

Towards a Theory of Change to guide a New Politics and Economics

The Need to Reclaim Politics from Growth and Vested Interests,
in part through a Shared Vision of Equity, Democracy and
Ecological Limits

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Summary

Our governments have, for decades, failed to address the housing crisis, crisis of inequality, climate and nature crisis and the wider cultural malaise. Changing which party is in power does not seem enough to address this. Some say this is because our politics is 'broken', but what if it is just doing exactly what it is intended to do, for those it serves?

Simply doing our best may not be good enough. Our politics and campaigning should be informed by sufficient strategies, or 'theories of change'. That is plans that can reset politics and economics such that it is able to deal with the crises of inequality and lack participation at the very same time as curbing our overproduction and overconsumption that risks both political and planetary breakdown.

Recognising and then closing the gap between our mounting inequality and worsening planetary crises requires us to extract our society from the current dominant economic worldviews and the way this works with (liberal/representative) democracy to block this from happening. Bringing about sufficient change must include rethinking politics and releasing it from the grip of growthist economics. A completely different worldview is required to inspire and be brought forward by hope-fuelled political activism. This is explored through the two linked parts of this paper.

The first part explores why the current democratic political system is insufficient to address the crises that we face, let alone realise the multiple benefits possible from doing so realistically and democratically.

The second part explores why a completely different way to frame 'climate justice' is needed for our economic system. We will not secure a decent quality of life for all within climate and nature limits unless that is what we prioritise. Sufficient climate action is not possible without addressing growing inequality – and that in turn is not possible without sufficient climate action.

We do not make these points lightly but honestly, based on our realistic assessment of our predicament and how we might best respond in ways that increase democracy, justice and freedom.

The authors use 'we' to refer to Greens and progressives – politicians, campaigners, activists and citizens – as a broad 'we'.

*'Not everything that is faced can be changed,
but nothing can be changed until it is faced', James Baldwin¹*

¹ Baldwin, J (1972), 'No Name on the Street', New York Times,
<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-street.html>

Where we are now

All is not well. A growing mix of human-made (which is not to say all humans are equally responsible) social and physical disasters is foretelling an increasingly destabilised world and unsustainable and dangerous futures. Climate breakdown, nature loss, increasing health risks, water and food insecurity are all key elements of the poly-crisis we all face. But these crises are not faced equally.² The short-term spoils of this devastation are flowing to an increasingly small subset of humanity, while, it seems, an ever-growing majority live increasingly precarious and vulnerable lives. We have a crisis of means (the resources and natural systems upon which all life depends) as well as a crisis of meaning in modern societies.³ In spite of decades of climate awareness, conferences, academic research and mounting scientific evidence, and political statements, the annual extraction and subsequent burning of coal, oil and gas has never been higher.⁴ While renewable energy, such as wind and solar, is cheaper than fossil energy, it is not displacing and replacing fossil fuels. Rather we see that the issue is not the cheap price of renewable electricity but that it is not as profitable as fossil energy.⁵ Thus, the energy transition is leading to what some call 'fossil fuel plus'.⁶ We know that to continue on our current path is to continue to destroy our planet and our climate, and as we do so our societies are becoming even more unequal (both globally and within countries). And aligned to both of these there is an upsurge in authoritarianism.

It is increasingly clear that political power serves the interests of a supporting network of very wealthy individuals (e.g. Musk, Trump, Farage) and corporations (from oil giants to tech. corporations). Authoritarian politicians tell us we need to 'take back control' which hands *these very same authoritarian politicians* greater power and control over us! They sow division by labelling those who challenge them as 'woke'⁷ and members of

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- ² Harrison, P. A., McElwee, P. D., and van Huysen, T. L. (eds.) (2024), *Thematic Assessment Report on the Interlinkages among Biodiversity, Water, Food and Health of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES Nexus Assessment)*; IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13850054>
- ³ Pattakos, A (2023), 'From Crisis of Meaning to Call for Meaning'. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/the-meaningful-life/202312/from-crisis-of-meaning-to-call-for-meaning>.
- ⁴ 2023 was the highest level of coal, oil and gas extraction worldwide. Energy Institute – Statistical Review of World Energy (2024), 'Fossil Fuel Production (World)'. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/fossil-fuel-production>, IEA (2025), 'Oil Market Report – April 2025'. IEA, Paris. <https://www.iea.org/reports/oil-market-report-april-2025>. 2023 also saw the highest level of global carbon emissions. Ritchie, H and Roser, M (2024), 'CO₂ emissions'. <https://ourworldindata.org/co2-emissions>.
- ⁵ Christophers, B. (2024), *The Price is Wrong: Why Capitalism Won't Save the Planet* (London: Verso).
- ⁶ Dunlap, X. (2018), 'End the "Green" Delusions: Industrial-scale Renewable Energy is Fossil Fuel+'. <https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/3797-end-the-green-delusions-industrial-scale-renewable-energy-is-fossil-fuel?srsId=AfmBOorc4ecOmMAb8DBlks3UUqMX-rkGYHGFG-W2fueXMdzWti5sen5>.
- ⁷ Woke is defined in Wikipedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woke>) as having shifted from just its original meaning of a heightened awareness of social and political injustices (particularly racial inequality) to also be used derisively to label those viewed as being overly sensitive or politically correct.

some nefarious ‘elite’ and deflecting blame to outsiders: mostly people who are powerless and vulnerable and on the edges of our society (both within countries and internationally). We have entered an era where political power has now been vested in many right wing populists: not just Trump in the USA, but also in Wilders (in the Netherlands), in Meloni (in Italy), in Orban (in Hungary), in Modi in India, in Putin in Russia, while Le Pen continues to gain traction in France, Farage in the UK, and so on.⁸

So what is the alternative? There must be an alternative to draw energy away from the ideology and structural imperative of endless GDP economic growth within a capitalist economic order. This is not new – it has been talked about in various ways for the past 50–60 years,⁹ but the question remains as to how it might be implemented. How might the current mosaic of campaigns and activism, political engagement and elected politicians deliver more than the sum of their parts – to bring about large-scale structural change in democratic politics, the economy, culture and lifestyles, norms and values? What might be the rallying cry for an inspiring but realistic politics and economics that provides for all within planetary boundaries while not ceding political space or resentment to the far right, including right wing populists? Does viewing these as all part of the same overall problem widen solidarity and trust, and build acceptance for a bold mandate for such change?

The Need to Address Climate, Equity and Democracy together

This is a tentative attempt to sketch out a theory of change of how we, Greens and other progressives, might address the social crises (rising inequality, poverty, social division etc.), the rise of right-wing populist politics and the climate and ecological breakdown – together. This is a call for acceptance that there is a clear alternative to letting fear and populist campaigns sap our energy. This should be accepted for material and scientific reasons, and not only, normative or ideological reasons.

Neither inequality and societal breakdown nor climate and ecological breakdown can be addressed by treating them as different sets of priorities, each siloed within a dominant worldview that puts economic growth above all else. A focus on inequality that is climate illiterate will not deliver fairness in the long-term. Similarly, what some call ‘carbon tunnel vision’ in addressing climate change can result in policies and

⁸ The authors have named the individual leaders not their parties as they have attracted votes not first and foremost for their policies but backing a person who sounds like they will turn things around – reflected in the focus on Trump as opposed to the Republican Party in the US and Farage over above Brexit/UKIP/Reform party in the UK.

⁹ For example, since the landmark publication of *Silent Spring* (Rachel Carson, 1962) and the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* report (1972).

strategies at odds with efforts to address deepening inequalities, as well as continuation of non-climate problems such as the nature/biodiversity crisis.¹⁰

Right wing populists manufacture conflict between fairness and justice on the one hand and climate and nature priorities on the other. This erodes trust in our liberal democratic politics, along with our trust in science and expertise. Michael Gove's now infamous statement, "*I think the people of this country have had enough of experts*"¹¹ is but one of many examples of weaponising scientific knowledge and creating culture wars, which increasingly define politics.

Campaigns to address social injustice and inequality and the climate and ecological crisis must be joined up so they can be addressed together. We must democratically transform economic and political institutions and shift cultural norms across society. Citizens need to be persuaded of the need for different economic visions, futures and options – to be implemented by government. These should articulate a vision of where we want to get to, while being *honest about what getting there might entail, and who and what it might involve*.

We therefore explore why collective action is required, and why hope for a sustainable future only lies in *radical or revolutionary theories of change and transformation*. This seeks to challenge what is wrong in our so-called democracy and stuck within our current economic system that resists meaningful change to its impact on people and planet.

Currently electoral liberal democratic politics is framed, and hemmed in, by neoliberal economics. This is not just an ineffective strategy for change – it is the strategy that is being actively used to block change, to create divisions, and in doing so secure an authoritarian-leaning, far-right populist political mandate that then actively takes change off the agenda. In addition, our liberal democracy is based on an extremely limited conception of citizen involvement in politics, law and policy-making: that of voluntary voting in periodic elections and paying taxes. But democratic citizenship extends beyond the roles of voter and taxpayer. Citizens should instead have greater input and involvement in the governance of society, including as outlined later, extending democratic decision-making to the economic sphere and workplaces.

Economics and politics must serve citizens, not markets and private corporations. It must reduce excessive inequalities of income, wealth, assets and political power. But

¹⁰ Burton L (28 March 2022), '*It's time to move beyond "carbon tunnel vision"*', Stockholm Environmental Institute, Stockholm, Sweden. <https://www.sei.org/perspectives/move-beyond-carbon-tunnel-vision/>.

¹¹ The ex-MP made this reference in relation to questioning around the lack of economists who had publicly stating that Brexit would be good for the UK economy. Islam, F (3rd June 2016) '[EU: In or Out? Faisal Islam Interview with Michael Gove](#),' Sky News. EU: In or Out? Faisal Islam Interview with Michael Gove, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sz1_LHtfuCl.

that alone is not enough. It must do this whilst shrinking our overall material and energy footprint to operate within the 'safe operating space for humanity' (i.e. climate and ecological limits). Unless we reposition our understanding and operation of our political economy in this way, we will not secure sufficient change – either not enough, or too slow.

Such a shared worldview of where we are heading can inform the pathway to get us there. It can empower people with real hope that collectively we can actually change things. Opening up the possibility of reclaiming our politics and having a positive, functioning *democratic society and culture* (not just a *democratic political system*) is a crucial part of enabling sufficient change to happen. This is a positive message – that living within the earth's limits *can* increase human wellbeing, deepen democracy and strive towards equity.

Honesty is therefore needed. Not just about our ecological predicament, or even that it is linked to deepening inequality and social (and global) injustice. And vice versa. But that bringing forth of a different social and environmental future is a single challenge that requires fundamental political and economic changes. Transparency is needed about the way economic growth is bound to increasing material and energy use, so ratchets up exploitation and pollution. Nothing short of a major reset of our economics and our lifestyles is required – and these are fed not just by our culture and values, but by our political institutions and practices, both within and between countries globally.

There is no possibility of 'sustainability in just one country' after all. As laissez-faire economics is increasingly bound to authoritarian politics we need a clear, alternative, political strategy and political leadership. Delivering greater equity and enabling lifestyles that sit within climate and wider ecological limits *together* requires transcending representative democracy and a *far* greater democratisation of society and economy. This must reframe and reset our economics. Such that it is no longer defined by growth. But instead by redistribution and regeneration that meets the needs of everyone.

Structure of this report

This is presented as two parts, which could be read together or separately. Each has a main recommendation, as follows:

Part one of this paper makes the case that our current Western, liberal democratic system is inadequate. It is unable to address the multiple crises we face (or realise the opportunities from addressing them). We must reset our politics and economics if we are to address our crises of inequality and climate change.

It is simply not possible to bring about the necessary cultural and economic change whilst continuing to prioritise the private and profit-oriented ownership and control structure of the economy. This places the lifestyles of wealthy individuals and rich nations above both the health and wellbeing of Western societies and the development needs of the majority of humanity living in the Global South. And it limits how we value our climate and environment. Our current, globalised and centralised political-economic system exploits and divides rich from poor, workers from that which their labour produces, and people from planet.

Changes to politics and the economy require more of us to act politically, both within and beyond formal politics. Greater transparency and stronger systems of accountability would shine a light on whose interests capitalist political and economic decision-making systems serve. Giving more power and political agency to citizens would shake up our stale electoral politics. It could underpin stronger collaboration between political movements and community action. It could shake out lobbyists, eliminate corrupt practices and unmask what is really on offer by authoritarian politics and technological solutions. Doing this would make public the real political choices that we face.

Part two of this paper explores the need for our politics to govern economics, and therefore society and the environment, completely differently. A radically different worldview is needed with very different overarching priorities: democratisation within biophysical limits and an economics of sufficiency (for all). This must replace how our politics enables our global economic system to maximise wealth and income for the richest – without any real constraints to how much we exploit each other or the planet.

Relocating politics and economics to sit within planetary boundaries is essential if we are to ensure everyone has enough. Such a shared vision of equity, ecological limits *and* democracy could right size, redefine and reshape our economy. This would transform all aspects of our politics; not least shift its overall priorities (to sufficiency within limits), to prioritise the welfare and future of all people. Drastically reducing the scale of our exploitation of human societies and the natural world requires wholesale transformation to the spheres of production, distribution, consumption and economic development. That means challenging current institutionalised power and vested economic interests. It would change who holds political power and whose interests are served.

Such a shared vision must displace the current ineffectual reformist and technological promises that pretend it is possible to sufficiently change society while at the same time retaining economic growth as the main political/economic priority – either

nationally or globally. It is not possible. Examples of such growthist and techno-optimistic promises include those offered by the UK's new Labour government and the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.¹²

Although many promises are made that an economy that prioritises profit, capital accumulation and increases in GDP makes a sustainable future possible, it actually makes such a future *impossible*. We have spent too long focusing on the problem and our current systems, making it hard to see alternative structures or ways of doing things. But when we gather imaginatively it is possible to see that alternatives are possible.

Reducing our energy and material use to within climate and ecological limits will require different plans for different places. Such a localisation of society should celebrate the distinctiveness of different places and cultures. Unless local plans and strategies are co-created openly and democratically the strongest actors (e.g. corporates, and those with more wealth or influence) will put their own interests first. That points to a reimagining of our political and economic institutions, cultures and ways of life.

Replacing economic growth as the structural imperative of the economy will of course be politically contested. Reducing our energy and wider resource use to within environmental limits, whilst ensuring all people can live decent and fulfilling lives will not be easy. Not just more shared, collaborative and democratised ways of producing the goods and services that society needs but a radical redistribution of resources. An example of this is outlined in Kate Raworth's 'Doughnut economy' model.¹³ Redistribution must apply equally within and between countries and deliver on promises of climate justice and social justice. Realising this will depend on how we come together, and act.

¹² <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>, <https://labour.org.uk/change/mission-driven-government/>. The UK Labour Party has committed to five missions but these don't go beyond current capitalism (the first is for continued economic growth). Neither are developer-friendly housing targets, solar and wind turbines and getting the public sector to work effectively going to address the climate or inequality crises. Indeed Labour's inspiration, Marianna Mazzucato is quoted as wanting to 'save capitalism' (<https://marianamazzucato.com/>) – "One of the world's most influential economists... on a mission to save capitalism from itself." In contrast Mazzucato's inspiration, the Apollo programme to land on the moon plan for the first time, was to achieve something not previously imaginable.

¹³ Raworth, K. (2017), *'Doughnut Economics'*, op cit.

Part 1: Reclaiming our Politics

1.1 What is Wrong with Our Politics?

"If you assume there is no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope. If you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, then there are opportunities to change things, then there is a possibility that you can contribute to making a better world." Noam Chomsky¹⁴

This first part explores why it is necessary to change politics, and economics, if we are to address inequality and climate change. This has three subsections:

- Firstly, there is an exploration of the breakdown of trust in politics today, and how our liberal electoral democracy falls far short of what is needed;
- Secondly, how we might approach take the initiative, address conflict and reclaim the words 'freedom' and 'security';
- Thirdly, what a Green and progressive led politics that rebuilds trust through bold narratives that build from where people are now; and
- Finally, how we might build a wider movement for change through a more participatory democracy and sufficiently radical vision of the future.

Greens and other political progressives should organise and work together to shift the debate and build political pressure. Crucially as Greens and progressives we must be ready to collectively open-up and seize opportunities when they arise, such that our institutions and economic systems and structures are remade. Agreeing and sharing an inspiring yet realistic vision of a *sufficiency* economy is key (see Part 2 of this paper). But what is blocking such a future and the constant calls and even publicly stated commitments to bring it about? How is the power of elected politicians and government (at all levels) to change policies and governance structures linked to citizen action?

A Breakdown of Trust: a Politics of Lies

In July 2025 just 12% of the British public trusted Government to put country ahead of party: an all time low.¹⁵ Have you ever heard a politician announce one thing on the radio and suspect or subsequently discover that the opposite was actually true? Say one thing, as a cover for continuing to do the opposite now seems to be embedded in the standard playbook of politics. For example, Labour claims that it is

¹⁴ Chomsky, N. (1997, January). Wired Magazine.

