

Time to consider a guaranteed minimum income

By Edward Keenan

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It's familiar news by now that jobs — full-time careers with decent salaries, full benefits, generous pensions, and lifelong stability — appear to be an endangered species. The question is whether it's possible for that to be a positive development. And if it's possible, how do we make it happen?

A series of stories this spring by the *Star*'s Sara Mojtahedzadeh detailed the new normal of precarious work in Toronto, and an avalanche of reports backs up her vivid reporting: a majority of Toronto workers are in temporary, part-time or contract jobs now, according to a United Way and McMaster University report, for example.

We're aware of this, and we're talking about it, which is a good thing. The less good thing, I think, is that when politicians talk about it, for the most part, they talk about trying to bring good old-fashioned jobs back. Alberta's new government has proposed a 47-per-cent increase in the minimum wage. Mayor John Tory noted the importance of good jobs and wages in improving Toronto's quality of life, the *Star* reported this week. And the federal NDP and (to a lesser extent) the Conservatives both promised recently to bolster workplace protections for interns.

I am an enthusiastic supporter of better workplace protections and wages. I have a good, unionized, stable job. I like it. But regulation of work and workplaces isn't likely adequate to solve the problem we face. No matter how high minimum wages are, they will not help people unable to get a job that pays them. And there are a lot of reasons to think that no matter how good workplace safeguards are, the number of people who can expect to hold a conventional job will continue to drop.

This phenomenon is the subject of the cover story of this month's issue of the *Atlantic*, in which Derek Thompson looks at the future as "A World Without Work." The state of technology is such that we're nearing a place in which the needs of the economy, and the needs of the people in it, can be met without requiring the labour of everyone. Thompson cites some now familiar benchmarks: the corporate giant of the 1960s, AT&T, employed 758,611 people; today's (otherwise much bigger) corporate giant, Google, has only 55,000 workers.

It isn't the case (or isn't only the case) that greedy corporations hate hiring people. In many cases, the employees just aren't needed. How many mail sorters and carriers have you put out of work because it's easier, cheaper, and faster for you to conduct most of your correspondence by email? How many secretaries have lost their jobs because we all carry mobile phones stocked full of message and scheduling applications? How many retail clerks are replaced when we shop online? Most of these jobs are supplanted by things or processes that are not just cheaper, but better in many ways for many people.

But how do people pay their bills if no employers want to hire them? Thompson discusses a solution that's sometimes proposed in Canada (and was endorsed by the federal Liberals at a convention): a guaranteed minimum income. The idea is to extend to all people essentially the program we already have in place for senior citizens through old age security: payments from the government that ensure they have enough to cover the necessities of life. This would provide some stability for people hopping from gig to gig, ensuring that the absence of a full-time job wouldn't mean the absence of food and shelter.

It's not quite as revolutionary as it might at first seem — until recently, unemployment insurance provided adequate income security for most workers' needs, and functioned as an income supplement to seasonal workers in some industries. We already provide some direct, unconditional income support to every parent in the country.

There are legitimate obstacles to making such income supplements universally available that need thought and debate. But it is an idea worth far more discussion, I think.

Thompson sees another problem, in that he fears income on its own won't provide the dignity and psychological fulfilment that jobs do.

I'm less worried about that. A post-jobs world seems unlikely to be a post-work world. Most

people want to be productive, but are forced by economic circumstance to do things they hate doing. If we all had the equivalent of a trust fund, I think most of us would do as many trust fund kids do: we'd throw ourselves into creative and artistic projects, charitable enterprises, politics and community work, entrepreneurship — the fulfilling (and useful) labour that is difficult or risky to depend on financially, and so is now overwhelmingly the province of the privileged.

It is a long-promised science fiction premise: a world in which people are freed from the drudgery of mindless work they hate and able to pursue the things they love. The future's looming crisis isn't a lack of jobs; it's a lack of the income those jobs have traditionally distributed. Solve the latter problem, and the post-job world looks like nothing to fear.