

Gary Stevenson's break

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Gary Stevenson put out a video yesterday in which he said that he was retiring from YouTube, at least for the time being. He indicated that the time being might mean nine months, and that when he returns, he might do monthly rather than weekly videos, and that they might be collaborative because the pressure of producing a weekly video is too much for him.

What became clear from this video is that he is burnt out. It is obvious that he put a lot of effort into his Channel 4 documentary on tax and wealth, and that, in the aftermath of its poor reviews, he has simply run out of road.

Let me be clear. I am not criticising Gary. Burnout is real. It happens to many people. It certainly happens to creative people, and that is what Gary has been. I also understand a great many of the pressures that Gary describes.

He describes the pressure of having to think up, create and film a video every week. I know all about that. I make one every day. Even when we are on holiday, there is still a daily video. The only thing that has stopped me publishing has been time in hospital. And I know the pressure of this as well. As I am writing this on Monday morning, we have no video available for Tuesday morning. Nor do I know at this moment precisely what it will be about. In fact, I have no very clear plan for it at all, let alone an idea for an outline script. We have just one reserve video in stock which we could use if I really run out of inspiration, but that is it. If we use that tomorrow, I am still under pressure to create another one for Wednesday. This is the reality of media creation.

And I can sympathise with the pressures as well. It is stressful being under constant scrutiny. That is particularly true in my case because I choose to read my below-the-line comments. I am aware that most of the time these are helpful, add value, and are appreciated by others. That is why I try to provide the relatively secure space that this blog makes available, which in itself is unusual. I do that by quite deliberately getting rid of commentators who appear here quite regularly who are rude, offensive, or just have the apparent intent of wasting my time. In part, that is because I wish to create a place for others to comment, but it is also about surviving the process of blog

publishing. Constant attacks do have an impact. Whoever first said that sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me totally misunderstood reality. Words can hurt, and sometimes they do. I have developed a thick skin, but not impermeability.

I also recognise Gary's problem that being recognised as an issue. I very much doubt that Gary realised that when he started writing he would become well known. I, too, most certainly never realised that this might happen, but it is now quite commonplace for me to be approached by people who ask if I really am Richard Murphy, which I customarily confirm. Let me be clear, I usually enjoy these conversations. Most are warm-hearted and undertaken with good intent, but it is odd, and contrary to most human experience, to be widely recognised and, because I appear in many people's lives every day, to be thought of as a friend when I have never had the personal chance to reciprocate the sentiment. It does create stress and expectations, and I think Gary is indicating that he is suffering from that.

That said, I think he is suffering from something else, and that is that his campaign has also burnt out. I have no doubt at all that Gary's sentiments are genuine, and his motivations and concerns are real. But when he began talking about wealth taxes, he had to subsequently admit that he had no idea how he might deliver one, and in the end he has latched on to ideas from Gabriel Zucman, none of which make the slightest bit of sense.

Zucman shows no understanding of the role of tax in the economy. He buys the household analogy. He thinks tax funds government spending. It is clear he has very little understanding of how a wealth tax might work in practice, rather than in his theoretical framework. His targeting is very limited, and any potential gain is very modest, and nothing either Gary or Gabriel Zucman talk about actually addresses the fundamental flaws inside the tax system as a whole that perpetuate the opportunity to accumulate wealth that many of the world's tax systems currently provide.

Those are fundamental campaigning failures. In my opinion, you can only campaign in the long term if what you are asking for is coherent, has a comprehensible theory to underpin it, and has detailed mechanisms for delivery that can be explained, are obviously deliverable, and clearly tackle the underlying problem that you are addressing. Gary's campaign did, quite simply, lack these qualities. So do those of organisations like Tax Justice UK, which I helped establish, and many other organisations that demand wealth taxes without understanding precisely what they are talking about because they lack the expertise to do so.

If, then, Gary's time off was used for a critical reappraisal of what he was doing with his time, and what reforms he wishes to make, that would be of immense value.

Gary is a successful campaigner. He has raised awareness. He has reached audiences which would otherwise not have engaged with tax campaigning issues. All of those

things are successes. If he can now hone the message towards something that is deliverable, and uses his time off to reflect on that, the outcomes could be great.

Either way, I wish Gary a good break. I hope he recovers well. I hope he rediscovers a purpose and, in the meantime, the work here will go on.