How far to nudge? Assessing behavioural public policy

Peter John (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar; 2018; ISBN: 978-1-786430-54-0; 192 pp; £65)

Peter John's *How Far to Nudge?* delivers a timely assessment of the progress and promise of behavioural economics (BE) as the initial burst of general enthusiasm gives way to a more reflective evaluation. The book provides a comprehensive primer to the uninitiated – John has the ability to convey complex ideas and concepts with great ease and simplicity – but also offers the informed academic or experienced policy practitioner with some interesting insights and ideas on the future direction of behavioural public policy.

In the first seven chapters, John assesses the development of the area. Chapter 1 provides a summary of the scope of the book. Chapter 2, 'Behavioural Public Problems', comprehensively describes the areas that cover behavioural policy; for example, our resistance to behaviours that we know are beneficial; habits – the behaviours that we barely recognise; our reactance to authority; and collective behaviours. This chapter finishes with an interesting discussion on the impact of poverty and blame attribution. John, in an example of his clear style, tells us that human behaviour, as a crucial aspect of achieving desired policy outcomes, should be more than a truism. The behavioural argument has to 'take the causal form that certain behavioural traits and biases detrimentally affect the policy outcomes in ways that are systematic, knowable and fixable'.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 provide an easily digestible summary of the development of inquiry into human behaviour. Chapter 3 outlines the reasons for the pre-eminence of the rational choice model and subsequent criticisms of the model. John then gives us a solid history of BE up to the publication of the *Nudge* book that brought BE into the public consciousness. He outlines 'nudge' in Chapter 4. Chapter 5

then details the movement of BE into the mainstream, prompted by politicians with their eye on the public mood to establish nudge units. While these three chapters have some pertinent material, I felt, particularly in Chapter 5, that John gives us too much detail on the development of the Behavioural Insights Team and its changing form.

Chapter 6 is an excellent discussion of the shortcomings of nudge. John outlines its limited range, its purported weak and temporary effects, and the limited knowledge base on which it draws from. However, he makes the point that BE can have very cost-effective policy changes that are worth implementing. Chapter 7 brings us through the ethics of nudge and Thaler & Sunstein's attempt to straddle both camps with the phrase 'libertarian paternalism'. Again, John's clarity is to the fore here when he concludes that nudges 'are public policies authorised by democratically elected governments that are subject to review… ethical acceptability depends on how open and effective are the procedures for authorisation'.

Chapter 8, for me, is the highlight of the book. John sees the scope of BE expanding to how behaviour can be changed over the long term. John wants to see BE with public policymakers as the subjects; with an examination of their biases, herding effects, habits and reactance to authority. He sees an important place for public engagement in policy in this regard. Chapter 9 provides an assessment of John's view on behavioural public policy. One gets the feeling that he is disappointed in the direction it has taken so far and he sets forth his vision for the more radical approach of 'nudge plus'.

How Far to Nudge? is an excellent book on the development of BE since its infancy. John has great skill in conveying complex ideas with efficiency and simplicity. He makes interesting what a lesser writer would make tedious, and he provides us with innovative insights to the development of the area.

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