

The Measure of a Society

Are there solutions to issues such as homelessness, addiction, poverty, and overstressed mental health services? “A decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization,” wrote Samuel Johnson. The thought was echoed by Mahatma Gandhi: “A nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members.”

For years we’ve relied heavily on charity, drawing on the good will of countless faith groups, retirees, schoolchildren and community organizations that are under ever-increasing strain.

A systemic problem requires a systemic solution. Growing wealth inequality requires measures to limit the extremes of wealth and poverty. Over 100 years ago, [Abdu’l-Bahá](#) spoke of the need to “no longer delay in altering conditions which bring the misery of grinding poverty to a very large number of the people. ... There must be special laws made, dealing with these extremes of riches and of want.” This is true now more than ever.

One promising idea currently making the rounds is GAI, or Guaranteed Annual Income. GAI was successfully experimented with in Dauphin, Manitoba from 1974 to 1978, when it was shelved due to a change of government. The research lay buried in hundreds of sealed boxes until researcher Dr. Evelyn Forget recently brought them to light, receiving the attention of government and press. (See [A Canadian City once Eliminated Poverty](#), Huffington Post, 12/23/2014)

Its advocates claim that the GAI has the potential to not only positively impact almost every social issue, but bring together the entire political spectrum. Astonishingly, it has support from both liberal and highly conservative economists. As economist Glen Hodgson of the Conference Board of Canada explained in [a policy paper in 2011](#): “Fifty years ago, Milton Friedman developed an idea called a “negative income tax” to address poverty with minimal government bureaucracy while increasing workforce attachment.”

Eliminating the patchwork quilt of current programs for a simpler, cost effective solution that’s better by almost all measures is as fiercely calculated as it is magnificently utopian. A Fraser Institute article underlined not just the complexity but the huge cost of the existing system, estimated at “roughly 10 per cent of the economy (this includes spending and tax measures by all levels of government targeting people with low-income, the disabled, the elderly, and parents with young children). By any measure, GAI reform would be a major undertaking, perhaps one of the most fundamental government reforms in Canadian history.”

Commonly cited benefits of a GAI include reduced health costs, including mental health costs; reduced poverty; and reduced costs of government. It creates a work incentive by ensuring that people are always better off financially when they work, unlike the current welfare system that tends to penalize initiative. Financially difficult choices would be far more doable – such as entrepreneurship, retraining, and raising a family, not to mention caring for those with disabilities or failing health.

As the Bahá’í writings point out, “*That which was applicable to human needs during the early history of the race can neither meet nor satisfy the demands of this day...*” The task of the day, whatever the method, is to find a way to create a more unified, prosperous world that will do justice to our values.

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