

LETTER TO LIBERALS: LIBERALISM, ENVIRONMENTALISM, AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

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Let me begin by thanking the New Economics Institute and Susan Witt for this opportunity. Over the years, under Susan's leadership, the Schumacher Lectures have opened many a new horizon, pointing the way to a better world. I'm proud to be part of this effort.

Many of us, I think, bestride the uneasy gap that separates American liberalism and American environmentalism. If asked by a pollster, we would say "yes" to liberal and "yes" to environmentalist. And progressive souls in Congress generally support both causes. But between the people and the Congress, there are the organized groups advocating for the two causes, and they, well, they typically go their own separate ways. This pattern is common on the progressive side—every progressive cause in its own silo. But much less silo-ing is common on the right, where the typical think tank or advocacy group will cover everything from stripping EPA of its power to address climate change to ensuring that the rich are minimally taxed. I think they have something to teach us.

Today, I want to argue that the walls separating liberals and environmentalists must be breached—to win, there must be a fusion of progressive causes, we must forge a common agenda, and we must together build a mighty force on the ground, at the grassroots.

This progressive fusion is necessary, first of all, because we are stronger if we support each other. We are better together. That should be enough of a reason given the formidable forces we face—forces that certainly gained strength in the recent mid-term elections. But there are other, deeper realities to consider beyond mere alliance.

For their part, environmentalists are slowly coming to see that real progress on their issues will remain elusive unless the liberal agenda of social justice and political reform is steadily realized. In a land of pervasive

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economic insecurity and stark inequality, American environmentalists will keep losing. In such a land, the economic will continue to trump the environmental. Environmentalists will continue to live in a strange place where they can save the planet only if it helps the economy.

In a similar way, environmentalists will also keep losing if American politics remains as it is today. Peter Barnes notes that:

[T]he “influence industry” in Washington now spends \$6 billion a year and employs more than thirty-five thousand lobbyists [and that was a few years ago] [I]n a capitalist democracy, the state is a dispenser of many valuable prizes. Whoever amasses the most political power wins the most valuable prizes. The rewards include property rights, friendly regulators, subsidies, tax breaks, and free or cheap use of the commons. . . . We face a disheartening quandary here. Profit-maximizing corporations dominate our economy. . . . The only obvious counterweight is government, yet government is dominated by these same corporations.¹

So environmentalists need for liberal causes to succeed. Do liberal groups that fight for social and political improvements need for environmentalists to succeed? I believe the answer is clearly yes. For example, environmental success on climate and energy would usher in an era of much needed growth in green jobs. And the new rights-based approach to environmental protection is embracing liberal themes like climate justice, the human right to water and food, the right to cultural survival, and more. But I would like to stress the liberal stake in environmentalism at a deeper level.

Consider a world in which environmentalists continue to lose on the big issues like climate change. Many of our most insightful observers today see current trends leading us to some type of collapse, catastrophe, or breakdown, and they see climate change and other environmental crises as leading ingredients of a devil’s brew that also includes such stresses as population pressures, peak oil and other energy supply problems, global income disparities, economic and political instabilities, terrorism, failed states, nuclear proliferation, and similar threats.

A world of environmental failure would be an increasingly nasty place. A world where environmentalists fail is a world of food and water shortages; sea level rise; increasing heat waves, fires, floods, storms, droughts, and other so-called “natural” disasters; deforestation, desertification, and biotic

1. PETER BARNES, CAPITALISM 3.0: A GUIDE TO RECLAIMING THE COMMONS 36, 45 (2006).

impoverishment; pollution and toxification; energy shortages; and unpleasant surprises. This is not a world where the concerns of the poor and powerless or even the average Joe are likely to fare well, and politics in such a world could move in unfortunate directions.

Some who have constructed scenarios of the future see a continuation of “business as usual” leading us to a “fortress world.”² Here is how Paul Raskin and his colleagues describe the evolution of Fortress World. They describe it in global terms, but it could happen anywhere.

