

reply

## **An untested premise: would voters really support redistribution through UBI which left many of them worse off? A reply to 'Changing circumstances and new basic premises: turning the affordability and feasibility relationship on its head' by Howard Robert Reed et al<sup>1</sup>**

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Yes, a 'Plimsoll Line' or minimum income guarantee at a decent level should be an ambition of any social security system. There are both universal and targeted routes to this goal. Universal ones have the advantage of better take-up. But the much bigger issue is what system is able to achieve minimum entitlements adequate to escape poverty, spending more money on redistribution with the public's consent. The proposed 'starter scheme' retains a high degree of means-testing, contributing to a design that sharply reduces poverty with the help of extra tax revenue (Reed et al, 2023b). Universal Credit could also achieve this with higher entitlements; calling it a 'patching' scheme does not change this (Hirsch, 2023).

The more full-blown versions of UBI would involve many better-off voters accepting high taxes that reduce their net income, in some cases by a lot. The key assertion of the authors here is that people would vote for this if delivered as a 'universal' scheme, rather than to an 'out-group'. This supposition remains untested at the ballot box. Preliminary evidence that the pandemic improved public support for social protection does not demonstrate the permanent and dramatic transformation in voter opinion that the authors imply.

Of course I support any scheme setting a Plimsoll Line that brings the lowest incomes closer to the Minimum Income Standard that I've spent the past 16 years helping develop – without imagining that this income level will be guaranteed in full by any method in the foreseeable future. The key question is whether a universal benefit can be set higher than a targeted guarantee, if the former requires much higher taxes but may stimulate greater willingness to pay them. The day after the election when people vote for this, I'll be the first to join the celebrations.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> This article is part of a debate. To view the full debate, see issue 31.1.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

## References

- Hirsch, D. (2023) The big tax hikes that make UBI ‘affordable’ could be used to cut poverty in more targeted ways: a reply to ‘Universal Basic Income is affordable and feasible: evidence from UK economic microsimulation modelling’ by Howard Robert Reed et al, *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 31(1): 163–5, doi: [10.1332/175982721X16702576055509](https://doi.org/10.1332/175982721X16702576055509).
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