



Sustainability Citizenship

Andrew Dobson

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Summary

- Governments have stopped governing; markets have become the origin and legitimating source of policy.
- Environmental behaviour-change policy is dominated by fiscal incentives and disincentives – financial punishments and rewards. This approach appeals to people’s self-interest and can be effective in the short term.
- It will fail in the long term because it doesn’t engage people at the level of principle. Engagement lasts only as long as the incentive/disincentive.
- Increasing attention has been paid recently to behavioural economics – ‘nudge’ – as a way of changing people’s environment-related behaviour.
- This also fails to engage people at the level of principle. Likewise it is fundamentally anti-democratic in its determination to change behaviour without us knowing it is being changed.
- Neither of these approaches recognises that sustainability involves ethical judgements and they are therefore fundamentally unsuited to policy-making in this area.
- An alternative is sustainability citizenship: ‘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’.
- 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.
- Government should:
 - provide greater opportunities for citizens to participate in environmental policy-making;
 - make clear the ethical and normative questions at stake;
 - provide support for grassroots initiatives and create more opportunities for civic engagement;
 - provide appropriate funding streams and build social capital.

‘It is as absurd to see sustainability as a matter of resizing 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’ (from pg. 9 below.)



1. From state to market: the abdication of government

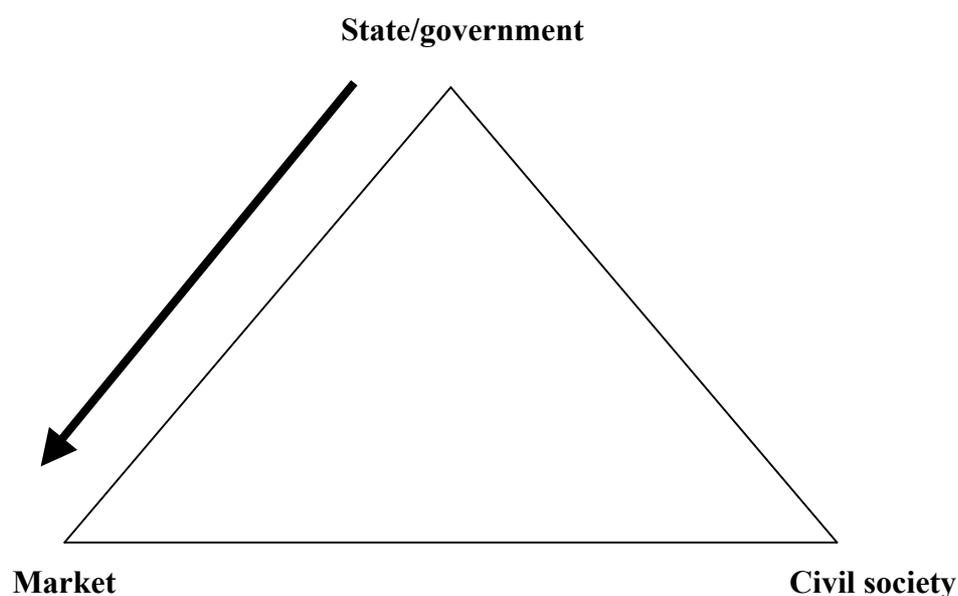
Up to about forty years ago, UK governments governed through enacting legislation and expecting citizens to comply with it. The legitimacy of this approach was grounded in the democratic nature of the political system – if citizens didn't like the legislation they could vote out the government and give 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 post-war 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 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 (I am referred to by my local authority as a customer rather than a citizen).

This shift of the origins and legitimating source of policy from the state/government to the market is illustrated in the Figure below. Note that civil society is entirely absent from this story, a point to which we will return below.

The result is that 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 at one



and the same time the constraint on, and opportunity and reference point for, policy-making. It is the reason why we can't do things, why we must do things, and how we must do them. The upshot of this is the unseemly sight of pro-cuts governments around Europe threatening voters with bankruptcy brought about by unaccountable credit ratings agencies with Dickensian names like Standard and Poor – and ideologies to match.

