

A photograph of a diverse group of young people in a crowd. In the center, a man with a beard and a bun looks down at a smartphone. To his left, a woman with curly hair looks off to the side. On the far left, a man with a beard looks forward. To the right, two women are also looking down at their phones. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor public space.

# VIEWS OF A UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

Perspectives from across Australia

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**Views of a Universal Basic Income: Perspectives from across Australia**

**Edited by Tim Hollo, The Green Institute.**

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## Views on a UBI

What would your life be like if you—and everyone around you—had a Universal Basic Income?

How would it change the choices you make to know that there was a no-questions-asked, non-judgmental, society-wide support in place that we all contribute to and all benefit from?

What would you do differently if our society explicitly valued unpaid contributions, recognising that paid employment isn't the only—or even necessarily the best—way to participate?

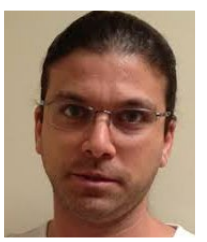
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These aren't just abstract, utopian questions. They are the kind of things we need to be asking ourselves, as individuals, as communities, and as policy makers, as we face up the tremendous challenges of the 21st century.

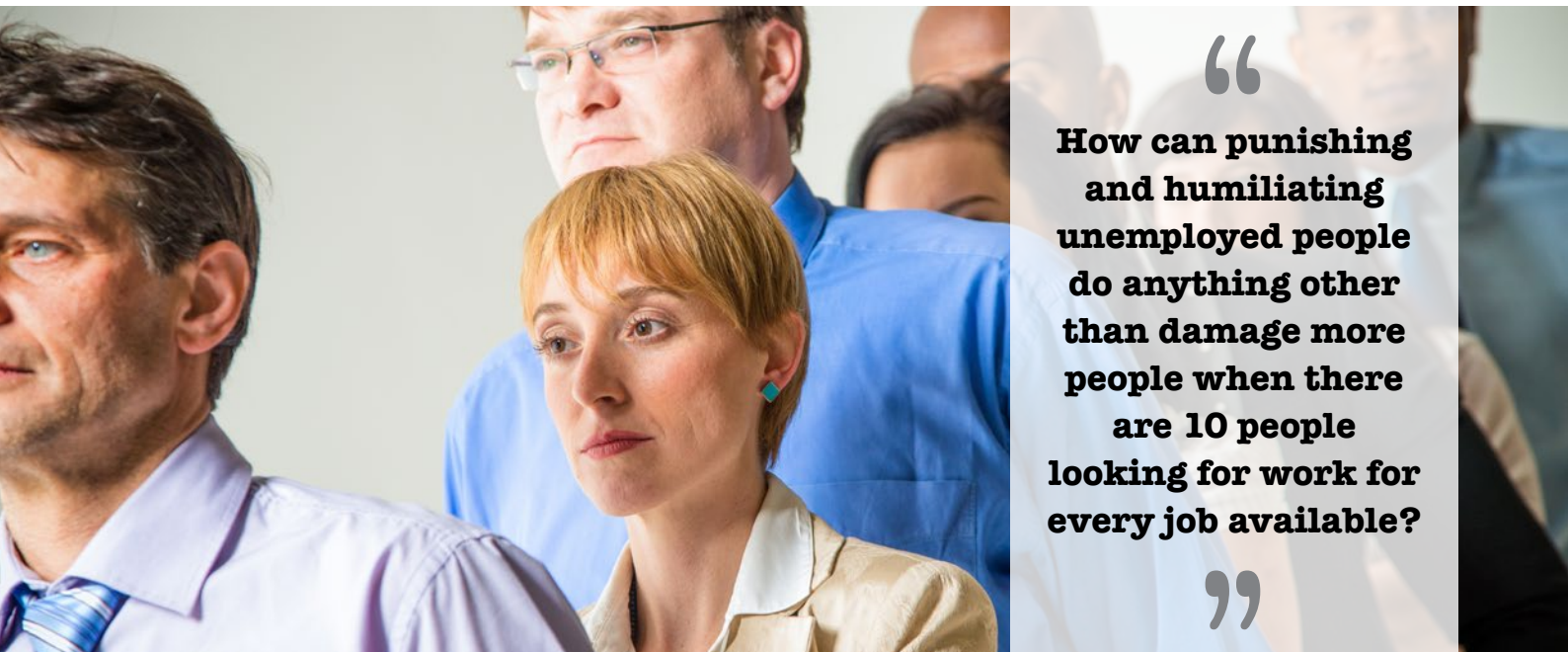
Climate change and encroaching ecological limits, the exponential rise of automation and AI, unrestrained corporate capitalism, the free distribution network that is the internet, and the movement of people around the globe, are all having previously unimaginable impacts on the ways our society and economy are structured, with flow on impacts now being felt in our politics.

Most of us don't feel these factors at the high, systemic level, of course.

We feel them as a sense of unease and anxiety. We feel them as a loss of control over our lives. We feel them as worries about not having enough work, or having too much work and not enough time for friends and family, or constantly having to fight each other for work in the "gig economy". We feel them when we celebrate winning short-term contracts the way we used to celebrate a job for life. We feel them when having to deal with a welfare system which is designed to humiliate and punish us for being vulnerable, through no fault of our own. We feel them when squeezed between caring for young children and aging parents, having little energy for ourselves, but worrying about what life will be like as we ourselves age. We feel them as we see jobs from mining to accountancy, manufacturing to journalism, disappear.



**Tim Hollo** is Executive Director of the Green Institute. A former Director of Communications for Christine Milne, he has also worked in campaign, communications, policy and governance capacities for Greenpeace, 350.org, the Nature Conservation Council of NSW and others for over 15 years. As a musician, he has performed around the world, from the Sydney Opera House to Carnegie Hall, and, in 2013, he founded Green Music Australia. His writing has been published in *The Guardian*, ABC Online, Crikey, The Huffington Post and elsewhere.



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Ultimately, as the world changes around us, we need to grapple anew with these most fundamental questions of how we are to interact with each other, how we are to live?

The recent Federal Budget, lauded by commentators as a return to the centre, singularly failed to grapple with these questions, preferring to side-step any questions of the future of work in the same way it side-stepped climate change. Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison still seem to think that we can put people back to work by cutting taxes for the rich and taking an ever more punitive approach to welfare. But, far from trickling down, corporate tax cuts just mean those at the very top get more government support to keep sucking the rest of us dry. And how can punishing and humiliating unemployed people do anything other than damage more people when there are 10 people looking for work for every job available?

The outcome of this kind of politics is that more and more people legitimately feel like they have no control over their lives, and that those in power are colluding to increase their own power and wealth, leaving the rest of us behind. This loss of control feeds the far right agenda of “Make America Great Again”, “Reclaim Australia”, and Brexit. If we don’t make a serious attempt at asking—and answering—these questions, we leave ourselves exposed to the rise of the right, whose agenda will help no-one, leading only to more pain.

There is no silver bullet answer to these challenges. There never is—which is why the left always struggles to compete with the easy siren song of the far right.

However, as proposed in the Green Institute paper from late last year, *Can less work be more fair?*, part of the solution can be a Universal Basic Income (UBI)—paying every member of our society a basic living wage that is enough to keep them out of poverty, unconditionally, no questions asked, no judgement cast. This simple step would reverse the nonsense divide and rule rhetoric of “lifters and leaners”, replacing it with a genuine commitment that we are all in this together.

In the context of evaporating jobs, a properly and thoughtfully implemented UBI can give people confidence that they won’t be left behind. Instead of fear of automation, it can help us embrace John Maynard Keynes’ vision from 70 years ago—that, by 2030, we would be working 15 hour weeks, dividing labour fairly, with the bulk being taken on by machines.

By enabling people to leave jobs where they are exploited, a UBI can rebalance power between workers and employers. By publicly and systemically rewarding non-paid work, it can go some way to redressing gender-based power imbalances.

In a world where we struggle to find time for ourselves, our friends and family, UBI can give people the opportunity to do more of what they want and less of what they don’t want. It can encourage and enable more volunteerism, more care for each other, more creativity, more community participation.

Because it will require greater taxes on those who can afford to pay, and because it will release the constant pressure of the work-to-consume cycle, a UBI could reduce some of the imperatives to consume, giving our environment more breathing space.

A UBI can enable us to live better, to contribute more and differently, to reclaim control of our lives.

There is, of course, understandable caution about the idea. Many unions and social organisations are legitimately sceptical of the idea because they fear it may jeopardise aspects of the broader social wage they have fought for for decades: better pay and conditions, stronger support systems, greater investment in public health and education, more jobs. But there is also a great history of unions and social organisations fighting for less work: for the 8 hour day, for weekends and public holidays.

It is vital that a UBI not be treated a silver bullet, and that it be implemented carefully, thoughtfully, and in such a way as not to replace or undermine the broader social wage. Inasmuch as it can give workers more flexibility and confidence to leave jobs, of course, it could also assist in the negotiation of even stronger working conditions.

While maintaining these caveats front and centre, the Green Institute is seeking to take the conversation on Universal Basic Income further. Because of the scope of the issue, involving the whole of society, there is no obvious “natural constituency” for a UBI. Similarly, there is little discussion or thinking about what it might look like in practice—how it might impact on people’s lives.

This collection brings together personal reflections from people from an extraordinary array of walks of life, considering what a UBI might do for them and others in their positions. From a farmer, a carer, an artist, an Indigenous woman, two people caught up in the Centrelink “robodebt” debacle, a university student, a coal miner in the Latrobe Valley, and a mother, we have here a remarkably diverse range of views, from passionate commitment to sceptical interest.

Each of them individually provides food for thought. Together, they begin to paint a picture of what might be.

What kind of world do we want to live in? How are we to live?

These views on a UBI give us a fascinating window on these most important questions.

## Let's do something visionary in Indigenous social policy

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is not a subject I knew much about until I met an academic colleague at ANU whose research and political advocacy was about UBI. As an Indigenous colleague, I set about learning what I could, and found this to be a concept of the most basic use as a foundation to income policy for Indigenous Australians.

Since the Whitlam Labor government and subsequent Fraser governments' welfare safety net reforms of the 1970s, Aboriginal people have benefited from receiving a level of income support, especially to those in rural and remote areas and those in special situations such as sole parents or living with a disability. This has enabled many to support themselves and their families. The advent of this safety net of basic income support was important social policy.

Since the Howard government introduced its notion of welfare reform, and with the disgraceful, manipulative policy agenda of Noel Pearson to control the income of Indigenous people since the early 2000s, we have seen an increase in poverty, violence, abuse of the aged (due to them holding the Basics Cards) and other social policy disasters as a result. I knew many Aboriginal women who could not leave abusive family situations because they had no way to support themselves, let alone a family as a single parent, since this income support has been taken away.

The Howard government was bent on a policy of bringing the budget into surplus, and income support was one of the areas on which it focused to decrease welfare dependency on the State in order to save money for a budget surplus. As a senior policy advisor in social policy at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet at the time, I witnessed and, much to my shame, was involved in seeking budgetary reform measures from some of the most vulnerable welfare recipients.



**Tjarana Goreng-Goreng** is an experienced manager, researcher and teacher in Indigenous education and social policy. Currently undertaking a PhD at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at ANU, she is former Director of the Centre for Indigenous Education at the University of Melbourne, and Assistant Professor Indigenous Studies at the University of Canberra. She has held senior positions with the Federal and NSW Governments, runs a consulting practice in transformational leadership mentoring, and has an established research practice in restorative justice.



For Indigenous Australians, Indigenous social policy has been a disaster in most recent times because of Noel Pearson's welfare reform agenda and because of the implementation of the Northern Territory Emergency Response which introduced draconian measures into remote communities already mired in poverty, unemployment and low educational aspirations. To then introduce welfare reform in the form of basics cards to reduce the consumption of alcohol, gambling and pornography is even further evidence of the right wing conservative agenda of a government concerned with bringing the budget into surplus on the back of the people already most vulnerable.

The Commonwealth Development Employment Program (CDEP) which operated successfully for over 20 years in regional and remote Indigenous communities meant that many Aboriginal people could work for their income support and at least have some semblance of pride and dignity in work even if it wasn't full time salaried employment. It meant working in and for your community for its improvement and gave many activities which they could engage in rather than doing nothing, or engaging in illegal activity or non-useful social activities which involved crime or which did not support the local economy. CDEP



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”



worked well and was supported and popular with Aboriginal communities because of its many benefits and its accessibility. It was a highly successful program dumped by the Howard government – essentially another social policy disaster.

Universal Basic Income would provide something quite different, something socially supportive and economically viable to Indigenous communities where paid work, entrepreneurship, business and strategic investment are non-existent. It would enable individuals and families to support themselves and each other and provide for the necessities of living which welfare dependency does not. Not only that but it would take away the shame and lack of dignity that comes with having to live on a Basics Card. What kind of society are we creating where we shame people for not being able to gain employment in areas where there is virtually no available employment, or for not having the educational qualifications to work in the only jobs available?

UBI can provide a socially responsible system of income which allows Indigenous Australians, particularly those in areas with little or no prospects of paid employment, a way to have accessible income with incentive to do other things. Many Indigenous people in remote communities have access to utilising their cultural traditions and knowledge in business development. With the right support, they have the capacity to employ community members and engage a wider section of the hospitality, tourism and business sectors in their communities, their environmental knowledge, and the development of scientific research around plants and medicines and a myriad of other industries. Providing a Basic Income which is not government controlled or shaming in its application will enable a population riven by discrimination, racism and prejudice a platform on which they can stand and build social, civic and environmental foundations to better not only individuals but families and entire communities and regions.

