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## Melkert jobs, a unique experiment

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### **Melkert Jobs, a unique experiment**

**Kees Mosselman and Joan Muysken**

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# Melkert Jobs, a unique experiment

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## ABSTRACT:

Contrary to the still prevailing belief in the Netherlands that the Melkert job project was a failure, we argue based on a political-economic analysis that the Melkert job should be considered an innovative and successful project. It fully acknowledged that a large group of long-term unemployed should not be left in the lurch by creating basic jobs for this group, leading to improved public services. The Melkert job as a basic job thus represents a concrete implementation of the job guarantee, which currently is increasingly gaining interest in Europe.

JEL codes: E65, J68, H53, N34

Key words: Melkert Jobs, public employment, job guarantee, basic income

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## 1. Introduction

In the early 1980s, a unique public sector jobs project was introduced in the Netherlands. This project, which became known as 'Melkert jobs', was named after Ad Melkert, the Minister of Social Affairs who introduced it in 1994. This project is particularly interesting as it anticipated the recent interest in Job Guarantee projects and experiments in Europe. However, surprisingly little has been published in the international literature about the precise nature of the project and why it expired in the early 2000s. We are interested in a concise analysis, since we advocate the introduction of basic jobs and the history of Melkert jobs might provide important insights.

We found far more references to 'Melkert Jobs' in publications than we expected, given the lack of a comprehensive overview in the international literature. But all these references are in the context of more general discussions. For instance, they are mentioned in overviews of public sector programs (Rose, 1999; Brodsky, 2000; Wolinetz, 2001; Auer, 2002) and in comparative surveys of the welfare state (Delsen and de Jong, 1998; Delsen and Jacobs, 1999; Nickel and van Ours, 2000; Van Berkel and de Schampheleire, 2001; Hansen et al., 2002; de Graaf and van Berkel, 2011). Additionally, significant attention has been paid to the role of Melkert jobs in the development of the welfare state (Hemerijck and van Kersbergen, 1997; Visser and Hemerijck, 1997; van Oorschot, 2002; Hemerijck, 2003), also in relation to the 'third way' (van der Veen and Trommel, 1999; Hemerijck and Vail, 2004; de Gier and Ooijens, 2004; Alexiadou, 2013; Jürgens, 2019). Melkert jobs are also mentioned in relation to other aspects of the welfare state, such as inclusive labor markets (Klosse and Muysken, 2016), attitudes towards unemployment (Horn et al., 2023), poverty (Snel and Karyotis, 1998), work quality (Karasek, 1997, 2004), public services networks (van Gestel, 2023), and empowering large cities (Braun et al., 2016). Finally, in the discussion of personal or job characteristics, Melkert jobs are mentioned in the context of discrimination (Doomernik, 2016), the underground economy (Williams, 2004), youth unemployment (Lowe, 2001; Meijers and te Riele, 2004), undereducation (Batenburg and de Witte, 2001; Kremer et al., 2021), poverty (Valkenburg and Coenen, 2000), and disabilities (van Oorschot and Boos, 1999).

Despite all these references, there is no complete account of the history of the 'Melkert jobs' and their downfall. In this paper, we aim to fill this gap<sup>1</sup>. First, we discuss the introduction of Melkert jobs in 1994, which were implemented because of the prevalence of persistent long-term unemployment. Then, we show how significant changes in the political-economic climate in the 1990s resulted in the phasing out of Melkert jobs from 2002 onwards. We subsequently demonstrate that the Melkert jobs experiment was actually quite successful. Therefore, we outline key lessons from the experiment that should be considered when implementing job guarantee and basic jobs. Finally, we argue that Basic Income and the parallel labor market are not suitable alternatives to the basic job.

## 2. The rise and fall of Melkert Jobs

### 2.1 The Introduction of Melkert Jobs

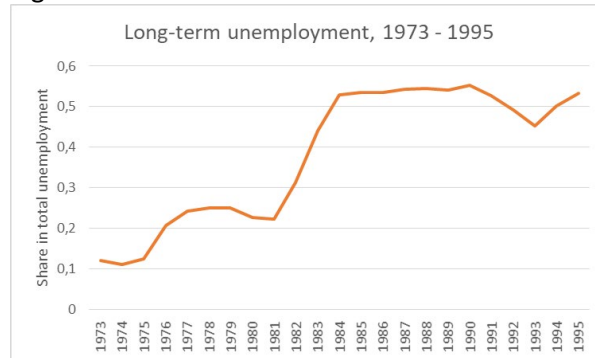
In the 1970s and 1980s, unemployment in the Netherlands was high, as it was in other Western European countries. This was partly caused by several international oil crises. At the peak of unemployment in late 1982, the famous Wassenaar Agreement was reached between government, employers' organizations and trade unions, with wage moderation in exchange for employment as its main outcome.

