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**Universal Basic Income in Belgium and the Netherlands:  
Implementation Through the Back Door?**

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# Universal Basic Income in Belgium and the Netherlands: Implementation Through the Back Door?

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**Abstract.** Since the early 1980s, one can find in Belgium and the Netherlands some of the most prominent advocates of a universal basic income (BI), i.e. an unconditional minimum income paid by a political community to all its members on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement. However, within the framework of a shift towards “activation” of benefit recipients through soft forms of workfare, the prospects of the idea of giving everyone an income by right might look gloomy. This paper first shows how Belgium and the Netherlands are restructuring their income security programmes along ‘activation’ lines. It then focuses on the way BI proponents have taken part in the debates on welfare state reform in the past 25 years, including in some cases at the governmental level. Finally, it analyses some of the reasons that account for their failure to gain political support. Even if the moral objection to an income by right without a related duty to work seems to be the most decisive impediment, it appears that the “active welfare state” rhetoric might offer, somewhat paradoxically, new opportunities to the tenacious advocates of less conditional forms of income support.

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## Introduction

Since the early 1980s, one can find in Belgium and the Netherlands some of the most prominent advocates of a universal basic income (BI), i.e. “an income paid by a political community to all its members on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement” (Van Parijs 2000). In no other advanced European welfare state the BI debate has been so broad and lively than in the Netherlands. Since 1975, the idea of a *basisinkomen* has been discussed within many Dutch political parties, trade unions, social organisations, and even at the governmental level. It was at the core of various official reports that progressively increased its respectability in political circles. Belgian political actors have always been more reluctant to it, with the noteworthy exception of the two green parties. But the academic discussion has been quite extensive. The founding congress and second international conference of the *Basic Income European Network* (BIEN) were held in Belgium, respectively in 1986 and 1988. In 1999, a Belgian political formation named *Vivant* was launched as the first European single-issue party entirely focused on BI. Although it remains a tiny player in Belgium’s political game, it managed to attract public attention on the proposal through eye-catching posters in the country’s main cities.

In this paper, I scrutinise the political chances of BI in the low countries and the probability of incremental steps into that direction. In **section 1**, assuming that BI would replace most existing means-tested minimum income schemes, I will briefly review the main social assistance programmes of both countries. It appears that a paradigm shift is underway which may at first sight seriously undermine the progress to a more universal and unconditional income-security system. In fact, as it is the case of many other European countries, Belgium and the Netherlands are in the process of restructuring their welfare states along ‘activation’ lines. Even if effective retrenchment remained limited to date, work requirements have been more strictly enforced with the passing years. Partly based on interviews and an extensive review of the press, **section 2** will be devoted to an account of twenty-five years of BI debate in both countries. The Dutch discussion already started in the mid-1970s, whereas the idea only appeared in 1985 in Belgium’s public debate. Even if the Dutch BI proponents were politically more powerful, in both countries the numerous BI advocates always failed to gain long-lasting political support for their proposal. But in addressing questions of universality and conditionality, they managed to have an influence on the terms of the welfare reform discussions. **Section 3** will then focus on the very reasons of this failure to gain political support, which are of paramount importance for the future prospects of unconditional minimum income schemes. Starting from the hypothesis that under certain conditions a BI would be economically sustainable, most participants in the debate stress that four important obstacles have been in the way of the proposal. As is argued in some detail, the moral objection to an income by right without a related duty to work seems to be the most decisive impediment. Finally, in the conclusions I shall try to clarify why, given the obstacles and objections they encountered, most Dutch and BI proponents have adopted an incremental approach. Refundable tax credits or a ‘participation income’ constitute two possible steps which may prove to be far more promising than the strategy of the royal way to a full BI.

## 1. A Paradigm Shift in Welfare

In the literature, both Belgium and the Netherlands are generally classified as corporatist or Christian-Democratic welfare states.<sup>1</sup> Trade unions and employers – the so-called ‘social partners’ – play an important role in the shaping and administration of social security. Most benefits are insurance-based and financed through payroll contributions. Tax expenditures play only a modest role in the field of social policy, mainly in the form of tax allowances for children, even though things have been changing in the late 1990s – in particular in the Netherlands. To sketch the broad context of the basic income (BI) discussion, this section briefly considers the main characteristics of both welfare states and focuses on minimum income schemes as well as recent trends in social assistance. It is not part of the purpose of this paper to develop a detailed scenario for the concrete implementation of a BI in Belgium and the Netherlands. I shall here assume without argument that a generous BI scheme would replace existing means-tested minimum income schemes, the bulk of tax credits and exemptions, and be integrated with family allowances and, in the Dutch case, the basic pension scheme. In the field of social insurance, BI would replace the bottom part of the earnings-related unemployment, invalidity and pension benefits; the income floor it provides would remain supplemented by earnings-related benefits, designed to make up the difference between BI and current benefit levels.

### *Dutch ‘Miracle’ and Belgian ‘Status Quo’*

Since the mid-1990s, many scholars have expressed admiration at what has come to be called ‘the Dutch Miracle’ (Visser and Hemerijck 1997). During the 1980s the Netherlands had been stigmatised as an exemplary case of ‘welfare without work’, and the Dutch themselves were moaning over the ‘Dutch disease’. In the second-half of the 1990s, instead, the Netherlands became a model for European decision makers. The economy seemed to have fully recovered: the real GDP growth was nearly 4% on average over the 1997-2000 period.<sup>2</sup> Above all, the standardised unemployment rate had dropped from a peak of almost 10% in 1983 to 2.4% in 2002 (OECD 2002b). According to the usual interpretation, the 1982 Wassenaar agreement between unions and employers inaugurated a long period of wage moderation and working time reduction, which in turn resulted in the creation of many jobs. Over this period, the social partners managed to produce agreements on various aspects of social security and industrial policy. Significantly, social rights of part-time workers were gradually strengthened, and the trade unions did not oppose the massive creation of temporary jobs. Activation policies may also have helped the unemployed to enter the labour market. Thanks to renewed corporatism, including strong but indirect governmental influence on collective agreements, the vicious circle was surprisingly broken (Hemerijck and van Kersbergen 1997; Hemerijck and Visser 2000). Although it happened without a master plan, the Dutch social partners were able to deal with internal difficulties as well as external pressures. As was stressed by Rhodes (2001: 184), the Dutch case can therefore be described as the “most

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<sup>1</sup> The corporatist character of the Belgian system is very pronounced. Unions are powerful and relatively centralized. Although the categorization of the Dutch welfare state as Christian-Democratic or corporatist has been challenged (see Goodin and Smitsman 2000), since the mid-1980s there has been a clear revival of concertation between social partners (see *infra*).

<sup>2</sup> However, according to OECD calculations, the outlook for the coming years is « highly uncertain and rather gloomy » (OECD 2002a: 9). Real GDP growth has fallen at 0.2% in 2003. In May 2002, one of the main Dutch newspapers ran as a headline: ‘The Dutch economy comes to a complete standstill’ (*De Volkskrant*, 18 May 2002).

advanced example of ‘competitive corporatism’ in Western Europe”. However, this optimistic picture has been somewhat qualified (see for instance Becker 2000; Delsen 2000: 47-75). The full-time employment rate remains quite low, since most of the newly created jobs are only part-time.<sup>3</sup> If one takes a broad definition of unemployment, including alternative forms of non-employment like the overcrowded disability scheme (AOW), Dutch unemployment has only slightly declined since the mid-1980s. Moreover, even if the level of income inequality remains relatively low, it has significantly increased since the early 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Long-term poverty did not decrease, partly because the dramatic job growth mainly benefited women whose partner was already at work. Finally, in the early 2000s, real GDP growth had fallen at less than 1% (0.2% in 2003).

Despite these qualifications, it is clear that policy adjustment within corporatist institutions has made change and adaptation possible in the Netherlands. Compared to the Dutch transformations, Belgium is sometimes said to have been stuck in a kind of ‘immobilism’ (Hemerijck and Visser 2000). Unlike the Dutch ones, Belgian unions and employers have not been able to strike a deal at the national level during the 1980s, and failed again to do so in the mid-1990s. The discretionary power of the federal state in industrial relations has therefore increased, but has proven to be more efficient in neutralising the social partners than in combating unemployment (Vilrocx and Van Leemput 1998: 342). From about 10% in the mid-1990s, the standardised unemployment rate dropped to 6.8% in 2002, under the European average (7.6%) but still far above the Dutch level (OECD 2002b). Part-time work is not considered as a viable alternative by unions, and has never been fostered by the government. Moreover, contrary to the Netherlands, many social rights do not apply to jobs below a certain threshold of hours. The main way of clearing the labour market remains the generous early retirement scheme, which is increasingly seen as weighting down public finances. Hemerijck and Visser (2000: 253) harshly conclude that there is no other country “where governments designed so many pacts, proposals and plans to coax unions into accepting wage restraint and employers into creating jobs, with so little success”. A crucial explanation may lie in the fact that in Belgium innovative policy-making has long been ruled out by the linguistic clashes that occurred between the Flemish and French-speaking communities. The distribution of responsibilities in social affairs among the federal state and the three regions (Flanders, Brussels, and the Walloon region) does not enhance the global efficiency of Belgium’s employment policy. But the linguistic conflict does not account for all failures in public policy. One must for instance remember that Belgium is the oldest industrial country of continental Europe. It specialised in the production of coal and steel whose profitability began to decline in the 1960s. By contrast, the Netherlands has never been a true industrial nation. The adaptation of the Dutch economy to new international pressures proved to be far less painful. One should also stress that in Belgium the slow shift to services has mainly benefited to Flanders, whose economic situation is far better than Brussels and the Walloon region. Even if speaking of a relative ‘status quo’ in terms of outcomes at the federal level is correct, one should consequently pay attention to the regional differences. For instance, whereas in 1999 the unemployment rate in Flanders was 7.5%, it was 17.3% in the Walloon region and 18.1% in Brussels (OECD 2001: 61-63).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Netherlands has, by far, the highest percentage of part-time work in the OECD area (see the illustrative Fig.19 in OECD 2002: 68). Comparatively, the proportion of Belgian part-time employment remains very small.

<sup>4</sup> According to Smeeding (2000), the rise in income inequality was around 10% in the Netherlands over the period 1975-2000. Comparatively, the rise was very modest in Belgium (around 1%). Belgium has, with Sweden and Finland, one of the smallest Gini coefficients among industrialised countries.

<sup>5</sup> In the same vein, while exploring European unemployment figures, David Cameron points out that “if there are substantial differences in rates of unemployment among the member states, there are also substantial variations *within* many of the member states, which should caution one about drawing conclusions about unemployment on the basis of national averages” (Cameron 2001: 17). This is of particular importance in the Belgian case.

### Minimum income schemes.

The core transfer programmes of the Belgian and Dutch welfare states are earnings-related. Social insurance, financed through social contributions of workers and employers, provide various benefits covering such social risks as unemployment, sickness, and disability. In the case of unemployment, workers are expected to register as unemployed and stay available for work. Whereas benefit duration is dependent on work history in the Netherlands, they are theoretically payable without time limit in Belgium. However, an unemployed person can be denied the right to benefit if she is in an ‘abnormally long period of unemployment’, i.e. if this period is as twice as long as the regional average for the same sex and age category (Arcq and Blaise 1998: 671).

Both countries already have universal schemes, which are nevertheless far removed from a true basic income for all as they are restricted to specific age categories. Family allowances are flat-rate, and granted without means or income test. In Belgium, the amount for each child is modulated according to the birth-order of the child (higher for the second than for the first, and higher for the subsequent children than for the second), whereas this factor is not taken into consideration in the Netherlands. The Dutch family allowances are comparatively much lower than the Belgian.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the first tier of the Dutch pension system is made of an universal non means-tested basic pension, financed through general taxation. Since it guarantees every citizen aged over 65 a flat-rate income floor of €869 monthly (for a single person), it has sometimes been described as a first step towards a comprehensive basic income scheme for all. BI proponents often use it as a good example of unconditional programmes, which produce some of the consequences expected from a BI: when a person is assured that she will benefit from a basic income as she reaches the age of 65, she will more easily enlarge one’s horizons and choices during her active life – which is precisely one of the core arguments in favour of a comprehensive basic income scheme.

Finally, a residual tier provides social assistance for those who cannot benefit from the other two tiers. This mainly takes the form of a minimum income guarantee. Here I shall focus on the two general baseline systems of income support: the Belgian *minimex-bestaansminimum* and the Dutch *Algemene Bijstand Wet*.<sup>7</sup> It is important to stress that since the early 1990s onwards there was a sharp increase in the number of social assistance recipients in Belgium, whereas the Dutch figures showed a decreasing trend. The number of Belgian social assistance recipients accelerated to a growth rate of 11% for the years 1994 and 1995, and then to 13% in 1996. By contrast, the number of Dutch claimants has been gradually declining since 1988 (OECD 1998: 25-26).<sup>8</sup>

The Belgian ‘subsistence minimum income’ guarantee (*minimex* in French, *bestaansminimum* in Dutch) was created in 1974. Financed through general taxation, it is designed to provide a safety-net for those who have lost other entitlements or have no other means of subsistence. The administration of the *minimex* is typical of the so-called ‘negotiated regulation’ of poverty, as was defined by Paugam (1999: 23-25). While the amount and the target are established by the federal legislator, local authorities are in charge of the implementation of the right to the minimum income. The *minimex* is only financed half by the federal state, the

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<sup>6</sup> To have a full picture of the state support to families, one should of course consider existing tax reliefs for dependent children, additional benefits targeted at low-income families, and more broadly parental-leave schemes and child-care facilities. Regarding family allowances in the stricter sense, Belgium can be described as a “high support” country, and the Netherlands as a “medium support” country (Gauthier 1996: 188). Regarding cash transfers to families, Belgium is the most generous of all OECD countries (Gauthier 1996: 171).

