

Recent Political Manifesto Commitments to Basic Income in Canada

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Abstract

We detail the political party commitments of a basic income in Canada over the last decade, a period of time in which we have seen renewed conversations about a basic income in Canada. We find that in all but one case the policy commitments lack any detail about design choices and no commitments to a basic income reference the principles of a basic income. Overall, at the political level there continues to be a lot of detail that have yet to be mapped out, detail that is important to understanding the specific commitment and whether the stated objectives could be achieved with the form of basic income proposed. In addition, the implementation of key technical elements seems poorly understood. These existing political commitments provide limited information that B.C.'s Expert Panel on Basic Income can use to inform any design decisions. This is unfortunate, as the policy debates on a basic income are unlikely to move forward in any definitive fashion without the details being flushed out.

Introduction

While the Government of British Columbia started its investigation into the possibility of a basic income in the province in 2018, the notion of designing and implementing a basic income is a new policy conversation in neither Canada nor B.C. One of the most cited experiments with basic income, not only in Canada but also around the world, was the Manitoba Basic Annual Income Experiment (MINCOME) conducted between 1974 and 1979 (University of Toronto, n.d.). The MINCOME experiment ran its course and then faded from the policy discourse in Canada.¹ It has, however, re-emerged in the last decade, with several political parties including policies aligned with the idea of a basic income in their political platforms, most notably the federal and provincial Green parties. What have these recent policy commitments been, how detailed are the proposals, and are there enough details to see how they fit within the principles and elements outlined in Tedds et al. (2020)? Does this provide any guidance for B.C.'s Expert Panel on Basic Income? In this paper, we will review some of the history of the basic income idea in Canada, in politics, theory, and practice. We will look at the idea of a basic income as a recurrent item on the agenda of federal and provincial/territorial political parties in the last decade and map the proposals onto the framework developed in Tedds et al. (2020).² We begin with the federal parties and then move to the provincial/territorial parties, focusing on commitments made between 2007 and 2019.

Basic Income Policy Commitments: Federal Political Parties

Since 2007, the Green Party of Canada has presented its policy commitments in a document called Vision Green (Green Party of Canada, 2019b). That document has been updated periodically, and its commitments incorporated into various election platforms, but every version of Vision Green, including the inaugural 2007 version, has included a commitment to some form of a basic income. Initially, the commitment was to immediately institute a basic income for people with disabilities through the conversion of the disability tax credit to a refundable credit, the establishment of rigorous “needs based” eligibility standards, and changes in the disability test and definition of disability to allow people with disabilities to work without losing their eligibility for this basic income (Green Party of Canada, 2008, p. 77). Over the longer term, the party was committed to implementing a guaranteed livable income (GLI) after “time for study, reflection, and great support from all three levels of government” (Green Party of Canada, 2008, pp. 89-90).

¹ Simpson Simpson, W. (2020). *Basic Income experimentation yesterday and today: Challenges, achievements, lessons*. Research paper commissioned by the Expert Panel on Basic Income, British Columbia. goes into the detail on this and other basic income experiments.

² A concurrent research project is reviewing all political manifestos back to the 1940s and considering the context in which basic income policy discussions arise, along with the context in which these discussions end. We expect this work to be completed in 2021.

In 2015, the Green Party proposed in its election platform, as a step forward on a GLI, to provide dividends to every Canadian from the revenues collected from a price on carbon (Green Party of Canada, 2015, p. 137). It also made more detailed commitments toward a GLI, which it envisioned now as a negative income tax,³ therefore administered through the tax system, the payment for which would be set regionally at a level above the poverty line and have no behavioural or reporting conditions. It was also clearly stated that all other programs (provincial welfare, disability, seniors benefits, unemployment insurance, etc.) would be eliminated by the GLI (Green Party of Canada, 2015, p. 136). How this longer-term vision would work with the shorter-term vision of a social dividend is not addressed in the platform. The 2019 Green Party of Canada election platform modified this longer-term proposal for a basic income by committing fully to a national GLI with no means test, replacing all existing welfare and poverty programs; the benefit would vary regionally according to what would constitute a livable income, financed by higher taxes on those whose total income was above a certain, but unstated, amount (Green Party of Canada, 2019a). The GLI was no longer envisioned as a negative income tax, but instead as a universal benefit.