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensive report in Dutch on the rise and fall of Melkert jobs, consult Mosselman and Muysken (WBS, 2020).

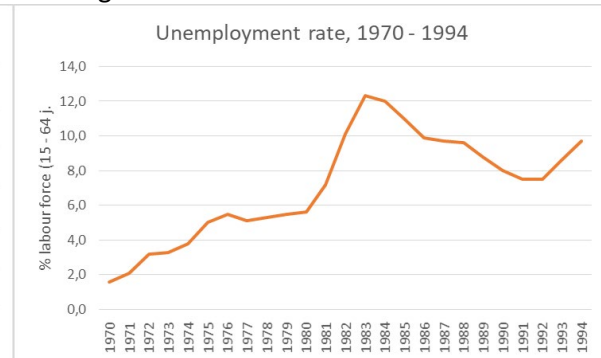
Unemployment did decline in the following years but remained at a high level with a lot of long-term unemployment (Figure 1). In 1990, to tackle long-term unemployment, the Pool Jobs Scheme (BP) was introduced, which can be seen as a precursor to the Melkert jobs. Additionally, with a ten-year delay, the Youth Employment Guarantee Plan (JWG) was introduced in 1992, targeting young people and unemployed school leavers.

Figure 1



Source: Rapportage Arbeidsmarkt 1986;  
Sociale Nota 1997

Figure 2



Source: CPB 2018

After a gradual decline in unemployment in the second half of the 1980s, there was another alarming rise to nearly 10% in 1994 (Figure 2). Within this development, the most vulnerable groups in society were disproportionately hard hit. Additionally, the economic outlook was particularly bleak according to explorations by the Central Planning Bureau. In these alarming economic conditions, the social-democratic/liberal Kok I cabinet took office. Ad Melkert, the social-democratic (PvdA) Minister of Social Affairs and Employment, very soon presented his (EwLw) employment plan, the 'Regulation for additional employment for the long-term unemployed' (Melkert, 1994). The main component of this plan was the decision to gradually create a total of 40,000 jobs in the collective sector for the long-term unemployed and welfare recipients during the cabinet period 1994-1998. The minister aimed to achieve a dual objective with his plan: (1) creation of (extra) regular, permanent jobs in the public sector – normal jobs for normal people, as the minister said – and (2) improvement of the quality of services in the public sector<sup>2</sup>. From 1996 onwards, for this plan almost everyone used the name "Melkert job".

## 2.2 Changes in the Political-Economic Climate and Consequences for Melkert Jobs

While the introduction of the Melkert jobs during the cabinet period 1994 – 1998 proceeded largely according to plan, significant changes occurred in the political-economic climate (van den Brink, 2020; Mellink and Oudenampsen, 2021). The economic view on the functioning of the labor market was strongly influenced by the 'Jobs Study' of the OECD in 1994. In this study on the causes of rising unemployment in the early 1990s, the OECD based its analysis on the views of Layard, Nickel, and Jackman (1991), which attributed unemployment to obstacles in the labor market, in line with the concept of NAIRU. Government policy to reduce unemployment should, in this view, focus on addressing these obstacles and curtailing social security. It is clear that the OECD was very critical of Melkert jobs. This more neoliberal economic vision also permeated the (party) political field, especially among social democrats in Western European countries. As a result of the rise of neoliberalism in the

<sup>2</sup> Another part of the (EwLw) employment plan concerned the provision of wage subsidies for up to 20,000 jobs with a temporary employment of 6 months for the benefit of experimental employment projects in the private sector, for the same target group. This Scheme was included some years later, together with the JWG and the BP, in the Job Seekers Involvement Act (WIW).

economic-political debate, these parties adopted the 'Third Way' as their new directive, which involved in The Netherlands a 'definitive farewell to socialist ideology' (Kok, 1995; Mellink and Oudenampsen, 2021).

