



Green House's 'post-growth' project: an introduction

What is 'Growth' for and can we afford it?: A critical twenty-first-century assessment of the hegemonic economic policy of our time

Rupert Read

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You can download this publication from
<http://www.greenhousethinktank.org/page.php?pageid=publications>

ISBN 978-0-9569545-6-5

Print copies of this publication may be bought online from <http://www.lulu.com/>.



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Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to other members of Green House for the inspiration for this project which arose at our meeting in the Peak District in January 2012.



Summary

This paper introduces Green House's 'post-growth project,' a series of reports designed to show that an alternative to the false dichotomy between growth and austerity is necessary, possible and desirable.

It is necessary because planetary limits will in any event end growth soon.

It is possible in that we believe that we can now begin to plot a path to a post-growth world.

It is desirable because much about that world can actually be better than the world we now inhabit.



What Jesus meant, was this. He said to man, 'You have a wonderful personality. Develop it. Be yourself. Don't imagine that your perfection lies in accumulating or possessing external things. Your affection is inside of you. If only you could realise that, you would not want to be rich. Ordinary riches can be stolen from a man. Real riches cannot. In the treasury-house of your soul, there are infinitely precious things, that may not be taken from you. And so, try to so shape your life that external things will not harm you.'

Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*

If you spend your time thinking that the most important objective of public policy is to get growth up from 1.9 per cent to 2 per cent and even better 2.1 per cent we're pursuing a sort of false god there. We're pursuing it first of all because if we accept that, we will do things to the climate that will be harmful, but also because all the evidence shows that beyond the sort of standard of living which Britain has now achieved, extra growth does not automatically translate into human welfare and happiness.

Lord Adair Turner, Chair of the UK Financial Services Authority



Introduction

Everyone agrees that we are in the midst of a massive financial and economic crisis. We have suffered the biggest ‘crash’ since the 30s, and it may get far bigger yet. How ought this on-going crisis be understood and resolved?

On the mainstream view: We have vast government deficits, and stagnant economies. We need economic growth – and we also need for austerity, bringing with it massive cuts in public services.

... But what if this diagnosis, which reflects mainstream wisdom, is all wrong? What if the crisis that we are currently experiencing is one which casts into doubt the entire edifice of capitalist economics, which sets growth as the primary objective of all policy? What if the fight between those who say that without austerity first there can be no growth and those who say that we must invest and borrow more now in order to resume growth is a false dichotomy (because both sides are assuming ‘growthism’ as an unquestioned dogma)? What if the vast government debt-mountains are in any case actually not as vast as we have been told they are, once (for instance) we establish which parts of them are odious, as countries of the global South have found, and thus should not need to be repaid? What if there is a way of coping with these deficits without having to ‘grow’ the economy more? What if metaphors such as calling an economy whose size is not growing relative to the ecosystem a ‘stagnant’ one are part of the problem rather than of the solution? What if the hegemonic assumption that we need to return the economy to a state of growth is wrong:

what if further growth is impossible, or undesirable, or both?

What is growth for, now, anyway; do we really still need it? (N.B. The “we” here is in the first instance people in countries like ours. Our post-growth project is primarily oriented toward Britain and countries in broadly-similar positions. Our project allows for / would in fact make *more* room (in terms of ‘emissions space’, etc.) for material progress in the lives of poor people in ‘developing’ countries). Is economic growth now anything other than the production of more tat that we don’t need and don’t even really want, through overly hard work, and at the cost of despoiling our shared planetary home beyond repair? Is ever more economic activity a good thing at all, in a world where what is scarce, increasingly, is nature, and time, and peace and quiet?

These ‘what-if’s already tacitly indicate what we believe. Green House’s post-growth project is designed to show that an alternative to the false dichotomy – the false objectives – of growth and austerity, is necessary, possible and desirable.



Why a post-growth project?

Our first task is to show that it is necessary for ours to become a post-growth economy. This task comes first – seemingly paradoxically, before even showing that it is possible – because there are still too many people (especially in positions of economic and political influence) who don't understand why there is a need in the first place to seek for such a new economy. The simple answer is that we are hitting planetary boundaries, and hitting them fast – and that it is economic growth that is the chief driver of this process. Unless we change course very soon, it will probably be too late to prevent our planetary ecosystem from going into irreversible decline. And that would certainly mean irreversible decline for the human race.

