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OPINION

Is basic income the way to a better quality of life in Canada?

These issues of power and influence are for the most part ignored by advocates.

By Dennis Raphael and Toba Bryant

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Dennis Raphael and Toba Bryant argue we should put our energy into supporting the labour movement and showing Canadians how the “one per cent” dominate their lives, not fighting for basic income programs. John Rennison The Hamilton Spectator file photo

An entire industry has developed around calls for a basic income for all Canadians.

Our skepticism about BI as a viable public policy is based on three assumptions we believe to be accurate.

Our first assumption is that public policy in Canada is influenced by the balance of power between the corporate and business sector (the one per cent), organized labour, and civil society. In Canada, the one per cent exert profound influence on public policy-making in many areas. The one per cent is not concerned with providing adequate income through wages and benefits, affordable housing, food

affordability, but rather in their bottom line profit-making. As a result, meeting the goals of BI advocates — reducing poverty without threatening existing benefits and services — goes against the profit making of the one per cent in at least two ways: it would put upward pressure on wages and require additional taxes on the one per cent to fund a fulsome welfare state.

Our second assumption is that Canada's approach to public policy in this period of global capitalism is one of limiting redistribution, controlling or reducing social spending, and sidestepping management of the labour market. This has always been the case in Canada but has accelerated over the past three decades. BI in the form its advocates desire goes against all three of these embedded features.

Our third assumption is that poverty is a result of low wages and grossly inadequate social assistance levels that serves profit-making by benefitting the one per cent's bottom line. A BI at livable levels would not benefit the one per cent, who profit from inadequate social assistance that force people to take their low-paid and insecure employment.

It is clear that to meet the needs of most requires an equitable distribution of income and wealth and provision of social goods, such as affordable housing, education, food, secure and well-paying work; in other words, a society where the needs of the average person come before the desires of the one per cent. Canada is currently not such a nation.

If our analysis is correct, we should be working to rectify the imbalances in power and influence in Canadian society that create poverty and move affordable housing, food, and secure work beyond the reach of increasing numbers of Canadians.

How can this be accomplished?

First, increase the power of organized labour by making it easier to unionize workplaces and secure collective employment agreements.

Second, increase taxes on the wealthy to levels of other rich countries to improve access to and levels of benefits that keep Canadians out of poverty.

Third, reform or even transform the current economic system that so badly skews the distribution of the resources necessary for health and well-being by providing public alternatives in housing, food distribution, and other areas such as banking, telecommunications and transportation. Resisting the transfer of public services — including health care — to the profit-oriented private sector is essential.

These issues of power and influence are for the most part ignored by advocates of BI. Advocates naively assume rational arguments concerning the benefits of a BI will be considered by policymakers, whose commitments are to the one per cent rather than most Canadians. Poverty and inequality are political issues involving the distribution of power and influence and resisting the priorities of the one per cent.

There is much that can be done to improve the quality of life of Canadians. The energies directed to advocating for BI would better be served supporting the labour movement, calling out policymakers who are in the pockets of the corporate and business sector, and educating and mobilizing Canadians to address how their lives are dominated by the one per cent.

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