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Inaugural Robert Bateman Conversation

Progress and Growth in the 21st century

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Participants

Professor Ann Dale, Moderator, Canada Research Chair, Sustainable Community Development, Royal Roads University, Victoria, British Columbia

Dr. Peter Brown, McGill School of Environment, Department of Geography, & Department of Natural Resources Sciences, Montreal, Quebec

Mark Burch Writer / Educator, Voluntary Simplicity and Sustainable Livelihood, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Sarah Burch, Research Associate, Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation (MC³), Royal Roads University and University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia

Dennis Foon, Film Maker and Writer, Vancouver, British Columbia

Rebecca Foon, Director, Sustainability Solutions Group, Montreal, Quebec

Yuill Herbert, Director, Sustainability Solutions Group, Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia

Seth Klein, BC Director, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Vancouver, British Columbia

Dr. Sonja Novkovic, Department of Economics and Master in Management, Cooperatives and Credit Unions, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia

Frances Westley, Head of the Centre for Social Innovation at Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario

Bateman Conversation

Ann Dale

Thank you everyone for participating in what I hope will be a very interesting discussion about the meaning of 'growth' and 'progress' in the 21st century. Maybe one of the first things we have to consider is decoupling progress from growth?

We have one of the most diverse panels I have ever had the privilege of moderating. Before we start with our first question, would you mind briefly introducing yourselves and why you think this topic is important? Don't forget that you can attach power point presentations, journal articles, hyperlink websites or videos into your conversation.

Mark Burch

Hi Ann:

I am a writer, educator and group facilitator recently retired from the position of Director, Campus Sustainability Office for the University of Winnipeg. Since 1995, I've published five books about voluntary simplicity, developed and delivered an undergraduate course in simple living offered through Menno Simons College and The University of Winnipeg, and offered hundreds of workshops and presentations on voluntary simplicity. I currently have one more manuscript under review by a publisher: *The Simplicity Exercises: A Sourcebook for Simplicity Educators* and another manuscript under revision: *Mindful Sufficiency: The Inner Path to Sustainability*.

I'm interested in our discussion topic because I believe sustaining civilized human communities on Earth will be impossible without a psycho-social transformation of values, perception and motivation. While both better technology and reformed economic policies are an essential part of any sustainable future, neither is sufficient on their own to effect this transformation. We must engage practices of personal and cultural evolution first to reshape our worldviews and narratives of the good life, and then technological and economic changes will follow more or less organically in service of our new understanding of the good life.

Ann Dale

Welcome, Mark, I very much appreciate your time, I wonder why some people think 'complicated' is better than 'simple', 'bigger' is better than 'smaller'?

Rebecca Foon

Hello everyone,
My name is Rebecca Foon and I am a director with Sustainability Solutions Group. We are delighted that you are all participating in today's e-Dialogue. Through our ongoing research and work in sustainable development, we are continually brainstorming, researching and discussing new transformative models to help move the sustainable agenda forward. I look very forward to this dialogue on progress and de-growth in the 21st century.

Peter Brown

Thanks Ann for this opportunity. I have written extensively on the need for a new macro-economics based on a scientific understanding of the Earth and an ethic of RIGHT RELATIONSHIP—the name of my most recent book.

Ann Dale

Welcome Peter and Rebecca, Peter, great title, want to explain what you mean by the RIGHT RELATIONSHIP?

Peter Brown

Right Relationship means a mutually enhancing relationship with other persons, species and the Earth itself. one of the big problems with our culture is that we think the world is made up of natural resources that we may use as we see fit. This is fundamentally disrespectful. The growth fetish will tip us into climate chaos.

Mark Burch

Hi Peter:

Nice to meet you if only online. Greetings from the Winnipeg Monthly Meeting of Friends, Canada's newest Friends Meeting. I've read you book with interest and look forward to the contributions you will make from that perspective!

Peter Brown

Thanks, a pleasure to meet you as well.

Sarah Burch

Hello everyone! I'm very glad to be here. My name is Sarah Burch, and I'm a Research Associate in sustainable communities.

I'm co-appointed at Royal Roads University and the University of British Columbia and my work focuses generally on the behavioural and institutional barriers to transformative change in communities, and urban climate change governance.

I've just finished a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Oxford's Environmental Change Institute where I started a project that looks at small businesses as interesting new actors on climate change. I also worked on integrating climate change into the UK's

biodiversity policies, and studied ecosystem-based approaches to adaptation and mitigation for the European Commission.

I'm particularly interested in the idea of transformative change - tackling sources of inertia in our technological, socio-economic, and political systems to attain a fundamental transitions towards sustainability.

Yuill Herbert

Hi everyone!

I'm Yuill Herbert and I work with a co-operative called Sustainability Solutions Group. I read a report by Tim Jackson called Prosperity without Growth and have been thinking about the role of co-operative in zero growth economy. Some colleagues and I have published a paper on that subject which is attached.

File attachment [Cooperatives v 4.0.doc](#) (88.5 KB)

Sarah Burch

Thanks for this, Yuill. I like the way you present the 'growth dilemma' - certainly pertinent to these discussions.

Ann Dale

Welcome Sarah, Yuill and Rebecca. Mark, isn't this a paradox, because those with 'more' are not necessarily happier?