¹⁵ Unlock Democracy blog (3rd July 2025) *The battle for trust in politics is being lost.*
<https://unlockdemocracy.org.uk/blog/2025/7/3/the-battle-for-trust-in-politics-is-being-lost>.

planning (not developers' – who incidentally are big political donors^{16,17}) that acts as the block to house building and is the reason for high house prices?¹⁸ Similarly, Boris Johnson's promise that leaving the EU would lead to an extra £350 million a week for the NHS, as plastered on the side of the Vote Leave Bus, might well have swayed the Brexit vote!¹⁹ And Conservatives promised to limit migration, but it increased.²⁰

Perhaps the worse example is the political cover-up of the way economic migration is encouraged by Western economies to avoid addressing entrenched inequality. Public discourse should separate the increase in genuine asylum seekers from the overall levels of net migration, including to the UK. But instead there is repeated scapegoating of migrants, which conveniently covers-up the failure of politicians to address increased inequality.

This is not helped by media incorrectly labelling asylum seekers as illegal immigrants and the laser light focus on those arriving in small-boats crossing the English Channel as opposed to (the far greater number of) economic migrants to the UK. Asylum seekers are mainly from countries where law and order has broken down, and vulnerability to natural disasters has been exacerbated by climate change (caused not least by countries like the UK and USA).²¹ Deliberately blurring the distinction between economic migrants and asylum seekers is inhumane and despicable. Instead, it is vital that politicians stop covering up the real reasons for the 'cost of living' crisis, such as failing to address overall rising inequality which is linked to the longstanding failure to provide enough genuinely affordable homes and adequate pay for care work in the UK (see **Box 1.1**).

¹⁶ Williams, M (12 July 2021) '20% of Tory donations come from property tycoons.' <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/20-tory-donations-come-property-tycoons/>.

¹⁷ Das S (21 December 2024) 'Revealed: property donors behind 'breakfast club' that donated £130,000 to Labour.' <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/dec/21/revealed-property-developers-behind-breakfast-club-that-donated-130000-to-labour>.

¹⁸ IPPR (14 February 2025), 'Revealed: 1.4 million homes left unbuilt by developers since 2007'. www.ippr.org/media-office/revealed-1-4-million-homes-left-unbuilt-by-developers-since-2007.

¹⁹ A mischievous statement wrapped in a lie. Lichfield J (18 September 2017), 'Boris Johnson's £350m claim is devious and bogus. Here's why'. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/18/boris-johnson-350-million-claim-bogus-foreign-secretary>.

²⁰ O'Flynn B (23 May 2024), 'The Conservatives' and Labour's records on legal migration'. <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-the-conservatives-and-labours-records-on-legal-migration>.

²¹ In 2023, the top five most common countries of nationality of people who applied for asylum from within the UK were Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Walsh PW and Jorgensen N (1 July 2024), 'Asylum and refugee resettlement in the UK'. <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migration-to-the-uk-asylum/>.

In 2022, 84% of refugees and asylum seekers fled from countries highly vulnerable to climate change, whereas it was only 61% in 2010. UN (undated, accessed July 2025), 'Global issues: Refugees'. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/refugees>.

Why does the UK has a Lack of Genuinely Affordable Homes and a ‘Cost-of-living’ Crisis?

Taking a more systemic look at the facts:

- Fewer genuinely affordable homes are being built, and private rental costs have soared.²² Escalating private rent levels, and the UK’s deepening housing crisis, has fuelled increasing reliance on overseas workers.²³ This in turn increases the demand for private rented homes.
- Energy prices have also soared since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, linked to Europe’s dependence on Russian gas and how UK’s electricity pricing is tied to gas prices.²⁴,²⁵ This, combined with post-Covid inflation and Brexit, has worsened inequality in the UK and the ‘cost-of-living’ crisis experienced by many.²⁶

The depression of many wages to become clustered at or just above the UK’s minimum wage, and the failure to provide sufficient affordable housing in the UK are a result of government choices. Some have called this out, saying that calling this a cost-of-living crisis draws focus away from the rise in inequality and accumulation of wealth which could address this: rather there is an equity crisis.²⁷

Some sectors have become more reliant on lower cost labour from overseas, as more UK residents are struggling to maintain their standard of living. For example, the way the non-provision of affordable homes in the UK is connected to the ‘need’ to invite a hundred thousand care workers to the UK each year is rarely admitted to by politicians.²⁸ Neither is the fact that the UK’s net migration is largely a result of government and business invitation – their own strategy and policy – the opposite of what is implied by media headlines.²⁹

Box 1.1 Glossing over the Government’s Failure to Address Rising Inequality Fuels Right Wing Populism

The extent to which politicians continue to say one thing and then do the other, whether talking about equality (or indeed equity),³⁰ climate or migration – is not just

²² Up until 2011-12 most new ‘affordable homes’ in the UK were at a social rent (similar to the old notion of ‘council housing’ at 50% of market rent. Now in 2023-24 of the 62,000 new ‘affordable homes’ in the UK, just less than 10,000 were at a social rent. Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (21 November 2024), ‘Affordable housing supply in England: 2023 to 2024’. This is due to a more developer-friendly planning system in England (the blockers are housing developers, not the planning system) as well as reduced government funding for social housing.

²³ Rees T (13 May 2024), ‘UK Housing Rents Driven by Record Migration, Analysis Finds’.

²⁴ Stauder A (18 April 2025), ‘EU-Russian Gas Phase-Out: The State of Energy Decoupling’.

²⁵ Ritchie, H (15 August 2023), ‘If the UK has lots of renewables, why do electricity prices follow gas prices?’ <https://www.sustainabilitybynumbers.com/p/electricity-pricing>.

²⁶ Partington R (22 June 2022), ‘Brexit is making cost of living crisis worse, new study claims’.

²⁷ For example, comments made in the interview on Radio 4 with climate scientist Kevin Anderson on 7th November 2025. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m002lpnc>.

²⁸ Samuel M (13 March 2025), ‘Government curbs overseas recruitment with providers required to prioritise staff already in England’.

²⁹ For example, overseas social worker recruitment: Sanctuary Personnel (no date, accessed July 2025), ‘Why choose Sanctuary International to help you relocate as an overseas social worker’.

³⁰ Equity is an equality of outcomes, as opposed to just equality of opportunity, income, wealth or access to resources.

dishonest, but a failure in the whole way politics is being conducted. Mainstream politicians declare they wish to change things, but at the very same time use language and excuses such as, *"What you have to understand is"* to justify why nothing meaningful is going to change now ... if ever.

There is a clear link between the state of our politics and democracy and the rise of the far right, and the yawning gap between political promises and actions to address inequality and improve the lives of citizens, and to act on climate and environmental impacts. These issues are now inextricably linked and need to be prioritised over the overarching goal of neoliberal economics *and all politics and liberal democracy that perpetuate it*: continued, endless and always unevenly enjoyed economic growth.

A Democracy that Looks Beyond Growth

It is time we had a democratic and public political debate as to whether continued growth is possible and can – or will ever – benefit us all. Politics is increasingly polarised around two distinct choices for humanity:

- Either a narrowing of who is served by politicians and political parties (either nationalist, or focusing on only certain interests within society); or
- Looking beyond the 'tyranny of growth' to articulate visions of a better future for all.³¹

Accepting the latter, there is a need to look beyond growth. So, if capitalism needs to grow, and we need to look beyond continued economic growth, we need to look beyond capitalism.³² That is, there is no capitalist solution to the poly-crisis. As Andreas Malm and Wim Carton put it, 'There is ... no path to a liveable planet that does not pass through the complete destruction of business as usual.'³³ This is how we interpret the 2023 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, which concluded:

"The scientific evidence is unequivocal: climate change is a threat to human wellbeing and the health of the planet. Any further delay in concerted global action will miss a brief and rapidly closing window to secure a liveable future for all".³⁴

UN General Secretary António Guterres also read this report in a similar manner. He noted that:

³¹ Barry, J (2019), '[Green republicanism and a 'Just Transition' from the tyranny of economic growth](#)',

³² Blackwater B (2015), '[Why do capitalist economies need to grow?](#)' Green House think tank, UK.

³³ Malm, A. and Carton, W. (2024), '[Overshoot: How the World Surrendered to Climate Breakdown](#)'. Verso, London.

³⁴ IPCC (2023), *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>

"This report is a clarion call to massively fast-track climate efforts by every country and every sector and on every timeframe. In short, our world needs climate action on all fronts -- everything, everywhere, all at once".³⁵

Yet all mainstream and far-right parties remain fixated on growth (and the promise of growth) rather than applying social and environmental policies in a joined-up way. Even mainstream centre-left parties (e.g. UK Labour) still prioritise growth-over-all and serve elite interests, so fail to deliver the deep decarbonisation and the associated deeper redistribution needed for a better, fairer, future for all.

Such a fixation on growth limits political support for climate action to that which continues to drive economic growth. So too little, too late. Instead of choosing between elite interests, we should ask whether we want elites to rule over *us* for *their* (short-term) benefit *at all*. Consequently, while the great divide at its core is about whether politicians prioritise growth or strive for equity (equality of outcomes) within ecological limits and genuine democracy – it is also, first and foremost about who gets to maintain political power and control.

Equity should be a precondition on a sustainable future,³⁶ and the *only* foundation on which the profound cultural changes to shrink our scale of energy and resource use can be justified. But equity and the climate are sidelined when power and money take centre stage. The far right and other right-wing populists govern through authoritarian power and propaganda that is a toxic, yet potent mixture of fear, disgust, nostalgia and control. It is as if announcements by Trump since his 2024 re-election are designed to create moral panic and remove the space for alternative narratives to take hold. Trump is removing climate spending and publicly available climate data in the US³⁷ and similarly Nigel Farage's Reform UK promises to scrap climate and equality positions in local government.³⁸ Yet at the start of COP30 international climate conference in November 2025, to which the US have failed to send any high-level delegates, the media headlines were dominated by Trump plans to sue the BBC: is this moral panic at the expense of our future?

Democracy and democratisation of more areas of our lives, especially the economy, are therefore a non-negotiable precondition for a safer and better future for us all. This entails moving beyond liberal democratic modes of government: moving democracy

³⁵ Guterres, A. (2023), '[Secretary-General's video message for press conference to launch the Synthesis Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#)'.

³⁶ Pickett K and Wilkinson R (2009), 'Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better'. Allen Lane, UK. Chapter 15 and Millward-Hopkins, J., Steinberger, J. K., Rao, N. D., & Oswald, Y. (2020). Providing decent living with minimum energy: A global scenario. *Global Environmental Change*, 65, 102168.

³⁷ Cusick D (14 March 2025), '[NOAA Scraps monthly climate briefings, citing staffing shortages](#)'.

³⁸ Land J (6 May 2025), '[Nigel Farage tells council staff to find "alternative careers" ahead of EDI and climate change crackdown](#)'.

beyond the purely electoral to the economic sphere. When social and environmental policies become inseparable (as discussed in Part 2 of this paper) 'the economy' shifts from being the overarching policy goal to an agent of delivering change – how democratically chosen policies can be realised. Only then can the economy be freed to be owned, controlled and shaped by the people, for the people.

Insufficient Democracy

Yet the current dominant liberal democratic electoral model actively holds back the changes set out above. Electoral democracy is a necessary but not sufficient condition to bring about change. For example, this can be seen in its failure up to this point to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, child poverty or homelessness or to reverse increasing inequality. Some of the problems of liberal democracy include:

- Focus on individual behavioural change approaches to the climate crisis, usually linked to techno-optimism, and a commitment to 'greening capitalism' (based on its ideological preference for capitalism as the only way of organising the economy).
- Limit and constraint of politics to narrow policy options. The 'Overton window' is used to dismiss and not even consider policy options that threaten the economic status quo as 'unthinkable'.³⁹
- Separation of the role of political parties who campaign to help candidates to get elected, from that of campaign groups, activists and constituents who try to influence how these politicians behave once they are elected. This model places the power for change mostly in the hands of just a few (elected, mostly national, ruling party) politicians who have power alongside those who have sufficient money or power to influence them (e.g. banks, leaders of multi-national corporations, editors of newspapers and so on).
- Assumption that outside of elections, politics is a spectator sport, for all but a small number of players on an unfair playing field.

Relying on a few people to win the planetary battle for us within our current economic system will not work, not least because of the need for collective solidarity to fight increasingly authoritarian political and economic power. Instead, there is a need to mainstream a different vision for our future and change how we are governed gain a much wider awareness and acceptance.

So, how might this impact on the many and varied political theories of change? Will sufficient change be led by existing established locations of power within society, or from those largely excluded from having agency in our society such as the working class, indigenous communities, young people, migrants and refugees?

And how might *who* leads this change and *how* it comes about impact upon the

³⁹ Shaw, C. (2024), *'Liberalism and the Challenge of Climate Change'*. Routledge, London; Barry, J. (2012), *'The Politics of Actually Existing Unsustainability'*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

almost unspoken assumption that ‘progress’ will continue unabated: continued real-estate development and urbanisation; industrialisation and extractivism; disposable and highly energy and material intensive patterns of consumption. In theory, if one were to listen favourably to Government press releases, it would appear that politicians in positions of power have responded to the climate science, declared their commitment and set this in policy. However, in practice, policy is siloed, and in some areas is ineffectual while in other areas it is slowly or only partially implemented. In practice, equality and climate policies are subservient to the Treasury’s perpetual diktat that nothing can get in the way of never-ending and ‘necessary’ economic growth! Changing this requires political power to shift. It requires sufficient pressure to be brought to where true power lies – such as to generate a sufficient response to our predicament. This requires strategies that identify and exert influence where power lies and is governed.⁴⁰

Democracy: Abused, not Flawed

Democracy within the welfare state organisation of the economy and society, appear to serve our ‘common good’ at least as it was defined from the post-war period to the mid-1970s. But inequality still persists globally as well as within most countries. Indeed, our current set of governance systems has completely failed to seriously consider, and address, either growing inequality or our flagrant disregard for environmental limits.

UN processes and international agreements state the intention to address these deficits. For example, the United Nations conventions to combat desertification (UNCCD)⁴¹, climate change (UNFCCC)⁴² and biodiversity (CBD)⁴³ all meet annually. But while these bodies have all introduced new rules and priorities, the overall political governance structures and pre-eminence of economic growth have hardly changed. So in spite of the warm words inequality persists, and the climate and nature crisis gets worse.

This is not helped by the way governments are wide open to corporate influence. Not least the extent of corporate donations and political access. But consider also the lack of transparency that results from the UK parliament having *never* had a written constitution, and the lack of accountability that results from President Trump in the USA being able to appoint Supreme Court judges that now rule in his favour. The choice between first-past-the-post or proportional representation elections is not

⁴⁰ This was the challenge explored by a project of Surrey Climate Commission. Surrey Climate Commission (15 April 2025), [‘What’s stopping us stopping climate change 2.0: transforming Surrey into a home of thriving people and nature’](#).

⁴¹ <https://www.unccd.int/cop16>.

⁴² unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/what-is-the-united-nations-framework-convention-on-climate-change

⁴³ <https://www.cbd.int/convention>

sufficient to address this democratic deficit. A far wider reform of governance systems is needed. Perhaps more crucially though, our political governance systems are strongly tied to elites who dominate the upper echelons of power, as a semi-permanent 'ruling class'. The mainstream left and right, as well as right wing populists and authoritarian parties, are firmly aligned to many of these elite and/or corporate interests.⁴⁴ Only widespread and popular citizen mobilisation against this can reverse this. After all, polite women did not win the vote ...

Such wholesale (i.e. political *and* economic) change is hard to imagine. Contemporary electoral democratic politics has become even more beholden to money and power, media ownership and control. Meanwhile citizens find it difficult, if not impossible, to believe that radical change is either achievable or necessary. When politicians state that they are serving our interests but are really served by vested interests that finance them, they lose our trust.

These are fatal flaws. Politicians should be providing leadership to enable better collective decision-making, not peddling false hope. Critically, the notion that it is possible to shift all humanity to enjoy a high quality of life within environmental limits, while simultaneously further increasing our scale of consumption, and production in each country and worldwide is perhaps the biggest lie: one that allows humanity to carry on living today as if there is no tomorrow. Talk of 'green growth', 'net zero' and 'natural capitalism' all deny that growth and capitalism themselves are problematic, in addition to growth's negative social outcomes (see Part 2 of this paper). And it locks in dependence on technofixes (such as carbon capture and 'sustainable' aviation fuels).⁴⁵ It is no coincidence that this serves the interests of major political donors – he who pays the piper calls the tune!

