Improving Our Chances of Transition to Sustainability

The Role of Values and the Ethics of Solidarity and Sympathy

Andrew Dobson

[−] Abstract and Keywords

Governments are failing to govern. They are hollowing out both the safety nets of social support and of ethical norms. The market is guided by financial incentive and short-term profit-making, by nudge and uncontrolled externalities, where sustainability citizenship cannot gain a toehold. There is a gap between responsive and responsible government. There is too little space for genuine civic engagement and for effective localism. This is the tipping point that has to be engineered by communities working for their collective betterment.

Keywords: tipping points, hollowing out, government failure, nudge economics, sustainability citizenship, community-based democracy

Sustainability is a moral and ethical issue, so it is vital to see that we will not reach the tipping point at which it becomes the new common sense until its ethical dimensions are much more deeply rooted in the minds of citizens and policymakers alike. In this regard things do not look especially positive, especially in the realm of policymaking.

Policymakers have a range of tools at their disposal. First they can legislate. Laws may or may not be informed by moral and ethical considerations, but law-making is certainly an opportunity for governments to make ethical and moral points. In the context of climate change, for example, a government might decide on a regime of congestion charges in a country's major cities. These charges might be explained in terms of revenue-raising – a fiscal measure designed to raise money. But they might also be explained as being underpinned by the recognition that transport accounts for about a third of greenhouse gas emissions, that climate change affects the life chances of near and distant others, that it is usually the most vulnerable who are least able to cope with these challenges, and that it is therefore the duty of responsible governments to encourage their citizens to drive less.

Legislation seems an obvious vehicle through which to establish the moral and ethical 'weather' in a society – a great opportunity to engage citizens in these dimensions of the sustainability question. Up to about 40 years ago, UK governments governed through enacting legislation and **(p.321)** expecting citizens to comply with it. The legitimacy of this approach was grounded in the democratic nature of the political system – if citizens didn't like the legislation they could vote out the government and give another one a try.

This model where the state, through its agent the democratically elected government, was the origin and author of policy, was called into question during the mid-1970s by the theoreticians of the New Right and, subsequently, the governments of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the USA. The postwar settlement between state, citizens, and government was undermined as the market challenged the legitimacy of elected governments to set policy, and governments in return increasingly absented themselves from the public policy space, transferring to markets ever greater scope and freedom. The effects of the success of this challenge are plain to see, from the selling off of previously state-owned assets, such as the railways and telecommunications, to the outsourcing of public services, such as waste collection and care for the elderly, to the inundating of the public sphere with market-based language (we are often referred to by local authorities as customers rather than citizens).

In liberal-capitalist countries over the past 40 years governments have been increasingly reluctant to govern, in the sense of taking responsibility for a country's political, social, and economic direction of travel, and offering arguments for preferring that direction of travel to others. Instead, the market is the constraint on, and opportunity and reference point for, policymaking. Governments hide behind the market by presenting it as a series of 'facts that speak for themselves', thereby absolving themselves of the need for ideological debate, and presenting policymaking as a matter of following common-sense. The result has been the virtual disappearance of the moral and ethical dimension of the politics of sustainability, at least in so far as the business of government is concerned.

Governments have compounded this moral and ethical 'hollowing out' by digging around in the policymaking toolbox and coming up with two further options which make it even less likely that morals and ethics will be part of the sustainability debate. The first is fiscal incentives and disincentives, and the second is rooted in behavioural economics – or what has come to be known as 'nudge'.

The logic of the fiscal approach is simple: people will want to avoid fiscal pain (fines) and embrace fiscal pleasure (rewards), so as long as the incentives and disincentives are set up in the right way, people's environmental behaviour can be altered. One important benefit of this approach is that it **(p.322)** can work very fast, often resulting in observable positive outcomes as soon as a charge is put in place (e.g. a congestion charge for vehicles). In the context of the urgency with which some environmental problems need to be dealt with – the most obvious being climate change – policy tools that secure behaviour change quickly are obviously attractive.

But from the mainstream point of view there is one huge advantage. People need have no environmental commitment whatsoever for it to work. No hard work needs to be done persuading people of the environmental and other reasons for getting out of their cars – just go with the grain of human nature, understood as the pursuit of self-interest, set up the incentive structure, then sit back and watch the environment heal.

In the longer run this advantage can turn to disadvantage. People respond to the fiscal prompt and not to the principles underlying it, so they are likely to relapse into their previous behaviour patterns once the incentive is removed. Car drivers, for example, drive less in cities with a congestion charge, but they do so because they do not want to incur the congestion charge, not in order to reduce carbon emissions. Their behaviour is changed by a superficial response to a carrot or a stick, rather than through commitment to a point of principle.