Under this first head, Green House's main task (i.e. building on what has already been accomplished, by the Club of Rome, by the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment, and so on) will be chiefly to rehearse the link between economic growth and ecological impact, and to point up the absurdity of the rhetorical appeal for 'green growth'.¹ We will also be concerned to show how, when we take the energy and resource demands of infrastructure and design seriously, there is in any case no quick 'green industrial' route to a genuine sustainability. And that the terrible risk of on-going growth mania is that everything from the green belt and our forests to speed-limits and the ability of our very climate to provide an environment in which we can survive and flourish will be sacrificed on the altar of increasing the size of the economy (and concomitantly decreasing the size of our remaining

intact ecosystems). This means ripping up our world, in order to feed it ever-faster into the growth machine.

Our second task is to show that it is possible to have an economy that one does not seek perpetually to 'grow', at the present time, in our world and in this country. This kind of 'existence-proof' for a 'steady-state' economy is already partly available, in the great work of Herman Daly, Tim Jackson, and Peter Victor. But there is some further work to be done, work in economics, to show in more detail how it is possible (including in terms of what changes to our financial and industrial systems and our working lives will be necessary, if a 'steady-state' economy is to be stably possible). There is work to be done to apply the macroeconomic framework that no-growth implies to the reality of UK macroeconomics in 2012. There is work to be done to show how you can provide public services that keep us safe and cared for, and keep control of the public debt, without economic growth. There is work (in 'cultural politics') to be done to show how a steady-state economy needn't result in a society in a kind of stasis or in permanent retreat from values such as innovation, vibrancy, dynamism and pluralism. There is work to be done in the area of social psychology, to explore and transcend the link between identity and consumption. And there is work to be done in philosophy and linguistic psychology to start to effect a challenge to the intellectual hegemony of growthism, the creation of a new post-growthist common sense.

This last piece of work demands a comprehensible, communicable sense of what a post-growthist economy would be like. Our view is that this



sense can begin with the term “a dynamically stable economy”,² which makes clear that a so-called ‘steady-state economy’ could and should and would be a positive, inspiring place, in which we could return the human race³ to the path towards a ‘good life’, and (in particular) in which the economy is continually in flux, with some sectors growing as others shrink. Natural systems are typified by dynamic change rather than the “steady-state” which was the first suggestion for a new model for a sustainable economy. So we are seeking a dynamic, mutable economy, while respecting the crucial constraint that material throughput does not increase, and indeed, was designed rather to be deliberately built down over time to a long-term ‘sustainable’ level: one-planet living.

Our third task is to show that it is desirable to accept, embrace, plan for, and realise an end to growth as the primary objective, now. This is perhaps the central ambition of our project. For under this head, what we need to do is to make clear to people what it would actually be like to live in a post-growth, ecologically-sane Britain – and that it could, should and would involve a better life than we have at present. Not ‘progress’ in the debased sense that has equated it with more and more industrialism, less and less nature, less and less security, more and more things, degraded human relationships; but, rather, real progress. This third task builds on the second task by creating a vision of a post-growth society that is actually appealing, in terms of health, vibrant local communities, continued long-distance communications but within a context of putting into reverse the hyper-mobility of our time. This part of our work involves creating a sense of purpose in our taking care

collectively of the future, a future which involves stronger relationships with each other, with the species we share the planet with, and with the natural world.⁴ What we are aiming for ultimately is nothing less than the revitalisation of human society, through enhanced relationships with each other and with the natural world, and a substitution of moral or spiritual values for the material obsessions of our time.



Changing the way we think about the economy

Overall, we are involved in a ‘deep reframing’ of the issues facing us as a people (and as a species). This deep reframing, this new visioning, aims to expel the growthist paradigm, by showing that it is neither possible nor desirable for us to continue to seek to inhabit it. To put the point more romantically: it shows how we can build a new Jerusalem together, in a greener and more pleasant land, a land that will last – so long as we give up the destructive delusion of a return to economic growth, the delusion of salvation via a crude materialism.

One of the deep re-definitions that will be accomplished, then, will be of ‘wealth’. We do not see a growthist society -- which is obsessed with increasing flows of ‘goods’ (sic.) rather than with maintaining stocks of what is genuinely good -- as generating wealth, in its true sense, at all. We agree rather with Ruskin when he said “There is no wealth but life” and with his suggestion that industrial societies in fact produce more ‘illth’ than ‘wealth’. For this reason, we will be raising a question-mark even over the ideal of ‘sustainable development’ itself. Insofar as ‘sustainable development’ seeks to increase stocks of ‘man-made’ capital, which then need to be serviced, it is unclear that it helps maintain what we most need now: healthy, functioning ecosystems; and economic systems that to the maximal extent possible respect as well as genuinely mimic such ecosystems.

