

A Most Neglected Movement

In 1920 Dennis Milner was the first person to publish, in the English language, a book length explanation of a universal Basic Income. The book was entitled *Higher Production by a Bonus on National Output. A Proposal for a Minimum Income for All varying with National Income*. This book brought together the 1918 arguments outlined in a 16 page pamphlet written with his wife Mabel and a 78 page book written by his friend Bernard Pickard in 1919. They were Quakers and members of a group promoting what they called a State Bonus Scheme. Essentially Dennis Milner's proposal was that 20% of all incomes in Britain would be pooled and paid as an identical payment to each person irrespective of age.

Milner wrote:

The Minimum income is thus an attempt to secure capability for work by abolishing destitution (as to which it is new only to the extent of its simplicity) and an attempt to encourage willingness to work in an atmosphere devoid of Industrial Compulsion (p.19).

Van Trier (pp.31-32) notes that Milner's ideas were debated at the 1921 Brighton Conference of the British Labour Party. You might suggest that there is nothing remarkable about all that. But it would appear that after 1921 the struggle to introduce a Basic Income waged by the Milners and Pickard was virtually forgotten.

Between 1921 until the 1980s there is hardly a mention of them. Professor Rob Watts in 1984 acknowledges Denis Milner's book as a forerunner to the modern Basic Income debates but it was not until 1989 that Walter Van Trier began to uncover the extent of Milners and Pickard's forgotten contribution to Basic Income. In 1995 Van Trier published his PhD thesis, entitled, *Every one a King*. Over a third of the thesis is devoted to the Milners and Pickard.

Van Trier thesis is in part a detective story about three missing people and the demise of a movement promoting a universal system of income support. Like most writers on income guarantees I had, in 1989, credited Lady Juliet Rhys-Williams with being *the originator* of the idea of guaranteed minimum incomes in 1943. When, in 1975, the Henderson Poverty Inquiry recommended the introduction of a guaranteed minimum income in Australia it was to Rhys-Williams rather than the Milners to which he looked for a model. In the same year, a group of Australian Finance and Treasury officials using the collective name, Priorities Review Staff, put up a counter proposal to Henderson. It was to the right wing economic fundamentalist Milton Friedman's negative income tax model they turned. Neither Rhys-Williams nor Friedman mention the Milners nor Pickard.

Given that it is 81 years since Milner wrote and until recently the memory of Milners and Pickard have been erased by the accumulated detritus of history, one might ask: what is the point of resurrecting their writings? Do these writers have any relevance in current income security debates? Above all are there lessons for people working in the human service industry which can be drawn from their writings?

The answer to all these questions is an emphatic yes!

Milners and Pickard argued for universal payments; that is non-means tested and paid as a right to every permanent resident (irrespective of age) in a country. They were determined that there was to be no compulsion to accept work. They were attempting to replace the misunderstandings, abuses and inequalities of the categorical targeted poor law system with a simple easily understood system. They were writing at the end of the First World War. By the time Rhys-Williams was putting forward her ideas, Friedman claimed to have started thinking about his ideas in the same year, the world was nearing the end of the Second World War and she specifically wanted to exclude from payment able bodied workers who refused employment. By 1962 when Friedman first published his ideas on negative income tax – his ideas came with much of the erosion of workers entitlements, youth wages, the industrial deregulation, abolition of minimum wage provisions, and so forth which we associate with the present globalised industrial and social welfare landscape.

In Australia in 2001 the McClure Report on participation income, the entire mutual obligation debate, work for the dole, compelled literacy and numeracy training, youth payments at 44% of the Henderson Poverty Line, with 386,946 Australian breaches imposed upon Social Security recipients in the 2001/2002 financial year. Dole Diaries, two year waiting periods for migrants, increased surveillance of welfare recipients, the proliferation of Dole Bludger hot lines and all the other stigma inducing components of the present day Australian categorical means tested Social Security system are the very antithesis of what the Milners and Pickard were on about.

At the very time when Australia as a nation is economically stronger than at any other period of our post invasion history the government is imposing on the least affluent citizens increasing pressure to establish their worthiness to receive Social Security. Mutual obligation is based on the assumption that compelling people to do something in return for payment of poverty line income is appropriate. Prime Minister Howard has spent a considerable amount of energy campaigning against workers upward envy being directed towards wealthy sections of the community. Yet is seemingly oblivious to the fact that demanding a return for providing poverty line income fans the flames of downward envy. Unemployment has hovered between 6.0 and 7.0% in 2002/3. Australia refuses to share the available work amongst all the available workers or even to adopt a 35 hour a week limit on employees as France has done. It refuses to provide a decent income guarantee for all those without other income sources as recommended by Professor Henderson in 1975. It is time we as a nation turned again to the idea of providing a universal Basic Income as suggested as early as 1920 and being seriously considered by governments and academics in many parts of the world.

Anyone interested in Basic Income can find out about international developments by visiting the Basic Income European Network (BIEN).

Bibliography

Basic Income European Network BIEN web site:

<http://www.etes.ucl.ac.be/BIEN/bien.html>

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