From a policy point of view this is a marked weakness of the fiscal incentive tool. But from the point of view of a politics of the environment the damage is much greater. In removing all talk of morals and ethics from the debate, the fiscal incentive approach encourages the idea that sustainability makes no moral or ethical demands on us. To grasp how bizarre this is, think of a similar claim being made in the context of votes for women or the ending of slavery. Would we be happy with a policy approach to these issues based on fiscal incentives? Can we imagine being 'incentivized' not to manacle people and put them in the hold of a ship before sending them to work for nothing in sugar plantations? No, and not just because it might not work, but because these issues demand ethical and moral reflection. Votes for women and the ending of slavery are the right thing to do, and we are selling these issues a long way short (misunderstanding them, indeed) if we rely on people's short-term financial self-interest as the sole motivation for them.

The other approach to environmental policymaking is 'nudge', drawing on the eponymous book by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2009), and deploying the insights of behavioural economics. This book has rapidly became required reading in the higher reaches of the UK government. In May 2010 the Cabinet Office and the Institute of Government published a **(p. 323)** document called *Mindspace* which aimed to bring nudge to wider attention among policymakers. Fiscal incentives bypass norms, but at least those subject to the policy are aware that there is a policy, and that they are subject to it. Nudging also eschews normative debate – but it goes even further by hiding even itself from view. Nudging works best when no one knows they are being nudged. This could well turn out to be the high (or rather, low) point of a particular approach to policymaking – including environmental policymaking – which effectively depoliticizes (and certainly de-democratizes) politics. And by 'politics', here, we mean not the institutions of government and the people who occupy them. We refer to the Aristotelian understanding of politics – debating and enacting what is right and wrong, and what is just and unjust.

'Mindspace' works as follows: 'For policymakers facing policy challenges such as crime, obesity, or environmental sustainability', writes one of the report's authors, Paul Dolan:

> advances in behavioural science offer a potentially powerful new set of tools. Applying these tools can lead to low-cost, low-pain ways of 'nudging' providers, consumers and citizens into new ways of acting by going with the grain of how we think and act. This is an important idea at any time, but is especially relevant in a period of fiscal constraint.
>
> (Dolan 2009)

Rather than operating at the level of normative reasoning as to why we think and act in the way we do and debating those reasons in terms of right and wrong, just and unjust, the Mindspace approach seeks to influence behaviour by changing the contexts which encourage people

unconsciously into one course of action rather than another. Mindspace takes behavioural science to the very heart of policymaking – and simultaneously displaces politics.

One key reason given by its advocates for 'nudging' is that it 'goes with the grain of how we think and act', as Dolan (2009) puts it. This makes nudging seem hard-headed and realistic – characteristics that the electorate like to see in their politicians (or so the politicians would have us believe). Dolan goes on to say:

> In simple terms, we can seek to change behaviour in two main ways. First, we can seek to change minds. If we change the way they think about and reflect upon things, then we can change their behaviour. The success of these kinds of interventions has been somewhat mixed. Second, we can seek to change people's behaviour by changing their contextual cues. If we change the 'choice architecture', then we can change their behaviour. It turns [out **(p.324)** that] our behaviour is a lot more 'automatic' and somewhat less 'reflective' than we have previously thought.

> (Dolan 2009)

This makes it clear that 'nudgers' aren't interested in normative debate – or what Dolan calls the 'changing minds' approach to politics. This, apparently, is because of 'mixed results' – i.e. policymakers don't always get what they want. Instead they propose to look at the world in the same way as consumer experts look at supermarkets. These experts know that consumer behaviour is affected by how the supermarket is designed – we are encouraged to buy this product rather than that one by the siting of shelves and signs, the smells and sounds we encounter, and the direction we walk round the shop. An environmental example of nudging – which appeared on the *Nudge* website not so long ago – is making recycling bins larger and general waste bins smaller in the expectation that people will begin to recycle more and throw away less.

In thinking of sustainability as a matter of tweaking behaviour, nudgers commit what philosophers call a 'category mistake'. Ethics, norms, and values are not an optional extra in sustainability – they are constitutive of it. From this point of view, it is as absurd to see sustainability as a matter of re-sizing waste bins as it would have been to nudge slave owners towards ending slavery by making their ships a little shorter and narrower. Unsustainability is a moral and ethical affront with severe practical consequences for all beings – human and non-human – that suffer from it.

