States of Reason

Freedom, responsibility and the governing of behaviour change

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Executive summary

Public behaviour has long been the concern of government. States need to maintain order, prevent citizens from harming each other and promote the public good. They often aim to foster behaviour that is thought to be good for individuals and society at large, such as voting, healthy eating, or more controversially, marriage and particular styles of parenting.

Along with families, communities and markets, governments can inform, educate, cajole and coerce people, contributing to the social and physical environment in which individuals choose how to live. Social and cultural norms are deeply, if slowly, influenced by these signals. That is why debates about government strategies aimed at changing personal behaviour go to the heart of significant political and philosophical questions about the boundaries between the private and the public, the limits of state control, and the ability of individuals to act rationally and independently.

For much of its history, the state has provided people with goods, services and benefits. But increasingly, the success of public services and the welfare state depends on the active cooperation of the recipients of those 'public goods'. What is more, many of the new challenges we face as a society, such as climate change and rising obesity, require us to change our behaviour. Debates about such issues are highly charged but increasingly common in our public life. Since 1997, the Government has explicitly argued for interventions to change behaviour and has launched initiatives across a range of policy areas.

It is therefore timely to reflect on the appropriate role of government in changing how individuals behave. In this report we ask what the rationale is for state interventions in public behaviour and what principles should guide public policy when the state seeks to act. When is action by the state to change behaviour inevitable, permissible or wholly unjustified? And what kinds of intervention are warranted?

The report develops a framework setting out when and how government intervention in public behaviour is justified. It brings together insights from different policy areas but focuses in particular on three examples:

· Anti-social behaviour

· Climate change

· Personal finance, specifically, people's ability to manage their finances.

It considers whether government policies in these areas are appropriate and how effective they are in meeting their stated aims.

The current focus on behaviour

In recent years we have found out a great deal about how and why human beings behave in the ways they do. Research has uncovered more about what shapes and influences people's behaviour; increasingly sophisticated marketing has rapidly put this knowledge to use. Yet speedy uptake of the new evidence by the marketers and advertisers has not been matched in government and policymaking circles. Policy is still being developed on the back of an anachronistic understanding of how behaviour is influenced and what makes people change. If we are to move beyond the current limited policy approach, then new thinking is required.

Current policies directed towards changing people's behaviour reflect a growing understanding that government acting alone cannot solve intractable policy problems. Citizens, along with the private sector, need to be engaged in partnership with public authorities if policy is to be effective.

The growing understanding of behaviour and what influences it is one set of pressures on policymakers contemplating change of this sort. Another comes from more ideological concerns informing this government's approach to policy that favour a focus on individual behaviour. Many recent interventions aimed at changing public behaviours have been justified by appealing to the notions of partnership between citizen and state, and citizen empowerment. This is a democratic strain in government policy that stresses the merits of devolving power and responsibility to local communities and their citizens. Empowerment is the concept of trying to promote individual and community capacity for overcoming social problems.

The current government rarely invokes the kind of thrift and self-improvement championed by the Victorian moralist Samuel Smiles. It rejects the Thatcher maxim that there is 'no such thing as society, only individuals and their families'. Its frame is social. It usually argues that individual rights and responsibilities, and the exercise of civic and social virtues, are underpinned by public action, rather than crowded out by it.

Admittedly, the Government's appeals to personal responsibility are often couched in a moral language of community. This troubles civil libertarians concerned to limit state power and protect individual liberties, particularly when it comes to public safety and social order. Quite a lot of new legislation over the last decade has provoked this kind of concern. Analysts concerned with social justice have criticised some policies for their failure to adequately take account of the structural conditions that shape people's abilities to change their behaviour and their circumstances.

It is critical, therefore, to examine the normative arguments behind policy interventions, not just whether policies work. In part, this is because such very different types of behaviour change are in the Government's focus. Those that involve direct personal benefit, such as healthier habits or improving financial acumen are relatively easy to understand as 'empowering'. They also have the benefit of reducing the burden on the tax payer. However, others are harder to fit into the empowerment frame; reducing carbon emissions by flying less or reducing water use involve less direct personal benefits. Given this complexity, what should be our guiding principles?

