

Is the UK Labour party facing up to a post-growth future?¹

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For longer than most of us have been around, the major political parties have been united by the goal of making more economic “growth” happen. They have been divided on the means, but there has been little or no disagreement about the goal. Only the Green Party has taken a somewhat different line, at times questioning the primary goal of “growth”, although I would argue that, even in their case, this focus has been inconsistent and poorly developed³.

In a recent piece for the Labour affiliated socialist society SERA (“Labour’s Environment Campaign”), Labour front bencher, Chi Onwurah, in a piece I have replied to⁴, argues that this is what distinguishes Labour from the Greens:

“But what distinguishes us from the Green Party is their belief that economic growth and environmental sustainability cannot go hand in hand, that sustainability means abandoning the quest for greater economic prosperity and achieving a ‘steady-state’ of zero growth.”

However, there are indications that some sections of the Labour movement are at last beginning to accept that the pursuit of economic growth is highly problematic, and beginning to explore some alternatives. This ought not to be surprising, given the influence of the ecology movement on the New Left of late 60s and 70s. The New Left had some influence on Labour via things like the Greater London Council administration and the Institute for Workers Control, as well as through the influx of activists, feminist, Marxist, environmentalist, pacifist. However, the influence was marginalised both what Raymond Williams⁵ called the “productivism” of the mainstream labour movement and Labour’s neoliberal turn under Kinnock and Blair⁶.

I’ll review the evidence, or rather the straws in the wind, for an opening to the critique of “growth”, consider why it has been difficult for Labour politicians to accept the idea of a steady state economy, post-growth or degrowth, and finally look at

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3 See the party’s policy page on the economy: there are scattered references questioning growth and GDP but nothing like a coherent critique and counter-proposal: <https://policy.greenparty.org.uk/ec.html>

4 My response was [published by SERA](#) (and the piece by Onwurah is referenced there too): It was somewhat shortened and the title changed by the SERA editor: the original piece is here: <https://steadystatemanchester.net/2017/12/19/practical-degrowth-for-labour/>

5 Williams, R. (1982). *Socialism and Ecology*. London: SERA. Reprinted in *Resources for Hope*, London, Verso, 1989.

6 Going further back, the socialisms of William Morris and Robert Blatchford both had a strong ecological streak as did what were arguably even earlier roots of the British socialist consciousness in the peasants revolt and the mobilisation of Diggers and Levellers during the English revolution.

what a Labour post-growth approach might look like⁷. I will draw upon things I've written elsewhere but also add in some new material.

Straws in the wind?

1) The All Party Parliamentary Group on Limits to Growth.

This cross party group was established in 2016.

The aim of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Limits to Growth is to provide a new platform for cross-party dialogue on economic growth in a time of environmental and social transition.

This rather tame description does not do justice to the work being done in its support, from the Centre for Sustainable Prosperity, led by Tim Jackson, author of "Prosperity Without Growth"⁸. A key document is the review, by Jackson and Webster, "Limits Revisited", which provides an update on the Limits to Growth Thesis, finding its conclusions sound in highlighting the impossibility of continued material economic growth on a planet with finite resources and sinks⁹.

The APPG is chaired by Caroline Lucas MP (Green Party) and co-chaired by Daniel Zeichner MP (Labour), Kevin Hollinrake (Conservative) and Alan Whitehead (Labour). It counts among its members no less than nine Labour MPs, including five with shadow ministerial responsibilities (Barry Gardiner, Gerald Jones, Clive Lewis, Jonathan Reynolds, and Alan Whitehead). There are also a number of Labour Lords.

Membership of this grouping does not mean acceptance or promotion of a degrowth agenda but it is likely to indicate interest in the issue of the Limits to Growth and a reasonably critical approach to the usual rhetoric of growing the economy to achieve social and environmental benefit.

2) John McDonnell's speech

In November (2017) Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, John McDonnell, gave a remarkable speech¹⁰ to the conference of the Institute for Public Policy Research. His brief had been the economy after Brexit. But he went much further in speaking of a context that is both wider and more fundamental. For perhaps the first time, a

7 For convenience I will use these terms, degrowth, post-growth and refer to the Limits to Growth and the Steady State Economy in a rather interchangeable way: there are, however some distinctions among them. See Kerschner, C. (2010). Economic de-growth vs. steady-state economy. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 18(6), 544–551. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2009.10.019>; Demaria, F., Schneider, F., Sekulova, F., & Martinez-Alier, J. (2013). What is Degrowth? From an Activist Slogan to a Social Movement. *Environmental Values*, 22(2), 191–215. <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327113X13581561725194> For an overview of degrowth as a community of ideas and practice, see D'Alisa, G., Demaria, F., & Kallis, G. (Eds.). (2014). *Degrowth: a vocabulary for a new era*. Abingdon, Routledge.

8 Jackson, T. (2017). *Prosperity without growth: foundations for the economy of tomorrow* (Second Edition). London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. The second edition includes a fascinating account of the panicky reception of the original report by Gordon Brown in 2009.

9 Jackson, T., & Webster, R. (2016). *LIMITS REVISITED A review of the limits to growth debate* (p. 24). London: ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON LIMITS TO GROWTH. Retrieved from <http://limits2growth.org.uk/revisited>

10 John McDonnell speech to IPPR conference, 14/11/2017 <http://press.labour.org.uk/post/167496540629/john-mcdonnell-speech-to-ippr-conference>

leading Labour politician has acknowledged that *the pursuit of economic growth is itself problematic* and the reason is the ecological and climate crisis that threatens the very basis for any kind of economy, and indeed for human society itself. This is what he said:

“At the most abstract, the problem we face can be stated very simply. Every 1% added to global GDP over the last century has meant, on average, adding 0.5% to carbon dioxide emissions. As the size of the world economy has grown, so too has the pressure it places on our ecosystems. The consequences of that pressure are now becoming all too apparent. On current trends we are heading for a 3.5 degree celsius increase in global temperatures this century; a rise that would wreck everyone’s economy. This isn’t only about climate change. Other fundamental natural systems are at risk.”