CDEP provides the evidence that UBI can deliver as a social investment. As a basic income for work system, it became in some areas very entrepreneurial, with communities utilising their skill base and workforce to undertake all types of clever adapted employment/work programs which led to successful business developments. The same could occur with a UBI system. The current welfare system is punitive and paternalistic and gives no incentives to anyone to involve themselves in development, either as individuals or as groups. The current welfare to work system is socially destructive and impoverishes people, families and communities even more than they already were. Why we would as a country continue such disastrous social policy is beyond understanding. If it is to shame and blame people for not being educated or employed, then it works. If it is to drive incentives to engage in work and employment or education, then it is a complete failure.

Another point that requires consideration is that many Indigenous people are suffering generational trauma. This impacts on their emotional and mental capacities to engage in work or the education system. This is a social crisis and needs to be addressed, not in a punitive way, but in a compassionate, empathic and socially just and socially conscious way. Providing a UBI could do this in addition to supportive social

programs to enable recovery, to enable a person to work towards working and community engagement and development. It gives breathing space to enable an individual to do what is necessary, to get well, to deal with the myriad of social issues that impact their families, so that they can return to health and wellness and become useful members of society.

It is obvious from the statistics reported annually in the Closing the Gap Reports and Productivity Commission data that the current systems and social policy in Indigenous Affairs are not working and are making no difference to this generation of Indigenous peoples. We need a new road and a new vision. Perhaps UBI can begin that process.

## A carer's perspective

We don't really go bushwalking anymore.  
I do all of the digging and heavy lifting.  
We eat a lot of leftovers.  
I often go to social events alone.  
We regularly fail to do the dishes.  
I don't worry about money.

We don't really stay out late anymore.  
I miss the energy my husband had.  
We can't plan too far in advance and we often cancel on people.  
I am always on alert.  
We regularly fail to clean the toilet.  
I don't worry about money.

We cry, we grieve, we pick up the pieces,  
We laugh, we love, we carry on.  
We. Don't. Worry. About. Money.

I've been with my husband for 11 years. For nine of these years he's had Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), an illness that is only just beginning to be taken seriously by the community and the medical world but one that has dramatically shaped my life.

The very brief story: one day while we were travelling in Western Australia Garth got sick and never recovered. We went from an active outdoors life, bushwalking most weekends, riding our bikes, climbing and socialising, to one where we watched a lot of television, stayed inside and did a lot of crying. When he first got sick Garth would be in bed when I left for work and still there when I returned home. He could no longer walk around the block. Riding his bike was technically possible but he paid for it with weeks of no energy. I did all the shopping and the cooking. He got depressed. We stopped dreaming of bushwalks. We stopped dreaming. We coped. Just.



**Dr Millie Rooney** is a carer. She cares for many people in her community and considers this to be a valuable and legitimate (if unpaid) part time job. She is an (over) active member of her local food cooperative where she is able to revel in her passion for community building and being fed good food. Millie has a PhD in neighbourhood sharing economies and teaches first year students about social change, social justice and global food systems. Millie is also able to combine her interest in teaching and caring in her part time position as the coordinator for a university student sustainability internship program.





“  
... the fact that we have always been able to afford healthy food, a trip back to our family, to have the heating on and the certainty that we would have a roof over our heads, has certainly contributed to our general wellbeing.  
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After about three years Garth started to slowly improve and got to the point where he could ride an electric bike, work a couple of days per week and even managed a short overnight bushwalk if I carried most of the gear and we walked slowly.

Life could be easier, but we've moved beyond coping. We got married, we live within the pocket of energy he has. I am occasionally able to be the sick one who drops the bundle.

We have coped well. Bloody well. And while I take some credit for this, the fact that we have always been able to afford healthy food, a trip back to our family, to have the heating on and the certainty that we would have a roof over our heads, has certainly contributed to our general wellbeing.

In many ways we've been lucky. Garth being sick has caused a lot of heartache, a lot of grief and panic and tears and despair. But we've been ok. We've had food and shelter and enough luxuries to pad out the sickness.

The thing is, I don't need to worry about money.

I've been reflecting on what it is like to be the carer for someone with CFS, what has been challenging about it and how much harder the whole awful mess would be if I didn't feel some sense of financial security.

To provide some broader context.

When Garth got sick, both he and I had substantial savings so we were never panicking about being able to afford to go to the doctors, trial various (expensive) nutritional supplements, massage therapists or specialists. Neither of us really drink, or eat out, and we don't own a car. We don't have kids. We have a relatively cheap middle class lifestyle.

Garth worked for a lot of the time he was sick. While he only worked part time, it was at great cost to his physical and mental health and to our relationship (I'll return to this), but he was pulling a fairly good hourly rate. Since he's been sick I've variously been on a PhD scholarship and then numerous casual and contract positions at the university. While these positions have little to no security, they pay approximately \$50 an hour, which goes a long way in Tasmania.

In 2016, Garth and I bought a house and, thanks to the generous contribution of his parents, we now have a warm sunny home and a very small mortgage.

At the beginning of 2017, Garth's contract came to an end and we decided it was important for his health that he did not seek another job. While a lot better than he was when he first got sick, for the last couple of years his health has seemed to worsen. For the first time since he got sick, I'm feeling the financial responsibility.

For the first time since he got sick I'm feeling slightly trapped in a job I'd like to leave because *one of us has to pay the bills*. Now let's be clear. I only need to work three days per week on my university wage to keep us afloat. We're not exactly struggling. But on top of working multiple casual jobs across multiple days with pathetic job security (always takes more energy than the hours they pay you for), at the moment I also have a few other jobs I need to do to keep us functioning.

Garth and I agreed that when he finished his paid work, he would become the house spouse. His job would be to do the shopping and the cooking so that when I got home from a day of juggling my multiple roles I wouldn't have to then turn around and cook dinner. Some weeks this reality works, other weeks I still cook dinner. In a bad week I earn the money, I do the shopping, I cook the dinner, I clean the house (but rarely do the dishes or clean the toilet—because I also like to have time for fun things), I do the washing, I check in with Garth and we plan a new strategy for managing this week's energy budget.

So what is my point? I married the man I love, I live in a perfectly cosy little cottage, I only have to work three days a week and most of the time I'd say I'm content if not happy. But the thing is, when I think about the value of the UBI from a carer's perspective I'm not thinking about my own situation. Essentially my own situation is functional *because I already have a secure basic income* in the form of savings, a well-off and supportive family, and a pretty well paid job.

Imagine if I had to deal with this illness and at the same time struggled to put food on the table? What if we had no savings and I only earned \$18 an hour? What if we hadn't been able to see counsellors, afford supplements, or eat the more expensive but definitely helpful food?

What if I not only lost the faith I have in my husband's ability to look after me in a crisis, but I also lost my ability to have a social life outside of the home he is often trapped in because I had to work long shifts?

For someone like Garth, it is very difficult to get his illness recognised by Centrelink. So I'd also be spending a lot of my time standing in queues, convincing people he was really sick, feeling less and less supported and more panicked and lonely and isolated.

Recently I tried to seek counselling help from an organisation who should have understood. They didn't. I left feeling like I was making Garth's illness up. I left feeling completely undermined. Imagine if I had been asking for money to feed us?

This week I've been reminded of how quickly your world as a carer can come unravelled.

Things have been going well with Garth and his health for some time, but recently things have taken a turn for the worst. His energy levels are going down and I'm once again faced with the prospect of carrying the entire burden: cook dinner, pep him up, go to work, accept that he can't give me the physical love and affection I'd like, do the shopping, go to work, miss him desperately, keep up a happy face, cancel a social engagement, have a cry, go to work.

It puts me on the edge of sanity some days, but actually, when I think about it, I might be on the edge, but I'm fairly firmly tied on. I'm not about to tumble off that cliff. I'm not worried about a roof over my head, food on my table, clothes on my back.

I'm not worried about money. And because of this, I am more than just a carer for my husband. Because I know about the reality of this illness, because I have nine long years of caring practice, I also care for others in our community.

A good friend of ours has had CFS for the past year. She has been so sick that she can't even get out of bed to microwave her own dinner. So along with another member of our community I arranged a microwave roster to make sure she was eating. Each night one of us would drop by, check she was ok, heat her dinner, silently sit with her and then creep out. She has no partner to care for her or to share her expenses. She's still battling Centrelink with her precious energy reserves so that she can afford to eat.

Another member of our community had glandular fever and depression. I'd check in on her in response to other people asking if I could. She'd sometimes come and stay the night at our house because we know what it is like to need quiet company and we know what it is like to need belief in your illness.



I do so much care work that I now introduce myself "Hi I'm Millie, I'm a carer ... " before I say what I do for a living. At the height of my caring role for these three people I'd come home from my paid work exhausted knowing I had to pull myself together to look after these people. If I could be free from my paid work to do this job fulltime, to be a carer of people in my community, what a wonderful thing that would be.

The thing is, I can dream about this. I can find the time to write about a UBI and think about how great it would be *because* I am financially secure.

I am Ok. And I want other people to be that way too.



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## A view from the welfare front lines

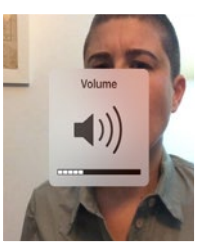
The social media conversation around the #NotMyDebt campaign has seen repeated calls for a Universal Basic Income (UBI). Typically these calls have come from people rightly frustrated with the waste, inefficiencies, and incompetence they see in the service delivery of the Department of Human Services (DHS) and contracted support agencies.

The #NotMyDebt campaign was initiated via social media in response to concerns about the Government's Online Compliance Intervention (OCI) automation issuing false debts—what became known as the “robodebt” scandal. What started as a weekend website build, social media story, and fact sharing exercise snowballed into a crowd sourced response to a government policy.

As coordinators of #NotMyDebt we have quite deliberately remained single-issue, with messaging and conversation as focussed as possible in order to maintain momentum while managing the workload of our volunteer base. However, social media, like any other room full of people, generates spontaneous discussions; people may have come into the room for a very specific reason, but eventually they will talk about other issues, and describe what they see as root causes and responsibility, and their hopes for a better future.

Throughout online discussions, Facebook comment threads, and our Twitter feed, UBI and the cashless welfare card are issues that have been raised. Our observation has been that mentions of UBI most often centre on:

1. waste and inefficiency in delivery of government services;
2. the high level of intervention and reporting that is required for social service support;
3. the inability of government to create systems and processes that deliver and are cost effective;
4. the disruption caused by reporting and compliance systems' incompatibility with people's lives;
5. frustration at the level of usefulness of (often basic) courses and workshops people are required to attend; and
6. the lucrative nature of government contracts for job agencies and work for the dole programs, and the usefulness (or otherwise) of these services to individuals.



**Lyndsey Jackson and Amy Patterson** are coordinators of the #NotMyDebt campaign. #NotMyDebt is a nonpartisan group of volunteers who formed in response to issues with the governments Online Compliance Intervention program and the issuing of erroneous debt notices that have caused confusion, time wasting and distress for many. On request we have submitted this piece based on the unique ear to the ground that the #NotMyDebt campaign has provided.

Those receiving welfare payments, in particular those who have done so for a length of time or at a number of points in their lives, gain by necessity an experienced insight into the system, and understand too well who the winners and losers are.

When, for example, DHS demands that people report income fortnightly, via a telephone system in which waiting times of two hours are common or an online interface that sometimes feels as if it were intentionally designed to be un navigable, in order to perform complicated conversions of pay periods to match an inflexible IT system... well frankly, it shits people off. When government departments and Ministers refuse to even recognise or acknowledge the lived experiences and concerns of people, it makes them furious.

As is often the case, those with the most contact with a system become the most knowledgeable and insightful into its usefulness, successes, and shortcomings; yet they are also often the ones listened to least, and with the least influence on policy.

The calls for UBI heard via the #NotMyDebt social media channel come primarily from people frustrated about their treatment within the system: frustrated with job network providers, consistently seeking work with little success or significantly underemployed.

In many cases these are people who contribute to their communities in rich and varied ways, such as those volunteering their time and labour to the #NotMyDebt campaign. Often they are participating anonymously out of fear of retribution from Centrelink or the Government. Despite the fact that their reliance on Centrelink fully or partially for survival leaves them vulnerable, they have joined the campaign because they believe in assisting strangers they will likely never meet who are affected by the OCI program and struggling to get clarity as to the legitimacy and calculation of their debts.

The expressed hope is that with a UBI this sort of contribution to building and strengthening communities—in common with caring work and volunteering—would be recognised or even encouraged.

At the same time, people are being driven to confusion and frustration by moving goal posts and policy changes that ordinary people can't understand and can't navigate. Those on disability payments are particularly precarious, not least because assessments finding them "able" to take on more hours are often at odds with the assessment of the individual's abilities by their doctors and themselves.

The inflexibility of job network providers is also frequently reported, with people sent to poorly or impossibly timed interviews or meetings, often with little consideration for other pressures and commitments—we hear that women in particular feel the brunt of this. Some people report being hesitant to take on short term work due to difficulties with Centrelink or a job network provider down the track. Many report being worried about getting a "robodebt" due to the OCI program.



The feeling that people are continually complying with whatever perceived whim is directed their way from job agencies and via policy, yet still they are persecuted through media and rhetoric, is strong.

The anxiety that there are not enough jobs to go around, and that digital disruption will make things far worse, is also strong and intertwined with the calls for a UBI.

#NotMyDebt shone a light on how reliant people are on family and community support, as well as legal and community services, to navigate Centrelink: a further hidden cost to the delivery of the social services system.

In the face of this frustration and anger at unresponsive, inefficient bureaucracy, UBI seems a logical fallback: people want to dismantle the system and start from scratch, evenly distributing an income to all. And UBI is a policy that has vocal supporters on both the left and the right of political ideology, as well as from moderates. That in itself should give us pause, that groups with such startlingly opposed agendas both see UBI as possessing unique promise. If nothing else this should inspire caution, close attention to any actual policies and mechanics proposed behind the glowing vision, and a broad and serious conversation.

