The 14th Kilbrandon Lecture (University of Strathclyde, 23 November 2016): ‘Every man, every woman, every child should have a basic income as a right’

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[Missing from transcript – opening remarks and a reference to Trump.]

Unfortunately for us, he’s not going to be the only political monster. We have the prospect of Marine Le Pen. We have disgusting people running Turkey and Hungary, and we have our own types in the wings, waiting to take over. We are on red. Not amber. We are on red.

And the story, of course, trickles down to children, because children are ultimately the really worst-off victims. And the young precariat are not far behind. And we should be angry. That’s the first point I want to make this evening.

The second is a little bit of background. Those who’ve had the dubious privilege of listening to me before, when I’ve come to Scotland, will not be surprised to hear it again. I apologise for that. We are in the midst of and at the darkest point of a global transformation, the painful construction of a global market system. And the disembedded period has been dominated by financial capital and a neoliberal ideology of competitiveness, individualism and commodification. A very atomistic view, in which the systematic dismantling of all institutions and mechanisms of social solidarity have been very much in the foreground of their agenda, leaving more and more people exposed to their vulnerability, exposed to insecurity.

But the theme of my book, which has just come out, and which is beginning to have a life –– some more scars on my back – and which is called The corruption of capitalism, is that we’ve actually moved beyond the period of neoliberalism to a period of what I’m calling rentier capitalism, where the rentiers – the owners of properties and property rights – are extracting more and more of the income from the rest of us. And affecting the precariat in new and more intensive ways.

What we’ve got is a system rewarding property owners – intellectual property owners – including those who are systematically taking ‘the commons’. It’s a theme of the new book. I’ll be talking about it tomorrow at the University [in a seminar for students and staff at the University of Strathclyde]. But the commons is so vital for children, so vital for the precariat. We live in the commons. We need the commons – the parks, the land, the spaces, the social amenities, the libraries – all of those things which are so vital for a vital life. And they are being taken away and privatised and commercialised, and that’s a background context. It doesn’t affect children directly. But it does, of course, in the longer term. It dissolves society.

The question I will just pose rhetorically, and come back to it later if I have time, is that the rentier income is morally and economically unjustifiable. I’m an economist. John Maynard Keynes in 1936 predicted the euthanasia of the rentier. Because he thought that where capital becomes so broad and spread, it would chip away at the capacity to take rental income. He didn't foresee the
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ability of powerful elites and finance, and Goldman Sachs and the others, to create a structure that would empower rentiers to take even more from us. But that rental income is actually a potential resource for paying out a basic income.

I want to leave the question in the air: that if a basic income is affordable, from using the rent and building capital funds, as I described in the final chapter [of The Corruption of Capitalism], would you support a basic income? It’s a rhetorical question. Because often people address the opposition to a basic income on the grounds that it is unaffordable. Right? And the theme of the book is to say that it is affordable.

Now, I want to put that on the background, and just for the sake of most of you who have never heard me talk on the subject, give a little background on the precariat. What has been happening – and I’m not going to go into the reasons why it’s been happening – is that a new class structure has been built around the world superimposed on old class structures. We have a plutocracy. We wish we didn’t. Ugly individuals, with their billions and billions, up in the stratosphere. One of them has just become a powerful man.

Below them are the elite, hanging on, making their multimillions from rents. Underneath them, a long way below, is a salariat. Some in this room will be part of the salariat, with employment, security, pensions and things like that. But that is shrinking too, and they are worried about their children, and their teenage children in particular, entering something further down. The old proletariat, which nurtured Labour parties and Social Democratic parties and so on, is shrinking and their agenda has lost force.

Underneath that is the precariat. And under the precariat is a lumpen – an underclass – out in the streets, dying prematurely.

One of the acronyms that has just gained popularity, is one that makes my blood boil. It doesn't often boil. JAMs. I mean, isn't it pathetic? Please tell me I'm not alone in thinking it's pathetic. Just About Managing. What about the people who are not just about managing? Not JAM? What a stupid use of terms playing around.

But the precariat means something. It is a class in the making, because it consists of millions of people who are being habituated to accept a life of unstable labour and unstable living, without an occupational narrative to give to their lives. When young, they want to be something, and then become something, and then in retirement, speak to their grandchildren and say, ‘I was something’.