Significant changes are needed to stop our society's opaque and unaccountable governance systems from holding back change. The ways that democracy is bought by elites and corporations (including media owners) are corrupt. Stopping this is an important precondition to ending Government's subservience to those desiring continued economic growth. The influence of those with political, institutional, community and corporate power must be limited by ensuring political decision-making processes are transparent and aligned to an agreed sustainable future vision.

Such changes must be demanded and secured by those with legitimate political power – primarily active citizens and then those elected to political office.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ For example, to the extent that political parties are financed by corporate donations. Mills T, Massoumi N, Richardson G, Stronge W, Kikuchi L and Balagopalan S (May 2024), '*Politics for Sale: Analysing twenty-one years of UK political donations*'. <https://autonomy.work/portfolio/politics-for-sale/>.

⁴⁵ Simms A, Johnson V and Murray L (undated, accessed July 2025), '*The Impossible Hamster (and economic growth)*'. <https://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/the-impossible-hamster/>.

⁴⁶ All people can have political power, but our consumer culture discourages us from being active citizens.

1.2 Taking Back Our Power

Speaking Truth to Power

Politicians have always sought to appeal to both voters' legitimate self-interests for material improvement while also aspiring to the collective interests and the 'common good'.⁴⁷ However, where politics has been corrupted by vested interests it has increasingly prioritised the self-interests of the corporates and elites who fund most political parties and politicians, thus turning Western democracy into an oligarchy.⁴⁸ This has led to greater dishonesty about what is actually on offer from the political mainstream. For example, consider the interests of the *Daily Mail* and Elon Musk. What stories and policies will sell most papers, make them richer and realise *their* interests, as opposed to the common good?

The extent to which a different politics is needed to address the poly-crisis must be clearly set out. Crucially, politics must no longer unquestioningly accept an economics at odds with the scientifically established biophysical realities of this planet. It is time to call out the fictitious assumptions that underpin fictitious 'unicorn' neoliberal economic models.⁴⁹ Without frankness and transparency, politicians (and economists) will remain unaccountable. Transparency is needed to shine a light on the financial interests that influence what is shared through the media and social media as well what drives the decisions of politicians.⁵⁰ Only then can politics to be held to account such that corrupt practices and vested interests might be ousted.

Increased honesty – from politicians, policymakers, academics and journalists as well as citizens – is needed as to the real and present dangers towards which our current political promises and capitalist economics are leading us.⁵¹ This must avoid fuelling despair and fear, which 'right wing populists' feed off. Such honesty is a necessary first step in generating hope. Instead, it must lead to a shared acceptance of the dangers we face and support for an alternative vision.

⁴⁷ Barry, J. (2021), 'Green republicanism and a 'Just Transition' from the tyranny of economic growth', *Critical Review of International Political Philosophy*, 21:4, pp. 725–742.; Lechat, B. (2013), 'Do We Need a Green Republicanism?', <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/do-we-need-a-green-republicanism/>.

⁴⁸ Part of the 'collapse of Democracy' relates to the change in funding of political parties relates to the decline in membership (BIT Blog (12 August 2024), '[Collectivism is out and individualism is in](#)'). leading to a greater amount of funding (and therefore influence) coming from large donations (Gordon H (13 August 2024), '[How big donors fund our political parties](#)').). See also Hare J and Read R (2012), '[Strangled by the Duopoly: The collapse of UK Democracy, 1975–2012 and some proposals for its revival](#)'.

⁴⁹ Barry, J. (2105), 'Green Political Economy: Beyond Orthodox Undifferentiated Economic Growth as a Permanent Feature of the Economy', in Gabrielson, T. et al (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), (pp.304–317).

⁵⁰ See Read R, Scott-Cato M and Blewitt J (2017), '[Sinister Interest – Reforming the Media](#)' and <https://www.mediareform.org.uk/media-manifesto-2024>.

⁵¹ Berners-Lee, J. (2025), *A Climate of Honesty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

We believe such a vision requires political leadership but also, more importantly, wider participation in political decision-making and democratisation of economies.⁵²

Reaching Out

For this to happen the way the media and politics interact must change: as this has a strong bearing on how elected politicians, political parties and citizens interact. Different people wielding power is not enough to address this. Better governance systems are required. Democratic engagement should include more participative forms of democratic decision-making such as citizen assemblies and mandated town hall meetings between all local politicians and citizens. And democracy should be extended to workplaces, education, and provision of public services etc.⁵³

Changes must include better control of the media, social media platforms and the use of AI. This would reverse what appears to be happening, such as through the use of social media and artificial intelligence (see **Box 1.2**).

⁵² It is instructive to note that Winston Churchill in his first speech as Prime Minister during the second world war said the following: *"I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival."*
<https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/blood-toil-tears-sweat/>

⁵³ For an example of the range of possible participative options see Smith, G. (2009), *'Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation'* Cambridge University Press, UK.

How does social media (and AI) impact on how politics?

Artificial intelligence (AI) combined with the for-profit platform economy (including social media platforms)⁵⁴ centralises control to a relatively small number of ‘influencers’, platform owners and architects.

Despite the illusion that social media allows all of us to post content, algorithms determine which posts are seen by whom. The data on who sees and likes what, collected by the owners and operators of this ‘platform economy’, is not disclosed publicly and is used to target advertising (including political messaging). So, while social media creates the illusion of participation and control, in reality this is not the case. Our views are shaped through the filtering, promotion and framing of content. All at the whims of the platform owners. This affects the decisions we make – both in driving consumption and in how we ‘consume’ politics.

One example is the way AI and social media impacts our consumption patterns. Advertising and influencers affect how we behave and what we buy. For example, the impact of social media use on the rise of fast fashion, which has a high climate impact.⁵⁵ The advent of Love Island and its close ties to Instagram, took product placements to a whole new level. For example, when Siânise Fudge glided into the Love Island final in her emerald green gown, online searches for her dress spiked, selling out of £25 dresses.⁵⁶ The scale of our addictive consumption is eye watering. In 2019 the UK clocked a million tonnes of carbon emissions (CO₂e) from air freighting in textiles and garments: air freight of clothing accounted for 6.6% of the weight of clothing but 79% of the carbon footprint.⁵⁷ Disposable fashion is driving ‘just-in-time’ production and higher impact trade.⁵⁸

Similarly, AI and social media significantly impact on how political democracies function, such as through micro-targeting of political advertising through collaboration between tech giants and political parties (e.g. Facebook linked to Cambridge Analytica, Musk’s use of ‘X’, and Donald Trump’s establishment of Truth Social). Social media spending can dominate political election spending but this, let alone wider political use of social media, is virtually unregulated.

AI and the platform economy (including social media) is a powerful political tool that can influence our perceptions and political views, whilst algorithms, ownership (e.g. Musk’s own posts) and advertising affect what we get to see.

Box 1.2 Does Artificial Intelligence and Social Media Limit Political Agency?

⁵⁴ Exceptions include the Mastodon social media platform. But this has far fewer subscribers.

⁵⁵ Stokes, V (13 January 2020), ‘Is Instagram Bad For The Environment? Exploring How Social Media Drives Fast Fashion’. <https://stellar.ie/real-talk/is-instagram-bad-for-the-environment-exploring-how-social-media-drives-fast-fashion/76928>.

⁵⁶ Davison, T (2 March 2020) ‘Love Island’s fast fashion legacy is bad for the environment and here’s why.’ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/love-islands-fast-fashion-legacy-21595656>.

⁵⁷ Analysis of the UK’s overall trade carbon footprint for 2019 showed air freighted clothes accounted for 692 of 876 kTCO₂e while only 79k of 1,195k tonnes in 2019. Sims P and Essex J (2020), ‘Trade and Investment Requirements for Zero Carbon’. Green House think tank. See Annex. www.greenhousethinktank.org/trade-and-investment-requirements-for-zero-carbon/.

⁵⁸ Thrown away, far before its end of life. Anane M, Jordan L, Quashie-Idun, S (18 June 2025), ‘UK brands found in ‘fast fashion graveyard’ in African conservation area.’ unearthed.greenpeace.org/2025/06/18/uk-brands-fashion-dumps-african-protected-wetlands/.

But a shift to ‘take back control’ of our communications is far more easily said than done. We must reduce the power that those in control of media and social media have in mediating communication between citizens and politicians. But this must be part of wider cultural change to demand and enable a better democracy (both through elections, and a deepened participation that better holds politicians to account between elections). None of this is easy, but it is necessary.

Resolving Conflict

Such change will be contested. Although some political conflict seems inevitable, the question remains to what extent it will result in meaningful change. We need to expect conflict in any large-scale transformation of societies and economies. Potential areas of conflict will stretch from challenging wealth ownership in the UK to how politics is conducted around the world. For example, how can sufficient change bring about:

- Better planning and land-use. How do landowners choose what food to grow, and how? What types of houses are built where, and are they affordable and zero carbon?
- Different geopolitics. Instead of the Ukraine war driving up oil and gas profits; (including for Russia), what would be the geopolitics associated with reducing the scale of material and energy production and consumption in Europe, and globally?⁵⁹

The fact that such changes involve confronting elites and vested interests makes the label adopted by Extinction Rebellion activists as ‘rebels’ apt. There is a need to build in both an expectation of conflict and conflict transformation responses into our theories and strategies of change.⁶⁰ Again, difficult but necessary.

If we accept that overcoming conflicts is an inevitable part of navigating the transformation of our society, then:

- Either there will be more fear and/or violence imposed by those in power (our current trajectory, and acknowledging that the status quo is based on systemic violence); or
- Our societies need to become more (not less) democratic and better at collectively navigating conflict while minimising violence.

Democracy is best understood in this time of worsening planetary crises and injustice as a non-violent way of resolving conflict.⁶¹ Yet, liberal democratic politics in the face of a worsening range of societal tensions (including racism, xenophobia, increasing inequality in wealth and declining material welfare for many) and against the backdrop of the destabilising climate and nature crisis is itself becoming a battleground. It is also

⁵⁹ Wouters R (ed.) (January 2024), ‘Geopolitics of a Post-Growth Europe: Being More With Less’. https://gef.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Geopolitics_web.pdf.

⁶⁰ McIlroy, D., Brennan, S. and Barry, J. (2022) ‘Just transition: a conflict transformation approach’, in Pellizzoni, L., Leonard, E. & Asara, V. (eds.). *Elgar Handbook of Critical Environmental Politics*. Edward Elgar, pp. 416–430.

⁶¹ McIlroy, D., Brennan, S. and Barry, J. (2019), ‘Just transition: a conflict transformation approach’, <https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781839100673/book-part-9781839100673-39.xml>

presiding over a more violent social order. Currently liberal democracies are repressing political protest at home, while at the same time engaging and supporting imperialist wars abroad. The ecocide-genocide in Gaza of the Palestinian people is a prominent example.

Peace must be recast as a core element of an evolving post-growth geopolitics. This applies to both how we seek to resolve current conflicts and how we develop a greater global societal safety net to increase our collective resilience and ability to recover differently from increasingly severe, frequent and complex natural disasters that lie ahead.⁶²

Reclaiming Freedom and Security

There is an ongoing political battle, especially with right-wing politicians suggesting that addressing climate change will remove personal freedoms and negatively impact capitalism and the 'free market'. This has two part-truths embedded in it. The richest have most to do to reduce their consumption patterns, specifically regarding car travel, private investments, traded goods and international travel.⁶³ And the working class will be impacted most greatly if the economy fails to provide the well-paid jobs, income and wealth, and therefore the time, resources, goods and services essential for decent lives for all.⁶⁴

Indeed, the far-right, populist and orthodox mainstream politicians may use different rhetoric and have quite different economic policies, but they all still tend to benefit the richest (elites) most. Growth is driven by capital investment that further concentrates wealth. Increased wealth inequality pushes up income and asset inequality.⁶⁵ Or put simply, both far-right and mainstream policies tend to increase inequality, since inequality is both a driver and consequence of economic growth under capitalism.⁶⁶

So, the political mainstream and the right-wing populists both offer 'growthist' economic policies that continue over-consumption, private and profit-oriented

⁶² Essex J (2020), 'Building Back Differently: A Climate Emergency Recovery from Covid-19'. Green House think tank. https://www.greenhousethinktank.org/static/2021/build_back_differently_gas.pdf.

⁶³ Oxfam 'champagne glass' model of consumption-based class-climate inequities – Oxfam (2023) 'Climate Equality: A planet for the 99%'. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/climate-equality-a-planet-for-the-99-621551/>.

⁶⁴ Gough, I. (2017), Recomposing consumption: defining necessities for sustainable and equitable wellbeing. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences*, 375(2095), 20160379 and Brand-Correa, L. I., & Steinberger, J. K. (2017), A framework for decoupling human need satisfaction from energy use. *Ecological Economics*, 141, 43–52.

⁶⁵ Cantante, F (2020), Four profiles of inequality and tax redistribution in Europe. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 7, 33 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0514-4>.

⁶⁶ Barry, J. (2012), *The Politics of Actually Existing Unsustainability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

ownership and control of the economy. This funnels benefits to the lifestyles of the richest and glosses over this, while sidelining the poorest and most vulnerable: both in individual countries and worldwide. Overconsumption for those who can still afford it is sold as the unattainable dream to those increasingly just surviving at or close to poverty and precarity. And 'freedom' is offered in exchange for a promise of security at the cost of our passivity and acceptance of the undemocratic and unsustainable status quo.

Such economic and political promises must be called out for what they are: seductive forms of mythic thinking: in short, dangerous lies.⁶⁷ Our increasingly 'post-truth' world is awash with fake news, alongside political, media and business leaders promoting dangerous forms of illusory 'techno-optimism' that justify continuation of a growth and consumer based, anti-democratically organised, capitalist economic system. Trust in politics, especially national politicians and the liberal democratic system itself, has never been lower.⁶⁸

Green and progressive politicians need to set out a narrative and expectation that a better future is not just possible, but reclaims the notions of freedom and security through an ecologically and socially just future (as articulated here). This must counter the acceptance of continued unsustainable and ecocidal growth combined with economic or military power – or even worse, growth achieved via greater spending on the military as is now currently the case with the 'Keynesian militarisation' in the UK, USA and the EU. Military Keynesianism is an economic policy based on the position that government should raise military spending to boost economic growth. This policy is being pursued by the UK Labour government and other European states, ostensibly to combat the threat of countries like Russia and now Iran.⁶⁹

Freedom and security need to be reconnected together, as they are in a balanced society. The nation state, family and wider society must re-provide the security and freedom that bind all people *together* through an economy and lifestyles that demand an order of magnitude less of the earth's resources. Instead of uncertainty around the future leading to feelings of deep fear, acts of mobilising people to bring such a different future about can bring forth hope.⁷⁰ This is based on the moral psychology

⁶⁷ Barry, J. (2021), 'A just transition to a sustainable economy: Green political economy, labour republicanism, and the liberation from economic growth', in Breen, K and Deranty, J. P. (eds.), *The Politics and Ethics of Contemporary Work: Whither Work?* (London: Routledge)

⁶⁸ Montagu I and Maplethorpe N (2024), '*British Social Attitudes 41: Five years of unprecedented challenges*'. <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-03/british-social-attitudes-41-%7C-five-years-of-unprecedented-challenges-1303.pdf>.

⁶⁹ Toporowski, J (2024), 'The War in Ukraine and the Revival of Military Keynesianism', <https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/blog/the-war-in-ukraine-and-the-revival-of-military-keynesianism>

⁷⁰ Holemans D (2021), '*Freedom and Security in a Complex World*'. Green European Foundation, Brussels.

that it's not that you have hope and then you act, *but that it is in acting that hope is realised*.⁷¹

1.3 Beyond the Mainstream

A Shift to Politics of the Edges

Those on the edges of politics are now calling out mainstream politicians' increasing reliance on false hope. The UK 2025 local elections saw a shift to the right, with a strong win for Reform, Labour's lowest national vote share since 2009 and a collapse in the Conservative vote.⁷² This change coincided with a rise in voters' concerns about the 'cost-of-living' (and corresponding fall for climate change), symbolised by Labour's reduction of winter fuel allowance for pensioners – now reversed.⁷³ Ironically, Reform won the most seats in this election by calling for action to fix 'Broken Britain' – while being complicit in its breakdown.⁷⁴ Indeed the notion of 'taking back control', 'fixing broken Britain' and so on, play into a top-down, strong leader view of politics, epitomised by the likes of Trump. Politics has shifted. It used to be a battle for the centre ground, such as the importance of 'Mondeo Man'.⁷⁵ Now the centre ground is being hollowed out, and those at the margins are increasingly framing the political debate.

Nigel Farage was on the UK political programme 'Question Time' in December 2024. His flippant, stereotyping and derogatory remarks dominated much of the debate. The most significant other interventions were perhaps Alastair Campbell's reframing of Farage's focus on immigrants by referencing Brexit but the most potent was that of an audience member.⁷⁶ But even then, it was a debate largely on Farage's terms. Just as

⁷¹ Johnstone C and Macy J (2012), '*Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in with Unexpected Resilience & Creative Power*'. <https://www.activehope.info/>

⁷² The Conservatives and Labour both lost around 2/3 of the seats they defended in the 2025 UK local (county council) elections. The Liberal Democrats and Greens both doubled councillor numbers while Reform gained 677 and 10 councils – roughly the same as that lost by the Conservatives.