Mark Burch

Well, perhaps this is the case to some degree because of how we are biologically wired, as the cognitive psychologist Timothy Miller has argued---any animal that wanted less or to live more simply probably would have been at a reproductive disadvantage in evolution. So to some extent our preference for more is wired in.

But consumer culture makes a science of amplifying and directing these natural impulses and desires beyond what the planet can now supply. There are also cultural reasons why we prefer the bigger, faster, more "features" (complex) since people who

have these things get more social attention than those living closer to a sustainable scale.

Peter Brown

Yes, the market manufactures the person--the understanding of self and the good--and then makes billions catering to it puppets. We need to redefine efficiency away from satisfying ANY desire--and construct people who are citizens--otherwise we will continue to have a bad person DEMOCRACY.

Sonja Snovkovic

Hello everyone,

my name is Sonja Novkovic – department of Economics and Master in Management – Cooperatives and Credit Unions at Saint Mary’s University in Halifax. My interest is in research and promotion of economic democracy in general, and co-operative firms in particular. Co-operatives (and other social economy enterprises) should be explored as a micro-economic foundation for sustainable economic development. My interest in today’s conversations is to connect a different kind of micro economic model to progress and economic development.

Ann Dale

Welcome Sonja, glad to have you on board. We are just waiting for our colleagues, Frances Westley, Seth Klein and Dennis Foon.

Dennis Foon

Hi, I'm Dennis Foon, glad to be here. Much of my work as a playwright, screenwriter and novelist deals with the challenges facing young people – and adults in a fast-changing world. My near-future trilogy, *The Longlight Legacy*, takes place in a post-apocalyptic landscape that forced me to give a lot of thought to where our planet is headed – in both physical and spiritual terms. I like to think of it as Road Warrior meets Carlos Castaneda.

Seth Klein

Hi all,

Seth Klein here, I'm the BC Director with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. My main areas of research/work deal with poverty and inequality, so I bring that lens to this discussion (I co-chair the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition).

The CCPA-BC office is also home to a major multi-year research alliance called the Climate Justice Project. That project seeks to map out how our province becomes carbon-zero by mid century, but does so in way that reduces inequality and enhances social justice. It seeks to bring into focus a new picture of "the good life"; one that lets people see how we will live, work, play and get around in a new way. And so questions of ecological sustainability, waste, and GHG emissions are a big part of what our office is currently focused on.

The CCPA has published on questions of GDP and alternative indicators for many years. I'm sure I'll share some of those resources along the way.

Ann Dale

Welcome Seth and Dennis, I can see I will have my hands full trying to moderate such brilliance:) Dennis' comments seems to be a good jumping off point for our first question. Does the current economic system need to change and why?

Yuill Herbert

The UK report helped us really think through these issues. It is fascinating from an economic perspective.

It is available here: <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications.php?id=914>

Here is the table of contents to give you an idea:

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Sarah Burch

My perspective on whether or not the economic system needs to change comes through a social and environmental lens, with little expertise on markets, financial regulations etc. Overall my view is: absolutely, it needs to change. Escalating inequality, rampant externalities, and of course the mantra of the Occupy movement (private profits public losses) suggest that the system is fundamentally broken.

Dennis Foon

Let's say everyone suddenly came to their senses, like they do in Hollywood movies when the giant meteor is headed to the planet. Suddenly everybody stops fighting each other, looks up and goes Holy Mackerel, we gotta stop that thing! As most of you know, that Holy Mackerel moment has passed us again and again. I guess this excellent conversation is an attempt to give some rational thought to these issues in hopes of avoiding the big smack-down – or at least being able to provide viable alternatives when the time comes.

Yuill Herbert

There is no question in my mind that the way in which we think about the economy needs to change. Growth is becoming impossible, but a fascinating observation from the stats is that it is changing. Attached is a chart of economic growth for the past 50 years with a regression line. As you can see the line is declining. I can't prove this but I think that as we use up resources economic growth becomes increasingly difficult.

File attachment [GDP trends.pdf](#) (52.07 KB)

Mark Burch

Yes, and I think it would be interesting to explore the energy and resource intensity of each marginal unit of production (and consumption) going forward. This is seldom reported because it's not a simple concept for the public to grasp. But a good example is oil production. We hear much talk about the proven reserves or anticipated reserves that will be found in a certain area, but no discussion at all about the energy investment that will be required to bring it to market. The ratios have been getting worse and worse for decades now. I wonder if the same principle might apply to other products and services.

Sonia Snovkovic

Needs to change, absolutely. How exactly, and how we'll get there is another matter... I am looking forward to your views.

Seth Klein

We certainly need a major rethink of priorities.

But first, I think we need to clarify our terms. Growth is most often taken to mean growth in GDP. I think it is more helpful to distinguish between income growth (as captured by GDP) vs. growth in material throughput, resource extraction, waste and GHG emissions. I think there is a clear ecological imperative telling us that we cannot sustain the latter forms of growth. But I'm not sure we need to see a stop to GDP or income growth.

For example, GDP is best known as an equation that we all learn in Economics 100: $GDP = C$ (consumer spending) + I (investment) + G (government spending) + $X-M$ (net imports/trade).