If you are in the precariat today, you don't have the opportunity for that narrative to your life. That, to me, is far more important than unstable, casual jobs. We can all put up with that. In fact, there is a virtue in not being stuck in the same boring, full-time job for years and years and years. What...? Who
thought that was Nirvana? Crazy. But you can’t accept a life of unstable labour if you are not going anywhere, if you are not developing yourself. That's the critical issue.

And in addition, the precariat – the young precariat in particular – face a life where they have to do a hell of a lot of work that is not labour. Work that is not recognised, not rewarded, not in our statistics, not in our political rhetoric. But if you don't do it, you pay a heavy price. It's a very critical part of being in the precariat. In addition, the precariat has to rely on money wages. It doesn't get access to paid holidays, paid pensions, paid holidays, more paid holidays, lovely retreats in manors were they have stewed coffee in the morning and whisky in the afternoon. It doesn't have the prospect of any of those benefits. It has to rely on money wages. And those money wages are falling in real value and have been stagnant for 30 years in the United States, in Britain, in France, in Germany, and in many other countries. You can document that.

So, if you are relying on money wages and you don't get the security providing forms of income, it means you are facing more and more insecurity and more and more uncertainty – unknown unknowns – for which you cannot insure. I can tell you that, as an economist. And this means that people in the precariat are always living a life on the edge of unsustainable debt. Debt is not an incidental aspect of modern life. Financial capital – and I quote a number of the top people – want us all to be permanently in debt. All this rhetoric about reducing debt and balancing books – it's a lie. They want debt, because debt is a mechanism for extracting money and making profits, for heaven’s sake. I'll talk about how they do it tomorrow [in a seminar for students and staff at the University of Strathclyde].

But in addition, the precariat finds that they have a level of education which is above the level of labour they can expect to obtain. So they lose the economic right to practise what they have qualified to do. It's very, very frustrating as a way of living. It's the first time in history that has happened. Now, we face another crisis. I'm not going to speak about it, but it's a commodification of education crisis. Because more and more people who are in the precariat have gone through an education system that is a fraud. In the United States, when I give lectures, and I can ask people afterwards – students – about their own history, they say: I don't need to know about that. What do I need to know about that? It doesn't help me get a job. So the result is they have no knowledge of civics, no knowledge of philosophy, no knowledge of their culture. So they hear a man telling a lie after lie. No problem. No problem. It’s what he means really, you know? You can dumb down, but you pay a price.

This aspect of the precariat is a very, very important one. But ultimately, for a Scot, or for anybody in Europe, there is another aspect, which is that if you are in the precariat you are being pushed into a means–tested socialist system – social security system – where you have to prove to some bureaucracy that you
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are a deserving poor person. You have to demonstrate to a bureaucracy that you are obsequious and humble and obedient, and do what you meant to do. Now, if anybody here doesn't know this phenomenon, shame on you! But I'm sure you do know it. Because that means that people in the precariat face enormous poverty traps. And these charlatans – excuse me, I shouldn't talk like this with a vice-chancellor present – I should be more erudite and academic, especially at the Kilbrandon Lecture. But these people who don't understand the poverty trap that people experience, today in the Autumn Statement, they lowered the 'taper rate', for which you will lose your benefits, by 2p. (The Autumn Statement is a budget statement by the UK Chancellor in November 2017 in which it was announced that the rate at which a benefits for low earners (Universal Credit) is withdrawn would reduce from 65 per cent to 63 per cent, meaning that workers would lose 63p, rather than 65p, of their welfare for every pound they earn above their work allowance).

That means, in their rhetoric, that Universal Credit will mean you face a marginal tax rate of 65% rather than 67%. Actually, in reality, now it's over 80%. That means that you face a marginal tax rate, if you're in the precariat, which is three times as much as the higher-income groups are facing. Now, what sort of system of equity and justice is that? But that's the reality. But it's worse than that, because you also face what I call precarity traps. If you lose your short-term job tomorrow morning, do you think you get benefits the morning after? You're joking.

Many people – and many of them seem to write to me about their stories from all over the place, and I feel the pain – can't do much about it, but I can feel the pain. They have to wait months. They have to queue, they have to fill in forms, they have to do this, they have to satisfy that. They mustn't argue. They must put up with it. And then, in the end, they make a mistake. They were five minutes late. We didn't need Ken Loach's film, I, Daniel Blake, to tell us that, but it's great that it's done. But this is the reality. And so you get to a situation where people wait, then they start getting benefits, and then along comes another bureaucrat saying, 'You've got to take a short-term job the other side of Glasgow paying the living wage – perhaps – but it may only last three weeks.’ It's a marginal tax rate of 80%. Tell me, which young person would be sensible to take that situation? Because three weeks later, they will be back at the end of the queue waiting to ask for benefits again. So, what happens is that people in the precariat are reduced to being supplicants. This is the essence of the precariat. It's the most important aspect of it. A supplicant is somebody – original Latin – who obtains things by prayer. You can do it secularly or you can do it religiously. That is the reality for the precariat.