The progressive[1] case for government intervention

In a liberal society, we should not expect to agree on what is good for all individuals, such as happiness or welfare. The freedom to shape and pursue our own goals is a defining characteristic of a liberal society. The state cannot justify efforts to get everyone to conform to an overarching substantive vision of the good life for all – whether that is religious or secular. However, neither does liberty imply that we may pursue our goals without interference. Properly understood, liberty refers to the real or substantive freedom to pursue the things we value.

The implication of such a meaning is that we may need to change the structures, institutions and

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1. ippr takes 'progressive' to mean having a commitment to social justice at its heart (Pearce and Paxton 2005). 'A socially just society is one where each has opportunity to fulfil his or her potential, in which the distribution of social and economic goods is fair and in which a fair distribution is understood to require high, though not complete equality. Contemporary progressives see a flexible open market economy supported by strong public services as the best means to achieving social justice.' (Margo 2007: 6)

processes that govern how we live our lives, and the inequalities we experience in our society. Although we pursue different goals in life, we all need to be in a position to exercise genuine choice, and for this to happen requires government to tackle inequalities in resources and opportunities, and to promote social justice.

To foster a more equal society in which each of us has substantive freedom also requires us to attend to civic virtues and common political belonging. The state therefore can indeed justify redistributing resources between citizens, outlawing discrimination, and promoting political and social equality.

The state is also justified in fostering conditions in which individuals' autonomous, non-manipulated choices can flourish. Although individuals do not behave in ways that traditional theories of 'rational choice' predict, in a just society it is both possible and necessary for us to make informed, empowered and effective decisions affecting our individual and collective lives. The state should therefore act to empower its citizens, in their private lives, as consumers and by deepening democratic processes.

State interventions must respect the substantive freedom of all citizens; they should not be inequitable. The state can require responsible behaviour from citizens, for example, those who are receiving state benefits. But the conditions must not be unfair.

As traditional liberal theory recognises, the state may act to prevent individuals acting in ways that harm others. The state may also prevent harm to vulnerable people such as young children who may not be deemed capable of rational choices.

Harm may consist of:

· Specific identifiable harm to others, such as anti-social behaviour or smoking

· Harm to others through excessive calls on public resources, such as repeatedly irresponsible behaviour

· Harm to 'general others' within state boundaries, such as littering

· Harm to 'future others', such as excessive depletion of natural resources.

State interventions must be in proportion to the harm and be guided by procedural justice, where the process is as important as the outcome. The state therefore sometimes has no option but to make certain behaviours impossible. This is not just about preventing direct harm such as crime, but also about ensuring that it is not possible to buy a washing machine that uses more energy than necessary.

We now know more than ever about how choices are made, and the extent to which they can be described as rational. Government policies inevitably structure the background against which individual choices are made. Government can also determine the 'default' positions taken by individuals, for example by reducing salt in processed foods or making pension arrangements 'opt in' rather than 'opt out'. In the latter case, individuals should retain the choice to opt out of the default. This reflects the important concept of 'libertarian paternalism' as developed by Sunstein and Thaler (2003). But in this instance, the state's objective should not be the welfare or utility of the individual but his or her substantive freedom.

There needs to be the widest possible discussion of what constitute the necessary conditions for the exercise of real freedom, and the specific instances in which government agencies should set a default position. This is therefore an argument for an egalitarian and democratic liberal paternalism.

Understanding behaviour

The traditional instruments of government such as information, tax and other laws, rely on a classical concept of rational behaviour. Yet, individuals do not always make rational choices. Poeple use mental shortcuts (heuristics) to make decisions, and what we choose often depends on the context of making the choice. Individuals also often lack self-control or simply want to fit in with what they see others doing. We have good evidence for all this now. The only way to understand the complexity of people's choices is to see how they are rooted and profoundly influenced by the social and physical environment in which they have to be made.

