

# The problem with left-wing think tanks

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*I wrote the long note that follows because of something that [Gary Stevenson had to say in a recent video](#), coupled with my own reaction to an event I attended more than two weeks ago, which, to be candid, I found to be quite shocking.*

*I am deliberately missing out many of the details of the event that I attended, from which I left early, but am in response to what Gary had to say, offering a broadly-based theory as to why so little of what supposed left-of-centre think-thanks do is in any way useful in tackling the problems that we, as a society, face.*

*I stress that the opinions offered are personal.*

*I also stress that I know that there are exceptions to the general observations I make, but in this case, the generality is crucial because it is that generality which is defining what these organisations do, and what their funders appear to expect of them.*

*The conclusion, for those who do not have time to read all that follows, is that you would be wise to presume very few of these think-tanks have almost anything helpful to say at present on any of the significant problems that we face.*

*Again, I can offer exceptions, like Common Weal in Scotland, but they are notable precisely for this reason and because they have a conviction that overrides the generality that I note.*

*My conclusion is one that I have felt for a long time. If we are to get change, it is independent thinkers who are going to provide it. Gary is one of them. I suggest I am another. There are others as well. Almost without exception, we have real-world experience to offer. That is what makes our approach different, and I suggest valuable. We also work as we do out of pure conviction. Of course, some in think-tanks share that conviction, but without real world experience, they do not have solutions. And that is the problem with these organisations and the politicians who graduate from them.*

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I [mentioned recently](#) that I had significant sympathy with Gary Stevenson when he mentioned the problems that he had encountered when volunteering with the New Economics Foundation (NEF), which is a left-of-centre think tank. He referred to the time when he did so in 2014. Things might be different now, but the point that he made was that at that time, his desire was to work on tackling the problem of inequality that he had observed and made a great deal of money from when working in the City of London. His hope was that NEF might provide him with a base for tackling this issue, and after six months, he left, somewhat disenchanted.

Gary explained the problem that he had observed in a quite straightforward way, as is his style.

He noted that there is a massive division within UK society. Approximately ten per cent of people in the UK are either fairly well off or are very financially comfortable.

Of these, approximately two per cent are very wealthy, and their life experience is so removed from the reality of the rest of the population that it is very hard for most of them to have any comprehension at all of what it might be to live in a precarious financial position, let alone one where ends simply cannot meet. Inequality is, then, beyond the comprehension of most of these people.

The other eight per cent or so of this group are well off. The likelihood that they will ever encounter a major financial difficulty is low. That might be because they have made sufficient income as a result of their own efforts, or these days, it is at least as likely that inheritance has played a significant part in achieving this outcome.

Some of these people could, if they put their mind to it, recall that they came from less fortunate financial positions, but once they have been to university, been exposed to the privilege that they now enjoy, and adopted a lifestyle which is of privilege, of which process many of them will be wholly unaware, it is most likely that the biggest influence on their behaviour and attitudes will be those people who are very wealthy. Most of this eight per cent aspire to be in that top two per cent group. The consequence is that they, wittingly or unwittingly, also find it very difficult to imagine what it is like to be part of what Guy Standing has called 'the precariat', and as a result, they give the issue of inequality very little thought.

It is people from these groups that Gary found populating the think tank world that he encountered. It is very largely people from those groups that I have encountered in the work that I have done with NGOs over many years now.

I am not suggesting for a moment that everyone I have met is in this category, but a very large number have been. If there is one thing that has bound together many of those who seem to work for left-wing NGOs, it is that they are comfortable enough, or have parents who are secure enough to make them feel sufficiently comfortable that they can afford to spend the early part of their careers working in such organisations.

*There are exceptions, but this is what I have observed.*

*There is another very good reason why this is a young person's world. It seems to me that most of these campaigners might think that they are well-intentioned, but they share a number of characteristics in common. In particular, very few of them have any real-world skills. They might have degrees, often at master's level, and sometimes a PhD, but all that has prepared them to do is write an academic paper. Professional qualifications, most especially in the areas in which they campaign, are very rare.*

*Instead, if they have a career plan, it is, first of all, as an activist. They might this week be working on the environment, and next week on poverty, and the week after on gender equality. They have been persuaded that generic campaigning skills are all that are required to do such a thing.*

*Most of them also share another characteristic in common. This is that they wish to move on from the NGO world into politics, which is where many of those who are more successful do end up. Many former NGO personnel are now amongst the ranks of Labour MPs who are actively voting to make life worse for those on low incomes, about whose conditions they never thought of campaigning when in a think-tank.*

*This is Gary's description, to which I've had a little personal flavour, but I think things are actually much worse than this, partly as a consequence of having co-created some of the tax justice NGOs that operate in the UK, and having now parted company with all of them on the grounds that I now think most of them to be unable to deal with tax related issues that it seems to me none of them really understand because they are very largely staffed by people who have never worked in tax in anyway. They do, therefore, lack any form of understanding of the real world in which tax operates.*

*In addition, it would also seem that very few of them have the intellectual grasp or willingness to understand just how tax operates. As the current CEO of one of those organisations once put it to me, if he ever suggested that tax did not fund government spending but did instead, as he knew to be correct, say that tax was an instrument to control inflation he would never secure funding for his campaigns ever again, and so he stated his intention to continue perpetuating the untruth that tax funded government spending, which myth he knew supported his organisation and his own job.*

*That is the precise problem with these organisations. Not only do they not know what they're talking about, but when the truth is pointed out to them, they deny it. That is because what these organisations now primarily exist to do is to perpetuate the jobs of those who want to work in tax NGOs. The last thing that I think they want to do is to actually solve the problems surrounding tax.*

*This is, again, clear from what is happening in the tax justice movement. After John Christensen and I had, surprisingly successfully, worked with the IMF, World Bank and, most especially, the OECD to advance understanding of the real problems with tax*

*havens, which we renamed as secrecy jurisdictions in the process, we then persuaded the OECD of the merits of country-by-country reporting, which I had created in 2003, and of automatic information exchange, which John and I have been heavily promoting. We also explained the need for the disclosure of beneficial ownership of companies in tax havens and the need for all accounts to be placed on public record.*

*We secured the first two of these from the OECD and made progress with the last. But then, as John and I moved on after having taken the campaign to this point, those who followed us, some of whom we had recruited into the organisations in question, began to realise that their jobs might be under threat if these elements of the campaigns for tax justice were completed.*

*They did, as a consequence, change the whole focus of what they were talking about. Instead of continuing to work with the OECD, which has been so effective in creating change, they pursued an agenda which suggested that the OECD was, if anything, the enemy with regard to tax justice, rather than the agency that had done the most to facilitate it. Instead of wishing to continue the pattern of work that John Christensen and I had created, which had a solution focus to achieve quickest and best outcomes, not least by proposing answers to questions that the OECD then adopted as policy, they promoted the idea that the OECD should be removed from its position as the creator of the rules for world taxation, and that this task should be moved to the United Nations. This was because the OECD was considered by them to be a rich country club, and the UN is inclusive.*

*I get the principle that motivates this sentiment. I also suggest that the principle is, from the point of view of these campaigners, usefully within their field of comprehension, which comprehension is high on issues related to equality and low with regard to tax, and also usefully obstructive to any real progress, so perpetuating their roles.*

*As should have been obvious to these people, the slight problem with this plan is that the UN has almost no skills in this area, although it has had a tax committee for many years, employing about three people to deal with this issue. This lack of competence was not, however, seen as an obstacle – although it very clearly is. Instead, it was considered more important to include all of the nations in the world of tax negotiations.*

*Again, this sounds like an excellent idea until you realise two things.*

*The first is that most countries do not have the resources to engage in such discussions, and the UN has no track record of providing the means to let them do so. The discussions would, then, continue to be dominated by all those countries that dominate the OECD, with one obvious exception, which is the second problem. This is that this process would, by its very nature, if undertaken through the UN, also give a powerful voice to the world's tax havens, who these tax justice organisations now propose should engage in discussions on the future of the world's tax system as equal*

partners. The one thing that can be guaranteed is that these tax havens, which can command considerable financial resources, will definitely turn up to take part in the UN process, whilst many of the world's poorest nations will not. Inherently, therefore, I think that the solutions that people now in tax justice organisations have promoted are retrograde, likely to be unworkable, and impossible to deliver because the UN simply cannot take on this task.

The NGOs have, however, been successful over the last few years, getting many of the world's poorest countries to vote in the UN for this shift in power, even though it will almost certainly deliver results that may be worse for their tax wellbeing because tax havens will ensure that this is the case.

The consequence has been deadlock, which is precisely what these NGOs want, because as a consequence they can now campaign to their heart's content for decades to come, knowing that they have secure employment whilst doing nothing whatsoever to solve the tax haven problem that does still persist in the world, although not nearly so badly as when John and I first worked on the issue. These campaigners have destroyed a viable solution, to which they no longer had the competence to contribute, and abandoned a solution-focused approach to tax justice campaigning and adopted a process-focused approach instead, which ensures that they have jobs for life.