Now, that's the background. Because what I've been arguing for, for 30 years, is that we should move to a system where every individual – everyman, every woman, every child – should have a basic income, as a right. A human right, a
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citizenship right, a legal resident right. Call it what you like. The essence of it – first of all, I'll give a definition, but you can define it in several ways – the idea of a basic income is that everybody would receive a modest basic amount, paid regularly. It could be from this capital fund that I was talking about earlier, it depends on how you want to do it. It should be paid in cash. It should be universal, so everybody receives it as a right. It should be unconditional in behavioural terms. The only condition is you obey the law, and you obey the law of the land. And it should be individual. So that every woman receives it, every man receives it, and the child will receive it through the mother or the surrogate mother. So, that's the definition.

I've always believed that a basic income is justified on grounds of social justice. And I go back to Thomas Paine, and I'd like to read you his wonderful statement in ‘Agrarian Justice’ of 1795. He wrote it in the winter, a very difficult winter for him – he was participating in the French Revolution and the American Revolution – and he wrote this wonderful text. He said:

It is a position not to be controverted, that the earth in its natural, uncultivated state, was and ever would have continued to be, the common property of the human race. It is the value of the improvement only, and not the earth itself, that is an individual property. Every proprietor, therefore, of cultivated lands owes to the community a ground rent, for I know of no better term to express the idea, for the land which he holds. And it is from this ground rent that the fund proposed in this plan is to issue.

And he went on to argue for, effectively, a basic income. And he then went on to say why it should be universal and not just for the poor. Very much advanced thinking for his time. Now, for me, you can extend the Painian rationalisation to all forms of property, that the rent should be shared. And for me, the principal justification for a basic income is precisely a matter of social justice. And I draw there on a principle which I've slightly modified – I'm sure he would have agreed – of John Rawls's theory of justice. I call it the 'security difference principle'. A social policy is socially just, only if it improves the security of the most insecure groups in society. And I've challenged social policy thinkers, particularly with the old Social Democratic variety, to tell me of any scheme that meets the security difference principle better than a basic income. Because means-tested social assistance has low take-up, stigmatises, many of the worst–impoverished people don't get it, don't receive the benefits. It imposes costs on the most insecure people in our society. It doesn't match up. So in terms of social justice, a basic income is a powerful policy.

The second justification for a basic income is that it would enhance freedom. There are two types of freedom that I think it would enhance.

First is the liberal approach to freedom. In that regard, I say that every social policy – and I would say this to the Scottish Government considering the reforms
they are taking now, and I really wish them success: I genuinely think that it’s fantastic, because I think you are going to lead the debate.

The second principle is what I call the ‘paternalism test’ principle. Every social policy should be judged as socially just, only if it does not impose some controls on some groups that are not imposed on the most free in society. The paternalism test principle has failed every single day with the current welfare system. Every single day. Controls are placed on the most insecure people in our society, that most of us in this room wouldn't contemplate. And we’d feel indignity if we were to have to face those.

The third principle is that any social policy, to be socially just, should advance the rights of the recipient and reduce the discretionary power of the bureaucracy. A basic income meets those tests with pride. But the other things that they are going into these days in welfare reforms do not.

For me, there's a lovely quotation. The second – I'm not going to have many more, only this one – I've used, because it is a liberal principle by T.H. Green in 1879. It’s subtle, but I think any welfare reformer, thinking of children and teenagers and young people in particular, should think about this.

The real function of government being to maintain conditions of life in which morality shall be possible. And morality consisting in a disinterested performance of self-imposed duties. Paternalism...paternalistic government does its best to make it impossible, by narrowing the room for the self-imposition of duties and for the play of disinterested motives.

