

Team Human:
Taking Basic Income To The Next Level

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"Leaders need to recognize that a compassionate society must create a wealth of opportunities for meaningful work, so that everyone who is capable of contributing can do so." - Dalai Lama, 2016.

Very little about human nature has changed, but almost everything about our environment has changed. In this lies our great current promise and peril.

Humans are built to survive, with contradictory impulses pulling us to cooperate with and take advantage of each other. We cooperate as long as we feel safe. But when insecure, we put ourselves first. Today, the sphere of cooperation for most people is decreasing. And the field of competition is growing. Increasingly, we get what we can, distrust those we don't know or understand, and withdraw into smaller and more distant groups. Everyone feels surrounded by "the other". And it's about to get worse.

Since the 1970's, after a brief phase of increasing Western prosperity after the unprecedented investments of World War II, our win-lose economic model has been hollowing out society. Incomes have stagnated or dropped, and the economy has turned from full-time production to part-time services. Only massive deficit spending has kept us afloat. The US debt is now greater than 20 trillion dollars. Almost every western country is one economic shock away from being unable to service their debt. As are households.

And now we are entering the next stage, with technology automating the service economy, and artificial intelligence beginning to automate even the intellectual economy. With an ever shrinking pie, the centrifugal forces are accelerating. The worst instincts of humans in survival mode are coming to the fore. From north to south, Europe is fracturing. The signs of social and political unrest we have seen since the 2008 financial crash foreshadow our future – our civilization coming apart.

Everyone knows this, feels it viscerally, across the generations. It is the common thread uniting the core supporters of both Trump and Sanders. Both the young and the old are increasingly distressed. There is a direct link to the opioid epidemic and increasing suicide rate in rural communities. The US unemployment rate appears low only because a greater percentage of the population has given up on employment than ever before. Except for a fortunate few, the jobs that are available are precarious, low paid, and insufficient to support home ownership or a dignified retirement. And automation continues its relentless march, hollowing out the security of the jobs that remain. The warning signs are clear. Civilizations are not guaranteed success or even survival. We could collapse. And right now that is the road we are on.

Unless we do something. And the natural solution rapidly gaining mind-share is implementation of a Basic Income (BI). Since the iconic conservative economist Milton Friedman proposed a "negative income tax" in the 1960's, economists have known that providing monetary stimulus at the bottom end, to individuals, is at least as effective as

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providing it at the top end, such as the \$4 trillion provided by the US Federal Reserve to banks and corporations since the 2008 financial crisis. The question is one of implementation, with BI pilots now being explored in jurisdictions around the world. However, to be widely legislated and implemented, it must be supported by both sides of the political spectrum, and mesh with human nature.

Which is why a basic income must come with jobs attached. The Dalai Lama said it well in the quote heading this essay. The prominent economist Larry Summers captured the same need in 2015: *"In our society, whether it is taking care of the young or taking care of the old, or repairing a lot that needs to be repaired, there is a huge amount of very valuable work that needs to be done. It's much less clear there's a viable business model for getting it done. That suggests important roles for public policy."*

Bill Gross, one-time manager of the world's largest bond fund, said in 2016 that we need a *"Keynesian/FDR job corps or a Kennedyesque AmeriCorps that puts people to work helping other people"*. Bill Gates in 2017 said *"What the world wants is to take this opportunity to... free up labor, to let us do a better job of reaching out to the elderly, having smaller class size, helping kids with special needs."*

And Barack Obama said much the same thing in his last interview as US President, that Democrats *"are going to have to start thinking about where do jobs come from and how much government involvement is there in the marketplace. Do we have a job-sharing economy that works so that everybody has work? Because it turns out work is not just about finances, but it is about dignity and feeling like you got a place in the world."*

Adding jobs to the BI also makes it politically viable. Without a jobs component, a clear eyed assessment suggests it will not be practically implementable – able to be widely legislated at a reasonable level of income. That is, half our citizenry are conservative minded, with an equal vote, and are unlikely to accept BI at a meaningful level sufficient to raise a family and have a dignified retirement as long as it looks like one-way free money without an obligation to give anything back to society.

