

What is 'doing politics'?

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Those at the tax justice conference organised by the Joffe Trust were asked by a speaker last night why more of us were not 'in politics'? One present is a former MP, so the suggestion that there were no professional politicians present was not quite true. But the challenge was very clearly to ask why we apparently sit on the sidelines whilst MPs do the politics.

My response is to go back a long time. When I was in my teens I was fortunate to be mentored by a chap called Jack Ray, who had a big influence on me. Jack was born in 1917. These days he would have gone to university and flown high. That was not possible for him as the son of a clerk, and the war also changed the direction of his life: he served throughout it. He was a man of extraordinary intelligence that was under-appreciated by the class and money laden society in which he grew up.

Jack appreciated my interest in politics as a teenager, although we did not share opinions on the issue. His advice was, however, I think sound.

He thought the best politicians wrote poetry. I think he had Yeats in mind. If they could not do that then they wrote novels. I recall discussing Dickens, and many others. Then they wrote philosophy. And whatever happened, they always wrote. The best MPs read what those 'political' thinkers wrote. The rest of our MPs got the version that permeated the press. But they were all influenced by the poets, novelists, thinkers and writers, and rarely was a thought ever their own.

So, he told me to read. And write. And then write again. That was the way to create political change, he said. And so I have.

I remain ardently non-party political. There is no reason to be otherwise. To be so would constrain my thinking process.

And I do not see my work as being primarily political because it is not. It is about making systems work to best effect for society. But of course that has political impact. It could not be effective and not be so.

That is true of all tax justice campaigners. Just as it is true for those on the right who oppose tax justice.

So do we do politics? Yes, of course we do. But we don't do party politics, and that's just fine. And if anything we say is useful the politicians will follow along in due course. That's always been the way.