The global economy spawns a new class of internationally connected affluent. But there is a counterpoint—the billions of desperately poor whose boats fail to rise with the general economic tide. . . . As the level of poverty increases and the gulf between rich and poor widens . . . [t]he remnants of the institutional capacity and moral commitment to global welfare are lost. Meanwhile, environmental conditions deteriorate. Multiple stresses—pollution, climate change, ecosystem degradation—interact and amplify the crisis. Disputes over scarce water resources feed conflict in regions with shared river basins. Environmental degradation, food insecurity and emergent diseases foster a vast health crisis. . . . In this atmosphere of deepening social and environmental crisis, conflict feeds off old ethnic, religious and nationalist tensions. Poor countries begin to fragment as civil order collapses and various forms of criminal anarchy fill the vacuum. . . . [T]he bite of climate change and environmental devastation grows fiercer. The affluent minority fears it too will be engulfed by rampant migration, violence and disease. . . . A system of global dualism—some call it a *Fortress World* . . . emerges from the crisis. The separate spheres of the haves and have-nots, the included and excluded, are codified in asymmetrical and authoritarian legal and institutional frameworks. The affluent live in protected enclaves in rich nations and in strongholds in poor nations—bubbles of privilege amidst oceans of misery. In the police state outside the fortress, the majority is mired in poverty and denied basic freedoms.³

Clive Hamilton reports on a 2009 conference of climate experts at Oxford, where the question, “Can we continue to gamble with democracy?” came up.⁴

2. PAUL RASKIN ET AL., GREAT TRANSITION 26–27 (2002).

3. *Id.*

4. CLIVE HAMILTON, REQUIEM FOR A SPECIES: WHY WE RESIST THE TRUTH ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE 207 (2010).

The point was made that slashing emissions may require a “benevolent tyranny.”⁵ But, as Hamilton notes, tyrannies are rarely benevolent for long.

In recent years, military experts and others have warned repeatedly that climate disruption could lead to humanitarian emergencies, climate refugees, conflicts over water and other resources, failed states, extreme North–South tensions, and any number of other threats to international security and stability. A new book, *Climate Wars*, just came out.⁶

Of course, there is a lot of speculation in these various looks into the future, but at a minimum one can conclude that the liberal program—the liberal agenda—is threatened by unfolding climate and other environmental trends. We know that in times of great stress, loss, and instability societies can tend to illiberal answers. Liberals need to appreciate how serious and near-term environmental threats actually are and what they threaten. Political and social systems are threatened, not just ecological ones. Liberals, indeed all of us, also need to recognize that environmental threats are much too serious to leave to the environmentalists.

There is another line of inquiry that also points to the need for the greening of liberalism. This area is opened up not by thinking about a world of environmental failure but by thinking about the requirements for environmental success. Ideas coming forward today from cutting-edge environmentalism offer the potential to strengthen the liberal agenda. At the same time, environmental analysis these days is pointing to some novel policy prescriptions that are definitely at odds with prescriptions regularly urged by American liberals. I believe that in both these areas, the new environmental thinking may have something to offer American liberals.

The most important area where this latest environmental thinking conflicts with the current liberal agenda is on economic growth. Over the years, I have read many books by our leading liberals—most recently Bob Reich’s *Aftershock*⁷—and I attend daily to the excellent online liberal news and opinion summary Campaign for America’s Future,⁸ and read and admire both *The Nation* and *The American Prospect*. So I know that American liberals tend to be strong advocates of economic growth. Indeed, the way the growth issue is perceived in Washington today, those fighting current battles there have little choice. But a growing number of environmental thinkers are urging a different perspective. They see a world where past growth has brought us to a perilous state environmentally; where we are poised for unprecedented increments in growth; where this growth is proceeding with

5. *Id.*

6. GWYNNE DYER, *CLIMATE WARS* (2008).

7. ROBERT B. REICH, *AFTERSHOCK: THE NEXT ECONOMY AND AMERICA’S FUTURE* (2010).

8. CAMPAIGN FOR AMERICA’S FUTURE, <http://www.ourfuture.org> (last visited Apr. 1, 2011).

wildly wrong market signals and without needed constraints; and where a failed politics has not meaningfully corrected the economy's obliviousness to environmental needs.

