

Speaking truth to power at the OECD

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The phrase 'speaking truth to power' is one attributed originally to Quakers - although no one is quite sure who first said it. As a Quaker I like it: it's what I seek to do.

I did so at the OECD yesterday. The second half of the afternoon session of the public consultation on transfer pricing descended into what I considered a farcical discussion for more than an hour on the transfer pricing adjustments needed if a member of staff tried to leave a company with their know-how.

Now there may be an issue of concern for tax here (although, overall, I suspect not) but if that is the case it firstly did not need discussion at length between a few representatives of the tax profession at length for an hour or more, and secondly was clearly not the issue of highest priority (or anything near it) in international tax.

So, after an hour of listening to paint dry I intervened and made the point that 99.9% of the world's population would not think this issue a priority in world taxation. I'm absolutely confident I am right.

The intervention clearly took some by surprise. I am sure it was considered by some that I breached etiquette. I really do not mind if they did. The session was a perfect example of just why the OECD has missed the point, and has become so far behind the times, on international tax issues. A tiny coterie of advisers were permitted to hijack debate and the whole decision making process to pursue a point of near irrelevance where, no doubt, in due course, they hope to offer 'value added' consultancy services to their clients on how to address an issue largely of their own creation whilst all around the international tax system fails to deliver on its key objective, which is the payment of the right amount of tax in the right place at the right time. I have little doubt that this is also part of their aim.

The OECD is an inter-governmental body. It is not a business think tank. It has to be accountable.

It has to deliver to the almost entirely democratic states who make up its membership.

In that case the need is for it to focus on the issues of concern in society, and not the issues of concern to big business alone.

That motivated my intervention. It may have been unusual. But it really is time that the OECD realised it has a duty to deliver for the people to whom it is accountable - and as a member of civil society representing quite a number of large NGOs I think that in many ways I am closer to those people than the representatives of the Big 4 present.