

## The toxicity of tax havens claims another victim

Published: January 13, 2026, 6:47 pm

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When I began this blog, if a Treasury minister had enjoyed the benefit of a flat owned by an offshore trust it is very unlikely that anyone would have known. It was also, quite extraordinary, unlikely that anyone would have paid a lot of attention. As I know from my personal experience of campaigning on tax haven issues from 2003 onwards, getting the media to take any interest in tax, let alone tax haven matters twenty years ago was very hard. Maybe that is why John Christensen and I were probably the first and the only two full-time campaigners on this issue anywhere in the world at that time.

Yesterday, Labour Treasury minister Tulip Siddiq had to resign because she had been provided with the benefit of the use of a flat that was associated with a trust named in the Panama papers, which provided a potential link to members of her family who were in the now fairly recently deposed government in Bangladesh.

She put out a statement saying that after investigation, she had been found not guilty of any wrongdoing but still felt it right to resign as a consequence of her association with the provision of that property and the questions that arose as a consequence. The Commissioner who had reviewed the matter made it clear that questions of poor judgement did arise, even if wrongdoing had not occurred.

From that, I draw the conclusion that twenty years of campaigning on issues relating to tax havens, opacity, tax abuse, financial corruption and more has delivered a return. No longer can people in public life in the UK use such arrangements with impunity, and that is to be welcomed.

Twenty years ago, I took a lot of abuse from a great many people in a great many tax havens about what I had to say about the uses to which these places were put, all of which they denied, but all of which have subsequently been proven to be appropriate. John and I stuck to our guns, and others joined the campaign.

Neither of us might talk very much about tax havens anymore because we have both moved on to address other issues, but I will never regret the time I spent enduring that abuse because the consequence has been a change in public perceptions about

financial abuse and that is reward enough. We set out to explain that the use of tax havens was toxic because these places were created by people who had the intention of undermining the choices of democratic governments around the world. People now believe that is the case.

Tulip Siddiq might well be as innocent as she claims. I have no evidence otherwise, but her resignation is entirely appropriate. She took a Treasury post without declaring what had happened in her past, and it will be impossible for her to pretend that the provision of a flat for her use was not a benefit linked to the use of a tax haven by a relative of hers, about which she should have known. She had no choice but to resign, and did the right thing by doing so, although I suspect that she knew that if she did not, then her sacking would have followed.

Progress on issues like this takes place slowly and incrementally. This news is another welcome development in that process. But what is clear is that it is fair to say that as a result of our campaigning work, the rules on tax haven opacity around the world changed, starting with those relating to the UK's Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories and then moving on from there due to work undertaken at the OECD. I was at the heart of that process for a long time. I offer no apology to Tulip Siddiq for what happened. She should have been very aware of this as an issue. If she was not then she was not fit for office.