In his book *Prosperity without Growth*, a leading British economist, Tim Jackson, frames the growth issue this way: "During the [period since 1950] the global economy has grown more than 5 times."⁹ The size of the world economy is on track to double, then double again, by mid-century. "This extraordinary ramping up of global economic activity has no historical precedent," Jackson notes.¹⁰ "It's totally at odds with our scientific knowledge of the finite resource base and the fragile ecology on which we depend for survival."¹¹ Jackson continues:

A world in which things simply go on as usual is already inconceivable. . . .

For the most part, we avoid the stark reality of these numbers. The default assumption is that . . . growth will continue indefinitely. Not just for the poorest countries, where a better quality of life is undeniably needed, but even for the richest nations where the cornucopia of material wealth adds little to happiness and is beginning to threaten the foundations of our well-being.

The reasons for this collective blindness are . . . easy enough to find. The modern economy is structurally reliant on economic growth Questioning growth is deemed to be the act of lunatics, idealists and revolutionaries.

But question it we must. The idea of a non-growing economy may be an anathema to an economist. But the idea of a continually growing economy is an anathema to an ecologist. No subsystem of a finite system can grow indefinitely, in physical terms. Economists have to be able to answer the question of how a continually growing economic system can fit within a finite ecological system.

The only possible response to this challenge is to suggest – as economists do – that growth in dollars is 'decoupled' from growth in physical throughputs and environmental impacts. But . . . this hasn't so far achieved what's needed. There are no prospects for it doing so in the immediate future. And the sheer scale of decoupling required . . . staggers the imagination.

In short, we have no alternative but to question growth.¹²

9. TIM JACKSON, *PROSPERITY WITHOUT GROWTH* 13 (2009).

10. *Id.*

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.* at 13–16.

And that questioning must begin soon. Consider the following recent news stories:

- “Heat Waves Could Be Commonplace in the US by 2039”¹³
- “Glacial Melt and Ocean Warming Drive Sea Level Upward”¹⁴
- “Indian Ocean Sea Level Rise Threatens Millions”¹⁵
- “Melting Mountains Put Millions at Risk in Asia”¹⁶
- “Greenland Glacier Slide Speeds 220 Percent in Summer”¹⁷
- “Models Foresee More-Intense Hurricanes in the Greenhouse”¹⁸
- “Ocean Acidification Unprecedented, Unsettling”¹⁹
- “Fifth of Vertebrates Face Extinction”²⁰
- “World’s Mangroves Retreating at Alarming Rate”²¹
- “Depletion of Aquifers Is a Looming Tragedy”²²

In this regard, the existential issue of global warming and climate disruption is particularly worrying. Many analysts have concluded that it will probably be impossible to reduce greenhouse gas emissions at required rates in the context of even moderate economic growth. The needed rates for reducing the carbon intensity of economic output are simply too high. In *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*, I indicated that to reduce U.S. carbon emissions by 80% between now and 2050, the carbon intensity of production would have to decline by 7% a year, every year, if the U.S. economy is growing at 3% a year.²³ That’s huge. It involves wringing carbon out of the economy at a phenomenal rate.

The new economics foundation (nef) in London, which has contributed so much to the new economic thinking, has recently completed a thorough

13. *Heat Waves Could Be Commonplace in the US by 2039*, SCIENCE DAILY, July 9, 2010, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/07/100708122617.htm>.

14. John Mulrow et al., *Glacial Melt and Ocean Warming Drive Sea Level Upward*, WORLDWATCH INST. VITAL SIGNS, July 22, 2010, <http://vitalsigns.worldwatch.org/vs-trend/glacial-melt-and-ocean-warming-drive-sea-level-upward>.

15. David Fogarty, *Indian Ocean Sea Level Rise Threatens Millions*, REUTERS, July 14, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/07/14/us-climate-oceans-rise-idUSTRE66D0TX20100714>.

16. David Fogarty, *Melting Mountains Put Millions at Risk in Asia: Study*, REUTERS, June 10, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/06/10/us-climate-rivers-asia-idUSTRE6594TG20100610>.