Get it? In other words, you can't be moral if governments are telling you what to do. You can only be moral if you are a free person. Because then you can be responsible for your own decisions, your own actions, your own opinions. If government, even if it is most benign, is constantly telling young people how to behave and how not to behave, they cannot escape being infantilised. It’s a really important liberal principle. But I believe in republican freedom. Republican freedom goes further than liberal freedom, in the sense that you can only be free if you are free from the unaccountable domination of you by others. That doesn't mean the others have to be good or bad. It means, to be free, I can make that decision without having to worry what they tell me or may not tell me. I must have republican freedom. The great Greek philosophers understood the difference, and Aristotle, in particular, advanced republican freedom. Hannah Arendt took it further. And I think it's extremely important in contemplating what a basic income is all about. Basic income is paid individually. So, for a woman, it empowers her. For a disabled person, it empowers – in a different way from means-tested or other behavioural testing.

And I just want to say that the way I’ve taken it forward in a number of papers – because we did a pilot and I kept wondering: Why are the effects so much greater than the money seems to promise? Why are we seeing so many
improvements that are worth much more than the money that they are receiving in the basic income? And the reason is that the emancipatory value of a basic income is greater than the money. It gives people a sense of assurance, of security, and the ability to make individual decisions, not based on averages, but based on particular needs and priorities.

And I want to give two examples, to lighten the mood, if you like. We did a basic income pilot in Namibia, and everyman, every woman, every child received the basic income. And towards the end, I went to one of the villages and I called some of the young women, teenagers, across. All women. And I said to them, ‘What's been the best thing for you about having the basic income?’ They giggled, they didn't want to answer, they were shy. Foreigner, you know? Then one of them had the courage and she said, ‘You know, before, at the end of the month, when the men came down from the field with their wages in their pockets, we had to say, “Yes.” Today, when they come down, we say, “No.”’ That's emancipation.

The second example was in a pilot we did in Indian villages. And when we went to one of these villages, all the teenage women wore veils. And we had to have their pictures taken, because we had to issue cards so that they were entitled to their basic income. And they wouldn’t take their veils off. So we had to arrange a little hut – everything had to be done in this hut. They got their cards.

And about seven months later, I went back to that particular village – they were collecting data. And I said to one of my Indian colleagues, I said, ‘Have you noticed a change?’ ‘No.’ I said, ‘All the women – none of them are wearing veils!’ He said, ‘Yeah. Yeah, that's true.’ So we called some of the women across. Again, nervous, no-one wanting to say. But then they chatted, and one of the women said, ‘Look, before we had our basic income, we had to do what the elders told us to do. Now we have our own basic income, our own bit of money, we do what we want to do.’ It's rather important. That's emancipation.

Now, if you think about it, and you think about means testing and behaviour testing, you very quickly realise that the emancipatory value of any benefit that you receive is less than the money value that it says on the paper. I can give you countless examples. I won't. I'll leave it in your imagination. For me – I’ve argued this, and we did it with our Indian pilots, there are two meta-needs for freedom. One is basic income security, and the other is voice – agency – collective and individual. But I’ll leave that aside for the moment.

The third justification for a basic income, particularly in our societies today, is that it would reduce poverty far more effectively than any existing, costly program out there. But not only would it reduce poverty, it would reduce economic insecurity and inequality. It would do it better than the existing schemes, because it would be universal, because it would be transparent.
Everybody knows what everybody else is receiving as a basic income. And if I'm not getting it, then someone will speak for me if I can't speak for myself. You are not a supplicant.

It’s administratively less expensive, but I’ll come back to the obvious objection – why give to the rich, you know, why do that – in a moment.

But the more important thing than addressing poverty as such – income poverty – is that a basic income, being a permanent guaranteed payment, gives you security, basic security. Not total security – we’re not talking about, you know, a huge amount, we are talking about, in extremis, being able to survive. But, you know, it's coming. And that security is extremely important for what I’ve called the 'precariatised mind'. The precariatised mind is that you are so insecure and you’re so worried about making the wrong decision and misusing your time, that you lose control of your time. And the stress: don’t be surprised that the psychologists have found it lowers your IQ. Fact: if you are experiencing chronic insecurity, your IQ suffers.

Lovely fancy terms have been used in the new literature. Your ‘mental bandwidth’ is shrunk. You get the idea. They give it fancy names. They’ve got to get PhDs. They’ve got to be able to be invited to give Kilbrandon Lectures, so they use fancy terms. You see, I can use such terms. But it’s a reality, because people who are under stress and insecurity don’t make rational decisions. They concentrate on the present. They concentrate on just getting through the day, or whatever it might be. And the psychological insecurities play through into dysfunctional behaviour and dysfunctional development and, of course, play through to their children, if they are able to have children.

