

Where was the tax justice movement?

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There is a strange dimension to the Zahawi story that needs to be noted. Despite the vast amount of comment made in the media on Nadhim Zahawi's tax affairs the one group notably almost totally absent from any discussion of the issue was the UK's tax justice movement.

There was, it has to be said, very good reason for this. Although the tax justice movement, as created by the likes of John Christensen, Prem (now Lord) Sikka and myself, was an expert network intended to empower other organisations (and most particularly, aid agencies) to deliver policy initiatives in this area (most pacifically in the Global South) none of the organisations now associating with this movement in the UK now appear to employ anyone with any significant tax expertise. Nor do they seem to think that such expertise is important.

As evidence I offer this advert that I noted last week from Tax Justice UK:

A final reminder that we're recruiting a Head of Advocacy and Policy.

Along with our allies, we're building momentum for progressive tax reform. In the run up to a highly contested 2024 general election tax will be high on the political agenda.

To do this role you don't need to be an expert in tax policy, but you do need to be hungry for change, and able to convince people in positions of power to listen to our messages and make changes.

We're looking for a savvy political operator with a track record to achieve political change and a commitment to tax justice. You will be confident in shaping policy, building good working relationships across all political parties and a strong team player.

4-5 days / 28 or 35 hours a week

Salary: £50,568 (pro rata for part time)

Deadline: This Monday (30 Jan) at 9am

You can find out more here: <https://www.taxjustice.uk/head-advocacy-policy.html>.

Note that the person that they are seeking will be a very well-paid and passionate campaigner but although they will head tax policy for this tax justice organisation no specific knowledge of tax is required.

I will be candid: I think that this is absurd. They know that I think this. That is why they broke association with me and John Christensen, and I notice that Prem Sikka has also broken his ties with the Tax Justice Network.

I am quite unable to work out how you can meaningfully campaign on tax issues without having the expertise available to you to understand the subject, and it is not clear that any of these organisations now have that. As a result, they were almost entirely absent from any meaningful debate upon the Zahawi case. I guess that the journalists have now worked out that they are not the people to ask whereas in my time with such organisations we were usually the first port of call.

It is staggering that much of the meaningful debate on tax justice issues has now been taken over by people who once appeared to be opposed to what we stood for, albeit that many of them have now retired from private practice and appear to have become more enlightened as a result.

Meanwhile, the tax justice movement dedicates its time to fighting what they see as the tyranny of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, whilst seeking to deny that it was only through active cooperation with that organisation that people like me secured the massive gains that we did for tax justice through the creation of country-by-country reporting and automatic information exchange from tax havens. I gather many in the movement now regret those gains precisely because of the cooperation required with the OECD to secure them.

The tax justice movement was relevant for some time. Now it is just an increasingly irrelevant branch of identity politics campaigning, being ineffective on either issue.

I hope whoever is funding that position at Tax Justice UK thinks they will get value for money from their head of policy who does not need to know about tax. I have no idea how they might do so.