

A question for all campaigners

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I am giving a talk on campaigning at an NGO this afternoon. I always find such things a challenge. What to focus on? How to say it? How to make it relevant to this organisation's particular concerns? I do more thinking about presentations than I usually let on about.

But then a thought occurred to me, which was that none of the people working at the organisation in question should actually want to be there. After all, their aim should be to solve problems. And if they did then they would be out of a job. So that should be there objective: to make themselves redundant in the jobs they have now. Knowing what they might do then could be very telling, for them and the organisation.

So I asked myself the question, given that I do some campaigning: what would I do if we had tax justice? I know it's unlikely, but it's a fair to ask.

I have to say that going back to accountancy practice would not be my choice.

And I have not seen a commercial deal or idea that has really excited me for a while.

The reality has been that my career has been a lot more interesting since I began work on tax justice than in its first twenty years or so, and that's because the intellectual challenges have been so much bigger. So I'd want to teach now. And what? I suspect it would be on finding the new state of well-being to replace the economist's conventional idea of equilibrium.

Equilibrium has never appealed to me. It is antithetical to everything I believe in: change that drives increase in well-being; doing better, just because it's what we as people are really meant to do; exploring new ideas, relationships and experiences because they are how we grow. None of that suggests this state where nothing can change or all will be worse off has any merit to it at all. In fact, I simply do not believe that state exists, or should, so aiming for it is positively harmful. It is merely a statement of the conservative mind set made manifest in economic theory.

But equally, I do not think that opportunity is unfettered; we now know that and so

choice is inevitable, but the choice we make cannot be driven by the absurd notions of Pareto optimality.

I found that an interesting exercise because I would not be doing tax in an ideal world. But since we do not live in an ideal world I will carry on with where I am, because the change I seek drives in the direction I want to go.

Which is the reason why the question is important: unless there is goal congruence there is no point doing anything.