The central reason for caution amongst those of us working on the #NotMyDebt campaign is that we have read so many versions of another story, one that doesn't get connected with UBI in the conversations we've seen. People share their reliance on broader support services provided and managed by DHS, and their vulnerabilities, losses, and fears when these services fail them or don't deliver fully. These are vital services that many Australians rely on heavily; perhaps not continually, but at some points in their lives. The stories shared

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with #NotMyDebt highlight in so many ways large and small that the social safety net is, crucially, more complex than just the delivery of regular monetary payments to individuals. It's not merely a wasteful bank or a payroll office, as much as the rhetoric of the two major parties would seem to foster that view.

If designing a UBI in the name of efficiency alone, what else gets dismantled in the pursuit of UBI? What conversations do we need to have, as a community, first?

If UBI leads, as the right dreams, to the wholesale dismantling of all Government social service agencies, can they, and the services they provide to vulnerable people, ever be rebuilt again? What happens to the vital informal knowledge of the workers within those systems, tacitly distributed and maintained by institution-specific social norms and practices not explicit operational rules? What does it cost to reinvent the wheel?

Would it be better to make tough non-partisan decisions about the services we provide, about why and where there is waste rather than dismantling the whole thing? If it's an initiative supported by both the left and the right, how would the implementation differ? Whose priorities win out when those systems are designed? And what are the downstream consequences of that?

Some people need more to survive than others; are universally equal payments fair payments? What impact would a UBI have on the bargaining capacity and wage rates of workers, particularly those in unskilled and already precarious industries? A UBI could give them more bargaining power by removing the fear of being left behind without a job, but it could also suppress wages even further.

The danger is that UBI is treated as a silver bullet response to complicated questions about the role, nature, and future of social security and welfare, about what we think it means to be a society, and about what people need to be secure.

Those things feel self-apparent. They aren't. That's why we support a thorough conversation about what a UBI might entail and how it could be designed.

The #NotMyDebt campaign website has collected 520 stories and counting. Not all of them were due to the OCI program (or "robodebt"), but all shared themes of distress at the cost of living pressures compounded by a Centrelink debt. Housing insecurity, inability to pay bills such as electricity or car registration, and real doubt about being able to afford even food and vital medications were consistent themes. For many, a debt pushed them back down when they had worked so hard to get ahead. Struggling with the system was and continues to be another blow.

UBI offers a vision of security in society with no questions asked, no hoops, no judgement. For people tired of being judged, told they are not doing enough, are not good enough, while surrounded by manifest waste and misdirected resources, this has obvious appeal.

Can we find a way to imagine ourselves into those complexities?

## Farmers and UBI

I am not going to try to define what a UBI (Universal /Unconditional Basic Income) is, nor the social and political theories behind it, nor explain how it might be applied in Australia, nor at what cost. Others far more qualified than I have done that and have clearly stated that a UBI can be all things to all people depending on what form it takes. This means it is easy to find support for a UBI from conservatives and libertarians, to progressives and socialists of all persuasions. All I am going to try and do is briefly discuss what a UBI might do for farming, farmers, social justice, and the environment.

Before I launch into why I believe a UBI could be of great benefit to farmers and rural and remote Australia, a brief overview of the state of play is in order. Some 98% of Australians are urban dwellers and their understanding of agriculture and farmers is filtered through the heroic myths and stories of “life on the land” as promoted by industry bodies and government. So below is a list of some inconvenient facts (truths) to temper the rose coloured glasses of many. Most of these facts are readily available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, industry bodies and the Department of Agriculture.

- Farmers commit suicide at twice the national average rate.
- 70% of farms are only financially viable due to “off farm income”.
- The average age of farmers is close to 60 and slowly climbing.
- 50% of farmers hope to retire in the next five years.
- There are three to four jobs for every agriculture graduate but the ag colleges remain stubbornly under populated.



**Michael Croft** is a family farmer and operates a vertically integrated, value adding, field to fork operation, in southern NSW. Passionate about biological farming, diversity and resilient food systems, he walks the talk of triple bottom line, promoting eating as an agricultural, ecological and political act.

Michael has been the director of several industry organisations, a leader in the Slow Food movement, founding president and national spokesperson for the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA), the Australian delegate to the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), and the Australasian civil society delegate to the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) of UN's Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

Michael is also a graduate member of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (ARLF), and has post graduate qualifications in Rural Leadership from James Cook University.

- In 2013, for the first time in Australia's history, the banks owned more than 50% of all farm equity.
- We are losing some 76 farmers a week, on average, from a low base of some 140,000 or 0.6% of the population.
- At 61% of Australia's landmass, agriculture presides over record rates of biodiversity loss.
- The terms of trade for agriculture have been in consistent decline for over 60 years.
- Healthy fruit and vegetable crops are routinely "ploughed in" as "no longer viable".
- There is only one tomato cannery left in Australia.
- It takes 10 calories of oil to produce and deliver one calorie of food to your table.
- The three daily meals the majority of Australians enjoy have travelled over 10,000 kilometres before they reach the stomach.
- The 25 most common weekly purchase food items in a Melbourne shopping trolley have travelled some 70,803 kilometres.
- The carbon emissions of agriculture are a stunning 17% on their own, but the food system as a whole's emissions are closer to 30%—and that's before waste is accounted for.
- Almost 80% of the retail grocery market is controlled by two corporations.
- There are only two days worth of staples and five days worth of all food on super market shelves at any one point in time.
- As Australia is "open for business", foreign transnational corporations increasingly own our food production, distribution, transport and export networks.
- As an agricultural exporter, Australia can feed three times its population, yet we have some 2.265 million food insecure people and 575,000 of these are children.
- And, to cap it all off, we then waste close to 40% of all the food we produce, mostly as post-consumer waste.<sup>1</sup>

I defy anyone to read this list and say that there is not a systemic social, economic, and environmental crisis going in our food and agricultural system. Yet that is what many at the highest levels of government, academia, bureaucracy, and farm lobby groups do repeatedly. The points in the list are usually siloed, with each dire symptom being approached in isolation by different agencies and departments that rarely communicate with each other, let alone co-operate. Systemic evaluations are placed in the "too hard basket" which leaves a few underfunded academics and one or two self funded public intellectuals to contemplate the "what ifs".

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Rose, ed, *Fair Food—Stories from a movement changing the world*, UQ Press 2015, p74, 75.



## WTF, WTF?

Where's The Food, Without The Farmer? To quote the American poet Wendell Berry, "Eating is an agricultural act!" because your choice of food drives demand in an agricultural sector. Of course agriculture is performed in our environment, ergo, "eating is an environmental act." As all Greens know full well, the environment is highly politicised and contested, so "eating is a political act!" And then our food choices also involve ethical considerations, as any vegan will be quick to tell you. The point being: farming, food, environment, economics, ethics, and politics should not be siloed but rather treated in a systemic fashion. To do otherwise is to do the same thing repeatedly expecting a different result.

WTF, WTF links us all to environment in a culture where everything is priced and little is valued. In our single bottom line paradigm, something as simple as growing your own food becomes a revolutionary act—what Saul Newman describes as the insurrectionary politics of autonomy. Of course the insurrectionary politics of autonomy assumes the social justice that affords unfettered access to land and water. So, to labour the point, farming, farmers, food, social justice, and the environment are inexorably linked and must be viewed holistically as a system.

“

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Consequently, any attempt to support farming and agriculture must also adopt a holistic, systemic solution. One such solution is a UBI. I'll now look at a number of specific aspects of farming which relate to how a UBI can address the challenges of farming systemically.

### **Farming—the first gig economy**

Much has been written about the gig economy and the benefits that a UBI would confer on those so engaged, and farming is the original gig economy. Bluntly, a farmer has a seasonal and weather dependent job, that might or might not deliver her a product, and that depends on corporate buyers to accept or reject her produce at 10–20% of the retail sale price—if she is lucky! It is not hard to make a case for a UBI for farmers when this is the lot for the vast majority.

The financial security afforded by a UBI would make it easier for a farmer to take on the gig knowing that she make not get paid at the end of her labours. If that sounds like an awfully precarious situation to be in, it is. In a conventional gig economy, if you get the work you will get paid for it. This is not necessarily the case for farmers; with buyers routinely rejecting contracted produce due to cosmetic imperfections.

### **Farmers—the first precariate**

An old joke farmers sometimes share: how do you become a millionaire farmer? Start with two million!

Not only is farming a tough economic gig, but it is also a precarious existence for the farmer. Planting a crop is an act of faith, or a gamble depending on your worldview. You hope for an income at the end of several months of hard work, if fires, floods, pests, diseases, droughts, hail, and bank managers don't get in the way. Obviously a UBI would be a safety net against the vagaries of seasonal weather and nasty surprises, with the possible exception of the bank manager.

Farmers are price takers, and this results in a precarious relationship with buyers (employer equivalent), and this in turn means a precarious income. A UBI would help improve a farmer's bargaining position, as they would no longer be totally dependent on the whim of the markets and fickle buyers.

Farmers in both the global North and South are price takers because there is a world wide glut of food. The world's farmers produce enough food for over 11 billion people, and Australian farmers produce three times as much food as we can consume. To illustrate the point, niche (food) markets are a classic economic response to a glut and develop in Australia only to be quickly overwhelmed by new entrants offering greater quantity and or quality often for less money—think coffee. It beggars belief why governments of all persuasions call for a doubling of food production. That would make matters worse for food producers and a global obesity epidemic.





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### Farmers, the first and most influential environmentalists

The numbers don’t lie: farmers control some 61% (4.692 million square kilometres) of Australia’s land mass, and 94% of Australian farmers actively undertake natural resource management. This is absolutely the case, but so also is the common refrain in rural communities, “You can’t be green when you are in the red.”

In the current, and dominant, single bottom line economic paradigm, where all social and environmental costs are externalised, farmers can only be good environmental custodians when they have the time and can afford it. Farmers want to be good custodians of the land—notwithstanding illegal tree clearing in Queensland that are exceptions that don’t disprove the rule.

There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that a UBI would facilitate better environmental outcomes for the substantial areas of land farmers control—which is most of Australia. My own experience is that I would like to fence off areas of land that adjoin a National Park to exclude stock, but the \$10,000 of fencing materials is a stumbling block (my time and labour would be free—something a UBI would help compensate for). I wonder how many other farmers would do environmental remediation if a UBI were in place? A great many, if my discussions with farming friends and neighbours are anything to go on.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/radical-conservation/2017/jan/24/what-if-we-gave-universal-income-to-people-in-biodiversity-hotspots>

### **Modern industrial agriculture cultivates climate change, and Australia is a world leader<sup>3</sup>**

I know it's been popular to denigrate farmers as climate change vandals, and this is generally true of corporate driven industrial agriculture. Australia is without question the world leader in industrial agriculture and the single bottom line rules most environmental decisions where the only question is "Will promoting our business as a good environmental custodians boost our sales or profit?"

Regardless, the facts are that over 70% of the world is fed by peasant-based agroecological farming, and that 70% of this is performed by women who farm one hectare or less. Here's the real kicker: these small farms produce twice as much food per hectare as a much touted productively 'efficient' Australian farm. To be clear, women who farm biologically diverse smallholdings feed the world, and they do it very well under very difficult circumstances—patriarchy. So the quintessential and "best" global farmer is definitely not some bloke sitting on a \$500,000 combine harvester staring down several thousand acres of monoculture. But I digress.

My hope is that a UBI would allow more Australian farms to transition to smaller scale agroecological and organic farming systems, and thus help cool the planet. Many is the time I have heard broad acre farmers express a desire to transition to biological and organic farming systems, only to cite a lack of funds and the very real fear of income loss during the transition phase as productivity falls slightly before recovering. "You can't be green when you are in the red."

Just to reinforce the importance of a UBI facilitating farmer-led change and action on our greatest existential threat, according to Paul Hawken's modelling in his latest book and associated video, *Drawdown*, food represents eight out of the top 20 solutions to global warming. And "The solution to climate change is under our feet" via agroecology.<sup>4</sup>

### **Aging farmers, intergenerational succession, young farmers and a UBI**

Farmers are aging and retiring, and few have intergenerational succession plans in place. To complicate matters, most farmers advise their children not to follow in their footsteps and to seek their fortunes in the city. The rural-to-urban drift continues unabated as a result. Now imagine if the farmer's daughter were to receive a UBI with no strings attached. What would she choose to do? What other income generating options would she explore? What farm-based experimental, innovative, and entrepreneurial activities could she imagine and develop independently of, and possibly complimentary to, her parents' farm business? A value adding enterprise perhaps? The point being that the options and creativity that a UBI would launch in farming families and communities would be immense, and possibly stem and even reverse the slow decline of rural Australia.

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jan/09/modern-agriculture-cultivates-climate-change-nurture-biodiversity-olivier-de-schutter-emile-frison>

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/sep/10/soil-our-best-shot-at-cooling-the-planet-might-be-right-under-our-feet>; [http://www.theecologist.org/blogs\\_and\\_comments/commentators/2988239/agroecology\\_cools\\_the\\_planet\\_so\\_why\\_are\\_governments\\_backing\\_agribusiness.html](http://www.theecologist.org/blogs_and_comments/commentators/2988239/agroecology_cools_the_planet_so_why_are_governments_backing_agribusiness.html)



Then there are the “tree changers” and young wannabe farmers. How many young, enthused, and innovative Australians might try their hand at farming if income was less of a barrier? “New blood” and fresh eyes and ideas on farms often yield extraordinary results if the burgeoning youth food movements are anything to go by.

### Seasonal labour and a UBI

Farming’s seasonality means highly fluctuating labour requirements throughout the year. A lack of labour at harvest and other peak times means transient labour, often foreign, is a necessity to bring in the crops on many Australian farms. How many unemployed people would jump at the chance of seasonal work if they weren’t threatened by the loss of benefits as they earn additional income? I suspect that if a UBI removed the chains that tie people to a welfare system that appears designed to humiliate, stigmatise and punish, many would jump at the chance.