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 policy-making as a matter of following common sense. Contemporary UK environmental policy-making is no exception to this rule, with consequences for how we understand sustainability and for the public realm more generally. Two approaches to environmental policy-making in the UK are especially significant, because they illustrate key aspects of this new settlement: the pursuit of (a particular understanding of) self-interest on the one hand, and the avoidance of ideological debate on the other.



2. Fiscal incentives: no need for ethics

The first approach we want to look at is the use of fiscal incentives and disincentives to alter people's environment-related behaviour. The logic 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 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).¹ In the context of the urgency with which some environmental problems need to be dealt – 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 advantage that far outstrips even this one. The real beauty of this approach is that 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.

But in the longer run this advantage can turn to disadvantage. For in this model, 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 want to avoid 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 values 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 'incentivised' 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.

Like anti-slavery and votes for women, environmental issues involve ethical questions. Even if we take a narrow resourcist view of the environment we need to ask ourselves why we value the resources the environment supplies us with, if only to help decide an order of priority for conservation and protection. And some theories of value suggest that we should treat the environment as an end in itself and not



as a means only. Then there is a vast range of questions relating to the construction of a sustainable society. Are restrictions of personal freedom justified in the name of sustainability? Does greater equality lead to more sustainability? Is it right to argue that democracy and sustainability are incompatible? The problem with fiscal incentives for sustainability is they habituate us against thinking in terms of morality and ethics. In deliberately bypassing the normative ‘why?’ stage of the policy process, the fiscal incentive approach removes any possibility of social learning.

One key sign of the managerial, value-free status of mainstream sustainability is that it is a shared goal right across the political spectrum. Female suffrage and the end of slavery eventually became shared goals of course, but massive ideological battles were fought over them for a long time beforehand. It is as though sustainability has bypassed this stage, and every ostensibly value-free approach to environmental policy-making – like fiscal incentives – is another defeat in the battle to establish the need for a democratic, egalitarian, low-throughput sustainability. This is not because fiscal incentives are necessarily incompatible with this kind of sustainability, but because they reduce the likelihood of sustainability being thought about in normative terms in the first place. In the hands of fiscal incentivisers sustainability becomes a non-normative policy objective that can be achieved by mobilising a reductive view of human motivation (self-interested utility maximisation) – and without making reference to sustainability at all.



3. Nudge: no need for politics

The second approach to environmental policy-making we want to consider is ‘nudge’, drawing on the eponymous book by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein and deploying the insights of behavioural economics.² Remarkably rapidly this book became required reading in the higher reaches of government, and in May 2010 the Cabinet Office and the Institute of Government published a document called *Mindspace* which aimed to bring nudge to wider attention among policy makers. Signed by the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service, Gus O’Donnell, and Sir Michael Bichard, Executive Director of the Institute of Government, *Mindspace* takes the managerial approach to policy-making found in the fiscal-incentive approach to an altogether new level. While fiscal incentives bypass norms, 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 policy-making – including environmental policy-making – which effectively depoliticises – and certainly de-democratises – politics. And by ‘politics’, here, we mean not the institutions of government and the people who occupy them, but the Aristotelian understanding of politics – debating and enacting what is right and wrong, and what is just and unjust.

Mindspace works as follows: ‘For policy-makers 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’.³

Rather than operating at the level of the *normative reasons* 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 avoids reasons and seeks to influence behaviour by changing the context which encourage people unconsciously into one course of action rather than another. In so doing, *Mindspace* takes behavioural science to the very heart of policy-making – and simultaneously displaces politics.

Dolan gives two explicit reasons and one less explicit reason why ‘nudging’ is a good idea. The two explicit ones are that it is ‘low-cost’ and ‘low-pain’. The low-cost claim is open to debate, yet it has become an unexamined and unquestioned assumption. We can see this from one example of ‘nudging’ given in the *Mindspace* document: that of the raised lines one encounters as one approaches a roundabout. These lines ‘nudge’ the driver to slow down. Note that the driver is slowing down because of the lines, not because she or he has learned that it’s a good idea to slow down when approaching a roundabout. Reduced to absurdity, this policy requires all roundabouts to have lines painted on their approaches. Wouldn’t it be cheaper to explain to people why slowing down at roundabouts is a good thing to do?