17. *Greenland Glacier Slide Speeds 220 Percent in Summer*, REUTERS, May 9, 2010, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2010/05/09/us-climate-greenland-idUKTRE6482AT20100509>.

18. Richard A. Kerr, *Models Foresee More-Intense Hurricanes in the Greenhouse*, 327 SCI. 399 (2010).

19. Richard A. Kerr, *Ocean Acidification Unprecedented, Unsettling*, 328 SCI. 1500 (2010).

20. David Fogarty, *Fifth of Vertebrates Face Extinction: Study*, REUTERS, Oct. 27, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/10/27/us-biodiversity-species-idUSTRE69P5FC20101027>.

21. *World’s Mangroves Retreating at Alarming Rate: Study*, REUTERS, July 14, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/07/14/us-world-mangroves-idUSTRE66D28X20100714>.

22. *Deep Waters, Slowly Drying Up: Depletion of Aquifers Is a Looming Tragedy. New Agreement Offers Hope*, ECONOMIST, Oct. 7, 2010, at 86.

23. JAMES GUSTAVE SPETH, *THE BRIDGE AT THE END OF THE WORLD* 113–14 (2008).

overview of whether climate goals can be met in the context of growth. The study is titled “Growth Isn’t Possible,” and that is an appropriate title given its conclusions.²⁴ In the end, nef quotes favorably this conclusion: “Economic growth in the OECD cannot be reconciled with a 2, 3, or even 4°C characterisation of dangerous climate change.”²⁵

We should be able to solve this puzzle. In *Managing Without Growth*, Canadian economist Peter Victor presents a model of the Canadian economy which shows that:

[I]t is possible to develop scenarios over a 30 year time horizon for Canada in which full employment prevails, poverty is essentially eliminated, people enjoy more leisure, greenhouse gas emissions are drastically reduced, and the level of government indebtedness declines, all in the context of low and ultimately no economic growth.²⁶

The new economics foundation has an ambitious effort underway to expand on this work.

So we have this difference between liberals and environmentalists on growth, and it is important that we move soon to resolve it. One must ask: Is it possible to successfully craft a common platform and agenda among American environmentalists and liberals? And is it possible that such a platform might contribute to the challenge recently laid down by Mark Schmitt to forge a persuasive alternative vision for the U.S. economy. “It’s time to get the idea machines cranked up,” he writes.²⁷

What we’re looking for now aren’t political answers, incremental reforms, or bargaining chips. . . . We need clarity about just how different the economy will be, even after the recession ends, and a strategy for how we can, once again, make sure that the vast majority of people will have a place in it.²⁸

Can we forge a common platform that rises to this challenge?

24. NEW ECONOMICS FOUND., GROWTH ISN’T POSSIBLE (2010), available at <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/growth-isnt-possible>.

25. *Id.* at 68 (quoting Kevin Anderson, Director, Tyndall Ctr. for Climate Change Research, Manchester Univ., Presentation at the Tyndall Assembly, Manchester, UK: Is Avoiding Dangerous Climate Change Compatible with Economic Growth? (2009)).

26. PETER A. VICTOR, *MANAGING WITHOUT GROWTH* 192–93 (2008).

27. Mark Schmitt, *The Idea Deficit*, AMERICAN PROSPECT, Nov. 16, 2010, http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_ideas_deficit.

28. *Id.*

Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained. So let me now offer for your consideration a first draft of such a platform and agenda for progressive fusion. You be the judge. For the sake of time, I will concentrate almost exclusively on domestic, not foreign, affairs.

A PLATFORM FOR PROGRESSIVES

We must begin by acknowledging that today's political economy is failing our country. This failure reaches many spheres of national life—economic, social, political, and environmental. Indeed, our country can be said to be in crisis in each of these four areas.

The *economic* crisis of the Great Recession brought on by Wall Street financial excesses has stripped tens of millions of middle class Americans of their jobs, homes, and retirement assets.

A *social* crisis of extreme and growing inequality has been unraveling America's social fabric for several decades. A tiny minority has experienced soaring incomes and accumulated grand fortunes while wages for working people have stagnated, despite rising productivity gains, and the poverty rate has risen to a fifty-year high. Social mobility has declined, the middle class is disappearing, schools are failing, prison populations are swelling, employment security is a thing of the past, and American workers put in more hours than workers in other high-income countries.