### The effects of a UBI on farm subsidies

To be clear, Australia doesn’t have farm subsidies. However we export two thirds of the food we produce. We also import a lot of food from countries that do have farm subsidies. An Australia UBI would go some way to countering the farm subsidies that our competitors receive without it being a “farm subsidy”. This would satisfy Australia’s neoliberal, export-focused obsession with “free” trade, and allow our trade diplomats to continue to attack other nations’ subsidies. No one said a UBI wasn’t a double edged sword.



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## Farms, autonomous AI robotics, and UBI

Technological “advances” accelerate, and we have probably all read about Uber trialling autonomous vehicles. Driverless, autonomous, electric buses are already on the streets of Perth, and some Australian mines now operate with autonomous trucks. The story in agriculture is no different.

Already there are autonomous soil and water samplers and controllers; autonomous sowers, harvesters, weeders and sprayers; solar powered electric drones that can identify weeds to a 0.5cm<sup>2</sup> resolution and poison them; fully automatic dairies where cows enter, are fed an individually-tailored supplement, and then milked before exiting on their own; a solar powered autonomous robot that can determine the ripeness of fruit better than a human, and then pick it and pack it with less bruising; and so it goes. Australian industrial farming is not exempt from autonomous AI robotics, and in many areas it leads the way.

What do these technological developments mean for farmers and farm workers? A shrinking jobs pool. A UBI will be a lifesaver for those who lose jobs that will be performed by intelligent machines that capital will supply. For those farmers who don't have access to capital to buy intelligent farming machines, a UBI would enable them to hire the machines or perhaps to transition.

A transition to what, you ask? Good question, and your guess is as good as mine.

The point that most commentators miss about the current technological revolution is that, for the first time in history, the bulk of people will have no jobs to transition to. This is simply because there is no task requiring physical or intellectual skills that an AI machine, or combination of machines, won't be able to perform quantitatively and qualitatively better than a human—collectively we will become redundant!

If it is a skill, it can be learnt, and AI machines excel at skill acquisition. This leaves only the creative jobs, but how many creative jobs will be left for humans to perform that AI machines can't? Again, your guess is as good as mine because, to quote Niels Bohr, *“Prediction is very difficult, especially if it's about the future.”* For those mulling the future I would simply point to the concept of singularity. Singularity is predicted to occur within 30 to 50 years and then “all bets are off.”

## Trade agreements and UBI

I would love to be able to quote authoritatively about the impact of Australia's so called Free Trade Agreements on farmers and agriculture, but I can't. The impact of Trade Agreements is largely unknown because they are not being monitored by government for performance: no KPIs, no measuring of anticipated and predicted outcomes against actual results, nothing. Now any farmer who said they were going plant a crop but weren't going to monitor it and then water it, etc, if necessary, would be laughed out of the district as a fool. Would you invest with a business that said it wasn't going monitor its performance and report back to you? No, I didn't think you would either, but this is exactly what is happening when Australia enters a Free Trade Agreement. It begs the question: doesn't Australia want to closely monitor the costs and benefits of a binding contract with a foreign power? And, if not, why not?

Anecdotally, however, our milk producers were understandably angry at \$1 a litre retail milk, which meant the price they received was below the cost of production. Our ties to the global price of milk through Free Trade Agreements were blamed by industry for the price cuts. At one stage our pig farmers were saying every time a pig left the farm for market it had a \$50 note tied around its neck. That's how much money they were losing per pig, with imported subsidised pork the culprit. When the local cheese makers agitate for much-needed price rises they are usually threatened with cheaper imports from New Zealand. And so it goes when the single bottom line is king. But a UBI would definitely help farmers struggling to compete with cheap and often subsidised imports, the entry of which is facilitated by our Free Trade Agreements.

### **UBI and off-farm income**

One of the shocking statistics quoted in the list above is that 70% of Australian family farms are only financially viable due to off-farm income. For most farms this means the partner or spouse of the farmer gets a job in town and commutes every day. During the recent mining boom, FIFO (fly in fly out) farmer/miners were common too. The stresses and strains placed on families subsidising a farm business with alternate sources of income are enormous and well documented. These stresses are also seen as normal, par for the course. Imagine the outcry if 70% of politicians had to work a second job as a pharmacy assistant to keep their seat in parliament. There would be instant pay rises for all sitting members.

A UBI would change the need for off-farm income to keep most farms viable. That would not change the systemic inequities involved in farming, but it would be a good start.

### **Maternity leave, UBI, and farming women**

There are no maternity leave provisions for women who work their farms or their family's farms – period. It seems self-evident that a UBI would go some way to redressing this inequity.

### **Farmer pride, aka a UBI is not a handout!**

Farmers are tough and resilient, until they are not. They stand on their own two feet, until they can't. It is matter of stubborn pride to reject outside help such as "handouts", and only to accept it when in dire need. To accept a handout is seen as an admission of failure.

Even disaster and drought relief packages are received and administered like expensive medicines to stave off a lethal infection; importantly, they are not "a drug of dependence". These packages and the associated stigma might be reduced with a UBI because meeting many of the humanitarian needs (like putting food on the table of farmers) would have been resolved.

Importantly, a UBI is not a handout, it is not welfare. It is (or should be) the birth right of every citizen of working age. A UBI would remove the perception by farmers of failure attached to receiving welfare; it would be a right just like any other we take for granted (and probably shouldn't).



“  
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### **Farming is downright dangerous—UBI and farm safety**

Farming is one of the most life threatening and dangerous of occupations in Australia. The list of things that can harm or kill you on a farm makes most paramedics sit up and pay attention. However if the UBI experience of Dauphin in Canada is anything to go by, hospitalisations, accidents and injuries all declined when the UBI was introduced into the community. Mental health issues also declined significantly, something that Beyond Blue and others involved in mental health should be paying attention to, I would suggest.

### **Farmer creativity and UBI**

Australian farmers have been an extremely creative bunch. The stump jump plough and combine harvester are but two of the more famous inventions, and there are thousands more. Being inventive and producing a creation requires both time and money. Chasing ever diminishing productivity gains has meant there is little time left for farmers to tinker in the shed. The UBI could buy the creative genius of Australian farmers that most precious of commodities—time.

### **Food waste reduction and UBI**

Australian households throw out 20% of all food they buy, which is four million tonnes or \$8 billion worth of food a year. Understandably, eliminating or drastically reducing post-consumer food waste is an aim



of most government authorities. Not having to deal with four million tonnes of landfill is a powerful economic incentive before considering the environmental benefits. The issue is that food waste is a wicked problem for farmers—a wicked problem being one where fixing the problem, without addressing root causes, gives rise to other problems. Systemic problems are invariably wicked problems.

So what happens to farmers as the food waste problem is “solved” and waste reduced? Well, there will be up to 20% more food in a system that is already in oversupply. Prices for food will fall and consumers will definitely benefit. So will the environment. But farmers are the price-takers in the food system and we will have to wear further price reductions as result of post consumer waste reduction.

Now don’t get me wrong, farmers definitely want food waste reduced. We don’t like seeing our hard work going to landfill. However, farmers don’t want to be the only ones paying the price for society’s desired outcome. For farmers, solving food waste is a wicked problem. A UBI has the unique ability to reduce the impact of this, and I suspect many other wicked problems.

## Conclusion

Australians have long believed in and supported a “social safety net”. However, nets don’t catch all you want and they trap some you don’t. Unlike our current social safety net system, a UBI would come without the strings.

A no strings attached UBI would be a liberating experience for those caught in systemic nets of all types. Farmers would be no exception. Farmers and their families in receipt of UBI would be less constrained by systemic inequities and so freer to innovate, create, adapt, care for country, feed people with good and clean food, and more. Most importantly, farmers with UBI would be more resilient in a warming world, and help to cool the planet.

## UBI and Uni

The outlook for people currently studying, or considering studying at university is quite bleak.

The government allowances for which students are eligible—Austudy, Youth Allowance, and Rent Assistance for students who rent—are widely regarded as inadequately low, just as the body that administers these allowances, Centrelink, is inadequate.

Renting in the private market is very difficult whilst studying, at least without working to supplement income. But doing so is fraught, as underpayment is common in the industries that students work in. The relationship between graduating from a degree and getting a good job is weaker than it has been in the past, while at the same time, the number of students graduating from universities has been increasing by on average, 4.5% p.a. since 1999.<sup>1</sup> As a result, in some fields the number of graduates far exceeds the number of jobs.

With all this in mind, a Universal Basic Income (UBI) has the potential to drastically improve the lot of students in Australia, if implemented with care. As Frank Stilwell has argued, the devil will very much be in the detail,<sup>2</sup> and there are a number of risks that I will look at through the prism of my own personal experiences.

In 2016, I completed a B.A. in Political Economy and Social Policy as well as a Diploma of Languages in Mandarin Chinese. Like many students, I worked throughout my time as an undergraduate student and at times I received Youth Allowance. Since my degree and my diploma are considered separate courses by Centrelink, I was only able to receive Youth Allowance in semesters where I undertook three subjects in my degree. This made working a necessity and I was fortunate to find a part time job in customer service at a major supermarket. Working part time gave me a degree of financial security that many students do not have. However, it meant that I committed to working at least 10 hours a week throughout my undergraduate years. This meant that I had

1 Universities Australia 2015, 'Higher Education and Research: Facts and Figures', November, <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/australias-universities/key-facts-and-data#.WQA4OfI96Uk> accessed 19 April 2017.

2 Stilwell, F. 2016, 'A Universal Basic Income: Economic Considerations', p.50, in: *Can Less Work Be More Fair? A discussion paper on Universal Basic Income and shorter working week*, The Green Institute, December.



**Patrick Gibb** completed a Bachelor of Arts in Political Economy and Social Policy as well as a Diploma of Languages (Mandarin) at Macquarie University in 2016. Patrick's interests in social policy include the NDIS, Medicare and government allowances. He has recently developed an interest in Universal Basic Income. Patrick is also interested in financial markets, having reviewed Charles W. Calomiris and Stephen Haber's *Fragile by Design: The Political Origins of Banking Crises and Scarce Credit for the Economic and Labour Relations Review* in 2016. Patrick works part time for a major supermarket and is currently considering what Masters degree he would like to study.



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to choose between taking a full-time course load, working 50–60 hour weeks throughout each semester, and taking less than a full-time course load and consequently completing my studies more slowly. Since Mandarin Chinese is such a demanding language to learn, taking four subjects a semester was not a realistic prospect for me, at least not without risking the quality of my education and the marks I would receive.

Being able to take extra time to complete undergraduate studies is not something that all students are able to do. Family financial pressures may be such that students need to finish their degree as soon as possible to be able to move out of home. Equally, the stress of having to study and work at the same time as renting in the private market is enough to make many people want to finish their degree as soon as possible, even at the cost of poorer marks.

A carefully implemented UBI could mitigate many of these factors, benefitting students such as myself, and supporting a wide range of people through tertiary education. However, a range of design issues and risks need to be carefully considered.

The rate of the UBI would be crucial. Feasibly, a UBI could be set at a rate similar to existing student allowances. The main result of this would be to create stability, and remove the necessity of dealing with Centrelink to continually demonstrate eligibility. Beyond that, the results depend on whether a libertarian model of UBI or a more progressive UBI model prevails. As Ben Spies-Butcher argues, there is a big difference between abolishing the welfare state to make way for a UBI and maintaining the welfare state

while introducing a UBI and ensuring that there is greater public provision of essential services such as housing. Students could end up worse off, for example, if business and government use the introduction of a UBI as an argument to reduce minimum wages and undermine working conditions more generally, and this must be guarded against in implementation. But equally, a UBI could improve the bargaining position of workers by ensuring that they have sufficient economic security to engage in industrial action.<sup>3</sup>

Currently, many students rely on Youth Allowance or Austudy to provide some or all their income while they study. The maximum rate that Youth Allowance pays for a single student living at home is \$288 a fortnight, or \$437 if they live out of home.<sup>4</sup> The maximum rate that Austudy pays is \$437 a fortnight for single students, regardless of whether or not they still live at home.<sup>5</sup> Students on Youth Allowance or Austudy may also be entitled to receive \$132 a fortnight in Commonwealth Rent Assistance.<sup>6</sup> Although these allowances currently seem relatively secure from welfare cuts, having to deal with Centrelink means that receipt of these payments is by no means certain. I once experienced the misfortune of having to repay most of a semester's worth of Youth Allowance after a Centrelink call centre worker mistakenly approved my request to continue receiving it. I was informed over the phone that studying two subjects in my degree and one subject in my diploma meant that I was considered a full-time student and that consequently, I was eligible for Youth Allowance. This information was incorrect. However, because no note had been left on my file about the call and I did not ask for a receipt number, I had no evidence that I had ever had that phone conversation. My appeal was unsuccessful, and ultimately, I had no choice but to pay back the \$2100 that Centrelink had paid me that semester.

Stories like this are likely to be familiar to people who have had the misfortune of dealing with Centrelink. Yet it is fair to say that this story is not as egregious as the recent appropriately named 'robodebt' scandal. Recently Centrelink largely removed the human oversight of their automated debt recovery system.<sup>7</sup> This led to a massive increase in the number of debt assessments being made by Centrelink, a substantial proportion of which have been incorrect. Even by the admission of the Social Services Minister Christian Porter in January of this year, Centrelink recipients have been able to point out that the debt is incorrect 20% of the time.<sup>8</sup> It is possible that by now, that figure is much higher, given the difficulties that people had in disputing the debts that had been raised.

3 Ozich, C. 2016, 'The emancipatory potential of a Universal Basic Income', pp. 74–75, in: *Can Less Work Be More Fair? A discussion paper on Universal Basic Income and shorter working week*, The Green Institute, December.

4 Department of Human Services 2017, 'Payment rates for Youth Allowance', 24 April, <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/enablers/payment-rates-youth-allowance>, accessed 25 April 2017.