These and other lines reproduced below would not have been out of place at an International Degrowth Conference¹¹.

He then rather spoilt it with a standard, technologically optimistic, “green growth” policy perspective, which goes against the evidence that the material demand and impact of the economy cannot be significantly reduced while it grows. This is so both for the very deep carbon emission reductions we need and for the demand on other raw materials¹². To give an idea of the mix of degrowth-friendly and techno-optimist ideas in John's speech, the following table casts quotations into two columns corresponding to the two categories.

Broadly degrowth-friendly statements	Technological optimist statements
<p>At the most abstract, the problem we face can be stated very simply. Every 1% added to global GDP over the last century has meant, on average, adding 0.5% to carbon dioxide emissions. As the size of the world economy has grown, so too has the pressure it places on our ecosystems. The consequences of that pressure are now becoming all too apparent. 2017 is likely to be in the top three of the warmest years on record. The other two are 2016 and 2015. On current trends we are heading for a 3.5 degree celsius increase in global temperatures this century; a rise that would wreck everyone’s</p>	<p>To be clear, a belief that GDP cannot be the sole metric does not mean a rejection of technology or material progress. This is not about throwing out the advances of the last two hundred years or more. Quite the opposite. It is only by applying the products of science and technology that we can hope to meet the challenge of climate change. ‘’’’ So our industrial strategy has identified two national missions, closely following the approach suggested by the work of</p>

11 The next will be held in Malmö, August, 2018: <https://malmo.degrowth.org/>

12 See <https://www.opendemocracy.net/riccardo-mastini/degrowth-case-for-constructing-new-economic-paradigm>
<https://www.jasonhickel.org/blog/2017/11/19/why-branko-milanovic-is-wrong-about-de-growth>
<http://www.pnas.org/lookup/doi/10.1073/pnas.1220362110>

Broadly degrowth-friendly statements	Technological optimist statements
<p>economy. This isn't only about climate change. Other fundamental natural systems are at risk. One-third of the world's soil has already been degraded. In the UK, the Committee on Climate Change estimate that 84% of our topsoil has been lost since 1850. At this rate of decay, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that globe has only 60 years of farming left. What biologists call the "sixth mass extinction event" in the Earth's history is underway. Half the world's species of wild animals have been lost in the last forty years. And this pressure is growing rapidly. Of the total volume of carbon dioxide and methane emitted since 1751, half has been emitted since 1984. The impact of humanity on planet, accelerating since 1950, is now so pronounced that it is claimed we have entered new geological age of the Earth, the Anthropocene. Rapidly rising concentrations of carbon and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, deforestation and other habitat loss, and mass extinction are combining to put an end to the relatively mild climatic conditions humanity has spent most of its existence under. Planetary change requires more than small-scale, marginal adjustments. It requires concerted, public action on a scale that meets the challenge. As the IPPR's Commission on Economic Justice have argued, market-led approaches like carbon trading have failed to deliver. What we need instead is to take a radically different approach - repurposing old institutions, building new. We need to think we rethink the very purpose of economics. Growth for the sake of growth alone no longer works. We have seen an improvement in GDP but a decay in the quality of life The next Labour government will therefore ask the OBR to include the impact of climate change</p>	<p>Marianna Mazzucato and her researchers. The first is to radically decarbonize our economy, setting a strict target of 60% of energy from low carbon and renewable sources by 2030. The second is to transform Britain into a leading high-technology country, with the greatest proportion of high-skilled jobs in the OECD and 3% of our GDP spent on research and development by 2030. '''''' We are falling further and further behind. The spread of mobile technology, artificial intelligence and advanced sensors mean that resources can be used as efficiently and as effectively as possible. This is the "Internet of Things" – putting computing intelligence into the objects that surrounded us, and connecting them to the global network. ... This is about much more than having fridges that can tell you when to buy more milk. It's about the possibility of building a sensitivity to the environment in how we produce and consume. It's about meeting the challenge of climate change and environmental degradation head-on. So in agriculture, sensors in the ground already allow the precise monitoring of soil moisture and acidity. Drones allow the monitoring of crops, 24 hours a day. More precise monitoring means more data, which means that water and fertiliser use can be optimised. Early studies show that energy costs for US farms using the technology fall by almost a third per hectare, and water use for irrigation drops by 8%. Smart, interconnected devices offer the</p>

Broadly degrowth-friendly statements	Technological optimist statements
<p>and environmental damage in its long-term forecasts.</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Our old economics - fixated on crudely increasing GDP, regardless of how it is done - can no longer apply.</p> <p>Our old economic policy - fixated on letting markets rip, regardless of their consequences - can no longer hold.</p> <p>.....</p> <p>We will build a new economy: radically fairer, more democratic; sustainable and egalitarian; where alienated and insecure work has given way to free and creative labour.</p>	<p>prospect of helping to transform our entire energy system, radically decarbonizing our economy.</p> <p>.....</p> <p>We will need a sharp focus on those areas where the UK has clear advantage.</p> <p>The Committee on Climate Change has identified a number of areas in which the UK has a significant competitive advantage, like electric vehicles, energy storage, and low carbon chemical processes.</p>

3) Corbyn's Geneva speech

McDonnell's speech was followed in a matter of weeks by one from Jeremy Corbyn at the United Nations in Geneva¹³. The speech was wide-ranging and identified *“the four greatest and interconnected threats facing our common humanity.*

“First, the growing concentration of unaccountable wealth and power in the hands of a tiny corporate elite, a system many call neoliberalism, which has sharply increased inequality, marginalisation, insecurity and anger across the world.

