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# All you need to know about basic income

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"The growing interest in a basic income lies in the threat posed to work and the workforce by a rising and sustained move towards automation and artificial intelligence"

**Analysis: there's a lot of talk at present around basic incomes so is it time to introduce the concept to Ireland?**

Debate about the introduction of a basic income has begun to feature far more prominently in mainstream public and political debate in recent years at European and international level. This has arguably left many people asking, what actually is a basic income?

Sometimes referred to as a "Universal Basic Income", "citizens income", "citizens basic income" or simply "basic income", it consists of a periodic cash payment paid to all citizens regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, family structure and so on. It is not means-tested, meaning it is paid to everyone regardless of income or means. It is also paid unconditionally, meaning that there is no work or job-seeking requirement attached to legitimate receipt.

Ideologically, the idea of a basic income for all is perhaps most closely associated with a social-democratic model of welfare state, although there have been calls from both the left and the right of the political spectrum for the introduction of a basic income in different forms. The idea is also something that has been routinely endorsed in recent years by a veritable plethora of public figures, often from surprising quarters.

04:30

***From RTÉ Radio 1's Morning Ireland in 2016, economietrician Sjir Hoeijmakers discusses the trial of a Basic Income in parts of the Netherlands***

**"A national fund"**

Despite this seemingly sudden spike of interest in the idea, basic income is not a new concept, having featured in debate throughout much of recorded history and being traceable at least as far back as Thomas Paine's Agrarian Justice, which suggested that governments ought to "create a national fund, out of which there shall be paid to every person, when arrived at the age of twenty-one years, the sum of fifteen pounds sterling...And also, the sum of ten pounds per annum, during life, to every person now living, of the age of fifty years."

Here, Paine envisions basic income as a compensatory measure in the light of the vastly unequal relations between those who were the owners of property (i.e. the means of production) and those who were not. Although written over 200 years ago, Paine's ideals are arguably strikingly similar to those espousing a basic income today.

> ***While the idea has always had a cohort of staunch advocates, talk of a basic income was treated for many years like the policy equivalent of a drunk uncle at a wedding***

**Why now? The rise of the robots**

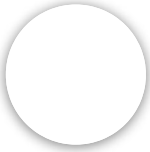
While the idea has always had a cohort of staunch advocates, talk of a basic income was treated for many years like the policy equivalent of a drunk uncle at a wedding: politely tolerated but best avoided, with perhaps one or two of the more verbose guests being of the view that said uncle should be taken outside and summarily shot. So why the recent and growing interest in a basic income as a legitimate welfare measure?

Of course, there are some who would decry the very idea of a basic income. Reasons for doing so tend to range from the complex, such as arguments which revolve around concerns over potentially inflationary effects, to the predictable argument that giving people "money for nothing" will create a disincentive to work. Numerous pilot schemes are currently ongoing with the data produced so far suggesting that fears of the latter are ultimately misplaced.

There are also fears that the introduction of a basic income could serve to undermine other welfare measures or that it could be used by employers to drive downwards pay and conditions. These are genuine concerns and ones that would need to be worked on both before and after the introduction of a basic income.

> ***The question remains as to whether a basic income would ever be politically or, for that matter, publicly tolerable in Ireland***

In support of the idea, it must be pointed-out that the streamlining of an overly bureaucratised and expensive welfare system is something that the introduction of a basic income could potentially achieve. Moreover, it should be noted that it is amazing what human beings can and do achieve when they are not mired in poverty or worried about where their next meal is coming from.



18:04

***From RTÉ Radio 1's Today With Sean O'Rourke Show, Fianna Fáil spokesperson on Social Protection Willie O'Dea and co-founder of Demos Helsinki Roope Mokka discuss basic income***

While not suggested as a social panacea, a basic income can should aim to:

(1) Lift people out of poverty

(2) Promote social cohesion and remove stigma

(3) Allow people opportunities for self-development through things education and voluntary-work;

(4) Allow people the opportunity to choose to engage in meaningful work.

**A basic income for Ireland?**

The question remains as to whether a basic income would ever be politically or, for that matter, publicly tolerable in Ireland. There have been those who have consistently advanced an argument for a basic income here, though this arguably appears to have fallen largely below the radar in respect to public consciousness.

Nevertheless, there is some indication of what Irish people think of the idea of introducing a basic income through the European Social Survey round 8 results. In it, respondents were asked if they would welcome the idea of a basic income here. 13.3% were strongly against and 31% against, with 46.2% in favour and 9.5% strongly in favour.

Applied to the whole of the population, this figure suggests that a majority of Irish people would welcome the idea of a basic income. Perhaps then, it's an idea whose time has come.

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**The views expressed here are those of the author and do not represent or reflect the views of RTÉ**

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Undoubtedly, the answer lies in the threat posed to work and the workforce by a rising and sustained move towards automation and artificial intelligence (AI). The suggestion of advances in the fields of AI and automation leading to an epidemic of joblessness is becoming less science fiction and more science fact. Some sources suggest that up to 15 percent or 400 million of the world's workers could face potential job-displacement in the coming years.




***An ARTE documentary on how a US NGO Give Directly are paying a basic income to Kenya's poorest for 12 years and observing the results***

Recent history has shown the devastating effects that job-displacement can have on communities through the lens of deindustrialisation, suggesting that those who govern and create policy would do well not to ignore the threat posed by the changing nature of work. Thankfully, there is some evidence to suggest that is not the case and the future of work is now beginning to feature squarely on the agenda of entities such as the European Commission.

That said, it is also important that concerns surrounding the future of work do not devolve into hyperbole. Change to the nature of work does not *have* to mean disaster. In this respect, thinking creatively about how to manage the changing nature of work and human welfare is essential. Undertaking this task must include a rethinking of the 'social contract' and an adjustment to the social safety-net. One way to potentially achieve this could be through the introduction of a basic income.

**Money for nothing?**