5 Department of Human Services 2017, 'Austudy', 17 March, <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/austudy>, accessed 25 April 2017.

6 Department of Human Services 2017, 'Rent Assistance', 19 April, <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/rent-assistance>, accessed 25 April 2017.

7 Pett, H. and Cosier, C. 2017, 'We're all talking about the Centrelink debt controversy, but what is 'robodebt' anyway?', 3 March, *ABC RN Background Briefing*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-03/centrelink-debt-controversy-what-is-robodebt/8317764>, accessed 26 April 2017.

8 The Canberra Times 2017, 'Centrelink debt recovery not the success that Christian Porter claims', 7 January, <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/ct-editorial/centrelink-debt-recovery-not-the-success-that-christian-porter-claims-20170105-gtmsy0.html>, accessed 26 April 2017.



I was affected by the robodebt scandal, and when Centrelink informed me that I had a debt to repay, for a number of weeks I was unable to submit payslips to dispute the debt on the Federal Government's web portal, myGov. I presume that this was because the web portal was unable to handle the volume of traffic that resulted from so many people disputing debts. Whenever I tried to submit payslips on myGov, the website would not accept them and ask me to submit the payslips later. This occurred regardless of the time of day—I tried numerous times in the early hours of the morning. I was forced to initiate a payment plan and begin paying off the debt to avoid being harassed by debt collectors while I disputed the debt. This is a situation in which others found themselves.<sup>9</sup> It has been suggested that at least one person has committed suicide due to the stress of being pursued by debt collectors acting on behalf of Centrelink recently.<sup>10</sup> Although I am opposed to the abolition of the welfare state to make way for a UBI, my experiences of Centrelink have been so negative that I can see the appeal of replacing our current welfare system with a UBI.

Since Australia's student allowances are so low and Centrelink can be very unreliable, it is very difficult for students to survive on student allowances alone, particularly if they are unable to live at home. It is for this reason that 77% of Youth Allowance recipients and 72% of Austudy recipients are in housing stress.<sup>11</sup> On top of this, 37% of students receiving rent assistance are paying more than half their weekly income in rent.<sup>12</sup>

9 Pett, H. and Cosier, C. 2017, 'We're all talking about the Centrelink debt controversy, but what is 'robodebt' anyway?', 3 March, *ABC RN Background Briefing*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-03/centrelink-debt-controversy-what-is-robodebt/8317764>, accessed 26 April 2017.

10 McKenzie-Murray, M 2017, 'Centrelink's debt collection pushed him over the edge', *The Saturday Paper*, 18–24 February, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2017/02/18/centrelinks-debt-collection-pushed-him-over-the-edge/14873364004249>, accessed 19 April 2017.

11 The Greens no date, 'Increasing Rent Assistance by 30%', p. 2, <https://greens.org.au/sites/greens.org.au/files/increasing%20rent%20assistance.pdf>, accessed 20 April 2017.

12 Ibid, p. 1.



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This is unsurprising given the results of Anglicare Australia's 2017 Rental Affordability Snapshot. For a single person on Youth Allowance with no other income, only 0.004% of properties could be rented without housing stress if they lived alone, and 0.007% of properties if they lived in a share house.<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly, being in housing stress interferes with students' ability to learn and perform well at university by interfering with their mental wellbeing. Whether UBI could reduce the proportion of students in housing stress depends very much on how generous the rate of UBI is, but it could certainly contribute, in conjunction with more targeted policies for affordable housing, such as increasing public housing stock.

The story for those who are able to live at home while they are studying is very different. I was able to live at home while I was a student because I have a good relationship with my parents and because they have enough money to be able to afford to have their son living with them. The privilege of being able to live at home gave me an advantage over many students because it provided me with stable and cheap accommodation. I never needed to worry about having to move because my lease was coming up, or because a landlord had decided to sell the property in which I lived. Further to this, I lived in a house that was not in a state of disrepair, unlike many students. 8% of people renting in Australia's private rental market live in properties in urgent need of repair,<sup>14</sup> and it is likely that this affects students disproportionately given their low incomes. The meanness of our current welfare allowances for students amounts to passing judgement on those students who through no fault of their own need to live out of home. Equally, it is reasonable to suggest that there is a class gradient when it comes to living at home as wealthier people are more likely to be located close to universities and have large homes with sufficient space to defuse familial tension. Given the advantages that there are to living at home while studying, some would argue that it would be unfair for such students to receive the full rate of UBI.

The inadequacy of student allowances means that it is quite common for students to work while they study. In the 2011 census, 62.4% of university students stated that they were working as well as studying.<sup>15</sup> The results of the latest census are still being released, so it is unclear what percentage of students are currently working and studying. However, it is unlikely that this percentage has drastically changed. In 2011, the top four occupations of students were all in retail or hospitality.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately for many students, a high proportion of jobs in these sectors are casual, and underpayment of wages is quite common. In 2013, the retail and hospitality industries each accounted for 19% of Australia's casual employees,<sup>17</sup> but specific figures on what proportion of retail and hospitality workers are employed casually are hard to come by. There have been numerous wage scandals in

13 Anglicare Australia 2017, 'Rental Affordability Snapshot: April 2017', p.14, <http://www.anglicare.asn.au/research-reports/the-rental-affordability-snapshot/docs/default-source/default-document-library/rental-affordability-snapshot-2017>, accessed 27 April 2017.

14 Choice, National Shelter and the National Association of Tenant Organisations 2017, 'Unsettled: Life in Australia's private rental market', p. 13, 15 February, <https://www.choice.com.au/money/property/renting/articles/choice-rental-market-report>, accessed 20 April 2017.

15 Parr, N. 2015, 'Who goes to university? The changing profile of our students', The Conversation, May 25, <https://theconversation.com/who-goes-to-university-the-changing-profile-of-our-students-40373>, accessed 20 April 2017.

16 Ibid.

17 Kryger, A. 2015, 'Casual employment in Australia: a quick guide', Department of Parliamentary Services, 20 January, [http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/prspub/3612450/upload\\_binary/3612450.pdf;fileType=application/pdf](http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/prspub/3612450/upload_binary/3612450.pdf;fileType=application/pdf), accessed 20 April 2017.

the retail and hospitality sectors recently. Baker's Delight was found to have been relying on a WorkChoices era enterprise bargain agreement to pay workers as little as \$8 an hour.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Coles was found to have underpaid some of its workers after its enterprise bargain agreement with the Shop, Distributive and Allied Union was found to fail the 'better off overall test' before the Fair Work Commission.<sup>19</sup> If sufficiently generous, a UBI may be able to make scandals like this less common as people would have less incentive to continue to work for employers who underpay their workers.

Although working while studying is often a source of stress for students and can negatively impact students' results, it does have many benefits aside from earning an income. In 2015, graduates who worked during the final year of their degree were more likely to be in full time employment within four months of completing their degree.<sup>20</sup> Working while studying has allowed me some insight into why this is unsurprising. Working in a customer service role at a major supermarket has allowed me to develop skills that universities do not teach. Given that I am often the first person who customers talk to when they wish to make a complaint, I have become accustomed to handling conflict situations. While most of the time this means doing what the customer wants (even if they are being a bit unreasonable), occasionally this means refusing demands that are completely unreasonable, which will often elicit abuse. While I do not claim to have a particularly thick skin, customer service has certainly made mine thicker. My job has also provided me with experience in managing staff as for the most part I work in a supervisory role. Naturally, I have also become much more comfortable talking to strangers. These are just some of the ways that I have benefitted from having worked during my degree. Given that large numbers of students work in retail, and the similarities there are between retail and hospitality, I expect that my experience has been similar to that of many other students.

The situation in the graduate labour market is nearly as bleak as the situation is in the hospitality and retail sectors. Partly as a result of Labor removing the cap on university places, many students are now graduating in areas where only a very small proportion of them end up being employed in the area in which they have trained. The legal sector is one area where this is very much the case. While more data is needed for a clearer picture of the situation of law graduates,<sup>21</sup> the situation for law graduates is quite grim. In 2014, 14 600 students graduated from undergraduate and graduate law degrees in Australia, yet

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18 Toscano, N. and Danckert, S. 2017, 'Baker's Delight caves into pressure and scraps 'unfair' agreement', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 February, <http://www.smh.com.au/business/workplace-relations/bakers-delight-caves-to-pressure-and-scraps-unfair-agreement-20170201-gu31zs.html>, accessed 20 April 2017.

19 Schneiders, B., Millar, R. and Toscano, N. 2016, 'Coles underpaid workers and cut penalty rates: tribunal', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 May, <http://www.smh.com.au/business/workplace-relations/coles-underpaid-workers-cut-penalty-rates-tribunal-finds-20160531-gp7vxm.html>, accessed 20 April 2017.

20 Healy, J. 2015, 'Graduating into a weak job market: Why so many grads can't find work', *The Conversation*, 29 July, <https://theconversation.com/graduating-into-a-weak-job-market-why-so-many-grads-cant-find-work-45222>, accessed 25 April 2017.

21 The Law Society of New South Wales 2015, 'Future Prospects of Law Graduates: Report and Recommendations', p6, <https://www.lawsociety.com.au/cs/groups/public/documents/internetcontent/980877.pdf>, accessed 23 April 2017.





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**A UBI with a rate higher than Newstart Allowance has the potential to allow graduates to wait longer for better job opportunities to become available ... [and] would reduce the amount of job turnover in the Australian economy**  
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Australia had only approximately 66 000 solicitors at that point in time.<sup>22</sup> Little will have changed since then. More broadly, while there has been a recent increase in the proportion of students working full time four months after graduation, from 68.8% in 2015 to 70.9% in 2016, this is still far less than in 2008, when 85.2% of graduates had found full time employment four months after graduation.<sup>23</sup>

Undoubtedly, figures such as these are a significant source of stress for students. This is likely a contributing factor to the high rates of mental illness seen among students, with up to one in three tertiary students between 17 and 25 contemplating suicide in the last year.<sup>24</sup> A UBI with a rate higher than Newstart Allowance has the potential to allow graduates to wait longer for better job opportunities to become available. This in turn would reduce the amount of job turnover in the Australian economy. For myself, if I was unemployed, a UBI would make me more inclined to pursue job opportunities now rather than waiting until after I finish a postgraduate

22 Tadros, E. and Walsh, K. 2015, 'Too many law graduates and not enough jobs', *Australian Financial Review*, 22 October, <http://www.afr.com/business/legal/too-many-law-graduates-and-not-enough-jobs-20151020-gkdbxyx>, accessed 23 April 2017.

23 Dodd, T. 2017, 'Good news at last for graduates hunting jobs', *Australian Financial Review*, 13 February, <http://www.afr.com/brand/special-reports/good-news-at-last-for-graduates-hunting-jobs-20170127-gtzygc>, accessed 23 April 2017.

24 Vukovic, D. 2017, 'One in three higher education students think about suicide or self-harm, report says', Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 6 April, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-06/one-in-three-students-consider-self-harm-and-suicide/8420728>, accessed 24 April 2017.



degree, at least provided that the UBI was more generous than Newstart Allowance. Given that Newstart Allowance is so low, it would make more sense to me to wait until I have finished a postgraduate degree and become more employable before I start looking for a full time job. Equally, the prospect of having to apply for dozens of jobs a month that are not relevant to what I have studied in order to meet Newstart Allowance activity requirements is very unappealing.

Alongside design and implementation challenges noted above, there is one area where a UBI could have a significant unintended negative consequence: the potential to increase the amount of time that students and graduates spend in unpaid internships. While there is a lack of historical data on unpaid internships in Australia,<sup>25</sup> anecdotally they are an emerging problem for students and graduates. Although it is argued that internships can be a “source of valuable experience, and can bolster a resume or form the basis of a positive reference,”<sup>26</sup> there is evidence that they only infrequently lead to paid employment,<sup>27</sup> and ultimately, they are unpaid. Should unpaid internships become more common in Australia, this would advantage students from wealthy backgrounds who are able to rely on the financial support of their parents to engage in unpaid work. While a generous UBI may act to level the playing field, at the same time, it could lead to employers having greater social licence to employ students and graduates as unpaid interns rather than as paid employees. This could lead to students and graduates spending extended periods of time working full time but only earning their basic income. This highlights how, as Ben Spies-Butcher has argued, it may be more strategic for progressives to focus attention elsewhere rather than campaigning for a UBI.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, it is also feasible—and arguable necessary regardless of the UBI factor—to regulate the use of unpaid internships to tackle this risk.

Students in Australia currently face many problems. The rates of welfare allowances such as Youth Allowance and Austudy are punitively low. Australia’s property market is failing to provide affordable rental properties for students. The industries in which students commonly work while studying are rife with underpayment and the graduate labour market is not providing enough jobs for graduates. While a UBI is no silver bullet, and substantial design and implementation issues need to be taken into account, it could alleviate some of these problems and make important university education easier and more accessible.

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25 Interns Australia 2015, ‘2015 Annual Survey’, November, [http://www.internsaustralia.org/interns\\_australia\\_2015\\_annual\\_survey](http://www.internsaustralia.org/interns_australia_2015_annual_survey), accessed 24 April 2017.

26 Productivity Commission 2015, ‘Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Workplace Relations Framework’, p. 823, <http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/workplace-relations/report/workplace-relations-volume2.pdf>, accessed 28 April 2017.

27 Interns Australia 2015, ‘2015 Annual Survey’, November, [http://www.internsaustralia.org/interns\\_australia\\_2015\\_annual\\_survey](http://www.internsaustralia.org/interns_australia_2015_annual_survey), accessed 24 April 2017.

28 Spies-Butcher, B. 2016, ‘Not Just a Basic Income’, p. 41, in: *Can Less Work Be More Fair? A discussion paper on Universal Basic Income and shorter working week*, The Green Institute, December.