<sup>7</sup> In 2002, the Belgian *minimex* became *integration income*. In the Netherlands, a new assistance law, the *Wet werk en bijstand* (WWB) took effect on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> These figures should be carefully interpreted. For the increase in recipients can be due to an increase in the system’s efficiency, and depict improvements in social assistance take-up.

remaining 50% being financed by the municipalities. However, the federal share is brought up to 60% or 65% in cities with a greater proportion of recipients. The *Public Centres for Social Assistance* (CPAS in French – OCMW in Dutch), created in 1976 and administered by the municipalities, handle each case individually. This personalised service leads to a significant responsabilization of the recipients, which has increased with the passing years. Recipients aged between 18 and 25 years must, for instance, conclude an individual integration contract with the CPAS (Vranken 1999: 172-173). The availability for work, which was already part of the initial 1974 law, is becoming a central component of the legislation that takes effect in 2002.

People aged more than eighteen whose resources are below the prescribed limit are entitled to the *minimex*. The amount is adjusted according to the means of the beneficiaries, and as a function of the resources of possible cohabiting partners. These means include other social benefits, assets, as well as income from savings and from property. The *minimex* is a 'top-up scheme', i.e. which makes up the difference between these resources and the prescribed maximal amount. On January 1st, 2002, this maximum was established at Euro 583.66 monthly for a single person, and €778.21 for a couple. It is calculated without any reference to the average disposable income or the minimum wage legislation, but is linked to the retail prices index. According to the Antwerp-based *Centre for Social Policy*, the lack of a true mechanism linking the *minimex* to general welfare has caused a significant deterioration of many beneficiaries' relative conditions of living (Cantillon et al. 2001).

The Dutch minimum income guarantee (*Algemeen Bijstand Wet* – ABW) was created in 1963, ten years before the Belgian *minimex*. From the very beginning, a specific regime (*Rijksgroepregeling Werkloze Werknemers* – RWW) was aimed at the unemployed whose rights to unemployment insurance benefits were exhausted. The scheme was similar to the ABW and was merged with the general social assistance programme in 1996. Like the *minimex*, the ABW is financed through general taxation and administered under the 'negotiated regulation' model: its amount is fixed at the central level, but its practical implementation is a matter for municipalities. The move to decentralisation has been marked since the late 1980s. The cost-sharing is nevertheless very different from the Belgian case, since only 10% of the total amount is borne by local authorities. This way of financing the scheme induces far more redistribution between rich and poor municipalities than in Belgium. Another crucial difference lies in the fact that the ABW level is fixed as a proportion of the legal net minimum wage (*Wet Minimumloon* - WML). This explains why its level is much higher than the level of the Belgian *minimex*. A single person is entitled to 70% of the net minimum wage, lone parents to 90%, and a couple to 100%.

On January, 1st, 2002, the maximal ABW monthly amount was €769.87 for a single person and €1099.81 for a couple. Just as in Belgium, individuals aged more than eighteen are entitled to the minimum income, provided the claimant's means do not exceed the maximal amount. Although availability for work is in principle required, the requirement was not enforced for the recipients until the new legislation was voted in 1996. In fact, work requirements were much stricter under the RWW scheme. Prescribed sanctions were applied, though with certain discretion from local authorities (Eardley et al. 1996: 275-276). In 1996 reform which merged the two schemes, work requirements were introduced for ABW to bring them in line with those existing from the beginning for RWW. The handling of ABW cases is individualised, but the claimants benefit from a supplementary protection which does not exist in Belgium: since 1998, local authorities are obliged to set up a 'council of recipients', which make the users partners in the development and implementation of administrative rules (UNIOPSS 2001: 202).



### **From de-commodification to active policies**

Since the mid-1990s, new developments in social policy are changing the face of the Belgian and Dutch income security programs. In both countries, like in many other European states, the old political discourse on ‘benefit dependency’ has gained increasing credibility. It seems to have spread into all spheres of discussion on social policies, across the whole political spectrum. In particular, unemployment benefits and minimum income schemes are being targeted. Those programmes are said to discourage ‘self-sufficiency’, and therefore would have to be transformed by actively linking benefits to work requirements. Partly under the influence of European guidelines, ambitious reforms have already been implemented. Slowly but surely, a new balance between rights and duties has been established. New obligations are imposed on beneficiaries, while eligibility criteria have been tightened and sanctions applied more strictly. In this respect, one can argue that both countries are in the incremental process of a paradigm shift in welfare.

As it was convincingly argued by Dutch scholars, “ideological developments are as important as economic circumstances in understanding this specific strand of welfare reform” (Spies and van Berkel 2000: 107). Frank Vandembroucke, the Belgian Minister of Social Affairs (*Flemish Socialist Party – SP.A*),<sup>9</sup> is probably the policy maker who voiced most explicitly the normative core of the new conception of social rights in the Belgian-Dutch context. On the occasion of an official speech he gave in the Netherlands in June 1999, he explained in detail his vision of the role of a reformed welfare system which he called ‘the active welfare state’. In his view, contemporary social security programmes should not only provide income security, but also “increase opportunities to participate in social life, so that the number of active persons in society is increased (...). It would be proper to suppress or correct, as much as possible, the current social security system mechanisms which discourage people instead of giving them incentives to be active” (Vandembroucke 1999: 5).

The concern about perverse disincentives is in some way related to straightforward budgetary constraints: a high level of employment is one of the conditions of a sustainable welfare system, given the challenges it will have to take up in the coming years (e.g. ageing population, or tax competition at the international level). But it is only part of the story. For the cost of an effective ‘active welfare state’ which would match Vandembroucke’s ambitions could easily exceed the benefits. In actual fact, a more fundamental motive lies in the idea that the best way to combat social exclusion is through providing job opportunities to people on benefit. A productive contribution, in the broad sense, to the wealth of a given society constitutes an invaluable source of self-respect. The role of the ‘active welfare state’ should then essentially consist in fostering participation, in various ways. As stated by Vandembroucke himself in an academic paper, “active participation in society should be included in any individual’s option set” (Vandembroucke and Van Puyenbroeck 2000: 87).

On the one hand, it would be by far an exaggeration to assert that Vandembroucke supports US-like workfare schemes, including work enforcement. In his view, social-democratic activation policies should be aimed at dealing with exclusion, not at stigmatising beneficiaries. On the other hand, he nevertheless clearly favours an individualised approach to social welfare, meaning that individuals could possibly be held responsible for staying out of the labour market. The ‘active welfare state’, he writes, “is bound to address questions of *individual responsibility*” (Vandembroucke and Van Puyenbroeck 2000: 87). In this sense, his conception of welfare is part of the same ideological family as British third-wayism or even American workfare. Within this framework, the importance attached to individual responsibility increases, whereas emphasis on collective responsibility – which forms the historical core of social security – loses its importance. In other words, the two main

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<sup>9</sup> After the 2003 general elections, Frank Vandembroucke became Minister of Employment and Pensions.

justifications for active social policies, namely preventing social exclusion (e.g. Vandembroucke) or combating benefit dependency (e.g. Mead 1992), are not mutually exclusive (Lødemel and Trickey 2000: 16). Depending on the main emphasis being put on the first or second justification, the effective policy would be significantly different. But both “refer to the end points of a continuum of goals” (Gough 2000: 52). Vandembroucke’s views have exercised considerable influence over the Belgian social policy debate. As such, they were the first explicit formulation of a diffuse political climate, which had also impregnated the Dutch public debate. The notion of an ‘active welfare state’ was prominent in the Belgian liberal-socialist-green coalition’s governmental agreement, published in July 1999. But it was already underlying initiatives in the field of social assistance and unemployment policy since the late 1980s, in Belgium as well as in the Netherlands. Interestingly, the need to create such an ‘active welfare state’ was also strongly emphasized at the special meeting of the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000 (Rhodes 2002: 329).

Adapting the distinctions proposed by van Berkel and De Schampheleire (2001) on the one hand, and those suggested in the study by van Oorschot and Engelfriet (1999) on the other hand, one can identify four main types of activation policies in the real world of Belgian and Dutch ‘active welfare states’. A first range of measures is aimed at reducing wage costs for low-skilled workers, through wage subsidies and a reduction of employer’s social security contributions. In both countries, these policies have already been widely used in the 1970s and 1980s, and were increasingly targeted at the long-term unemployed during the 1990s. Secondly, highly subsidised additional jobs have been created through local agencies, usually on a temporary basis. They are considered to be important steps towards a regular job. A third type of measures is designed to tackle the problem of financial traps. Tax credits targeted at low-paid workers have been implemented, and contribute at reducing the high effective marginal tax rates faced by benefit recipients entering on the labour market. Fourthly, some activation programmes are focused on education, training, and job counselling of people on benefit. Since they are usually part of individual integration projects, those training programmes are relatively flexible. Measures of the first and second type, as wages subsidies and job creation, are directed at the ‘demand side’ (i.e. the quantity of jobs available), whereas measures of the third and fourth type, as tax credits and training programmes, are in one way or another aimed at influencing the ‘supply side’ (i.e. the size and quality of the workforce).

This package of activation policies is mainly aimed at the re-integration of the unemployed. However, the very same logic progressively apply to social assistance claimants. As a matter of fact, the distinction between both categories becomes increasingly irrelevant for the analysis of activation policies. In their most advanced form, those policies are usually targeted at the young and the long-term unemployed. In Belgium, a significant proportion of the young unemployed claim social assistance benefits.<sup>10</sup> For even if most of them are entitled to low interim unemployment benefits (the so-called ‘waiting allowance’), some can receive social assistance supplements which top-up income to the level of the minimum income. In the Netherlands, the young unemployed are only entitled to social assistance in exceptional circumstances, since they are requested to participate in subsidised jobs. But a significant proportion of the long-term unemployed, whose rights to social insurance are exhausted, claim social assistance benefits. In other words, for both countries one should retain a broad definition of the categories targeted by activation programmes. These categories definitely include the unemployed receiving earnings-related unemployment benefits, but also means-tested social assistance recipients. None of them remain unaffected by the shift to the ‘active welfare state’.

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<sup>10</sup> By January 1997, 26.5% of the social assistance recipients were aged less than 25 years (OECD, 1998: 28).

According to social policy expert Jan Vranken, the shift from passive to active social assistance is one of the most important developments of the 1990s in Belgian welfare reform (Vranken 1999: 181). The social right to an income in case of need has been progressively replaced by a social right to reintegration through work or training. Before the 1990s, the link between work and the *minimex* was very loose (Arcq and Blaise 1998: 656). It was subsequently reinforced by various activation measures, some of which were already in place for those receiving unemployment benefits.<sup>11</sup> This development reached a provisional end point in the new legislation on minimum income, which replaces the 1974 law and took effect in 2002. Opposed by various social movements, including the main trade unions<sup>12</sup>, it perfectly conveys the ambitions of Belgium's political circles in terms of active social policy. Whereas the initial legislation's first article guaranteed the needy a right to the means of subsistence in the form of a minimum income, the new law subtly stipulate that everyone has "the right to social integration" (Belgium 2001a). As it clearly appears in the text, social integration will preferably take the form of paid work. The right to a minimum income remains, but the expression *minimex* – which was referring to the right to subsistence – becomes 'integration income', a means whose final goal is clearly contained in the label itself. Be it through the very name or be it through new modes of enforcement, the 'integration income' is much more linked to work than was the case before. To be entitled, the claimant will possibly be enrolled in an "individualised integration project", which consists in training and job counselling. For recipients under 25, it is compulsory and must lead to a job contract within a fixed term.<sup>13</sup> The new right to social integration then becomes an explicit "right to social integration *through employment*" (art.6). New incentives are implemented to encourage the local assistance offices (CPAS-OCMW) to set beneficiaries to work on the labour market, or to provide them with specific jobs within the framework of their integration project. In the preamble including the grounds for the adoption of the new bill, it is the unavoidable connection between social rights and the labour market which emerges the most obviously, integration through paid work being presented as the norm *par excellence*. Social policies, it is said in the document, "have to develop from strictly financial assistance to social action (...). Everyone should be able to find its own place in our society, to jointly contribute to its development and should benefit from the guarantee of the right to personal emancipation" (Belgium 2001b: 2).

In the Netherlands the shift to active social assistance appears even more powerful and radical (Kempermans and Vissers 1999). When the first liberal-labour coalition came into power in 1994, the unambiguous leitmotiv was 'work, work, work'. Similarly to Vandembroucke's public interventions, this slogan was the explicit formulation of an approach which had already been on the agenda since the late 1980s. But in the field of social assistance, it was foretelling an unprecedented turning point. As in the Belgian initial law on *minimex*, the Dutch legislation on ABW had established a right to the minimum income which was only based on need. The link with the labour market was quite minimal: the recipients were supposed to stay available for work. In 1996, the new General Social Assistance Act (nABW) has introduced various work-related conditions into the social assistance scheme. One of the most controversial of these elements is the introduction of a work requirement for lone mothers with children of school age, i.e. more than five years. The

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<sup>11</sup> For a general overview of Belgium's activation policies and a comparison with the Dutch ones, see van Berkel and De Schamphelre 2001.

<sup>12</sup> For instance: Van Keirsbilck 2001, which was published in one of the Christian-democratic trade-union CSC journals.