An *environmental* crisis, driven by a ruthless drive to grow profits and expand the economy regardless of the costs, is disrupting Earth's climate and impoverishing its biota.

And a *political* crisis, reflected in governmental paralysis and a democracy that is weak, shallow, and corrupted by—as Bob Kaiser's book says—*So Damn Much Money*.²⁹

To seek something new and better, a good place to start is to ask why today's system of political economy is failing so broadly. The answer is that key features of the system work together to produce a reality that is highly destructive. An unquestioning society-wide commitment to economic growth at any cost; powerful corporate interests whose overriding objective is to grow by generating profit, including profit from avoiding the social and environmental costs they create and from keeping wages and benefits low; markets that systematically fail to recognize externalized social and environmental costs unless corrected by government, but government that is itself beholden to corporate interests and thus not strongly inclined to curb corporate abuses; and a rampant consumerism spurred endlessly on by

29. ROBERT G. KAISER, *SO MUCH DAMN MONEY* (2009).

sophisticated advertising—all combine to deliver an ever-growing economy insensitive to the needs of people, place, and planet.

For the most part, we have worked within this current system of political economy, but working within the system will not succeed in the end when what is needed is transformative change in the system itself. The case for immediate action on issues like climate change, job creation, and unemployment extension is compelling, but the big environmental and social challenges we face will not yield to problem-solving incrementalism. Progressives have gone down the path of incremental reform for decades. We have learned that it is not enough.

We need to reinvent the economy, not merely restore it. The roots of our environmental and social problems are systemic and thus require transformational change—the shift to a new economy, a *sustaining* economy based on new economic thinking and driven forward by a new politics. Sustaining people, communities, and nature must henceforth be seen as the core goals of economic activity—not hoped for by-products of market success, growth for its own sake, and modest regulation. That is the paradigm shift we seek.

Today, the reigning policy orientation holds that the path to greater well-being is to grow and expand the economy. Productivity, profits, the stock market, and consumption must all go up. This growth imperative trumps all else. It can undermine families, jobs, communities, the environment, and a sense of place and continuity because it is confidently asserted and widely believed that growth is worth the price that must be paid for it.

But an expanding body of evidence is now telling us to think again. Economic growth may be the world's secular religion, but for much of the world it is a god that is failing—underperforming for billions of the world's people and, for those in affluent societies, now creating more problems than it is solving. The never-ending drive to grow the overall U.S. economy hollows out communities and the environment; it fuels a ruthless international search for energy and other resources; it fails at generating the needed jobs; and it rests on a manufactured consumerism that is not meeting the deepest human needs. Americans are substituting growth and consumption for dealing with the real issues—for doing things that would truly make us and the country better off. Psychologists have pointed out, for example, that while economic output per person in the United States has risen sharply in recent decades, there has been no increase in life satisfaction and levels of distrust and depression have increased substantially.

It is time for America to move to post-growth society where working life, the natural environment, our communities and families, and the public sector are no longer sacrificed for the sake of mere GDP growth; where the illusory promises of ever-more growth no longer provide an excuse for neglecting to deal generously with our country's compelling social needs; and where true citizen democracy is no longer held hostage to the growth imperative.

When you think about it, the growth imperative is how we are controlled: the necessity for growth puts American politics in a straightjacket—a “golden straightjacket,” as Tom Friedman would say—and it gives the real power to those who have the finance and technology to deliver growth.³⁰

Of course, it is clear that even in a post-growth America, many things do indeed need to grow: growth in good jobs and in the incomes of the poor and working Americans; growth in availability of health care and the efficiency of its delivery; growth in education, research, and training; growth in security against the risks of illness, job loss, old age, and disability; growth in investment in public infrastructure and in environmental protection and amenity; growth in the deployment of climate-friendly and other green technologies; growth in the restoration of both ecosystems and local communities; growth in non-military government spending at the expense of military; and growth in international assistance for sustainable, people-centered development for the half of humanity that live in poverty, to mention some prominent needs. These are all areas where public policy needs to ensure that growth occurs.