Moreover, ‘development’ all too often leads to increasing inequalities between people in society. This is not

sustainable, in an era in which inequality has run out of control and is now posing a crucial question for democracy: who rules, the 99% or the 1%? One of the deepest harms done by the ideology of economic growth is its endless deferral of the quest for a more equal society. ‘A bigger pie for everyone’ has prevented us from thinking clearly about sharing a pie that can be sustainably produced, a pie of a fixed size, a pie that doesn’t mean less pie for future people. As Herman Daly has put it, “is not the solution to poverty to be found in sharing now, rather than in the empty promise of growth in the future?”



Summing up

Here is the simplest way to sum all of this up. The question is really one of quality versus quantity. The growthist status quo maintains that economic growth is always desirable, that those numbers need to keep going up. It assumes that more stuff, more economic activity, etc., is what we need. By contrast, we think that what matters is quality, not quantity. We want to offer people a better life. A life that is based on having fewer material possessions and less formal economic activity, but more well-being, more community, more security, and much more of what Ivan Illich rightly called ‘conviviality’.⁵ More real wealth.

So: We need to change the media/political culture, the common-sense that assumes that it is ‘bad news’ when the economy doesn’t grow and to analyse what it is about the structure of our economic system that means growth must always be prioritised. We need to set out an attractive, attainable vision of what one country (and by extension our one world) would look like, once we deliberately give up growth-mania – and of how to get there. And we need to find ways of communicating this to people that make sense, and that motivate change.

These tasks, we have set ourselves. This is our post-growth project. We invite you to join us in helping us to make it happen.⁶ The prize could hardly be bigger: the possibility of undertaking a journey to a dynamically-stable economy where we feel at ease with each other and live in balance with our planet, an economy that will at last be compatible with nature, and productive at last of true human flourishing. An economy centred not around the vague and

dangerous mirage of growth, but around generating real wealth, real progress.



Components of a post-growth project

Where do we go from here?
We have planned a series of discussion papers to take forward various aspects of this project:

Joined up economics – Brian Heatley
This paper will argue that limits on resources and pollution are, in any event, bringing growth to an end. What will happen when growthist assumptions about consumer demand, investment and government spending come face to face with material limits? Can our unregulated financial system function without growth? How exactly can we organise a post-growth economy with no unemployment? Is inequality necessary for growth, and could ending growth improve equality? And could well-being actually improve?

Industrial policy and infrastructure – the depth of the challenge of a green transition – Jonathan Essex
This paper addresses the profound challenge that the limits to growth make for a just and green transition, in the sense of the material constraints on the resources that can be devoted to such transition. Most ‘Green New Deal’ proposals to date have not taken this seriously enough, especially in terms of constraints on infrastructure-development.

Post-growth public services – Brian Heatley
Traditionally public services have depended upon growth. Can public services survive without growth, and are there alternative ways of delivering

and organising services, reducing the rights-based approach and asking more from the public? This paper suggests so, and how.

Can't Pay; Won't Pay: Austerity, Audit and Odious Debt – Molly Scott Cato
The process of repaying the UK's vast public sector debt is disfiguring our society and distorting our economy. The process by which this debt was *acquired* is obscure to most citizens, and has been the subject of tendentious political argument. This has led to an incendiary situation where the most important political decisions of a generation, which are utterly changing the nature of the society we have negotiated between ourselves, are made within narrow, technical parameters with the citizenry being excluded from the discussion and deprived of the information they need to participate in a process of democratic consideration. *The establishment of a Public Debt Audit Commission is proposed to address this information gap and to facilitate public debate.* Such campaigns are spreading rapidly across Europe, inspired by the examples of successful debt negotiations in Latin America, framed around the concept of ‘odious debt’.

Post-Growth Politics – Andrew Dobson
The one thing we know for sure about the sustainable society⁷ is that it will be a low-throughput society. It will use fewer resources at a lower rate, and it will be powered with less energy. But what are the implications of this for how we live together, for our expectations and aspirations, for how we treat each other?



The historical record shows a correlation between increased energy use and the rise of what we might call 'enlightenment values'; equality, pluralism, autonomy, toleration, consent. Whatever else we might hope for in the sustainable post-growth society, most of us would want these values preserved since they lie at the heart of any progressive political project.

But what if there is a necessary connection between high rates of resource use and enlightenment values? How can we be sure that a decline in the rate of resource use won't be accompanied by the rise of more atavistic and rudimentary values? We know that for every unit of growth we use more resources and produce more waste: we cannot decouple growth from resource use. But we absolutely need to decouple enlightenment values from the energy and resources that accompanied their birth. This paper will make the case for the necessity and desirability of low-throughput progressive politics.