If we are to rise to the challenge of climate change, I think we would rightly expect to see a decline in C (less consumer spending on useless things, and a great deal of redistribution within that, with higher income households spending less and poor households spending more), and a decline in $X-M$ (as we replace GHG-generating trade with more local production). However, I think we would need to see more G (as governments spend more on meeting our core needs together, and on GHG reduction measures such as building retrofits, public transit improvements, inter-city high speed rail, etc.), and quite possibly an increase in I (as the private sector spends on new technology and capital equipment that allows it to capture and lower emissions). The net result of these shifts may well be that GDP still remains positive (at least for a few decades), given the scope of the task at hand.

The point here is that while GDP may still grow, we would see a dramatic shift in the component parts of the GDP equation.

(An analogous example would be how we re-make the economy during WWII: we saw a large reduction, indeed rationing, of consumer goods, and a redirection of resources by government and the private sector. People certainly changed their priorities, virtually over-night. But overall GDP increased. Rising to the challenge of climate change will ultimately require a societal effort and re-direction of resources of a similar scale.)

Peter Brown

I wonder if anyone could comment on the relationship between the money supply and the decline in Earth's life support systems. Keynes worried about the liquidity trap—but the central banks have engineered a liquidity bomb/thoughts?

Sarah Burch

By way of a general comment on the need for change in the current economic system I risk taking the sophistication of the discussion down a notch or two with a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon:

<http://slyoyster.hypervocal.com/cheap-thrills/2011/decades-old-calvin-and-hobbes-strip-succinctly-explains-occupy-wall-street-movement/>

Seth Klein

Oh that's a classic Calvin and Hobbes. Love it.

Ann Dale

Sarah, I think perhaps a loss of humour, wonder and beauty make us all poorer, thank you.

I am sensing we have consensus on the first question, that yes, the economy needs to change. One the things I find interesting is how one model became the only dominant narrative and why? I also wonder what happened to the government policy of the 1950s that argued for a somewhat equitable distribution of wealth to create a vibrant middle class, albeit to support continual growth. Why has steady-state economics so failed to gain traction? Any answers anyone? and Dennis, why can't we see the looming spaceship especially given the last two years of economic turbulence? Mark, any comments on that as well? Answers to Peter's last question? Seth, I didn't know about that equation, it factors in government expenditures, but another question, most political campaigns are fought on no new taxes, the taxman cometh, and taxes are a government's income to sustain critical services?

Peter Brown

On Ann's question about the dominant narrative, higher education has to take LOTS OF THE BLAME. what is taught in economics and finance is based on 18th century metaphysics and science. Economics MUST be rescued from the neo-classical nonsense. Finance is the handmaiden of a scheme blind to science and ethics. Anyone at a university who thinks like we do needs to attack from WITHIN!

Seth Klein

I think, Ann, that the reason we have not seen traction on a steady-state economics is two-fold:

- 1) It requires a great deal of income redistribution; and
- 2) No growth is fundamentally anathema to the capitalist model. Businesses (at least those with external investors) are all about growth. it is their raison d'etre.

If we are to achieve a steady-state economy, it inherently means a larger role of the government, or other non profit-seeking sectors as we meet our core needs.

Mark Burch

I agree but I would add some other factors as well:

1. Growth has always been proffered as the alternative to sharing. If we can grow the economic pie, then I really don't have to think about how large my piece is because yours may grow without my having to do anything different.

2. I also think that growth is to a great degree structural in the economy. How could anyone fulfill their contractual obligations to pay interest on 30 year bonds, or mortgages, or contracted union pay raises, etc., unless the economy continues to grow and produce surpluses?

Ann Dale

Doesn't this argue that we have to get the 'prices right'? In reply to Mark's last very thoughtful differences between growth, progress and development, I attach a paper written with a colleague on why human systems never go to optimal scale, but always to maximal.

File attachment [Scale.pdf](#) (117.51 KB)

Peter Brown

We have to take a look at zero or negative interest so growth is not compelled mathematically.

Dennis Foon

Why can't we see the collision coming? I'd add that Denial is an powerful force. And when combined with fear - and there's a lot of it right now - you have a difficult and dangerous situation, stoked on by plutocratic propaganda. We're at a tipping point, , but it's also an opportunity for positive change.

Mark Burch

I think there are a number of psychological factors at play in our collective inability to see "smack down" moments coming, or even recognize them when they are happening. If the sustainability crisis was like an on-rushing meteor a la Hollywood, maybe we'd get it. But I think Howard Kunstler got it right when he described the future as a "Long Emergency"---something so slow moving that it escapes normal human perceptions of time (we are notoriously short-term thinkers) and also escapes our perceptions of scale--very large scale changes like climate change being harder to perceive and process than things that happen closer to our body scale and perceptual limits (daily weather events).

Sarah Burch

I agree with the responses to Ann's question, although I would add that at the root of it all is a very deep set of values. In the industrialized West we've generally been at the mercy of a co-ordinated and extremely well-funded effort to build a sense of individualism and personal achievement/acquisition. These are the values that are at the heart of the capitalist model.

Frances Westley

Sorry for my late arrival. I have taken a few minutes to read through the comments and this is already a rich discussion. Let me briefly say, by way of an introduction, that I am a professor at University of Waterloo interested in social innovation. An important theme in this work is an emerging discussion around social finance, which is an umbrella term to cover efforts being made by governments, financial institutions and foundations to create new pools of resources for people who have alternative and innovative solutions to intractable problems, including those around conservation. While this is by no means a panacea for a system gone amuck, it offers a ray of hope for a shift in resource flows.