“Second, climate change, which is creating instability, fuelling conflict across the world and threatening all our futures.

“Third, the unprecedented numbers of people fleeing conflict, persecution, human rights abuses, social breakdown and climate disasters.

“And finally, the use of unilateral military action and intervention, rather than diplomacy and negotiation, to resolve disputes and change governments.”

Corbyn also noted that the conflict in Congo was minerals-driven and that climate change was driving food insecurity and social dislocation. He reiterated McDonnell's commitment to factoring environmental and climate damage into UK economic forecasts, extending this with a call for all countries to do this. Corbyn¹⁴, though less starkly than McDonnell, highlighted the fundamental nature of the environmental and climate crisis and its intrinsic connection with the current economic model. However, by restricting his critique to neoliberalism, rather than capitalism itself and the associated pursuit of economic growth, he likewise only partly rose to the real challenge facing Labour.

¹³ <http://press.labour.org.uk/post/168322341969/jeremy-corbyn-speech-at-the-united-nations-geneva>

¹⁴ Corbyn himself is both a cyclist and keen gardener: perhaps this indicates a receptiveness to concepts of sufficiency.

3) Local government

Some local government leaders continue to repeat the mantra of economic growth, typically in the context of seeking inward investment with the promise, or hope, that some of the wealth generated will trickle down to those in need. However, there are also some interesting innovators. Again these are not degrowth activists, but the mantra of growth is typically absent from their pronouncements and strategy statements. Concretely they are generally focussing on strategies to strengthen the local circuits of distribution and redistribution¹⁵. This approach has some potential to de-link local economies from the highly energy-dependent supply chains and circuits that characterise globalisation. Exemplars include the work of Preston¹⁶ and Enfield¹⁷ councils while features of such a municipalist agenda can be found in boroughs such as Oldham (the co-operative council model), Wigan (the Wigan Deal) Salford (Living Wage, changes to housing policy) and even in otherwise boosterist Manchester¹⁸, in its work on local procurement with CLES¹⁹.

In Greater Manchester, the election of a new mayor for the city region, together with the recapture of the party nationally by its mass membership (the “Corbyn turn”) has led to something of a break from the previous growthist, trickle-down model with fierce debates on key questions of the kind of workplace and housing development needed in the city and its surrounding settlements²⁰. The Mayor, Andy Burnham, a former Labour government minister (and one of the better ones to take on the health portfolio) has called a Green Summit, to work with environmental experts and campaigners on strategies for making Greater Manchester one of the leading green cities in Europe. However, Manchester remains a boom city with tons and tons of concrete being poured, skyscrapers popping up all over the central area, continued airport expansion and investment in warehousing and roads as well as luxury apartments, while the socio-economic indicators continue to show extreme deprivation of much of the population²¹. Growth is not delivering “for the many”, and how could it? Nevertheless, this is a possible site for some real change

15 But see my critical discussion of this as an economic strategy: <https://www.stirtoaction.com/blog/steady-state-launch-review>

16 See <https://cles.org.uk/coverage/the-preston-model-uk-takes-lessons-in-recovery-from-rust-belt-cleveland/>

17 See http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/cresc/sites/default/files/EnfieldExperiment_0.pdf

18 Haughton, G., Deas, I., Hincks, S., & Ward, K. (2016). Mythic Manchester: Devo Manc, the Northern Powerhouse and rebalancing the English economy. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 9(2), 355–370.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/300076623_Mythic_Manchester_Devo_Manc_the_Northern_Powerhouse_and_rebalancing_the_English_economy

19 <https://cles.org.uk/press-releases/manchesters-progressive-procurement-enables-growth-and-tackles-poverty/>

20 This has been covered well by Jennifer Williams in the Manchester Evening News:

<http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/manchester-housing-developments-skyscrapers-apartments-13729433.amp>

<http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/growing-labour-rift-over-housing-13651019.amp>

<http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/battle-manchester-city-centre-how-13311439>

<http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/salford-corbynite-city-paul-dennett-13666550>

with the potential for adopting an alternative model of city-regional development, the parameters of which are already quite well understood²².

4) Pronouncements of Labour influencers

Politicians, with rare exceptions, are not theorists or researchers. This is not really a criticism – they don't have the time. But they do draw upon the thinking of those whose job is to produce systematised, more or less theoretical, accounts of viable policy approaches. In the current context of neoliberalism's *interregnum* (when as Gramsci put it, the old order is dying but the new can not yet be born²³), it is not surprising that Labour politicians are looking around for new ideas, new ways of thinking about both old and new political and economic problems. Again there are no out and out degrowth thinkers in the ranks of Labour's academic and policy advisors but there are a number who have at least some familiarity with the debates over the limits to growth and the shortcomings of growth as a panacea. And some have made some interesting statements.

Alan Simpson, a former Labour MP, has been advising Labour on energy policy. In a public meeting in Nottingham, he was reported as speaking from the audience and making a joke about degrowth as an idea in the Labour Party - while some people are beginning to listen there are others in the shadow cabinet he said, for whom if you question growth economics you have to have a defibrillator at the ready²⁴.

Clive Lewis, recently returned to the opposition front bench and tasked by John McDonnell to look at Bank of England modelling of the economic impacts of climate change, noted in a tweet that Kate Raworth's *Doughnut Economics* is on his reading list. Kate Raworth's concept of the doughnut (or perhaps better, the lifebelt), articulates the safe operating space of humanity between the floor of meeting basic human needs and the ceiling of the planetary boundaries that we can only pass at our collective peril. While Raworth suggests being “agnostic on growth”, that concept is not so far from Latouche's original sense of degrowth as changing the subject, to focus on other important goods for humanity. Moreover, the very concept of living within boundaries means controlling material exploitation, and hence reducing and capping the scale of the economy – already, on a global basis some 1.7 times greater than the earth's biocapacity²⁵.