I am aware that the tax justice NGOs I am criticising will disagree with this narrative, and I respect their right to do so – although many of the stories they have created about John Christensen and myself are fanciful, or just downright wrong, whilst they are happy to claim our successes, when in my opinion the only claim that they can make is that they have stopped progress towards tax justice. We are just going to have to agree to differ on these issues. There is little common ground between us.

Importantly, though, a couple of weeks ago I observed the work of another NGO working in the economic sphere whose approach to their work can, I think, fairly be said to be broadly consistent with that of the tax justice movement's NGOs. I felt their work was also designed to take their cause nowhere, but would keep them in employment. I found that very troubling. What I realised is that this problem is disturbingly commonplace, as Gary Stevenson has also concluded. Without going into detail, let me put forward a proposition as to what a great many of the world's supposedly left-of-centre think-tanks and NGOs now do.

Firstly, they create a hypothesis that suits their convenience. This is very likely to be consistent with their own perception of the world, and most especially with their understanding of identity politics, to which subject they will dedicate a great deal of their time and effort without realising that, important as identity issues might be, the problems that are driving the world towards neo-fascism are created by poverty, gross inequality, and the failure to create effective mechanisms to tackle both.

Having created a false hypothesis to underpin their methodologies, they will then spend

*a great deal of time seeking to justify their approach. They will, for example, undertake extensive academic literature reviews to try to justify their position. They will also create statistical methodologies, many of which will lack theoretical justification and will try to prove hypotheses which are inherently obvious, and do not, as a result, require any such work to be undertaken. Lengthy and excruciatingly long reports will follow, often to be repeated at regular intervals.*

*In all of this, the key question of inequality will be very largely ignored because the focus will be upon the purity of process, and not the effectiveness of outcomes.*

*There is a simple explanation for all this. These people have been trained in the academic process, but so few of them have a real-world experience that they are unable to imagine what real-world outcomes might look like, or how they could be created, let alone be implemented.*

*Then, after all this effort has been expended and they discover that nothing has changed as a result of their work, these campaigners then go back to their funders and ask for another grant, which will then keep them in employment for a few more years, which is precisely what their highest priority is.*

*For saying things like this, John Christensen and I were effectively thrown out of the tax justice movement, and I am, to be candid, quite pleased to be distanced from it when so little of what it does now is of any real value in my opinion, and in particular when a great deal of what it campaigns for is likely to be profoundly harmful to the achievement of the goal of tax justice around the world, again, in my opinion.*

*I drew the same conclusion with regard to the work of the NGO that I observed a couple of weeks ago, whose presentation I attended. But realising that this practice was so commonplace forced me to ask myself whether I might be mistaken, to which my resounding answer is that I am sure that I am not.*

*Let me, then, conclude this rather long post. The conclusion is broadly similar to that which Gary Stevenson reached, but maybe a little more structured.*

*Fundamentally, there is no reason to think that the vast majority of our supposed left-wing think-tanks are capable of generating any form of solution to the problems of gross inequality and economic failure that our world now faces. That is partly because far too many of the people working in those think tanks simply do not understand these issues or their consequences. That is because they might be so insulated from the problems of inequality that they cannot appreciate the issue. It is also because few have the necessary world experience to either ask the right questions, or formulate appropriate responses to the problems of inequality, and that is because all their training is in academic-style analysis, which is very unlikely to provide any appropriate solutions, not least because such styles of analysis are now invariably formulated to ensure that the status quo is always maintained, which is precisely what these NGOs*

now do.

*Where does that leave us? There are three obvious things to say. The first is that just as much as our political parties are not where we should be looking for any answers to the problems that we face, largely because they are populated by the same type of people as left-of-centre NGOs are, nor should we think that those think tanks might provide answers either. This is because they neither want to find solutions, because that would make them redundant, and nor do they have the ability to create them in any case.*

*Second, this means that, given that the media thinks these think tanks are the voice of the left, little to do with left-wing thinking that ever has a chance of creating real change ever gets noticed by the media, which suits much of it very well, given it is right-wing inclined. It is almost as if there is a conspiracy to make sure that nothing happens to upset the neoliberal order.*

*Third, in that case, we have to look elsewhere for solutions to the problems of inequality and failed neoliberal economics. That's what I suspect both Gary and I think, and which is why we work as we do, as do some others. It is only by upsetting the status quo that we can create change, and if they are anything now, left-of-centre think tanks are very much perpetuators of the power structures within society, and so of the status quo. They are part of the problem, not the solution. I regret having to say that, but facing up to reality is a necessary part of finding solutions, and they are what we need.*