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[Home](#) > Behavioural Insights: The Second Team Leading the UK Government's Covid-19 Response

[Coronavirus](#) ^[1]

Behavioural Insights: The Second Team Leading the UK Government's Covid-19 Response

One World Governance — Part 35



by Martin Edwards
Sunday, 3rd May 2020

At the beginning of this millennium, a range of psychological tools was applied simultaneously on the British public to change the behaviour of smokers, drinkers and the obese. Today, we are all constantly being 'nudged' to make decisions which favour the preferred options set by global policy makers. But what is their ultimate objective, and which actors are working behind the scenes to change citizen behaviour?

There are two main areas of scientific 'expertise' which the Johnson régime relies upon to decide how it will deal with the Covid-19 'pandemic'. The first is [the team at Imperial College led by Neil Ferguson](#) ^[2], which claims to be able to use its [computer models](#) ^[3] to forecast the spread and impact of the disease. The second is the army of behavioural 'scientists' who have been 'nudging' us at every opportunity into making decisions which favour the preferred options set by global policy makers.

In 2011, the UK Column published an exclusive report, [British Cabinet Office Collaborates With French Brainwashing Guru To Change The Way We Think](#) ^[4], which warned that the public is to be reframed or 'nudged' into politically acceptable 'social norms' including healthy eating, voluntary work and tax-gathering. During the current 'pandemic', the nudging of the public has gone into overdrive, fully facilitated by the mainstream press and media.

What are behavioural insights?

Traditional methods ('tools' or 'stimuli') employed to change public behaviour are legislation, regulation, taxation and education.

More recently, however, we have seen how the application of numerous techniques of nudge theory (behavioural economics and psychology) have been used in order to modify how governments and the population at large make decisions. The [purpose of these so-called nudges](#) ^[5] is to 'encourage people to make better choices for themselves and society.'

One such 'better choice' concerns the highly controversial roll-out of 'smart' energy meters. The thinking behind this move is that 'households with smart meters will be able to receive highly personalised behavioural feedback, which is deliverable through a range of new technology platforms, such as a web portal, email, mobile applications and social media.'

[Behaviour Change and Energy Use](#) ^[6] — a joint publication of the Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team, the Department of Energy & Climate Change, and the Department for Communities and Local Government — presents insights which 'complement the Government's objective to reduce carbon emissions across all sectors.'

Energy consumers are therefore being deliberately misled. Energy companies are claiming that a 'smart' meter would mean an end to estimated bills and that consumers also benefit by instantly being able to see how much energy they have used in pounds and pence.

But the authors of *Behaviour Change and Energy Use* also point out that 'in the context of domestic energy use, providing consumers with feedback on how their energy use compares with similar households in their neighbourhood has been shown to reduce energy consumption in higher-than-average users.'

A further [document by the Department of Energy and Climate Change](#) ^[7] highlights the fact that when 'smart' meters are installed, the energy providers can switch off people's energy supplies if they deem the usage too high or if the grid is on a high load, only to be restored when usage drops or the user is more conservative with their energy consumption.



Configure Load limiting:

(Electricity only and requires consumer consent): Capability to switch supply off (or increment a counter and send an alert) when an 'instantaneous use' threshold (kW) is crossed. Once supply is disabled immediately rearms such that consumer can re-enable Supply if their kW use has returned below threshold.

Potential uses:

- Supplier could offer a tariff where on certain winter peak days consumer accepts a maximum consumption of 2kW in return for an annual discount on their bill (supply set to 'trip' when > 2kW);
- Supplier could offer a discount if a customer does not exceed a given threshold in any month (where consumption over the threshold triggers an alert to the supplier which cancels the 'bonus' payment for that month but does not disable supply);

[Smart Energy GB](#) ^[8] claims itself to be the 'voice of the smart meter roll-out.' The Smart Energy GB 2016 publication [A smart route to change: The application of behavioural science in supporting Great Britain's smart meter roll-out and changing the way we use energy for the better](#) ^[9] contains two chapters of relevance to this article. Chapter three covers 'Behavioural Change Models and the smart meter rollout', whilst chapter four covers the 'The SMART Approach to applying MINDSPACE.' We will learn more about 'MindSPACE' below.

The authors of *A Smart Route to Change* thanked the Behavioural Insights Team UK for their contribution.

A smart route to change with CEO Sacha Deshmukh



The report's foreword evidences that Maya Shankar, Senior Advisor for Social and Behavioural Sciences to President Barack Obama, spoke at an event hosted by Smart Energy GB.