Now, we know these things. And yet why is nobody listening? Why is nobody saying, ‘We must introduce systems that give people that security?’ Why is security given so little credence? Maybe it’s the toffs who’ve had silver spoons from their birth and have had pocket money and inherited wealth, and they can't understand these simple things. I don't know.

There was a Canadian basic income pilot done some years ago, and there were some very ambivalent findings. Some neoclassical economists got very upset, because they found that some teenagers reduced their labour supply when they had the basic income. And then further research showed the reason they were reducing their labour supply is they were spending more time in school. Oh, what terrible thing! And they were graduating with better standards, and more of them were going to university! Now, are you surprised? Am I surprised? Of course not.

But there was another wonderful accidental pilot among a group of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina. It’s a very, very fascinating, unique study. What happened was that a group of scholars decided to do a longitudinal study of child
development over a 20–year period. That was their thing. And they were trying to look at all the standard things that sociologists like to look at. And then, by chance, a casino was operating in part of the area where the Cherokees were living. And the Cherokee elders decided that all the profits from the casino would be distributed equally as a basic income to all the men, women and children of the Cherokee. So, while this study was going along, the basic income was being paid out to these Cherokee Indians and their families. Very interesting results.

The same questions were asked over 20 years. What happened was, the children's development, of those that received the basic income compared with the others, their improvements in conscientiousness was a dramatic finding. They were much more conscientious about what they did, and they were much more agreeable inside their families, with friends, and so on. And after about 10 years, they were roughly, on average, about one year ahead in school than those who had not received the basic income. Their parents were drinking less alcohol. The stress of relationships were much less among those that had been receiving the basic income. And the lesson I took from it, that wonderful study, is that improving the income security of the parents was one of the most effective ways of improving the child’s development. None of you will be surprised by that. But the fact that it is an empirical study gives it extra weight.

Now, we’ve done basic income pilots, as I said, in Namibia and India. If you’re interested, I’ve got copies of the book that resulted from the Indian pilots. But essentially, the findings can be summarised very, very quickly. We gave 6,000 people a basic income, and compared that with 6,000 similar people who were not given the basic income. The first thing that happened was the nutrition of the children went up dramatically. Contrary to what Sonia Gandhi had told us. She said, ‘They’ll all waste it on alcohol and tobacco’. Instead, not surprisingly to me, they spent it improving the nutrition of their children. So the WHO z–index – some of you may know it – but in an Indian village, typically it's very skewed to the left, so a very high proportion of the children are malnourished, and then you get an abnormal distribution, right? Contrary to what should be a normal distribution. And in those villages, at the beginning of the pilots they were all off to the left, and not surprisingly the girls’ distribution was even more skewed to the left. In other words, the girls suffered from worse malnutrition. We did weights and measures every six months. By the end of the year: something dramatic. I always said to my Indian friends, ‘Mozart was playing in my ears’. Because not only had the distribution of the children gone towards normal – a normal distribution of weight–for–age, for their age – but something wonderful happened. It improved more for the girls than for the boys. It improved for both, but it had improved more for the girls. And that finding was due partly to the fact that the mothers had their own basic income, the children had their individual income, and the priorities started to change within the families. They all had their basic income.
Not only did nutrition improve, but sanitation improved – toilets, things like that – their schooling improved. The children were not only attending school more often, but they were performing better in schools. And one of the typical reasons was they could afford shoes, and afford transport, and afford to have a breakfast in the morning. Indian children are no different from Scottish children or any other children. And, wonderfully, again, the girls’ performance and girls’ attendance improved more than the boys. Because they had further to prove, if you like. But, dramatic changes. Healthcare improved, so generally welfare improvements were great.

The equity effects of the basic income were equally dramatic, because it was the most vulnerable, the most downcast – the lower castes, the disabled – who benefited more than the others. And the picture on the front of the book [The corruption of capitalism] is of a disabled woman. And when I first saw her, she couldn’t even afford a sari. But by the end of the pilot – you see her resplendent on the front cover – she had her own sewing machine, her own sari, and she was the seamstress of the village. The equity effects fed through to the children of the most disadvantaged. But also we saw economic outcomes. Contrary to the prejudices of people, when you have basic security you work more, not less. And when you work you are more productive, not less. And you also, as we have shown and other experiments have shown, if you have basic security, you are more tolerant of others. You are more altruistic, and you value your community more. These are equity effects. They’re economic effects. We saw economic output going up dramatically.