## A view from the Latrobe Valley

Exponents of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) have been around for hundreds of years. Thomas More, Thomas Paine, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Bertrand Russell, Franklin Roosevelt, Eric Olin Wright and Milton Friedman are amongst the most notable ones.

Some of these notables expressed views on UBI when capitalism was at a nascent stage and others during its prime. We are now discussing UBI at a time when capitalism is beyond its fully ripened state. This has deep implications for how we think about its role in economic transformation, across society and specifically for those of us in the Latrobe Valley.

To really understand UBI's role, we need to see where we sit in that history. We need to understand capitalism as one of the political systems people have moved through, or are moving through, since the beginning of what we call civilisation, such as tribalism, slavery, feudalism, monarchy and capitalism. Capitalism was itself once a progressive political system and its introduction was strongly resisted by those whom benefited most from the political system/s that preceded it (feudalism and monarchy). Now, like all those before it, it is not surprising that the current main beneficiaries of capitalism resist even the thought of a change. They have many of us believing that capitalism is the end of the road, when it comes to political systems. For example, democracy and capitalism are presented to us as synonymous. Capitalists attempt to monopolise democracy; that is, they peddle the view that democracy is only possible under capitalism and that every other system, particularly socialism, could not be democratic by definition.

Like stages of systems that preceded capitalism, great debates are ongoing regarding their current stage, as witnessed by the continued existence of many monarchies and monarchs.



**Luke van der Muelen** immigrated to Australia in 1956 from Holland, settling in Morwell. He completed a Boilermaking apprenticeship, then worked in the sales, construction, timber and power industries in Australia and in PNG.

Living in Yallourn, he became active in the Save Yallourn Township Campaign and the "1977, 13-week Maintenance Strike", beginning his union, community, environment and peace activism. He became an honorary union official with FEDFA in 1989, involved in all issues involving the corporatisation/restructuring/privatisation of the SEC.

Luke was instrumental in the **SECV Not for Sale, Public First, Latrobe Valley Workers** and **Jobs Action** campaigns and was a member of the Save Moe Hospital campaigns. He became the inaugural President of the newly formed CFMEU Victorian Mining and Energy District in 2001, retiring in July 2016 as a CFMEU Life Member.

Luke and his partner Jenny have three adult children, one with special needs, so over the last 30+ years he has been part of the disability community.

Any view on UBI or any other proposals involving our society should be premised upon a clear acceptance of the state of our current political system. Where an accepted understanding is not possible, views should be accompanied by the author's understanding on the current state of our political system. This would aid readers in better understanding the presented view.

As I have already stated, I believe capitalism, at best, is at the fully ripened stage and growing mouldy.

Karl Marx's 1870's slogan "from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs" has always resonated strongly with me as a sound societal principal. My first thoughts on UBI brought this slogan to mind.

Whilst I'd naturally be a strong proponent for UBI, any discussion on the practicalities of its introduction at this time must include a frank and honest analysis of the current state of capitalism.

I cannot in my wildest imaginings see our current capitalist system delivering a UBI. Everything our current rulers do is in the opposite direction. For decades, the current inadequate social security system has been in decline and further attacks are planned.

Achieving a UBI will, I believe, require political system change.

And this political system change is vital, not just for delivering a UBI. Not only has capitalism outlived its usefulness but, further, I believe it can be demonstrated that its continued existence threatens our survival as a species on planet Earth. We must move on.

This systemic view is informed by my personal experience over 40 years. I've been a community, political and trade union activist in Gippsland since 1976 when the then State Electricity Commission of Victoria (SEC) began their destruction of the township of Yallourn. Back then we were very concerned about nuclear wars/accidents/waste. The "Yellow Peril" or the threat of communism were big back then. This was the Vietnam War era.

My concern for our civilisation's future has grown exponentially since then. With ANZAC day just passed, our Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull is "all the way" with DJT as Donald beats the war drums against China and North Korea. While at home Donald espouses the building of a 2000+ mile wall between the USA and Mexico as a positive.

Meanwhile there are some 12 million refugees on Earth today, thanks to recent world history in places like Pakistan, Uganda, Rwanda, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Haiti, Iraq, Kuwait, Vietnam, Lebanon, Iran, Afghanistan, Cambodia, East Timor, Palestine, Somalia, the Balkans and Syria.

Chernobyl, Fukushima, global warming, the Great Barrier Reef and the Adani coal mine come immediately to mind when one thinks of our environment and resource depletion.



UBI might seem like a small issue next to all of these, but in no way do I wish to disparage or diminish this worthwhile discussion. Unemployment, underemployment, unpaid employment and overemployment all continue to increase, and they are all manifestations of a failed political system. No amount of tinkering with it will fix it. And it is coming home to roost, politically.

Australians, along with good people across the world, are seeking answers/solutions to these big problems. People are desperate for good leadership. Good leadership involves providing sound analysis and understanding of the current political system and then working towards building a new one that truly serves the people. They won't get that from the Hansons, Trumps, Le Pens and Erdogans, who might identify some of the same problems, but their solutions are never about actually serving the people, no matter what they claim.

Let's take a look at how this has played out in the Latrobe Valley.

Between 1989 and 2016, I was a key FED&FA/CFMEU Trade Union official, representing mining and power workers. Our union, based in Morwell, is in the centre of the Latrobe Valley. This is where the SEC's workforce was most concentrated, and it's the region that was smashed by our current political system which restructured, corporatised and then privatised the power industry.

Back in 1989, the then CEO of the SEC decided to rationalise/restructure the SEC by reducing its then workforce of 23,000 by 20%, using the pretext that this was for the benefit of the Victorian community/people and for the people of the Latrobe Valley. The promise then was that this would mean a little pain today in return for large gains tomorrow.



This was also the time nationally when Labor's Prime Minister, Bob Hawke and the world's No 1 Treasurer, Paul Keating, were restructuring and rationalising across other publicly owned assets, finance and the way in which employment occurred. Once again, of course, it was presented as all for the benefit of the Australian people. Paul Keating had some of us believing that they were doing all this in order to prevent Australia from becoming a "Banana Republic".

Many at this time knew that everything was about to be restructured, corporatised and privatised and that every decent societal benefit Australians had struggled to build over generations was under threat.

Well, if we're not a Banana Republic now I'd like to know what we are or what a Banana Republic is.

The outcome in the Latrobe Valley at the time of these capitalist initiatives, all supposedly in the name of benefiting either the Australian, Victorian or Latrobe Valley people, was devastation. All of our profitable, publicly owned, essential assets were sold. Electricity prices have soared and more than 70% of the SEC workforce lost their jobs. We went from 23,000 down to 6000 jobs.

The conservative Productivity Commission in 1999 recognised the Latrobe Valley as the hardest hit region in Australia as a result of this "fix". It was an all too familiar situation, where multinational capital greatly benefited and the Australian people generally lost.

Back then, I was a Unit Controller at the Loy Yang A power station. Like thousands of others, I was not going to remain idle while Bob Hawke, Paul Keating, Jeff Kennett and their hangers on devastated our community.

I became an honorary trade union official, joined the Public First Campaign, became a Greens member and was a candidate in Federal and State elections. I joined in our local Save Our Hospitals campaign and helped form the Latrobe Valley Workers Forum and Latrobe Valley Jobs Action Campaign. In 2001, I gave up my Unit Controllers job to become the inaugural President of the CFMEU Victorian Mining & Energy District.

Sure, we didn't stop Bob, Paul, Jeff and their masters. But we achieved much, and without this huge community resistance to these damaging changes, the outcomes would have been even worse. Also, we would not have built the connections and gained the knowledge that we are now going to need to truly progress.

The 2014 Morwell Power Station closure and the recent Hazelwood Power Station closure have caused the loss of another 1000 precious, direct, well paid jobs. In the Latrobe Valley, the future of the remaining power station, paper and timber industry jobs is precarious, as are the jobs of thousands of Australians.

We clearly see the damaging effects of closures, growing unemployment, underemployment, unpaid work, over employment and technological developments. Combine that with capitalism and capitalist governments' complete inability to deal with these problems in ways that serves the people and it means the Latrobe Valley people, like all Australians, are in for very challenging times.

Now I could have said difficult, hard or worsening times, but that would be saying or accepting the premise that the people are going to continue to lose and that corporations, multinational capital or the markets are going to continue to win.

But even this analysis of winners and losers is seriously flawed. Any correct analysis of the current state of humanity on Earth sees us all in the same lifeboat. Reality dictates that we will either all become winners or alternatively that we will all lose. This is where the Hansons and Trumps really come unstuck – in making this an “us and them” fight, they make it certain that we will all lose.

I’m a proponent for the all winners model and realise that this will require political system change. I realise that the all winners model will require a UBI or the principle of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs”.

Further, the all winners model will require the achievement of peace, an improving environment, democratic governments, markets subservient to the needs of society and initiatives like UBI.

It was these sorts of great needs that led our forbearers to seek revolutionary change. We now face comparatively greater, more radical challenges than any previous epoch. Consequently, there is no choice other than to seek changes which meet the challenge.

Capitalism is the problem not the solution. I appreciate how concerning/scary all this “we need revolutionary change” stuff may sound. But why should it be concerning/scary? Do we not have the tools within our democracy to cope with challenge and change? Why can’t we have the societies we desire and must have?

We must move on. NOW.

## Poverty-traps and pay-gaps: why (single) mothers need basic income

Harper discovered she wasn't alone when she packed up her house, stopped paying rent and took her four-year-old son, Finn, on a six month "holiday" up north to warmer climes.

I found in every camp site, especially the show grounds as they're the cheapest ones that still have facilities, there were a couple of other single mums and their kids. I was also travelling with a friend and her son, so there were often five or six of us and a bunch of kids at each campsite. Up north there's even more. Over time we became familiar with each other.

Harper gave up her home because she couldn't afford the rent and have any quality of life. Paid work put her in a double bind: if she worked, she lost most of her Centrelink payments; if she didn't work there wasn't quite enough to make ends meet. So, she worked and stayed poor. These are the poverty-traps that keep many single mothers working-poor and unable to dig out.

In Australia now, there is a clandestine group of mobile single parents, mostly mothers, who have found they cannot, on Centrelink benefits and low-paid casual work, meet the cost of living. They have chosen instead to travel and live with their children in camping grounds and caravan parks around Australia, particularly in Northern NSW and Queensland, where living outdoors is relatively easy. For as little as \$10 a night at national parks and showgrounds and up to \$25 at caravan parks that have showers, washing machines and other facilities, they live on the move. Harper and Finn travelled between both—a few days roughing it in national parks followed by a return to "civilisation", taking showers, washing clothes and sharing dinners with friends at caravan parks. Here Finn could play with other children, some of whom were becoming familiar as they met in parks across Victoria and NSW. The vibe at the caravan parks sounds convivial—better than yelling at your kids to get ready for childcare and school, so you can go to a low-paying job and never see them—but also a little Orwellian: this is not a holiday; it's homelessness with benefits.



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Harper announced her “holiday” to friends and family on social media. Here they could follow her adventure in photos and status updates. “I had to call it that; I couldn’t admit to myself it was anything else”. The 6-month, 12-month or indefinite camping “holiday” is a functional, adaptable and resourceful response to the poverty traps single mothers so often find themselves in, and since the “welfare reforms” of the Howard years and Gillard’s removal of the sole parent pension for those with children over eight (ironically on the historic day of her misogyny speech), it is no surprise that this practice is growing. The truth is, some single parents can no longer work within the system; it is simply too hard. So, like other vulnerable mobile populations, they’re outside of it.

Harper told me there is a Facebook group dedicated to this practice but asked I didn’t share the name as it’s currently illegal to have no fixed address—or in other words, be homeless—and in receipt of Centrelink benefits, arguably when you need it most! People who have given up their home for long term camping and travel, often mixed with sleeping in their cars, provide the addresses of family and friends to meet eligibility criteria; in reality, paying rent has become too expensive.

With the turn to surveillance of welfare recipients—take the 2015 case of Tania Sharp whose Facebook status update of her pregnancy was used against her in court as evidence of welfare fraud—we move to a new kind of welfare state: the surveillance state. This is a net, but, far from a safety net catching people who fall, the analogy is closer to a fishing trawl where the recipients—disproportionately poor women and children—are being hunted and caught. The infamous robo-debt scheme also disproportionately catches single mothers in its “net”. There’s no safety in this net; rather there’s punishment, gender specific punishment, for not being “safely” ensconced in patriarchal marriages or well-paid jobs. Most so-called “welfare cheats” are single mothers.

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is a radically different concept—nobody has to apply, prove their worth, pretend they have or do not have a home, justify their sex-life or living arrangements, or fill out 20 page complicated and often contradictory forms. There are no deserving and undeserving poor, no recipients cast as “cheats”. The underlying philosophy is completely different: everyone has a right to a share in the collective wealth; they don’t need to bear a stigma or struggle for recognition, and unpaid care work is socially valued.

With the massive rise in the cost of living, particularly the cost of housing over the last decade, but also energy and telecommunication bills, many can no longer afford to meet their monthly payments or, like Harper, if they can, there is absolutely nothing left over and the stress involved in achieving this end makes daily life a struggle. Harper found she was cutting corners everywhere: meals were less nutritious, she didn’t have time to cultivate social relationships, and her mothering was compromised. When she gave up her house (a share house), sold almost all of her belongings and hit the road, she felt a freedom and control over her life she hadn’t had since Finn was born. Travelling for six months lifted the burden she felt around managing dual roles and her payments were not automatically chewed up on rent and bills. Harper had time with her son—literally all day long—which she cherished and claims healed their relationship.



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It felt like Finn was always between me and what I needed to do [go to work]. I had to rush and he wanted time; I had to put him in childcare and he wanted to be with me; he was always clingy and demanding and had begun acting out; I found him difficult to be around. I could never afford holidays so we never got a break from this stress and pressure. This is why I called it a holiday because it was a break from this cycle of exhaustion and poverty and stress.

