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An Anniversary Note – BIEN's 25th

By Guy Standing

Anniversaries are poignant human moments, points on a journey, never an end in themselves. Twenty-five years ago, on September 4-6, 1986, a small group of us held a workshop on basic income, and on September 6 decided to set up a network, BIEN. The memory is blurred; the documentation is scattered. However, this 25th anniversary is a testament to several aspects of BIEN, and it is perhaps acceptable to reflect on the journey so far.

It is intriguing that a core of the group that set up BIEN has remained active in its cause. Many of the original group, including this writer, had written papers advocating and justifying a basic income before we established BIEN. At the time, and for long afterwards, we were regarded by many of our colleagues and friends outside BIEN as quirky, idealistic, stupidly utopian or naïve. I recall the Director of the ILO's Social Security Department using the expression „bad, mad and dangerous to know“. We have always had members who had a talent for giving some credence to that simplistic denigration. But neither they nor the insults have dimmed the light.

I doubt if any of us would have imagined that BIEN would last more than a couple of years, if that. The longevity is a tribute to many in that group, some of whom moved out after playing important roles, some played leading roles before retiring to the ranks, some moved out and then returned, refreshed. Some of the early figures have died; they are not forgotten. Some of the fresh-faced, long-haired youths who were at the inaugural meeting have shamelessly gone on to become grand-fathers and grand-mothers. It happens.

In BIEN, it has always been true that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It has always had distinguished social thinkers, some of whom have gone on to become distinguished names in their field. Yet we have always recognised that it is the collective network, not individuals, which makes BIEN special. In a sense, at a personal level, a network such as ours is an exercise in associational freedom, in that the voluntary unpaid nature of what we have been trying to do together has strengthened each of us, to a greater or lesser degree. Would we have held the line if we had worked individually? I doubt it.

What has also been invigorating is that BIEN has always been ecumenical. Many who have added to its vitality have been profoundly religious and spiritual, many others have been atheists or agnostics. Politically too, we have avoided sectarianism. Some have been on the political right, others have been solidly on the left. It is testament to our charter and the many individuals who have steered the network that BIEN has always been a „broad church“. Nobody has been turned away or been subject to insults or disdain because of their personal views. If they have wanted to join the conversation, they have been welcome.

From the outset, there has been at least two lines of thinking that have dominated our conversation, one that is broadly philosophical and libertarian, stressing the appeal of a basic income as a right and as a stand-alone matter, the other that basic income should be seen as one component of a redistributive

political and economic strategy. A third line has always been there as well, but has become increasingly important, the potential of a basic income as a means of enhancing a more gendered and ecologically viable future. Perhaps it is this third line that will prove decisive in the next few years.

In sum, a fundamental defining feature of BIEN members is that they have been and will remain inherently non-conformists, in the great tradition of thinking that defines humanity. We all believe there is an alternative.

That leads to what has been the primary means by which BIEN has flourished, our national networks and our Congresses. Those networks have tended to fluctuate, sometimes depending on the energies of one or two people, to the extent of making them fragile as their leading lights move through busy lives. But it has been particularly invigorating to see how new networks have emerged in recent years.

This has partly been associated with the great change we made to our name, going from BIEN to BIEN in Barcelona in 2004, when after some background wrangling, we opted to formalise reality by changing the "E" from Europe to Earth, recognising that an increasing proportion of our members were from outside Europe. Looking back, it seems obvious that the name change should be made.

For some in our ranks that was not obvious at the time. Some worried that we would lose our focus; some worried that if, as was felt appropriate, we alternated our Congresses between a European city and one outside Europe that members would only be able to afford to go to one Congress every four years. The former fear has proved unfounded; the latter fear has meant we have a greater responsibility to raise funds to enable as many people as wish to come to be able to do so.

As for the networks, it has been impressive that the second generation have been daring and invigorating. It is invidious to single out particular networks, but besides our wonderful members in Brazil and Argentina, it has been exciting to see the emergence of BIN-Italia, BIKN in Korea, BIJN in Japan and USBIG in North America. My dream at the moment is to see one in India. In this huge and wonderful country, the debate about income security has suddenly become very topical.

As for our Congresses, I am sure many of us proverbially pinch ourselves from time to time in wondering how we have done them. Every single one has started with a sense of trepidation among the nominated organisers. Who is going to do the work? Where are we going to obtain the money? What should the themes be? Who will be our plenary speakers? Will there be enough quality papers?

Practically every Congress has had its moments of crisis during the organisational phase. And yet all have taken place, and an assessment of their evolution and contents would make a fascinating topic, perhaps for a Ph.D. Let me just recall the places where we have held our Congresses since our inauguration in Louvain-la-Neuve in September 1986. In chronological order they have been held in Antwerp, Florence, London, Paris, Amsterdam, Vienna, Berlin, Geneva, Barcelona, Cape Town, Dublin and Sao Paolo. The names trip off the tongue as great cities. In each case, those who did the incredible amount of preparatory work deserve tremendous credit.

In every Congress, there were wonderful contributions, often from newcomers, sometimes from distinguished politicians or personalities. Who could forget the moving speech made by Archbishop Desmond Tutu at the Cape Town Congress? Of course, no BIEN members had anything to do with the content of his speech. It was the delivery and the commitment shown by him that moved us. It is almost unfair to single him out, since over the years there have been numerous fascinating contributions. At

the Sao Paolo Congress, I recall a private chat with a fellow founder member in which we both remarked how extraordinary it was to find that we learned new ideas and interpretations at every Congress. Only a small fraction of the papers presented over the years have ever been published; I have a volume from the Geneva Congress in front of me now.