⁷³ Seddon P (21 May 2025), '*Starmer announces U-turn on winter fuel payment cuts*'.

⁷⁴ For example, note the chapter on Nigel Farage in James O'Brien's review of recent UK history. O'Brien J (2023), '*How They Broke Britain*'. Penguin books, UK.

⁷⁵ A stereotypical male identified as the sort of voter the Labour Party needed to attract to win the 1997 election. https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Mondeo_Man.

⁷⁶ During a debate on border control, one member said: "I just recently went to the Holocaust Centre just outside of Newark. "It was a real wake-up call because Germany in the 1930s, they were suffering economic difficulties because of the reparations of the First World War. And those people were desperate. And somebody was saying look the problem with our society is the Jews that are what's causing the problems. We will blame the Jews because they are ruining our country. Go forward now to this country. We're now blaming migrants, we're blaming immigrants. Migrants, illegal or legal, weren't responsible for austerity. That was the Conservative government. Migrants and illegals were not responsible for Brexit. Migrants were not responsible for Liz Truss's failure of leadership and don't forget, because of those populist policies in the 30s, a certain Adolf Hitler was elected. And if we follow the same rhetoric, the same blaming of migrants, we will go in the same way and the

climate campaigners called time on giving 'balance' to climate denial,⁷⁷ it is crucial that Greens and other progressives do not accept this 'two sides' framing which blocks the societal changes needed.

Feeding the seeds of division being sown by right wing populists will not work. Indeed, Naomi Klein put it like this:

"Any number of identity-based divisions can be marshalled to detract attention from the billionaires who fund the networks of misinformation and away from the economic policies— deregulation, privatization, austerity: Jews versus Blacks, Blacks versus Asians, Muslims versus Christians, "gender critical" feminists versus transgender people, migrants versus citizens. This is the playbook used by Trump and the other pseudo-populist strongmen the world over: throw some minor economic concessions to the base (or at least claim to do so), unleash the dogs of race and gender-based hatreds, and preside over a rapid upward transfer of wealth, alongside an authoritarian concentration of power."⁷⁸

Indeed, the recent rise in use of the term 'woke' (like 'political correctness' before it) was funded and is fuelled by right-wing and reactionary political actors, for explicit purposes of undermining and delegitimising progressive politics, associating the latter as 'elitist', 'out of touch' and beyond 'common sense'.⁷⁹ Right wing populists are framing the lack of action on climate, equality, migration, and the failure of politics itself (with calls such as to 'take back control') as the failure of individual choices. The key issue here is not that this consumer framing is completely ineffective in addressing these issues, but that it creates resistance through othering and blame. The right-wing populist mode of operation is to provoke to the point where they become the dominant force in politics. The political mainstream and media have both actively created as well as passively allowed right wing populists to frame the political narrative in ways that move political discussion to the right.⁸⁰ Farage and others (e.g. across

future of that path is very, very bleak." Robertson, A (6 December 2024), 'Question Time: Audience member clashes with Nigel Farage on migration'. <https://www.thenational.scot/news/24776211.question-time-audience-member-clashes-nigel-farage-migration/>.

⁷⁷ Read R (2 August 2018), 'I won't go on the BBC if it supplies climate deniers as 'balance'.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/02/bbc-climate-change-deniers-balance>.

⁷⁸ Klein, N (2023), *Doppelganger: A Trip Into the Mirror World*. Penguin books, UK. Emphasis added.

⁷⁹ James Melville (2020), *The Weaponising of 'Woke'*. <https://bylinetimes.com/2020/01/23/the-weaponising-of-woke/>.

⁸⁰ Just as fascism is liberalism in decline, likewise the liberal centre right (and left) is now a handmaiden to the far right. Wren-Lewis S (16 January 2024), *Why the centre right has helped cause the drift to the far right in Western democracies*. <https://mainlymacro.blogspot.com/2024/01/why-centre-right-has-helped-cause-drift.html>. Another recent example of the mainstreaming of far-right politics is the 2025 general election in Ireland where even though far right candidates did not achieve the breakthrough predicated, its talking points and narrative on refugees, immigration and the crisis in the Irish economy, especially housing, dominated the election. Similarly, the decision of Macron to install Bernier (noting his Conservatives came fourth in the French election) as Prime Minister backfired. Le Pen has already achieved one of stated aims, to cause chaos, with

Europe) have gained ground by putting out emotionally impactful and radical provocations, often combined with obnoxious and uncomfortable lies, that draw interest and seek to capture the public discourse, and like Trump generate millions of pounds worth of free media.

There is a growing hope that this will be countered better going forward. In September 2025 the England and Wales Green Party elected a new eco-populist leader in Zack Polanski. He gained traction, initially through alternative and mainstream media. In late October 2025 the Green Party polled ahead of both Labour and the Conservatives (second only to Reform) for the first time.⁸¹

Rebuilding Trust

Greens and progressives need to consistently reframe the political discourse to renew and deepen democracy. To resonate with the majority means making the links between dealing with climate change and entrenched inequality to individual, and often local, concerns. The challenge for the Greens, and other progressives, starts with calling out the false choices offered by the mainstream – whether it is the fallacy of unending growth, the failure to distinguish the inequality that underpins the cost-of-living crisis or the disingenuous way in which the UK mainstream use techno-optimism as a smokescreen to hide deeply-entrenched areas of climate inaction.

But in order to change what is *normal*; that is to transform how the majority of how people live, even for the *better*, a new narrative alone is not enough. Trust and solidarity needs to be re-established. And that is not going to happen unless politicians engage locally, one-to-one: reaching out to where people are, involving people (including those who do not share their values or political beliefs) in making change happen, actively listening to their concerns and making their lives better.

This change means being honest about how reaching science-based climate and ecological objectives **only works** when it is aligned a redistributive economy that prioritises fairness for all. This is why Kate Raworth's 'Doughnut economy' model is useful to visualise how justice and addressing the planetary crisis are inextricably linked.⁸² A 'justice-blind' approach only increases resistance to efforts to reduce overall levels of production and consumption because, without a focus on

bringing down Macron within her sights. Goury-Laffont (4 December 2024), 'French government collapse: Le Pen eyes chance to destroy Macron'. <https://www.politico.eu/article/marine-le-pen-emmanuel-macron-michel-barnier-vote-political-crisis-france-finances/>.

⁸¹ Calgie, C (October 30 2025) 'Mindblowing new election poll sees Greens leapfrog Labour and the Tories into second.' The Express. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2128041/Greens-second-poll-Reform>

⁸² Raworth, K. (2017), 'Doughnut Economics: Seven ways to think like a 21st Century Economist'. Random House, London.

redistribution, this depresses the standard-of-living of hard-pressed families. That is exactly what right wing populists stand for and feed off.

Implementing such a regenerative and redistributive economics as outlined by Raworth would directly and immediately impact those with high consuming and low-energy lifestyles very differently. The change would reduce mobility by replacing frequent flying with slower travel alongside ensuring more local services available to all. Inequality harms everyone.⁸³ Unless we shift our aspirations from celebrating the high-carbon lifestyles of the 'polluter elite',⁸⁴ it will not be possible to inspire middle-income and poorer households that we can all be better off when we consume less and share more. This could mean a cultural shift from idolising the lifestyles of wealthy celebrities to supporting more local music, culture and even more local football teams.

Targeting the disproportionate emissions of the richest 1% or 10% is key to both maximising emissions reductions while securing popular support for joined-up efforts to reduce emissions across sectors (notably transport, buildings and consumption). Such 'objects of political desire' might include policies that are symbolically popular and would avoid a French '*gilets jaunes*' type backlash against climate policies by the working class and poorest in society. For example, progressive measures to manage demand for flying (e.g. the Frequent Flyer Levy) should be matched by measures that target the high carbon lifestyles of the polluter elite (e.g. banning private jets), while also providing cheap and sustainable mobility options for all. Such a combination would undermine or dampen the right wing's attempt to translate such climate policies in a culture war issue pitting a 'green elite' against 'hard working and hard-pressed families'.⁸⁵ For example, the new Conservative Party leader has proudly declared that she 'loves being a culture warrior'.⁸⁶

Greens and progressives should be doing more to publicise and popularise facts stressing the level of consumption inequality. For example, the richest 1% globally

⁸³ This could include ensuring every community has its own local shop, community spaces, affordable nursery places, allotments, and so on. It is not just about making access to these services affordable to all through better buses and safer walking and cycling, but making more of these services available and affordable near where people live.

⁸⁴ The polluter elite are variously referred to as the top 1% or 10% of emitters globally (Alestig M, Dabi N, Jeurkar A and Maitland A (2024), '*Carbon Equality Kills: Why curbing the excessive emissions of an elite few can create a sustainable planet for us all*'. <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621656/bp-carbon-inequality-kills-281024-en.pdf;jsessionid=57FD53722A7800B6C92A0ADE758CBEA9?sequence=12>). The emissions of the top 0.1% of US citizens. In 2019, we estimate the U.S. top 0.1% had emissions (955 t CO₂e) 57× higher than bottom decile U.S. households and 597× higher than an average low-income country household. Starr J, Nicolson C, Ash M, Markowitz EM, Moran D (2022), 'Assessing U.S. consumers' carbon footprints reveals outsized impact of the top 1%'. *Ecological Economics*, Volume 205, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2022.107698>.

⁸⁵ For example, Turner C (4 January 2025), '*Net-zero 'flight tax' will raise cost of holidays*'. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2025/01/04/net-zero-drive-will-raise-cost-of-holidays/>.

⁸⁶ Geiger C (6 December 2024), '*I love being a culture warrior, says Tory leader Kemi Badenoch*'. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cd75n1jlv2eo>.

account for more carbon emissions than poorest 66%. And in the UK 70% of the flights taken in this country are by just 15% of the population. Similarly, that the wealthiest 10% of the British use around three times as much energy driving cars and five times as much for recreational activities, when compared to the bottom 10%.⁸⁷ The principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' must be applied at a societal level, just as it was formalised as part of the framework to govern climate negotiations in Kyoto over thirty years ago.⁸⁸ Tackling overconsumption whoever this is (including by celebrities and other high-profile elite cultural icons) is a crucial part of shifting away from a culture of consumerism. Such extreme consumption provides political cover to justify mainstream growthist politics and allows such high consumption lifestyles to not just persist but be marketed to us, to persuade to strive for and emulate such behaviours.

Instead, reducing the overconsumption of elites will make it easier to generate democratic support to realise positive changes that makes society less unequal and at the same time improve the lives of most people. Examples include investing in community-scale infrastructure democratising workplaces, and creating the new climate jobs and care work we need. Rebuilding community trust is vital to gather support for a very different future that also addresses the global divide with the majority who live with far lower levels of consumption in the Global South.⁸⁹

Calling out False Hope (on Net Zero)

The UK, at least on paper, has a clear policy framework to address climate change in line with international obligations and the climate science, including a Climate Change Act and five year carbon budgets. So why is the UK still building more and bigger roads?⁹⁰ How on earth can the UK's climate aviation strategy lead to further airport expansion?⁹¹

At the international level promises have been made. These are embedded in government policy. But the reality, the true nature of delivery is different. In spite of a shifting political dialogue, our economic decision-making and the workings of the wider economic system remains pretty much uninhibited. So the gap between promised policies and changes in mainstream practice is widening. The now widespread way this gap is papered over – by politicians. The misdirection and layers

⁸⁷ Watts J (20 November 2023), '[Richest 1% account for more carbon emissions than poorest 66%, report says](#)'. and Gabbatiss J (14 December 2022), '[Richest people in the UK 'use more energy flying' than poorest do overall](#)'.

⁸⁸ Zhang Y (4 May 2022), '[Thirty years with common but differentiated responsibility, why do we need it ever more today?](#)'

⁸⁹ Hickel, J (2017), '[The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and its Solutions](#)' William Heinemann, UK.

⁹⁰ Transport Action Network (2023), '[Why England urgently needs a roads reset](#)'.

⁹¹ AEF (no date), '[Challenging Airport Expansion](#)'.

of complexity and confusion are ever more elaborate. It has a name: greenwashing. And a more specific name: *net zero*.

Net zero is not just a clever way to block sufficient action to address the climate and ecological crisis. It is also just one way in which politics has ceased to be truly democratic. That is, what is being sustained is not functioning ecosystems, healthy habitats or a stable climate. What 'net zero' sustains is the political and economic status quo.

Climate action has not shifted the way politics and economics are firmly wedded to business-as-usual practices and ever more expansion, all of which is done in the name of progress, development and economic growth. This is in part a result of different, interconnected issues being siloed, and the real motivations for policies, or why things don't ever seem to change, being glossed over.

There is also a need to better 'join up' the political discussions around consequences of continued climate change, not least migration. Dangerous climate change is already increasing the extent that parts of the world will become uninhabitable, through extremes of wet-bulb temperature,⁹² coastal flooding and sea level rise. While this is becoming a dominant driver of international migration there is still no international convention that explicitly addresses migration from environmental or climate-related causes. Climate refugees have no legal status under international law.⁹³ The hypocrisy of right-wing politicians calling for less funding to address climate change, which increases further the likely extent of global migration must be called out (see for example **Box 1.3**).

Making the Connection Between Rising Climate Impacts and Migration

Spot the connection:

- World at hottest temperature since human civilisation began (2024)
- Global emissions still rising rather than falling
- Earth now certain to cross dangerous 1.5°C warming threshold
- Immigration becomes problem as millions of people move to Europe from equatorial countries.

It's a tricky one! Good luck!!

Box 1.3 Fun Summer Heatwave Quiz! (reproduced from Private Eye magazine, 26 June – 10 July 2025)

⁹² NASA Science Editorial Team (March 9th 2022), 'Climate Change May Make Some Places Too Hot to Live'. <https://science.nasa.gov/earth/climate-change/too-hot-to-handle-how-climate-change-may-make-some-places-too-hot-to-live/>.

⁹³ Balsari S, Dresser C and Leaning J (2020), 'Climate Change, Migration, and Civil Strife'. *Current Environmental Health Reports*. 2020 Oct 13;7(4):404–414. doi: [10.1007/s40572-020-00291-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40572-020-00291-4). <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7550406/>.

Politics is increasingly clustered around three distinct climate policy positions:

- Growthist mainstream politics, which tries to integrate climate action into existing worldviews and economic systems, such 'Net Zero's reference to technofix solutions;
- Right-wing populists, who dismiss Net Zero and the need for any climate action; and
- Greens and Progressives who are calling for sufficient climate action in line with climate science (and action on inequality and strengthening democracy as set out here).

The pro-growth mainstream position is epitomised by UK Labour (as well as the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives), who pigeonhole climate action primarily as an energy supply issue (whilst actively encouraging more demand, such as in new data centres and aviation) that is ever more reliant on as yet unproven technologies.

This is unfair and dishonest as it glosses over the need to address carbon emissions which have limited alternatives (producing steel and concrete, aviation and shipping, agriculture) as well as the resulting inequalities of focusing on supply-side measures alone (see **Box 2.3** in Part 2 of this paper). This position is challenged by both the Greens and right wing climate sceptics. Both say Net Zero is inadequate or flawed in its current form: it uses greenwash and increases inequality thus making the cost-of-living crisis worse.⁹⁴ These two opposing positions, which both link climate and equity, are increasingly defining political positions on climate change: whether we need *far* more climate action or should have none at all.

This is reflected in the focus of climate campaigners. This has shifted from Extinction Rebellion's focus on stopping oil drilling (still supply-side) to other campaign groups including Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil, that have more directly challenged the notion that a sustainable future can be one of continued driving, flying, space heating and throw-away products. This caused a backlash: led by right wing populists, including the Conservatives. In the UK 'low traffic neighbourhoods' and other policies that reduce car dependency have been a particular focus. Astonishingly, in Wales it was exposed that 'community campaigns' against 20mph speed limits to improve road safety across urban areas were led by Conservative Party activists – including in Sunderland!⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Harvey F and Horton H (15 June 2025) A useful enemy? Why Tories and Reform are calling net zero policy into question. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/jun/15/tories-reform-net-zero-climate-science>.

⁹⁵ A Conservative councillor from Sunderland with no apparent links to Wales is running multiple Facebook groups opposing the 20mph limit here despite apparently supporting the limit in his hometown. A Wales Online investigation has shown that the administrators of these social media groups have direct links to the Conservative Party. Hayward, W (15 January 2024), '*English Tory politicians running Facebook groups opposing 20mph in Wales while supporting it where they live*'. <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/politics/english-tory-politicians-running-facebook-28449407>.