Ann Pettifor, a post-Keynesian economist with a background in the global debt justice movement is an advisor to John McDonnell. She was a member of the Green New Deal group that published a classic²⁶ of green growth thinking in 2008. On several occasions she has criticised the emphasis on economic growth and

21 There is a critique here with links to other work:

<https://steadystatemanchester.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/so-what-would-you-do-v2-0.pdf>

22 See the alternative policy frameworks evolved by Steady State manchester, which themselves draw on policy, practice and research in the UK and beyond. <https://steadystatemanchester.net/treading-lightly-for-shared-prosperity-policies-for-greater-manchester/>

23 “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” Selections from the Prison Notebooks, “Wave of Materialism” and “Crisis of Authority” (London: Lawrence and Wishart), (1971), pp. 275-276.

24 Related to me by someone who was there at a talk given by George Monbiot, 16 November, 2018.

25 <https://www.overshootday.org/newsroom/past-earth-overshoot-days/>

even noted that it is untenable given the finite nature of the planet²⁷. However, in my view she wavers rather, arguing for an expansion of economic activity, without clarity about the need for contraction in some sectors if the needed expansion in other sectors is not to blow the ecological budget.

Richard Murphy, initially credited with some of the key elements of Corbyn and MacDonnell's economic thinking, has also criticised the pursuit of growth²⁸ and made interesting suggestions for changing the basis of taxation, including a consumption tax based on banking transactions (as a proxy)²⁹.

McDonnell's policy team also includes James Meadway, formerly chief economist at the New Economics Foundation³⁰. The critique of growth has at times been a clear emphasis of NEF with a number of people in present and past leadership roles associated with criticism of the growth dogma³¹, although the recent emphasis has been of rather more orthodox Keynesian kind. As an illustration that degrowth is entering into the intellectual nexus at the heart of Labour, in a write-up of a discussion on austerity, Meadway refers favourably to ideas in recent London lectures by degrowth academic Giorgos Kallis³².

A little further away, Neil McInroy, Chief Executive of the Centre for Local Economic Strategies, which works with a lot of Labour councils, has in personal but public statements been vocal in drawing attention to the inadequacy of “adjectival growth” (especially “inclusive growth”) with the odd mention of degrowth.

McDonnell's speech, discussed above, was to IPPR. IPPR has been very much a mainstream, social democrat, policy house, close to Labour but historically associated with the “modernisation” programme of Kinnock and Blair. However, in a surprising development, the December 2017 issue of IPPR's journal “Progressive Review”, on the Anthropocene, carried some very degrowth-friendly pieces, including one by ecological Marxist Jason Moore and one by Kate Raworth. The introductory editorial by IPPR staff Carys Roberts, Matthew Lawrence and Laurie Laybourn-Langton, was astonishing in its embrace of the themes of radical political ecology and ecological economics³³. It is worth quoting at some length:

“Ours is the age of global environmental collapse. Resources are being consumed at around 1.5 times the Earth's ability to regenerate them. We are living through the sixth mass extinction and nearly two-thirds of all vertebral life has died since 1970. The stubborn entrenchment of carbon into our

26 New Economics Foundation. (2008). *A Green New Deal. Joined-up policies to solve the triple crunch of the credit crisis, climate change and high oil prices: The first report of the Green New Deal Group*. London.

27 <http://www.primeconomics.org/articles/the-growth-delusion>

28 <http://www.taxresearch.org.uk/Blog/2015/12/08/what-does-growth-mean-for-the-left/#sthash.gmTnu3K0>

29 Murphy, R. (2015). *The joy of tax: how a fair tax system can create a better society*. Bantam Press.

30 <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/2017/12/18/the-making-of-a-movement-whos-shaping-corbynism/>

31 See for example Simms, A., Chowla, P., Murphy, M., New Economics Foundation, & Schumacher College. (2010). *Growth isn't possible: why we need a new economic direction*. London: New Economics Foundation. Retrieved from http://www.neweconomics.org/page/-/files/Growth_Isnt_Possible.pdf

32 Bramall, R., Gilbert, J., & Meadway, J. (2016). What is Austerity? *New Formations*, 87(87), 119–140. <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF.87.7.2016>
https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/nf87_08bramall_gilbert_meadway.pdf

33 <https://www.ippr.org/juncture-item/editorial-the-road-to-ruin-making-sense-of-the-anthropocene>

economies means that we are highly unlikely to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, increasing the chance of severe climatic disturbance. Meanwhile, the global food system has destroyed a third of all arable land and, at current rates, global top soil degradation means that there may only be 60 global harvests left. In all, human activity has pushed environmental systems into 'unsafe' operating spaces, threatening the preconditions upon which life can occur and societies flourish."

They draw the conclusion that,

“The scale and pace of environmental disruption fashioned by human activity require two concurrent responses.

The first is nothing less than a global socioeconomic transformation that brings our impact to within safe limits over the lifetime of the millennial generation. This is not guaranteed. A neoliberal Anthropocene could win out, hierarchical and undemocratic, imposing unevenly shared costs in a gendered, racialised way, operating beyond safe planetary boundaries, and looking to the anti-political ‘moonshots’ of Silicon Valley for salvation. Instead, we require a politics committed to democratic negotiation of the challenges of the Anthropocene, capable of collective restraint where necessary, while mobilising for shared abundance where possible. It will need to be attentive to global and intergenerational equity, capable of remaking economic institutions at scale, and rooted in new models of production and consumption, ownership and governance.