Jobs and meaningful work top this list because they are so important and unemployment is so devastating. We should be striving to add 500,000 new jobs a month, but likely future rates of overall economic growth are only mildly associated with declining unemployment. The availability of jobs, the well-being of people, and the health of communities should not be forced to await the day when overall economic growth might deliver them. It is time to shed the view that government mainly provides safety nets and occasional Keynesian stimuli. We must insist that government have an affirmative responsibility to ensure that those seeking decent paying jobs find them. And the surest, and also the most cost-effective, way to that end is direct government spending, investments, and incentives targeted at creating jobs in areas where there is high social benefit. Creating new jobs in areas of democratically determined priority is certainly better than trying to create jobs by pump-priming aggregate economic growth, especially in

30. THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN, *THE LEXUS AND THE OLIVE TREE* 83–92 (1999).

an era where the macho thing to do in much of business is to shed jobs, not create them. There need be nothing temporary or second-rate about such employment.

And, as William Greider has recently pointed out, reversing the U.S. gung-ho stand on free-trade globalization can bolster employment at home.³¹ To keep investment and jobs at home he notes, Washington needs “to rewrite trade law, tax law and policies on workforce development and subsidy.”³²

Of particular importance for the new economy are government policies that will slow GDP growth, thus sparing the environment, while simultaneously improving social and environmental well-being. Such policies exist: shorter workweeks and longer vacations, with more time for children and families; greater labor protections, job security, and benefits, including generous parental leaves; guarantees to part-time workers and combining unemployment insurance with part-time work during recessions; restrictions on advertising; a new design for the twenty-first century corporation, one that embraces rechartering, new ownership patterns, and stakeholder primacy rather than shareholder primacy; incentives for local and locally-owned production and consumption; strong social and environmental provisions in trade agreements; rigorous environmental, health, and consumer protection, including full incorporation of environmental and social costs in prices, for example through mandated caps or taxes on emissions and extractions; greater economic and social equality, with genuinely progressive taxation of the rich (including a progressive consumption tax) and greater income support for the poor; heavy spending on neglected public services; and initiatives to address population growth at home and abroad. Taken together, these policies would undoubtedly slow GDP growth, but well-being and quality of life would improve, and that’s what matters.

In this mix of policies, Juliet Schor and others have stressed the importance of worktime reduction.³³ For example, if productivity gains are taken as shorter worktime, personal incomes and overall economic growth can stabilize while quality of life increases. Schor points out that workers in Europe put in about 300 fewer hours each year than Americans.³⁴

31. William Greider, *The End of Free-Trade Globalization*, NATION, Nov. 4, 2010, <http://www.thenation.com/article/155848/end-free-trade-globalization>.

32. *Id.*

33. See JULIET B. SCHOR, PLENITUDE 103–68 (2010) (explaining “time wealth”); Juliet B. Schor, *Sustainable Consumption and Worktime Reduction*, 9 J. INDUS. ECOLOGY 37 (2005).

34. SCHOR, PLENITUDE, *supra* note 33, at 105.

Beyond policy change, another hopeful path into a sustainable and just future is to seed the landscape with innovative models. One of the most remarkable and yet undernoticed things going on in the United States today is the proliferation of innovative models of “local living” economies, sustainable communities and transition towns, and for-benefit businesses, which prioritize community and environment over profit and growth. The community-owned Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland is a wonderful case in point.³⁵ As Gar Alperovitz and his colleagues have pointed out, state and federal programs can be crafted to support community development and to finance corporations, local banks, community land trusts, employee and consumer ownership, local currencies and time dollars, municipal enterprise, and non-profits in business.³⁶

Running parallel to these changes in policy must be a change in national values. In particular, it’s time to move beyond our runaway consumerism and hyperventilating lifestyles. There are mounting environmental and social costs of American affluence, extravagance, and wastefulness. Even our larger homes and lots are too small to contain all the stuff we are accumulating. The self-storage industry didn’t begin until the early 1970s but has grown so rapidly that its floor space would now cover an area the size of Manhattan and San Francisco combined. We have a disease—“affluenza”—from which we need a speedy recovery.³⁷

The good news is that more and more people sense at some level that there is a great misdirection of life’s energy. We know we are slighting the things that truly make life worthwhile. In one survey, 81% say America is too focused on shopping and spending; 88% say American society is too materialistic.³⁸

Psychological studies show that materialism is toxic to happiness, that more income and more possessions don’t lead to lasting gains in our sense of well-being or satisfaction with our lives. What does make us happy are warm personal relationships and giving rather than getting.