Who Frames, Wins

A key political strategy is to reframe the debate (and gain traction through the various media). Greens and other progressives must reclaim the space to manoeuvre from their political opponents.⁹⁶

This requires bolder strategies to take the initiative, and set the political agenda. For example, Greens and progressive political movements should put out 'radical outliers': campaigns and messaging that capture and redirect the political discourse in completely unexpected and profoundly different ways. This requires risk taking, experimenting with communicating radical ideas and doing so in ways that relate to the interests and language of ordinary citizens using new and longstanding means of communication. Extinction Rebellion has had some success in shifting the political debate – including its campaign for the British Parliament to declare a climate and ecological emergency in May 2019 – but it now attracts less media coverage.⁹⁷ Such radical acts⁹⁸ shift public engagement and create space to transform the root causes of this wicked problem – our economic and political systems.⁹⁹

And in doing so, Greens need to change the conversation.¹⁰⁰ To articulate a positive vision of a different and better future, speaking directly to those people ostracised by the mainstream and targeted by right wing populists. This is crucial: to place hope over fear; to build social cohesion, deflect 'othering' by people like Farage; and to build movements united in a shared alternative vision (of equity, limits and democracy – see Part 2 of this paper). Such bolder actions will help call time on longstanding misleading stories like trickle-down economics by exposing the true causes of poverty. And call out the false green-wash claims that greener capitalism will suffice, or that society

⁹⁶ An analogy for this could be the game of Othello is about turning the black pieces white and vice versa with the aim for more pieces to be turned to one colour or the other (<https://www.worldothello.org/about/about-othello/othello-rules/official-rules/english>).

⁹⁷ Bevan, L. et al (2020), 'Climate change strategic narratives in the United Kingdom: Emergency, Extinction, Effectiveness', *Energy Research & Social Science*, 69.

⁹⁸ From the earlier meaning 'related to the root' – that is campaigning to change our politics, governance and economics, and doing so reset the power structure that underpin our society.

⁹⁹ Thomas-Walters et al found real-life evidence of the "radical flank effect," the idea that a more extreme climate group can increase support for more mainstream groups when protests are peaceful, but not when they are violent. Thomas-Walters L, Scheuch E, Ong A and Goldberg M (2025), '*The impacts of climate activism*'. Yale Program on Climate Change Communication. <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/the-impacts-of-climate-activism/>. As reviewed in https://grist.org/protest/climate-protests-effects-hands-off-trump/?utm_source=firefox-newtab-en-gb.

¹⁰⁰ How might Greens and progressives best give preference to media aligned with such a future vision, for example those that abide by the Media Reform Coalition propose four principles to improve governance of the media: independence, accountability, democratic control and universality? See <https://www.mediareform.org.uk/key-issues/media-commons>.

should bet on there being 'magical' technological solutions just around the corner to rescue us all.

On the one hand, and in keeping with our increasingly 'post-truth' politics and culture (promoted and exacerbated by social media and right-wing populism), this dominant approach to the planetary crisis is mythic in the same way described by former American President John F. Kennedy:

"The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie--deliberate, contrived and dishonest--but the myth--persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought".¹⁰¹

On the other, and going back further in history, this dominant approach that must be confronted is akin to the myth of the 'Achilles spear' from ancient Greek mythology. This was a weapon that could heal the wounds it inflicts, an older version of the modern one whereby the social and climate/ecological harms and problems of economic growth under capitalism can be healed by ... more and greener growth.¹⁰²

Realistic Narratives of a Better Now

Rui Taveres (Green Portuguese MP for LIVRE)¹⁰³ spoke clearly in November 2024 about how to successfully challenge right wing populist narratives. Taveres highlighted how:

"In the 1930s Roosevelt strove off fascism with a far more interventionist state. America pioneered the new era of the welfare state, public sector and social housing that was mainstreamed in the 1950s and 1960s in the 1930s with his call for a New Deal."

He emphasised the importance of a positive and optimistic narrative. "It is not a coincidence", Taveres concluded:

"That optimism wins. We have to set out what out a viable future for everyone looks like, to visualise what victory looks like."

He suggested that instead of being drawn into a focus on migration in a way that scapegoat's people – through a focus on scandals, criminalities and crises around (the minority of) illegal migration – we need to redirect the focus and energy of the public discourse, not let ourselves be redirected, unwittingly, towards identity-based divisions.

¹⁰¹ John F. Kennedy (1962), 'Yale University Commencement Address'.
<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkyalecommencement.htm>.

¹⁰² Barry, J. (2012), op cit.

¹⁰³ <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/article-author/rui-tavares/>.

An essential prominent element of redirecting the public's energy and focus is to promote justice and climate policies as a politics of abundance, of possibility, of making people's lives practically better (while using less energy and raw materials). This means stressing how such a politics of justice and climate will bring about meaningful, purposeful lives with space for enjoyment, and freedom from both persecution and monotony. We must avoid being trapped in the same fairy-tale thinking that underpins the economics of endless growth.¹⁰⁴ Greens and progressives should be actively and positively promoting what we want to make better – quality of food for all, decent and affordable housing for all, more meaningful free time, enough work (paid) and a society that values sharing and caring. Simply put – seeking to maximise quality of life for all – within environmental (including climate) limits. Such a change in narrative should also show how these things would actually meet people's needs far better.

This would be supported by policies such as maximum income ratios, taxing the climate damaging lifestyles of the rich, banning persuasive advertising, creating a far more *locally* circular economy (of money, resources *and* energy)¹⁰⁵ building community wealth and extending universal basic services. And it should be extended internationally such as to accept the need to fund climate loss and damage and cancel longstanding global debt. This would be a Caring Economy which has long been espoused by Greens, eco-feminists and eco-socialists and is tied to the notion of a 'Make-do-and-Mend' economy as previously proposed by Green House.^{106,107} Indeed, Tim Jackson recently proposed that 'care' might be a better organising principle for the economy than growth.¹⁰⁸

Such a shift to a caring, redistributive, regenerative, green and democratised economics would remove the way that neoliberal economics makes social and environmental issues subservient to growth, and trades them off against each other. The way to address social justice is climate justice, and vice-versa: *if our shared goal is*

¹⁰⁴ For example, mainstream thinking often sees a carbon budget (that we should stay as far within as possible) as something that we can 'spend up to the limit'. It would be better to equate it to "Vision Zero" strategy to eliminate road traffic fatalities and serious injuries as quickly as possible (<https://visionzeronetwork.org/about/what-is-vision-zero/>). This requires a different way of thinking.

¹⁰⁵ Barrass K, Boswell A and Essex J (2020) Energising the East. Office of Catherine Rowett MEP, UK. https://catherinerowett.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/EastofEnglandEnergyReport_LAYOUT_interactive-2-1.pdf.

¹⁰⁶ Barry, J. (2010), 'Choose Life' Not Economic Growth: Critical Social Theory for People, Planet and Flourishing in the 'Age of Nature', *Nature, Knowledge and Negation: Current Perspectives in Social Theory*, Volume 26, 93–113, <https://tortoiseshack.ie/327-protest-the-economics-of-care-with-prof-john-barry/>.

¹⁰⁷ Making better use and extending the life of what we already have rather than changing what sort of 'more' we desire. Essex, J (2014), 'How to Make Do and Mend Our Economy: Rethinking Investment Strategies for Construction and Industry to meet the Challenge of Sustainability'. https://www.greenhousethinktank.org/static/2014/make_do_and_mend_inside2_small.pdf.

¹⁰⁸ Jackson, T. (2025), 'The Care Economy'. *Polity*, Cambridge, UK. <https://timjackson.org.uk/the-care-economy/>

a liveable future that is fair for all then they are the same thing. To be sustainable simply means the ability to sustain, and if we want to sustain both people and planet then these twin priorities must now redefine our economics, not the other way around.

Our Choice: “Them” or “All of Us”?

A More Participatory Democracy (led by all of us, not by elites or others acting on our behalf)

Blindly hoping that a small group of people, such as an elite or just other people somewhere else, will save us (let alone all of humanity) is a deeply flawed and risky strategy.¹⁰⁹ But this is no less magical thinking than the blind hope that biofuels, carbon capture and storage or other new technologies can suck us back from climate overshoot after we have emitted too much carbon.¹¹⁰ Instead, increased participation in political and community level change is needed to shift public opinion, change the nature of our dominant culture, and strengthen and deepen democracy. *However, this won't be motivated by scientific or technocratic arguments of 'sacrifice' and top-down imposed 'limits'.* Neither will reliance on a few powerful authoritarian leaders to 'take control' work. Telling people what to do, against their will, is unlikely to work.

Instead, Green leadership needs to be genuinely participatory: leading in an, empowering and enabling way, bringing forth new ideas whilst being backed-up by civil society movements. Politics needs to give people meaningful agency to affect things that affect *their* lives and other things or people they care about – citizens and communities, not elites, need to 'take back control'.¹¹¹ That is, politics; in responding to the poly-crisis (from growing inequality and the declining wellbeing of citizens to the climate and ecological crisis); must be radically democratic, inclusive and participative. That is not to say there isn't still a need for greater political *leadership*, but that in turn will depend on more direct participation by civic society to bolder political decisions are not just made, but accepted by society, become new cultural norms, and then be built upon.

Early action by the rich (elites) is needed to reduce their overall level of energy and resource use is needed to widen popular support for shifting aspirations away from ever-more consumption. Support for radical decarbonisation and redistribution requires clear transparency on where emissions (and wealth) currently sits. This must

¹⁰⁹ This appears to be yet another form of 'othering' (as well as elitist, arrogant and potentially extremely anti-democratic).

¹¹⁰ Carton W and Malm A (2024), *'Overshoot: How the World Surrendered to Climate Breakdown'*. Verso, UK.

¹¹¹ Anderson, V. and Read, R. (2016), 'Take back real control! A Green response to Brexit', *The Ecologist*, <https://theecologist.org/2016/jul/18/take-back-real-control-green-response-brexit>.

then be matched by clear transparent communication by Government as to how much our personal and shared societal greenhouse gas emissions (and wider resource use) needs to be reduced, and a public conversation to support these changes being brought about. This communication needs to identify the structural not just individual reasons for that, and that government will use its power to limit the excessive consumption of the 'polluter elite' and the private economic interests that benefit from a culture of consumerism. At the same time, expertise and technical and scientific knowledge (which by definition is not known or knowable by everyone) is also needed.

So here we propose that in democratising our response to the planetary and associated socio-economic crises we face, these and other experts should be '*on tap not on top*'.¹¹² Our view here is informed by the acceptance that we need to approach the climate and ecological crisis not as normal policy or indeed scientific issues. In terms of policy, the response to the planetary crisis cannot be contained or constrained within the 'Overton window' of what is already publicly acceptable at a given time. Instead, we should frame our responses within a 'post-normal science' approach, a key element of which is democratising the production of scientific knowledge.

The democracy needed will be different from the inadequate, failed democracy we have now. We must remake much of the institutions of democracy (including extending democracy to the economy). In doing so we must extricate our current political system from the influence of vested interests that at best corrupt and at worse co-opt our current political system to be a communication tool of capitalism.¹¹³ Only then we can claim to have truly, 'taken back control' of our political and economic systems rather than sacrifice control to (a different set of) elites on the mythic and dangerous promise that they will give us a better (secure?) future.

Also, relying on a benign dictatorship or a new elite to democratically (or otherwise) become the new government is akin to waiting for politicians to change politics: it might happen, but we would not bet on it and whose interests it would serve ... Still it would seem incredibly unlikely that elites would *all* choose to use political power to address inequality or similarly (voluntarily) dis-benefit themselves. Such a voluntary

¹¹² Our view here is informed by the acceptance that we need to approach the climate and ecological crisis not as normal policy or indeed scientific issues. In terms of policy the response to the planetary crisis cannot be contained or constrained within the 'Overton window', while scientifically we should frame our responses within a 'post-normal science' approach, a key element of which is the democratising of scientific knowledge production. There is also a wider role for pioneers and those unafraid to speak the truth and truth to power. But such brave and courageous souls should, in our theory of change, be '*on tap, not on top*', there is inspire not non-democratically impose. On post-normal science, see S. Funtowicz and J. Ravetz (2003), '*Post-Normal Science*', <https://isecoeco.org/pdf/pstnormsc.pdf>.

¹¹³ Essex J, Sims P and Storey N (2020), '*Rethinking Energy Demand*'. Green House think tank, Chapter 2.

approach, reliant on individual inspirational figures in business or politics to 'save the day', has not worked till now. On the contrary, consider the current concentration of wealth and power that is linked to politics, not least through political donations. For example, consider Elon Musk's \$250 million and social media support to getting Trump re-elected and he offered \$100m to Nigel Farage in the UK, or indeed the possible links between Putin and Trump.¹¹⁴ So, it seems unlikely that most small groups of elites are going to advocate for a sufficient response that addresses the root causes of our predicament, not least because most elites directly benefit from the current economic system.

Instead, this paper proposes that Green Party politicians and activists work with other progressives and the wider green movement to more boldly take the lead, and frame the debate in ways that allow sufficient change to define the political discourse, and break the ties that bind politicians to continued economic growth.

This must involve campaigners. It is worth stressing too that this endeavour cannot wait for politicians to lead. Indeed, most political change follows campaigning that ensures that public support is won, such that a new political decision can be made *and* sustained, and includes workers. This movement will no doubt embrace some with privilege (sufficient time and resources to invest outside of family and work commitments to serve a greater cause), including some celebrities.¹¹⁵ The question asked here is less who *they* are but how many of *us* will act together (hopefully as many people as possible, including us) and what we will do.

Uniting Behind a Sufficiently Radical Vision

So, what would it take for Greens and other progressive politicians, campaigners and activists to co-create and unite behind a sufficiently radical vision? What would a radical vision based on a realistic theory of change that would deliver sufficient climate action, redistribution and a politics of citizen participation look like? Does the outline of this already exist so it might be fleshed out to become a force to be reckoned with? Can a wide movement for change be honest enough to share the hopes and dreams that are linked to a theory of change that can bring about a better future for all– that reaches out to the mainstream? How might people line up behind something sufficiently radical, that they feel able to share and own it? And how might this be

¹¹⁴ Hirsh M (30 October 2024), 'The Enduring Mystery of Trump's Relationship with Russia.' <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/10/30/enduring-mystery-trump-relationship-russia/> and Hirsh M (21 December 2018), 'How Russian Money Helped Save Trump's Business.' <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/21/how-russian-money-helped-save-trumps-business/>.

¹¹⁵ But not necessarily elites (e.g. top 0.1% more inextricably linked to capital accumulation and with greater self-interest).

sufficiently united, and effective, to overcome the obstacles and blockages that will be placed in the way of such changes coming about?

In 1942, the Beveridge Report identified five major problems that prevented people from escaping poverty or bettering themselves. This heavily influenced the 1945 Labour election manifesto, *“Let us Face the Future”*, which paved the way for the first Labour government.¹¹⁶ It is time we honestly faced our current predicament with similar clarity and boldness. This could build on the concept and campaigns for a Green New Deal, co-created by a small group in 2008 (based on the pre-existing notion of a Roosevelt’s New Deal) before being adopted by the Green Party and latterly other political parties and campaigns across Europe and North America.¹¹⁷ What would it take for a similar landmark shift to transform the current economic system today?

In addition, to what extent will campaigning and political activism extend to non-violent direct action? In many cases, from the suffragette movement and Rosa Park’s refusal to move from a bus¹¹⁸ through the Seeds of Hope acts to dismantle a warplane to highlight the plight of East Timor in 1996,¹¹⁹ to the Defend our Juries protests,¹²⁰ direct action has been a key part of the way in which the case for change leads to systemic change. These are questions that really need to be wrestled with: ‘in action’, not as an intellectual exercise.

That doesn’t mean grasping at a naive hope it will all be OK if we pick up litter on Saturdays. Hope has to be grounded in us publicly and collectively acknowledging how acute our predicament is, and the extent to which serious impacts are already locked in. That hope is drawn from the agency that develops when we act together: not to ‘solve’ all our ‘problems’, but to transform our society, and in the process transform ourselves. That we find *sufficient* courage to *do what is necessary*, as if our and our children’s future depended upon us.

Clearly, none of us, nor our actions or organisations will be sufficient on their own. Broad coalitions and movements are needed – with sufficiently radical outliers (as noted above). It is important to avoid placing hope in specific individuals, organisations or groups or let the things that divide us stop us coming together. This requires

¹¹⁶ BBC Bite size (undated) ‘Effectiveness of the Labour social welfare reforms, 1945–1951. The Beveridge Report.’
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zwhsf8/revision/3>.

¹¹⁷ See <https://greennewdealgroup.org/a-green-new-deal/>,
https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en and
<https://leapmanifesto.org/en/the-leap-manifesto/>.

¹¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosa_Parks.

¹¹⁹ The story of Hainsworth P (2018), ‘The Hammer Blow: How Ten Women Disarmed a Warplane’. Development Education in Politically Interesting Times, Issue 26.
<https://www.developmenteducationreview.com/issue/issue-26/hammer-blow-how-ten-women-disarmed-warplane>.