An alternative approach is sustainability citizenship. We define sustain-ability citizenship as 'pro-sustainability behaviour, in public and in private, driven by a belief in fairness of the distribution of environmental goods, in participation, and in the co-creation of sustainability policy'. More particularly, the sustainability citizen:

• believes that sustainability is a common good that will not be achieved by the pursuit of individual self-interest alone;

• is moved by other-regarding motivations as well as self-interested ones;

• believes that ethical and moral knowledge is as important as techno-scientific knowledge in the context of pro-sustainability behaviour change;

• believes that other people's sustainability rights engender environmental responsibilities which the sustainability citizen should redeem;

• believes that these responsibilities are due not only to one's neighbours or fellow-nationals but also to distant strangers (distant in space and even in time); **(p.325)**

• has an awareness that private environment-related actions can have public environment-related impacts;

• believes that market-based solutions alone will not bring about sustainability.

The sustainability citizen will therefore recommend social and public action.

As policy tools, fiscal incentives and nudge make sustainability less likely. First, this is because they deliberately avoid engaging the public in debates around ethics, norms and values – yet the deployment and internalization of this language is essential if we are to debate (a) what sustainability is, and (b) what we need to do to achieve it. Second, long-term sustainability policy success requires the sort of buy-in that can only be achieved through citizen participation and the co-creation of policy. One of the biggest obstacles to the realization of sustainability citizenship is the abdication of government from governing. It is not simply a matter of rolling back the state and expecting citizens in the guise of the Big Society to take over. Sustainability citizenship is a tender plant that needs nurturing by public agencies – the very agencies that are under attack from the market fundamentalists of the present Coalition government.

Government has a key role to play in sustainability citizenship. The trade-off between state and society is not a zero-sum game; less state will not automatically mean more society. In fact as the Young Foundation recently reported:

> When government cut back sharply in places as varied as US inner cities, and countries like Russia, the promised revival of civil society didn't happen. Often the spaces left by government were filled by organised crime or gangs. Ordinary citizens became more afraid, not more trusting, and the evidence from around the world shows that, surprisingly perhaps, the countries where civil society is often strongest are also ones with active government, even in such diverse countries as Brazil, Denmark and Canada.

> (Young Foundation 2010: 6)

Government can help by providing greater opportunities for citizens to participate in environmental policymaking, and for making clear the ethical and normative questions at stake. It can provide more support for grassroots initiatives and create more opportunities for civic engagement. Government can provide appropriate funding streams and build social capital. But above all, government must reconsider its overall role.

Sustainability citizenship invites government to recover its nerve, to govern once again, to engage citizens in the cut-and-thrust of ethical and **(p.326)** normative debate, and to resist the temptation to bypass politics in the name of an easy life. These ways lie the routes to infantilization, disillusion, and a vacuum where politics ought to be, filled with nudges and financial inducements. Aristotle was surely right:

> Man is a political animal … [since] humans alone have perception of good and evil, right and wrong, just and unjust. And it is the sharing of a common view in these matters that makes a household or a city.

> (Aristotle 1962: 28–29)

References

Bibliography references:

Aristotle (1962), *Politics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).

Carolan, M. (2007), 'Introducing the Concept of Tactile Space: Creating Lasting Social and Environmental Commitments', *Geoforum* 38: 1264–75.

Carter, N. and Huby, M. (2005), 'Ecological Citizenship and Ethical Investment', *Environmental Politics*, 14 (2): 255–72.

Dolan, P. (2009), 'Mindspace: A Simple Checklist for Behaviour Change', http://www.socialsciencespace.com/2011/01/mindspace-a-simple-checklist-for-behaviour-change/ (accessed 15 February 2013).

Gilbert, L. and Phillips, C. (2003), 'Practices of Urban Environmental Citizenships: Rights to the City and Rights to Nature in Toronto', *Citizenship Studies*, 7 (3): 313–30.

Jagers, C., Sverker, C., and Matti, S. (2010), 'Ecological Citizens: Identifying Values and Beliefs that Support Individual Environmental Responsibility among Swedes', *Sustainability*, 2: 1055–79.

Thaler, R. and Sunstein, C. (2009), *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).

Wolf, J., Brown, K., and Conway, C. (2009), 'Ecological Citizenship and Climate Change: Perceptions and Practice', *Environmental Politics*, 18 (4): 503–21.

Young Foundation (2010), *Investing in Social Growth: Can the Big Society Be More Than a Slogan?* (London: Young Foundation), http://www.youngfoundation.org/files/images/YF_Bigsociety_Screen__2_.pdf.

Access brought to you by: