

CONTRIBUTORS

Opinion | Part 1: Bringing basic income back into focus

A pilot program was making a difference in people's lives before it was cut short.

Updated April 10, 2026 at 6:00 a.m. | April 10, 2026   



Tim Button was a part of Ontario's basic income pilot program.

John Rennison/The Hamilton Spectator file photo

By Tom Cooper

Tom Cooper is the director of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction.

Ten years ago, Ontario took a bold step in social policy.

In the spring of 2016, Premier Kathleen Wynne's government announced it would launch an ambitious experiment: a Basic Income Pilot designed to test whether guaranteeing a minimum level of income could change people's lives.

It was a significant political decision. Basic income had circulated in policy debates for decades, but few governments had been willing to put the idea to a real-world test.



CONTRIBUTORS **OPINION**

Part 2: Basic income experiment continues to inspire

Instead of forcing people through a maze of fragmented social assistance programs, Ontario wanted to see if providing a stable income floor could improve health, housing, financial stability and employment outcomes.

For years, former Progressive Conservative senator Hugh Segal had urged governments to test the idea of a guaranteed income. After the announcement, he led a provincewide consultation asking communities what such a pilot should look like.

At the same time, University of Manitoba economist Evelyn Forget had documented the health and social impacts of the “Mincome” project in Manitoba in the 1970s, showing income stability could reduce hospitalizations, improve mental health and strengthen community well-being. Would the same be true 40 years later in Ontario?

While a handful of basic income experiments were underway around the world, Ontario’s pilot was among the most robust, involving thousands of participants and a multi-year evaluation.



CONTRIBUTORS **OPINION**

Part 2: Basic income experiment continues to inspire

By 2017, the pilot launched in Hamilton, Brantford, Thunder Bay and Lindsay. Convincing people to enrol wasn’t easy. Years of experience had taught many living in poverty to be skeptical of new promises from government. Within months however, 1,000 low-income residents in Hamilton had been randomly selected for the pilot.

The pilot was carefully designed but implemented quickly, perhaps too quickly. With only one year left in the Liberal government’s mandate, it launched in a politically uncertain moment. All three party leaders at the time — Wynne, Andrea Horwath and Doug Ford — said they supported allowing the experiment to run and evaluating the results.

As we would find out, one of those commitments proved short-lived.

At the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, we quickly realized the pilot was attracting attention far beyond Ontario. Media outlets from around the world began calling, eager to understand what was happening here and to speak with participants.

The Wall Street Journal, PBS, the BBC, South Korean TV and Japan's public broadcaster were among the outlets that came to Hamilton to report on the experiment.

One of the participants they met was Tim Button.

Tim had worked as a roofer until a fall left him injured and unable to continue in the trade. Like many people in similar circumstances, he also fell through the cracks of a social support system that too often leaves people surviving rather than living.

When Tim joined the pilot, I saw the transformation firsthand. He was re-engaging in community life and feeling better.

Tim used a small portion of his basic income to visit his family in Timmins for the holidays, the first time he had gone in 20 years.

I received an email from him early on Christmas morning. He had been outside shovelling his sister's driveway and wrote about how good it felt to be helping.

Tim shared his story with the media, helping explain Ontario's experiment to audiences around the world. "It's making a huge difference for me," [he told The Associated Press](#), noting he was eating healthier and could afford fruit and vegetables.

In early 2018 I received a speaking invitation from a United Way in Southwestern Ontario that wanted to learn more about basic income. Instead of going alone, I tapped Tim on the shoulder and asked if he would come speak.

His message was simple but profound.

Basic income was working.

He won over the audience that day. But Tim was far from alone.

Many participants chose to speak publicly about their experiences. It took courage. They understood they were not simply enrolled in a program. In many ways, they were helping to pioneer a new approach to lifting people out of poverty — perhaps one that could become the most important social policy of the 21st century.

Their willingness to share those stories helped turn a provincial pilot project into a global conversation about income security. But the story of Ontario's basic income pilot did not unfold as planned.

In the summer of 2018, shortly after Ford's Progressive Conservative government took office, the program was cancelled one year into the promised three-year

timeline.

For participants whose lives had begun to stabilize, the decision was a catastrophe.

Yet even with the pilot cut short, the lessons it revealed did not disappear.

Ten years after Ontario first announced the experiment, the debate about how best to guarantee economic security for Canadians continues. And the conversation about what comes next may only be beginning.

Opinion articles are based on the author's interpretations and judgments of facts, data and events. [More details](#)

[REPORT AN ERROR](#)

[JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS](#)

[ABOUT THE SPEC](#)