Moreover, government does not think and act as one body. Different departments act on different imperatives and may produce conflicting policies. It is local government that sets the scene for much behaviour, particularly environmental. And the media, private and voluntary sectors all play their part in the development of norms and the availability of choices, alongside informal social norms and peer pressure.

The concept of 'capabilities' is useful here. It rejects both purely individualistic or structural explanations of behaviour. It examines what limits people's capacity to achieve particular outcomes.

This approach argues that people have varying degrees of power over their own lives, and varying ability to change their behaviour. The extent to which they are able to act depends on many factors, from personal capabilities to deep social structures, from economic markets to community social norms.

Personal capability

Certain deep-seated human characteristics, such as our reliance on mental shortcuts and the power of habit, affect how people respond to interventions. Equally, people's attitudes, knowledge and intentions all make a difference to behaviour. The challenge for progressive policymakers is to think about how policy can make use of these traits, without unacceptably manipulating people.

It might mean looking at how the private sector has encouraged people to make certain choices and, for instance, deciding to impose more control over commercial methods of persuasion, perhaps by banning advertising of junk food to children.

There are other limits to behavioural interventions. Addiction, and to some extent, our genetic make-up, can make it very difficult for some people to change their behaviour. Policy needs to grasp this and ensure that people who cannot change their behaviour are not penalised.

Practical resources

How people act also depends on the resources at their disposal, the environments in which they act, and their position relative to others in their communities. There is little doubt that relative poverty matters as much as absolute poverty, and that policy needs to focus on reducing inequalities as well as lifting people out of material deprivation. The surroundings in which people live affect how they behave, and policy can do much to improve this through planning regulations and initiatives to improve neighbourhoods.

Peer groups

Peer group pressure makes a great difference to people's behaviour, particularly that of young adults. Peers have very powerful influences on young people. This only becomes a problem when the dominant group is one that commits acts of anti-social behaviour. Policy needs to be more imaginative in harnessing the positive impact that peers can have while challenging the more negative effects.

For example, policy that harnesses the pressure of peer groups might offer effective solutions to anti-social behaviour. This is an idea that has not yet been explored fully in British policy circles but is used widely in the United States.

Other external circumstances
The wider environment in which decisions are made deeply affects people's behaviour. The media, private and voluntary sectors significantly influence this broader context, particularly through their effect on social norms. These are very important in determining behaviour. Social norms develop over time, and are influenced by a great number of factors, including culture, the media, private sector and legislation.

The process of influencing social norms and changing culture is uncertain and very long-term, and particularly challenging for government. Legislation plays a role, but is generally more successful at hardening existing social norms than setting new ones. This is partly because of the immense political difficulties of putting into effect legislation that goes against the tide of public opinion, or even the very intense preferences of a minority. Using communications and tax policies to send signals about the social acceptability or not of particular behaviour is another option, but again takes time.

Understanding when to intervene
Before thinking about how to change behaviour, government has to make some complex decisions about when intervention is appropriate. ippr has developed a set of criteria for government to consider before intervening.

Weigh the risk
Is the behaviour in question posing a big enough social risk to warrant intervention? There needs to be good evidence that social risks are on a reasonably large scale and that individuals cannot protect themselves effectively. Policymakers need to have estimated how many people might be affected if no action is taken; whether inequality is being increased; and the long-term social and economic implications of the behaviour. Government should be wary of calls to 'do something', when the evidence suggests that the problem does not warrant action of this kind.

It is more challenging for government to act when a political mandate does not exist. The evidence suggests that government should take action to encourage people to change their behaviour when the risks to others are unacceptable, even if not immediately visible. In particular, government is justified in setting the environment in which people make their own decisions. However, citizens need to be engaged in their decision-making process.

Is there an acceptable trade-off between risk and freedom?
Consideration of risk needs to include asking whether it is severe enough to warrant any curtailment of people's freedom. Debates about proscribing conditions are important here. Any new conditions need to meet three tests before being introduced:

- The state needs to show that a service will be more effective if the change is made

- Social duties should not be inequitably enforced as a result

- Unacceptable harm should not fall on the poorest and most vulnerable.