Ann Dale

Welcome, Francis. Mark has referred to simplicity, Peter to the 'right relationship', Sarah to transformative change, Seth's equation, which leads me to my second question, is there a fundamental difference between growth, progress and development, perhaps these concepts should be decoupled? I strongly encourage our artists, Rebecca and Dennis, to comment on how the arts could contribute to this critical question? And Frances, dear colleague, jump, heaven only knows we are at a stage in our evolution where we need all the social innovation we can get! Peter, can you give me more explanation about what you mean by zero or negative interest?

Mark Burch

I think of growth as primarily pertaining to scale, number, mass or extent. It's a physical increase in the scale or extent of something---in the present context, the scale of the economy relative to the ecosphere upon which it depends for materials, energy, ecological services and waste sinks. Growth is commonly, but inappropriately, conflated with both development and progress.

By "development" I understand a qualitative change in something. Our society takes a positive view of development although if we reflect even briefly on how we use the word, it's clear that it isn't always positive. People can "develop" cancers as well as healthy muscles; "developing" a subdivision may denude an entire landscape; epidemics "develop" as their pathogens spread and mutate, etc. But note that in these examples, there may be no growth in size or scale, but rather a change in the qualitative aspects of something. The subdivision may be no larger than the forest or farmland it replaced, but it will be qualitatively different at every level.

By "progress" I understand positively valued development. We progress when we bring about qualitative improvement in our situation, especially when we do so without further growth. The problem with progress however, is that what we mean by "qualitative improvement" tends to be judged from a mostly anthropocentric perspective. We hope, of course, for "synergies" where human progress can also be marked down as progress for the entire ecosphere, but in practice, at least in my experience, these synergies are very difficult to find. Examples might be permaculture design regimes, or perhaps restorative architecture.

Frances Westley

Decoupled, perhaps, but perhaps put into new relationship. Under what circumstances does growth actually equal progress or development and when does it have a negative relationship on these other elements. I like Bill McKibbin's argument that in North America, for example, human happiness and economic growth kept step until the 1950s; since then they have been going in opposite directions. Clearly, up to a point,

economic growth builds human well being, is experienced by others as progress and development. But past a certain threshold they seem to be in tension. That's something that needs more probing.

Sarah Burch

Absolutely, Frances. Progress is an evolving and deeply cultural notion, as is development. The challenge comes, I think, when conflict occurs amongst simultaneous notions of progress, or development of one comes at the cost of development for another.

Seth Klein

Yes Frances. I also like how Bill McKibben (of <http://www.350.org/>) puts it: We are now a mature adult economy (unlike poorer developing nations). We are past our childhood and teenage growth-spurt years. We no longer need more growth to make a difference to our wellbeing and happiness.

But we do need to keep in good shape. We still have work to do. We're not there yet. And a big piece of that is rethinking the distribution of income, and deciding which of our needs we want to meet together (through our taxes, governments and other collective institutions).

Peter Brown

Hi Francis--good to know you are there. Money is complex and few understand it i think. but there is an argument that compound interest requires growth because there has to be more economic activity to pay back loans. if i borrow 100\$ at 4% i have to pay back 104 in the long run. Negative interest is a way to keep people form hoarding money. it creates incentives for fast turnover.

Seth Klein

Yes, we should absolutely separate growth and progress.

In some respects, I think the de-growth debate is distracting. GDP growth is neither good nor bad – it depends what form it takes. The point is to focus on what ought to be our real goals and how we choose to define "progress" and "a good life":
Dramatically lowering our GHG emissions;

Ending poverty and unemployment;
Stopping the unending depletion of our natural resources;
Enhancing true wellbeing and happiness.

And conversely, we ought to stop using GDP growth as the benchmark indicator for how we judge our governments. That needs to end (which is more of a political-cultural project). We should judge our governments on the basis of how they achieve the goals just mentioned. They are the measures that matter.

If our ecological goal is to end resource depletion, there are concrete policy tools to deal with that which we should focus on; we should just set hard caps on such activities (just as we need to set hard caps on GHG emissions). This will have a profound impact on prices. And we will see how that plays out in GDP terms (but it is a side issue). But using these tools (and the resulting increase in prices) will also have a harmful impact on lower-income households. So we need to keep that reality front-and-centre and use other policy tools to mitigate those impacts.

Ann Dale

Seth, hate to put you on the spot, what are some of the other policy tools?

Seth Klein

Not at all. I'm glad you asked. This is exactly what we've been looking at in the Climate Justice Project. Here are a few examples:

Marc Lee (our senior economist) models in this paper how to do fair and effective carbon pricing. He models a much higher carbon tax, but with the regressive impacts mitigated through public spending and a broad lower-income credit. You can find it here:

<http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/fair-and-effective-carbon-pricing>

Similarly, we look at how to tackle lowering household emissions, but in a way that does not increase energy poverty in this report:

<http://www.policyalternatives.ca/energy-poverty>

I would argue, to give another example, that if we are to truly treat natural gas as a transition fuel, then we need to bring in annual extraction caps, and then have a 30 year plan to winding-down the industry. But again, we need other tools to mitigate the impact on low-income households and just transition policies for workers.