Here’s a revolutionary new product that is trying to make it in the marketplace: Nothing. “Guaranteed not to put you in debt . . . 100% nontoxic . . . sweatshop-free . . . zero waste . . . doesn’t contribute to global warming . . . family-friendly . . . fun and creative!”³⁹ The young women

35. EVERGREEN COOPERATIVES, <http://www.evergreencoop.com> (last visited Apr. 2, 2011).

36. THAD WILLIAMSON, DAVID IMBROSCIO & GAR ALPEROVITZ, *MAKING A PLACE FOR COMMUNITY* (2002).

37. JOHN DE GRAAF ET AL., *AFFLUENZA* (2001).

38. CTR. FOR A NEW AM. DREAM, *NEW AMERICAN DREAM SURVEY REPORT 8* (2004), available at <http://www.newdream.org/about/pdfs/Finalpollreport.pdf>.

39. Buy NOTHING! YOUTUBE (Nov. 5, 2006) <http://www.youtube.com/user/BuyNOTHING#p/au/1/BMhQy9ZikZs>.

who were selling Nothing in the shopping malls refused to leave and were arrested!

The transformation of today's economy obviously requires strong and effective government action. Inevitably, the drive for transformative change leads to the political arena, where a vital, muscular democracy steered by an informed and engaged citizenry is needed.

Yet, for Americans, merely to state the matter this way suggests the enormity of the challenge. The ascendancy of market fundamentalism and anti-regulation, anti-government ideology have been particularly frightening, but even the passing of these extreme ideas would still leave deeper, more long-term deficiencies. Just as we need a new economy, we need a new politics.

There are many reasons why government in Washington today is too often more problem than solution. It is hooked on GDP growth. It is heavily influenced by the very corporations and concentration of wealth it should be seeking to regulate and revamp. And it is hobbled by an array of dysfunctional institutional arrangements beginning with the way presidents are elected, elections are funded, and congressional voting occurs.

Building the strength needed for change requires, first of all, a political fusion among progressives, and that fusion should start with a unified agenda. Such an agenda would embrace a profound commitment to social justice and environmental protection; a sustained challenge to consumerism and commercialism and the lifestyles they offer; a healthy skepticism of growth-mania and a democratic redefinition of what society should be striving to grow; a challenge to corporate dominance and a redefinition of the corporation and its goals; a commitment to an array of pro-democracy reforms in campaign finance, elections, the regulation of lobbying; and much more. A common agenda would also include an ambitious set of new national indicators beyond GDP to inform us of the true quality of life in America. GDP is a perfectly terrible measure of national well-being and progress. We tend to get what we measure, so we should measure what we want.

CONCLUSION

So, this is the draft platform for progressive fusion. How good is it for uniting environmentalists, liberals, and other progressive constituencies? I would guess everyone would agree that some of it is ahead of its time, certainly in terms of U.S. politics today. Yet if some of the ideas just presented seem politically impracticable today, just wait until tomorrow. Soon it will be clear to more and more people that it's business as usual

that's the utopian fantasy, while creating something very new and different is the practical, pragmatic way forward.

My hope is that we can soon begin a sustained dialogue among liberal and environmental thinkers on the need for a common platform, on the issue of growth, and generally on the goal of progressive fusion. In the platform I just presented, I endeavored to find a way to support the goals that liberals see growth as supporting—notably job creation—while still accepting what I see as the underlying reality; namely that GDP growth in America today isn't delivering on its intended purpose—better human lives—and that it is, meanwhile, at the root of environmental losses and the emerging climate crisis. I hope the liberal community will come to terms with the now large body of environmental scholarship on this issue, and do so before it is too late.