This reality was well described by J. D. Vance, in his book "Hillbilly Elegy", explaining why the US "red" states benefiting the most from social assistance turned conservative. As a teenager, working as a cashier in a grocery store, he saw people gaming assistance programs while talking on cell-phones that he could not afford. Resentment of these kind of abuses of public assistance was a primary driver of the turning of an eventual majority of citizens in the red states against liberalism. This is human nature, at root a primordial desire for fairness to ensure the few do not take the food of the many. Now, imagine the reaction of our citizenry to proposal of a completely unconditional BI at a genuinely meaningful level. This assessment suggests it will not be able to get the political support required to implement it in the first place.

On the other hand, add a jobs component, and a win-win solution is found. Conservative objections fall away. The political centre is found. The one idea which left and right say they agree on is "community". Support of 70% or greater are likely within reach.

Political viability is the reason adding jobs to BI is necessary. But it is not the animating reason. The more important reason is the need. Our world has so much work that needs to be done, just starting with health, education, and the environment, and no current way to pay for it. Consider just two requirements. We will not be able to improve the tragic final years of so many of our elderly who end in deep depression in senior homes without large application of resources, starting with people. And we will not be able to get rapidly

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emerging life-transforming advances in genetic health care to anyone but the wealthiest without huge investment of resources, starting with people.

Dozens of other serious, urgent, unfunded needs can easily be added to the list. Our planet itself faces significant low probability / maximal impact risks for which we have no solution, from asteroids to volcanic eruptions to solar electromagnetic pulses that destroy our electrical systems. Planets that survive don't make it by hoping they stay lucky. Humanity is running blind and way over-extended. Another percentage point on GDP growth is not our chief need. Care, protection, and promotion of our civilization must move to the forefront, while there is still time.

Adding jobs to BI both solves the challenge of automation, and provides a way to get so much other critically important work done. Without very large investments, starting with people, these problems will not get solved. If we do not leverage BI as the solution to meet these needs, another is unlikely to arise in time. Organizations, systems, and processes need to be established to bridge the surpluses of people and work. We need to find a way to prioritize the work and provide a fulfilling role for everyone within the great diversity of the human family. But this can be done. We have the expertise, and technology can help. We can quickly move to a world where there are more jobs than we have people. And note the self-sustaining benefit: everyone in such a win-win world is automatically incentivized to automate as much of their jobs as possible and make everything more efficient.

Without jobs, basic income is just another subsistence economic insecurity program. With jobs, we can get it to a level sufficient to raise a family and lead a dignified retirement, and help move our civilization to the next level. It is the obvious next step in our maturation.

Humanity is a team. We just don't know it or act like it yet. On a very small planet, in a very large and cold universe, with destructive trends increasing, unless we find a way to get on one team, our prospects are bleak. Technology and BI are offering us the opportunity to finally become one team. When we can move humanity past the tipping point of insecurity to security, our worst instincts will be dampened, and the best of human nature will be able to act. This is the promise on the other side of the peril. When society is no longer limited to a win-lose game, when humanity has the mental space to look outwards more than inwards, then the golden age of human civilization can truly begin.

Humanity has already done some amazing things. But we ain't seen nothing yet. When we finally move our civilization's consciousness out of the jungle in which it is still trapped, from Darwinian competition to mutual cooperation, then our potential will become truly unlimited.

The basic income is a great solution that technology has made necessary. But it's only politically viable and genuinely worthwhile if society benefits as well as individuals. When we add jobs to the mix, a BI at a genuinely meaningful level becomes politically feasible, practically implementable, and will finally free humanity to finally start building the truly great civilization we have always been destined to create.

This moment in history looks like a crisis. Times are dire. But if we approach the solution as one team, it can be our greatest opportunity. We should grasp it. We may not have another chance.