Are the known negative side-effects acceptable to the target group and the rest of society?
Interventions to change behaviour can have undesired outcomes. When these are known about, people need to be given the opportunity to decide whether they are acceptable. When they are not acceptable,

policymakers need to be able to stop the intervention. Ongoing evaluations are critical.

Do longer term equitable outcomes justify any short-term unfairness?
Any progressive government's interventions must be fair. We define equity in terms of fairness of outcomes between different social groups over the medium and long term. For short-term inequity to be acceptable, the target group needs to be involved in the decision-making process.

Cost effectiveness
Some interventions to change behaviour are known to be cost-effective, particularly in health. Others are harder to cost, especially where externalities are not taken into account, for example in the case of flying. Interventions need to demonstrate to the public that they are cost-effective. Possible unintended consequences need to be considered and communicated to the public.

Understanding different approaches

Policy that aims to change people's behaviour in one area can often be isolated from ideas that are being thrashed out elsewhere. Experts in health behaviour change may not be talking to experts in environmental behaviour change, and so on. Specialists need to share knowledge, but not only about techniques. They also need to debate together the underlying values behind interventions and their impact.

The model of 'information in: action out' is generally insufficient to provoke long-term behaviour change. Simply providing good reasons for people to carry out a particular behaviour is unlikely to prove effective, although it may provide a trigger to action. This provides a challenge for communications, which can often be the primary means of intervention. But carefully targeted and designed communications are a critical part of changing the wider social norms in which individual behaviours take place.

Information and understanding has a clear role to play in behaviour change when combined with other approaches. Policy has a clear role to play in increasing people's understanding of particular behaviours and tackling inequalities in their knowledge, whether this is directly through advertising or through working with other sectors, for example in food-labelling schemes.

Behaviour changes can be set off by particular triggers or critical moments. These may be the big life moments, or prompts that simply come from encountering a particular piece of knowledge at the 'right time'. One challenge for policy is ensuring that information is provided on an ongoing basis rather than through one-off campaigns.

Making sure the necessary infrastructure is in place encourages people to change their behaviour. This is not easy, especially when it comes to tough policy areas such as public transport, but helping people to take the first steps is critical. Recycling rates have increased dramatically where there are bins at the kerbside, close to people's homes.

Making things easy involves understanding dominant social norms and looking behind these to how people are motivated. Norms shift relatively slowly. Asking people to go against the norm is less likely to work than finding ways of challenging those norms, at least in the long term. Sometimes there will be conflicting norms; government will have to decide if it can intervene to support one set of norms without provoking a backlash.

People need to feel that they are not the only ones changing their behaviour. This is particularly relevant to behaviour that affects the environment, where people seldom see an immediate or personal benefit to their actions and may feel that changing behaviour costs them time and/or money. Feeling that the

Government and private sectors are also making an effort encourages people to shift their own behaviour.

Using financial incentives (positively or negatively) assumes a degree of rational choice and willingness to change. As with providing information, the challenges to rationality described earlier mean that alone, incentives are not always a success. They tend to work best together with other interventions.

ippr has developed two tools for policymakers. The first can be used to map behaviours according to how difficult they are to change. For example, habitual behaviours tend to be harder to change than those that are one-off.

The second tool develops a typology of interventions, based on the Sustainable Development Diamond, or 4 Es model. It shows the interaction between different kinds of intervention, and helps policymakers to assess proposed approaches.

Current interventions

Anti-social behaviour, climate change and financial capability are policy areas that illustrate differences in types of behaviours and government approaches. Anti-social behaviour is about the behaviour of a minority, which most people are happy to see dealt with punitively. Tackling climate change requires a collective approach; people see little personal gain when they change their behaviour. Improving financial capability is about direct individual benefit, but often some immediate costs.

Anti-social behaviour

Although much of the Government's approach to anti-social behaviour is to be commended and supported, there are serious concerns that the best academic research has not been adequately fed through into policymaking.