Sonia Snovkovic

Growth is the change in income (GDP or GNP/capita), i.e. production over time. Development includes income, but adds longevity (life expectancy) and education - I am talking about the Human development index here. Lately, that is adjusted by income inequality as well. Progress to me is not regressing in the human condition (wide sense), plus improving the human condition -including knowledge and general awareness of the world around us.

Ann Dale

Sonja, interesting discriminations, thank you. So, divorce is good for GDP, people have to pay lawyers, have two places and so forth, climate change is also good for GDP, people have to buy more air conditioners (per.com MacNeill). Development includes the concept of social justice, or something I am still struggling to understand, Soja's concept of spatial justice. Perhaps it is the difference on emphasis between 'being' and 'becoming'.

Seth Klein

I'm sure we would all agree that GDP is an imperfect indicator (with some perverse elements as noted). That said (and just to play devil's advocate a bit), it does serve as a useful proxy for our collective income as a society. Our ability to carry debt as a society is best represented by the debt-to-GDP ratio (if GDP stops growing, it becomes increasingly hard for government to invest in needed new infrastructure). Government revenues (on which we all depend for public services) tends to increase in tandem with GDP growth. And unemployment and poverty rates tend to track GDP trends in our society (although not always).

I note all this just to emphasize my earlier point, namely, that what we ought really to be focused on is stemming the growth in material/resource use, but not necessarily income/GDP growth. And additionally, that we need (via significant increases in upper-income tax rates) to be shifting the distribution of income from the wealthy to the poor and unemployed, and from unnecessary consumption to needed government spending on our shared public services and green infrastructure.

Sarah Burch

Just a comment on cross-cultural differences in notions of development - having just returned from England, I gained a new appreciation for what I think is the English preference (long nurtured and pursued) for pastoral scenes. 'Wilderness' is best if cleaned up, made accessible and gentle, symbolic of broader mastery over the whims of nature. Canada seems to have a much greater level of comfort with wilderness, growing I presume out of a frontier mentality. This isn't a value judgment of either approach - just interesting that notions of development may collide even in the industrialized West.

Peter Brown

Hi everyone:

Please excuse this "commercial" message. Please take a look at our website and help bring degrowth ideas to the desert that is North America.
Just put montreal.degrowth.org into google

Please publicize widely.

Frances Westley

Or the sum total of all the development means that the earth support system is exhausted. I think we need innovation on all fronts and we need governments to regulate so that it is economically viable for corporations to invest in sustainability innovation. We need government to innovate so that it can take more risks with new ways of doing things. We need the not for profit sector to continue to pressure government to regulate and innovate and to keep an alternate dialogue alive...one that stresses well being and happiness as targets as important as economic growth.

Yuill Herbert

One of the big questions or debates in the ecological economics field is whether humans can innovate their way around ecological limits. Do you think innovation has its limits or no?

Frances Westley

I think we can innovate our way in wonderful ways. But there are limits that are inherent in the current institutions that govern our economy, motivates our corporations and shapes our cultures. Only a few will choose voluntary simplicity in my view, but many will accept it if our institutions create the conditions. Yes, important innovations can

begin at local levels, with communities and inspired programs, but we also have to link these with opportunities at institutional levels, to great the broad system change that will make these changes "part of the water supply".

Yuill Herbert

I've been trying to reformulate innovation around social, economic and cultural innovation as opposed to technological innovation. It feels like the only socio-economic sphere in which our society can be truly creative right now is in technology (ipods to space travel) but there is little freedom to discuss let alone try different economic theories or mechanisms of organising that are non-hierarchical, or.... these experiments exist but all very much in the margins and are disregarded - I think the correct word is a hegemony?

In some senses the degrowth movement is a provocation. The danger is that it will be dismissed or marginalised. The opportunity is that it might frame a larger discussion about what the goals of society really are.

Peter Brown

Degrowth is not just about moving away from GDP, but from a form of life that is frantic and fraught with tension. shorter work days, fewer children, less control of the Earth. What in my WATER ETHICS book I call compassionate retreat.

Sarah Burch

In "Stone Age Economics," economist Marshall Sahlins offers a useful counterpoint to the prevailing view that humanity, through modernization and industrialization, evolved from an existence that was, in the words of Thomas Hobbes "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." Sahlins presents hunter-gatherer groups as the original affluent society, and offers evidence for this claim by examining both the lifestyles of the member of such groups, and common meanings of the concepts of scarcity and poverty. Scarcity, to Sahlins, is merely a relationship between means and ends, while poverty is a social status rather than an absolute and objectively defined state. In contrast with modern culture, which has created the concept of infinite needs, hunter-gatherer societies define material needs (based on the requirement of portability) that are well within the capabilities of the technology and time available to them. In this way, these societies were able achieve a kind of material plenty, adequate health and relatively abundant leisure time. In fact, Sahlins asserts that malnutrition and starvation are far more rampant in today's society of technological and material excess than they

ever were in hunter-gatherer communities.

Peter Brown

On Sahlins --yes this spot on----universal scarcity is a stipulation of the mad people in econ.

Mark Burch

At the risk of departing somewhat from a fascinating discussion of economics, I must say something about my principle passion which is voluntary simplicity. But in a broader sense, the psycho-social dimension of our sustainability challenges. I'm impressed with the miracles of technology and appreciate, if often I don't fully understand, the machinations of economics. But it has always seemed to me that both of these serve our worldview, our narrative of the good life.