However, probably over 600 papers have been presented at the thirteen Congresses. What then of the cause? Twenty-five years is a long time to have been refining our thinking without success. Well, progress has been substantial. In an early paper in the 1980s, I predicted that social policy would drift to workfare before an unconditional universal basic income became part of mainstream thinking, essential for responding to the growing inequalities and insecurities. Regrettably, workfare has been ushered into reality, in the United States, in the UK and in various ways elsewhere. It runs counter to any legitimate idea of freedom, and is divisive. It may grow uglier before there is a revolt against it. Then, I believe, our time will come.

In that regard, we might reflect on three quotations that have stayed with me during the twenty-five years. The first is a nice aphorism from Barbara Wootton:

“It is from the champions of the impossible rather than the slaves of the possible that evolution draws its creative force.”

We all know the feeling of being told a basic income is an impossibility. Usually, it is said by people who either presume it is impossible because it has never been done or do not wish it to be possible, because it might mean less for themselves or for their kind.

The second comes from William Morris, one of the early advocates of a basic income in his *News from Nowhere*. It was not from that book that the saying comes, but seems hugely relevant today.

“I...pondered how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.”

Those words were written in 1886. What is in a name? Probably, most of us in BIEN have toyed with terms that might work better than the familiar basic income – “social dividend”, “citizen’s income”, “basic income grant” (BIG), and so on. In the UK at the moment, the government’s new universal credit is not a basic income, but could be seen as a major step in creating a basis for moving towards what we might regard as a basic income.

The third statement is from a stranger fellow traveller. In 1947, a small group of 36 mavericks, led by Friedrich Hayek, convened a meeting in Montreux and set up the Mont Pelerin Society. Their ideology would not appeal to most BIEN members. However, for the best part of thirty years they met and wrote and lobbied, mostly ignored or regarded with disdain by conventional circles. In his preface to his 1982 edition of his famous *Capitalism and Freedom*, Milton Friedman, who had been a young economist at that 1947 meeting, wrote:

“Our basic function is to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the political impossible becomes the politically inevitable.”

Perhaps he was being a little cute, since his thinking had become part of the Washington Consensus by then. None of us think we are analogous to the overtly political Mont Pelerin Society, but after decades

of neglect, no less than eight of its 36 founders went on to receive Nobel Prizes in economics. My nominations go in on Monday!

More generally, the view that ideas go from being disregarded to being mainstream only after 30 years has, not surprisingly, appealed to me during the past 25 years. One could say that basic income is one of those ideas that Albert Hirschmann had in mind in saying that whenever a new progressive idea comes up it is subject to three reactions – the claim of futility (that it would be ineffectual), the claim of jeopardy (that it would endanger other goals), and the claim of perversity (that it would have unintended consequences). We have certainly faced those claims, and still do. But fewer people are being convinced by them.

As for the 30 years before an idea comes into its own, I feel quietly optimistic that we are ahead of the curve. Why is that? First, in the so-called rich countries social policy is in disarray, while insecurity and inequality have become pervasive and threatening to the social stability of society. In this, the precariat has become pivotal, growing angrier and more alienated by the day and filling the squares of cities in numerous countries. Second, we have seen a remarkable development in developing countries in the past decade. Here we have to admit that back in the 1980s we did not anticipate the extraordinary progress the debate on basic income would make in the near future. Yet in the past decade in particular, in Africa, Asia and Latin America, forms of non-contributory cash transfer have become hugely popular. We have seen the spread of so-called conditional cash transfers in Latin America and elsewhere.

These are not basic income schemes, being selective, targeted and conditional. However, they have legitimised the payment of cash in monthly payments as a vehicle to overcome poverty and insecurity. The task now is simpler – to show conclusively that targeting, selectivity and conditionality are profoundly wrong. Each day one can find more evidence and each day one can find that prominent policymakers have lost their confidence in one or other of the three. Conditionality is the worst of the challenges before us. It is pervasive and part of the new orthodoxy among politicians and some international financial agencies, notably the World Bank.

While the struggle goes on to show that conditionality is paternalistic, divisive and contrary to ideas of freedom and equality, a quiet revolution is taking place – basic income has been accepted as a legitimate option in development discourses. And we are seeing several countries where something like it is „on the cards“ or being tried. All BIEN members know of the law of 2004 in Brazil committing its government to a basic income. All BIEN members have been thrilled by the Namibian experiment. Now, we are in the middle of a pilot scheme in villages in India and in part of Delhi. Others in Brazil and elsewhere have lifted our spirits.

At national level, what amount to short-term basic income schemes have become integral to relief programmes following ecological and social shocks. And we are seeing national moves towards our goal in some unexpected places, including Mongolia and Iran.

We should not be carried away by these. However, they may turn out to be harbingers of a breakthrough. The evidence piles up that if the financial constraints are lifted, people everywhere act rationally in the interest of their families and their communities. The essential optimism that lies in the heart of all BIEN members is being supported in wonderful ways.

All of this is for more considered analysis on later occasions. A point on a journey is one for lightness, for reflecting on what drives us. At core, it is a sentiment that goes back thousands of years – a sense of social justice. In that regard, I am reminded of Aristotle’s wondrous words about *philia*. As I look back at our modest efforts, I can only think right now that BIEN has been, is and will remain a tribute to the virtues of friendship. For what has kept it together is a spirit of *philia* cemented by a common bond of wanting to make the world of inequality and exploitation a little better for all those who are economically insecure.

La lotta continua!