

Editorial – The guaranteed annual income: A little idea that might just solve some very big problems

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Changes in Canadian public policy tend to be incremental, but a groundswell seems to be building for a plan that could radically remake our social benefits structure.

The idea – guaranteed annual income – is not new; it's been argued over by academics since at least the 1940s, and a version was tested in Manitoba in the 1970s. What's different this time is proponents now find themselves in positions of power in municipal governments, provincial legislatures and on Parliament Hill.

Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard says he's "dead serious" about trying it, and last month appointed a cabinet committee to that end. It is presided by Labour Minister François Blais, a former Laval University political science professor who just happens to have written a book on minimum income programs.

Last week, another Laval academic – Jean-Yves Duclos, a former economics professor who after his election last year became the federal Families, Children and Social Development Minister – says he too is willing to look at implementing it.

The concept is simple. Replace the raft of income-support provisions currently administered, means-tested, audited and doled out by various levels of government – welfare,

community housing allowances, employment insurance – with a single benefit. It could be run through the tax system. If your income is below a certain level, you get a cheque.

Many conservatives have long liked the idea, which triggers the same intellectual-pleasure regions as a flat tax and could make government small and more efficient. The suggestion in Quebec is the province could shutter at least one department entirely. That appeals to the austerity-minded wing of Mr. Couillard's cabinet.

Fans on the left – see Alberta's NDP Finance Minister Joe Ceci, who before politics was an anti-poverty advocate – like the universality and the idea it could reduce income and social inequality.

The arguments against guaranteed income are also well-established, the main one being that it could act as a disincentive to work. Another is that governments can safely be relied upon to screw things up, as they arguably did in Dauphin, Man.

It's time to test the assumptions in the real world. Launch some guaranteed annual income pilot programs. Let's see how theory translates into practice in Canada.