I think that if we invested even 10% of the resource and energy we currently do in promoting consumption, and helped ourselves fashion a culture of low consumption living, this would be an essential first step to really creating the stimulus necessary for different takes both on technology and on economics. We need a transformation of what we want, what blows our hair back, what we recognize as success and worthy of social merit. These things are built into our worldview, which currently is heavily consumerist and materialist. But many alternatives have existed in the past, and do so currently, and we are much better now at telling ourselves new stories about what matters most in life.

So I think any strategy intended to develop a more sustainable civilization must address this psycho-social-cultural dimension of our narratives of the good life. Any thoughts?

Dennis Foon

I've interviewed a wide range of children and youth in numerous countries, some living in poverty, others living in comfort. No matter what their circumstances, they all shared an optimism for the future, compassion for others, a love of nature and the planet...and a desire to play. Much of my work is certainly an attempt to reflect and reinforce those qualities. But at some point, as we age, economic anxiety and other factors start working their dark magic and those essential values become subsumed by "adulthood." I believe that deep down, people mourn those qualities of childhood (even Murdoch has his Rosebud!), and under the correct conditions, they would be willing to try a non-growth based, cooperative economic model.

Ann Dale

What are the correct conditions for this to happen, my dear colleague? One of the principal ones for me, is that all museums, plays, performances should be free? We need to get back in touch with our senses, what is important to us, I blog about the meaning of 'the good society'. Peter just introduced another compelling concept, compassionate retreat:) Mark, in your response to Yuill, do we need to decouple wants and needs?

Dennis Foon

When we created *Feeling Yes, Feeling No*, A Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program, we knew that the larger problem of misogyny and victimization of children began in the family. We created the program as a series of workshops – with teachers, parents, police, and finally children – all to build awareness and to create an infrastructure of communication, goodwill, as well as a chain of command to respond to reports of abuse. At first people were very suspicious of our message (this was late 70's, early 80's) but when they realized it was a good way to keep their children safe, they bought in. This kind of small community development is one way, perhaps to think about promoting degrowth. The program, by the way, is now a very successful NFB film that's distributed world-wide, which is only to say it's become a grassroots communication/community building vehicle.

Sarah Burch

"My body's nobody's body but mine!" I'm a beneficiary of that campaign... I still find myself humming that song. :)

Dennis Foon

Mark, with respect to voluntary simplicity, I'm in your corner with this. Much of my writing (both for adults and children) focuses on the family, because I believe that unit is a microcosm of society. If you want to implement change, start small.

Yuill Herbert

It would be really interesting to hear how economists explain voluntary simplicity. I'm guessing it goes against most economy theory...? It what you are talking about our cultural worldview? Is growth and the desire for more a fundamental element of the dominant culture in Canada? I think that growth is irrelevant for most people, who want a good job and a happy life- farmers are a good example of that- they are generally not about accumulating, rather about making do.

Mark Burch

People living in Canada are just as materialist and consumerist in their orientation to life as anyone else. We are very much influenced as well by American media that strongly shape attitudes in that direction.

But I also find in workshops I offer and class discussions, that people can still access a personal, immediate awareness of what contributes most to a good life: (a) healthy relationships with family and community; (b) adequate leisure time and access to leisure "resources" such as clean water, wild spaces, etc.; (c) good work, which isn't defined by income but rather by the quality of the work experience and the sense that they are making a constructive contribution of something useful to society. Compared to these values, growth in income is what people settle for when they can't get what really makes for a good life.

Ann Dale

Sarah, can you talk a little about changing development pathways, first explaining what you mean by this? Dennis, do you have a place to go to 'see' more about my body is mine?

Sarah Burch

Absolutely, Ann.

The idea of transformative change grabs me because I'm seeing plenty of discussion about action on climate change – action plans, strategies, and initiatives abound. While this might be considered an improvement over blatant denial that a problem exists, I'm

curious about what potential these plans actually have to do more than tinker around the edges – i.e. Will any of them get us anywhere near the targets of 33% reductions in GHGs by 2020 and 80% by 2050.

These kind of reductions imply a transformation of the current energy system, and of modes of production/consumption. But I wonder what this looks like? Colleagues of mine would argue that a carbon neutral world would look exactly the same, but when we flick the light switch energy powered by solar would be flowing rather than electricity from coal. I'm not convinced. I think that our communities and values are also in need of a transformation of the goal of carbon neutrality (to say nothing of other goals – such as greater equality, better education for all, enhanced biodiversity etc).

But how to get there? I've come to appreciate the overwhelming forces of inertia in the system. Technologies are not independent beasts, but bound up in rules, organizations, values, habits etc. Out of this has emerged the idea of the development path.

In the 2007 assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change we defined a development path as “complex arrays of technological, economic, social, institutional, cultural and biophysical characteristics that determine the interactions between human and natural systems, including consumption and production patterns in all countries, over time at a particular scale.”

Dennis Foon

http://www.nfb.ca/film/feeling_yes_feeling_no/

Peter Brown

I agree with Frances about the limits of innovation. Jevon's paradox is always in the shadow of technical innovation. Shale gas is not likely to reduce energy consumption, but to lower the price of coal due to less demand and thus increase emissions-- government control is essential--but nothing is discussed at the fed level here or in the US.