And the final type of findings were those about emancipation. I’ve mentioned several cases, but particularly reducing debt bondage, indebtedness, and all of that that went with it. Now, to me, the objections – which I’ve discussed at length in the second of the ‘Precariat’ books A precariat charter: From denizens to citizens (2014) – can be dealt with forcefully, and in my view convincingly. It’s a lie to say that if people had basic income security they would stop working. It's a lie. The current system has disincentives to people working in the legal economy. Huge disincentives, and moral and immoral hazards that go along with it. It's a lie to say it's unaffordable. And when people say, ‘Why should we give something for nothing?’ they should look at their estates and their inherited properties, and the giving of something for nothing to the affluent of all our societies. Huge something for nothings. I’m proposing that there should be a bonfire of subsidies, and a Commission for the Eradication of Subsidies. I don’t know who we’d like to be chair, but I’m sure – we’ll ask the Vice-Chancellor (a reference to the Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Strathclyde, who was present and introduced the lecture). – maybe he’d be interested in taking that as a secondary job. But it would be a wonderful job. Because if you look at it, there are huge amounts of subsidies that are regressive, distortionary, that distort, and take a lot of money out of the economy.
It won't lower wages. It will give people power to say 'no' when faced by exploitation. I believe it would be emancipatory for women, because it's worth – even if you pay the same amount – it's worth more for a woman, and it's individual, and she can escape abusive relationships more easily. I think it has good properties in the sense that it responds to the insecurities and the maldistribution of income which is the crisis of our time.

And why I think so many people are suddenly interested is that it is becoming a political imperative. Recently, I got invited – and I’ll conclude on this story – I got invited to speak to the Bilderberg Group. Now, most of you, being wise, will never have heard of the Bilderberg Group. It was set up after the Second World War, and basically it’s the elite of the world – the most powerful people in the world – who meet once a year under Chatham House Rules, and they discuss topical issues. So, I got this email saying, ‘Would you please come and address the Bilderberg Group?’ I thought it was a Leftie friend of mine pulling my leg. You know, the next thing he’ll be doing is inviting me to give the Kilbrandon Lecture, or something like that! So I took no notice. Several days later, I got a phone call at my house saying, ‘Why haven't you responded? We are inviting you to speak at the Bilderberg Group.’ I said, ‘Well, I didn't take it seriously, blah, blah, blah.’ Anyway, eventually I consulted friends of mine in various countries, and they said, ‘Guy, you've got to do it! Let them hear! You've got to do it!’ So at the end of it, I went. Imagine. I was taken into this luxurious place – very, very luxurious, 120 people, armed guards everywhere. And I’m giving a talk on this subject. Sitting there is Henry Kissinger, looking like an owl, you know? He is as sharp as nails, unfortunately. I wanted to make a citizen's arrest, but, you know... Next to him was Christine Lagarde, the head of the IMF. Then there was Eric Schmidt, the Chief Executive of Google. And there were three prime ministers, five ministers of finance, and some of the wealthiest bas..... people in the world. Sorry. My language is deteriorating!

Now, I gave an hour–and–a–quarter talk on ‘The Precariat’, and then basic income. And I thought they’d all run for the bar, you know? ‘What the...? Who's let him in!’ You know?

But it’s because they are getting worried. They’re getting worried that the world economy is at a critical juncture, when monsters like Trump are suddenly taken seriously, and some even get elected President. And that sort of thing is not in their script. Because they want a nice, stable, global economy. But they know that they have overreached, and the inequalities and securities have become unsustainable – socially, economically, ecologically. And I think we now have the potential of mobilising a coalition for a new progressive politics, in which a new income distribution system is feasible, and that we’ve got a chance.

It’s only a silver lining, but it’s up to us to be energised and to oppose what is happening. And we can only oppose a paradigm if we’ve got a new paradigm to put in its place, Thomas Kuhn taught us that. And a new paradigm is taking
shape. There are pilots now in various countries. There are different groups emerging, new political groups, new young people forming precariat groups. New movements, new energies. And us oldies, if you like, should be just saying, ‘Go ahead. You lead us.’

Thank you very much.

**Commentary**

The lecture was followed by commentaries delivered by two students which we also publish.

**Kieran O’Neill**

Can I just really take this opportunity to say thank you, Professor Standing. That was enlightening. It was absolutely exemplary. I wish I could have the entire Youth Parliament here to hear it, but they’re probably outdoing something a bit more lively and youthful!