The second, ‘low-pain’, reason for the nudge policy gets closer to the heart of how behavioural science is in danger of driving the politics out of politics. By ‘low-pain’, Dolan and his *Mindspace* colleagues mean bypassing the messy business of giving reasons for policy, and having to deal with potential norm-based opposition to it. How convenient for politicians who want to turn politics into management to have a policy tool at their disposal which does away with the need for a legitimating process involving the discussion and development of policy with citizens.

The less explicit reason for ‘nudging’ is that it ‘goes with the grain of how we think and act’, as Dolan 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). In the hands of nudgers, ‘going with the grain’ means avoiding normative arguments. So as 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 our behaviour is a lot more ‘automatic’ and somewhat less ‘reflective’ than we have previously thought’.⁴

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. policy-makers 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 rather than that product 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.⁵

At the margins this kind of approach might well have some impact. But there are three reasons to be worried about the spread of nudging in the policy-making community and beyond. First, nudge (like fiscal incentives) offers no opportunity for ‘social learning’. Reasons for behaving ‘pro-environmentally’ are explicitly *not* given in nudge regimes, so there is no possibility – by definition – of learning what pro-environmental behaviour is, and why it is a good thing.

Second, Thaler and Sunstein call the manipulation of the contexts and environments in which choices are made ‘choice architecture’, and they refer to their theory as ‘libertarian paternalism’.⁶ It is libertarian because no one is explicitly being told what to do, and it is paternalistic because policy-makers work on the assumption that they know what is in our best interests. This is about as far from co-creation of policy as it is possible to get, and is fundamentally anti-democratic.

Finally, the critique of the lack of explicit normativity in the fiscal



incentive approach is even more relevant here. 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 resizing 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.



4. Sustainability citizenship: bringing ethics and politics back in

So fiscal-incentive and nudge approaches to sustainability policy-making fall short of what's needed because they eschew all talk of ethics, norms and values. An alternative approach is sustainability citizenship. We define sustainability 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:

1. believes that sustainability is a common good that will not be achieved by the pursuit of individual self-interest alone;
2. is moved by other-regarding motivations as well as self-interested ones;
3. believes that ethical and moral knowledge is as important as techno-scientific knowledge in the context of pro-sustainability behaviour change;
4. believes that other people's sustainability rights engender environmental responsibilities which the sustainability citizen should redeem;
5. 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);
6. has an awareness that private environment-related actions can have public environment-related impacts;
7. believes that market-based solutions alone will not bring about sustainability. The sustainability citizen will therefore recommend social and public action.