Shankar holds a [PhD from Oxford](#) ^[10], earned while on a [Rhodes Scholarship](#) ^[11], and a BA from Yale in cognitive science. We will examine her role in the global spread of the application of behavioural insights later.

Behavioural Insights Team — People

According to its own [website](#) [12], the Behavioural Insights Team board is chaired by Rob Taylor. Also on the board is the (British Government) Cabinet Office representative Janet Baker, and the NESTA representative (see below for more on that organisation) is Nathan Elstob. David Halpern is Chief Executive, and Simon Ruda, Director of Home Affairs and International Programmes, also sits on the board.

Dr. David Halpern is co-author of the 96-page report [MINDSPACE: Influencing behaviour through public policy](#) [13], published by the Cabinet Office and the Institute for Government. 'Nudging' is described in that key document as 'cues [that] act on people without their conscious knowledge: indeed, people actively resist the suggestion that their actions are being influenced.'

The [academic advisory panel](#) [14] of the Behavioural Insights Team includes Daniel Goldstein, Richard Thaler, Nick Chater, Peter John, Peter Tufano, Simon Burgess, Theresa Marteau and Gus O'Donnell.

Daniel Goldstein is [Principal Researcher at Microsoft Research](#) [15] and describes himself as 'an American cognitive psychologist known for the specification and testing of heuristics and models of bounded rationality in the field of judgment and decision making.'

Richard Thaler [16] is currently Professor of Behavioural Science and Economics at the Chicago Booth School of Business. He is the co-author of [Nudge: Improving Decisions on Health, Wealth, and Happiness](#) [17], published by Yale University Press in 2008.

Thaler's [website](#) [18] links to the blog [nudges.org](#) [19], which is the companion to his 2008 publication. According to the blog itself, it contains examples of 'nudging, choice architecture, libertarian paternalism, and many other terms you won't read about in standard economics books.' Thaler's examples of [a dozen mini-nudges](#) [20] provide a flavour of his mindset. Between November 2010 and September 2013, Thaler was listed as a member of the [advisory council at Demos](#) [21], the UK-based Marxist think-tank.

Nick Chater [22] is Professor of Behavioural Science at Warwick Business School, and, **Peter John** [23] is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at University College London.

Peter Tufano [24] is Dean of Oxford University's Said Business School, which [CPEExposed](#) [25] revealed as having links to leadership training 'charity' Common Purpose, and which in turn had links with a Paris business school specialising in, amongst other things, neurolinguistic (NLP) training for business leaders.

Simon Burgess [26] is Professor of Economics at the University of Bristol.

Theresa Marteau [27] is 'Director of the Behaviour and Health Research Unit in the University of Cambridge Department of Public Health and Primary Care, and Fellow and Director of Studies in Psychological and Behavioural Sciences at Christ's College, Cambridge.'

The main thrust of her research focuses on the 'development and evaluation of interventions to change behaviour (principally diet, physical activity, tobacco and alcohol consumption).'

She is the author of [Towards environmentally sustainable human behaviour: targeting non-conscious and conscious processes for effective and acceptable policies](#) [28] and a contributing author to [Judging nudging: can nudging improve population health?](#) [29], published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2011. Further examples of her published research papers can be consulted [here](#) [30].

Gus O'Donnell ('[there is only one GOD](#) [31]') was Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service between 1st September 2005 and 31st December 2011.

Since 2010, the Behavioural Insights Team appears to have [become embedded in various government departments](#) [32], the National Health Service (NHS), various British police forces, The Pensions Regulator (TPR), the Electoral Commission, and its influence also extends to many British local authorities.

As our first example, we can reveal that Dr Rupert Gill is [Head of Behavioural Insights at HM Revenue & Customs](#) [33] (the British tax authority), and is also a Common Purpose Leader. In our second example, we discovered that [Simon Buda of the Behavioural Insights team](#) [34] 'is responsible for BIT's [*the Behavioural Insight Team's*] work with the Home Office, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Defence, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and DfID [*the Department for International Development*], as well as multiple police forces and other government agencies.'

In 2014, it was announced by [Francis Maude](#) [35], Minister for the Cabinet Office, that 'the government's Behavioural Insights Team — also known as the Nudge Unit — [had] teamed up with Nesta, the UK's innovation foundation, to create a new mutual joint venture.' It was reported that Maude had stated that 'as a mutual joint venture, the new company will be able to grow its business and export services across the globe.' Francis Maude has also been discovered speaking in the Common Purpose video [A question of leadership: Crisis, communication and lessons from 2009](#) [36].

NESTA

NESTA [describes itself](#) [37] as 'an innovation foundation which works ... in partnership with others, including governments, businesses and charities.'

