

History of conscientious objection to military taxation in the UK

What do we mean by conscientious objection to military taxation?

Conscientious objection to military taxation is when people object on moral, ethical, political or religious grounds to money from their taxes being used to fund the military. They object to their taxes being spent on preparations for war or the conduct of war. Being obliged by the state to pay for the military (through our taxes) is sometimes referred to as 'financial conscription'.

History of conscientious objection to military taxation

There is a long history of people conscientiously objecting to paying towards war. Sometimes people have objected to paying taxes for specific wars, at other times people have objected to paying the proportion of their taxes which fund the military more generally. Conscience organised a webinar exploring the history of conscientious objection to military taxation, including the history of attempts to bring about legislative change. This can be viewed online ⁽¹⁾.



Who was the first conscientious objector to military taxation?

The earliest known instance in the UK was in the 12th Century AD. Around 1195 St Hugh of Lincoln (pictured) ⁽²⁾, along with Bishop Herbert of Salisbury, refused the demand by King Richard 1 for 300 knights for a year's service in his French wars. As a result, the entire revenue of both men's offices was seized by royal agents ^(1,3,4).

Peace Tax Campaign / Conscience

The Peace Tax Campaign (later to become Conscience) was founded in the UK in 1977 by Stanley Keeble, with the support of the Peace Pledge Union and the Quaker Peace Committee ^(5,6). The campaign sought to establish the legal right of conscientious objection to military taxation, proposing that the money was spent on peaceful purposes instead.



<https://conscienceonline.org.uk/education-for-peace/>

Campaigning for the right of conscientious objection to military taxation in the UK

Seeking to pass a Bill in parliament

Over the years, a number of MPs in the UK parliament have supported the campaign by, for example, tabling 'Early Day Motions' (equivalent to petitions for MPs to sign), or putting forward a Bill to parliament:

In 1986 Dennis Canavan presented a Bill seeking to establish a Peace Fund into which registered conscientious objectors could divert the military portion of their taxes.

In 1994 Neil Gerrard presented a Bill seeking to divert our military taxes to a peacekeeping fund for the study of conflict, the conversion of the arms industry to non-military production, and support to democratic structures and human rights in areas of potential conflict.

In 1999 John McDonnell presented a Bill seeking to give taxpayers the right to direct the proportion of their income tax which would otherwise be spent on the military to a fund for international aid.

In 2016 Ruth Cadbury sought leave to bring in a Bill to give taxpayers with a conscientious objection to war the right to direct the military portion of their taxes to a non-military security fund (7) .

Taking the issue through the courts

In 2004 a group of seven conscientious objectors to military taxation, known as the Peace Tax Seven, sought a judicial review of the issue in the High Court.

"We want to make a positive contribution to society by paying our tax in full. We object in conscience to paying others to kill on our behalf, but current tax policy forces us to do just that."

The request for a judicial review was refused. The Peace Tax Seven appealed. The appeal was refused and in 2007 the Peace Tax Seven applied to have the matter considered by the European Court of Human Rights (8) .



Individuals refusing to pay the military portion of their taxes



While waiting for legislative change, some individuals have chosen to withhold the military proportion of their taxes in advance of a legal mechanism being established. In 1986 Arthur Windsor became the first UK conscientious objector to be imprisoned for refusing to pay the military portion of his taxes (pictured outside HMP Gloucester with his wife, Ursula). In 1990 Nigel Wild was sentenced to 28 days for his refusal to be made complicit in killing. In 1995 war tax resister Roger Franklin was imprisoned twice (7) .