The second is a concerted effort to ensure resilience to environmental shocks within and between nations as the impacts of environmental change begin to mount.....

These may seem like issues beyond the control of progressive politics in Britain, but we would argue otherwise. Britain has, through its emissions and the spread and entrenchment of a certain model of economic growth, a large historical responsibility for our current predicament.... ”

Neither passage would be out of place in something written by a degrowth scholar. To all the above, I can add my own modest contributions to Labour party debate that have made the argument for degrowth and for divestment (see below)³⁴.

5) Divestment and climate change

One place where the economy and the environment come together is in the field of investments. Public and public-orientated institutions such as local government pension funds, charities, universities and health institutions all manage very significant funds, invested largely in stocks and shares. Overall, perhaps five percent of these funds are invested in companies whose main business is fossil fuel extraction. We know that burning fossil fuels is the major contributor to CO₂ pollution and global warming. For even a miserable 50/50 chance of avoiding 2

34 <https://leftfootforward.org/2017/11/labour-hinted-theyre-looking-at-a-post-growth-economy-heres-how-it-could-be-done/>
http://www.sera.org.uk/case_for_degrowth
<https://www.sochealth.co.uk/2017/12/08/divesting-fossil-fuels-public-health-action/>

degrees of warming 80% of known fossil fuel reserves have to remain unburnt³⁵. This represents a “carbon bubble” of stranded assets. As a result, a worldwide movement has been campaigning for divestment from these companies.

At the heart of the Labour movement, these calls for divestment have been endorsed and amplified by the local government union Unison, by the general assembly of the Trades Union Congress, by SERA, the Labour environment campaign, and by 86 Labour MPs (in regard to their own pension fund).

While fossil fuel divestment is consistent with degrowth, to support it does not imply adherence to degrowth thinking. Nevertheless it does show a readiness to question the way in which the current economy crosses planetary boundaries and potentially an interest in rethinking the way monies held in trust by organisations with a social mission might be better used for social and environmental good. These are key aspects of our own thinking on practical policies for degrowth to a steady state economy and society³⁶.

Why is this happening?

The above strands of evidence suggest an opening up on the part of key Labour party leaders and influencers to a set of arguments for taking account of the Limits to Growth in rethinking the orthodox emphasis of productivism and economic growth. I do not want to oversell this shift: it is no more than an opening, not the set of policy shifts that would be required.

Why is this happening at all? I suspect it is due to a combination of factors:

1) The inescapable evidence of ecological overshoot in the form of the climate crisis, ocean pollution, and air quality. This is concentrating the minds of most thinking people with the realisation that business as usual is untenable.

2) The resurgence of radicalism in Labour in the context of the economic, social and political crisis post the 2007-8 Great Financial Crash. Labour has always been an uneasy alliance of socialists (Marxist, Christian, utopian, empirical, humanist...) and non-socialists, and those who simultaneously espouse or hold to more than one perspective. But over the period from around 1983 (Kinnock's election) to 2010 (Miliband's election), the right was in the ascendancy, almost silencing discussion of alternative approaches to economy and society under a kind of “neoliberalism lite” ideology. With the collapse of neoliberalism's authority (manifested in the Labour party leadership in the two stage shift to the left via Miliband to Corbyn), a space has opened for alternative ideology. Now, degrowth and socialism are not the same thing by any means: there are socialists who believe that non-capitalist economic growth would not be harmful³⁷. But in this period of interregnum, where the ruling ideology of market solutions and the subjugation of everything to what the Australians used to call “economic rationalism”³⁸ is being dumped, there is opening up, not just to eclipsed political theory, practice and tradition but also to new ideas.

35 <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature14016>

36 <https://steadystatemanchester.net/2014/11/17/we-publish-the-viable-economy/>

37 For a discussion and critique, see Kallis, G. (2017). Socialism Without Growth. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1386695>

The family of political and economic approaches we now call degrowth is one source of ideas entering the new ideological maelstrom. Given its various roots in both radical political thought (going back as far as Winstanley and the diggers in the British tradition) and robust scientific analysis (systems analysis, as in the work of Donella Meadows and her Limits to Growth team, climate science, and ecological economics) degrowth is well placed to make a critical contribution.

Why degrowth is difficult for Labour

The above analysis might suggest that Labour is in a kind of temporary unfrozen state where unorthodox, even iconoclastic, ideas can be voiced and taken seriously. But that will not last: Labour would consolidate its ideology as a new, if temporary, settlement, following an ascendancy to government. That two stage picture is itself a simplification because within each of the two phases, pre-governmental and governmental, there would be an ideological struggle, a multidimensional one, in fact. In relation to degrowth, we can ask “why is it difficult for Labour people to accept the limits to growth thesis?”. Answering that might give us clues about how best to present degrowth thinking in Labour circles and to anticipate the sources of opposition and counter-arguments. I will offer an initial answer to the question by means of a table:

Barrier to degrowth thinking: assumptions common among Labour party members that get in the way of taking the Limits to Growth seriously.	Possible counter-argument from degrowth
Jobs: It is growth that will deliver much needed jobs.	Growth does not necessarily deliver jobs: if it relies on investment, then it is likely to reduce the number of jobs since investment tends to favour the modernisation of plant, automation, etc. To the extent that it does produce jobs these are not necessarily good jobs. We need instead to be much more specific, asking what kinds of employment do we want to create, where should it be and how should it be organised and supported? Those detailed questions do not boil down to “let’s have endless aggregate growth” - which is far too vague to be a sensible policy guide. The recent history of Japan suggests that it is possible to have zero or very low levels of GDP growth without a rise in unemployment ³⁹ .