While only the Green Party of Canada provided a tangible commitment to the form and function of a basic income in the 2019 election, both the NDP and the Liberal Party of Canada included interesting steps toward a basic income. In its 2019 political platform, the NDP committed to launching a national basic income pilot project and to continue the recently cancelled Ontario pilot program, as key elements in its efforts at tackling poverty (New Democratic Party of Canada, 2019, p. 67). The Liberal Party of Canada committed to moving forward on a guaranteed family leave plan, which ensures a basic income to all parents in the first year of their child's life (Liberal Party of Canada, 2019, p. 9).

Table 1 maps these federal commitments to a basic income to the 13 design elements detailed in Tedds et al. (2020). Where multiple commitments have been made over the years, the table presents the most recent commitment. Table 1 makes it clear that, in all cases, the proposals lack key information needed to fully understand the design elements. In addition, where there are details regarding a design element, the commitments made across the parties vary considerably.

³ While the phrase “negative income tax” was used, there were no details in the platform that provided the changes to the tax system that would allow for the delivery of a negative income tax. It is possible that the commitment was instead to a refundable tax credit, which, while similar to a negative income tax, is a different benefit instrument.

Table 1

Summary of Political Party Commitments to a Basic Income, Mapped to the 13 Design Elements,

Canada, 2019

Design element	Green Party of Canada	NDP	Liberal Party of Canada
Objective	Short-term: environment social dividend Long-term: poverty elimination	Eliminating poverty	Compensation for unpaid work of social value
Sufficiency	Short-term: partially sufficient Long-term: fully sufficient	Fully sufficient	Unstated
Exclusivity	Short-term: in addition to all programs Long-term: replaces all welfare and poverty programs	Unstated	Unstated
Universality	Universal population	Pilot	To parents in the first year of child's life
Beneficiary unit	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated
Equivalence scale	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated
Uniformity	Varying regionally	Unstated	Unstated
Duration	Permanent	Pilot	One year
Frequency	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated
Conditionality	None	Unstated	Unstated
Form	Cash transfer	Unstated	Unstated
Administration	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated
Funding	Short-term: carbon tax Long-term: higher taxes above an income floor	Unstated	Unstated

Basic Income Policy Commitments: Provincial/Territorial Political Parties⁴

Building on the Green Party of Canada's vision of a basic income, all provincial arms of the party have, in the last decade, also committed to a basic income; however, the form of the basic income each is committing to varies across the provinces.

British Columbia

In British Columbia, the Green Party first committed to a GLI in its 2013 election platform (Greens of British Columbia, 2013, p. 9). Similar to the federal party commitment, the provincial commitment is to unify all current income support programs into one comprehensive GLI that would both ensure that all people could meet their basic needs and reduce disparity between the rich and poor. The party's 2017 election platform noted that phasing in a basic income was a key priority, and it would begin by carrying out a pilot project (Greens of British Columbia, 2017, p. 19).

The B.C. NDP's 2017 election platform made no commitments to a basic income but did commit to ending poverty in B.C. by developing and implementing a comprehensive poverty reduction plan (BC NDP, 2017, p. 39). The 2017 NDP/Green Confidence and Supply Agreement included the design and implementation of a basic income pilot to test whether giving people a basic income would be an effective way to reduce poverty and improve health, housing, and employment (BC NDP Caucus, 2017, p. 7). This commitment led to the creation of the Expert Panel on Basic Income.

Alberta

In Alberta, the Green Party's 2019 election platform committed to a guaranteed annual income delivered through the tax system, an income program that would be supplemented with other programs where needed (Green Party of Alberta, 2019, p. 1). The Alberta Liberal Party's 2019 election platform also voiced support for a basic income, delivered in partnership with the federal government and based on the recommendations of an exploratory committee on how best to implement the policy (Alberta Liberal, 2019, p. 25). The party also committed to studying the implementation of a basic income policy through a pilot program in the province.

Saskatchewan

The Green Party of Saskatchewan included a commitment to a GLI in its 2011 election platform, the objective of which would be to eliminate poverty (Green Party of Saskatchewan, 2011, p. 2). While no other details are given in the short, three-page document, it does reference the unconditional universal income advanced by Livable 4 All (L'Hirondelle, 2012). In 2016, the commitment changed to an assured income for everyone, which would provide a top-

⁴ We found no political commitments by any party in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. This may be because the Newfoundland Green Party is not officially registered in the province.

up for everyone whose income was below the poverty line (Green Party of Saskatchewan, 2016).