When the Kok II cabinet (1998-2002) took office, socio-economic conditions had greatly improved. Due to the shifting political-economic landscape, there was more focus on the activating effect of social security arrangements, and fewer barriers to the labor market were advocated. Entering the regular labor market, especially the market sector, became the new credo. The official name of the job (EwLw job) was changed to ID job (I = entry job, D = step-up job). The existing 40,000 jobs were converted into 40,000 I-jobs, to be expanded during the cabinet period 1998-2002 with 10,000 I-jobs and 10,000 D-jobs (see Table 1). The D-jobs were intended for employees who had filled an I-job for 5 years (Coalition Agreement Kok II, 1998; Ministry of SZW, 1998).

Table 1 Jobs/Benefit Years (x 1000) for Various Schemes

	Melkert/ID	JWG	BP
1989		5	
1990		7	4
1991		7	6
1992		6	16
1993		12	16
1994		16	20
1995	6	22	22
1996	24	23	23
1997	38	25	24
	ID	WIW	
1998	40	42	
1999	45	53	
2000	50	40	
2001	55	36	
2002	53	35	
2003	46	29	
	WWB		
2004	34	+	14

Source: various edition of Sociale Nota

The ID jobs were intended to be permanent employment positions, but the staffing was to be flexible. This means that all ID jobs were given a step-up objective. This fundamentally deviated from the original setup of the EwLw job, namely an (extra) regular, thus permanent job within the collective sector. The new remuneration system was also tailored to step-up, with higher remuneration for D-jobs than for an I-job.

Around the turn of the century, unemployment had dropped to about 4% due to continued economic growth, and as a result, increasing criticism emerged on the active and, according to many, expensive labor market policy. In response, the Minister of SZW established an Interdepartmental Policy Research and Consultation group (IBO) to investigate the efficiency and effectiveness of the existing labor market instruments. The findings of this investigation, the IBO report "Aan de Slag" (IBO, 2001), were in line with the prevailing view on the functioning of the labor market and the retreating role of government. The report was widely supported by social organizations, even by the allied trade union movement, to the disappointment of the PvdA ministers. A few months after the IBO report, the Social and Economic Council unanimously advised to phase out subsidized employment in the long term (SER, 2002). This essentially sealed the political fate of the Melkert/ID job.



## 2.3 Phasing Out the Melkert/ID Jobs

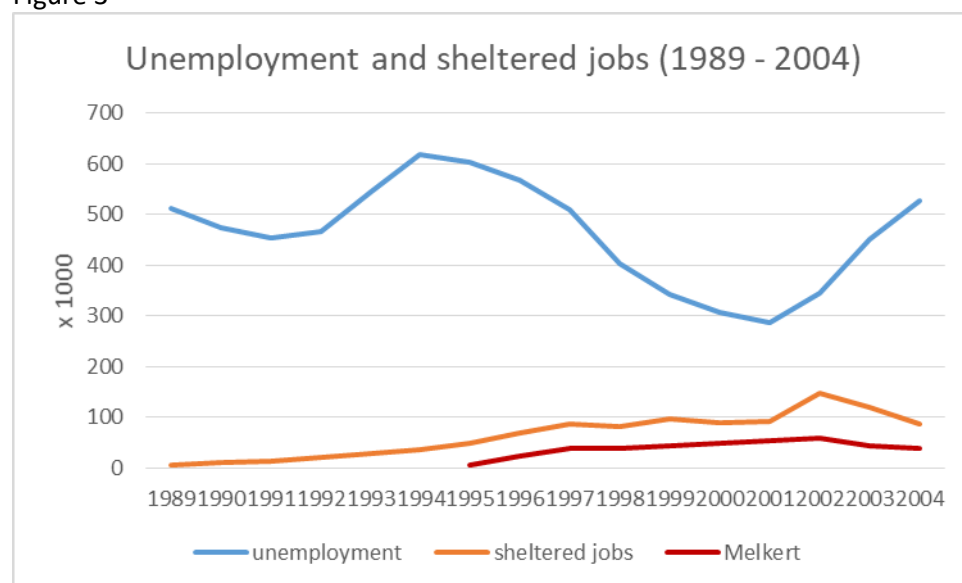
After the elections of May 2002, in which the social democrats (PvdA) suffered a major defeat, a center-right cabinet (Balkenende I) took office. From the outset, it was clear that the Melkert/ID scheme would be phased out. This phase-out was initiated by the then-liberal State Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment, the future Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, with a 'double decision'. First, it was decided to transfer the available ID funds to the municipalities for the freely disposable reintegration budget. Second this was accompanied by a significant budget cut of 25%, and further reductions were announced (Rutte, 2002).

