bigsociety-leggett

The Big Society: Can a Government change behaviour?

Yes, people need to be nudged to make better choices

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"Coalition ministers liken the fervour behind their Big Society agenda to Mao's Cultural Revolution. But it is far away from the Big Society that we find an approach to governing that does indeed come from a little red book. Based in the Cabinet Office is the Soviet sounding 'Behaviour Insight Team'. Drawing on behavioural psychology and economics, popularised in the bestselling book Nudge by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, this 'Nudge Unit' aims to steer us towards the right – or at least better – everyday choices. This might include encouraging us to eat our 5 a day, give up smoking, recycle or optimise our personal finances. Recent high-profile proposals from the Unit include making 'opt in' the default setting for organ donation, or prompting for a charitable donation when we use a cash machine.

In contrast to the once dominant economists' view of citizens as rational choosers, Nudge points instead to the 'Homer Simpson in all of us'. We are basically lazy, prone to inertia and, when we do get round to making decisions, they are often based on impulsivity and short-termism. We need to be nudged to make better choices. Into this scenario step the 'choice architects' – those whose work necessarily involves framing our decisions. The argument runs that whether it be the layout of supermarket shelving, or the presentation of complex financial data, it is inevitable that our choices will be (intentionally or not) framed in a way that nudges us in a particular direction. Why not use this fact to better serve the interests of the chooser? So in supermarkets put the healthier foods on shelves at eye level, or have our utility bills include our neighbours' average energy consumption.

Put this way, nudging seems uncontroversial. Small, subtle and inexpensive interventions could tackle intractable problems requiring widespread behaviour change. The evidence base and efficacy of such interventions are being explored by the Birmingham Policy Commission on The Future of Local Public Services. But, as with everything else, there will also be a politics of nudging. What forms might this take? Key to nudging is that it is supposed to operate on our 'unconscious system', bypassing our 'reflective system' and critical capacities. This raises questions about transparency and democratic legitimacy. We expect governments to clearly state their policies, and persuade us of their merits. But the irony of nudging is that the more it becomes subject to open debate, the less effective it is likely to be. Our reflective system will kick in and we might actually challenge the policy objective. Looking ahead, widespread nudging could open up new social fault lines. We might imagine a division between insiders – specialists and members of the public who are aware of behaviour change strategies – and outsiders who are not. Indeed, we could see new political causes, where concerned insiders mobilise to represent those vulnerable to excessive nudging by the state or private organisations. There may even be acts of direct resistance – nudging's reliance on marketing techniques makes it ripe for 'culture jamming' and subversion.

Such dystopian scenarios may seem farfetched in relation to Nudge's modest, evidence-based policy-making. But what is clear is that on Nudge's own reading of 'human nature', those who are deciding on citizens' best interests are as prone to ignorance, short-termism and impulsivity as the rest of us. Whitehall, like everywhere else, is full of 'Homer Simpsons'. It is for this very reason that Coalition advocates of the Big Society never tire of pointing out the pitfalls of 'nanny statism'. So it is curious that they are simultaneously endorsing a policy approach which makes even our unconscious decisions an object of government intervention. A Cultural Revolution indeed."

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