<sup>13</sup> The compulsory integration contract for people under 25 was already implemented in 1992. It involved job-seeking activity, training and counselling by social workers. However, it has not proven to be very successful, in part because of the lack of supplementary financial support for local assistance offices (CPAS-OCMW). Sanctions in case of non-compliance were very few (Eardley et al. 1996: 64).

employment rate of lone mothers is actually similar to the employment rate of mothers with partners (i.e. 40%) but, within the context of a new philosophy of welfare, being on social assistance imposes specific duties. According to Knijn and van Well (2001), this particular reform constitutes an “enormous ideological shift”, rather than a useful tool for helping single parents to get off welfare. In fact, they argue, due to various obstacles which were not taken into account by the Dutch parliament, the new law appears to be totally ineffective with respect to the activation of lone mothers. In 1998 a number of training and employment programmes for the young and long-term unemployed were merged into the Job-seeker’s Employment Act (*Wet Inschakeling Werkzoekenden – WIW*). It includes three main schemes, each designed as a single pathway to the regular labour market: subsidised jobs with a regular employer, with local employment organisations, and training or ‘social activation’ through unpaid work (Spies and van Berkel 2000). For the young unemployed, if no subsidised job is available participation in training and social activation is compulsory. After various warnings, recipients who regularly drop out of one of the WIW schemes, or refuse to participate in training activities, can ultimately be sanctioned by withdrawal of the benefit. In October 2001, the Dutch Minister of Social Affairs Vermeend firmly stated in an official order that possible exemptions from the duty to work had to be granted very carefully: “the obligation to work is the rule” (Vermeend 2001).<sup>14</sup>

In Belgium and the Netherlands a new balance between rights and duties of social assistance recipients and the unemployed is incrementally built up, which is above all based on a thick conception of reciprocity. The emphasis is put on individual responsibility, and the right to a minimum income is increasingly linked to work requirements. This link, which rests on a moral, and not a logical, connection (Cox 1998: 12), was strikingly theorised by the Belgian social-democrat Minister Frank Vandenbroucke. It assigns a new role to the social security system, which has never been – to date – its central purpose. It is obviously not a coincidence that Bea Cantillon, one of the most prominent social policy experts in Belgium, has firmly reasserted that income security must remain “the first-rank goal of social security” (Cantillon 2001: 13). “With the extension of social security to other goals”, she argued, “one take the risk of overloading the system with expectations it can not fulfil”. In the Netherlands, the paradigm shift takes place in the context of a so-called ‘miraculous’ economic recovery. The very low rate of unemployment put pressure on the people on benefit, who are increasingly suspected of being ‘undeserving’ and ‘calculating’ poor. In Belgium, the shift has been less radical, partly because of the less favourable economic climate, but also because of the opposition of stronger trade unions. However, the Dutch conception of activation has spread among Belgian policy-makers, particularly in Flanders, whose economic situation is closer to the Dutch one.

In any case, in both countries these reforms are constructing a new ideological framework within which any chance of a promising and dispassionate debate on a universal basic income appears at first sight to be jeopardised. How could one imagine that the idea of an unconditional minimum income could be taken seriously, while conditionalities in social assistance and unemployment insurance are gradually tightened in both countries? Whereas in the 1980s and early 1990s the Dutch BI debate was comparatively broad and lively, the proposal now seems to have entirely dropped from the public attention. In Belgium, it has gained increasing visibility during the 1990s, but it still lacks any broad political support. It is on the Belgian and Dutch political history of the idea that I shall concentrate in the second section of this paper.

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<sup>14</sup> A new assistance law, the *Wet werk en bijstand* (WWB) took effect on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004. It reinforces work requirements: for instance, people on benefit will have to accept a job even if it does not match their qualifications.

## 2. The Universal Basic Income Debate

### *Belgium : from green parties to high-tech businessman*

If in Belgium the idea of a comprehensive negative income tax system was discussed during the 1970s, the concept of a universal basic income (BI) only arose in the mid-1980s, almost ten years later than in the Netherlands. From the very beginning, it has always been in some way related to the green movement. In January 1983, Philippe Van Parijs, a philosopher from the Catholic University of Louvain and member of the Francophone green party *Ecolo*, had suggested that the party should endorse the idea of an ‘universal grant’ (*allocation universelle* in French). In his view, this measure could help foster autonomous activities and make it easier to redistribute working-time. It would also have been more efficient in combating poverty than the existing battery of selective benefits (Van Parijs 1984). At the time he wrote the first versions of his proposal, Van Parijs did not know that the idea had already been discussed in many countries, including the nearby Netherlands under the label *basisinkomen*. In 1986 however, he organised in Louvain-la-Neuve the founding congress of the *Basic Income European Network* (BIEN), of which he is from the very beginning one on of the main organisers.<sup>15</sup>

#### **1985 as a starting point.**

The Belgian debate, which had already been opened within *Ecolo* and the Flemish green party *Agalev*, broadened to the public sphere in October 1984. A prize of the renowned *King Baudouin Foundation* then rewarded an essay which was very similar to the one discussed by the Francophone greens. It had been submitted to the Foundation by the so-called *Collectif Charles Fourier*, a short-lived informal group based at the Francophone University of Louvain. The group included, among others, Philippe Van Parijs and the economist Philippe Defeyt, later to become a prominent figure of *Ecolo*. In April 1985, the collective edited a special issue of the Christian-democratic monthly *La Revue Nouvelle*, which had a considerable influence on the Belgian and, more broadly, French-speaking debates in subsequent years. For the first time, the expression ‘allocation universelle’ was launched in the public discussion. Van Parijs had coined it in reference to the notion of universal suffrage, suggesting that the social right to an unconditional income was the next revolution to come.<sup>16</sup> Nowadays, the expression is still commonly used to refer to BI, not only in the French-speaking parts of Belgium but also in France, Québec or Francophone Switzerland. In Flanders, however, the Dutch term *basisinkomen* (basic income) remains the usual formulation.

The *King Baudouin Foundation* prize and the special issue of *La Revue Nouvelle* were not only crucial for semantic reasons. In fact, they gave rise to numerous reactions in social and political circles. Part of the space in the *Revue Nouvelle* issue itself was allocated to the critics, which were often very fierce. In the following months, many articles dealing with the proposal were published in newspapers and magazines, in all parts of Belgium. Part of the severity of many commentators was undoubtedly due to the provocative nature of the initial proposal. In the opening article of the *Revue Nouvelle*, the members of the *Collectif Charles*

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<sup>15</sup> For an account of the first *Basic Income European Network* congress, see Van Parijs 1987.

<sup>16</sup> In 1992, Van Parijs stated it very explicitly: “[BI] is a profound reform that belongs in the same league as the abolition of slavery or the introduction of universal suffrage” (Van Parijs 1992: 7).

*Fourier* had designed a radical implementation programme for their BI.<sup>17</sup> “Suppress unemployment benefits, public pensions, the *minimex*, family allowances, tax exemptions and tax credits, student grants (...), public subsidies to restructuring companies. But grant every citizen a [unconditional] monthly allowance, sufficient to cover the basic needs of an individual living on his own (...). Simultaneously, deregulate the labour market. Abolish all the legislation imposing a minimum wage or a maximum working-time. Suppress all the administrative obstacles to part-time work. Lower the school age. Suppress the obligation to retire at a prescribed age. Just do it. And then, see what happens. (...)” (Collectif Charles Fourier 1985 : 345). Needless to say, this way of presenting the idea, despite the more sober arguments developed in the following pages of the journal, aroused considerable opposition from the left, to which the *Collectif Charles Fourier* claimed to belong. In a sense, it also negatively influenced the debate on a long-term basis, creating obstacles which have proven difficult to remove afterwards. On the other hand, the strong impact of the ‘universal grant’ proposal and the very success of the label were clearly due to this very innovative and radical way of tackling the issue of social policy reform.

Whether through the debate within *Ecolo*, in the *Revue Nouvelle* special issue or in subsequent articles published elsewhere, BI was mainly discussed on the left of the political spectrum. Therefore it is not surprising that most critics at the time focused on the liberal side of the proposal and argued that, if implemented, basic income would represent a “major social regression” (Lecleir 1985). If on the right side some lent a sympathetic ear to the idea, including among the employers (e.g. Roegiers 1985), they generally supported it for its unambiguous effects regarding the labour market deregulation. In any case, even if they were willing to discuss it, a vast majority of commentators unambiguously rejected the *Collectif Charles Fourier*’s proposal. One could say that this situation lasted during the whole period 1985-2002, independently of the new formulations of the idea, in Flanders as well as in the French-speaking parts of Belgium.

In Flanders, the debate had naturally been influenced by the Dutch discussion which was already launched since the mid-1970s. The right-liberal PVV was then in favour of a negative income tax system, which had also been discussed within the Flemish employer’s organisation VEV. The Flemish green party *Agalev* endorsed the idea of a partial basic income in 1984, at the time the Francophone Greens were discussing it through the impetus given by Philippe Van Parijs. But it was the simultaneous publication of a Dutch official report on BI (see *infra*) and of the *Collectif Charles Fourier* proposal that contributed the most to boost, be it very briefly, the Flemish debate on the topic. A few months after the King Baudouin Foundation prize was given to the group, and at the time the *Revue Nouvelle* issued its special edition, the Flemish left-wing journal *Komma* published a comprehensive analysis of basic income as a way of “uncoupling work and income” (Abicht 1985). The issue included a review of Belgian and Dutch debates, as well as a discussion of pros and cons of the idea. However, apart from *Komma* and a few newspapers’ articles referring to the ‘universal grant’,<sup>18</sup> the BI discussion remained quite marginal. This characteristic has actually always been an essential feature of the Belgian debate. From its very start in the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, it remained almost entirely confined to few academic circles and the two green parties.

### **Academics feeding the debate.**

Within Flemish universities, the BI debate has mainly been fostered by social scientists Jacques Vilrocx (Flemish University of Brussels) and Walter Van Trier (University of

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<sup>17</sup> This opening article had already been published by the *King Baudouin Foundation* in October 1984. See FRB-KBS (ed.) (1984), *Le Travail dans l’avenir*, Brussels: King Baudouin Foundation.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance ‘Universele uitkering schaft werkloosheid af’, *De Standaard*, 1 November 1984.

Leuven). Vilrocx, a well-known specialist of Belgian industrial relations, has defended the idea in many articles and interviews. He argues that traditional employment policies are counterproductive in promoting social integration. In the context of jobless growth, full citizenship “is only possible provided the link with the labour market is not a condition” (Vilrocx 1993: 205). Van Trier wrote an impressive PhD thesis on the prehistory of the current discussion on BI, in which he scrutinised the British debates on the ‘state bonus’, ‘social credit’, and ‘social dividend’ (Van Trier 1995b). He is one of the founding members of *Basic Income European Network*. Interestingly, in 1995 he had a strained debate on the merits of basic income with Belgian Minister of Social Affairs (at the time) Vande Lanotte (SP), who is at the origin of the ‘integration income’ legislation that takes effect in 2002 (see *supra*). At that time, Vande Lanotte’s position was already clear-cut as he was speaking of basic social rights: “we should eventually stop the discussion on basic income and opt for a discussion on the guarantee of a basic job. (...) A discussion on basic income is, fortunately in my view, all in the past now” (Vande Lanotte 1995). Vande Lanotte did not change his mind in spite of Van Trier’s efforts in heated exchanges through newspaper articles.<sup>19</sup>

On the other side of the linguistic border, two philosophers are stimulating the debate. Philippe Van Parijs, who initiated the discussion in the 1980s, wrote numerous articles on BI and edited a collective volume on ethical justifications of the proposal (Van Parijs 1992).<sup>20</sup> His masterpiece, entitled *Real Freedom for All*, is largely devoted to a left-libertarian argument in favour of the highest sustainable BI (Van Parijs 1995), and has been said to be “the most sophisticated case on its behalf yet made” (Gough 2000: 26).<sup>21</sup> However, it obviously got more coverage in Anglo-Saxon academic circles than in Belgian political circles. Jean-Marc Ferry, a French philosopher teaching at the Francophone University of Brussels, is another tenacious proponent of a citizen’s income. He considers it as a way of offering everyone the positive freedom of taking new initiatives outside of the labour market (Ferry 1995). In 2000, he published a plea for an European social constitution, which in his view should necessary include a right to a BI (Ferry 2000).<sup>22</sup>

### **The green parties.**

In Belgium, the only genuine political forces which have explicitly and somewhat continuously supported BI are the two green parties *Agalev* and *Ecolo*.<sup>23</sup> Despite the many personal and institutional links existing between both parties, this support has nevertheless never been part of a common strategy or platform. According to Philippe Defeyt, former member of the *Collectif Charles Fourier* and *Ecolo*’s Federal Secretary (the party’s three headed top position) from 1999 to 2003, it was never discussed in meetings gathering

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<sup>19</sup> Van Trier also wrote a chapter on BI in one of the most comprehensive books on the Belgian social security system (Van Trier 1995a).

<sup>20</sup> Van Parijs is since 1991 head of the *Hoover Chair in Economics and Social Ethics* of the University of Louvain, where scholars and researchers interested in the BI debate often meet, and where BIEN’s archives are located.

<sup>21</sup> See also Reeve & Williams 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Among these four main academic figures, only Van Trier and Van Parijs have worked on economic simulations of the cost and impact of a basic income in Belgium. Kesenne, Schatteman, and Van Trier (2000) show that, under certain conditions, a basic income could increase the Belgian employment rate. Van Parijs and Gilain (1996) have designed a static model exploring the impacts of a partial basic income fixed at €200/month. Aside from these studies, contrary to the Netherlands, very few simulations have been made. Noteworthy exception is the work of Christophe Joyeux and Isabelle Terraz (Francophone University of Brussels). In a micro-simulation of the distributive effects of a BI of €300/month, implying adjustments in taxes and transfers, they showed that poor households could be made better off provided the progressiveness of the tax system was maintained (Joyeux and Terraz 1998).

<sup>23</sup> In 1993, however, the left-liberal Flemish party *Volkswijze* briefly supported the idea (see Anciaux 1993).

members of both parties.<sup>24</sup> Created in the early 1980s, the two green parties were still very small political formations at the time the discussion on BI was launched by Van Parijs within *Ecolo*. However, they quickly became an integral part of the Belgian political landscape. Following a strong progress in votes during the 1990s, particularly at the June 1999 general elections, they took part in the first federal ‘purple-green coalition’ comprising socialists, right-liberals, and greens.<sup>25</sup> None of the portfolios they were given at the federal level included a direct link with social policies. However, Minister for Social Affairs of the Walloon region Thierry Detienne is a prominent figure of the party.

*Agalev* already officially adopted the idea of a modest negative income tax in 1984, as one of the components of the ‘green economy’. Even if the initial amount considered was small – around €250 at the time, it was nevertheless expected to rise with economic growth (Raes 1985). In following years, a comprehensive BI has tended to be firmly promoted as a medium-term objective, more explicitly than it was ever the case for *Ecolo*. As was the case for *Ecolo*, however, the idea was somewhat put aside in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>26</sup> In 1995, it resurfaced in *Agalev*’s electoral platform which stated that BI had to be “the very basis of the social benefits of the future” (Agalev 1995). As in subsequent documents on the topic, BI appeared to be conceived as a long-term objective, as an analytical tool to be used in thinking about social security reforms. According to *Agalev*, many incremental or even more comprehensive adjustments can be seen as steps towards a true BI for all. Family allowances, for instance, should become an equal right for each child, and their amount fixed irrespective of birth-order or age. A universal basic pension should be established, as it exists in the Netherlands. While the notion of ‘abnormally long period of unemployment’ (see *supra*) should be scrapped, the right to a minimum income should be made unconditional for the needy (Agalev 2001).