¹²⁰ <https://defendourjuries.org/>.

(Green and progressive) political education and thought leadership, and different ways to collaborate and learn being practiced. Such collaboration might help unpick the increasingly centralised powers that resist such systemic change.

What then might realise a closer collaboration between Green politics and the broader green campaigns (social and rights-based, as well as climate and ecological) for change with greater honesty and clarity? The likes of Oxfam and Friends of the Earth clearly call out the gap between the current mainstream political rhetoric and action on equity and climate change. So why not extend this honesty to set out the kind of political programme needed to bring about a zero-carbon future, at pace? This should distinguish between the rapid decarbonisation and wider reduction in resource use and redistributive economics needed, and the underplaying of the scale of change required by focusing on 'net' zero (as noted in **Box 2.1** in Part 2 of this paper).

In all of this there must be a connection with the lives and aspirations of working-class people – who are indeed the majority in society. This must extend enabling their political participation whilst removing the unfair political influence of vested interests which underlines this. Amartya Sen famously said:

*"No famine has ever taken place in a functioning democracy."*¹²¹

There must be a positive vision for a sustainable economic future that improves people's lives and aligns with the aspirations of people for better living conditions. But this requires democratic participation and honesty about how this relates to the climate science and biophysical realities of life on this planet. A politics of living well within natural limits is not a threat to improving the lives of citizens, as right-wing/far right and even left-wing positions wrongly and misleadingly claim. A politics of living well within natural limits is (only) a threat to our ruling elites, corporations and the wealthy.

If elites and those with privilege continue to use their preferential political access to maintain their levels of material and energy use, there won't be enough left for everyone else to live a decent life. Not within one country such as the UK, and neither worldwide.¹²² So, decent lives for all are simply not possible within the regenerative

¹²¹ Amartya Sen, extends the definition of poverty, beyond economic aspects to including political freedom and transparency (i.e. elimination of corruption), freedom of opportunity and to access credit, and economic protection from poverty through the welfare state. Sen A (1999) *'Development as Freedom'* Oxford University Press, UK, page 16.

¹²² The Zero Carbon for All tool created by the Global Sufficiency Lab provides zero emission trajectories for countries based on the fair-share principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC), a cornerstone of climate equity referenced in the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) July 2025 advisory opinion. See <https://www.thesufficiencylab.org/sufficiency-insights/zero-carbon-for-all/> and International Court of Justice (23 July 2025) *'Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change.'* <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/187/187-20250723-adv-01-00-en.pdf>

boundaries of the earth within the political (liberal democratic) or economic (capitalist) status quo. We are advocating the ending of the world as we know it, after all.

Such honesty would change the public discourse. It would help build capacity for greater Green and progressive electoral impact as part of a wider movement for change. This must both include a broad base such as proposed by the Climate Majority Project¹²³ and stronger radical outliers that gain traction and helps to fundamentally reposition our political economy. Extinction Rebellion (and smaller campaign groups such as Insulate Britain and Stay Grounded) served such a purpose recently. The broad base must also extend to include workplaces, trade unions, faith communities etc. – to provide not just different visions of the future but set out how those in many different livelihoods might be better employed to get us there.

And finally, what if we all need to play *our* part? We may believe that we lack sufficient time, resources or skills to make it happen. But every personality type, every person, every place has a role to play if economics and politics are to be radically transformed beyond capitalism and growth that first serves corporate and elite interests. It is not just politicians, campaigners and activists everyone who is needed to play our part – even the potato peelers of the revolution!¹²⁴ What this might entail is discussed in the Part 2 of this paper.

¹²³ <https://climatemajorityproject.com/>.

¹²⁴ Attributed to Carrie Hope Fletcher who talks about the importance of those peeling potatoes on stage behind the barricade while others prepare weapons (and have more high profile roles) in *Les Misérables*. See <https://www.thestage.co.uk/big-interviews/carrie-hope-fletcher>.

Part 2: A Shared Economic Vision of Equity, Democracy and Ecological Limits

“Why should democracy end at the factory gate or office door? As Greens and progressives we tend to view citizens not simply as taxpayers, nor simply as voters. Rather, we encourage people to take control of more of their lives in a democratic manner. Ultimately, we want to create a democratic culture and society and not just a formal democratic institutional system which allows citizens to vote”. John Barry¹²⁵

This second part of this paper is the mirror of the first part. Not only is it necessary to change politics, but also through that to enable us to change our economic system.

This second part of this paper explores further how such a change requires politics to be reframed – with a radically different worldview that binds together climate and equality¹²⁶, such that transformation happens at the scale and pace required. This part explores in more detail what this might entail, setting aside the politics of it (which are explored in the first part).

This is presented as a series of three challenges. The authors acknowledge that many more challenges could be added here but we focus on three that seem at least initial blocks to sufficient progress (beyond politics itself that is). These are:

- **Challenge 1:** The obsession of politics and economics with continued economic growth;
- **Challenge 2:** The lack of sufficient carbon reduction policy and delivery framework; and
- **Challenge 3:** The failure to focus on radically reducing overall energy and material demand, a key element to properly integrate climate and equity so that the economy is ‘right-sized’ and becomes more redistributive in nature.

This part ends by presenting a shared vision that fuses together the need for a deepening democracy with the joining up of climate and environmental limits with equity and justice requirements. This is now popularised as the concept of ‘doughnut economics’. The biggest challenge remains not how to describe it in theory – but to get our oversized economy back within planetary boundaries whilst ensuring

¹²⁵ Barry, J and Keller, S (2014), ‘The Green Promise of Democracy’, Green European Journal, <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/the-green-promise-of-democracy/>

¹²⁶ This paper focuses on equity (equality of outcomes) as well as equality of opportunity, resource use, income and wealth. The shared vision is for one of fairness – hence its focus on equity rather than just equality focus on equity here.

everyone's basic needs are met – both in the UK and worldwide. This is the political challenge that is focus of Part 1 above.

Challenge 1: Honesty about Economic Growth

It is time to close that gap between the scale of the problem highlighted by those raising the climate 'fire alarm' (often a minority) and the task of calling in the 'fire brigade', that is collectively and through our political and economic institutions taking sufficient action to get human society to a place of safety. Extinction Rebellion (XR) was formed to speak 'truth to power' and have a candid and science and justice-based discussion about the climate and ecological emergency. Another recent example is the Climate Majority's recent *Strategic Adaption for Emergency Resilience/ SAFER* report and initiative seeking to move the climate movement beyond a focus on climate mitigation towards realistically also stressing that we have to prepare ourselves and our communities for transformative adaptation to the impacts of a climate destabilised world.¹²⁷

Campaign groups (the 'fire alarm') have been successful in calling on politicians to acknowledge the seriousness of the climate and ecological emergency. This is reflected in many elected bodies, from national parliaments to local councils and universities, declaring 'climate and ecological emergencies'.¹²⁸ But politician's responses increasingly ring hollow: saying one thing whilst our levels of overconsumption, extraction and pollution continue to rise. The scale of collective response to the climate and ecological emergency is still wholly inadequate. If one was to turn on the TV or stand next to a busy road it is hard to see much change that gets to the heart of addressing the challenge humanity faces. This cognitive dissidence can be paralysing. Indeed, one longstanding climate scientist, James Hansen, is calling for a complete reset of politics in response to the enormity of the consequences facing us.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Read R, Bell R and Kavanagh L (2025) '[SAFER \(Strategic Adaption for Emergency Resilience\). Making climate adaptation mainstream](#)'. The Climate Majority Project.

¹²⁸ Latter, B (2021), '[Climate Emergency Declarations: What Do They Tell Us About Universities Response to Climate Change](#)'.

¹²⁹ Hansen et al conclude that equilibrium global warming for today's GHG amount is 10°C, which is reduced to 8°C by today's human-made aerosols. Equilibrium warming is not 'committed' warming; rapid phase-out of GHG emissions would prevent most equilibrium warming from occurring. But, under the present geopolitical approach to GHG emissions, global warming will exceed 1.5°C in the 2020s and 2°C before 2050. Impacts on people and nature will accelerate as global warming increases hydrologic (weather) extremes. The enormity of consequences demands a return to Holocene-level global temperature. Required actions include: (1) a global increasing price on GHG emissions accompanied by development of abundant, affordable, transportable clean energy, (2) East-West cooperation in a way that accommodates developing world needs, and (3) intervention with Earth's radiation imbalance to phase down today's massive human-made 'geo-transformation' of Earth's climate. Current political crises present an opportunity for reset, especially if young people can grasp their situation. Hansen, J.E., Sato, M., Simons, L., et al. 2023. [Global warming in the pipeline](#). *Oxford Open Climate Change*, 3(1), p.kgad008.

We now need to be equally honest and upfront about the implications of decarbonisation with respect to our economics and politics, specifically the fallacy of endless and permanent GDP measured growth and the myth of 'green growth'. It is time to come clean about the real flaws in our current growth-based economics:

- **Firstly**, the false myth that our economy has made us all happy and well, which is belied by crises of mental health, obesity and increasing years of ill health. Our fossil fuelled growth economies have passed a threshold where economic growth has become 'uneconomic growth', that is causing more problems than benefits.¹³⁰
- **Secondly**, acceptance that continued economic growth and the global reach of supply chains is underpinned by violence and exploitation.¹³¹ There is growing inequality¹³² and continued austerity, alongside 'extractivism' and pollution, which is despoiling nature, well beyond safe planetary boundaries. We could say 'everything is s***', crumbling and getting worse.
- **Thirdly**, the trickle-down of benefits from economic growth, promised for decades, were never obtainable for the majority. Indeed, neither the monumental scale of elite wealth nor the vast humanity living precariously in poverty has ever been greater.¹³³ UK debt; personal, private, public and national; is at an eye-wateringly high.¹³⁴

Mainstream economic models (based on neoclassical economics) are wrong. They offer out-dated, scientifically ignorant and justice-indifferent understandings of the human economy. They are, therefore, deeply flawed and indeed dangerous.¹³⁵ Consumer capitalism demands constant, never-ending growth in the overall scale of our consumption, and therefore production. The dominant understanding of the economy is ecologically ignorant (as it does not consider flows of energy, resources, pollution etc.). It therefore gives at best a very partial, and at worst a misleading model

¹³⁰ Daly, H. (1999), '*Uneconomic growth in theory and in fact*',

¹³¹ Trade and investment policy unjustly and unsustainably globalise the economy while public and private sector investment decisions still green-light investments that increase carbon emissions.

¹³² The notion that economic growth will deliver equity, or even equality through the 'invisible hand' of the market has been around a long, long time.

¹³³ In the UK, the poorest 50% owned less than 5% of wealth in 2021, and the top 10% a staggering 57% (up from 52.5% in 1995). The top 1% alone held 23%. The ratio of wealth to income has risen in the UK from 2.3 to 1 in 1948, to 5.7 to 1 in 2020. Kerr S and Vaughan M (2024), '*Changing the narrative on wealth inequality*'. See also <https://equalitytrust.org.uk/scale-economic-inequality-uk/>.

¹³⁴ In 2024 UK household debt reached £2.1 trillion (120% of household income. Francis-Devine, B (2025), '*Household debt: statistics and impact on the economy*'. House of Commons Library Research Briefing 7584. In February 2025 UK national debt grew to £2.8 trillion (96% of GDP). Public Sector Finance Delivery Team (2025), '*Public sector finances, UK: February 2025*'.

¹³⁵ The way neoclassical economic models work is flawed. See Steve Keen: (2011), '*Debunking Economics*'. Zed Books.

of the real-world context of the human economy, which is a subsystem of the large earth systems. Its ignorance of the biophysical dimensions of the economy (however organised) comes close to the usefulness of knowing the biology of a unicorn for guiding real world decision-making. The scale of energy and wider resource use worldwide has never been higher. This is driven, like an economic ratchet mechanism, through the construction of:

- Ever more roads leading to more cars and driving;
- Continued port and airport expansion leading to more shipping and flying; and
- More houses leading to more internal space for more stuff, etc.

Mainstream economics, and politics, continue to predict and provide ever more development, which increases production and consumption. Increased physical capital (buildings, infrastructure and urbanisation – supporting growing human populations) leads to (and is driven by) an ever-greater quantity and disposability of possessions. This in turn drives construction of more retail, factories and so on. At the same time waste and all forms of pollution are unaccounted for. Our dominant economic model does not reflect the reality of life on this planet. It is quite literally a form of knowledge that is detached from the biophysical laws that govern everything that happens on earth.

Yet this is how governments and the private sector continue to plan and invest in never-ending growth. Governments reassure us that growth can be ‘green’ and ‘sustainable’. New technologies are promised as the saviours that will enable the ‘decoupling’ of resource, energy and negative waste from growing an economy. But rather like knowing the biology of a unicorn, such confident assertions of technologically enabled decoupling are forms of ideological wish fulfilment.¹³⁶ While there is some evidence of relative decoupling, there is no empirical evidence of absolute decoupling.¹³⁷ *The issue is one of scale.* Improving the resource or energy efficiency of one product, or indeed sector, is not the same as reducing the overall macro-economic impacts on the environment. At the same time the individualistic culture this creates and requires, undermines and dismantles solidarity, making relationships more transactional. Together, our society, our centrist politics and our dominant neoliberal global economic system all prioritise such continued ‘economic growth’ above improvements in our wellbeing or limiting environmental pollution.

¹³⁶ This relates to the potential to decouple the level of energy and material use, and hence carbon emissions, from economic growth.

¹³⁷ EEB (2019), ‘*Decoupling Debunked: Evidence and arguments against green growth as a sole strategy for sustainability*’. <https://eeb.org/library/decoupling-debunked/>.

Such an overarching target of increasing growth fails to include any notion of whether the future will be better or not. It does not serve even the short-term interests of most of us.¹³⁸ It holds no vision. It just promises 'more': articulated on graphs of increasing economic GDP that are not backed by plans to more fairly distribute benefits or address inequality.^{139,140} It limits responsibility. It deals in quantities of production and consumption, not quality of life. It actively and deliberately seeks to create and excite desires for more – and the fear of missing out. Increasing growth binds us in relationships through money and limits trust. Such a misrepresentation breeds distrust in politics (which opens the door to far right, authoritarian and populist distractions and blame games) and lack a positive vision.

It is time for honesty. Not just about what an economy that addresses climate and inequality in the future might look like but how this would change the structure of society and the economy. It must also change how 'economics' is understood, including crucially how such a liveable future is in direct conflict with continued economic growth and capitalism.

Honesty is also needed about the level of progressive taxation needed to fund public expenditure so that it reduces effective inequality:¹⁴¹

- More collective and shared goods and services, such as proposed by those promoting 'universal basic services';¹⁴² and
- A greater focus on the inclusion of unpaid care work/reproductive labour. This must address both how unpaid care is 'made invisible' (for ideological not empirical reasons) by mainstream economic thinking (excluded from measurements of GDP and economic growth), and how this work is unequally distributed by gender.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Yet the UK Labour government appears to now be focusing on 'economic growth at all costs'. Kuenssberg, L (25 January 2025), 'Growth at all costs: Why Reeves in a sudden rush on the economy'. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c8ed6e4l29lo>.

¹³⁹ The fact that this has no relevance to the lives of most people is rarely explained.

¹⁴⁰ Growth relies on increasing inequality – it never has or will trickle wealth down to benefit the poorest. Woodward and Simms (2006), 'Growth isn't working'. New Economics Foundation. https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/7b6f36cb5e380aff0c_wsm6b1a5l.pdf.

¹⁴¹ Taxation is not needed to raise money but to allow the government to mobilise (and redirect) resources in ways that reduce effective inequality. Currently taxes and benefits reduce UK income inequality, but not wealth inequality. Household Income and Expenditure Team (2024), 'Effects of taxes and benefits on UK household income: financial year ending 2023'. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/theeffectsoftaxesandbenefitsonhouseholdincome/financialyearending2023>. The real constraints to the economy are the availability of actual resources, land, labour, technology, industrial capacity and so on. Dawney E (2025), 'Managing the UK Economy in times of the Climate Emergency' Green House think tank, UK. <https://www.greenhousethinktank.org/briefing-managing-the-uk-economy-in-times-of-the-climate-emergency>.

¹⁴² Coote, A. (2020), 'The Case for Universal Basic Services', <https://neweconomics.org/2020/02/the-case-for-universal-basic-services>.

¹⁴³ Salleh, A. (2024), 'Decolonize Ecomodernism!: The Anthropocene and its Others'. Bloomsbury, London, UK. Jackson, T. (2025), 'The Care Economy'. Polity, Cambridge, UK.

At the same time, honesty is needed to set out what needs to change for us to all live within the biophysical and regenerative capacities of the planet. Not least:

- Far fewer cars and flights especially for high consumers alongside better public transport and reducing the need for journeys made by cars and planes;¹⁴⁴
- Energy-efficient retrofit to reduce energy use in buildings and energy poverty; and
- A transition to less meat and dairy heavy diets.