The only other commitment to a basic income in Saskatchewan was made by the Saskatchewan NDP caucus in 2015, which called for a basic income pilot, in the form of either an unconditional cash transfer or a negative income tax (Young, 2015). However, this commitment to a basic income has never been included in the party's subsequent election or leadership platforms.

Manitoba

One of the most complete basic income proposals to date comes from the Green Party of Manitoba. Its 2016 election platform provided a detailed description and costing for a guaranteed annual income for all adult Manitobans (Green Party of Manitoba, 2016, p. 15). It was described as a refundable tax credit delivered through the tax system, featuring a guarantee based on family size, reduced at a fixed benefit reduction rate against total family income. The program was costed at an estimated \$1.39 billion, which would be paid through \$1.22 billion savings in redundant tax credits and programs, \$130 million in savings from reduced social assistance, and \$40 million in savings from eliminating the Manitoba Child Benefit, the 55PLUS, and the Rent Assist programs. This proposal was updated in the party's 2019 election platform (Green Party of Manitoba, 2019). The updated proposal is also for a negative income tax-style basic income that replaces most refundable and non-refundable tax credits in Manitoba. Eligible beneficiaries would be those aged 18+, but must be tax residents of Manitoba who have filed two consecutive tax returns in the province. In addition, the beneficiary unit would be the nuclear family. The base benefit would be \$7,200 for an individual adult, with the square root scale used to adjust the benefit for the number of adults in the family. The benefit would be reduced by 13.5% for every additional dollar of net family income, including EI, GIS, WCB, OAS, and CCB. The total cost of the program would be \$1.58 billion. Part of the additional funding would come from elimination of tax credits, changes to personal income tax brackets and rates, and a carbon tax, making the basic income proposal also part social dividend. The objective of the program is poverty reduction, measured using the after-tax low income cut-off (LICO-AT). Poverty rates would be reduced across the board, with poverty among elderly couples eradicated. (Green Party of Manitoba, 2019). This proposal is squarely informed by the existing academic literature modelling a basic income Canada, which is detailed and critiqued in Tedds and Crisan (2020).

The only other commitment to a basic income in Manitoba was in the Manitoba Liberal Party's 2016 election platform. It made a commitment to "financial security through MINCOME," referring to the province's 1970s basic income experiment, discussed above (Manitoba Liberal Party, 2016, p. 5). The guaranteed minimum income would be in the form of a guaranteed wage, where people who do not need it pay it back through monthly payroll deductions. The benefit is likened to employment insurance, if you become unemployed, or welfare if your situation worsens. The cost of the program would be determined based on a study, but the

program was seen as potentially resulting in costs savings for the province in the areas of health, education, family services, and justice, as well as eliminating a complex welfare system.

Table 2 maps these commitments to a basic income by the political parties in Western Canada to the 13 design elements detailed in Tedds et al. (2020). Where multiple commitments have been made across the years, the table presents the parties' most recent commitment. As with the federal parties (Table 1), in all but one case the proposals lack key information needed to fully understand the design elements. The only detailed proposal comes from the Green Party of Manitoba. In addition, where there are details regarding the design element, the commitments made across the parties vary considerably.

Table 2

Summary of Provincial Political Party Commitments to a Basic Income, Elements, Western Canada

Mapped to the 13 Design

	British Columbia	Alberta		Saskatchewan	Manitoba	
Design element	Green Party 2017	Green Party 2019	Liberal Party 2019	Green Party 2016	Green Party 2019	Liberal Party 2016
Objective	Poverty elimination	Poverty reduction	Poverty elimination	Poverty elimination	Poverty reduction (LICO-AT)	Poverty elimination
Sufficiency	Fully sufficient	Fully sufficient	Fully sufficient	Fully sufficient	Partially sufficient (\$7,200 for an individual adult)	Fully sufficient
Exclusivity	Replaces all current income support programs	In addition to programs where needed	Unstated	Unstated	Replaces most existing provincial refundable and non-refundable tax credits	Eliminate the welfare system
Universality	Universal population	Tax filers	Pilot	Universal population	Any adult 18+ in Manitoba who has filed two consecutive tax returns	Unstated
Beneficiary unit	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Nuclear family	Unstated
Equivalence scale	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Square root scale	Unstated
Uniformity	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Uniform benefit	Unstated
Duration	Permanent	Permanent	Unstated	Permanent	Permanent benefit	Unstated
Frequency	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Not stated	Monthly
Conditionality	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Income below poverty line	Benefit reduced by 13.5% for any additional net family income reported; net family income includes not just earnings but also EI, GIS, WCB,	Wages below a threshold