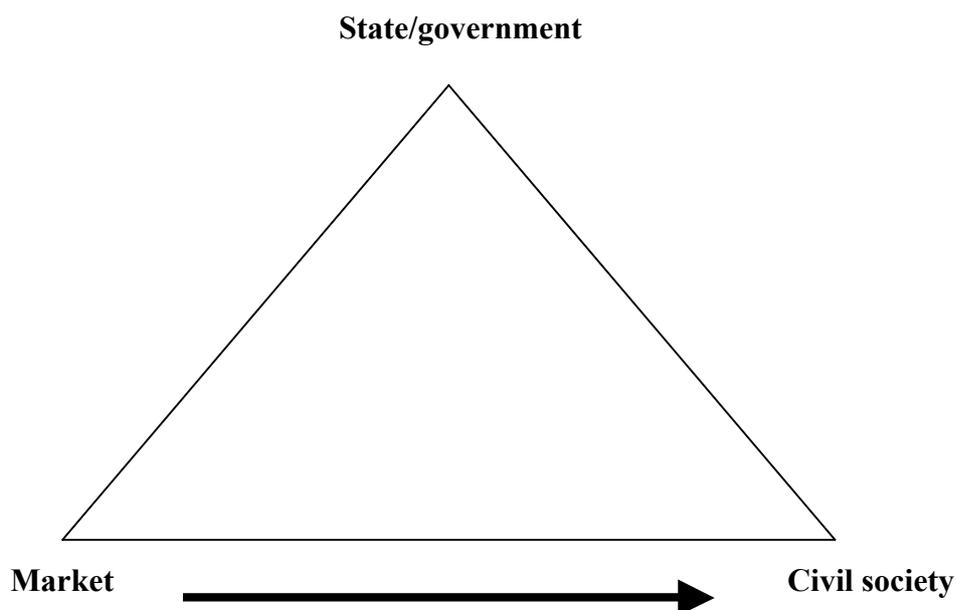
This is both a normative account of how people ought to behave and a description of how some people already do behave. This is because there is growing evidence for 'already-existing' sustainability citizenship. For example, in 2004 four thousand Swedish householders were asked how they perceived different types of environmentally-friendly household behaviours (relating to waste and recycling, transport and the consumption of eco-labelled products) and about their opinions on a set of policy instruments that could encourage these activities. The report concluded that a significant share of survey respondents displayed values consistent with sustainability citizenship, by putting an emphasis on non-territorial altruism and social justice. Respondents were found to care about all people, regardless of their whereabouts. This led the report's authors to conclude: 'The sometimes envisioned need to deal with individuals as rational consumers, promoting individual sustainability action through fiscal (dis)incentives and the promise of reciprocity, should not be taken for granted. As Swedes, according to our results, attribute a considerably higher importance to other-regarding values, this should be taken to reflect the likeliness for a positive formation of attitudes towards policies promoting a greater individual environmental responsibility on the basis of altruism and social justice'.⁷ There are other examples, ranging from ethical investment as a form of sustainability citizenship⁸ to communities in Canada⁹ to seed-saving

in Iowa.¹⁰ In one way or another all these examples show people demonstrating commitment to sustainability for normative reasons. In terms of the Figure we looked at earlier, the move towards sustainability citizenship represents a shift from the market to civil society as the origin and legitimating source of policy (see Figure below).

Sustainability citizenship draws on cosmopolitanism, civic republicanism and feminism. Derek Heater reminds us that as far as cosmopolitanism is concerned, in the original Greek sense, *'A person thus described [as a cosmopolitan] was ... someone conscious of being part of the whole universe, the whole of life, the whole of nature, of which all human beings, let alone just the community of the person's political state, were but tiny portions'*.¹¹ This sense of being part of a greater interdependent whole for which each of us is in some sense responsible is part of the civic republican mindset too. Sustainability citizenship is indeed a type of

ecological republicanism: *'In so far as the common good of any human community is utterly dependent – not only ultimately but in many ways immediately – upon ecosystemic integrity (both biotic and abiotic), that integrity must surely assume pride of place in its definition. And it is only maintained by practices and duties of active "citizenship", whose larger goal is the health not only of the human public sphere but of the natural world which encloses, sustains and constitutes it'*.¹²

Traditional conceptions of citizenship – cosmopolitanism and civic republicanism included – locate citizenly activity in the public sphere. Sustainability issues, though, disrupt this public/private divide, for we know that in the sustainability context private actions can have public consequences. Sustainability citizenship therefore endorses the feminist critique of a conception of politics that confines it (politics) to the public sphere. So, *'Along with the defiance of established*



