

A NATION OF INDEPENDENT PEOPLE

Götz Werner, the German business leader, would revolutionise society by means of the Basic Income.

M. Werner, you are accompanying the President of the Federal Republic of Germany in Latin America. When do you intend going into politics ?

I have no intention of doing that.

Why not ? It would be an opportunity to bring in the Basic Income.

The idea of the Basic Income is not yet ready to be politicised. It is a cultural impulse that needs time. As soon as the idea has lodged itself in people's minds, politicians will know how to implement it.

But don't you want to be one of them ? You come from the business world and are free of partisan constraints.

Politics is not as bad as that. I don't wish to classify myself politically. I am not an activist. In any case business leaders don't make good politicians. And today there is enough interest in the Basic Income among politicians – in all parties.

Really ? The SPD doesn't support it.

Maybe not the senior politicians, but rather further down in the party. The local SPD Association in Constance has contacted me recently. I get invitations to speak at many meetings – coming from all parties. There is a lot of initiative among the rank and file of the parties, but at the top people don't dare to commit themselves.

But the Presiding Minister of Thuringe, Dieter Althaus, is pushing for a form of Basic Income through a citizens' solidarity contribution.

Yes, but with that exception ranking politicians remain very reserved. And I understand that. After all, their first aim is to be re-elected.

In your opinion, in which party is the Basic Income most likely to be adopted?

Potentially, in all of them.

You are speaking diplomatically.

But with realism. Someone recently said to me : With the Basic Income, I have the opportunity to reconcile my socialist heart with my neoliberal reasoning. In this way financial security can be created while capitalism is liberalised. Everyone can identify with that.

Why do you interest yourself in this subject ? As a business leader and billionaire, you can live without the Basic Income.

That's not the point. It's a question of fraternity in business life. People must have regard for their fellow-men – and that's the main point in my book. The reason why so many people, in Germany and throughout the world, are suffering under capitalism is that such respect hardly exists. Our society is being poisoned by this egotism.

And the antidote ? It's the Basic Income ?

Yes. The decisive element in the Basic Income is the separation of work and income. At present, if I recruit someone at **dm**, I cannot easily fire him – simply because the employee is doing his work mainly for the income which guarantees him a living. With the Basic Income all that will change : I, as employer, will be able to coordinate my recruitment policy in a rational way ; for his part, the employee will have freedom to choose his job. The Germans will be able to become a nation of independent workers, freelancers.

Why can't they be that today?

At present we live in a political environment which hinders initiative. But we should be encouraging initiative. The moment people get their first Basic Income payment they will ask themselves the question : What do I really want to work at ? The Basic Income will itself release a vast wave of private initiative.

But maybe many people will just stay in front of the television.

That too, if you like. But the social collapse we're heading for now would not come to pass. I see this in Recife : Since the introduction of the "bolsa familia" (Brazilian family income), you can again go out of your hotel in the evening in safety. Compare that with the rioting in the Paris suburbs last year! If things don't change pretty soon, it's almost certain the same thing will happen in our country. In fact it's as certain as two and two make four.

The G8 summit is coming up, and with it a wave of criticism in the face of globalisation. Would the Basic Income be an answer?

Of course. The problem of the intrinsic link between work and income is a worldwide problem. Finally, we have to realise that we live in a single world and that what one does here in Europe or in the USA also has consequences in the Third World and *vice versa*. The fact that poverty exists is not the fault of globalisation – it is the fault of lack of freedom within the present economic order. Rich or poor, nobody is free today if he is chained to the workplace because his income depends on it. You can see this among workers and managers alike. Quite simply, the Basic Income is tailor-made for globalisation. It is up to the rich countries to be the ground-breakers and at last face up to this most urgent of social questions. We need a global social community – with a Basic Income for every individual. In the longer term that will do more good than any amount of development assistance.

We're now back to square one. How can the Basic Income be introduced?

Obviously, in our countries the élite should take responsibility for it. Our upper classes must get away from the polarisation between rich and poor and concern themselves seriously with the social question. That applies to the well-off, to the cultured and, even more so, to the media.

When do you think the Basic Income will be implemented?

Difficult to say. I think it is still too soon to put too much pressure on the political system. One mustn't ask too much of them: the politicians should deal with the problems of today; like managers. But it's up to citizens to reflect on the problems of the day after tomorrow. At the end of the day, politicians get their mandate from us and respond to the currents that influence society. But it is up to society to produce these currents.

- Interview by Konstantin J. Sakkas

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Profile : Götz Werner

Born in 1944 into a family of dealers in consumer chemicals, he created in 1973 the chain of consumer chemicals shops **dm**, now number two in the market. He took up anthroposophy and is married with seven children. At the time of the interview (2007) he is accompanying President Horst Köhler through Latin America.

His mission :

Götz Werner's new book is called « Income for Everyone » and deals with his idea of an unconditional Basic Income for everyone.

This model would be financed entirely from VAT, which could be as high as 50% if all other form of taxation is abolished. (**VIVANT prefers a consumption tax levied only on finished products**)