Its [Chief Executive](#) [38] since 2011 has been Geoff Mulgan.

Mulgan, a former director of *Marxism Today*, was previously engaged as director of the Government's Strategy Unit and head of policy in the Prime Minister's Office.

Whilst at the Government's Strategy Unit, he was co-author with David Halpern (now CEO of the Behavioural Insights Team), and others, of the 2004 Cabinet Office discussion document [Personal Responsibility and Changing Behaviour: the state of knowledge and its implications for public policy](#) [39], which concluded by stating that 'the public have a central role to play in improving outcomes in public services and achieving environmental goals.'

Mulgan has been Chief Executive of the Young Foundation, and director of the think-tank Demos (which he founded alongside Julia Middleton, founder and former Chief Executive of Common Purpose). Since 2016, he has been acting as [co-chair of a World Economic Forum group](#) [40] looking at innovation and entrepreneurship in the fourth industrial revolution.

NESTA is led by a [12-strong board of trustees](#) [41]. Chairman of the board is **Sir John Gieve** [42]. His early career was spent at the UK Treasury as private secretary to three chancellors (British treasury secretaries). Between 2001 and 2005, he was Permanent Secretary (chief civil servant) at the Home Office, and he was Deputy Governor of the Bank of England between 2006 and 2009.

David Pitt-Watson [43] is Treasurer of the major British charity Oxfam, and a board member of the International Corporate Governance Network. He is also 'Executive Fellow at London Business School, and Chair of the UN Environment Programme's Finance Initiative.'

Simon Linnett [44] is Executive Vice Chairman at Rothschild and 'has a strong personal interest in the "green" debate, seeking to influence discussion on auctioning emissions and chairing Rothschild's Environment Committee.'

Moir Wallace [45] is a career civil servant who is now Provost of Oriel College, Oxford, a position she has held since 2013. In 2008, she was appointed Permanent Secretary at the newly-formed Department of Energy and Climate Change, which she led for four years. She has her own web page on the [CSC Leaders website](#) [46].

CSC Leaders is a partnership between leadership development organisation Common Purpose and HRH The Duke of Edinburgh's Commonwealth Study Conferences (UK Fund). UK Column researchers also discovered Moira Wallace being quoted on a page on the Common Purpose website [Leadership programmes, University partners](#) ^[47].

Another link between NESTA and Common Purpose is provided by reference to the [LinkedIn profile](#) ^[48] of Olly Arber, formerly Director of Digital at NESTA. A visit to the [Common Purpose website](#) ^[49] reveals Arber quoted as saying:

The course ... gave me the confidence to step outside my normal ring fence and bring together wider groups to help create change.
(*Leading Beyond Authority*)

The [Behavioural Insights Team Update Report 2013–2015](#) ^[50] tells us that:

International organisations (including the European Commission, the OECD, and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) are setting up BIT-style [*Behavioural Insight Team*] functions or undertaking behavioural insights projects, drawing on the growing body of BIT and associated work, together with new findings from elsewhere.

Behavioural Insights at the European Commission

The European Commission's Science & Knowledge Service ran a programme called [Behavioural Insights Applied to Policy](#) ^[51] for EU civil servants at its Berlaymont headquarters in Brussels in February 2016. Owain Service, [formerly of the Behavioural Insights Team](#) ^[52], was in attendance.

Activities of the [Joint Research Centre \(JRC\)](#) ^[53] include monitoring the application of behavioural insights in European countries and organising workshops to connect practitioners in the field. The [Behavioural Insights Applied to Policy European Report 2016](#) ^[54] examines numerous 'policy initiatives across 32 European countries either implicitly or explicitly informed by behavioural insights (BIs).'

The [EU Science Hub](#) ^[55] website provides links to [country overviews](#) ^[56], including one for [the UK](#) ^[57]. The UK overview points out that 'the BIT has also worked with the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme.' Examples of the spread of Behavioural Insights via the networking approach across Europe is found by referring to the following websites:

- [The Swedish Nudging Network](#) ^[58]
- [Nudge Italia](#) ^[59]
- [Irish Behavioural Science and Policy Network \(IBSPN\)](#) ^[60]
- [The European Nudging Network](#) ^[61]

The OECD and Behavioural Insights

The [Organisation for European Economic Cooperation](#) ^[62] (OEEC) was established in 1948 to run the US-financed [Marshall Plan](#) ^[63]. OEEC's founding European member states were joined by Canada and the United States and signed the new OECD Convention on 14 December 1960. That convention entered into force on 30th September 1951, when the OECD was officially born.