This incremental approach has already been adopted by *Ecolo* from the very start of the Belgian discussion. It always considered BI to be more a guiding principle than an urgent claim. While the party officially but cautiously endorsed the idea at its first Socio-economic Congress in 1985, it hastened to stress that BI “could not be directly implemented”.<sup>27</sup> The idea has long been a bone of contention between its members, but since the early 1990s there seems to be a consensus around this approach of BI as a long-term objective. For instance green Walloon Minister Detienne, who felt worried about the radical and unpredictable effects of the uncoupling of work and income, agrees that the BI idea is interesting because it can give “guiding principles”. In his opinion, *Ecolo*’s priority should consist in acting so that those principles, including universality and individualisation of social rights, go forward.<sup>28</sup>

*Agalev* and *Ecolo* always failed to get the idea itself onto the social policy agenda. Or rather, given their hesitations on the timeliness of the reform, they never really tried. BI, be it as a long-term objective, was not mentioned in the federal government’s agreement they co-signed in 1999. If both parties opposed the new legislation on minimum income, they have not yet managed to reverse the shift to more conditionality in social benefits. The implementation of the new *integration income* was clearly in tension with the green commitment to an unconditional minimum income, be it a very cautious one.

### **A single-issue party focused on basic income: *Vivant*.**

One could not round off this brief survey of the Belgian BI debate without mentioning the very special case of *Vivant*. For it is a unique case in Europe of a political party whose

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<sup>24</sup> Defeyt, Philippe, interview, Namur (B), December 2001. In 2003 Defeyt resigned as federal secretary.

<sup>25</sup> Since the 2003 general elections, the green parties are not part of the federal coalition anymore.

<sup>26</sup> BI was not discussed at *Agalev*’s second economic conference which was held in 1990 (Agalev 1990).

<sup>27</sup> ‘Rester “purs” ou enfoncer un coin dans le système ? Le dilemme d’Ecolo’, *Le Soir*, 2 September 1985.

<sup>28</sup> Detienne, Thierry, interview, Namur (B), December 2001.



platform is almost entirely focused on the claim of a full BI.<sup>29</sup> Even compared to the green parties, however, *Vivant* is a very tiny player in the Belgian electoral game. Founded in 1997 by high-tech businessman and life-member of the *Basic Income European Network* Roland Duchâtelet, the party took part at the general elections of June 1999 for the first time. On average, its results varied between 2 and 2.4 percent. Although these percentages were small, they made *Vivant* the most successful among the parties not represented in the Federal parliament. This experiment was particularly instructive because of the public visibility it gave to the idea of an unconditional income. With no public funding or elected representative, the party had made its name in 1999 by a large-scale electoral campaign, mainly financed with Duchâtelet personal means – his contribution reached the impressive amount of €2,500,000. Through huge posters in the main Belgian cities and massive doses of leaflets, *Vivant* had been very successful in attracting attention on its central proposal: the introduction of a basic income for every citizen. ‘You will receive an income at the age of eighteen’, ‘Free yourselves with the basic income’, ‘Choose your liberty with basic income’, were some of the eye-catching slogans used by the party. With *Vivant*, BI was making a controversial entrance into Belgium’s broad public debate, going well beyond the usual academic and green circles.<sup>30</sup>

Ever since the birth of the party, newspapers have been paying attention to the newcomer’s proposals, although some were very critical. In many articles of the Francophone press, the BI-based programme was described as “simplistic” and “ultra-liberal”, whereas Flemish newspapers were explaining to their readership that BI was a “complicated” message.<sup>31</sup> In general, the approach was more positive in Flanders than in the French-speaking parts of the country, where businessmen taking to politics arouse more suspicion. But the political world was filled with scorn for *Vivant*. The think tank of the Francophone *Christian-Democratic Party* (PSC), for instance, analysed its programme and concluded that it had to be quickly forgotten. In a way, the radical profile of *Vivant*’s platform could even have weakened the proponents of BI within other formations, in particular within the green parties. At the very start of *Vivant* Duchâtelet was in contact with *Agalev*, but the Flemish greens promptly broke off communications with him. In their new statement on BI edited in 2001, they unambiguously dismissed *Vivant*’s proposals, arguing that its platform was totally “unfeasible” (Agalev 2001). According to *Ecolo* Minister Detienne, *Vivant* was a very illustrative example of the danger BI can possibly represent if it is to be considered as a global alternative to the existing social security mechanisms.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, even if the emergence of *Vivant* on the political scene has contributed to the spreading of the idea, it cannot be said to have boosted Belgium’s discussions. Since the 1999 elections, the party has dropped out of the public attention. In January 2002 however, it organised a big conference on BI with the participation of some prominent figures of the European debate. Francophone newspapers grabbed the opportunity to make fun of the party with paragraphs entitled “*Vivant* is not dead”.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed account of the *Vivant* experiment, see Vanderborcht 2000.

<sup>30</sup> *Vivant*’s programme, even if well-documented, appeared to be somewhat unrealistic on a short-term basis. It was structured around three main claims: (1) introduction of a Basic Income for every citizen, at a level varying with the recipient’s age (the proposed amount for an adult aged between 25 and 64 was €500/month); (2) abolition of the income tax on earnings lower than €1,250/month, and of social security contributions, both aimed at strongly reducing labour costs. A flat tax of 50% would apply to earnings above €1,250; (3) compensatory increase of *Value Added Tax*, offsetting the decrease in labour cost so that retail prices remain the same on average.

<sup>31</sup> See for instance ‘Le paysage politique s’enrichit d’une vieille utopie’, *Le Soir*, 15 June 1998 and ‘Vivant, met hulp van positieve boodschap en vele miljoenen’, *De Morgen*, 31 May 1999.

<sup>32</sup> Detienne, Thierry, interview, Namur (B), December 2001.

<sup>33</sup> In French, *Vivant* actually means ‘Alive’. See ‘Vivant n'est pas mort’, *La Libre Belgique*, 7 janvier 2002.

### *The Netherlands: basic income (was) on the agenda*

As in the Belgian case, the understanding of the mechanisms and dynamics of the Dutch political discussions on BI requires to briefly look back at the political history of the idea. However, summarising the Dutch debate is a far more difficult challenge than giving an overview of the Belgian one. For there is no other country where, as in the Netherlands, so many actors were involved in the BI debate, to a greater or lesser extent. After having given a succinct account of more than twenty-five years of intense discussion,<sup>34</sup> I will focus on political forces in the stricter sense, including the government.

#### **Welfare without work, but with a basic income?**

The Dutch discussion on BI has strongly varied with the ups and downs of the unemployment rate (Groot and van der Veen 2000: 197-200). It started in the mid-1970s, as the forewarnings of the economic crisis were emerging, and reached a summit of intensity in the mid-1980s, as 10% of the active population was unemployed. Between 1985 and 1993 – the unemployment rate was decreasing significantly – BI formed the subject of scientific studies. It came back in the forefront in 1992 owing to a new report published by a governmental agency. Partly due to unfavourable unemployment figures, the discussion was again more intense between 1992 and 1995. Since the mid-1990s and the surprising ‘Dutch miracle’ (see *supra*), BI remains essentially confined to academic and intellectual circles; on the political scene, it became at best an internal debate within some parties. In September 1998, the Seventh Congress of the *Basic Income European Network* was held in Amsterdam. In 2002, while the unemployment rate had dropped under the 3% the idea seemed, at first sight, far removed from the institutional agenda.

This parallel evolution of unemployment rate and BI discussion is partly due to the arguments used by the Dutch BI proponents. In particular during the 1980s, as the fatalistic approach to unemployment was spreading among observers, BI was often presented as an elegant way of giving up full employment while reforming the costly welfare system, without neglecting the preservation of a safety net. When more favourable times followed austerity periods, this fatalistic flavour may have harmed the proposal, explaining its relative discredit. On the other hand, one should not forget that the discussion was still alive in the periods 1985-1992 and 1996-2002. The existence of various groupings defending BI explains the fact that it remained present, be it in the background, in important debates on social security reforms. In other words, the economic crisis was only working as an impetus for an extension of the discussion. With the emergence of the so-called ‘Dutch miracle’, BI proponents have tended to promote it as a way of tackling social exclusion rather than uncoupling work and income.

The Dutch debate was launched in the mid-1970s, when professor of social medicine J.P. Kuiper (University of Amsterdam) wrote a few articles on the links between work and human life. In his view, a separation between work and income was made necessary by the de-humanising character of traditional labour. Even though Kuiper was not explicit as far as the implementation and financing of his proposal was concerned, he clearly pleaded for a guaranteed income covering basic needs (Kuiper 1976). He is the father of the Dutch debate. In 1977, the small *Radicals’ Political Party* (PPR), then part of the ruling coalition, officially took up BI into its electoral platform. In doing so, the PPR actually launched the discussion in political circles. In the following years, while the unemployment rate was rapidly increasing, various organisations called for the introduction of a form of BI. This was the case of the

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<sup>34</sup> For a more detailed account, readers should refer to Groot and van der Veen 2000.

*Union of Food Workers (Voedingsbond FNV)* affiliated to the powerful *Federation of Dutch Unions (FNV)*. At the time, it was the main organised group officially in favour of the idea. It published various eye-catching leaflets explaining the ins and outs of BI (see for instance Voedingsbond 1981), and often restated its commitment during the 1980s. While in 1981 the PPR edited a new platform including BI again (PPR 1981), an heated debate took place within the *Labour Party (PvdA)* on the same topic, and different versions of the proposal were considered. However, the strong and structured minority in favour of the idea – which included the former president of the European Commission Sicco Mansholt and the Nobel laureate in economics Jan Tinbergen – did not manage to get it into an official programme. Similar developments affected other parties, such as the left-liberal *Democrats 66 (D66)* and the *Pacifist Socialist Party (PSP)*.<sup>35</sup> Finally, a few social movements were also interested in BI. The claim of a guaranteed income was seen as a unifying factor by some of the unemployed organisations which were emerging at the time. It was discussed at length within the *National Organisation of Social Beneficiaries (LBU)*, which published in 1986 a vigorous plea in favour of BI (LBU 1986).<sup>36</sup>

But the most intense period of discussion was a direct consequence of the publication in October 1985, by the renowned and influential Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), of a bulky report significantly entitled *Guarantees for Security: Perspectives for a New Social Security System* (WRR 1985). This document was part of an ongoing reflection on the future and cost of the welfare state in the context of economic recession. The report insisted on the necessity to guarantee income security independently of the variations in economic circumstances: “the guarantee of minimum social benefits has to be the most important goal of social security” (p.7). While suggesting a profound reform of the Dutch welfare state, the suppression of the minimum wage and substantial reductions in employer’s social contributions, the WRR called for the implementation of a partial BI of €200/month, “given without any work requirement” (pp.8-9). The reactions to the report were almost unanimously negative, which is hardly ever the case for a WRR publication. The traditional proponents of BI, such as the *Voedingsbond FNV* and the *Radicals’ Political Party*, attacked the idea of a partial BI of which the amount was far below the poverty level. Unions and the Labour Party denounced the trend towards more flexibility on the labour market, and the government found the measures too radical, laying the report aside.

This failure had a considerable impact on the discussion. BI was almost dropped out of the political debate until 1992. Between 1986 and 1992, it mainly became a subject for academic research, whether in economics or sociology. In 1987 however, various groups committed to the idea launched the association ‘Workshop on Basic Income’, aimed at facilitating co-ordination of the BI proponents’ activities.<sup>37</sup> At the 1989 elections, the Radicals’ Political Party united with three other small political formations – including the PSP – to form the new party *GroenLinks* (which means ‘Green Left’). The first electoral platform of *GroenLinks* included a plea for BI, inspired by prior documents published by the PPR.

In May 1990, the Minister for Social Affairs and Employment published a very detailed study of BI which it had commissioned from two academics. Having proposed an account of the Dutch debate, the authors insisted that the idea of an unconditional income was

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<sup>35</sup> See for instance: D66 1983.

<sup>36</sup> In this document, it clearly appears that BI is considered to be a unifying factor for the social movements: “most of the time, the various groups representing the social benefits recipients have different views and act separately (...). Therefore, a more general and unifying perspective is urgently needed. The idea of an universal basic income, set at the level of subsistence, is one of the key-components of this unifying perspective” (LBU 1986: 10-11).

<sup>37</sup> In 1991, it became the *Association Basic Income*. At the end of 2000, it had almost 250 members, mainly coming from political parties – a majority of them being members of the PvdA (Boerlage, Saar, and Schäfer, Emiel, interview, Amsterdam (NL), May 2000). *Website*: <http://www.basisinkomen.nl>

less controversial than in the mid-1980s. They even asserted that “if there is one European country where BI makes a chance to be on the agenda, in the short or medium term, this country should be the Netherlands” (Roebroek and Hogenboom 1990: 195). The period 1992-1996 proved they were at least partially right.

First, the *Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (Centraal Planbureau – CPB)*, an important governmental forecasting institution, published at the end of 1992 a report including – among others – a BI scenario for the future of the Dutch economy. This scenario, called “Balanced Growth”, involved the introduction of a partial BI in the form of a negative income tax, designed to deal with unemployment traps and high marginal tax rates for the low-paid (CPB 1992). In the long-term (twenty-five years), the objective was to implement “a negative income tax of which the level equals the minimum income for a single person” (CPB 1993: 55-56). This report undoubtedly lent new credibility to BI among economists close to the political circles.

