

There is no such things as 'taxpayer's money'

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I am presenting the [Salter Lecture](#) at the Yearly Meeting of British Quakers in Bath tonight, using the above title 'Tax justice: a Quaker's concern'.

The lecture, which is organised by the Quaker Socialist Society, is an annual event. Recent lecturers have included Tiny Benn, Danny Dorling and Ed Mayo, so apart from following in a rather white and male tradition I am also following a line of notable thinkers.

The lecture is named after [Dr Alfred Salter](#), a South-east London doctor with a pioneering passion for social reform, and is definitely not a Quaker preserve. I do break tradition in that sense, because although I do not tend to speak about it much here (like, in that respect, quite a lot of my personal life) being a Quaker is a fairly important part of life for me.

The lecture is, unusually for me, something I have written in advance because it will be published, and I will share it when it is. That does also mean I can share some of it now to trail one small part of what I will say, which is:

American Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. said in a speech in 1904 that 'Taxes are the price we pay for a civilized society'. I agree. But I would go further than that. I would suggest that we don't as such pay taxes. The funds that they represent are, I suggest, in fact the property of the state. After all, if we give the state the power to define what we can own, how we can own it and, to a very large degree, what we can do with it — and we do — then I would argue that we also give the state the right to say that some part of what we earn or own is actually its rightful property and that we have no choice but pay that tax owed as the quid pro quo of the benefit we enjoy from living in community.

This philosophy is, of course just about the polar opposite of that of the neoliberal who thinks that all taxation is, in effect, theft of the private property of the individual that the state must, by coercion and threats wrest from their possession. That notion of tax as theft is, by the way, commonplace in neoliberal thinking. Its expression in milder

form gives rise to the term used by politicians of all parties in recent years when they talk about spending 'taxpayers' money', with the clear implication that the government really does not own the funds in its possession.

Well let me inform you that there is no such thing as 'taxpayers' money': it is the government's money to do what it will with in accordance with the mandate it has been given and for which it will have to account. It is the government's money precisely because we owe it to them in accordance with the laws that we, by consent, have agreed to comply with and which underpins the society of which we are a part and in which we wish to live in reasonably peaceful harmony.

I will probably never get a more sympathetic hearing. But there again, I may be wrong about that. If I am, I will let you know.