Critically, it should be made clear that addressing socio-economic injustices (locally and globally) and addressing the climate and ecological emergency are two sides of the same coin. Our society can *only* meet the needs for all within the available resources and safe pollution absorption capacities *if* our ways of living are markedly different and include much more sharing and collective forms of social provisioning.¹⁴⁵

This would represent a change in our politics and how we both understand and operate economics. There is a need to value collective forms of wellbeing and celebrating differences across our society instead of ascribing significance to abstract and unevenly enjoyed GDP-measured 'economic growth' and increasing levels of individual consumption. Such a shift from valuing our 'standard of living' in terms of increasing levels of individual consumption to a shared quality of life is not new.¹⁴⁶ This will shift us from seeing ourselves first as consumers, taxpayers and workers, to first being free and equal citizens.¹⁴⁷

Challenge 2: Acceptance that Net Zero is Not Zero

The easy stuff is now within reach. This has emboldened the position of pro-growth climate capitalists. The UK Labour Government's plan to secure the capital investment for 95% of UK electricity to be 'low carbon' by 2030,¹⁴⁸ and commitment to no new oil

¹⁴⁴ Political debates on the climate impact of expanding airports and roads are completely disconnected from political decisions based on what the supposed economic need is. Notable exceptions include New Economics Foundation and the excellent work of Alex Chapman in calling out the flaws in aviation's promises. Chapman, A (2023). '*Losing Altitude*'. New Economics Foundation, UK. <https://neweconomics.org/2023/07/losing-altitude>.

¹⁴⁵ Barry, J. (2019), '*Sharing and caring for things for a Sustainable Economy*', <https://qpol.qub.ac.uk/sharing-and-caring-for-things-for-a-sustainable-economy/>.

¹⁴⁶ See Guiding Principles and the figure on p17 of HM Government (2005), '*UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy*'. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a78a0eae5274a277e68e375/pb10589-securing-the-future-050307.pdf>.

¹⁴⁷ Alexander, J (2023), '*Citizens: Why the Key to Fixing Everything is All of Us*'. Canbury Press. <https://www.jonalexander.net/the-idea>. Barry, J (2016), 'Citizenship and (Un)Sustainability: A Green Republican Perspective', in Stephen M. Gardiner, Allen Thompson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

¹⁴⁸ A&O Shearman (2024), '*New UK Government bets big on energy and infrastructure*'. <https://www.aoshearman.com/en/insights/new-uk-government-bets-big-on-energy-and-infrastructure>.

and gas exploration in the North Sea is welcomed.¹⁴⁹ The scale of renewables planned is ambitious: quadrupling offshore wind capacity alone by 2030.¹⁵⁰ However, the UK Government's focus on electricity not overall energy use sits alongside green lights for aviation emissions to continue to grow, ignores the need to reduce the overall energy and material demand, and glosses over the UK's huge scale of industrial imports.^{151,152}

Yet the UK Government still has no real plan to reach zero carbon by 2050: only to be 'net zero' – see **Box 2.1**). The Government's 'net' zero target is still not been backed up with the wider social and environmental changes needed. Their plans for net zero do not set out what is required (politically, economically and socially), or the extent that this can be realised within our current capitalist economic system. Instead, the focus of Net Zero is on risky 'strategies' dependant on fanciful techno-optimistic futures.¹⁵³ This highlights why some groups calling for a 'net zero carbon future' are not aligned with the Green and progressive campaigners and politicians. The UK government's 'growth mission'¹⁵⁴ is inconsistent with the UK compliance with international climate agreements. This is reflected in Friends of the Earth's two successful legal challenges that the UK government's failure to draw up credible plans to decarbonise the UK economy.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁹ See Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, HM Treasury, James Murray MP and The Rt Hon Ed Miliband MP (5 March 2025) *Press Release: Government to unleash the North Sea's clean energy future*.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-unleash-the-north-seas-clean-energy-future> and Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, Michael Shanks MP and The Rt Hon Ed Miliband MP. (19 June 2025), 'New guidance issued for environmental impact assessments'.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-guidance-issued-for-environmental-impact-assessments>.

¹⁵⁰ Murray J (18 June 2024), 'Could an offshore wind boom hold the key to Labour's ambitious clean power goals?' <https://www.businessgreen.com/news-analysis/4323983/offshore-wind-boom-hold-key-labours-ambitious-clean-power-goals>.

¹⁵¹ Electricity accounted for less than 30% of UK energy use in 2023. Department for Energy Security & Net Zero (2024) 'Energy Flow Chart 2023'.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66a7b5e8fc8e12ac3edb065d/Energy_Flow_Chart_2023_TWh.pdf.

¹⁵² Clean electricity is only a fraction of 'clean energy'. In 2023 renewable energy made up 46% of UK electricity supplied but only 15.5% of overall energy use. In 2023 the UK consumed 317 TWh, around 10% of the total energy use of around 3000TWh, including embodied-energy in imports. Department of Energy Security and Net Zero (2024), 'UK Energy in Brief, 2024'.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66a76bf2ce1fd0da7b592e5d/UK_Energy_in_Brief_2024.pdf

and Ritchie, H (2021), 'How much energy do countries consume we take offshoring into account?'

<https://ourworldindata.org/energy-offshoring>.

¹⁵³ The UK Government's Jet Zero Strategy, setting out how continued aviation growth is consistent with full decarbonisation of the UK economy is a good example of this. Department for Transport (2022) 'Jet Zero strategy: delivering net zero aviation by 2050'. www.gov.uk/government/publications/jet-zero-strategy-delivering-net-zero-aviation-by-2050.

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/missions/economic-growth>.

¹⁵⁵ Friends of the Earth (2024), 'Landmark High Court judgement finds government's climate plan 'unlawful' – again'. <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/latest/landmark-high-court-judgment-finds-governments-climate-plan-unlawful-again>.

Why Net Zero is Not Zero

The UK is not planning to reduce its carbon emissions to zero

The UK has committed to reach Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, **with any residual greenhouse gas emissions balanced by removals.**¹⁵⁶ Net Zero refers to a state in which GHG emissions entering the atmosphere are balanced (at least in theory) by carbon removals out of the atmosphere.¹⁵⁷ It is also heavily reliant on the scale-up of other technological solutions, including the use of 'green' hydrogen and synthetic fuels such as 'sustainable' aviation fuel (SAF). In common with other countries, the UK's net zero target also excludes the embodied carbon of imports and military GHG emissions.¹⁵⁸ Thus, *achieving 'net zero' in the UK is not the same as achieving zero carbon*, either in the UK, or globally. In contrast, Julian Allwood's Absolute Zero report published a roadmap of what would be required to reach zero carbon in the UK.¹⁵⁹

Net zero's carbon removal technologies are not yet deployed at scale

The UK Government's independent Climate Change Committee (the CCC) regularly assesses the government's plans for achieving Net Zero, including plans for how carbon will be removed at a massive scale from the atmosphere by 2050 to 'offset ongoing emissions' as not all sectors have plans to be fully decarbonized, ever. It recently reported that aviation and agriculture are expected to be the largest emitting sectors by 2040, with emissions continuing past 2050, the government's net zero date.¹⁶⁰ The CCC contrasts the scale that this will be needed against the current lack of delivery of carbon capture and storage technologies, in the UK and worldwide, as follows:¹⁶¹

- Engineered removals are predominantly bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS), with some direct air carbon capture and storage (DACCS), enhanced weathering, and biochar. This will grow to reach -35.8 MtCO₂e in 2050. These are a **necessity to deliver Net Zero, as some sectors, including aviation, cannot reach zero emissions by themselves.**
- Engineered removals are **not yet deployed at scale.** They will take time to scale up and work to do this must accelerate now. ... [This becomes] a significant source of uncertainty in 2050. Former US Climate Envoy, John Kerry said 'the quiet part out loud'

¹⁵⁶ Climate Change Committee (2025) '[Seventh Carbon Budget: Advice for the UK Government](#)'. page 11.

¹⁵⁷ Climate Change Committee (2025) '[Seventh Carbon Budget: Advice for the UK Government](#)'. page 26.

¹⁵⁸ Overseas military emissions were exempted from the 1997 Kyoto Protocol and military emissions reporting were optional in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. This accounted for \$2.2 trillion expenditure in 2023, equivalent to the GDP of Russia or Canada ([//militaryemissions.org/](http://militaryemissions.org/)) with emissions between 3.5–7% of global emissions, not including reconstruction (Parkinson, S (8 July 2023), '[How big are global military carbon emissions](#)'. In Responsible Science journal no.5.

¹⁵⁹ Essex, J (2020), '[Absolute Zero Carbon Britain](#)'. Green House think tank, UK. Review of Paul Allen, et al (2019), '[Zero Carbon Britain: Rising to the Climate Emergency](#)'. Centre for Alternative Technology, UK. Allwood, J, Dunant, CF, Lupton, RC et al. (2019), '[Absolute Zero: Delivering the UK's Climate Change Commitment with Incremental Changes to Today's Technologies](#)'. UK Fires.

¹⁶⁰ Climate Change Committee (2025) '[The Seventh Carbon Budget: Advice for the UK Government](#)'. pages 40, 77 and 178.

¹⁶¹ Climate Change Committee (2025) '[The Seventh Carbon Budget: Advice for the UK Government](#)', pages 249 and 133. And on page 272 commenting on the uncertainty of direct air carbon capture and storage (DACCS) technologies the report adds that, 'Deployment is driven by the need to balance residual emissions in 2050 to achieve Net Zero' but that is based on scaling up, 'Globally [a] number of small-scale plants that are operational or under construction.'

when he admitted that ‘50% of the reductions we have to make to get to net zero are going to come from technologies that we don’t yet have. That’s just a reality’.¹⁶²

Imports excluded: climate impact of consumerism and globalisation ignored

In addition, the UK’s legally binding targets only include emissions within the UK’s territorial borders. Emissions associated with imports are almost as high, but excluded. In 2021, imported emissions were 381 MtCO₂e, compared to 423 MtCO₂e for territorial emissions. UK imported emissions are expected to soon become the majority of UK emissions, as while territorial emissions have fallen significantly, imported emissions have stayed relatively flat since 1990.¹⁶³

Box 2.1 Why Net Zero is Not the same as Zero Carbon

Net Zero’s false framing around deploying climate ‘technological solutions’ is misleading and dangerous on many fronts. It is perilous as the proposed solutions are not deliverable now, if ever, at scale. It implies climate change is a problem that can be ‘solved’ by experts. This in turn masks the need to change our consumption, trade and economics. Such false hope is amplified by calls from the political mainstream for even greater reliance on unproven carbon removal technologies. One example is a report published by the Tony Blair Institute in April 2025.¹⁶⁴ This ‘report’ highlights the reality that globally fossil fuel consumption and carbon emissions are still rising but then suggests even greater reliance on carbon capture and storage! Such advocacy of **future** use of unproven technologies to offset against further increases in emissions **today** is clearly nonsense as to guarantee it is effective requires at least time travel! But apparently that is all that is needed to screen mainstream politicians and economics from the fundamental choice we must face. There is an increasingly obvious dichotomy between continuing with business-as-usual (with a few well publicised tweaks or glossy additions) and the fundamental changes to institutions, infrastructure, culture, ways-of-life that sufficient, meaningful change would entail. This duplicity continues to divorce climate policy from economics allowing contradictory promises of climate action and continued overall economic growth to go unchallenged. And it has left mainstream politics apparently frozen – staring at the ghost of climate future whilst being haunted by the ghosts of our industrial past and consumerist present. Mainstream politician’s failure to desire to lead sufficient action, either to address inequality or climate (as both **have** to be addressed together now), seems to

¹⁶² Murray, J. (2021), ‘Half of emissions cuts will come from future tech, says John Kerry’, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/may/16/half-of-emissions-cuts-will-come-from-future-tech-says-john-kerry>.

¹⁶³ Climate Change Committee (2025) ‘*The Seventh Carbon Budget: Advice for the UK Government*’. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/The-Seventh-Carbon-Budget.pdf>, page 375.

¹⁶⁴ Fursman, L (2025), ‘*The Climate Paradox: Why We Need to Reset Action on Climate Change*’. Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. <https://institute.global/insights/climate-and-energy/the-climate-paradox-why-we-need-to-reset-action-on-climate-change>.

have led to a continued failure to communicate or initiate the degree of societal change that sufficient climate action requires. And the public has now noticed.

We need a public discourse that leads to not just a collective acceptance that we aren't where we need to be, but honesty about where we need to get to, and what actions are required now, or at least with unprecedented speed. This should multiple benefits that we would then all enjoy! But first and foremost it must expose the 'Emperor's New clothes' mythic techno-dreaming of Net Zero. The reality of the climate science is clear. What is needed is zero carbon much sooner,¹⁶⁵ and globally, not 'unicorn thinking' about sustaining the status quo.

Challenge 3: Zero Carbon requires Reducing Energy Demand

The notion that 'net zero' might enable a new way of zero carbon living is now being exposed as the wish fulfilment it always was. It is vital that the debate shifts from talking solely about where electricity is produced (repeatedly conflating *electricity generation* with overall *energy demand* in discussing what is needed to deal with climate change)¹⁶⁶. That is, a sustainable future is one based not just on being a low-carbon energy one, but a lower *energy* one.¹⁶⁷ If we are to overcome the 'fossil fuel plus' problem mentioned above, where renewables are simply adding to the overall increase in energy and fossil fuel use, a first step is to consider that the challenge is we face is not simply replacing fossil fuels with renewables. The challenge must include how to socially innovate so that everyone can enjoy high quality lives using less energy (and resources more generally). So, the transition required for heating buildings and for transport is not just about going electric but about reducing the overall demand for energy and resources, which is compatible with some households or sectors increasing energy, so long as the macro-level is reducing (See **Box 2.2**).¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Jackson, J (2021) 'Zero Carbon Sooner – Revised case for an early zero carbon target for the UK.' Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP), Surrey, UK. <https://cusp.ac.uk/themes/appg/zero-carbon-sooner-update/>.

¹⁶⁶ This has resulted in what should perhaps be a side line debate on the extent to which nuclear power is a precursor for zero carbon to overshadow the wider issue of whether – let alone how – we need to get on and reduce our overall energy – and material demand.

¹⁶⁷ Barry, J and Ellis, G. (2010), 'Beyond Consensus? Agonism, Republicanism and a Low Carbon Future', in Devine-Wright, P. (ed.), *Renewable Energy and the Public: From NIMBY to Participation*, (London: Routledge), pp.29–42.

¹⁶⁸ Academics exposed the last UK government's 70% reduction in its ambition, as transport decarbonisation was reduced to a supply side problem, focused on electrification. Marsden, G (2023) '[Reverse Gear: the reality and](#)

Powering-down Demand Alongside Powering-up Renewables

Half of the climate conundrum has been deliberately overlooked by centrist politicians the world over. Back in 2007 the Centre of Alternative Technology presented its vision of how we might get to zero carbon.¹⁶⁹ Central was the notion that as well as ‘powering-up’ our renewables, there was an equally important need to ‘power-down’ our demand over the same time period, such that we no longer need fossil fuels, or more widely degrade and exploit natural resources.

Absolute Zero requires Demand Reduction

This notion that we need to reduce overall energy use has since gained traction. Many academics and campaigners are now calling for a ‘degrowth’ in the scale of our energy and material use, whilst ensuring there is sufficient resources to meet the basic needs of all. This includes the work of Jason Hickel¹⁷⁰ and Julia Steinberger¹⁷¹. However, while Professor Allwood of Cambridge University’s landmark publication of Absolute Zero in 2019 said that the UK government’s 2050 target for net zero effectively requires UK to reach ‘absolute’¹⁷² zero carbon emissions, this has still failed to get much traction from the mainstream politicians or economists.¹⁷³

Box 2.2 Overlooking Demand Reduction

This limiting of focus on net zero to energy supply also increasing inequality, reduces democratic participation, causes delay and has wider social and economic consequences as explored in **Box 2.3** below.

implications of national transport emission reduction policies’.

¹⁶⁹ Oakley H, Hooker-Stroud A, and Shepherd A. (eds.) (2019), [‘Zero Carbon Britain: Rising to the Climate Emergency’](#).

¹⁷⁰ Hickel J (2020), [‘Less is More: How Degrowth will Save the World’](#). Penguin books.

¹⁷¹ Steinberger J (2022), [‘Degrowth and the good life: Lessons from research on energy use’](#). Kongres Regeneraeji, June 9th 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MS6FHYU4V5c> and Millward-Hopkins J, Steinberger JK, Rao ND, Oswald Y (2020), [‘Providing decent living with minimum energy: A global scenario’](#), *Global Environmental Change*, Volume 65, 2020,102168, ISSN 0959-3780.