Second, the formation in 1994 of an unprecedented liberal-labour government coalition raised “high hopes for basic income”, though only for a short period (Groot and van der Veen 2000: 208). In December 1994, the left-liberal Minister for Economic Affairs Hans Wijers stated in a newspaper’s interview that the Netherlands were “inevitably moving towards something resembling a basic income”.<sup>38</sup> The liberal Minister of Finances Gerrit Zalm made similar remarks a few days later. These statements triggered off harsh reactions. The Minister of Social Affairs and Employment Ad Melkert (*Labour Party*) expressed his deep disagreement with his colleagues. In the House of Representatives, the leaders of the different groups were also very negative, and decided that the idea was fit “for the dustbin”.<sup>39</sup> However, Wijers’ party *Democrats 66 (D66)*, which had already advocated the idea in the past, seemed more inclined to welcome the idea. BI constituted the main item discussed at its February 1995 Congress. One year later, D66’s research department published a leaflet on the topic, which was aimed at widening the debate launched by Wijers. But, mainly because of disagreements within the ruling coalition, BI was already far removed from the governmental agenda. D66’s initiative proved to be short-lived.

As was mentioned in the first section of this paper, a shift towards the activation of people on benefit has occurred in the Netherlands. Consequently, since the mid-1990s the room left for a discussion on BI has gradually shrunk. The proposal has even been dropped out of *GroenLinks*’ platform for the May 2002 general elections. Yet, as in Belgium, the greens were the only genuine political force still officially endorsing the idea, be it in a very modest form.<sup>40</sup>

### **A zoom on political parties.**

This brief chronological overview of the Dutch BI debate suffices to indicate how exceptionally broad and lively this debate has been, relative to other countries. I will now turn to a more systematic analysis of the political forces involved in this discussion.

The first official commitment of a political party to the idea goes back to 1977, when the small *Radicals’ Political Party (PPR)* included BI into its electoral platform. The PPR kept defending the proposal during the 1980s, while scrutinising it more thoroughly in various publications (see Van Ojik 1985). When the green party *GroenLinks* was founded in 1989, the PPR’s studies strongly inspired the new party’s strategy on income security. Its first programme stated that “every human being has the right to a decent income, whether he works or not (...)”. *GroenLinks* then called for “a large and carefully organised public debate on basic income” (GroenLinks 1989). In 1990, its research department published a booklet

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<sup>38</sup> ‘We moeten het ontstaan van een onderklasse voorkomen’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 17 December 1994.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Kamer wijst plan basisinkomen af’, *De Telegraaf*, 19 December 1994.

<sup>40</sup> A smaller green party, *De Groenen*, is also advocating the idea of an unconditional basic income.

specifically focused on the idea (GroenLinks 1990). In subsequent years, the party gradually adopted a more pragmatic approach, suggesting the introduction of a modest negative income tax which would be easier to merge into the existing welfare system. The maximal monthly amount of the proposed ‘foot income’ (*Voetinkomen*) was set between €225 and 275, i.e. two thirds of the minimum income for a single person at the time. This proposal was still part of the platform for the May 1998 elections, of which *GroenLinks* was one of the big winners since it almost doubled its seats at the House of Representatives. Although the following platform for the period 2002-2006 did not include any explicit reference to BI, in the section devoted to income redistribution *GroenLinks* suggested the transformation of the existing general tax credit into a negative income tax, without further explanations (GroenLinks 2002).

The *Radicals’ Political Party* (PPR), followed by *GroenLinks* into which it merged, is the only Dutch political formation which maintained BI in its platforms during more than twenty years. However, the claim made by the PPR was comparatively more specific than *GroenLinks’*. Two reasons account for that difference. First, during the 1980s the high unemployment rate constituted a catalyst for the reflections on the uncoupling of work and income. It was at the time the main argument used by the PPR: “it becomes ever clearer that the current economic system can no longer provide a job to all the people who would like to carry on paid work for covering their basic needs” (Van Ojik 1985: 4). Secondly, the PPR was a relatively small and unified political formation, of which the members had been able to converge on a controversial proposal.

According to *GroenLinks* European deputy Alexander de Roo, “the ‘foot income’ proposal, which is actually a partial BI, [was] the result of a compromise” between the different components of the party.<sup>41</sup> Kees Vendrik, a *GroenLinks* MP, confirms that “divergences on the basic income question came to light at the very start of *GroenLinks*”.<sup>42</sup> In 1990, for instance, one of the four components had published a leaflet in which the arguments against BI were spelled out (Klappe 1990). Vendrik also points out that “each time [*GroenLinks*] has to write the electoral platform, proponents and opponents are bitterly discussing the advantages and disadvantages of BI”. Taking side with the opponents, he insists that *GroenLinks* “is not officially in favour of BI, but rather of a modest negative income tax” in the framework of a general reform of the Dutch welfare system.<sup>43</sup> During the 2002 electoral campaign, tensions were high again within *GroenLinks*, and the absence of any firm statement on BI in the platform was considered by the party’s BI proponents as a true capitulation (see Groot 2002).

This division is illustrative. It was an essential feature of the BI debates within other Dutch political parties, at least until the mid-1990s. In each case, individuals or groups in favour of the idea constituted an influential minority, which sometimes managed to launch an open debate on the topic. Most exemplary is the case of the left-liberal party *Democrats 66* (D66), which had decided to “carry out a basic inquiry” on the topic in the aftermath of its February 1995 Congress.<sup>44</sup> Already debated in the 1980s, the idea had gained in popularity within the party after Minister Wijers’ declarations in 1994. However, despite its research department efforts to stimulate a thorough discussion of the pros and cons of BI (“an internal debate on basic income can be very positive for the party”, wrote D66 research department’s director Christiaan de Vries in the booklet he edited in 1996 (de Vries 1996: 33)), the idea was shelved. The main explanation lies in the fact that, as it was the case for *GroenLinks*, the

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<sup>41</sup> de Roo, Alexander, interview, Amsterdam (NL), May 2000.

<sup>42</sup> Vendrik, Kees, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

<sup>43</sup> However, one should notice that an investigation showed that 74% of the participants at *GroenLinks’* November 1995 congress agreed with the following statement: “a basic income should be introduced in the following ten years” (Lucardie et al. 1999: 168).

<sup>44</sup> de Vries, Christiaan, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

party was sharply divided on the BI question. Facing Wijers and the BI proponents, some D66 deputies were strongly opposed to the prospect of a BI-based programme. They “refused to adopt the approach launched by the research department”, and the internal debate died out.<sup>45</sup>

Similar developments also affected the *Labour Party* (PvdA) from the early 1980s onwards. According to Paul de Beer, who worked at the party’s official think-tank and was one of the instigators of this reflection, at the time it was launched “the circumstances were such that many thought it was impossible to reach full-employment ever again”.<sup>46</sup> This somewhat fatalistic observation was at the root of the PvdA Working Group on Basic Income, which was launched in June 1985. Its stated objective was unambiguous : “to talk the PvdA members into adopting a favourable view of BI, which will have to be part of the 1986-1990 electoral platform”.<sup>47</sup> The group failed on the latter point – since no official stand was taken – but managed to feed a discussion which provoked serious tensions within the party. “The party leaders”, Paul de Beer says, “were strongly opposing BI. They were asserting that it would be dangerous for the party’s future to endorse such a proposal. ‘We are a *labour* party’, they said ; ‘with BI we would be implying that we don’t believe we are still able to find a job for all’”.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, since the PvdA leaders did not want their party to look defeatist, the idea was rejected. However, it reappeared on several occasions during the 1990s. In 1992, a PvdA commission published a booklet in which the justifications and advantages of BI were detailed. Nonetheless the conclusion was cautious – to put it mildly: “the proposal of introducing a BI, though interesting and stimulating as a utopia, must be put aside” (Commissie Wolfson 1992). The 1994-1998 electoral platform qualified this somewhat, stating that “local experiments on basic income should not be excluded” (PvdA 1994: 42).

One could add the examples of the Liberals (VVD) and the Christian-Democrats (CDA) to show that the idea of an unconditional income has raised some tensions within all main political formations.<sup>49</sup> In each of the main Dutch parties, a significant minority has been openly advocating the idea. Hence, even if these minorities always failed to get BI into electoral platforms on a long-term basis, one can assert that the BI discussion has been far less marginal than in Belgium. Whereas in the Belgian case the idea has only been thoroughly discussed within the green parties *Ecolo* and *Agalev* – the small party *Vivant* being a very specific phenomenon – in the Netherlands it has been considered by each party as an alternative worthy of discussion. It was also seriously considered once at the governmental level, namely at the beginning of the first liberal-labour coalition elected in 1994, which probably represents a unique case in Europe.

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<sup>45</sup> de Vries, Christiaan, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

<sup>46</sup> de Beer, Paul, interview, Diemen (NL), May 2000.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Manifest « Werkgroep PvdA Voor Basisinkomen »’, June 1985, quoted in *Werkgroep PvdA Voor Basisinkomen*, 1, September 1985, p.2. See also ‘De PvdA en het basisinkomen’, *Intermediair*, 7 February 1986.

<sup>48</sup> de Beer, Paul, interview, Diemen (NL), May 2000.

<sup>49</sup> Within the VVD, a discussion on the negative income tax was already launched in the 1970s. In the early 1990s, a minority had explicitly suggested the introduction of a BI. On the other hand, the leader of the VVD group in the House of Representatives vigorously opposed the idea in 1994 (see ‘Groep VVD’ers pleit voor basisinkomen’, *De Volkskrant*, 28 July 1990, and ‘Dit kabinet mist een gevoel van urgentie’, *De Volkskrant*, 29 January 1994). At the end of the very same year, VVD Minister of Finance Gerrit Zalm made a strong plea in favour of the negative income tax. Similarly, some of the most prominent figures of the Dutch BI debate are members of the Christian-Democratic Party CDA. Nico Douben, for instance, directed the WRR commission which came out in favour of a partial BI in 1985; Herman Wijffels, an economist and former director of the CDA research department, was elected president of the Social and Economic Council – which gives advice to the government on social policies – in March 1999. He expressed on many occasions his positive feelings about BI (see ‘Bankier bepleit gedeeltelijk basisinkomen’, *De Volkskrant*, 16 November 1988). In the late 1980s, the CDA section of Rotterdam explicitly argued in favour of a full BI (‘CDA Rotterdam bepleit basisinkomen voor iedereen’, *Trouw*, 7 December 1988).

### **Basic income on the governmental agenda.**

In the period 1994-1995, BI was taken into consideration as one credible element of the welfare reform package at the highest political level, i.e. the government. It firstly constituted “one of the serious alternatives to the existing social security system”<sup>50</sup> that were scrutinised in the summer of 1994, during the formation of the coalition under the direction of *Labour Party* leader Wim Kok. Representatives of the three parties (PvdA-VVD-D66) “had agreed on the principle of a BI, but not yet on the amount”.<sup>51</sup> Secondly, BI was again in the front-page news in December 1994, when two prominent ministers of the same coalition but from different parties, Hans Wijers and Gerrit Zalm, stated that a BI or a negative income tax were indeed alternatives to be investigated in detail.

This last episode provides a perfect illustration of the Dutch BI debate dynamics, this time led at a decisional level. In the December 1994 interview already mentioned, Minister of Economic Affairs Wijers actually showed himself quite cautious, asserting that “in so far as the coalition supports the [BI] plan, we can only move *very gradually* towards such a system”. His colleague Minister of Finance Zalm also stressed that “the negative income tax, which is a form of basic income (...) is an alternative we will have to investigate *on a long-term basis*, when the time comes to talk about social security reform”.<sup>52</sup> However, the impact of these careful declarations was considerable, partly because they were taken up by newspapers under catchy titles. The influential *NRC Handelsblad*, for instance, ran as a headline: “Wijers wants to implement a basic income”.<sup>53</sup> The reactions were instantaneous and often harsh. BI proponents and opponents from all political parties confronted each other through repeated opinion columns and passionate interviews, reviving latent tensions within their own formations.

While Minister Zalm was trying hard to defend his views, he was attacked by a deputy of his own party who considered BI as an inherently “unfair” proposal.<sup>54</sup> A similar discussion involved members of the *Christian-Democratic Party* (CDA), a party which had just been relegated to the parliamentary opposition. Whereas a CDA MP argued that “basic income means the end of solidarity”, another prominent figure of the party replied with an extensive inventory of the advantages of BI over other alternatives.<sup>55</sup> The discussion within the *Labour Party* (PvdA) involved among others two of the party’s most important figures. Minister of Social Affairs Ad Melkert rejected the idea, asserting that it was either unfair – if the benefit was set below the level of subsistence – or impossible to finance – BI would cost “billions” if it was implemented at the minimum income level. The Dutch Prime Minister and PvdA leader Wim Kok, on the contrary, declared that BI should not be dismissed in a long-term perspective, and asserted that he had been surprised by “such hasty negative reactions”.<sup>56</sup>

Given the extreme caution to which a ruling Prime Minister is constrained, this latter element is particularly instructive. It indicates that BI was considered a worthwhile alternative by the Prime Minister himself. “I am not against carefully examining what we can do, on a long-term basis, with that idea”, he said, while adding that he would advise “all the people who are passing judgements on Wijers and Zalm to consider the subject in a more balanced way”.<sup>57</sup> As rightly noticed by one observer, the BI discussion which was before “in the

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<sup>50</sup> ‘Basisinkomen was serieus alternatief tijdens formatie’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 December 1994.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Basisinkomen was serieus alternatief tijdens formatie’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 December 1994.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Zalm : « Zo gaat werken weer lonen »’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 December 1994.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Wijers wil invoering van basisinkomen’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 17 December 1994.

<sup>54</sup> ‘De Korte : « Het is niet rechtvaardig »’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 December 1994.

<sup>55</sup> See respectively De Jong 1994, and Faber 1994.

<sup>56</sup> See respectively ‘Kamer voelt niets voor invoering basisinkomen. Zalm en Wijers krijgen ook geen steun in kabinet’, *De Volkskrant*, 19 December 1994, and ‘Premier Kok sluit basisinkomen op lange termijn niet uit’, *De Volkskrant*, 20 December 1994.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Premier Kok : basisinkomen bespreekbaar’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 December 1994.

margins of policy-making” suddenly became an item for “the ministerial level” (Van Gelder, 1994). However, BI quickly dropped out of the agenda onto which it had just been propelled. For it had not only proven to be at the source of internal party divisions, it also became a bone of contention within the recently formed government. Furthermore, Wijers and Zalm did not receive any official support from their own political sides. Consequently, the BI public debate faded away once again.

