

Sixty three, with a passion to work

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Forgive me a more personal note please. I am 63 today. I admit that does not seem possible. Nor does it seem reasonable. And congratulations are definitely not sought, although my twin (and yes, I do have one) might enjoy them.

Deep down I am at least a little aware that for a long time I thought that this was the moment when older age began. I think that that this was because both my father and the man who was my mentor as a teenager retired at the age of 63. My father lived until he was 92. Jack made 95. Maybe retiring at 63 was a good thing to do. Both enjoyed quite good health until their late eighties. But nonetheless these two very different men ended their formal careers to pursue leisure pursuits at the age that I now am.

In contrast I have no intention of retiring. Indeed, I have had discussions about a new (part-time) post recently and would want to make a seven year commitment to it. And even then that does not seem to be the limit to my working. My friend Colin Hines still works in the Green New Deal at 75 and has no intention of stopping as yet. I've long said that I think 83 might be a good retirement age, health permitting.

I suspect the difference in attitude that both Colin and I have towards work from that which my father and my mentor, Jack, might have had is that we are intensely fortunate to work pursuing things that we believe in. In contrast, my father spent the last twenty years of his working life in the same role. No doubt he was good at it. But after he was widowed when my mother died in her fifties and he was 57 he always said he would work until the balance of frustration and reward tipped in the wrong direction. It did in the end, and he went. Somebody else had to design the lines of pylons that march across the east of England. That was what he did, but I am not sure he believed in it.

My long held suspicion has been that many people would love their work to be more meaningful and that if only it was we could be so much more creative as a country. What always amazes me is how enormously able people who appear to be doing jobs that demand little of them in terms of management or creativity can be in their leisure activities. The range of talent brought to bear in hobbies, households and personal lives

always seems to me to be so much greater than that which is utilised in a great many workplaces. None of that creativity is measured in our GDP, of course. Most does not give rise to measured economic exchange. But all those skills exist.

I am aware that I have been able to pursue work of pretty much my own choice and making since I was 26. I wonder how different this country would be if others had that opportunity. I did so without inheritance or financial support, although with the tremendous advantage of what was, in effect, a free university education. Now we are intent on burdening people with debt, plus rent or mortgage obligations that are so much bigger, proportionately, than those I had to fund forty years ago.

But what if we changed that? What if we worked to release the creativity in everyone? Is it possible that work might be less of a burden, which I know that for many it is, and that instead it might become a means to release the creativity everyone has within them but which work too rarely utilises at present?

This is the sentiment I have when I hear people say that our future will be so much harder if we are green. The suggestion is always that we will have less, and my honest response to that is that this may well be true. Consuming less 'stuff' may well be what the future holds. But, on the other hand, there is almost no limit to the amount we can do for each other with almost no emissions cost.

Suppose we could do that? Suppose we could soften this harsh boundary between work and leisure? Suppose we could find the way to make this divide, so real in the case of retirement, so much less intimidating because work was something we could embrace as part of living well?

What would that world look like?

Would a four day week start the process?

Would better access to capital so that people can start businesses help?

Is this what a universal basic income is really meant to achieve?

Could leisure and work merge more often?

And what is it that might encourage people to take the risk of putting their creativity to work?

I suspect I don't feel 63, with the implication of retirement that has always had for me, precisely because I do not feel alienated from my work, or want to leave it. It would be a great outcome if more people could feel like that in the future. It seems to me that this is an essential part of the Green New Deal. I will keep working for it.