Just to introduce myself. My name is Kieran. I’m the elected member of the Scottish Youth Parliament for the Glasgow, Maryhill and Springburn constituency. And I also sit on the Executive Committee of the Glasgow Youth Council, with responsibility for policy and public affairs. So I get to all this fun stuff. I was asked to come along this evening to provide a youth perspective of the notion of a basic income and the needs of young people, but more specifically to provide a very Glasgow–specific perspective. And that is by no means easy, so I hope that if I slip up you can all forgive me.

That constituency I represent, the constituency I am very proud to represent, because it’s the community I grew up in, is in the bottom decile of every ranking of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, and has been since records began. Now, that is not something that should be accepted or expected, but for some reason it is. Now, no one should be happy for that, and especially the fact that it is repeated over and over in communities across Glasgow. The best set in Scotland, obviously. And many people, many organisations, many people who have made very well–intentioned attempts and actions to try and remedy this situation, and none have succeeded.

Now, the notion of a basic income – a universal basic income, a citizen income, call it what you will – was completely alien to me and all of my colleagues until a few months ago. Because it seemed absolutely mad. The idea that we could somehow afford to give everyone a block grant of money just seemed completely unfeasible, even though someone who is a bit of a left–winger like myself would gladly welcome such a policy.

Many had serious concerns. That was until, of course, my colleague, Thomas McEachan MSYP, who represents Glasgow Pollock and is a student at this
university, proposed a motion at our national sitting of the Youth Parliament, which was held in July of this year. And the motion read, ‘The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that universal basic income, otherwise known as a citizen’s income, should be introduced to ensure that all citizens, no matter their circumstances, can live with dignity and economic security’.

Now, my first reaction to this was, ‘Oh God, no’. And that’s not because I don’t support the motion. I completely support it. But we all knew that it would have very little hope of passing. And I understand that the common sort of misconception is that a Youth Parliament is a sort of left-wing cabal of young people who are revolutionaries and care not for fiscal implications – we simply want to do something, we do it now. If only.

We are anything but. The Scottish Youth Parliament has a bit of a history for being very representative of the sort of broad political flavour. We are lucky in Scotland – there is representation from all sides of the field, and it is a very, very tough crowd.

So, when Thomas came to me and said, ‘Oh, Kieran, by the way, I’m proposing a motion about universal basic income’, I said – I made a noise, I can’t really describe what it was – and we knew it would be close, and when the debate eventually took place, our assumptions were absolutely proven. There were a number of very well-intentioned pleas saying that we need this, that Scotland needs this. And there were also a very large number of objections raising that, ‘Why should we get this? This demotivates people to go out and work, to make a living. It’s welfare state, it’s nanny state’.

And sadly the motion failed: where 41% of Youth Parliamentarians agreed with it, 39% disagreed with it, and 20% abstained from the vote. And while we had the majority, our rules set out you have to get more than 50% support of the Youth Parliament, so the motion sadly failed. And that was incredibly disappointing, because a lot of work went into ensuring that proposal passed. There were a number of very well-orchestrated, helpful interventions that did absolutely nothing to change the result. But that is how democracy works, and you are totally entitled to have issue with that, given the result in America.

Now, I believe the motion failed, not because of opposition to the notion of a universal basic income, but what we in the Glasgow group now are calling ‘blissful ignorance’. Not in any way malicious, not in any way negative. Simply a lack of understanding and experience of the sort of environment and the people who need this, who need the basic income to be implemented in Scotland.

Now, that wasn’t the case in Glasgow, not for myself or any of my colleagues. And the Glasgow Youth Council, of which I am also a member, met the following week, debated the exact same motion. The only difference, instead of 100 MSYPs from communities across Scotland, from Shetland to Dumfries, we had
50 youth councils from across Glasgow. And the motion was supported with 86% of the vote.

We concluded that a basic income for everyone should not be a radical demand for change. It shouldn’t be this fantasist delusion of this sort of claim. It should be what it says on the tin: a basic fact. It's an absolute and assured minimum by which each individual should receive, to ensure that they can live with the absolute, most basic quality of life. Now, that isn't radical; that’s simply what’s right.

For as long as there are children in Glasgow whose only meal – sometimes their only hot meal – is a school lunch; For as long as there are parents who are in full–time employment and have to go to food banks to feed their children; For as long as there are young people who cannot reach their full potential through education, because they cannot afford to; For as long as society keeps on refusing to help those who need it the most, the basic income is not a fantasy – it is an absolute necessity. And it should not take a film to remind people of that.

