old jobs have been replaced by ones in the new technologies, it ignores the decades of misery before they catch up. Automation does not present a new concern. It is merely one more cause of poverty and inequality which is the driver for so many of us in this movement, and which has beset too many people, especially women and children, for far too long. However, one optimistic aspect of this phenomenon is that, since automation and precarious employment is now encroaching on the professional and middle classes, we might hope to attract more powerful allies to our cause.

At a conference in London in 2014, a British politician advised us that the main Westminster parties are aware that the UK's contributory National Insurance and means-tested Social Assistance systems are broken, but none knows what to do about it, and none will put their necks on the block until it has been made safe to do so. Safety entails two requirements.

Firstly, it must involve some empirical experimental evidence – not just to show that it brings about the anticipated good outcomes, but, even more importantly, (even though one cannot

prove a negative), to show that no disastrous unintended consequences will follow. Now, we are seeing increasing activity in this area in this congress, with further testing of past data, the ongoing experiments around the world, and the planning of new ones. Karl Widerquist has often said that research is not enough. And he is right about that. But it is also true that our research must be exemplary. Good quality research is a necessary condition for change to take place, but it is not sufficient on its own to influence evidence-based decisions. We need activists also.

The second requirement is that an informed public must be demanding that a BI scheme be implemented. Even more importantly, the informed public must reclaim their democracy, and engage with, and teach, their elected representatives, who will be the ones who will vote on whether BI schemes are implemented in the future. These are important educational and campaigning roles for BI activists. It has been pleasing and educational to me to hear about the dissemination technique of framing and the importance of narrative in persuading people to be open-minded to new ideas. These are completely different from the skills of the academic; the two communities are complementary and must work co-operatively to change attitudes and power relations in society.

Thus, we can see that there are layers to the movement, with theoretical research forming a broad base. Empirical research forms another layer, mapping the topics in the theoretical layer, and the activism is a further layer, influencing the public and opinion-formers, policy-makers and politicians. I know that I am not alone in struggling to map out a comprehensive structure into which to insert my own BI ideas and facts. There seem to be too many inter-related parts. Maybe three layers could help to simplify the schema?

Another enormous change since 1986, is that of the technology at our fingertips. Now many of us have access to word-processing programs, sophisticated statistical techniques, microsimulation software and, for many of us, access to official data sources – not always the data that one wants or in the form in which one would like it, but, nevertheless, an enormous improvement. Many of us now have access to information online, that previously was only available by consulting books and journals in a library. In addition, we all are now connected by fast and diverse communications. One innovation in this congress has been the inclusion of a film festival, which is fantastic. And I have not had time to attend any of it.

There is always so much going on, and, in spite of being involved in this debate for over thirty years, I am still learning. My one gripe about BIEN Congresses is that I feel frustrated at missing out on so many interesting parts. There are always several competing papers in each of the parallel sessions that I would like to attend, but until I learn how to be in two places at once, I shall continue to miss out on so much. What is the solution? One might be able to read all the abstracts, but for someone who is dyslexic, like me, it is so much easier to listen and discuss things face to face.

Another difference between 1986 and now is that we used to call it 'Basic Income'. Now it is called UBI. What is this all about? It seems to be a generational phenomenon. What is the difference between BI and UBI? And is it universal or unconditional, and what about individual? Really, it should be UIUBI. And so, BIEN would become UIUBIEN. If we wish

to use superfluous adjectives and initials in order to educate the public about BI's defining characteristics, let us be really pedantic and base it on the BIEN definition. It is a *periodic cash* payment, so it should be PCUIUBI. Please starting practising 'PCUIUBI'. Or why not just use plain 'BI'?

And, talking about the characteristics that define a BI – when the structural faults of the means-tested Social Assistance system are addressed and corrected – the couple or household assessment becomes individual-based, targeting is replaced by universalism, differential levels of payment become undifferentiated except that they could be age-related, and the conditionality designed to influence behavior melts away. Thus, out of the wreckage of the old system, the BI emerges like a flower.