					OAS, and CCB payments	
Form	Cash transfer	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Refundable tax credit	Guaranteed wage
Administration	Unstated	Tax system	Unstated	Unstated	Canada Revenue Agency via the tax system	Payroll
Funding	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	\$1.58B program cost, partially self-financed by cancelling select refundable and non-refundable tax credits (\$1.53B), changing personal income tax brackets and thresholds (0.3B), \$50/tonne carbon tax (\$0.34B)	Reduced costs from health, education, family service, and justice

Ontario

In Ontario, the 2014 election platform of the provincial Green Party stated that the party would push the Ontario government to establish a guaranteed annual income for Ontarians (Green Party of Ontario, 2014, p. 12). A little more detail was provided in the party's 2018 election platform, which committed to implementing a basic income guarantee for all Ontarians at the low income cut-off level (Ontario Green Party, 2018, p. 23).

The Ontario Liberal Party's 2014 election platform committed to implementing a new poverty reduction strategy and transforming social assistance (Liberal Ontario, 2018, pp. 4-5). The Liberals won the election and in Budget 2016, the government announced a basic income pilot as part of the path to a comprehensive reform of social assistance (Government of Ontario, 2016, p. 132).⁵ The Liberal Party, and the Ontario NDP, reconfirmed their commitments to the pilot and its evaluation in their 2018 election platforms (Ontario Liberal Party, 2018, p. 14) (Ontario NDP, 2018). However, the Liberals lost the 2018 election to the Conservative Party of Ontario, which had verbally committed to keeping the basic income pilot begun by the Liberals in 2017; the party cancelled the pilot shortly after winning the 2018 election.

Quebec

In June 2016, the Quebec government set up an expert committee to explore moving toward a basic income guarantee, which submitted its final report (Volume 3) in November 2017 (Gouvernement du Québec, 2018). With respect to a basic income, the committee found the idea to be a utopia, albeit a source of inspiration for its recommendation. The committee made 23 recommendations, each of which is entirely about reforms that can be made to the existing system (Ministère des Finances, 2017). In 2018, Québec solidaire in its election platform committed to conducting a guaranteed minimum income pilot in several municipalities, with an eye to eventually using it to replace social assistance benefits (Quebec Solidaire, 2018, p. 17).

New Brunswick

The New Brunswick Green Party in its 2018 election platform pledged to ensure that within 10 years no New Brunswicker would fall below Statistics Canada's basic standard of living measure. As a way to meet this commitment, it promised to pilot a basic income guarantee (BIG) program in three regions for three years, with the objective of phasing it in over time (Green Party of New Brunswick, 2018, p. 17).

Nova Scotia

The Nova Scotia Green Party's 2013 election platform supported the concept of a guaranteed annual income as a way to address poverty (Green Party of Nova Scotia, 2013, p. 8). The 2017 election platform is more specific, stating that a GLI, delivered as a form of a

⁵ The details of this pilot are outlined Simpson, W. (2020). *Basic Income experimentation yesterday and today: Challenges, achievements, lessons*. Research paper commissioned by the Expert Panel on Basic Income, British Columbia.

negative income tax, set at the threshold of a livable income, would eliminate poverty and be paid for by streamlining existing benefits and tax credits into one lump-sum payment that citizens could allocate toward their own needs, rather than having to request various benefits from different levels of government or agencies (Green Party of Nova Scotia, 2013, p. 8).

Prince Edward Island

The PEI Green Party's 2015 election platform outlined a plan to establish a basic income guarantee (BIG) commission to review past research and conduct a public consultation to identify the style of BIG that best suits PEI (p. 11). The Green Party's 2019 election platform recommitted to this idea and noted that the party would set up a commission to develop a BIG pilot that would be expanded to all islanders based on the outcomes of its evaluation (p. 11). Likewise, in 2019, the PEI NDP's election platform committed to a five-year pilot project to evaluate a guaranteed annual income as a way to ensure a livable income for everyone. The pilot would target recipients of the HST rebate, based on income tax filing (NDP Prince Edward Island). The 2019 election ended with a minority government in which the PEI Progressive Conservative Party operates as a consensus government with the PEI Liberal Party and the PEI Green Party. In July 2019, the PEI Legislative Assembly created a special committee that would, in part, report back on recommendations regarding the creation of a BIG pilot for PEI (Legislative Assembly of Prince Edward Island, 2019).