Ann Dale

My dear colleague, how do we begin this discussion then?

Seth Klein

I agree very much with Peter's point about the Jevon's Paradox. That's why I contend we need to put hard caps on that which we are trying to limit (GHGs and resource depletion and waste). In the absence of that, efficiency gains in one area will just lead to more consumption somewhere else.

Peter Brown

Yes, what is getting under way now is an acceleration in the race to the precipice.

Sarah Burch

I agree, Seth - this seems to be the result of a total lack of systems thinking, and appreciation of cascading effects.

Peter Brown

But the model underlying econ and finance is Newtonian, not Prigogine. I just read lots of Beinhocker's ORIGIN OF WEALTH--a nominal complexity evolutionary economy book; but he seems to miss the main message of thermodynamics that there are limits to Earth's life support capacity.

Mark Burch

I too have noticed some Newtonian references in our conversation. When I'm feeling hopeless I just remember that society is not the Titanic--a massive physical bulk that makes its way by sheer force of momentum. We are rather more like a flock of birds, or a school of fish, and we can change direction on a dime if we have a good reason to do so. Witness the Arab Spring...

Sarah Burch

Further - the reason I'm keen on finding levers that trigger a shift in the development path as a whole, not simply one technology, one sector, one geographic area etc. But

this requires coherent policies that consider synergies/tradeoffs etc.

Yuill Herbert

Interesting concept. Is a development pathway something that is occurring and to reduce GHG emissions we need to alter that pathway? Or is a development pathway a means to avoid the inertia of the status quo?

Sarah Burch

In my view we're always on a development path of some kind - and the path itself (or various aspects of it) is imbued with inertia. This could be a low emissions path or a high emissions one.

Rebecca Foon

We recently organized an e-Dialogue on Sustainable Cities. A major barrier identified by municipalities (with regards to moving the sustainable agenda forward) is process inertia and the need for integrated planning and decision making. Breaking down silos...and getting people talking. Hence, the importance of diverse dialogue, fostering creativity, creating collective solutions...like what we are doing today...

Ann Dale

Ah, the notions of limits, Peter, I would love to hear Mark's take on why we deny limits, biophysical, economically and socially, and why we think we will all die in our sleep when we are 86? I am being too intrusive as a moderator:) And with respect to what Sarah and Yuill just discussed, development is part of the human condition, no?

Dennis Foon

Another thought about cooperation. There was study done some years ago where they tried to determine how to get young people past prejudice. By far, the most effective technique was to just give a diverse group a physical problem to solve together. In building the structure together, they began to also build bonds. That physicalization and cooperation was far more effective than any amount of lectures, punishments or lessons in history.

Yuill Herbert

Very interesting. I have been focused on the model of economic cooperatives as a potential structure to address environmental limits but if they can also address social challenges- I wonder if anyone has studied this...?

March Burch

It can be fun though to put Jevon's paradox in cultural context. I think the paradox holds only for a society in which the narrative of the good life is that of consumption. A person living in such a culture can't imagine any else to do with the savings from efficiencies or conservation except to go shopping for something else. What if we used innovation differently? What if we said savings from conservation can be used to purchase more leisure to learn a language, meditate, make love, hang out with the kids pushing clouds through the sky? Then Jevon's paradox would break down because savings from efficiency/conservation would be converted into time, not more consumption.

Peter Brown

Agree wholeheartedly.

Rebecca Foon

Fantastic, thus creating a major societal shift in values. Veering us away from deep embedded feelings of social competition for material wealth, greed, etc. A shift in values towards peace, well-being, health and community building (values that are not rooted in unsustainable modes of production and consumption) need to come from- or be inspired - by alternative models that embrace diversity, culture, art, community, humanity...

Seth Klein

I think the project before us is both a cultural and a policy one. I agree that, at a cultural level, we are fundamentally asking people to re-imagine what they understand the good

life to be (away from one based on the accumulation of more stuff, a bigger house, more cars, more travel, etc.).

We are asking people to abandon 50 years of advertizing bombardment telling us what to desire.

But we also need policy (including hard caps on emissions and redistribution of income). Because until that cultural shift occurs, even giving people more time will not reduce consumption (I find, for example, I do most of my consumption on the weekends).

Sarah Burch

I absolutely agree, Seth. While I do hold a fundamental faith in the power of the individual to trigger change, innovate, demonstrate compassion etc I also feel that the 'school of fish' has some pretty base inclinations... and guidance in a structural sense is required if we are to accelerate a transition.

Mark Burch

I would never pose cultural transformation and policy development as in any way mutually exclusive. I think we need both. I just see policy as evolving from our worldview, even though it can certainly also exert a formative influence on worldviews.

Peter Brown

Yes, look at the French degrowth literature LaTouche for example.

Seth Klein

BTW, this is my first time participating in an e-dialogue. It's exhausting!

Yuill Herbert

It keeps you on your toes, no?

Ann Dale

Seth, if you find it exhausting, try to moderate:) I think this is probably our fastest dialogue yet, you guys are all brilliant, and perhaps it is a function of your diversity, this is the most diverse panel I have moderated thanks to working with the wonderful people I am privileged to work with, Sarah Burch, Rebecca Foon, Yuill Herbert and Rob Newell. I would like to add that in addition to being an urban planner, Rebecca is a wonderful rock cellist and Dennis Foon is her father. And Sarah's father is Mark Burch, maybe their relationships have contributed to the quality of this conversation, with some already established trust, Rebecca, we haven't hear from you?