In the past year, I have been accused both of being a communist and of getting into bed with billionaires. Strangely, this makes me feel quite optimistic, since it implicitly recognizes that BI is not a one-horse system. It will not have just one outcome, but a range of possible objectives – equity, efficiency and liberty – that appeal to both left and right, although with different priorities. This emphasizes that fact that, while the majority of delegates here would not demur at being described as left-wing, we must also be able to speak in an inclusive way to people with right-wing leanings. I find that when I talk with people about the broad objectives that a BI could help to fulfill directly – to respect and value all individuals and emancipate them; to prevent or reduce poverty and increase wellbeing; to redistribute income, creating a more just and inclusive society; to restore the incentives for paid work which means-testing destroys; and to simplify the administration of benefits and make it less intrusive – there is little – apart from perhaps redistribution – that right-wingers disagree with. It is important to discuss BI with those who have a different perspective, so that a broad coalition of political opinion can take the BI movement forward.

I was accused of getting into bed with billionaires at a recent lively session on BI at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. At one stage, the chair asked the audience how many would be willing to pay up to 50% income tax in order to pay for a BI, and about three-quarters of them raised their hands!

Talking about billionaires, I have often wondered what makes the 0.1% richest and most powerful of the world's seven billion population tick. They control governments, own banks and the media, and seem to have undue influence in too many pies. They seem like an alien breed to me. I note that they don't seem to be prepared to share responsibility for anyone else, which smacks of immaturity. They must have enormous inferiority complexes that can only be assuaged by being rich and powerful. They seem to distrust everyone – is this part of a guilt complex? And finally, they don't seem to be able to empathise with other people, especially with the misery of poor people. We call people like that 'sociopaths'. While damaged children might deserve a certain amount of sympathy, they are also very destructive, and they should certainly not be given powerful toys to play with. How come that it appears to be people with potentially severe personality defects that control much of the world?

An aspect of BIEN congresses that makes it special for me is the composition of delegates. There seem to be more young people here this year, or is this just a matter of my age, and

everyone seeming to get younger as I get older? This is *your* future that we are trying to create, and it is important that you become engaged in the debate. I love the fact that you are inter-disciplinary, and that you bring such a breadth of understanding to the congress. I love the fact that we are so international, but it leaves me feeling inadequate, because I am a monolingual Anglophone. I am so grateful to all of you who come here speaking English as a second language, which makes things so much easier for me, but puts an extra strain on many of you. Please believe me, we do not take it for granted. Finally, we are a mixture of skills and experience – academics, activists, civil servants, politicians, journalists, film-makers, and people at the sharp end who have experienced the shortcomings of our social security systems at first hand, and some who have even experienced the difference that a BI can make.

The icing on the cake for me is that I have always found the BIEN congresses very friendly. It is wonderful to be among like-minded people, and to feel part of a warm and caring family. Although we are just ordinary folk with the usual range of strengths and weaknesses, I have always found that there is something else special about us, and that is that *'we walk our talk'*. We are not so much wanting just to change our social security systems, but to start a revolution, *a velvet revolution*, to make the world a place fit for humans, while also protecting the other species that comprise the ecosystem. We hold dear the values of compassion, justice, liberty and solidarity and we try to act them out in our own lives. It must be obvious to us all, that if we are part of a movement to implement BI, it can only be possible if it is underpinned by a deep love of humanity. We should be able to look at the most despicable, wretched or evil person and say, 'I may not like you, but I will not judge you, and I respect and care about you enough to want you too to have the blessing of a basic income'.

People like us, who are prepared to walk our talk, could change the world. So, to borrow a Buddhist phrase, please, 'go forth abroad the world with bliss-bestowing hands'.

(Compiled, and augmented slightly, from the notes on which my talk was based.)

This paper can be shared with, and read by, anyone who is interested in Basic Income. Please quote source, if referring to it. Thank you.