Territories

Both the Northwest Territories and Nunavut govern by consensus government and, to date, no consensus government commitments have been made to a basic income. In Yukon, the Yukon Green Party, as part of its core beliefs, is committed to a GLI that will replace all existing income assistance programs. The amount of the GLI income supplement would be determined by cost of living, along with other factors (Yukon Green Party, n.d., p. 15). In addition, the Yukon NDP 2016 election platform committed to developing a guaranteed annual income pilot project for Yukon as a means to reduce poverty (Yukon New Democrats, 2016, p. 16).

Table 3 maps all of these commitments to a basic income by the political parties in Eastern Canada to the 13 design elements detailed in Tedds et al. (2020). Where multiple commitments have been made over the years, the table presents the most recent commitment. As with the federal provincial parties and those in Western Canada, all proposals lack key information needed to fully understand the design elements. In addition, where there are details regarding a design element, the commitments made across the parties vary considerably.

Table 3

Summary of Political Party Commitments to a Basic Income, Mapped to the 13 Design Elements, Eastern Canada

	Ontario	Quebec	New Brunswick	Nova Scotia	PEI		Yukon
Design element	Green Party 2018	Québec solidaire 2018	Green Party 2018	Green Party 2017	Green Party 2019	NDP 2019	Green Party 2016
Objective	Poverty elimination	Poverty elimination	Poverty elimination	Poverty elimination	Poverty elimination	Poverty elimination	Poverty elimination
Sufficiency	Fully sufficient	Fully sufficient	Fully sufficient	Fully sufficient	Fully sufficient	Fully sufficient	Fully sufficient
Exclusivity	Unstated	Eventually replaces social assistance	Unstated	Replaces all existing benefits and tax credits	Unstated	Unstated	Replaces all existing income assistance
Universality	Universal population	Pilot, then universal	Pilot, then universal	Universal population	Pilot, then universal	Pilot, recipients of HST credit	Universal
Beneficiary unit	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Household	Unstated
Equivalence scale	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated
Uniformity	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Varying with cost of living and other factors
Duration	Permanent	Pilot, then universal	Pilot, then universal	Permanent	Permanent	Pilot	Permanent
Frequency	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated
Conditionality	Income below poverty line	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated
Form	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Refundable tax credit	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated
Administration	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Tax system	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated
Funding	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated	Eliminates existing benefits and tax credits	Unstated	Unstated	Unstated

Note: Ontario does not include details of the pilot which was a government of Ontario initiative and is detailed in a companion paper. Quebec does not include details of the Quebec Basic Income Expert panel, which was a government of Quebec initiative.

Conclusion

We have detailed the political party commitments of a basic income in Canada over the last decade, a period of time in which we have seen renewed conversations about a basic income in Canada. We see that in all but one case the policy commitments lack any detail about the series of design choices. In all cases, there is little reference to the principles of a basic income and how the design choices address those principles. Overall, at the political level there continues to be a lot of detail that has yet to be mapped out, detail that is important to understanding the specific commitment and whether the stated objectives could be achieved with the form of basic income proposed. In addition, the implementation of key technical elements seem poorly understood. In particular, some proposals reference the basic income delivered as a negative income tax, with no discussion as to what tandem changes are needed to deliver on that element. Finally, the political commitments provide limited information that B.C.'s Expert Panel on Basic Income can use to inform any design decisions, other than the fact that the reduction or elimination of poverty is the most common stated objective of a basic income. This is unfortunate, as the policy debates on a basic income are unlikely to move forward in any definitive fashion without the details being flushed out. While it is clear that the Manitoba Green Party is focused on providing more details for its commitment to a basic income, what may be appropriate for a small province whose population is heavily concentrated in one city may not be appropriate for a larger province, such as B.C., whose population is less concentrated. This then leads to the question, If the details of a basic income in Canada are not fleshed out in political policy commitments, is there any existing literature that has done so? As it turns out, there is a small but growing literature that attempts to model, in detail, basic income proposals. What forms of a basic income have been modelled in Canada to date, what are their costs, and what options have been put forward to fund the policy once implemented? These questions are taken up in Tedds and Crisan (2020).

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