The municipalities thus became responsible for retaining or phasing out the ID jobs. They were faced with further cuts to the reintegration budgets and increasingly opted to use these (limited) funds for supportive and mediating reintegration activities, rather than for ID jobs (Balkenende I, 2002). The gradual phase-out of the ID jobs was thus inevitable and final (see Table 1).

## 2.4 Why Melkert Jobs Were a Success

First, we want to emphasize that Melkert jobs in the 1990s, and still today, evoke strong emotions in debates, with many people having the impression that it was a failed experiment. This is remarkable because, strictly speaking, the actual scope of the Melkert project, both in terms of the cost share of active labor market policies and as a percentage of total unemployment, was relatively small (Figure 3)<sup>3</sup>. Our analysis is that during this period, there was a very rapid change in the political-economic framework – reflected in opinions held by the media and the public – leading to significant political and ideological disagreements.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 3



Source: CPB 2018 and Table 1.

<sup>3</sup> The unemployment share varied between 10% and 20%. The costs were at most 30% of the total costs of active labour market policy – these total costs constituted at most 0.8% of GDP.

<sup>4</sup> The change in opinion is illustrated by the big difference between the 1994 recommendation of the Andriessen Commission (Commissie Laagste segment van de arbeidsmarkt, 1994) to create 100,000 'additional jobs' (Melkert jobs 'avant la lettre') on the one hand and the 2001 IBO recommendation discussed above to abolish additional permanent jobs/Melkert jobs and focus from now on reintegration on the other. See also Van den Brink (2020).

During the period of the Melkert jobs and in subsequent discussions, the main point of criticism has been that there was insufficient reintegration to the regular labor market. Remarkably, this criticism overlooks that moving on to the regular labor market was never a goal of the original setup of the Melkert jobs. This additional objective was only included at the request of the liberal political party VVD during the formation of the Kok II cabinet in 1998. The IBO report also correctly points out this fact but it does state that a (necessary) scheme for sheltered employment should involve very modest numbers. This suggests to us that the IBO report, without further empirical underpinning, assumes that the majority of long-term unemployed and inactive individuals could move on to the regular labor market after a reintegration process. In our view, this assumption of the IBO report is a reflection of the spirit of time rather than the result of thorough research into Melkert jobs (Kraaijeveld, 2016).

In our analysis the 'experiment' with Melkert jobs was successful, because of its threefold character: (1) the direct targeting of the intended audience, namely long-term unemployed individuals with social assistance benefits, who have no chance finding a job on the regular labor market, (2) the permanent nature of the jobs offered in the public sector, improving public services, and (3) the use of saved benefits as (partial) funding for the Melkert jobs under the motto 'work above welfare.'

This threefold structure is essential: The Melkert job transforms structural long-term unemployment with social assistance benefits into structurally higher added value of government, resulting in better public services, at relatively low business economic costs, with the use of saved benefits. Ultimately, the societal result will be determined by the difference between the extra added value of government and the extra costs not derived from the saved benefit. This societal impact must still be supplemented by the additional societal value of workers in better health compared to benefit recipients.

Looking at the scope of Melkert jobs realized within municipalities and the care sector – by the end of 1998, 35,000 of the allocated 40,000 jobs were occupied – this number is small, 0.45%, relative to total employment, but certainly not negligible. Municipalities saw improved services in childcare, healthcare, education, and also safety thanks to Melkert jobs. Additionally, municipalities realized an increasing outflow from social assistance, partly as a result of the Melkert jobs<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. Lessons for Working with Basic Jobs

What particularly appeals to us about the Melkert jobs project is that government can help those who are disadvantaged in the labor market by offering (basic) jobs in government sectors, where the saved social benefits can serve as partial funding for these jobs. This approach closely aligns with the concept of the 'Job Guarantee,' developed by a group of American institutional economists such as Copeland, Gordon, Minsky, and Wray, and by Mitchell in the Australian context. According to these authors the central government should provide additional employment if the market economy does not create sufficient employment. These situations can occur during a recession – a temporary decline in employment – and in times of prolonged structural unemployment.