The Paradox of a Green Stimulus – Molly Scott Cato

The lessons economists learned from the last great slump was that a capitalist economy will fail without sufficient demand, and that the social and political consequences of the failure of demand are insupportable. Since then the need to stimulate demand has been a key political objective. On the production side this meant designing short-life into products through methods such as constant changes in standards and death-dating. On the consumption side it meant the deliberate use of psychological techniques to lure people into a status hierarchy based on

conspicuous consumption. Ecological citizenship requires that we use resources efficiently, and therefore transcend an economic system that cannot survive without expanding aggregate demand.

Sustainability Means Equity: The central role of co-ops in a post-growth economy – Mary Mellor

The most basic requirement of a green economy is that human economies should operate within the boundaries of ecological sustainability. Key to a green economy is limiting the production of goods and services to that which is necessary to meet human need, thus enabling all humans and other species to flourish. Such an economy would operate on the basis of sufficiency, with the aim of providing enough goods and services on a sustainable basis to maintain a good quality of life. A sufficiency economy would necessarily operate on the basis of social justice as sufficiency for one must mean sufficiency for all. There is no basis for social justice and economic democracy where economic systems are based on unequal access to resources. For this reason, the aim of sufficiency is not compatible with competitive market driven economies and must instead be organised along co-operative lines.

A new post-growthist common sense – challenging the hegemony of growthist discourse – Rupert Read and Matt Wootton.

This final paper builds on the work already accomplished or essayed in the present introduction to the project, by setting out the *rhetorical and conceptual* resources needed in order for a post-growth economy to seem not just possible, nor even just necessary,



but common-sensical. Something that makes obvious sense, rather than (as at the present time) something seemingly outside the 'mainstream'. This requires ending the communicative hegemony of 'growthism'.



Endnotes

1 We will do this in a short ‘Common Ground’ document, which will set out the background to the innovative work we are accomplishing in the post-growth project, by setting out what we take for granted based on existing literature. Such as, the clear link, on balance, between economic growth and ecological deterioration.

2 The term ‘dynamically stable’ can sound oxymoronic: until one thinks of a good and obvious example, such as a pendulum. In such an economy, innovation is welcomed, and indeed constantly encouraged: a dynamic economy would rely on the ingenuity of its citizens more than the exploitation of material resources. (An alternative term to which we are also attracted is: ‘dynamic equilibrium’ economy; this term is originally due to Lewis Mumford: *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1934/1963: 429).) Note that we are NOT using the term ‘dynamically stable’ in its technical sense in dynamic systems theory, that is that if the economy receives a smallish shock it will return smoothly to a stable condition -- although clearly there are family-resemblances between that technical meaning and our broader proposed meaning, for this term which we think (as explained, supra) expresses what we are after better than the standard term ‘steady state’.

3 “Development” then in the true sense of the word – not in its debased contemporary sense, as little more than a synonym for economic growth. Best to avoid the need for this note, and the rather nasty word ‘development’

4 We will also touch on the huge and important topic of transition - transitional politics for moving to a post-growth economy. How to get from here to there when we are suggesting a ‘paradigm shift’. We mainly want in this project to make plausible a post-growth economy; but we also (as for instance in Scott Cato’s paper on an Audit Commission, and Essex’s paper on infrastructure and the green transition) aim to offer a helpful addition to what is already present in the work and ideas of organisations such as the Transition Movement (www.transitionnetwork.org/) and the Green Party, who are of course already to plotting and undertaking policies on how to get from here to there.

We note here only that actually the task of transitioning to a post-growth economy is less hard and less radically novel than it might seem – for Britain is already, roughly, in a situation of no growth, as Japan has been for a generation... The transition that is needed is only to an economy and a society that works, and flourishes, without always desperately and hopelessly seeking to restart growth...

5 For explication of the term “convivial” in this context, the best short source is:

<http://gaianeconomics.blogspot.co.uk/2006/12/green-lord-aruges-for-convivial-economy.html>

6 By e.g. signing up to be a supporter of Green House; by donating to us; perhaps by offering us your expertise...

7 We are uncertain how useful the term ‘sustainable’ is in pointing toward a post-growth economy (rather than to an economy that attempts to green business-as-usual). We use it here ‘pro tem’. For a case by one of us that ‘sustainability’ is precisely the concept that we need, and that it needs reclaiming, see Ray Cunningham’s paper at

<http://www.greenhousethinktank.org/files/greenhouse/admin/-2.pdf>. For a case against ‘sustainability’, listen to the talk by Rupert Read at <http://blogs.bournemouth.ac.uk/environmental-change/2011/03/08/the-conference-in-audio-2/>

