

**The Way Forward - Move Ahead:
A Commentary on Proceedings of the Twelfth BIEN Congress,
Dublin. Ireland June 2008**

By

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I wish to extend my thanks to Séan Healy and Bridget Reynolds of the opportunity to participate in the Twelfth BIEN Congress in this capacity. In first met Séan and Bridget at the Sixth Congress of USBIG in 2007 when I presented a paper assessing the political viability of UBIG around the globe (Caputo, 2007). In that paper, I used a rather stringent criterion to assess the legislative disposition of BIG-related proposals in a various countries which had considered it formally over the past several decades. Those countries that had rejected it whether outright or after serious consideration I classified as dead, while those who had adopted such policies as non-contributory universal pensions or children's allowances I classified as "stealth" countries. Séan and Bridget were sitting toward the back rows of the session, much as they are today. When I had finished my paper, Séan raised his hand and after the usual accolades afforded such presentations he politely informed me (and everyone else at the session) that I misclassified Ireland. I had placed Ireland among the dead. Séan then proceeded to inform us (all session attendees) briefly of Ireland's having already implemented provisions guaranteeing incomes to children and elderly persons and that efforts were still in place to secure a basic income of those in the middle of the age spectrum. Later in the Congress he and Bridget gave a fuller version of these efforts and as many of you know from the Ireland BIG conference that preceded this BIEN Congress that prospect is still very much alive.

My charge today is to identify themes of the Congress in light of my research on the political viability of UBIG around the world. Toward that end, I would like to say something about the first part of the paper about which Séan had so graciously served as a corrective. The first part of that paper identified UBIG's competition, which takes several forms (Grinspun, 2005). UBIG competes a variety of *conditional cash assistance* programs: *Oportunidades* in Mexico, *Families en Acción* in Columbia, *Bolsa Família* in Brazil. It competes against right to work programs such as India's *National Rural Employment Guarantee Act*, passed in 2005. UBIG also competes with micro-lending programs popularized by Muhammad Yunus (2003), the founder of The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. And UBIG also competes with refundable tax credit programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), now the largest anti-poverty program in the United States. As I reflected upon my participation in this Congress, I asked why such programs are so popular. Why, for example, does the Mayor of New York travel to Mexico City to assess the efficacy of conditional cash grants on low-income parents to promote education of children? Why despite mixed results of earlier evaluations (e.g., World Bank, 1998a, 1998b) and by his own disclosure as reported by Bajaj (2006) that only about 5 percent of Grameen borrowers get out of poverty every year, micro-credit programs nonetheless remain popular around the globe, including the US (Sample, 2006)? How is it that organizations promoting earned income tax credit programs spread beyond the US to Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, Mexico, the UK (RESULTS, 2006)?

Perhaps the most appropriate question regarding what rests on the political horizon for the basic income guarantee is what is there about conditional cash-assistance

and other incentive programs such as the EITC that gives them more popular and political appeal. What makes behavior-oriented policies more likely to see the light of day than a basic income guarantee whose unconditional nature is one of its strongest selling points?

I do not propose to have a definitive answer to this question. However, an essay entitled “Public and Private Values” Karl Popper (2008b) provides a partial explanation of why conditional cash assistance and EITC programs might have more political appeal than UBIG. Popper demarcates the agenda for public policy from non-agenda and contends that fighting against concrete circumstances (he uses the word evil which I prefer to avoid in light of contemporary politicized application of the term particularly by the GW Bush administration) should be considered a public duty, while realization of general welfare goods such as happiness should not. The essence of Popper’s argument rests on the idea that it is much easier to reach agreement on proposals aimed at addressing specific social problems than it is to find a common political agenda among people holding irreconcilable positive visions of what constitutes a good society. Freedom seems to encompass one such vision, whether understood as a gradient that can be maximized to its highest level with UBIG via Van Parijs (*Real freedom for all*) or as a status which one either has or does not as argued by Karl Widerquest at this Congress. My sense is that political viability is increased by proposals meant to address specific problems. Advocates might increase the political viability of UBIG by linking it to a specific problem or set of problems that has contemporary immediacy. UBIG is not a panacea, but to the extent that it can be linked to addressing specific problems that are socially relevant and amenable to political intervention, then its chances of capturing a line item on the public agenda increases.