38 “Economic rationalism” was a term eventually supplanted by “neoliberalism”, but it perhaps better captured the idea of an accountancy model of societal management where everything must be costed in order to be compared and preferably traded (*pace* Oscar Wilde). The same thinking can be found in the work of the thinker who first used the term “decroissance” (degrowth), André Gorz - Gorz, A. (2007, 2012). *La salida del capitalismo ya ha empezado ~ decrecimiento*. <http://www.decrecimiento.info/2012/01/la-salida-del-capitalismo-ya-ha.html> (online Spanish translation from the French original which appeared in *Herbert Marcuse, Michel Bosquet (Andre Gorz), Edward Morin, Sicco Mansholt et al.* First published in French by Le Nouvel Observateur, 1975). also see Gorz, A. (2010). *Critique of Economic Reason*. London: Verso. And Gorz, A. (2012). *Capitalism, socialism, ecology*. London: Verso.

Barrier to degrowth thinking: assumptions common among Labour party members that get in the way of taking the Limits to Growth seriously.	Possible counter-argument from degrowth
Poverty and deprivation: we need growth to lift people out of poverty and deprivation.	Growth can have the opposite effect by increasing the rate of exploitation: some gain but others lose. That has been the recent history of the UK's "economic success", the explosion of in-work poverty. The evidence elsewhere also shows that a rising tide does not necessarily raise all boats – it can sink many boats ⁴⁰ . Historically, the pursuit of growth has deferred the consideration of equality, since when gross incomes generally increase across the board, there is the illusion that things are getting better ⁴¹ .
Technological fix: we can deal with the problems of growth by investing in smart technology.	Technology will be necessary to live sustainably but it will not be sufficient. Technological solutions themselves require energy and materials. Replacement of fossil fuelled cars by electric vehicles, for example requires an expansion of scarce minerals at a time when it is getting harder to extract them ⁴² . Moreover, while technological innovation might offer some respite in terms of material impacts, compound GDP growth means that the material footprint continues to grow. An example would be the increasing increasing area covered by wind turbines and the increasing mass of copper needed for cabling since energy use will grow at a compound rate too.

39 <http://postgrowth.org/japan-the-worlds-first-post-growth-economy/>
<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/03/learning-love-stagnation>

40 <http://www.levyinstitute.org/publications/when-a-rising-tide-sinks-most-boats-trends-in-us-income-inequality>

41 We explored this at greater length in our first report” In Place of Growth.
https://steadystatemanchester.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/inplaceofgrowth_ipog_-content_final.pdf

42 <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2018-cobalt-batteries/>

Barrier to degrowth thinking: assumptions common among Labour party members that get in the way of taking the Limits to Growth seriously.	Possible counter-argument from degrowth
<p>Squaring the circle. Growth as consistent with environmental protection: sustainable development or having our cake and eating it.</p>	<p>The key proposition here is what is called decoupling: the removal of the connection between the GDP growth and the growth of material and energy throughput (from extraction to waste)⁴³. Take CO₂ emissions: while the efficiency of the economy (in terms of tonnes of CO₂ per unit of production) has improved, emissions overall are rising. Some countries, including the UK, have experienced falling CO₂ emissions even while GDP has risen, but this has been due to a) the outsourcing of production to China and the global South, b) the one-off move to gas for electricity production, c) the fall in real incomes together with the large contribution to GDP growth from housing price inflation and speculation. Even if the improvement is real, it is minimal compared to the deep cuts in emissions that are needed to stall global warming⁴⁴.</p> <p>When other materials are considered, the situation is even worse. There is no evidence that overall material flows of materials through the economy have reduced while GDP has increased⁴⁵.</p>

43 Climate scientist Glen Peters provides a helpful introduction to the concept: <http://www.cicero.uio.no/no/posts/klima/can-we-decouple-out-of-the-climate-crisis>

44 I reviewed the evidence for country decoupling claims in some detail here: <https://steadystatemanchester.net/2016/04/15/new-evidence-on-decoupling-carbon-emissions-from-gdp-growth-what-does-it-mean/comment-page-1/#comment-16801>

45 Schandl, H., Fischer-Kowalski, M., West, J., Giljum, S., Dittrich, M., Eisenmenger, N., ... Fishman, T. (2017). Global Material Flows and Resource Productivity: Forty Years of Evidence: Global Material Flows and Resource Productivity. *Journal of Industrial Ecology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jiec.12626>

Ward, J. D., Sutton, P. C., Werner, A. D., Costanza, R., Mohr, S. H., & Simmons, C. T. (2016). Is Decoupling GDP Growth from Environmental Impact Possible? *PLOS ONE*, *11*(10), e0164733. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0164733>

Wiedmann, T. O., Schandl, H., Lenzen, M., Moran, D., Suh, S., West, J., & Kanemoto, K. (2015). The material footprint of nations. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *112*(20), 6271–6276. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1220362110>

Barrier to degrowth thinking: assumptions common among Labour party members that get in the way of taking the Limits to Growth seriously.	Possible counter-argument from degrowth
<p>Class: the green movement is a middle class one that does not represent the interests of the working class.</p>	<p>This is sometimes heard but it is scarcely relevant. The scientific evidence about the crisis of the global economy overshooting the earth's capacity cannot be dissolved into a question of class. Moreover, there are many working class environmental activists, especially in the global South. As the Scottish working class community activist Cathy McCormack pointed out, there is a close connection between things like poor home insulation standards and wasteful energy generation and severe poverty: cold homes and climate change as heat goes out of the roof!⁴⁶</p> <p>It is precisely because poor and working class people are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation that the false promise of growth has to be resisted: it will only make the situation worse, as millions of people on the receiving end of the global mining corporations, agribusiness and oil industry pollution are finding worldwide⁴⁷.</p>

46 McCormack, C., & Pallister, M. (2009). *The wee yellow butterfly*. Glendaruel, Argyll: Argyll Publishing.

47 Martinez-Alier, J. (2002). *The environmentalism of the poor: a study of ecological conflicts and valuation*. Cheltenham: Elgar.