¹⁷² This challenges the narrative of ‘net’ zero as also flawed in different ways. Readfearn, G (9 October 2024), [‘Andrew Forrest says net zero is ‘fantasy’ so his goal is ‘real zero’. What does he mean and can he achieve it’](#). Dyke J, Watson R and Knorr W (22 April 2021), [‘Climate scientists: concept of net zero is a dangerous trap.’](#)

¹⁷³ Allwood, J, Dunant, CF, Lupton, RC et al.(2019), [Absolute Zero: Delivering the UK’s Climate Change Commitment with Incremental Changes to Today’s Technologies’](#) UK Fires.

How Net Zero's Focus on Energy Supply Limits the Scope of Climate Policy

Limiting political consideration of action on climate change to one of energy supply has (at least) four important features:

- **It ignores social aspects.** This framing avoids, undermines or downplays questions of (in)justice and (in)equity, and the need for a 'just transition'.¹⁷⁴ Inequalities include those in relation to energy poverty, heating, food and transport as well as the distribution of wealth, income and resources across society, tend to be ignored. For example, subsidies for electric vehicles and solar PV panels benefit those rich enough to purchase them, leading to lower energy supply to those with a higher income and wealth.
- **It leads to climate delay.** A supply side framing lends itself to climate delay, relying on future speculative and risky technological 'solutionist' approaches.¹⁷⁵
- **It relies on experts not citizens.** Finally, and related to the latter, is the non-political or essential passivity it requires of citizens. For example, the expectation that when you turn a switch, power comes on. Thus, a supply side framing of the planetary crisis reduces populations to that of spectators and end users, not as decision-makers who shape the energy transition.¹⁷⁶
- **It ignores wider environmental and economic aspects.** This framing conveniently ignores the need to address continued environmental exploitation worldwide and reduce the scale of energy and resource use and changes to the way the global economy works to deliver carbon reductions at pace.

Box 2.3 Consequences of Net Zero's Framing of Climate as an Energy Supply Problem

Our political programmes must now shift to better using existing solutions alongside radically reducing our demand for energy and materials.¹⁷⁷ Reframing the energy transition to combine supply and demand-side policies is needed.¹⁷⁸ The political

¹⁷⁴ Healy, N and Barry, J. (2017), 'Politicizing energy justice and energy system transitions Fossil fuel divestment and a "just transition"', *Energy Policy*. 108, pp. 451–459.

¹⁷⁵ Barry, J. (2021), 'Green republicanism and a 'Just Transition' from the tyranny of economic growth', *Critical Review of International Political Philosophy*, 21:4, pp. 725–742.

¹⁷⁶ Community (or even home) energy generation in contrast increases awareness, and makes the link between energy supply and demand.

¹⁷⁷ There may be plans for making steel using green hydrogen, for green concrete, green hydrogen and zero carbon flights at some point, but these are not yet technologically and commercially scalable. Similarly, carbon capture and storage (bioenergy or direct air capture) remains unproven at scale. Until then there is a need to radically reduce the demand for high-carbon building materials and long-distance travel. This represents a precautionary approach that reduces risk now, rather than the dominant approach based on continuing business as usual with the bet on future technological innovations to 'clean up' later.

¹⁷⁸ Fergus Green highlighted that unless policies to limit fossil fuel extraction and those to constrain demand for oil, coal and gas apply pressure to reduce supply and demand together, then they will not cut carbon emissions. Green, F., Denniss, R. Cutting with both arms of the scissors: the economic and political case for restrictive supply-side climate policies. *Climatic Change* 150, 73–87 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-018-2162-x>. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10584-018-2162-x>.

economy of the energy system (not just electricity supply) will change too, including who owns and controls the means of *energy* generation.

Such an energy (and wider resource) transformation needed is far more than moving from a corporate/privately owned energy system based on carbon to a corporate one based on renewable energy. This is articulated through concepts such as Just Transition, Green New Deal, Provisioning Society, Care Economy and Eco-Social Welfare State, which are introduced in **Box 2.4**. Fundamentally, all these require a transformed politics and economics.

Different Approaches to Transform the Overall Economy

A Just Transition and Green New Deal. Realising a socially just transition to a sustainable future requires a planned approach that delivers meaningful work while addressing economic inequality and the climate crisis together. (Advocated through a Green New Deal by Caroline Lucas and many others.¹⁷⁹)

A Provisioning Society. A zero-carbon society that is sufficient to meet all of our needs must be one that enables us to be democratically active in our workplaces and communities, secures new 'systems of provisioning' and ways of living that create connection and meaning that empowers us and our actions. (Advocated by Holemans, Ferrante and Vermass, amongst others.¹⁸⁰)

A New "Eco-Social" Welfare State. This is the notion that the climate and equality crises should be addressed together, including through rich forms of participation, coalition-building and deliberative democracy. Such a new socio-economic order is characterised by 'socialising consumption and democratising production'. This would result in more of our consumption needs being met by collective, public (state and non-state) modes of provisioning – through greater democratic control of workplaces at the firm level and greater democratic state management of the macro-economy. (As advocated by Mary Murphy.¹⁸¹)

A Democratically Planned Steady State Economy/Eco-Socialist Post-Growth Economy. This is a science-based view of how to democratically organise a regenerative economy within ecological, climate and resource limits while ensuring the needs of all are met, and the rights of the non-human world recognised. This asserts that it is possible to organise 'natural monopolies' outside the market system.¹⁸² These are viewed as human rights not commodities and are, best produced more locally with local government, nation-state and local community, worker and citizen input. Economic planning would prioritise a 'dashboard of objectives' from lowering socio-economic inequality and increasing human wellbeing (including mental health) to minimising resource throughput and pollution (including greenhouse gas emissions) rather than annual growth in GDP. This would reduce formally paid employment to that functionally necessary for a steady state economy, while supporting care work as the core economy.¹⁸³ Crucially, it also sees finance and money creation as a 'commons' and 'public good' managed democratically by the state, not a private or scarce commodity, thus overcoming the 'how will we pay for the green transformation' question.¹⁸⁴

Box 2.4 The Politics of Putting a New Worldview into Practice

¹⁷⁹ The notion of a just transition and Green New Deal are now both widely accepted.

<https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/explainers/what-is-the-just-transition-and-what-does-it-mean-for-climate-action/> and <https://greennewdealgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/a-green-new-deal.pdf>.

¹⁸⁰ Holemans D, Ferrante L and Vermass E (2024) *Enough: Thriving Societies beyond Growth*. Page 43, quoting Britt Way (2022), 'Generation Dread: Finding Purpose in an Age of Climate Crisis' (page 10). <https://www.brittway.com/books>.

¹⁸¹ Murphy M (2023) 'Creating an Ecosocial Future.' Bristol University Press, UK. <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/creating-an-ecosocial-welfare-future>.

¹⁸² For example, health care, energy/electricity and other utilities, food, housing and transport networks.

¹⁸³ Pendergrass, D and Vettese, T (2022), *Half-Earth Socialism: A Plan to Save the Future from Extinction, Climate Change and Pandemics* (Verso), https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/products/2650-half-earth-socialism?srsltid=AfmBOooOqPEWWSEnRCvoTPysWNdcfNzyGZ2Oo8DTJKnl_nlxC_t2371

¹⁸⁴ Olk, C, Schneider, C and Hickel, J (2023), 'How to pay for saving the world: Modern Monetary Theory for a degrowth transition', *Ecological Economics*, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0921800923002318>

Greens and progressives must counter mainstream political framing that somehow individual behavioural change alongside supply-side measures can be sufficient. Climate scientists also recently highlighted this distinction contrasting that just 5% of carbon reduction would be achieved by individual 'behaviour change' but this rises to 70% through joined-up efforts to reduce energy demand.¹⁸⁵ A series of interviews with academics researching demand reduction by Green House explored how this might be achieved.¹⁸⁶ Cultural norms, business practices and 'systems of provisioning' all need to change together.¹⁸⁷ This must include restricting how the advertising industry locks us into patterns of behaviour and ways of life that deny individuals agency.¹⁸⁸ Thus, only through 'structural transformation' of economic, production, cultural, political and technological systems is sufficient individual level behavioural change possible. On its own individual level change will, at best, result in modest reform of the status quo, and fall way short of the transformations needed. A focus on individual level behavioural change alone is actively justice blind in relation to class, gender, race and geographical location. Worse than that, our existing political and economic system frames our response to the climate, inequality, and democracy crises as a set of individual choices made by rational 'consumers'. This then leads us to blame others when change does not happen (othering) and creates a cultural resistance to change, feeding far-right populism.

So, this means that our built environment, transport and other infrastructure systems need to be completely transformed alongside a reset to our cultural norms, political governance arrangements and our economic system. And that bringing about such change requires inspiring and empowering political leadership. Whilst some people will desire this change, others will (in part as they are encouraged to do so by media and marketing) resist it.

Clearly such changes to how we live will not be easy. We must make these changes together and accept them as undeniably different yet *better not 'worse'*. Currently our

¹⁸⁵ IPCC (2022) 'IPCC Sixth Assessment Report: Mitigation of Climate Change'.
www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg3/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGIII_FullReport.pdf, Chapter 5.

¹⁸⁶ Essex J, Sims P and Storey N (2022) '*Rethinking Energy Demand*.' Green House think tank, UK.
<https://www.greenhousethinktank.org/rethinking-energy-demand-framing-report/>.

¹⁸⁷ We need to shift from talking about individual agents to larger structures and institutions. Martin, P. and Denis, A. (eds.) (2010), *Human Agents and Social Structures* (Manchester: Manchester University Press) and
www.greenhousethinktank.org/rethinking-energy-demand-framing-report/.

¹⁸⁸ Sims, P (2021), '*A proposal for restricting manipulative advertising in public spaces*'. Green House think tank, UK.
https://www.greenhousethinktank.org/static/2021/Restricting_manipulative_advertising_in_public_spaces_Jan2021_v1.pdf and to the notion of social governance through corporate advertising (as opposed to state propaganda) as discussed by Adam Curtis in the TV series, 'I can't get you out of my head'. Sims, P (2025), '*TV Series: I can't get you out of my head*'. www.greenhousethinktank.org/tv-series-i-cant-get-you-out-of-my-head.

dominant cultural worldview and economics normalises flying halfway around the world to visit a relative, go on honeymoon or celebrate retirement – without any acknowledgement, recognition or care of the huge impacts of such choices magnified across society. Much of this is a reflection of the dominant capitalist political economy. For example, choosing to take the ferry and train on holiday or when visiting relatives requires longer paid leave alongside a change in aspirations. Clearly there is much still to change in our politics and culture as highlighted in the backlash, at least by a vocal minority, such as when a person driving to hospital found the motorway blocked by climate activists.¹⁸⁹ Such challenges are defended by the status quo. These unhelpfully frame reducing demand for our most climate-polluting acts as taking something away: removing freedoms; reducing our wellbeing; perhaps health even. It also neglects to identify ‘the system’ and those in power from having any agency or responsibility. Here we are reminded of the anti-enclosure slogan from the 18th century:

*“The law locks up man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
But leaves the greater villain loose
Who steals the common from off the goose”¹⁹⁰*

A Shared Vision: of Equity, Limits and Democracy

So, what if Greens and other progressives were instead to *focus politics and campaigns* around a shared vision that committed to both a necessary reduction in climate and environmental impacts, and provided for the needs of *all* in society, both within and between countries?

Such a positive vision for a sustainable economic future would improve and better people’s lives. It aligns with people’s aspirations for better living conditions. Yet it also requires honesty about how this must be set within the climate and biophysical realities of life on this planet. The way we all live in Western societies must be transformed. But the reality is that if elites and others with privilege maintain their far higher levels of material and energy use there won’t be enough left for everyone else to live decent lives. That is why the transformation cannot ignore issues of class inequality and economic injustice. Therefore, honesty is needed about how these changes will impact the lives and aspirations of all across Western societies, including the working class and the majority – but far more greatly impact the lifestyles of those with higher wealth and incomes. Decent living for all is simply not possible within the

¹⁸⁹ Kelly K (26 May 2023), ‘I don’t believe that’s the case: Just Stop Oil activists refuse to make way for a man ‘urgently heading for hospital’. <https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/just-stop-oil-activists-refuse-move-man-going-hospital/>.

¹⁹⁰ Unattributed 18th century anti-enclosure slogan. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Goose_and_the_Common.

regenerative boundaries of the earth within the political (liberal democratic) or economic (capitalist) status quo.¹⁹¹ After all, we are advocating the ending of the world, as we know it, which is *not* the same as the end of the world.

Such a future sustainable economy has been described as '*doughnut economics*'¹⁹². This calls for the whole economy to be repositioned to sit in the safe-space between an ecological ceiling (outside ring of the doughnut) and social foundation (inside ring of the doughnut). The theoretical level of the *social foundation* within the ecological limits is determined by the level of inequality.

This is only possible in the UK if overall levels of consumption are vastly reduced (to stay within those ecological limits)¹⁹³ and inequality is also vastly reduced (i.e. by democratising the ownership and control of production and reducing excessive consumption, especially by the 'polluter elite'). Reducing inequality of income and wealth must go hand-in-hand with addressing our global and national inequalities in consumption, ownership and emissions. Achieving these aims requires nothing short of a wholesale transformation of the economy beyond a growth-focused and carbon and consumer fuelled capitalist one. The changes; to relocate the economy to sit within planetary limits, fast enough to avert complete climate breakdown, while at the micro level providing for a decent quality of life for all whilst simultaneously weaning our culture away from its compulsive addiction of consumerism; require a far greater democratisation of society, rebooted politics and a massive reduction in inequalities. That level of vision, plan or perhaps even understanding appears almost completely absent from current mainstream UK politics.¹⁹⁴

Public acceptance of a fair *and* ecologically sustainable vision for society requires sufficient public support for a significant reduction in energy and materials demand, which at the same time also requires a redistribution of energy and materials to ensure everyone's needs are met. In Raworth's doughnut economics terms, we need to stay below planetary boundaries (the outer ring) and at the same time above the social floor (the inner ring). New 'systems of provisioning' by government must be

¹⁹¹ For examples see analysis set out in Millward-Hopkins J, Steinberger JK, Rao ND, & Oswald Y (2020), 'Providing decent living with minimum energy: A global scenario'. *Global Environmental Change*, 65, 102168.

¹⁹² Kate Raworth (2017), '*Doughnut Economics: Seven ways to think like a 21st century economist*'. Chelsea Green publishing, UK.

¹⁹³ Richardson K, Steffen W, Lucht W, Bendtsen J, Cornell SE, Donges JF, ... & Rockström J (2023), 'Earth beyond six of nine planetary boundaries'. *Science advances*, 9(37), eadh2458.

¹⁹⁴ Barry, J (2015), 'Green Political Economy Beyond Orthodox Undifferentiated Economic Growth as a Permanent Feature of the Economy', in Teena Gabrielson et al (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp.304–317 and Lawson N (5 December 2024), 'Keir Starmer Must Ditch the Politics of Deliverism and Put the People Back in Charge'. <https://bylinetimes.com/2024/12/05/keir-starmer-must-ditch-the-politics-of-deliverism-and-put-the-people-back-in-charge/>.

agreed collectively, and ideally locally, to gain support for governments to rollout significant changes to how we live together within planetary and justice parameters.¹⁹⁵

This public engagement must extend to secure support for change to society's overall 'systems of provisioning': to shift overall patterns of capital investment and the direction of the economy (and which bits grow and which bits shrink). This requires a deepening of democracy and citizen involvement in decision-making such as local or workplace economic planning and policymaking. Such feedback mechanisms are vital to ensure politicians positively lead public opinion and bring people with them. This is probably how change happens anyway – not just top-down or bottom-up, but a combination of both, happening together. Without this, individual efforts will backfire and our 'daily practices' will just bounce-back, as they did in many areas once the Covid pandemic lock-downs ceased.¹⁹⁶ Such a vision of a sufficiency and redistribution must therefore require a transformed democracy (including extending democracy to the economy and workplaces), as explored in Part 1 of this paper.

Such an alternative '**equity, democracy and ecological limits**' future vision and framing should clearly define what a safe 'operating space for the economy' would be. This would necessitate changes in where power lies, and whose interests it serves. And it should engender hope that as a society we can, *and will*, bring this about. This requires more than just a collaborative approach, but a clear theory-of-change and shared vision that draws energy from populism to a public, shared agreement to put into practice plans for us *all* to live well within ecological limits. But more than that: such hope-fuelled activism must be sufficient to stop what is holding back the system changes required.

¹⁹⁵ Description of Systems of Provisioning and how this affects our daily practices that define how we live are set out in Essex J, Sims P and Storey N (2002), '*Rethinking Energy Demand*'. Green House think tank, UK. <https://www.greenhousethinktank.org/rethinking-energy-demand-framing-report/>

¹⁹⁶ Sorrell S (2009). Jevons' Paradox revisited: The evidence for backfire from improved energy efficiency. *Energy policy*, 37(4), 1456-1469.

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