Several papers at this Congress reflected the tension between vision and practicality. Should UBIG be adopted whole cloth? To what extent do efforts such as noncontributory pensions promote or thwart adoption of UBIG? As pointed out in several papers, given the radical nature of a guaranteed income, many find its unconditional nature to be threatening since for example it may empower women to be less reliant on men or otherwise objectionable if it should encourage too many free riders and thereby detract from the efforts of those promoting the common good. There are competing visions of the common good and as Popper suggests theoretically and as the popularity of alternatives of UBIG mentioned earlier suggests practically, agreement may be more difficult to achieve. Perhaps linking UBIG to its ability to solve specific social problems is defensible. After all, as mentioned many times throughout the Congress, UBIG is not a panacea. Its political viability might then be enhanced to the extent it can be linked to alleviation of specific social problems, while adhering to its vision. In light of all the proposals and programs describing unconditional grants to elderly persons and children presented at this Congress and in light of Popper's insight differentiating an agenda for public policy from non-agenda, it seems to me that the way forward for UBIG is to move ahead. That is, there is no one single approach. Invariably, the political climate and context will play large parts in determining whether a whole cloth or piecemeal approach is more or less viable politically and each of you is better suited to assess that given the particulars of your own environments. Allow me to again call on Popper to provide some support for your efforts.

Popper's essay "Public and Private Values" which I previously mentioned appears in an edited collection of essays and correspondences (Popper, 2008b). I had been

pursuing this volume several days ago prior to this Congress and was startled to read some of the content in a letter to the philosopher Rudolf Carnap. That correspondence caught my eye because I expected it might say something about Popper's use of falsification to demarcate scientific statements and practices from ideological ones – of particular interest to me because of several related courses I teach to doctoral students. Much to my surprise, this is what I found in the letter, something I suspect those of us who were not familiar with this side of Popper's work will nonetheless find most relevant to our UBIG-related efforts.

In a letter dated 6 January 1947 to Rudolf Carnap, Popper was distinguishing his views from that of Socialists, asking rhetorically if there were means different from those associated with socialization that might resolve problems. "I believe there are" Popper (2008a) wrote. "For example," he continued:

I believe that productivity is high enough (i.e., that we are rich enough) to guarantee everybody a decent income (out of income taxes). By doing so, we would automatically eliminate exploitation, for exploitation is based on the threat of starvation.

That such a measure would go hand in hand with a certain state-interference in the economic realm, and perhaps with the socialization of monopolies, is clear (p. 104).

How many times have we heard variations on the themes of abundance reaching levels sufficiently high to warrant a guaranteed income? How many times have we heard that UBIG would adequately address the myriad forms of exploitation? If guaranteeing

everyone a decent income was a viable option in 1947 when Popper wrote to Carnap, it certainly is today.

You might have noted that Popper also mentioned the role of the state, another theme that was interwoven throughout this Congress. To what extent is paternalism good, bad, or indifferent in regard to UBIG-related political efforts? As I was preparing for this Congress I was also surprised to read that economist Richard Thaler and legal scholar Cass Sunstein made the case for libertarian paternalistic public policies in their recently published book *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness* (Yale University Press). In their view, according to Cassidy (2008), libertarian paternalism, a form of behavioral economics, is a relatively weak, nonintrusive type of paternalism because by providing incentives to do certain things, such as limit carbon emissions or keep children enrolled in schools choices are not blocked, fenced off, or significantly burdened. Efforts to move people in directions that will make their lives better are nudges, that is, any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. To count as a nudge, an intervention, whether initiated by the public or private sector, must be easy and cheap to avoid.

To conclude, my work on the political tractability BIG, whether classified as either dead or stealth, suggests that it might be helpful to account for the appeal that alternatives to BIG have and what role the state has to play. Formally, this means assessing political feasibility in light of the contemporary climate of opinion regarding support for incentive-based policies that address specific problems. Informally, this means enhancing the capacity for a social movement based on the premise that BIG has

something specific to contribute to resolving social problems rather than increasing freedom in the abstract.

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