Now, the Scottish Government now, of course, have the power to do something. They are in the process of designing their own completely unique and ethical social security system, something we in the Scottish Youth Parliament and the Glasgow Youth Council fully support. And the governing party of the SNP themselves, in our opinion, now have a political obligation to explore the potential of this basic income. As you may know, a motion was passed at the March conference unanimously supporting further research into it. Of course, at this stage, it is only a promise of more research, but it's much more of a start and we can’t really urge anything more than they commit to that.

And if I could urge anyone to do anything, it would be to advocate that the Scottish Government are bold and govern in the interests of the people who elected them. And I completely support Professor Standing’s commitment to a broad coalition in favour of supporting this. If this isn't something that myself as a young person can’t support, then I think we should all just pack up and give up, and just let President Trump – I don’t know – build a wall around us!

The question of this lecture is addressing the needs of children and young people in Scotland. And I think I can say with absolutely no uncertainty that for a very long time, and certainly for as long as I’ve been alive, no administration of any colour, whether it is based in London...whether it is based in London or Edinburgh, has been doing this effectively. We need to be bold, and we need to change the way things are. We need to ensure that things simply do not stay the way they currently are. We need to do something. And we need a basic income. Thank you.

Gary Paterson
If I could just first of all say, it's a real honour to be asked to speak at this event as well. I am someone who went through the care system myself. The focus of Lord Kilbrandon’s work for the Children's Panel has had a real great impact on my life.

But my care experience and my wider access experience is very much compounded by social economic challenges. So for me, this topic, I think, was very interesting – something that I'm keen to delve into a lot deeper. We are now seeing more visible warning signs – signs that we've seen, for those of us on the left, for probably many years before I was born, anyway. Growing up, I witnessed the economic challenges of my parents’ lives and my own life which have given me focus to improve the lives of people from my background, And indeed we can see that this is not just a working class issue, but also warning signs are showing we have to address inequality if, not only workers, but the rest of society which to maintain everything that we hold dear in society. And one of those solutions can be the idea of a basic income which has perhaps been seen in the past as a kind of rather radical proposal.

I did actually write some notes beforehand, and I was actually encouraged to hear about your experiences with the elite at the Bilderberg. But I think it is actually encouraging that they are looking at perhaps alternatives that are not part of their normal framework. Because the fact of the matter is, these scenarios like Trump, Brexit, Le Pen, what's happening in places like Turkey – these are movements that have actually people from backgrounds similar to myself, but don't see politicians and society listening to their concerns. They're not hearing about the problems that they are living with.

And really, not just for people that are on the left politically and academically support this idea, what we really and genuinely need to see is people beyond the left and centre and the in right, actually, start to see that things we hold dear are at risk if we don't address this issues of inequality. If you hold dear those international institutions, if you hold dear the political system that you have at the moment, if we don't look at alternatives such as this to start to challenge the status quo of the economic winners and losers’ system, it won't just be us that suffer as people on the left, or even just working class people like myself, it will be everyone. We are all tied into this together, so we really do need to see a response, across society, to the challenges that we are facing, politically and economically.

So I just wanted to say that from my particular aspect it was very encouraging to hear from Mr Standing, and I'm sure there are a lot of people today will have some food for thought, going away. So, that's pretty much my point. I just wanted to thank you very much for a very good lecture. Thanks.

Guy Standing
Professor Guy Standing is a Professorial Research Associate at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and a founder member and honorary co-president of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN), a non-governmental organisation that promotes a basic income for all. He has held professorial appointments at the universities of London, Bath and Monash, as well as senior posts with the International Labour Organisation. He is the author of many books, journal articles and reports. www.guystanding.com

Kieran O’Neill

Kieran O’Neill is an elected member of the Scottish Youth Parliaments for Glasgow, Maryhill and Springburn and also sits on the Glasgow City Council’s Youth Engagement Policy Commission which will be reporting to the Council in 2017 with a number of recommendations to improve the lives of young people in Glasgow.

Gary Paterson

Gary is a student of international relations at the University of Strathclyde. Gary is a ‘care–experienced’ young person involved in campaigns, in politics, focused on improving, widening access, welfare and support, and closing barriers to opportunities. He is a former president of the Strathclyde Students’ Association and was previously a member of the executive of the National Union of Students – Scotland.

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