Anti-social behaviour has to be understood as a product of deep and wide socio-economic forces. Disadvantage, inequality and a range of factors that have borne down particularly hard on disadvantaged communities have created environments that give rise to anti-social behaviour. A fundamental rethink of the way we socialise young people and distribute resources and opportunities is therefore needed. There are also key questions raised about the growing influence of advertising and the media on the definition and cultural norms of childhood and youth culture. In effect, media and advertising have taken power away from parents in determining the leisure activities, communication norms and behavioural norms influencing young people. Policy needs to re-empower parents in these spheres.

Government policy has also served in some instances to disempower parents. Re-categorising behaviour that normally would be dealt with by parents, particularly behaviour in the home, as 'anti-social' means that the responsibility for disciplining children is removed both from parents and from the local community. Rather than local parents feeling empowered to assert behavioural norms, as has traditionally been the case in well-functioning communities with high levels of social capital, relations between communities and young people are increasingly mediated by the police and social workers. This is not appropriate to most day-to-day interactions between young people and adults. Strategies are needed that support and empower parents and local communities.

Nevertheless, there is also a clear need to tackle the very real issue of anti-social young people. Anti-social behaviour has to be both prevented and stopped, and simply removing the punishments is not the answer. The focus must be on changing behaviour, not merely punishing it, especially when we are dealing with young people still in a process of learning and internalising norms and values. Key to our analysis is the role that structured activities play in teaching norms of behaviour and enabling young

people to develop the skills they need in order to manage their own behaviour effectively.

Policy should focus on empowering and supporting parents and local communities, as well as supporting 'problem' families. Parenting programmes should be seen as part of a wider programme of interventions; parenting orders are not necessarily the best way to change the behaviour of children who are already behaving anti-socially. Empowering communities to feel that they can take a collective stand will help. Government could support training in community leadership and investment in grassroots organisations. Supporting restorative justice, where offenders and their victims are brought together to encourage the offender to take responsibility for their behaviour, could help repair some of the damage caused by anti-social behaviour.

Improving relations between young people and local police should be a key aim of police authorities. The police and others should also focus on using 'peer education', particularly to combat drug and alcohol use among young people. Involving young people in policy implementation, for example through consultation exercises and through the creation of 'youth mayors', should be encouraged.

There should be much greater caution in the use of ASBOs (anti-social behaviour orders). They are almost certainly inappropriate for those under 18, except in genuinely exceptional circumstances. And there should be a review period after six months for all ASBOs and a maximum limit of two years. The priority should be to tackle those forms of anti-social behaviour that most make people feel unhappy in their own homes and unsafe in their community.

Tackling climate change
Climate-friendly behaviour change is driven not only by policies that appeal to the rational side of human nature – especially information and pricing – but also by a range of social and psychological factors. If policy fails to change personal behaviour in a significant way in the next few years by using this new palette of options, then government may have to fall back on yet more radical (and possibly more costly) options.

Government is beginning to engage with this agenda, but to be successful, it needs to confront an array of deep-seated issues in a way that only a systematic, strategic approach can achieve. There are four essential elements to such an approach:

· Prioritising the areas where behaviour needs to change

· Identifying which are the key barriers in the priority areas, and which groups of people are particularly involved

· Developing the most appropriate interventions to overcome these barriers

· Developing smart and effective communications.

Getting people to change their most carbon-heavy behaviours, namely heating homes, car use and heating water, would have a huge impact. Major behaviour change is also needed if flying is not to become an even larger problem within the next few years. Government must also focus on measures that do not require personal behaviour change at all. It could, for example, increase environmental standards for appliances, houses and cars. There is scope to improve the status and affordability of environmentally-friendly products and behaviour.

Attempts to combat climate change are hampered by the fact that the solutions that would work best are politically unpopular, despite increased public acceptance of the problem. In order to get people on board

for such policies, we need better communications and information so that people understand the effect their actions have on the environment. Enabling people to adopt alternative forms of behaviour, by making these cheaper, more visible and more attractive, is also vital.

Government's own behaviour must be consistent with what it is asking the public to do. A recent assessment of the Government's record on energy and travel in its own operations demonstrates patchy commitment. Credible leadership requires that government takes every opportunity to exemplify behaviour change. At the very least, the Government should make sure it meets the targets for sustainable operations on the Government estate and in the Sustainable Procurement Action Plan.