This strategy was applied successfully in the Melkert jobs project. However, our analysis also reveals that mistakes and incorrect assumptions were made during both the preparation and implementation of the project. We list these mistakes to draw lessons from them, so that we can avoid the problems that ensue from them in the (re)introduction of basic jobs or the implementation of a job guarantee. But first, we argue for the desirability of a job guarantee for everyone and discuss the close link between this objective and basic jobs.

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<sup>5</sup> In the period 1995 – 2002 the number of welfare benefits fell sharply, partly due to the Melkert jobs. Before 1995 the level was around 500,000, in 2002 it had fallen to 340,000; see CBS Statline.

### 3.1 Job Guarantee for Everyone and the Basic Job

The original concept of the Job Guarantee focuses primarily on preventing and tackling unemployment. It moves away from the idea that unemployment, especially in the form of natural unemployment, functions to keep the economy operating smoothly. A key principle of the job guarantee approach is that it is government's responsibility to fully utilize all productive factors at all times. Government then acts as the 'Employer of the Last Resort,' offering a 'Job Guarantee.' Such situations can occur during a recession – a temporary decline in employment – and during prolonged unemployment. To prevent inflationary pressure, government must offer this additional employment at the prevailing minimum wage, which must still guarantee a living minimum. The minimum wage implies that the job guarantee is affordable and prevents displacement in the labor market. See Mitchell and Muysken (2008, 2010) for a comprehensive overview of these ideas<sup>6</sup>.

We also can consider the prevention/tackling of hard-core unemployment, defined as available labor potential with a great to very great distance from the regular labor market, as part of the Job Guarantee. This aspect is less elaborated in the literature cited above, because in the Anglo-Saxon countries, this hard core is less prevalent than in the continental Western European countries.

For the Dutch context, this latter approach to the job guarantee is elaborated in Klosse and Muysken (2011, 2014). It is emphasized that the job guarantee for everyone explicitly concerns an 'inclusive labor market' where there are also employment opportunities for the hard-to-place. In Dankbaar and Muysken (2019), it is further proposed to experiment with socially useful jobs that people themselves suggest and with possibilities to connect employees from the job guarantee with 'social employers.' It is crucial that the work is continuously meaningful and useful, and that employees are treated with respect, regarding their background and ambitions.

The basic job provided by government is the concrete elaboration of the job guarantee. Everyone who wants to and can work – full-time or part-time – and who cannot find work on the regular labor market can start in a basic job at the prevailing minimum wage. The basic job can thus function as a remedy in times of insufficient employment and for those who have no chance to enter the labour market not even during economic booms.

Several EU countries have now started Job Guarantee-like experiments<sup>7</sup>. To give these experiments a good chance of success, it is important to identify the lessons that can be learned from the experiment with the Melkert jobs.

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<sup>6</sup> Recently this idea has been adopted by Atkinson (2015), Banerjee and Duflo (2019), Skidelsky (2019), Kelton (2020) and Tcherneva (2020), among others.

<sup>7</sup> Markowitsch and Scharle (2024), a report for the European Commission, mentions the following experiments in Europe: in Austria 'The Marienthal Job Guarantee project', in France and Belgium 'Territoires Zero Chomage de Longue Durée', in Germany 'The Solidary Basic Income project' and in The Netherlands 'The Gronings Basic Job project'.

### 3.2 Lessons from the Melkert Jobs Experiment

Below, we discuss the key learning outcomes of the Melkert jobs experiment. These are important for developing proposals for the introduction of and experiments with basic jobs.

#### *Lesson 1: The Nature of Basic Jobs and the Role of Government*

Basic jobs are supplementary jobs, consisting of a single task or multiple tasks, that are not offered by government on the regular market due to budgetary constraints and/or a low return/cost ratio. Supplementary and non-regular are the key words here. These boundaries must be explicitly respected. If it concerns work that is not supplementary but structural and/or work that is regular, then that work must be offered on the regular labor market at an appropriate wage.

Offering basic jobs, outside the regular labor market, can by definition only be achieved by government as it requires legislation and political decisions. A basic job consists of supplementary tasks to strengthen the quality of public services which should not displace regular tasks. If the private sector is given the resources to improve public services, there is a very high chance that job seekers who do not belong to the category of long-term unemployed with low labor productivity will occupy the basic jobs (SCP, 2023).

People in a basic job can, in principle, also be seconded to social enterprises that accept that the basic job needs to be adjusted to the possibilities and limitations of the basic job holder while accepting that the respective basic job holder is supervised by a certified job coach from the employment company.