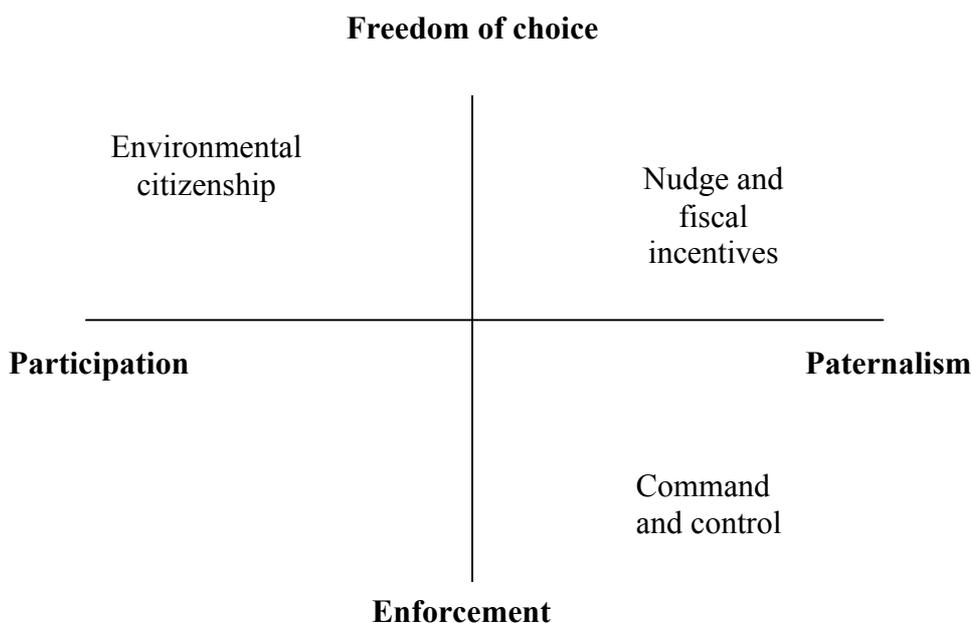
typologies, environmental citizenships confront traditional dichotomies between public/private and local/global. While the (re)creation of the public sphere is a major theme in citizenship literature, the division between private and public is more permeable than is usually accepted. Environmental citizenships endorse changes in consumption, disposal and character that are usually considered part of the private realm, but that are also publicly pursued, accountable, and have repercussions beyond the private. In this way, environmental citizenships endorse the common feminist assertion that “the personal is political”.¹³

The differences between fiscal incentives, nudge and sustainability citizenship in terms of freedom of choice/enforcement and participation/paternalism are summed up in the Figure below. Both nudge and fiscal incentives are paternalist in the sense that the architecture that promotes them is imposed rather than debated. Nudge is strongly paternalist in that ‘choice architecture’ is

deliberately hidden from view, while fiscal incentive policy is weakly paternalist in that norms and values are hidden and undebated.

It is probably overgenerous to regard nudge as involving freedom of choice, and its location in that quadrant of the Figure is based on the claim made on its behalf by its supporters. This claim is made on the grounds that nobody is being told what to do, but given that nudging involves the manipulation of contexts so that people unconsciously follow one course of action rather than another, they can hardly be said to be choosing freely. In the case of fiscal incentives, we might be said to have a choice in that no-one is forcing us to pay the congestion charge (for example), but as ever with market-based choice, freedom is proportional to the ability to pay. As the saying goes, we are all free to have tea at the Ritz but not all of us can afford to do so.

Even assuming there is something to be said for nudging and fiscal



incentives in terms of freedom as the absence of coercion, neither of them have anything to do with freedom as the co-production of policy – or what we used to call ‘democracy’. This is at the heart of sustainability citizenship, though. In this sense ‘freedom of choice’ and ‘participation’ are two sides of the same coin in the theory and practice of sustainability citizenship: each is exercised through the other.

As policy tools, fiscal incentives and nudge make sustainability less rather than more likely. First, this is because they deliberately avoid engaging the public in debates around ethics, norms and values – yet the deployment and internalisation 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. So one of the biggest obstacles to the realisation 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 – just those agencies that are under attack from the market fundamentalists of the present Coalition government.

For 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.’¹⁴

Government can help by providing greater opportunities for citizens to participate in environmental policy-making, 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. Is it the hands-tied agent of the market’s bidding, or is it the catalyst for democratic change originating in civil society? Sustainability citizenship invites government to recover its nerve, to govern once again, to engage citizens in the cut-and-thrust of ethical and normative debate, to resist the temptation to bypass politics in the name of an easy life. That way lies infantilisation, disillusion and a vacuum where politics ought to be, filled with nudges and financial inducements. Our way treats us as grown-ups, engaged and capable of ethical debate and social learning. 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.’*¹⁵



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