The Paris-based OECD now has 39 member countries that account for 80% of world trade and investment. The [OECD works](#) ^[64] with 'governments to understand what drives economic, social and environmental change, and, promotes policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.' It is now typically thought of as the club of the world's most developed economies and a platform for exchange of social policies.

The OECD claims that since 2013, it has been at the forefront of [supporting public institutions](#) ^[65] who are 'applying behavioural insights to improving public policy.'

It was no surprise for us to learn, then, that the OECD supports the United Nations in ensuring the success of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) ^[66]. This is evidenced by the OECD's 12-page document [Better Policies for 2030: an OECD Action Plan on the Sustainable Development Goals](#) ^[67].

The OECD publication [Behavioural Insights and Public Policy: Lessons from Around the World](#) ^[68] contains reference to 'over 100 case studies showing the application of behavioural insights to public policy.'

The programme of the OECD's [Behavioural Insights and New Approaches to Policy Design workshop](#) ^[69], held in Paris on 23rd January 2014, makes interesting reading. The [Introduction to Behavioural Insights and New Policy tools](#) there was given by [David Halpern](#) ^[70], Chief Executive of the UK's Behavioural Insights Team.

Owain Service, former Managing Director of the Behavioural Insights Team, played a part in Session 2, *Mainstreaming "New" Thinking into Institutions*, while Session 7, *From Nudging to the Next Frontiers*, was jointly facilitated by Professor Richard Thayer, Chicago Booth School of Business, via video link. Thayer, it will be recalled, is an advisory panel member of the Behavioural Insights Team.

Spreading Behavioural Insights Worldwide

The [Behavioural Exchange series of conferences](#) ^[71] are events that have taken place in Sydney, London, Singapore, and Harvard University in the United States.

For example, [Behaviour Exchange Sydney 2014](#) ^[72] was 'the world's first global public policy behavioural insights conference.' Plenary speakers included David Halpern and Professor Richard Thayer. Also present was Maya Shankar, the former Senior Advisor to the Deputy Director at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

Evidence contained in the [Nudging in Government video Behaviour Exchange 2014](#) ^[73] demonstrates that Maya Shankar and David Halpern were already familiar with each other at that time.

In the spring of 2014 Shankar was the keynote speaker at the [United Nations Psychology Day](#) ^[74], an event focused on how psychological science can inform global sustainable development. September 2015 saw former President Obama sign [Executive Order 13707](#) ^[75] — *Using Behavioral Science Insights to Better Serve the American People*, which institutionalised the US Government's Social and Behavioral Sciences Team (SBST) and codified the practice of applying behavioural science insights to federal policy. In February 2017, Maya Shankar became Google's first Head of Behavioural Insights.



Behavioural Science Advisors to the United Nations, Dr. Maya Shankar and Dr. Lori Foster, briefing Secretary-General BAN Ki-moon on the United Nations Behavioural Initiative (UNBI).

Dr. Maya Shankar and Dr. Lori Foster, Behavioural Science Advisors to the United Nations, are the authors of [Behavioural Insights at the United Nations, Achieving Agenda 2030](#) ^[76].

This document tells its readers that:

In January 2016, Secretary-General BAN Ki-moon engaged the first-ever Behavioural Science Advisor to the United Nations, as a way of bringing cutting-edge behavioural science insights to the forefront of policy and programming discussions across the UN. *[Since then,]* the UN Secretariat and the UNDP Innovation Facility have launched a small team of behavioural science experts — the UN Behavioural Initiative (UNBI).'

[BEHAVE 2020](#) ^[77] is the 6th European Conference on Behaviour and Energy Efficiency. It is to be held on 21–23 October 2020 at the UN City Copenhagen office.

It is being run by the United Nations Environment Programme, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Technical University of Denmark. The main topics for discussion there include: *Behavioural insights for effective climate change mitigation* and *Users' behaviour in transport and mobility*. The Copenhagen venue serves as the global thematic hub for energy efficiency for the [United Nations Secretary General's Sustainable Energy for All \(SEforALL\) initiative](#) ^[78].

Conclusion

These, then, are the people driving the government's response to Covid-19, alongside the more often discussed 'A-Team' at Imperial College.

It should perhaps come as no surprise that the message from the UK Government for several weeks now has been that the *behaviour of the public* is key to any decisions regarding the lifting of the so-called lockdown.

What might be more surprising to many is that the *types* of behavioural change being demanded of us by the Behavioural Insights 'experts' in response to a global 'pandemic' fit so nicely with the aims and objectives of those pushing for global change via the Millennium Development Goals.

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