A growing proportion of the public is clearly concerned about the climate problem and good policy should dictate that they are empowered to do something about it themselves. Before reform is imposed on them, people deserve the opportunity to change their behaviour. Then the positive energy that people acting together can bring to bear may truly be harnessed.

Improving financial capability
Improving Britain's financial capability is vital if we are to avoid significant financial problems in the future. Too few people are planning effectively for retirement or for an unexpected drop in income, despite the fact that most could afford to do so.

Even if policymakers now have a much better grasp of the nature of the problem, we are still underestimating its scale. Over the long term, the best way to improve financial capability is to engender a profound cultural change, both in attitudes to personal responsibility and behaviour, and in attitudes to consumption, sustainability and debt.

A central challenge is closing the motivation gap between what people say they think is important and their actual behaviour. Policy needs to find more effective ways to empower people to change their behaviour, working with their aspirations and with a degree of realism about the difficulty in engaging them. There needs to be more thought put into how policy can make best use of the latest developments in economic psychology and behavioural economics.

ippr's research shows that there is a two-way relationship between people's interest in improving financial capability and their financial behaviour. The more interested and knowledgeable people are about finances, the more likely it is that they will be able to navigate their way through this territory. And having a greater stake in financial products can also lead to greater interest in managing them well. This suggests that we need a two-pronged policy: providing the most appropriate advice and guidance to those who want it, when they want it; and providing the best possible structures to make it easier for people to act in more financially capable ways.

Improving the way we talk about financial capability, and the way we communicate with people about this topic, is important. The Financial Services Authority (FSA) should be congratulated for its recent revision of the way it advertises and presents this issue. But there is scope to be far more innovative than has been the case so far.

Since the evidence suggests that even poor households can save, the Government should offer people with debt problems the option of having debt repayments deducted automatically from benefit payments (up to a small set maximum), including Working Tax Credits.

One of the clearest lessons from research is that commitment plays a crucial role in changing behaviour, because this helps mitigate against people's tendency to prevaricate, possibly acting against their own

stated long-term interests. Helping people to make and keep commitments is therefore an important way of tackling the motivation gap.

There is a strong case for seeing financial capability as more of a central social welfare issue. This would imply moving responsibility for the National Strategy from the FSA to the Government, through the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

The DWP and DfES have considerably better access to the public, through social services offices and education providers. They also have more experience in running large-scale programmes, and have the evaluative and research capacity to assess these. Government also has greater expertise in dealing with financial issues that affect ordinary people's lives than the FSA and there are strong links between the rest of its core business and financial capability issues.

Public policies have only recently begun to mirror their conceptual shift towards attempting to affect behavioural outcomes, rather than merely narrow notions of financial literacy or 'financial inclusion'. There is a need to continue evaluating policy in terms of its impact on behaviour, practical skills and attitudes.

Conclusions

All three fields of behaviour described here have seen some successful interventions and use some very innovative approaches. But across all three, implementation is patchy and progress is slow. Policy in all areas struggles to affect social norms and to close the gap between intention, knowledge and action. All three behavioural interventions that ippr has examined show that the way the debates are currently framed and communicated makes it more difficult to change these and the behaviour concerned.

It is also a matter of analysis. A more sophisticated understanding of the behaviours involved – particularly anti-social behaviour and those that impact on the environment – would help policymakers develop better interventions. But perhaps the biggest challenge is political. It is far more publicly and politically acceptable to enforce harsher measures against a minority – as in the case of anti-social behaviour – than it is to take on behaviour undertaken by the majority and commonly deemed to be socially acceptable. However, this raises major questions for considerations of equity.

The Government should develop clear principles and guidelines for any interventions it makes to change personal behaviour, based on the principles ippr has outlined here. In particular, individuals' preferences and choices have to be seen in the context of the environment in which they are rooted. It is also clear that some paternalism is inevitable as many policy choices the Government makes – even if that is to do nothing – will impact on people's behaviour. Nevertheless, a key part of the state's goal should be empowering citizens to make good choices; it can help individuals think in more rational ways and to develop greater levels of individual responsibility.