#### *Lesson 2: Ensure Temporary and Permanent Basic Jobs*

In times of a shortage of employment the job guarantee has an important function. Then the basic job, at the statutory minimum wage, serves as a temporary employment safety net until the labor market recovers. In this situation, the basic job (as an employment position) does not need to be permanent. However, it seems wise to have a substantial pool of basic jobs available at the start of a recession.

For reasons of fairness and effectiveness, performing a basic job must be financially more attractive than income received from benefits, and financially less attractive than the remuneration of jobs on the regular labor market<sup>8</sup>. The social security system must be fair and encourage employment<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, the minimum wage as the remuneration for a basic job is partly motivated by the importance of avoiding wage inflation (Mitchell and Muysken, 2018). In all cases, the minimum wage is a “minimum living wage,” meaning that one should be able to uphold a decent life standard. With such (net) wages, one falls outside the poverty statistics.

The long-term unemployed with a great distance to the labor market formed the target group of the Melkert jobs. The transition opportunities to the regular labour market of this group, after gaining work experience, were expected to be very modest given the great distance to the labor market. This implies that the vast majority of people with a Melkert job can reasonably be considered to have a permanent job, based on a permanent employment contract (Kees Kraaijeveld, 2016). Therefore, both the basic job and the holder of the basic job have a permanent character.

People who are permanently employed in a basic job, with an insurmountable distance to the labor market, must accept that their starting salary is the minimum wage, but they can count on modest

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<sup>8</sup> In almost all Western societies employees are entitled to temporary unemployment benefits. These employees will probably not accept a basic job, but they will spend their time looking for other work.

<sup>9</sup> In our evaluation of Melkert jobs we also identified the problem with Melkert jobs of a higher salary than the minimum wage (Mosselman & Muysken, 2020).

yearly salary increases in line with the applicable collective agreement. In countries with forms of sheltered employment, the applicable collective agreement can be applied.

Finally, basic jobs are not intended for people with an officially assessed labor disability. In recent years, guarantee jobs and sheltered workplaces have been developed in the Netherlands for these people via the Target Group Register (Doelgroepregister). After the decision in 2015 to abolish the Sheltered Employment Act (WSW), people with a labor disability – assessed and determined by the UWV and through the Practice Route (Praktijkroute) by municipalities – were included in the Target Group Register. Employers can then employ people from the Target Group Register, with a wage cost subsidy provided by government depending on the degree of labor disability.

### *Lesson 3: Do Not Neglect Implementation Problems*

The Netherlands has a long history of job placement, employment mediation, and job coaching for welfare recipients, the unemployed, and the disabled. This is also a history of many changes in legislation and institutions. Municipal social services have been responsible for the reintegration of welfare recipients since 2004 – with the introduction of the Work and Social Assistance Act (WWB). The decentralized implementation of the Melkert jobs in the period 1994 – 2002 was therefore a vulnerable component of the experiment.

Thanks to years of experience with local and regional reintegration and employer services, this expertise is now well developed, especially and almost exclusively for the reintegration and placement of job seekers with a short distance to the labor market. This development is reinforced by limited reintegration budgets.

For the placement, support, and supervision of long-term unemployed people with a great distance to the labor market, more specific expertise, suitable jobs, and a corresponding budget are needed<sup>10</sup>. A recent experiment in Groningen with basic jobs for long-term unemployed people did show that participants might need long-term, or even permanent, supervision. Actually, professional supervision at the workplace and in all areas of life is important to keep this target group on track (Mosselman and Polstra, 2023).

Of course, (social) enterprises can also employ people with a great distance to the labor market. This would consist of work on the regular labor market. Often, this will involve people with a labor disability, registered as such. Wage costs are then partially covered by subsidies. In this way, the enterprise can still develop a business model.

### *Lesson 4. A Structural Policy Measure Requires Clear Goals, a Long-Term Approach, and Good Experiments*

The Melkert project was intended to be structural from the outset. The extra jobs for long-term unemployed people would have a regular and sustainable/permanent character. Such a structural policy measure must be thoroughly prepared, including a socio-economic impact analysis in the short and especially in the long term, as well as an analysis of political risk factors. An implementation plan must also be drawn up. In practice, the focus has mainly been on the policy ambitions of the cabinet. In Mosselman and Muysken (2020), we propose a long-term approach. We advocate an introduction in stages of a job guarantee for everyone, where the basic job is first included as an instrument in the Participation Act for the long-term unemployed, after which the job guarantee can also be opened for other long-term and temporarily unemployed people.

