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Summary

Mindfulness is credited with helping people undergo an inner transformation, which could help bring about change in the world. In an opinion piece, former British MP, Chris Ruane, talks about the recommendation of a new UK report, called Mindful Nation, to ensure that the mental health benefits of mindfulness can be brought to areas as diverse as education, health, criminal justice and the work place. He also shares his vision on how this practice could be extended at EU-wide level, with further adoption by MPs and MEPs across the political spectrum.

From Mindful Nation to Mindful Europe



From personal mindful practice in Parliament to community-wide policy level

"Be The Change You Want To See" was Gandhi's sage advice on how to bring about change in the world.

Inspired by these words, Lord [Richard Layard](#), director of the well-being programme at the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics, UK, and myself proactively focused on bringing [mindfulness](#) forward as a catalyst for change. Three years ago, we invited Mark Williams and Chris Cullen, from the [Oxford University Mindfulness Centre](#), UK, to help us establish mindfulness practice in the British Parliament.

Why introduce it in Parliament? Mindfulness is credited with providing the cognitive and emotional resources that ensure resilience and flexibility in the face of a stressful and fast-changing work environment. It achieves this by encouraging a curious, responsive and creative engagement with the present moment. Even brief periods of mindfulness practice can lead to [objectively measured](#) higher cognitive skills such as improved reaction times, comprehension scores, working memory functioning

and decision-making.

By experiencing its benefits first-hand, I believe, MPs are more likely to translate it into policy. There is a pressing need to address mental ill health as the World Health Organisation has predicted that it will be the biggest health burden on the planet by 2030. There needs to be measures implemented to prepare for this tidal wave--let alone deal with the citizens who are increasingly stressed.

Adoption of mindfulness across the board of education, health, the criminal justice, and the work place, could therefore play a crucial role to play in reducing the burden of mental health problems on individual well-being. And, ultimately, it could encourage the flourishing of a healthy nation.

Hot parliamentary topic

Congressman Tim Ryan in the USA had already set up a similar group of mindful politicians on [Capitol Hill](#). We hoped to replicate this example. And we were really pleased when twenty MPs and Lords attended the first session. Overall, 115 persons have since been trained, with another twenty signed up for the next session, this year.

Having personally felt the transformative power of mindfulness, these MPs decided to set up a Mindfulness All Party Parliamentary Group ([MAPPG](#)). This group-- supported by academics in from coalition of Oxford, Exeter and Bangor Universities--set up to develop mindfulness policies in the areas of education, health, criminal justice and the workplace. Interestingly, it has been achieved in a cross-party, collegiate way. Those involved have recognised that personal and societal well-being is above party politics, being pursued for the good of the nation and humanity.

In the past twelve month, this [Mindful Initiative](#) drew together dozens of mindfulness practitioners, journalists, academics and scientists who gave thousands of hours of free time to work to work on a new report entitled [Mindful Nation](#). This report has just been launched today, 20th October 2015. Subsequent launches in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament are also planned because many of the areas the report covers are devolved to these administrations.

The report weaves true life testimonies of the benefit of mindfulness with closely referenced scientific research. Among the most convincing research is a recent [meta-analysis](#) of 209 studies, which concluded that mindfulness-based interventions showed "large and clinically significant effects in treating anxiety and depression and the gains were maintained at follow-up."

Mindfulness in policy

The report makes reasonable requests of government to transfer this research into practical public policy. Specifically, *Mindful Nation* makes substantive recommendations including commissioning Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) in the National Health Service for the 580,000 adults at *risk of recurrent depression* each year. This is in line with the guidelines developed by the National Institute For Health and Care Excellence (NICE), the body in charge of approving new therapies in the country.

In fact, research indicates that incorporating MBCT into the Improving Access To Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme could save £15 (€20) for every £1 (€1) spent, offering people an

alternative to antidepressants, use of which has [increased by 500%](#) in 20 years. What is more, 32.3% of young Britons between 15-25 have one or more psychiatric condition, which include the most common mental disorders--namely anxiety and depressive disorders--as well as more serious mental conditions.

Another recommendation include the creation of three mindfulness teaching schools--to be selected by the Department of Education--to pioneer mindfulness teaching, co-ordinate and develop innovation and disseminate best practice. In addition, the report points out to the need to train government staff in mindfulness, especially in the health, education and criminal justice sectors. And finally, the report suggest researching the use of mindfulness training for offender populations in the criminal justice system.

The benefits of mindfulness on the health of the nation should be of real interest to policy makers. Particularly, since the government has put a great emphasis on improving productivity, and nurturing creativity and innovation in the UK economy.

Debates centered on well-being

But the adoption of mindfulness should not be limited to the UK Parliament. So far, our MAPPG has worked closely with interested parties to set up mindfulness groups in the Welsh Assembly and the Dutch Parliament, as well. In parallel, progress has also being made toward setting up groups in the German and Australian Parliaments and there is a growing demand further afield.

This progress in adopting mindfulness could be massively increased if it was adopted for personal practice by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Ultimately, it could help in placing it at the heart of public policy at an EU level. Best practice could then be encouraged in 28 States.

In fact, mindfulness should be at the heart of any well-being programme--a notion that is of increasing importance across the EU. French president Sarkozy, for example, introduced the measurement of well-being as an indicator of [economic performance and social progress](#). Meanwhile, British Prime Minister David Cameron announced in 2010 that the UK Office for National Statistics was to start [measuring subjective well-being](#) to help guide national policy in the UK. Well-being was also firmly [on the agenda](#) at the 2014 edition of Davos.

I hope that over the next ten years, we can develop an international network of politicians who personally practice mindfulness. I anticipate this practice could be the stimulus that prepares them to take mindfulness to the heart of government in European countries so that they can be the change they want to see.

[Chris Ruane](#)

Chris is honorary president of the Mindfulness All Party Parliamentary Group at the UK Parliament and Trustee, Oxford Mindfulness Foundation, and of Bangor University Mindfulness Centre.

Photo credit: Chris Ruane.