Mowforth, M. (n.d.). - The Violence of Development. <https://theviolenceofdevelopment.com/>

Barrier to degrowth thinking: assumptions common among Labour party members that get in the way of taking the Limits to Growth seriously.	Possible counter-argument from degrowth
<p>“And the environment”: whereby nature is seen as separate, secondary to human life, society and economy.</p>	<p>It is essential to show that a) degrowth is about more than the environment, but is relevant to economic and social stability, to equality, to democracy and to culture, and b) that the natural and physical world is not separate from our lives, from society and economy but an integral part of it: this is a key assumption of ecological economics which situates the economy, as an open system, within the wider systems of the planet and its ecologies. As Jason Moore shows⁴⁸, our social and economic systems are co-constructed with the natural ecosystem: look at the British landscape, a hybrid of nature and human construction.</p>

48 Moore, J. W. (2015). *Capitalism in the web of life: ecology and the accumulation of capital* (1st Edition). New York: Verso.

Moore, J. W. (2017). *World Accumulation and Planetary Life*. London. Retrieved from https://soundcloud.com/goldsmithsuol/jason_moore

Moore, J. W. (2017). *World accumulation & Planetary life, or, why capitalism will not survive until the “last tree is cut.”* Retrieved January 18, 2018, from http://www.perc.org.uk/project_posts/world-accumulation-planetary-life-capitalism-will-not-survive-last-tree-cut/

Barrier to degrowth thinking: assumptions common among Labour party members that get in the way of taking the Limits to Growth seriously.	Possible counter-argument from degrowth
We can't isolate ourselves: we live in a global world and we have to compete to survive.	<p>We don't need to isolate ourselves but instead to develop a kind of selective, ethical globalisation. On trade, that means following the principle of subsidiarity: what can be produced locally should be, otherwise the process is wasteful and polluting. This would mean an end to absurdities like the simultaneous import and export of potatoes between the UK and Germany, something that is repeated for numerous products. It would mean a reduction of economic specialisation but not an end to it⁴⁹.</p> <p>Competition in a global context is a zero sum game with winners and losers. As socialists let's find a better, co-operative way.</p>

Post-growth policies

Post-growth policies for a Labour government

If there is indeed an opening in Labour to the degrowth family of ideas but there are real barriers to their acceptance, then those who understand the Limits to Growth and degrowth thinking need to go on the offensive, presenting the practical policy options that stem from this perspective. Luckily, there is a growing body of work on this⁵⁰ by degrowth thinkers.

A short list, drawing on several of these sources, might include the following:

- 49 Simms, A., Moran, D., & Chowla, P. (2006). *The UK interdependence report: how the world sustains the nation's lifestyles and the price it pays ; part of the Interdependence Day project - new maps for an island planet*. London: New Economics Foundation.
- 50 O'Neill, D. W., Dietz, R., & Jones, N. (Eds.). (2010). *Enough is Enough: Ideas for a Sustainable Economy in a World of Finite Resources. The report of the Steady State Economy Conference*. Leeds: Center for the Advancement of the Steady State Economy and Economic Justice for All. Retrieved from http://steadystate.org/wp-content/uploads/EnoughIsEnough_FullReport.pdf
- O'Neill, D. (2017) A sustainable economy. *Progressive Economics Group*: <https://peg.primeeconomics.org/policybriefs/a-sustainable-economy>
- Kallis, G. (2015). *Yes, We Can Prosper Without Growth: 10 Policy Proposals for the New Left*. (Various versions, published in various places including the Guardian.) <https://theleapblog.org/yes-we-can-prosper-without-growth-10-policy-proposals-for-the-new-left/>
- Burton, M. (2017) *Practical degrowth for Labour*. <https://steadystatemanchester.net/2017/12/19/practical-degrowth-for-labour/> (also published in an edited version by SERA: http://www.sera.org.uk/case_for_degrowth)
- Rigon, A. (2017). Degrowth Politics and Policies for Degrowth. *Degrowth Blog*. <https://www.degrowth.info/en/2017/03/degrowth-politics-and-policies-for-degrowth/>
- Gough, I. (2015, October). Macroeconomics, Climate Change and the 'Recomposition' of Consumption. *Prime Economics*. Retrieved from <http://www.primeeconomics.org/articles/macroeconomics-climate-change-and-consumption>

- 1. Stop subsidizing and investing in activities that are highly polluting** (the UK government subsidy for fossil fuels stands at £6.9bn p.a. and for aviation at £9Bn) moving the liberated public funds towards clean production.
- 2. Work-and resource sharing** by reducing the working week at least to 32 hours and develop programmes that support employers that want to facilitate job-sharing, with income loss for the top 10% only. We need to better share the wasted and badly distributed resources and wealth of our abundant economy.
- 3. Minimum and maximum income.** High incomes mean disproportionate resource use: cap them but also set a floor. Labour is already considering basic citizen's income, popular in Green and degrowth circles though I remain unconvinced. Negative income tax and/or a participation income might work better.
- 4. Tax reform** for a progressive system that taxes use of energy and resources, wealth, property and land value. This could incorporate proposals for frequent flyer and workplace parking levies. There could be a tax on financial transactions and preferential tax rates for labour-intensive services with low energy throughput and consumption of nature.
- 5. Controls on money creation.** Money creation via credit is necessary for business but uncontrolled it leads to a spiral of unnecessary consumption. Impose regulation of bank lending for tight but cheap credit. Also make environmental and social impact assessment mandatory for major bank loans, with these two dimensions built into statutory auditing as well as the financial bottom line.
- 6. Citizen debt audit** to not just restructure but eliminate unpayable household debts via their "pardon".
- 7. Support the alternative, solidarity society.** Do this through subsidies and tax exemptions for co-operatives, social enterprises, community land trusts and so on. It also means the de-privatisation of public space, opening up resources to community groups.
- 8. Optimise the use of buildings.** Retrofit, refurbish, downsize and share, saving fuel costs and emissions. Expropriate vacant housing. Respond to any remaining need by building low energy social housing, within already urbanised areas. Add a jobs-generating deep retrofit programme so property brought back into use is both cheap to heat and has very low emissions.
- 9. Reduce advertising.** To tackle demand side drivers of excessive material flows, establish very restrictive criteria for allowing advertising in public spaces, reducing the incessant promotion of consumption.
- 10. Establish environmental limits**, via absolute and diminishing caps on the total of CO₂ that can be produced and the total quantity of material resources (material,