It is worth contrasting this episode with the preceding peak of the Dutch BI debate. The publication of the WRR (Scientific Council for Government Policy) report in 1985 also provoked a heated discussion. But at the time the BI plan had never really been considered as an alternative at the governmental level. The only member of the ruling coalition who reacted publicly to the report immediately after its publication was the Secretary of State for Social Affairs, who even called it “a disastrous and socially unacceptable plan”.<sup>58</sup> A tough verdict which summarised most of the declarations that followed the report’s publication, as well as the government’s official position. Furthermore, whereas during the Wijers-Zalm controversy the BI proponents seized the opportunity to argue in its favour, they did not take advantage of the WRR publication. On the contrary, they split on the standpoint to be adopted. For some, a partial BI was not the right way forward: since it was not enough for a living, it had to be supplemented with conditional benefits whose all perverse effects would all be maintained. This was the stand taken by the *Radicals’ Political Party* (PPR) and the *Union of Food Workers* (Voedingsbond FNV).<sup>59</sup> For others, such a reform was a necessary step towards a full BI, and the WRR plan was therefore a most welcome contribution. Paul de Beer, a prominent figure of the *Labour Party’s* Working Group on Basic Income, was already resolutely in favour of this incremental approach, but an exception on his own side.<sup>60</sup>

The WRR episode brought for the first time to light the crucial fact that Dutch BI proponents are not only spread over the whole political spectrum, but also divided along ideological lines. They have always had different conceptions of the role of the welfare state and, hence, of the optimal policy package in which BI should be integrated. In other words, it is not enough for them to unite and go beyond partisanship through groups like the Vereniging Basisinkomen (Association Basic Income) at the Dutch level, or the Basic Income European Network on a European scale. They still have different views on the best strategy and the desirable final outcome. This constitutes one of the possible obstacles to the progress of BI, on which I shall now focus in the third section.

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<sup>58</sup> ‘Kabinet acht voorstellen sociale zekerheid voorlopig onuitvoerbaar. Plan WRR voor basisinkomen “funest and onacceptabel”’, *De Volkskrant*, 19 June 1985.

<sup>59</sup> According to the Voedingsbond FNV, the WRR “is openly supporting right-wing political forces” (‘Vakbeweging en werkgevers laten weinig heel van voorstel WRR’, *De Volkskrant*, 19 June 1985.) The PPR stigmatize the WRR, which is said to favour “social splits” (*Radikalenkrant PPR*, September 1985).

<sup>60</sup> de Beer, Paul, interview, Diemen (NL), May 2000.



### 3. Four Obstacles in the Way of a Universal Basic Income?

The Dutch debate on a universal basic income (BI) has been very lively and intense over the period 1975-1995. The idea was discussed within all political parties of any importance, within several trade unions and social movements, and even at the governmental level. The arguments used in its favour were numerous, ranging from ethical justifications related to individual autonomy and social esteem to the call for a flexible and deregulated labour market. In Belgium, by contrast, the discussion has remained far more narrowly confined to academic circles. On the political scene, the green plea for BI made by *Agalev* and to a lesser extent by *Ecolo* has become, if anything, more timid with the passing of years. The emergence of the highly idiosyncratic party *Vivant*, and its huge posters on BI in Belgian cities, did not contribute to making BI a plausible alternative in established political circles – indeed, arguably made things worse in this respect.

It is not easy to account for this considerable difference between the two countries. A crucial explanation may lie in the role played by the trade unions. Belgian unions are far more powerful than their Dutch counterparts and they had, at least until the mid-1990s, closer links with governing political parties. More than 55% of the Belgian workers are affiliated to a union, a percentage which is similar to the Nordic countries, whereas less than 25% of the Dutch workforce is.<sup>61</sup> For various reasons, most European trade unions have strongly opposed the idea of uncoupling work and income.<sup>62</sup> In welfare states where they take part in the administration of social security they might see BI as a threat to their position, for in some scenarios the unconditional minimum income would replace a number of existing social insurance mechanisms – as in the scenario imagined by the *Collectif Charles Fourier*. Since Belgian unions, contrary to the Dutch ones, are handling individual cases of unemployed workers in the framework of a Ghent System,<sup>63</sup> they might even more suspiciously look at the implementation of such an automatic payment system. Furthermore, a BI would definitely make part-time and flexible work easier, a perspective which Belgian unions, again in contrast with the Dutch ones, have never really accepted. Arguably, a BI would also tend to give individual workers more power to negotiate on their working conditions. This, again, might be perceived as a threat to the traditional role of unions in collective agreements. From the very start of the discussion, Belgian unions have been very critical on BI. After the *Revue Nouvelle* special issue, the *Christian Unions Confederation* (CSC) – Belgium's main trade

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<sup>61</sup> Unemployed and pensioners excluded. Union density rates in 1990 (unemployed and pensioners *excluded*): 56.5% in Belgium and 24.1% in the Netherlands. Van Ruysseveldt and Visser (1996: 230) stress that “unemployed and retired members account for a large and growing share of Belgian and Dutch union membership; 31.7% of all union members in Belgium in 1989, as against 17.4% in the Netherlands”. The union coverage rates (i.e. the percentage workers covered under collective agreements) are much higher than the union density rates: 90% in Belgium and 81% in the Netherlands (figures for the 1990s, Esping-Andersen 1999).

<sup>62</sup> This view should probably be somewhat qualified. The case of the Dutch *Voedingsbond FNV* is a good counter-example, even its commitment to BI was related to the specific context of the ‘welfare without work’ period, as well as to the very composition of its membership. In any case, as van Berkel (1994) has pointed out, the *Voedingsbond*'s statement on BI was an “exception to the rule”. In Ireland, the *SIPTU* (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union) has also been a cautious proponent of BI. Nevertheless, examples of European trade unions in favour of BI remains very few. For a possible explanation, see the model designed by Groot (1999).

<sup>63</sup> “In Ghent systems, unions run voluntary (though heavily subsidized by the state) unemployment insurance programs, generally through the operation of local labor exchanges (...). Only four Western European countries – Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland – have real Ghent systems. Belgium has a hybrid system ; though because unions do exercise a great deal of administrative control in fact, it is often considered a de facto Ghent system.” (Scruggs 2002: 286).

union – attacked in its newsletter the “silly and worrying utopia” of the *Collectif Charles Fourier* (CSC 1985: 4). Some union officials are still among the most uncompromising opponents to BI.<sup>64</sup> The preparatory report of the Christian Unions Confederation’s Congress on ‘The just income’, which was published in January 2002, included a section entitled “No basic income”.<sup>65</sup>

Aside from the question of the unions’ influence on social policy debates, an alternative explanation has been suggested by the Belgian social scientist Walter Van Trier. In his view the difference between Belgium and the Netherlands, with regard to the receptivity of political circles to BI, is mainly due to the fact that a stronger link exists between Dutch policy intellectuals and politicians. In his opinion, “the debate on the welfare state, and more broadly on policy reform proposals, is much more professionalised in the Netherlands than in Belgium”.<sup>66</sup> In both countries the BI discussion started from academic circles: the impetus was undoubtedly given by Kuiper in the Netherlands and Van Parijs in Belgium. Subsequently BI was thoroughly examined by many social scientists, economists, and philosophers. But only the Dutch academics were able to instil BI into political debates. With the exception of *Agalev* and *Ecolo*, it has not been the case in Belgium. It would be exaggerated to therefore conclude that Dutch intellectuals get a better hearing than their Belgian counterparts. But the existence of institutions like the *Scientific Council for Governmental Policy* (WRR) or the *Social and Cultural Planning Office* (SCP) give a stronger impact to long-term policy-relevant thinking, which may have facilitated the discussion of radical ideas like BI.

Several other Dutch characteristics are worth mentioning, which would need further exploration. The existence of a basic pension scheme, as well as the existence of non-means-tested student grants, has certainly constituted a favourable background for the discussion of a basic cash guarantee for all. Also, the fact that a greater proportion of the Dutch unemployed are social assistance beneficiaries, hence receiving non-earnings related benefits, may have enhanced the attractiveness of BI. Finally, one should not forget the role played during the 1980s by independent organizations of claimants, which never really emerged in Belgium where a much larger proportion of the unemployed are affiliated to a trade union.

In any case, even if the Dutch reached furthest in the public discussions on an unconditional minimum income guarantee, BI has never been implemented so far. Like in Belgium, BI advocates always failed to get long-lasting political support. How can one explain the setbacks they had to suffer in both countries? The vast majority of the key personalities I interviewed in Belgium and the Netherlands dismissed the most common explanation, i.e. the alleged prohibitive cost of such a scheme. Rather, they focused on institutional, sociological, and, above all, ideological factors. Some of them argued that the fact that BI had been advocated by numerous intellectuals in both countries has not enhanced its political chances. For it has given BI the reputation of being a radical utopian proposal, somewhat disconnected from the realities of social struggles. Others insisted on the damaging scattering of BI proponents over the whole political spectrum. Even if in this section I will scrutinize these objections in some detail, it seems that they were neither decisive nor particular to the BI debate. Indeed, the most important obstacle has been a moral one. Since BI would be paid regardless of willingness to work, some believe it would allow able-bodied to receive benefits without ‘contributing’ to the common wealth. It would, in other words,

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<sup>64</sup> For an extreme example, see Palsterman 1996.

<sup>65</sup> The BI proposal was rejected for two reasons. First, paid work is still the main source of self-development and social integration; second, if BI was implemented, the state and employers would feel exempted of keeping combating unemployment and fostering the improvement of working conditions, since everyone would be able to earn a living without working (ACV 2002).

<sup>66</sup> Van Trier, Walter, interview, Leuven (B), December 2001.

contradict the reciprocity principle lying at the basis of social cooperation. Hence, according to many observers, it is highly unlikely that the Belgian and Dutch electorates will ever accept such a welfare reform.

### **Too radical !**

Be it in Kuiper's writings, in the *Collectif Charles Fourier's* proposal, in the WRR report or in the *Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis* (CPB) scenarios, BI has most of the time been presented as the core element of possible substantial reforms of the welfare state. Furthermore, during the 1980s most of the Belgian and Dutch BI proponents were claiming for the implementation of a full BI, set at the level of the existing minimum income schemes. These two factors have contributed to giving BI the reputation of being a very radical measure, which has obviously represented a considerable advantage for its success in stimulating academic discussions, but a damaging drawback for the sake of guiding the reform of highly resilient welfare states. Although at the end of the 1990s most proposals were structured round partial benefits, to be implemented gradually, this reputation still persists in both countries. According to Dutch MP Kees Vendrik (GroenLinks), who favours higher benefits targeted at the disadvantaged over an universal minimum income, BI would indeed be far too much of "large-scale solution, and therefore would not be suited to a well-located problem [i.e. social exclusion]".<sup>67</sup>

The publication of the *Scientific Council for Governmental Policy* (WRR) report in 1985 – a report which subsequently remained a central point of reference in the Dutch discussion – had provoked many negative reactions going in the same direction as Vendrik's assertion. The *NRC Handelsblad* editorial called the WRR plan "a revolution in social security". And five years later, the lesson drawn by *De Volkskrant* was still that "the break suggested [by the 1985 WRR plan] was far too radical".<sup>68</sup> This argument was used by the government itself as a justification for the rejection of the whole WRR plan. In this respect, the official government's reply delivered to the WRR Commission in October 1985 was significantly unambiguous: "the council [WRR] has weakened his own position in suggesting, on the basis of its studies, a global project aimed at implementing a totally unprecedented system" (The Netherlands 1985: 28). *A fortiori*, similar comments were made by many observers after the *Revue Nouvelle* special issue on the 'universal grant', which launched the Belgian debate a few months before the publication of the WRR report. The fear that such a big-bang in social security would undermine the traditional welfare state's mechanisms, and thereby contribute to dismantling it, was widespread.<sup>69</sup>

The fact that an overwhelming majority of actors involved in social policies consider BI as being too radical, and therefore possibly burdened with unpredictable effects, may undermine its political chances as a medium-term alternative. At the time of the Wijers-Zalm controversy in December 1994, a Dutch BI proponent pointed this out very lucidly: "it is absolutely justified that nobody wants the introduction of a BI in the short term. For nobody can anticipate the social and economic consequences of such a radical change in the social security and tax system. This may be the most important disadvantage of the proposal" (Polk 1995). As noted by Paul de Beer, BI opponents from all political sides can easily and tirelessly argue that "there are other and less radical ways of reaching the same goal".<sup>70</sup> This

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<sup>67</sup> Vendrik, Kees, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

<sup>68</sup> Respectively: 'Revolutie in de sociale zekerheid', *NRC Handelsblad*, 18 June 1985, and 'De zoete wraak van Douben', *De Volkskrant*, 16 June 1990.

<sup>69</sup> See for instance the standpoint of the *Christian-democratic Party* (Lecleir 1985) which stated that the *Fourier Collective's* radical proposals were going to give neo-liberals weapons against the welfare state. The same argument also lies at the core of CSC 1985.

<sup>70</sup> de Beer, Paul, interview, Diemen (NL), May 2000.

observation has incited most of the Belgian or Dutch BI proponents to modify the strategy which was prevailing in the 1980s. Instead of calling for an unconditional right to the minimum income and claiming that redistributive mechanisms should be thoroughly transformed, they adopted a more pragmatic position. At the end of the 1990s, all green parties (Agalev, Ecolo and GroenLinks) were arguing for a very gradual implementation, in which BI was seen as a long-term objective. The small formation Vivant represents the only exception to the success of the incremental strategy among organised BI proponents.<sup>71</sup>

« It appeals to intellectuals »<sup>72</sup>

The links between academics and political circles are obviously strong in both countries, as in any other advanced democracy. In Belgium and the Netherlands the BI debate, as was already mentioned, has been fostered by numerous intellectuals. But in this case the academic pedigree has proven to be a double-edged sword. In fact, BI has often been stigmatized as an alternative paradigm fabricated by intellectuals which were disconnected from social realities. Hence, even if Dutch intellectuals and academics interested in BI were more successful than Belgian in attracting political and media attention, they were almost even unsuccessful in getting BI on the governmental agenda.