Travelling meant Harper was able to reconnect with her son. He also had playmates in the caravan park with their communal yet contained play areas. Harper had friends to share dinners with. There is now a small but growing population of homeless single parents who live this way; they're home-schooling their kids or still have pre-schoolers. They're on the move—but not in any socially sanctioned way. They're not travelling like young people, or middle-income families or retired baby-boomers. Not quite refugees, but certainly rendered so vulnerable that they are unable to take root and live in society, or at least not permanently. They are on its “flexible” fringes recast as mobile passengers; not quite in and not quite out. While I laud the innovative adaptation to circumstances, which not only gets out of the iron triangle (working to pay the rent and paying the rent to work; paying for the car to drive to work to pay for the car) but solves a number of other problems of modern living: highly regulated schedules, less and less time for children and relationships, leisure based on meaningless consumption. Nonetheless, there is still

a remainder: “chosen” homelessness is not an answer, at least not at the structural level, to the problem of (single) mothers’ poverty. It is an idiosyncratic not an institutional solution.

This is one story of poverty and homeless that is emerging on the fringes of our society. I have another ...

Naomi rents her beautiful four-bedroom home on Airbnb every weekend for around \$800. She has three teenage kids who stay at their friends’ houses or accompany her to her parents’ houses, one and two hours away respectively. On occasion they have driven further afield for a bed. As a wife and mother who took “a long time”<sup>1</sup> to complete her studies while caring for her three children, Naomi doesn’t have great employment prospects. Into her mid-40s now and currently going through a divorce, she has very few avenues for earning an income and can no longer rely on her breadwinner spouse. She doesn’t have the track record for professional employment despite now having multiple degrees. She applies for many jobs, has been shortlisted for two and has been given none. The gig economy provides an instant if unstable solution to the immediate problem of income. She doesn’t need an uninterrupted CV, a talent for bullshit and three professional referees to list her home on Airbnb, but neither does Airbnb give her any job security or superannuation. She’s thinking about Uber too; she has a people mover—good for mums with large families and, as it happens, trips to the airport from her regional home. The gig economy is not and never will be a substitute, but it has certainly stepped in to fill a yawning economic gap. Living in a trendy tourist town and thanks to marriage to a high earning spouse, Naomi owns—at least for now—a beautiful home. She enjoys hosting and also rents rooms during the week. However, after eight hours of laundry, making beds and cleaning to hotel standards, she has to clear out of *her own home* for the weekend, every weekend. Everyone she and her children stay with has the sense that this is not an independent visit but a need, which puts a strain on relationships.

Naomi’s weekend homelessness is also a novel and adaptive solution to the crisis of income in her system, but it comes at a cost: the children are disrupted in their routines. “The kids and I find it really disruptive, but how else can I make \$800 to pay the mortgage and bills? How? The bank would reclaim the house if I didn’t do this”.

Naomi only receives a small Centrelink benefit since her kids are all teenagers and she’s supposed to get a job. The problem is she’s both over and under qualified—she has several degrees, including a postgraduate research degree, but almost no work experience. There isn’t a lot of casual work in regional Victoria and she is still actively mothering; or, as is the case with older kids, ferrying them around. “I still need to pick the kids up from the bus stop, take them to their friends’ places and after school activities, cook them dinner, make sure they’re doing their homework”. For Naomi, being away at a job and adding an hour each way for commuting isn’t an option as a lone primary carer. Then there’s the emotional fall-out of the divorce. The children need her to facilitate and foster their lives. What job realistically accommodates this?

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<sup>1</sup> I put these words in inverted commas because the default time schedule is a neoliberal one that presupposes workers have wives at home. When you are the wife and mother a different time-schedule ensues that involves care for children and running a household. These are crucial and time-consuming jobs. So, Naomi was “slow” by conventional standards but not by maternal ones.

I don't have the years of experience and so without Bob paying the mortgage and bills and not being eligible for single parent support, this is how I'm living. Running a BnB suits me and at least I can be there for the kids.

Naomi would prefer a job but this is her novel solution for now. The gig-economy is stepping in to fill the gap, albeit poorly.

## Mothers and basic income

UBI offers an alternative to these poverty traps that are increasingly ensnaring women in the space between low-income waged work, declining welfare and unstable, abusive or non-existent marriages. It makes a new gender contract possible and facilitates women's economic independence. Women have gained this independence as *individuals*—the individuals of the liberal social contract—but they have not done so as mothers. As we shall see, on almost every index mothers earn less, have less time to earn more, undertake the great majority of unpaid care work, and suffer the highest pay and promotion gaps and, here's the rub: most would prefer to care for their children, especially when they're young. As Catherine Hakim's large-scale research shows, most mothers prefer to combine paid work with care work, while up to 20% prefer to stay at home full-time (2000). Basic income offers *mothers*, especially single mothers, a means to achieve economic independence at a modest standard while disentangling this from the interlocking and mutually reinforcing institutions of marriage, employment and welfare. In a modern liberal-democratic society, this is the proper foundation of liberty, of mothers' liberty.

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Women's unpaid care work used to be "paid for" through the institution of marriage (as it often still is, albeit in modified form). That is, through the distribution of the husband's wage to the whole family. This was the basis of the family wage that sanctioned men being paid at a higher rate than women. However, with men's declining employment rates and stagnating wages, rising rates of divorce and more children born out of wedlock, poorer mothers' access to a share of our collective wealth has declined. Women have always had lower wages and a radically compromised capacity to earn an income if they are the primary carers of their children (as most women are); this is not new. What is new is that under neoliberalism all people are required to maintain a full-time secure attachment to the labour force over a lifetime, regardless of their capacity to do so. Now that marriage is both an optional and a soluble institution, this situation has become acute for separated, divorced or never married mothers and we see it showing up in the feminisation of both poverty and homelessness.

From the opposite perspective, what I find interesting, immersing myself in the focus on automation and precarity in the broad basic income literature, including academic and journalistic articles alike, is the assumption that precarious access to employment is something new. Certainly, on a mass scale it is for most (though not all) men and the spectre of middle class professionals losing their jobs—something already happening in fields like journalism and academia and likely in the health sector next—is a very significant social and economic change; but for all but the most privileged women this economic precarity is *the historical and contemporaneous norm*. Thus, while a full-time, well-paid job over a lifetime is the route to economic security, notwithstanding the rhetoric of gender equality, very few women have *ever* had such jobs. So, my argument isn't just that basic income is the only viable macro-economic answer to increasing economic inequality—specifically, the decline of full-time, secure jobs—but that it is a *crucial answer* to the as yet unresolved issue of gender justice under capitalism.

While I support a basic income for everyone, I think it is important to identify the specificity of mothers in this debate, given both the tendency to ignore the centrality of gender justice and the extent to which, when gender is centred, motherhood is glossed over. In fact we need to make the socio-economic impact of becoming a mother and of mothering work explicit.

Women who are not mothers, not-yet mothers, or long past actively mothering dependent children are all in quite different socio-economic positions (although of course the structural effects of mothering last a lifetime). It's not that gender doesn't matter; it's just that motherhood matters more.

We can look at this demographically variegated landscape by looking at the gender pay gap and then looking at how motherhood impacts this.

In Australia, women's full-time wages were 82.8% of men's, with a wage gap of 17.2%. The gender pay gap has grown over the last decade from 14.9% in 2004, to a record high of 18.8% in February 2015 before falling slightly again in 2016. As a result women are earning less on average compared to men than they were 20 years ago!





ACTU Gender Pay Gap Over the Lifecycle report

However, this figure is calculated without including overtime and bonuses, which substantially increase men's wages, or part-time, which substantially decreases women's wages. In other words, "83 cents in the dollar" substantially overstates wage parity. When this difference is factored in, the pay gap widens to just over 30%. And in the "prime childrearing years" between ages 35–44, this gap widens to nearly 40%.

A more realistic figure is gained by looking at full-time versus part-time earnings as well as average male and female earnings directly. Here we see the pay gap more clearly. For example, in 2016, average weekly earnings were \$1,727.40 for male employees and \$1,010.20 for female employees (a difference of close to \$720 per week). However, most mothers work part-time which exacerbates this pay gap yet again.

If we consider full-time and part-time work, the wage disparity widens further. Compare the \$1,727.40 for full-time male employees with \$633.60 for part-time female employees; now we have a gap of over \$1100 per week! Close to half of all Australian women worked part-time in 2015–16—44% (double the OECD average). However, this figure rises to 62% for mothers with a child under five and almost 84% for those with a child under two. Close to 40% of all mothers work part-time regardless of the age of the child, while only 25% worked full-time.

The remainder, it needs to be remembered, were *out of the workforce altogether*. As the ABS put it, "Reflecting the age when women are likely to be having children (and taking a major role in child care), women aged 25–44 years are more than two and a half times as likely as men their age to be out of the labour force."

Age of youngest child is a key predictor of women's labour force participation although it has almost no bearing on men's labour force participation and when it does it is in the opposite direction: fathers of younger children typically undertake more paid work. Moreover, a quarter of all female employees work casually and their average weekly earnings were just \$471.40. Think about that—a quarter of all working women earn less than \$500 a week! These days barely covers the rent let alone food, bills, and educational and commuting costs.

Occupational segregation and motherhood wage penalties also kick in to this mix. If we look at labour force participation, we see that coupled mothers have higher rates of participation than single mothers given the additional support they receive with childcare and income.

Given the average full-time male wage is significantly higher than the average female wage and, moreover, that women carry the overwhelming share of unpaid care and domestic work and thus typically work part-time in their key childrearing years—and, we should remember, fully a quarter do not work at all!—this is not simply a matter of two incomes being better than one, which is of course true, it is that access to a share of *male monopolised wealth*—that is, to put it in stark terms, access to a husband—is essential for *mothers* to avoid poverty.

In broad terms, the closer we are to mothering dependent children, including especially infants and pre-schoolers, and the further we are from access to a male wage, the poorer we are as women.

Never married single mothers with dependent children are the worst off and it moves progressively from there, with young, educated, urban, never-married, childless women earning very close to, and in certain cases in the US, outstripping average male wages. This contrast gives us a sense of the variegated nature of women's socio-economic position and again highlights that mothers are a distinct group and, more fundamentally, that the life course transitions of marriage and motherhood continue to negatively affect women's (independent) socio-economic status.

Often when we're talking about **women's** lower labour force participation and lower earnings, then, we're actually talking about **mothers'** lower labour force participation and lower earnings and, more specifically again, we're talking about mothers with dependent children; although the lasting effects of care labour means women across the spectrum have reduced earnings, assets and retirement savings if they have mothered.

To highlight this point, Australian sociologist and time use scholar Professor Lyn Craig has shown that many of the socio-economic disadvantages affecting women are, in fact, specific to mothers. As she says,

... the marker of the most extreme difference in life opportunities between men and women may not be gender itself, but gender combined with parenthood. That is, childless women may experience less inequity than women who become mothers.

Another important reason we need to differentiate mothers from women is that over the last 40 years the standard female biography has changed significantly. Whereas once adulthood was by and large synonymous with marriage and motherhood for women, on average women now have a long stretch of adulthood—from the late teens to around age 30—before they have a first child.

For educated and/or unpartnered women, the birth of a first child is often later again into the 30s and sometimes up to 40. Moreover, while only around 10% of women did not become mothers in the mid and later twentieth century, this has now risen to 24%. So, not all women are mothers and many women experience a large chunk of adulthood before they become mothers and after they are actively mothering dependent children.

So there are structural and individual injustices that are specific to mothering dependent children, including an unequal division of domestic labour, unequal access to jobs given the unpaid work load at home, employment built on an implicit breadwinner model that is incompatible with parenting (including school hours, school holidays, sick children and so on), discrimination in the workplace and, in the event of unemployment and/or divorce, an increasingly punitive welfare state and a high risk of poverty. Single mothers and their children make up the bulk of those under the poverty line in the western world. In Australia, of all family groups, single parents constitute the largest single group of those living in poverty (proportionally).

Marriage is no longer the safety net (or gilded cage) it once was with just over 30% of marriages ending in divorce in Australia and predicted to rise to 45% in the coming decades. Additionally, fewer people are entering into marriages and cohabiting relationships have even higher rate of relational breakdown than marriages.

This means a large and growing number of women who are mothering children are caught in this literal economic no-man's land without adequate access to waged employment, a breadwinner husband, or welfare. I am not suggesting that access to a husband is a right; I am suggesting that the liberal dissolution of the institution of marriage has not been followed with any viable economic alternatives for mothers. Basic income is the obvious choice to stop a large and growing number of women sliding into poverty.

Mothers undertake the bulk of unpaid care work, without which our society would cease to function. To turn this around, we need to ask: is it acceptable that as a society we free-load on this care?

Mothers' economic autonomy—that is the very foundation of their citizenship and their liberty—is undermined by the extant intersection of the institutions of marriage, employment and welfare. It is on this basis that I am identifying mothers, and more still single mothers, as a specific socio-economic and political group in urgent need of basic income. This is a human rights crisis given that lone parent families are one of the fastest growing family forms in western societies and, moreover, that women head 80-90% of these families.

Unlike the contemporary issues put forward for basic income—namely, mass unemployment from automation and digitisation—the issues facing mothers are not new. Indeed they have been with us since the very inception of capitalism and the waged-labour system. Moreover, they are among the most compelling, given that women and their dependents comprise the majority of the poor. With the liberalisation of markets and marriage, a large and growing body of women and children, such as Harper and Naomi, are being left out of the social contract. Basic income is the critical policy answer to this problem.





# The dramaturgy of a Universal Basic Income

Ten years ago, the Prime Ministership of John Howard came to an end. His time in office was marked by a corruption of public discourse: alongside others around the world, he waged a culture war that carved the Australian polity into rigid groups based on ideas and world-views, the consequences of which deeply resonate today.

It marked the beginning of a long-term project of mine to bring progressive ideas from artistic practice into the national conversation beyond the realm of the arts.