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<sup>10</sup> See SCP (2019) for an analysis of the failed activation policy of the Participation Act and see Commissie Reguleren van Werk (2020) and Kremer, M et al. (2020) for proposals to improve the activation of the (long-term) unemployed, including the introduction of basic jobs.

For policy effectiveness, it is important not only to conduct impact analyses in advance but also to carry out and properly evaluate experiments. If it is impossible to experiment in advance, the initial period of the new policy approach must be thoroughly monitored and evaluated, so that adjustments can be made based on evaluations.

Very little evaluation has been done during and after the Melkert jobs project (Theeuwes, 1996). Some reports on the Melkert jobs have been published, but they reflect the spirit of the time more than consisting of an actual evaluation (Rekenkamer, 1996; IBO, 2001).

#### **4. Basic Income and the Parallel Labor Market: Not Suitable Alternatives**

The notion of a basic income for everyone has a very long history – it was proposed, for example, by Thomas Moore in 1516 in his book *Utopia*. Against this background, recent advocates such as Rutger Bregman and Philip van Parijs characterize it as a Utopian project (Bregman, 2019; van Parijs, 2019). Two central ideas feature these proposals: (1) people are not too lazy to work, and a basic income allows them to do what they enjoy; (2) with a universal basic income, society does not need a heavily rigged bureaucratic surveillance apparatus with high implementation costs. However, the concrete proposals on how a basic income should be implemented in practice vary widely (van Parijs, 2019).

We agree with many others that the introduction of an unconditional, universal basic income for everyone equal to a minimum wage at subsistence level is not affordable. This observation is increasingly acknowledged by proponents of a basic income. But then holds, as Robeijns (2019, p.6) states: “it is extremely true that the devil is in the details: only by clearly outlining all the details can we make a responsible normative analysis of basic income.” In her analysis, Ingrid Robeijns convincingly shows that with a basic income below the subsistence level, the freedom argument, ad. (1) above, is not self-evident in the Netherlands. Moreover, the costs of a basic income must be weighed against the possibility of investing it in improving the social infrastructure (including housing, healthcare, and education)<sup>11</sup>. Additionally, there will be implementation problems, ad. (2) above.

Finally and interestingly, Robeijns (2019, par. 8) points out that the reciprocity principle is an important difference when comparing a basic job with basic income. The principle of justice dictates that everyone who can work should, in principle, be willing to contribute to society. Although this principle is widely endorsed by philosophers, Robeijns shows that in practice there are many problems such as the poverty trap, the question of who can and cannot work, and the availability of jobs. Furthermore, she points out that one can also contribute to society in non-market ways, such as through volunteer work. This latter aspect fits well within our proposal for basic jobs. In this respect, it is noteworthy that Robeijns overlooks the lesson we formulated earlier, that basic jobs belong in the public sector. However, her argument is a significant illustration of our Lesson 3: Do not neglect implementation problems.

The concept of the parallel labor market was introduced into the Dutch public debate around 2015 by the Start Foundation and Ton Wilthagen. Frustrated by the decades-long failure to get more people to participate in the regular labor market, they propose creating jobs in a parallel labor market so that the ‘regular’ labor market would not have to be disrupted. “Work in the parallel labor market comes from both government and public sectors, as well as from the private sector. Government organizes work that meets a great societal need... The private sector provides work that is not profitable to carry out in its regular form, with some of this work being reshored from abroad.” (Brouwer et al., 2018). A

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<sup>11</sup> This is also an important argument for Robeijns (2019, par. 7) as to why the notion of ‘collective inheritance’ does not automatically advocate a basic income. Collectieve inheritance means that the current generation owes its prosperity to the collective efforts of previous generations and may therefore also share in it collectively.

central idea is “using current benefit funds as ‘capital’ for the creation of this type of socially valuable work.” (Blauwbroek et al., 2021).

In this proposal, people with a disability, who permanently rely on support, are offered permanent contracts. For others, the parallel labor market offers temporary transition positions (to become suitable for the regular labor market) and shelter positions (for when the economy is in a downturn). A participation income is paid, which is financed from freed-up benefits.