To give substance to these general observations, one may first notice that scientific reports aimed at contributing to government decision in social policy were at the origin of major discussions on BI. This was for instance the case in 1985 with the *Scientific Council for Governmental Policy* (WRR) report on social security, as well as with the *Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis* (CPB) report at the end of 1992. Secondly, within most of the Dutch parties in which BI was discussed, the debate had been launched by the research department. It was the case of the *Radicals' Political Party* (PPR), the *Labour Party* (PvdA), *GroenLinks* and *Democrats 66* (D66). In the latter case, it partly accounts for the quick ejection of the proposal: “the debate was far too dependent upon the research department”, asserts its director Christiaan de Vries.<sup>73</sup> But the fact that academics were stimulating the debate appears with the utmost clarity in the Wijers-Zalm case. For, Paul de Beer argues, the two ministers were “intellectuals, academics, economists which were freely thinking of alternatives; they thought it was possible to think freely and in an innovative way of socially unacceptable proposals”.<sup>74</sup> Zalm, for instance, was only conveying ideas which he developed when he was a professor in economics and – above all – a director of the *Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis* (CPB). It was under his impetus that a BI scenario had been included in the 1992 CPB report. His 1994 statements as a Minister of Finance formed a sharp contrast with the negative feelings of most politicians with respect to BI, including his colleagues within the government.

Regarding the social movements, the Dutch *Union of Food Workers* (*Voedingsbond FNV*) represents the most illustrative example of the possible negative effects of that cleavage. During the 1980s, its strong support for BI was in some way related to the very composition of its membership. Most of the *Voedingsbond FNV* affiliated members were unemployed or low-paid workers, and they could therefore be seen as net beneficiaries from the possible implementation of an unconditional minimum income. However, a closer look at the history of BI within the *Voedingsbond FNV* learn that the influence of well-educated staff

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<sup>71</sup> In 2000 the chairwoman of the Dutch *Association Basic Income* Saar Boerlage argued that she still was in favour of a full BI as a short-term objective. She nevertheless admitted that this view was not shared by most association's members (Boerlage, Saar, interview, Amsterdam (NL), May 2000).

<sup>72</sup> Besseling, Paul, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

<sup>73</sup> de Vries, Christiaan, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

<sup>74</sup> de Beer, Paul, interview, Diemen (NL), May 2000.

members was decisive in the choice of the BI strategy.<sup>75</sup> Neither the very didactic leaflets on BI edited by the union, nor the workshops which were organised in some localities or the training projects aimed at the members were sufficient to maintain the interest in the idea. The debate got out of steam and stopped altogether in the early 1990s. According to van Berkel et al., who made an in-depth analysis of this episode of the Voedingsbond's history, one of the main reasons lies in the fact that it was a "top-down" debate (van Berkel et al. 1993: 22). As the leaders themselves were conceding afterwards, "it proved difficult to mobilise members on such an abstract and long-term objective as BI"; this very abstract perspective, mainly supported by the executive, was contradicting "the more concrete members' interests that they were experiencing in the daily life" (van Berkel et al. 1993: 22-24).<sup>76</sup>

In Belgium too, academics have been at the origin of the BI debate which may not have been started without their initiative. But again the academic origin of the idea may at the same time have undermined its political chances. From the very beginning, the *Collectif Charles Fourier's* 'universal grant' has been described by some of its critics as a dangerous utopia, disconnected from the social dimensions of politics.<sup>77</sup> Walter Van Trier thinks that widespread anti-intellectual feelings within Belgian unions partly accounts for the proposal's rejection. Within the green party *Ecolo*, BI was also often dismissed as an idea which was not sufficiently rooted in social movements. *Ecolo* Minister Thierry Detienne's cautious approach to BI originates in the fact that it constitutes a proposal "which does not always take ongoing social debates and power struggles into account".<sup>78</sup>

### **The scattering of BI proponents**

In the Netherlands and, to a lesser extent, in Belgium, BI proponents were scattered over the whole political spectrum. Hence, they formed at best an active minority within their own formations, with all the consequences in terms of internal splits already mentioned. This scattering of small groups, some observers have argued, has not increased the political chances of the idea. For BI proponents were not only unable to get the proposal in their respective party's programme, they were also unable to create a strong trend in its favour across the partisan cleavages. Coming from different political persuasions, giving different justifications of BI, "they [had] no interest in working together".<sup>79</sup> According to MP Kees Vendrik, this constitutes a fundamental defect of BI, which only offers a very "weak electoral strategy". In his view, BI is like "a washing powder that can be used in any washing machine", from the left to the right.<sup>80</sup>

The scattering of BI proponents has often been stressed by Dutch observers. After the *Scientific Council for Governmental Policy* (WRR) report publication in 1985, the left-liberal weekly magazine *Groene Amsterdammer* questioned whether a coalition in favour of BI could ever be possible: "BI does not seem to be advocated by only one political side, but by many people coming from all political sides". In early 1993, soon after the *Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis* (CPB) had published its scenarios for the Dutch economy, another commentator noted how since the early 1980s the idea "threw people into confusion, from the left to the right". In December 1994, at the time of the Wijers-Zalm controversy, a *NRC*

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<sup>75</sup> This fact was confirmed by Paul de Beer (de Beer, Paul, interview, Diemen (NL), May 2000).

<sup>76</sup> For an account in English, see van Berkel 1994.

<sup>77</sup> See for instance CSC 1983, and 'L' allocation universelle: du rêve à la réalité', *En Marche*, 20 June 1985.

<sup>78</sup> Detienne, Thierry, interview, Namur (B), December 2001.

<sup>79</sup> de Beer, Paul, interview, Diemen (NL), May 2000.

<sup>80</sup> Vendrik, Kees, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

*Handelsblad* journalist made similar remarks in his editorial entitled ‘The debate crosses political cleavages’.<sup>81</sup>

However, one could argue that the fact that BI advocates are spread over the political spectrum constitutes a considerable *advantage* for the proposal’s feasibility. In the case of Belgium and the Netherlands, BI could in fact become the unifying factor of many types of coalitions. Even if the scattering was described as an obstacle by many actors of the BI debate and the people I interviewed, it should therefore not be considered as decisive. This may be true for the two first obstacles too. The radical flavour of the idea was a more important obstacle when BI was presented as a short-term alternative. If it is considered to be a long-term objective, to be reached through gradual reforms, the obstacle can be circumvented.<sup>82</sup> It is the strategy already adopted by most Belgian and Dutch BI proponents, with the noteworthy exception of the Belgian party *Vivant*. Perhaps some significant steps in the direction of BI have actually already been undertaken. The other critique which consists in dismissing BI as being disconnected from social realities should not be under-estimated. In both countries, it has negatively influenced the BI debate in a significant way. But again, this does not mean that it constitutes a decisive impediment. The question of the role intellectuals can play in the shaping of policy reforms, which is of course crucial in political science, will not be treated here. Let us simply assume that, in one way or another, many social policy reforms are related to scientific work, be it empirical or not. Academics can indirectly inspire reforms or even act as policy entrepreneurs, designing alternatives and pushing for them in governmental circles.<sup>83</sup> The fact that BI was not advocated by influential social movements or trade unions does not mean that it offers no answers to some of their specific claims, or to broader social problems such as exclusion and unemployment, which authorities have to deal with. Accordingly, the fact that BI as an alternative to existing patterns of social policy was designed and advocated by academics does not make a significant difference with many other reform proposals. It should therefore not be considered an insurmountable obstacle.

Hence, the major obstacle is probably of another type. It is a *moral* obstacle which clearly underlies other minor obstacles. It consists in the rejection of a *unconditional* right to the minimum income. It lies at the basis of many clashes within parties, as BI seems to appeal to a conception of justice distinct from the majority’s views; and it would represent a radical break with centuries of conditional policies aimed at the needy.

### **The moral issue: ‘Why pay the lazy?’**

Belgium and the Netherlands already have universal family allowances. Moreover, all Dutch citizens aged more than 65 have the right to a basic pension which is neither means-tested nor earnings-related. The basic pension is very popular among the Dutch population, and its calling into question by the Christian-Democrats was, at least partly, at the origin of an unprecedented defeat at the 1994 elections. This massive support and the existence of

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<sup>81</sup> See respectively ‘De triomfantelijke terugkeer van het basisinkomen’, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 19 June 1985; ‘Het “Linkse” basisinkomen kan “Rechtse” problemen oplossen’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 7 January 1993; ‘Debat dwars door politieke lijnen’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 December 1994. The scattering also partly accounts for the splits *within* parties. For instance, when the idea is suggested on the left, some argue that it is a right-wing idea, referring to the most liberal versions of BI and its ‘Friedmanian’ inspiration.

<sup>82</sup> Few politicians are interested in long-term objectives. But the point is that most of them could be interested in short-term steps.

<sup>83</sup> On the role of academics in the agenda-setting process, see for instance Kingdon (1995: 53-55): “After interest groups, the collection of academics, researchers, and consultants is the next most important set of nongovernmental actors”. Kingdon rightly points out, however, that one should carefully distinguish between inventors and entrepreneurs (see p.183). In the case of the BI debate in Belgium and the Netherlands, many academics or researchers have been inventors *and* entrepreneurs; Van Parijs and de Beer are illustrative examples.

universal and unconditional minimum incomes at both end of the life course could imply that a universal BI for all would easily gain popular support, in particular in the Netherlands. Dutch BI advocates often argued that, in this sense, a BI is already in place. However, a fundamental and obvious difference explains that the strong support for a basic pension is perfectly compatible with the unpopularity of BI.<sup>84</sup> As was stressed by several interviewees, “retirees are not required to work anymore”, whereas the majority of possible BI recipients would be able-bodied, thus naturally required to contribute to the common wealth.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, the moral objection to BI arises from a largely shared conception of justice which states that every able-bodied person should work to cover her basic needs.

Unconditionality with respect to work is no doubt the most controversial feature of BI. It has been the subject of numerous discussions among philosophers. For a great deal, Van Parijs’ philosophical enterprise is aimed at dealing with this objection. Whereas he argues that the introduction of the highest sustainable BI would reduce injustice (Van Parijs 1995), some critics have tried to show that it would increase it. Among them, the Dutch philosopher van Donselaar argues that BI would generate parasitism, since the lazy would be better off than in the absence of such a scheme (van Donselaar 1997). In the 1970s, Kuiper already came up against the very same objection, which he tried to defuse in restating that “everyone has the duty to work according to her capacities” (Kuiper 1976: 507). But he did not went into the details of practical consequences for his own BI plan. Moreover, he also acknowledged that it was probably impossible to find a “no nonsense way of sanctioning refusal to work” (Kuiper 1976: 510). Afterwards, this delicate question kept underlying all discussions on BI and welfare reform, be it in Belgium or in the Netherlands.

To take a single example, the moral objection was raised on several occasions in 1994-1995 after the statements of Ministers Wijers and Zalm on BI.<sup>86</sup> “BI is controversial, but not for financial or economic reasons”, an editorial writer noted after days of heated debate; “it is an ideological debate, which relates to the fact that the link between work and income is broken: citizens have the right to an income without obligation to search for work. The majority of the Dutch population is repelled by the perspective of this ‘money for nothing’” (Van Empel 1994). The work ethic is still strongly present in Dutch society. Empirical research has for instance demonstrated that in Europe the Dutch people are the most restrictive towards the unemployed. Friedberg and Ploug (2000) constructed an ‘average score of restrictiveness’, including among other indicators the extent to which people insist on the duty to work when one is unemployed, and endorse the obligation to accept jobs which do not match one’s qualifications or experience. They concluded that in 1992 the Dutch reached the highest score of all seven European countries they analysed in their study.<sup>87</sup>

Within this context, suggesting the introduction of an unconditional minimum income in an electoral platform appears to be very risky, and activation policies or reinforcement of work requirements much more politically profitable.<sup>88</sup> For this very reason, Belgian green

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<sup>84</sup> A public opinion survey conducted in 1993 in the Netherlands shows that only 19% of the Dutch population would support a partial BI as suggested by the *WRR* in 1985 (Survey conducted by the Social and Cultural Planning Office, quoted in Groot and van der Veen 2000: 222).

<sup>85</sup> Besseling, Paul, interview, The Hague (NL), May 2000.

<sup>86</sup> For good examples during the 1980s, see ‘Inkomen los van arbeid roept hevige emoties op’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 5 June 1980, and de Beer (1985).

<sup>87</sup> Countries included in the survey: Denmark, Germany, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands and United Kingdom. The average score of restrictiveness for all seven countries is 2.5, the Dutch score being 3 (Fridberg and Ploug 2000: 343). On the idea of reciprocity and the reluctance of Dutch policy-makers vis-à-vis BI, see Pioch 1999.

<sup>88</sup> Needless to say, the relationship between public opinion and policy agenda is far from being straightforward. It has been at the core of numerous studies on public policy. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to give an overview of the existing frameworks. For a detailed presentation, see e.g. Parsons 1995: 110-125. The exact

leader Philippe Defeyt admits he would oppose any explicit reference to the radical unconditionality of BI in *Ecolo's* programme.<sup>89</sup> In Belgium and in the Netherlands it seems that BI cannot be openly defended by politicians who want to bid for power. But might there not be a way of introducing a basic income without relying on such open advocacy, 'through the back door' as it were? This will be the subject of my concluding remarks.

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nature of the link between the work ethic or the average 'score of restrictiveness' and the political discourse on BI will need further exploration.

<sup>89</sup> Defeyt, Philippe, interview, Namur (B), December 2001.



## Conclusions: Two Possible Back Doors

In the first section of this paper, the strong trend towards activation in social assistance was described as a ‘paradigm shift’ in Belgian and Dutch welfare. At first sight this transformation, which obviously represents a new political version of the work ethic just referred to in the Dutch case, offers few opportunities to basic income (BI) proponents. As the overview of Belgian and Dutch debates shows, the radical unconditionality of BI with regard to work requirements constitutes the feature that most contributes to making it impossible to sell. How could BI be openly defended within the framework of the new balance between rights and duties of social assistance recipients and the unemployed? How could it fit into the thick conception of reciprocity which lies at the basis of the emerging ‘active welfare state’? Rather than being described as a highly advanced form of de-commodification, as Esping-Andersen once did (1990: 47), BI now tends to be negatively considered as the ultimate ‘passive benefit’. It seems that if significant steps are to be undertaken in the move from targeted poverty alleviation programmes to a universal and individualised minimum income scheme, they will only be indirect and incremental. Hence, a possible implementation *through the back door* should not be excluded.