Gough, I. (2017). *Heat, greed and human need: climate change, capitalism and sustainable wellbeing*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Pub.

Greenhouse think tank: *Post Growth Project*. <https://www.greenhousethinktank.org/post-growth-project.html>

And at the level of the City Region: Steady State Manchester. (2017). *Policies for the City Region*. <https://steadystatemanchester.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/policies-for-the-city-region-the-longer-version-v3-final.pdf>

water, land) that the country uses, including, via a footprinting approach, emissions and materials embedded in imported goods.

11. When negotiating international trade agreements, make them conform with frameworks on climate change and consumption of nature. This is particularly relevant in the context of Britain's exit from the European Union.

12. Implement ecological footprint product, reparability and service labelling.

Product certification should establish the ecological footprint of every product and service. This would be part of the labelling in order to make it easier for consumers to understand the ecological impact of their consumption choices in a transparent and robust way. Something similar already happens with energy ratings on appliances – this extends the model.

13. Abolish the misleading GDP indicator. Focus on real things- jobs, incomes, activity, investment, care, health, well-being and environmental restoration.

Policies at the regional scale:

The regional level is important for two reasons. Firstly, for reasons of sustainability and resilience, degrowth implies a relative strengthening of regional economies, reducing the dominance of London. Secondly, Labour is in power in a number of the newly devolved areas such as Greater Manchester and Merseyside, as well as in Wales⁵¹ and, indeed, in Greater London. The following points highlight key areas for local policy development, based on our Policies for the City Region paper, where the following headlines are developed in more detail.⁵²

1. Climate change, and other dimensions of ecological overshoot are so serious that we need to radically overhaul the regional economies and political processes, particularly by reducing carbon emissions and unsustainable consumption.
2. Carbon limits/targets should be set for each sector of the economy – “greening” housing, transport and energy production.
3. Local institutions which invest large amounts of money, e.g. for pensions, should stop investing in fossil fuels, and instead invest in planet-friendly activity, where possible locally.
4. Local authorities and other anchor institutions should prioritise sustainable and affordable food supply by supporting local food production, processing and distribution.
5. “Anchor institutions” (e.g. local authorities, hospitals and universities) should foster local well-being, equality and wealth through procurement, recruitment, pay and waste policies and by exploring how they can make their resources available to communities.
6. Co-operative enterprise and governance should be promoted, in all sectors

⁵¹ The proposals are relevant to the broadly social democratic SNP administration in Scotland too.

⁵² Steady State Manchester. (2017). *Policies for the City Region*.

<https://steadystatemanchester.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/policies-for-the-city-region-the-longer-version-v3-final.pdf>

7. Metropolitan and local authorities, and other partners, should use their collective strength make our regional economy more resilient through “localisation”, for example shorter supply chains, and employing local people. At the same time they should support necessary international trade with clear ethical standards for social and environmental benefit.
8. Regional investment funds or banks should be established in order to finance ecologically-sound and socially-just investments for a resilient eco-regions.
9. A parallel (and probably not sterling-linked) Regional Unit of Currency could be established, to help provide funding for public services, keep money within the local economy and promote financial services for all.
10. A local strategy for redistributing wealth should consider innovations such as a jobs guarantee, a local participation income, more labour-intensive working, and support to local enterprise.
11. Local elected leaders should lead a campaign for national sharing of resources, including fighting against public sector cuts and in favour of government expenditure where needed.
12. Any “economic” strategy must consider all activities, whether monetised or not, which support people’s everyday lives and wellbeing.
13. Policies should aim to promote convivial, caring and proactive communities which, with government support, are capable of designing and implementing solutions to local issues.

Conclusion

The socialist movement has multiple roots, many of which were closely associated with a rebellion against the domination of life by a set of practices and ideology that reduced everything to an “economic” rationality. Cloaked by that economic rationality was (is) the domination of the many by the few, the property owners. And with that economic rationality of domination goes the domination of nature, its pell-mell exploitation without regard to its regeneration and to the future. Moreover, this rationality involves the imperial exploitation of other peoples and regions.

In degrowth we can find all these concerns and we could imagine a natural, mutual sympathy with socialists and their allies, were it not for the adoption of many of the dominant assumptions, models and methods into the heart of the socialist and Labour movement. But perhaps, in these times of crisis (of hegemony, legitimacy and of imagination), when the thoughtful are seeking and exploring alternatives, then there is an appetite to consider the framework of degrowth while jettisoning the absurdity of endless growth on a finite planet. This article has suggested some ways this might be happening, although it is careful not to overclaim: Labour has a long way to go before it can be said to have a policy framework that is consistent with what we already know about limits, overshoot and the extremely dangerous place that the pursuit of growth has taken us all. Clues to finding that framework have been given, but the path to it will sooner or later have to be trodden by the party itself.