Equity needs to be central

Any progressive intervention should have equity at its heart. This means ensuring both that the policy instruments used and the outcomes they achieve are not regressive either in the short or long term. There are more pernicious forms of inequality inherent in some approaches to changing people's behaviour. Equity in terms of outcome is critical, but increasing evidence suggests that fair processes are also very important in creating political legitimacy.

Currently, ensuring equity is not given high enough priority. There is a danger that in shifting the focus of public policies onto personal behaviour, social problems get viewed too simplistically as consisting of

individual failing and pathology. Without a clear hold on the significance of the collective context, policymakers can overlook or downplay the structural barriers that often prevent people from making choices that are in their interests and those of the wider society.

Specific interventions or strict conditions attached to benefits may also increase inequality. The sheer number of initiatives may further undermine rather than empower particular communities. It is very often the same people being targeted for their behaviour related to health, the environment, welfare and crime. It is critical that it is not only the poorest who are thought to have reciprocal responsibility to the state.

Towards a more sophisticated analysis and response
ippr's analysis shows that behaviour is not always analysed as effectively as it could be. Policymakers do not always take into account the best evidence about human psychology, motivations and responses. Whole-systems, or 'ecological', approaches stress the need to analyse all levels of behaviour, and to develop responses addressing each. The capabilities approach is a useful way to think about personal behaviour, and the degree to which choices are genuinely free.

Government also needs to accept that some types of undesirable behaviour cannot acceptably, feasibly or affordably be changed. Behavioural interventions are inexact, and unintended outcomes are common. Effective evaluations must be in place.

Engaged citizens
The public does not think in terms of particular behavioural initiatives conducted by individual departments. Rather, people develop a general sense of how the state wishes them and others to act, and the degree to which it is willing to enforce this. People do not look to the Government to provide everything, and they accept the role of the private and voluntary sectors in the provision of some social goods. As consumers they have flexed their muscles and increasingly know their own powers. Yet as citizens there is a growing disconnection between the people and their elected representatives.

If they were framed in a way that helped to develop a common approach to joint problems, behavioural debates could be an opportunity to move towards a better relationship between government and citizens. But if anything, public perceptions of state interference risk undermining trust further. For progressives with strong democratic values, it is therefore essential that attempts to change behaviour strengthen rather than undermine democratic political systems. If the state is perceived as authoritarian, or even simply as nagging, fragile interest and trust in politics can be further eroded.

Policy is neither neutral nor blind to outcomes; it defines certain social goods and then strives to achieve them. It is now generally accepted that engaging the public with policy improves implementation, even if effective engagement is very difficult to achieve. However, public participation in policymaking still tends to happen at the point where the only genuine choices are about relatively narrow implementation options. In order to create a sense of partnership, citizens need to be involved in the larger decisions about which social goods are a priority.

When to lead and when to follow
The Government has a significant role to play in leading behaviour change. This is partly about leading public opinion where necessary as well as listening when public attitudes are more progressive than policy. However, it is also important to ensure that government actions do not undermine behavioural messages. Policy consistency is important, both within departments and across Whitehall. This is particularly important in relation to environmental issues where people see little immediate benefit from their personal behaviour change. It also illustrates the challenge of trying to act when government is not

a cohesive unit, and is itself only one of a number of players.

Part of leadership is knowing when to let go. Many interventions are more appropriately run at the local level, particularly those approaches that aim to affect peer behaviour or neighbourhood problems. Local government and the voluntary sector have a clear and important role in taking the lead at the local level, and in developing the capacity of communities to deal with problems. Equally, the private sector and the media have a major influence on behaviour, and need to be seen as partners. Setting the environment in which decisions take place is a key role for politicians.

This all has profound implications for the state. It must simultaneously do less and more. If key policy challenges are to be met, public behavioural goals must also be met. This will not happen unless there is a deeper sense of partnership between citizens and state. Working together with people to address common threats is the greatest challenge government faces.