The new emphasis on the activation of benefits and beneficiaries is ambiguous. Admittedly, the very notion of ‘activity’ cannot be reduced to paid work in its stricter sense. Unpaid activities like caring, training or voluntary work should be included in its broad definition. For many people they also represent a way of contributing to the common wealth. In other words, “it is not hard to show that having a job and making a social contribution may or may not coincide” (Young 2000: 28). Consequently, if the purpose of the so-called ‘active welfare state’ is to foster active participation in social life, as it was stated by Belgian Minister of Social Affairs Frank Vandenbroucke, then it should to a certain extent also value activities *outside* of the labour market. Vandenbroucke himself challenged the assumption that paid work is the only valuable social contribution. In his 1999 *Den Uyl* lecture in Amsterdam (see section 1, *supra*), he called for a maximisation of the possibilities of active participation, while stressing that “one should *not* reduce this plea to participation in the labour market” (Vandenbroucke 1999: 11). In Belgium to date this view has not been translated into concrete social policies. In fact, as it appears in its preamble, the law on minimum income that takes effect in 2002 is quite restrictive: “participation in social life can take various forms; nevertheless the access to paid employment remains one of the most secure ways of achieving autonomy” (Belgium 2001b: 3). The newly created ‘integration income’ is not yet aimed at valuing unpaid activities, and recipients are still required to enter the labour market as quickly as possible. But, as Vandenbroucke’s assertion shows, there seems to be some room left for a public discussion on the very meaning of ‘activity’. In 2000, for instance, the *King Baudouin Foundation* published a report entitled “Work and Activity: Towards the Full Participation”, which called for a relaxed conception of participation. According to the authors, the unemployment benefit should be transformed into a ‘participation insurance’, aimed at fostering unpaid activities (FRB-KBS 2000, Vanderborght & Van Parijs 2001). However, regarding the broadening of the scope of activities to be valued, the Netherlands seems comparatively ahead. For, despite the effective paradigm shift in welfare and the renewed emphasis on work requirements, the restructuring of the social assistance system allows for new experiments in social activation. Since 1996, municipalities have the possibility of implementing projects aimed at fostering the inclusion of the long-term unemployed through unpaid activities. Some already broadened the target group to people who refuse to enter the labour market. Recipients who take part in these non-compulsory

programmes can be exempted from the work requirements. In Rotterdam, one of Netherlands' largest cities, "participation in social activation is voluntary, and the [social activation] project is not primarily aimed at re-inclusion within the labour market" (van Berkel et al. 1999: 103). Moreover, in 1999 the Dutch government introduced an innovative scheme aimed at helping the artists on benefit. Within the framework of the Income-Security Act for Artists (*Wet Inkomensvoorziening kunstenaars – WIK*), some of them can be exempted of all work requirements during a maximum of four years. Although the WIK benefits are inferior to the social assistance levels, they are similar to the Belgian minimum income.<sup>90</sup>

Thus, some contradictory trends are at work in both countries which could offer new opportunities to BI proponents. In fact, one common argument in favour of BI consists in asserting that an universal minimum income would help at valuing useful and non-market activities which are not yet recognised. Following the advice of the British economist and BI advocate Anthony Atkinson, BI supporters could therefore compromise and promote the idea of a 'participation income'. Atkinson believes that "a major reason for opposition to basic income lies in its lack of conditionality"; therefore, he argues that "in order to secure political support, it may be necessary for the proponents of basic income to compromise – not on the principle of no test of means, nor on the principle of independence, but on the unconditional payment". In his view, they should support a BI conditional on participation, in the broad sense. (Atkinson 1998: 147-148). Within the framework of Belgian and Dutch 'active welfare states', and given the strength of the moral objection to an unconditional income, the incremental transformation of the minimum income scheme into a modest participation income seems one of the only feasible steps towards a true BI. The Dutch experiments in social activation show that this option should not be excluded. A participation income would be a more coherent way of giving benefits than the existing programmes which implies numerous discretionary exemptions. Even if this option seems less plausible in the Belgian case, it is worth mentioning that Belgian Minister Frank Vandenbroucke commented quite sympathetically Atkinson's proposal, which he called "perhaps the road of political wisdom" (Vandenbroucke 1997: 165)...<sup>91</sup>

In both countries the participation income could represent a significant step towards BI. It would not contradict the reciprocity rhetoric, while simultaneously giving BI a decisive boost. For in a further stage "one may well realise that paying controllers to try to catch the few really work-shy would cost more, and create more resentment all over than just giving this modest floor income to all, no questions asked" (Van Parijs 2000). A form of participation income is therefore one of the most plausible ways of implementing a BI through the back door in Belgium and the Netherlands.

However, a second type of incremental and indirect strategy could possibly lead to effective results too. The Belgian and Dutch governments are searching for new instruments to deal with the so-called 'welfare traps', i.e. the fact that benefits are withdrawn at a 100 per cent tax rate as the recipient enter the labour market. In both countries, refundable tax credits have already been implemented with the explicit aim of 'making work pay'. If in Belgium it

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<sup>90</sup> In the official presentation of WIK, the Dutch government significantly acknowledges that work requirements can make it extremely difficult to "create works of art and to gain a reputation in artistic circles". However, WIK benefits are not totally unconditional. As in the case of the minimum income, they are means-tested. Furthermore, to become entitled one must be a holder of an artistic diploma or be officially recognised as an artist by the independent organism *Kunstenaars&CO*. One of the criteria is the revenues from artistic activity, which must be superior to €1,089/year. The monthly amount for a single person was €538.91 for a single person and €758.87 for single parents in January 2002. (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid – URL: <http://home.szw.nl>, section 'uitkeringen').

<sup>91</sup> On the relations between paid work, valuable contribution to the society's wealth and basic income, see Kildal 1998.

remains modest and targeted at low-paid workers, the Dutch system clearly goes in the direction of a more universal benefit.<sup>92</sup> Before the 2001 comprehensive fiscal reform, all Dutch taxpayers benefited from a general tax exemption on part of their taxable income. The non-earning partner had to transfer this exemption to the working partner, which means that the former's financial incentive to enter the labour market was reduced. Due to the transferability mechanism, "the implicit marginal tax rate on income earned by the dependent partner [was equal] to the marginal tax rate of the breadwinner" (Groot and van der Veen 2000 : 216). Of course, this exemption scheme mainly benefited to well-off households subjected to higher marginal tax rates. Since January 2001, this tax allowance has disappeared and has been replaced by a new individual 'general tax credit', which is a discount *on the amount to pay*. Contrary to the previous scheme, the credit does not reduce the total taxable income and is therefore independent of the marginal tax rates. Consequently, it benefit all households equally. More important still for our purpose, the credit is made *refundable*. The worker's non-working partners are entitled to the full amount of the credit (about €1,500/year), *which can be directly paid onto their bank account*. They keep this entitlement as they enter the labour market, but it then takes the form of a discount on the income tax to pay, supplemented by an additional 'employment rebate' of about €800. As a consequence, non-working partners should "find it more attractive to seek paid employment" (The Netherlands 2000: 11).

In other words, since January 2001 Dutch citizens who are not doing paid work are entitled to a modest negative income tax, provided they have a working partner paying a positive income tax. If its level were gradually increased, and its payment not restricted to working families, this refundable tax credit would provide an unconditional and individual minimum income floor to all Dutch citizens. It would, in other words, provide the missing element between universal child benefits and the basic pension. Therefore, it can be said to represent a big step in the direction of a BI. However, it is not an explicit move, since the stated objective is to launch an active tax policy which gives incentives to enter the labour market. But this has also been one of the stated objectives of BI from the start. Again, like in the case of an hypothetical participation income, this possible implementation 'through the back door' would thus be made thanks to the 'active welfare state' rhetoric.

The transformation of the general tax exemption into a tax credit has long been proposed by Dutch BI advocates.<sup>93</sup> According to Euro-MP Alexander de Roo (GroenLinks), this has proven to be a successful strategy: "it will quickly become clear that the amount of the credit is not high enough to have positive effects on the labour market (...). One will then realize that a true universal and unconditional income is a better alternative".<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, the Minister of Finance Gerrit Zalm, one of the instigators of the 2001 fiscal reform, expressly denied this. Answering the green group's questions during a parliamentary session, he

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<sup>92</sup> Regarding tax credits, the Belgian tax reform was far less ambitious. A refundable tax credit targeted at low paid workers has been put in place, which constitutes a very modest version of the American *Earned Income Tax Credit*. Ecolo leader Philippe Defeyt acknowledged that the tax reform represents a wasted opportunity for Belgian BI proponents (Defeyt, Philippe, interview, Namur (B), December 2001). With a true refundable tax credit of the Dutch type, it was possible to make a step in the direction of a better integration of the tax and benefit system. While designed by people who had looked closely and sympathetically at BI proposals, the version that was eventually proposed and approved was much more watered-down.

<sup>93</sup> For instance, the PPR stated in its 1981 electoral platform that « it is technically possible to get closer from a basic income by means of the integration and individualisation of the tax exemption » (PPR 1981: 22). In 1994, as it was again thinking of basic income as a long-term alternative, the PvdA argued for the « replacement of the tax exemption by a tax credit », which would subsequently become a « negative income tax » (PvdA 1994: 42). In 1999, *GroenLinks* also asserted that « the first step towards a basic income consists in the transformation of the existing tax exemption into a general tax credit » (Van Gent et al. 1999).

<sup>94</sup> de Roo, Alexander, interview, Amsterdam (NL), May 2000.

asserted that “the individual and refundable tax credit can *not* be considered to constitute a small step towards the implementation of a basic income” (Zalm and Vermeend 2000). Of course, this is a matter of interpretation. But the very fact that Minister Zalm took the trouble to make such a statement could paradoxically reveal that BI remains a possible option. This cautious statement would then only have been a way of defusing a renewed discussion on the subject, in order to avoid splits within the ruling coalition. In fact at the time he was a director of the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB), Zalm himself argued for a gradual implementation of BI and clearly described the very first step: “one should start with the suppression of the general tax exemption’s transferability mechanism”...<sup>95</sup> Political effectiveness does not always sit easily with intellectual consistency.

Despite numerous obstacles and a strong moral objection to BI, the idea of an unconditional minimum income is not totally out of the picture in Belgium and the Netherlands. The activation rhetoric which underlies current welfare state reforms paradoxically offers new opportunities for advocating a (partial) uncoupling of work and income. New incremental developments in Dutch fiscal and social policies tend to prove it. In a working paper they wrote some years ago on the BI debate in the Netherlands, Roebroek and Berben were rightly speaking of an ‘incremental paradox’ (Roebroek and Berben 1988). Having analysed years of heated discussions on Dutch income security programmes, they concluded that a radical reform such as BI could not be explicitly implemented, but that no major social or political force would oppose an incremental process in the same direction.

The back door strategy lacks the grandness of the front gate. For sure, if there are good reasons to believe that the front gate will remain tightly locked, it might make some sense for BI supporters to keep knocking – but not at the expense of the careful exploration of less pretentious accesses to the mansion, starting, perhaps, with the two I have identified.

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<sup>95</sup> ‘CPB – directeur Prof. G. Zalm verwacht veel van het geleidelijk invoeren van het basisinkomen’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 7 January 1993.

## List of abbreviations

ABW	General Assistance Act (the Netherlands)
Agalev	Flemish Green Party (Belgium)
BI	Basic Income
BIEN	Basic Income European Network
CDA	Christian-Democratic Party (the Netherlands)
CPAS	Public Centre for Social Assistance (Belgium)
CPB	Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis
CSC	Christian Unions Confederation (Belgium)
D66	Liberal Democrats' Party (the Netherlands)
Ecolo	Francophone Green Party (Belgium)
FNV	Federation of Dutch Unions
LBU	National Organization of Social Beneficiaries (the Netherlands)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPR	Radicals' Political Party (the Netherlands)
PSC	Francophone Christian-Democratic Party (Belgium)
PSP	Pacifist Socialist Party (the Netherlands)
PvdA	Labour Party (the Netherlands)
PVV	Flemish Liberal Party (Belgium)
RWW	Social Assistance for the Unemployed (the Netherlands)
SP	Flemish Socialist Party (Belgium)
VEV	Flemish Employer's Organization (Belgium)
VVD	Liberal Party (the Netherlands)
WIK	Income-Security Act for Artists (the Netherlands)
WIW	Job-Seekers Employment Act (the Netherlands)
WML	Minimum Wage Legislation (the Netherlands)
WRR	Scientific Council for Government Policy (the Netherlands)

## List of interviewees

*Belgium* (official position at the time of the interviews, i.e. December 2001):

DEFEYT, Philippe, Federal Secretary of the Francophone Green Party Ecolo, Namur;

DETIENNE, Thierry, Minister for Social Affairs and Health, Walloon Region, Namur;

VAN TRIER, Walter, Researcher at the WAV - *Steunpunt Werkgelegenheid Arbeid Vorming*, Leuven.

*The Netherlands* (official position at the time of the interviews, i.e. May 2000):

BESSELING, Paul, Head of the 'Social Security Unit' at the *Centraal Planbureau* ('Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis'), The Hague;

BOERLAGE, Saar, Chairwoman of the *Vereniging Basisinkomen* ('Association Basic Income'), Amsterdam;

DE BEER, Paul, Senior Researcher at the *Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau* ('Social and Cultural Planning Office'), The Hague;

DE ROO, Alexander, Member of the European Parliament (*GroenLinks*), Vice-chairman of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Consumer Policy at the European Parliament, Brussels;

DE VRIES, Christiaan, Director of the Research Department of *Democraten 66*, The Hague;

SCHÄFER, Emiel, Secretary of the *Vereniging Basisinkomen* ('Association Basic Income'), Amsterdam;

VENDRIK, Kees, Member of the Dutch Parliament (*GroenLinks*), House of Representatives, The Hague.

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