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## Will the Nudge Unit be pulling your strings after Freedom Day?

With Covid restrictions about to be eased, politicians have turned to the dark arts of weaponised psychology to keep the public onside

By Laura Dodsworth

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During this week's press conference to announce the relaxing of legal restrictions on July 19, the Prime Minister spelt out in unusually stark terms the extent to which the Government

has been relying on behavioural science to manage the population throughout the epidemic. “We will change the basic tools that we have used to control human behaviour,” Boris Johnson said, in a casual admission that shows just how far this approach has permeated the minds of our political leaders.

His sombre demeanour suggested that what is billed as “Freedom Day” will in fact be anything but. The tools may be changing, but the extent to which the Government will be manipulating our everyday behaviour will remain just as intrusive.

In Whitehall parlance, this is known as “nudge” – the dark art of politicians getting the general public to do exactly as they wish, without us even realising it.

Governments have always manipulated our emotions and used fear to engender compliance and docility in the population. But in the past decade – and particularly during the pandemic – the tentacles of the behavioural scientists have tightened around our lives. The Behavioural Insights Team, or “Nudge Unit”, was established in the Cabinet Office during David Cameron’s administration and now sits at the heart of government.

In writing my book, *A State of Fear*, [I spoke to government advisers who told me they were stunned by the weaponisation of psychology](#). Even before the pandemic, with things like terror incidents and the Salisbury Novichok attack, the approach has not been to understand how people will react, but rather ask how do the politicians want people to react – and how can they make it happen?



“Behavioural psychology is an industry,” a scientist who advises the Government told me anonymously. “They are very pleased with themselves at the moment. And Britain is seen as leading the way in how to manipulate people. There is skipping in Whitehall corridors. The public have been proved to be incredibly sheepish, so there’s more nudge coming.”

There are already warning signs about how we might be manipulated in the weeks and months to come. On masks, for example, the legal requirement to wear one may be removed on July 19, but don’t expect to see them disappear any time soon. According to a poll published yesterday, 72 per cent of the public will continue wearing them on public transport, while 64 per cent back shops barring people who refuse to cover up. A separate poll found that one fifth of Britons even want a nightly curfew at 10pm, even after the pandemic is over.

This is not only predictable, it was planned, to a degree. The use of social conformity and peer norms to “control human behaviour” was typical throughout the epidemic. The nudgers wanted us to monitor each other.

Prof David Halpern, chief executive of the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), who also sits on the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) and one of its offshoots, the Scientific Pandemic Influenza group on Behaviours, or SPI-B, referred to the desirability of this citizen

policing when he said that: “Most of the heavy-lifting is done by the public, frowning at people who aren’t wearing masks. The British are particularly good at doing this.”

In an astonishing public admission when masks were first mandated last year, Metropolitan Police Commissioner Dame Cressida Dick said she hoped that people would be “shamed” into complying by other members of the public.



With more than half of the population now double-vaccinated – 51.2 per cent of all eligible Britons have now had both jabs – expect the emphasis to shift on to long Covid. It’s all too apparent that Covid doesn’t kill children, so scientifically its “hangover” effects are a grey area that can be leveraged, potentially exploited to encourage, say, the idea of vaccination in children, or the rollout of daily testing in schools.

Can it be coincidence that, in recent days, Prof Chris Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer, has warned of a “significant” increase in long Covid among the young?

Similarly, if the Government really wants us to retreat from the state of fear it put us in at the start of the first lockdown last March – when the Prime Minister urged us, “at this moment of national emergency, to stay at home, protect our NHS and save lives” – we must get wise to its reporting of data. The current Covid dashboard, to which we are subjected on the news

every evening, has floated the big scary numbers to the top – but without context. We are told about deaths and hospital admissions, but never about the recoveries.

If the Government was serious about things returning to normal, the nightly reported figures might be better switched to the amount of antibodies in the population at large, or the reduced lethality of new variants, both of which tell a positive story.

Manipulation takes many forms. We may be increasingly able to travel this summer, but politicians, including the erstwhile health secretary Matt Hancock, make public announcements about their own staycations. In recent days, there has also been talk of six-hour queues in arrivals lounges, as well as the difficulty of booking the required PCR tests, perhaps in a bid to further deter us from venturing abroad.

And that is not to even mention the cost. Transport Secretary Grant Shapps has announced that [all children aged five to 18 will have to undergo PCR tests when they return from amber-list countries](#) with their parents or individually – something which could add £400 to a holiday for a family of four.

Even if they do not wish us to actually go on them, the very prospect of foreign holidays is being wielded as a “nudge” to encourage vaccination, at a time when the uptake has almost halved over the past fortnight, and tailed off notably among the under-30s.

This week, an incentive offered football fans to get the jab ranked among the more flagrant enticements: London Mayor Sadiq Khan gave away 50 pairs of tickets to watch the Euros final in the Trafalgar Square fan zone, and one pair of tickets to watch the live event at Wembley. Quite a temptation for a football fan – and certainly the first time we have used such incentives to encourage vaccination.

Can behavioural science have a role in helping us climb down from fear? Veteran disaster and recovery planner Prof Lucy Easthope thinks we will see the Government amplify authentic, feelgood moments this summer to uplift general public mood and confidence, along the lines of Chancellor Rishi Sunak’s Eat Out to Help Out scheme last summer.

However, she remains worried about the winter ahead, and warns that “the Government has undermined its technical and moral legitimacy, and they will use fear again if they need us to do something”.





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For anyone who might dismiss all this as a conspiracy theory, I would suggest they consider a now-infamous minute of a Sage committee meeting last March. It noted that the SPI-B behavioural insight subgroup had warned that many people “still do not feel sufficiently personally threatened” and that “the perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased”.

This isn’t a genie that needs to be squashed back into the bottle, it’s a hydra that has a head in every single government department. It’s not stopping, it’s not going anywhere.

One way or another, we will be nudged through the pandemic until its bitter end and, conceivably, we will continue to be nudged into the future as good model citizens. But who defines good? Which tools do the technocratic advisers use, what are the harms, benefits and ethical impacts? The public needs to be consulted.

Throughout the pandemic, we have proven ourselves to be very suggestible. For me, “Freedom Day” isn’t about getting our independence back at a particular moment, but a stepping stone towards a more democratic society – one in which we can truly be free again.