I doubt that we'll miss our growth fetish after we say good-bye to it. We've had tons of growth—growth while wages stagnated, jobs fled our borders, life satisfaction flatlined, social capital eroded, poverty mounted, and the environment declined.

The environmentalists, for their part, have got to abandon their silo and do things like embrace the excellent social agenda laid out by Bob Reich in *Aftershock*.⁴⁰ There, he advocates a series of far-reaching and admirable measures to address America's vast social insecurity and income disparities. Reich bases his case for such measures on the need to restore the purchasing power of the middle class so that their consumerism can in turn spur economic growth and create jobs.⁴¹ While I support Reich's prescriptions, I believe the logic of greater economic security and equality leads in a different direction. Over time, Reich's measures would, happily, dampen consumerist impulses, as Robert Frank and others have noted,⁴² and a virtuous circle becomes possible because, as Amitai Etzioni observed recently, a societal shift away from consumerism will make redistribution policies more possible.⁴³

I find hope that real change is indeed possible in many places. Progressive causes are turning to the task of building grassroots political strength. There's a proliferation across the American landscape of new models of enterprise and community development and revitalization. There's a growing questioning of consumerist lifestyles, and people are fed

40. REICH, *supra* note 7, at 127–40 (2010).

41. *Id.*

42. See Robert H. Frank, *Income Inequality: Too Big to Ignore*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 17, 2010, at BU5; Robert H. Frank, *Building the Bridges to a Sustainable Recovery*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 12, 2010, at BU5.

43. Amitai Etzioni, *Spent: America After Consumerism*, THE NEW REPUBLIC, Jun. 17, 2009, <http://www.tnr.com/article/spent>.

up with our failing politics. Then, there's the birth of a series of "new economy" organizations and initiatives that are committed to linking these issues and forging new strengths for systemic change. Among these initiatives are the New Economy Network,⁴⁴ the New Economics Institute,⁴⁵ the New Economy Working Group,⁴⁶ the 3rd Millennium Economy Project, and the Capital Institute.⁴⁷ Included here are projects seeking to move America beyond consumerism and to dethrone GDP, efforts where Demos,⁴⁸ the Center for a New American Dream,⁴⁹ and numerous others are involved. If you're interested, I encourage you to join with us in these efforts and help us build the support these initiatives need.

To conclude, let me ask: What if the following occurred? Are the following occurring today? A decline in legitimacy as the system fails to deliver social and environmental well-being, together with a mounting sense of crisis and great loss, both occurring at a time of wise leadership and accompanied by the articulation of a new American narrative or story, by the appearance around the country of new and appropriate models, and by the projection of a powerful set of new ideas and policy proposals confirming that the path to a better world does indeed exist—were all these to come together, real change would be possible. And prospects would be enhanced and advanced by a new social movement, powerful and inclusive. All progressive causes face the same reality. We live and work in a system of political economy that cares profoundly about profits and growth. It cares about society and the natural world in which it operates mainly to the extent it is required to do so. So it is up to us as citizens to inject values of justice, fairness, and sustainability into this system—and government is the primary vehicle we have for accomplishing this. But, mainly, we fail at it because our politics are too enfeebled and government is more and more in the hands of powerful corporations and great wealth. Our best hope for real change is thus a fusion of those concerned about environment, social justice, and true democracy into one powerful progressive force. We are all communities of shared fate. We will rise or fall together, so we'd better get together.

Thank you.

44. NEW ECON. NETWORK, www.neweconomynetwork.org (last visited Apr. 2, 2011).

45. NEW ECON. INST., www.neweconomicsinstitute.org (last visited Apr. 2, 2011).

46. NEW ECON. WORKING GROUP, www.neweconomyworkinggroup.org (last visited Apr. 2, 2011).

47. CAPITAL INST., www.capitalinstitute.org (last visited Apr. 2, 2011).

48. DEMOS, <http://www.demos.org> (last visited Apr. 2, 2011).

49. CTR. FOR A NEW AM. DREAM, <http://www.newdream.org> (last visited Apr. 2, 2011).

