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#### **Universal Basic Income Trials Being Considered in Scotland**

By Libby Brooks

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Scotland looks set to be the first part of the UK to pilot a basic income for every citizen, as councils in Fife and Glasgow investigate trial schemes in 2017. The councillor Matt Kerr has been championing the idea through the halls of Glasgow City Chambers, and is frank about the challenges it poses. “Like a lot of people, I was interested in the idea but never completely convinced,” he said. But working as Labour’s anti-poverty lead on the council, Kerr says that he “kept coming back to the basic income”.

Kerr sees the basic income as a way of simplifying the UK’s byzantine welfare system. “But it is also about solidarity: it says that everyone is valued and the government will support you. It changes the relationship between the individual and the state.”

The concept of a universal basic income revolves around the idea of offering every individual, regardless of existing welfare benefits or earned income, a non-conditional flat-rate payment, with any income earned above that taxed progressively. The intention is to provide a basic economic platform on which people can build their lives, whether they choose to earn, learn, care or set up a business.

The idea has its roots in 16th-century humanist philosophy, when it was developed by the likes of Thomas More, but in its modern incarnation it has lately enjoyed successful pilots in India and Africa. Despite its utopian roots, champions believe that this is an idea whose time has come, particularly in Scotland where the governing Scottish National Party (SNP) voted in support of a basic income at their spring conference (although the proposal has yet to make it into their manifesto).

The shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, has suggested that it is likely to appear in his party’s next manifesto, while there has been a groundswell of interest among anti-poverty groups who see it as a means of changing not only the relationship between people and the state, but between workers and increasingly insecure employment in the gig economy.<sup>1</sup>

At the heart of any experiment with basic income is money: how much should people get and where will it come from? Kerr says his instinct is to base the amount on similar calculations to those made for the living wage. “It’s about having more than just enough to pay the bills. But part of the idea of doing a pilot is to make mistakes and also find out what is acceptable to the

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<sup>1</sup> In a gig economy, temporary, flexible jobs are commonplace and companies tend toward hiring independent contractors and freelancers instead of full-time employees.

public. There will be a lot of resistance to this. Part of the problem is we're working against a whole discourse of deserving and undeserving poor."

As for where the money comes from, "the funding question is always the big one, and really will depend upon the approach a pilot takes," says Jamie Cooke, head of RSA Scotland, which has been spearheading research on the subject across the UK. Drawing on the experience of similar projects ongoing in Finland, Utrecht in the Netherland and Ontario in Canada, Cooke suggests "[I]t could be funding from particular trusts, it could be individual philanthropic funding, as we have seen in the States, or it could be a redirection of the existing welfare budget."

Scotland was recently added to the list of "places to watch" for basic income activity by the Basic Income Earth Network, founded by the radical economist Guy Standing, whose hugely influential book *The Precariat* identified an emerging social class suffering the worst of job insecurity and most likely to be attracted to rightwing populism. "The thing about Scotland is that they really understand the precariat," says Standing, who recently visited the country to meet civil servants, local authorities and campaigners to discuss a basic income. The momentum is there, he says, and once it is framed around a desire for greater social justice "then you get away from the stale debate about whether if you give people the basic income then they will be lazy... Everywhere I go, it is the communities that feel left behind by globalisation that are most interested [in the idea of a basic income]. We have seen a sea-change in attitudes."