There are several aspects of this proposal that conflict with the lessons we have drawn from the Melkert experiment – see also Dankbaar and Muysken (2019):

Firstly, in the proposal only temporary contracts are offered (‘transition contracts’). The assumption is that most people who rely on the parallel labor market are unemployed because they are not yet sufficiently equipped for (re)entry into the labor market, or they want to maintain their skills during periods of high unemployment. In the first case, people must transition once they are sufficiently equipped; in the second case, people must leave once unemployment decreases. This does not align with Lesson 3 we drew from the Melkert jobs experiment.

Secondly, participants in the parallel labor market receive a “participation income” that is lower than the minimum wage but higher than subsistence income. Consequently, the resulting jobs do not provide a stable foundation under the labor market that guarantees all workers decent work for at least the statutory minimum wage, as is the case with basic jobs – see Lesson 4 above. The participation jobs are not ‘real’ jobs.

Thirdly, participants in the parallel labor market can work at regular enterprises. As Blauwbroek et al. (2021) state, “... over the years, a significant ecosystem of so-called social enterprises has emerged that can also play a good role in this. Last but not least, private companies should also be able to take an initiating role in this. ... If private parties participate, it will also benefit the creativity and speed of getting initiatives off the ground.” All this contradicts our analysis of the Melkert experiment that basic jobs belong in the public sector: the many experiences with unintended use of wage subsidies by the private sector and the displacement of slightly less marginal labor lead to our conclusion not to make basic jobs available to the private sector<sup>12</sup>.

## 5. Conclusions

In this article, we have analyzed the Melkert jobs project. Because there has not yet been a comprehensive overview of this unique experiment in the international literature, we have provided an overview of the introduction of Melkert jobs in 1994, in response to persistent long-term unemployment, until their phase-out in 2002.

Contrary to the still prevailing belief in the Netherlands that the Melkert job project was a failure, we argue based on a political-economic analysis that the Melkert job should be considered an innovative and successful project. It was innovative and successful because it was fully acknowledged that a large group of long-term unemployed should not be left in the lurch and that basic jobs – suitable jobs – should be created for this group, leading to improved public services. This dual objective, partly funded by the remuneration of (saved) benefit funds, was the core of the Melkert project. The Melkert job as a basic job thus represents a concrete implementation of the job guarantee, which is increasingly gaining interest in Europe.

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<sup>12</sup> See Mosselman and Muysken (2020)

The Melkert job remains a shining example of active labor market policy aimed at employment for everyone, despite its shortcomings revealed during its preparation and implementation. If the Melkert approach had been continued after 2002 under later cabinets – of course, with improvements and adjustments based on the evaluation of experiences, as indicated by us – we can assert without hesitation that long-term unemployment and underutilization of labor at the lower end of the labor market would be substantially lower than it is today. In that respect, we also have broadened the original concept of the Job Guarantee, i.e., the prevention and tackling of cyclical unemployment, with the prevention/tackling of hard-core unemployment.

We discussed the four key lessons that can be drawn from the Melkert jobs experiment. These are important for developing (future) proposals for the introduction of basic jobs and for the design and implementation of the Job Guarantee-like experiments recently and currently starting in several EU countries.

In this regard, we outlined the significant role of government. Offering basic jobs is by definition the task of government based on legislation and political decisions. Under certain conditions should secondment of basic job holders to social enterprises and the private sector be possible.

In line with our broadening of the Job Guarantee concept, government should provide both temporary and permanent basic jobs, important principles for the remuneration of basic jobs apply here. Special attention must be given to preventing implementation problems. This is particularly relevant for the assignment of basic jobs and the supervision of long-term unemployed with a basic job. Furthermore, we advocate a long-term approach and a phased, gradual introduction of the job guarantee for everyone.

We further argued that both the concept of an unconditional, universal basic income at the level of the minimum wage and the concept of the parallel labor market should not be considered sensible alternatives to the job guarantee.

We conclude with a brief note on the financing of the job guarantee for everyone. The few studies conducted on this subject indicate remarkably low costs (SEO, 2020 and Tcherneva, 2020). The main reason for this is that with a job guarantee, previously unused earning capacity is now utilized, and former benefits and administrative costs are saved. Additionally, the positive social effects of work on quality of life, health, and healthcare costs have not yet been accounted for.

Government investment in unused labor capacity, education, and lifelong learning is a valuable, even necessary investment in the future of society. This is also an important lesson from the Melkert jobs experiment.

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