Open, inclusive and underscored by a desire for discovering new ways of working, creating and making, the language of contemporary arts practice can help us deal with change and experiment. It has the potential to expand the quality and depth of civic discourse and action well beyond its own sphere.

Universal Basic Income would be a major change, a social experiment, which would challenge our ways of working, creating, making and being.

How might the language of arts practice help us contemplate UBI? The word 'dramaturgy' is a good place to start.



**David Pledger** is a contemporary artist, curator and activist working within and between the performing, visual and media arts in Australia, Asia and Europe. His live performances, installations, interactive artworks, documentaries, digital art and discursive events have been presented in various locations including theatres, galleries, museums, a car-park, a stables, a cattleyard, a suburban house, a film studio and the Australian Institute of Sport. His work is notable for engaging publics in productive and provocative ways which is generated by a cross-disciplinary dramaturgy in which a central platform is engaging with artists across artforms and experts from social, scientific and academic fields. He is regularly published in online and print journals such as *The Conversation*, *Arts Hub*, *Artlink*, *Art Wires*, *Dancehouse Diary*, *The Daily Review* and *Platform Papers* on matters of artistic practice, cultural policy, social commentary, arts activism and international relations.

He is currently engaged in various artistic adventures with social change agency, *Igniting Change*, the Ministry for Empathy, *Bleached Arts* with the site-specific *Hotelling*, the Arts Centre Gold Coast around his future-focussed cultural provocation *2970°* and the Spatial Information Architecture Lab (SIAL) at the School of Architecture and Design, RMIT, where he is on a research scholarship investigating the effect of 'noise' on our social, cultural and political systems.

Dramaturgy is a very useful concept, partly due to its flexibility. It can be transposed into different meanings depending on the artistic context, and it can have meaningful value when applied outside the arts. Why? Because dramaturgy has to do with how a 'thing' works, whether that 'thing' is a work of art or the world itself.

In an artistic context, dramaturgy is the process of connecting and matting ideas into practice. Dramaturgy is rarely fixed, necessarily adaptive and, due to its reliance on collective, collaborative actions, it is inherently resistant to the processes through which other practice-related words such as 'creativity' and 'innovation' have largely had their meaning stripped from them.

Central to the notion of dramaturgy is the idea that an artwork is generated by an operating system driven by random and non-deterministic algorithms that are entered and extracted by human actions. Applying the concept more broadly, dramaturgy can embrace the idea of an operating system of culture or society. Because at its core is the element of change. In fact, dramaturgy is defined by change. Its utility as an operating system is determined by its capacity to be altered in a creative and evolutionary process driven by the algorithms of human behaviour.

That's why it's useful when discussing the potential, degree and kind of change imagined by the introduction of a Universal Basic Income.



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If one thinks of social dramaturgy, or the operating system of a society, as a flexible, evolving series of interweaving 'human algorithms' then entering a new algorithm into the system, such as a Universal Basic Income, requires knowledge of both the system and the new piece of code, as well as a sense of how the two might impact upon each other.

There is both optimism and consternation around the effects of a UBI algorithm on our social dramaturgy. Which is fair enough. There's always trepidation when introducing a new piece of technology into an operating system whether it's new media, like VR, into arts practice or a new piece of legislation within an existing legal framework.

Of course the UBI isn't exactly a new piece of code. It's been around for a while. It's implicit in the social safety nets of Northern European countries such as Sweden, Denmark and Norway. And lately, Finland and The Netherlands have begun testing the waters of a formal UBI implementation as Scotland also contemplates a pilot scheme.

The conditions under which a UBI might be introduced in a society are determined by multiple factors, or existing algorithms, that generate its operating system. They are concerned with culture, geography, the economy and the environment. And each society is different. So the code needs to be written or customised accordingly.

In working out how to do this we need to understand our own conditions and become knowledgeable about systems elsewhere.

The arts paradigm might be quite useful as a micro example. So let's start with the conditions under which Australian artists currently operate, based on analysis I undertook in 2013.

In respect to income, direct funding for individual artists in Australia had fallen by about one-third since the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> In real terms, they earned less from their artistic practice in 2013 than they had twenty years ago.<sup>2</sup> The arts had one of the lowest annual incomes for a sector's primary producers. Unsurprisingly, the artist-population was decreasing. In respect to influence and agency, artists were barely visible at elite levels of governance and their autonomy had been compromised and curtailed by government policy that had effectively institutionalised them. And this was before the events of the last two years which saw George Brandis, in the role of Arts Minister, gut the Australia Council of the Arts of its 'uncommitted funds', the major source of Council's funding to the independent and small-medium sector. The lot of the Australian artist is a parlous one.

Of course, these daily life conditions are not created in isolation. They are a consequence of the adoption by conservative and post-socialist Western governments of a neoliberal ideology that 'proposes government

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1 Peter Shergold, *New Models, New Money: Foundation for The Artist*. Discussion paper, Arts Queensland and Centre for Social Impact, UNSW, 2011.

2 David Throsby and Anita Zednik, *Do you really expect to get paid? An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia*. Australian Council for the Arts 2010.

re-structure and re-scale social relations in accord with capitalism's unrestrained demands.<sup>3</sup> The values underlying this proposition permeated the Australian arts scene with devastating effect. The so-called 'Australian arts industry' was brought into existence in order to justify public funding for the arts and keep it in step with neoliberalism's reductive mentality, quantifying the value of human activity through a single measure: the economic unit. The 'metrics virus' hits the arts hard because its funding architecture and philosophy is not supportable by mainstream economic theory.<sup>4</sup> The value of the arts lies in emotional affect, social well-being and cohesion, the generation of ideas and the expression of intellectual, creative and personal freedoms, all highly resistant to substantive measurement methodologies.

Further, the 'Australian arts industry' is entirely problematic as it is largely driven by a well-paid managerialist class that fetishizes the artist, the primary producer, and cannibalises their need to create. The diminution of the artist has been facilitated within and by this class whose growth is directly linked to maintaining the artist's inequitable position. How do you characterise a human activity as 'an industry' when a third of its primary producers, artists, live below the poverty line?<sup>5</sup> The hoops that the arts scene jumped through to satisfy the KPIs of neoliberalism created a torsion or a distortion that has sickened the sector.

So there are both actual and contextual issues at play when considering the advent of a Universal Basic Income. In actual terms, if we enter a UBI algorithm into this part of society's operating system, then it will most likely drag the Australian artist out from under the poverty line. In contextual terms, the oppressive ambience of the sector would be mitigated simply by correcting the gross inequity that prevents it from operating fairly and productively.

But how do we write this algorithm?

Well, here's a couple of stories that might be useful when thinking about the kind of code we need to write to enter the set of conditions relevant to the arts and artists into the wider social operating system.

So it's 1994. I'm standing in line at a Social Security office in Sydney handing in my Unemployment Benefits Form. I've spent a number of years as a young artist oscillating between being a recipient of unemployment benefits and independently sustaining my artistic practice. I am about to head for Seoul where I have been appointed Visiting Lecturer at the new Korean National University of Arts. I resolve then and there that this is the last time I apply for Unemployment Benefits. I keep my promise and more than twenty years on, I have established a national and international arts practice and, as the head of a small-medium-sized arts company, I have employed hundreds of artists and arts workers during that time.

3 Norman Fairclough, 'Critical discourse analysis in researching language in the new capitalism: over-determination, transdisciplinary and textual analysis' in Claire Harrison and Lyn Young (eds.) *Systemic linguistics and critical discourse analysis*. London and New York: Continuum, p.103.

4 Ben Eltham, *When the Goalposts Move*, Platform Papers 48, May 2016, p. 49.

5 David Throsby and Anita Zednik, *Do you really expect to get paid?* Australia Council for the Arts 2010.



My trajectory as an artist and cultural operator is directly linked to a social security system that, at the time, interpreted governing legislation in a way that tacitly accommodated the economic reality of artists. I remember regarding the social security context as one which informally provided the artist with an approximation of a living wage largely because the conditions of seeking employment were non-restrictive, in particular placing only a minimal burden on the artist to seek work outside her profession. So, in terms of our code, the right to refuse any non-artistic job would be a key element.

Whilst a living wage for artists is not as broad an application as Universal Basic Income it does share many of the concerns often cited in resistance to the UBI, the main one that it acts as a disincentive for the unemployed to seriously seek employment. This was not so in my case. However, it might be better to forgo a personal anecdote for a set of protocols that has been in place elsewhere for some years.

So it's 2009. I'm now based in Belgium working on a project connecting Australian and European artists. Flanders, Walloon and a small German-speaking community constitute the Federal State of Belgium. Over the last twenty years the Flemish have led a renaissance in Western European contemporary performance which has had far-reaching global influence. Part of the reason is the calibre of its artists and cultural operators. Part of the reason is its social security arrangements for artists. The two are intimately connected to Belgium's success.

The operating system that generates the social security arrangements for Belgian artists is complex. However, as an algorithm that sits within the national social security system, it reflects the value Belgium places on the artist and goes a long way to ensuring a financial formula that adequately reflects this value. I never got the sense that artists were trying to 'game' the system nor that the arrangements provided a disincentive to work. Nor was there any sense that these attitudes were common or acceptable either by the arts community or society in general. The accommodation for artists was simply viewed as a legitimate support. So in terms of our code, the social value of the artist and the principle of support should be embedded.

In practical terms, the Belgian social security system effectively picks up the financial slack for artists, in-between jobs. For example, in any given year a professional musician will alternate periods of unemployment with periods of work. She notifies the National Employment Office (NEO) of the days she works, for which she receives no unemployment benefit. Her gross annual pay of, say, EUR 5,000 does not affect the amount of her benefit she receives when not working.<sup>6</sup> So another valuable component would be flexibility for the individual worker.

Belgium is not alone in the support it gives to artists. In Denmark, for instance, 275 artists are granted an annual stipend of between 15,000 (AUD\$2,500) and 149,000 Danish Krone (AUD\$25,000) every year for the rest of their lives.<sup>7</sup> Ireland still offers generous tax exemptions to artists on income up to 40,000 Euros,

6 <http://www.kunstenloket.be/en/advice/reimbursement/can-i-combine-income-artistic-activity-unemployment-benefit>

7 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2010/jan/24/artists-day-jobs>

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**Our code needs to have the following elements: the principles of support and social value, a clear economic benefit, flexibility in its accommodation of individual circumstances and the right-to-refuse any job outside the identified profession**

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although since 2011 exemptions come with more stringent qualifications. France has a similar system to Belgium, the *intermittent du spectacle*, which has come under forensic scrutiny during its lean economic times. This has produced strong arguments for its maintenance. One is that without it the general economic circumstances would further deteriorate. French arts economist Françoise Benhamou qualifies its significance to the cultural economy: ‘The entire economic equilibrium of the audio-visual world and theatre is based on it.’<sup>8</sup> The notion that such a system is a boon rather than an impost on the economy would also be written into the code.

So now we know a little more. Our code needs to have the following elements: the principles of support and social value, a clear economic benefit, flexibility in its accommodation of individual circumstances and the right-to-refuse any job outside the identified profession.

<sup>8</sup> <http://eipcp.net/policies/2015/jacquemin/en>

Whilst these considerations are specific to the arts frame, they may also be useful when considering the amplified space of a Universal Basic Income. So in going forward, it might be worthwhile undertaking sectoral-based pilot schemes to identify elements in the code that would specifically benefit the idiosyncrasies of a single sector and other elements that might be applied more broadly across society.

So it's 2023. I'm watching the telly, ABC News 23. The Federal Minister for the Arts, Education and Employment, Senator Adam Bandt is fronting the cameras on the steps of the Sydney Opera House creating a theatrical tableau with his coalition partner Deputy Prime Minister, Tanya Plibersek that looks like a selfie and probably is. They have chosen this locale for obvious reasons to stream live the results of a Senate Committee Report on the Effects of Universal Basic Income in the Arts Sector 2018–2023 just tabled in Parliament. After some well-considered platitudes extended to his co-Chair and Deputy PM, Senator Bandt announces key findings in the 5-year pilot scheme testing the efficacy of a Universal Basic Income on the arts sector. His delivery is forceful and proud. Ms Plibersek smiles generously beside him, occasionally plucking stray bits of hair from across her face that the wind seems determined to affix there like Utzon's setting sails behind her.

It's pretty cool to be standing here on the steps of the Sydney Opera House to publicly release the findings of this Report. I know the Deputy Prime Minister won't mind me taking a bit of kudos for The Greens in locating this important test case in the arts sector. It was the Greens after all that proposed a living wage for artists at the Federal Election 7 years ago. I want to tell you that this pilot scheme has been a tremendous success. For the first time in Australian history, the majority of Australian artists are living above the poverty line. For the first time in 20 years, there's been an exponential increase in the making of new Australian artworks, a corollary of which has been the raising of the general profile and appreciation of the arts and artists across the board in Australia. There's more artists working in educational contexts, more artists working in non-arts sectors where their skills have become seriously valued for dealing with the tectonic social changes we're all contending with. So how good is that? And for all you late-blooming neoliberals tuning in, guess what? Economic data recorded over the 5 years indicates an increase in GDP directly attributed to a more robust cultural economy. We're proud to say that these results, from implementing a Universal Basic Income in the arts sector, say to us, why don't we do it across the board? So why don't we? Let's stop workers getting screwed. Let's get with the UBI!

The two politicians stand cheek-by-jowl. Bandt smiles gnomishly. Plibersek beams ambitiously. Some things never change. Some things do.

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**What would your life be like if you—and everyone around you—had a Universal Basic Income?**

**How would it change the choices you make to know that there was a no-questions-asked, non-judgmental, society-wide support in place that we all contribute to and all benefit from?**

**What would you do differently if our society explicitly valued unpaid contributions, recognising that paid employment isn't the only—or even necessarily the best—way to participate?**