Let's move to our third question, given the time, and my apologies to the e-audience, normally we take questions, but this is moving so fast on me that this will be a variation.

Are there other viable economic models that are not based on growth?

Yuill Herbert

It may be that at a micro level one of the solutions to the challenge of growth is right there under our noses- the co-operative sector which include consumer co-ops such Calgary Coop, MEC, Federated Co-op, Scotsburn Dairy and hundreds more as well as credit unions such as Vancity, Metro, Credit Union Atlantic and others. In public corporations, growth is a necessity. In co-operatives growth is a constraint on their goal of providing goods and services to their members.

Sonja- it would be very interesting to hear your thoughts on this...

Sonia Snovkovic

Yuill is faster here, so he may already be typing away....
alternative systems - co-operative systems seem to offer one alternative. Not pressed by return on capital. they do grow, but slower and for a different purpose. To reach scale economies they form networks; they also use spinoffs as a model of growth (easier to preserve democratic decision making).

Ann Dale

Sonja, any references for us?

Sonia Novkovic

Most recent and very interesting book capital and the debt trap :Learning from cooperatives in the global crisis. Claudia Sanchez Bajo and Bruno Roelants, Palgrave

Peter Brown

Peter Victor and Tim Jackson are the best i know of----both have recent books. i am working with the Capital Institute on a report called the Third Millennium Economy report that will have five sections: 1. Limits. 2. Ethics
3 Macro models, 4. Finance and 5 Governance. hopefully, about 50 pages.

Sarah Burch

I may unfortunately have to dash in a moment to teach my class... but I wanted to draw your attention to a rather thoughtful blog post that captures some of what we've been talking about (especially wrt what we value, how the system is built etc). It's a bit of a read so perhaps is a post-dialogue thing...

<http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/10/12/1025555/-Open-Letter-to-that-53-Guy>

Seth Klein

On the question of a new (or reformed) economic model: The CCPA published a nice short paper back in 2002 (by Peter Victor and the late UBC economist Gideon Rosenbluth) that modeled how to end poverty and achieve full employment in a no-growth economy. You can find it here:

<http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/saving-environment>

It's somewhat technical. It's not a whole new economic model. But rather, plays with the component parts of the traditional Keynesian GDP model to show how these key goals can be achieved.

Again, the key here for this to work is a great deal of re-distribution of income. What we cannot sustain is growing inequality, with some households spending way more than they need, while others are barely making ends meet.

Mark Burch

Don't want to miss the boat here:

Key here is what is meant by “viable.” Viable in what sense?

There are certainly historical examples, as well as contemporary anthropological cases, of economies organized to meet human needs which are not based on growth. We might even say that such systems existed even in Western societies prior to the invention of capitalism in the 16th century. But it's doubtful that many of these systems could deliver an affluent consumer lifestyle on the scale we now seem to think is necessary for a good life in North America. Come to think of it, not even growth oriented globalized capitalism is up to the task as it is demonstrably destroying the ecosphere in exchange for delivering a brief period of affluence to a minority of the world's people.

In my view the key question revolves around what an economy is for? If the goal of economic activity is to deliver a lifestyle of every increasing affluence to an ever increasing population indefinitely, no such system can remain “viable” over the long term on a planet of finite size. However, if the goal of economic activity is to provide sufficient material goods and services to sustain a fixed population in the equitable pursuit of non-material values, and especially aims to define “progress” as the ability to perform this task on an ever-diminishing resource and energy footprint, then I think it would be “viable” to sustain the human experiment for a very long time indeed.

Sonia Novkovic

Another home grown model is Quebec's social economy. The idea of 'patient capital' to finance people-centered businesses (social enterprise) long term with limited return - purpose is development, not quick return. RISQ is one such fund..

Seth Klein

I think some of the solution lies in broadly increasing our sources of patient, local, and non profit-seeking capital (sources of investment that are not growth dependent, but still perfectly able to innovate and create employment). That may be credit unions, coops, social enterprise, crown corporations, pension funds... it takes many forms.

Sonia Novkovic

That's right-and more of it is on the way.

See www.cecop.coop for the book Beyond the crisis. Cooperatives, Work, Finance

Peter Brown

This has been wonderful, stimulating and it is heartening to get to know or reconnect with everyone.

Ann Dale

How to summarize such a wonderful conversation, yes, the economic system is broke on many fronts, but there are innovative ways forward, critical tipping points, but an economic system devoid of human values becomes disconnected from the public. Key messages are voluntary simplicity, social/spatial justice, grounded in the arts so we can 'see' the coming spaceship, that enhances not dampens transformative change, that decouples growth, development and psycho-social values around progress so that diverse development pathways are possible?

Any concluding comments, dear colleagues.

Mark Burch

Another interesting take on these questions is Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Maria Mies book, *The Subsistence Alternative*, ISBN 1-85649-776-3. Develops a perspective of an economy that serves life, and more of what supports and sustains life, as contrasted with our existing economy which tends to kill and feed on death.

Sarah Burch

Thank you Ann for your skillful moderation and to the group for stimulating and thoughtful discussion. I certainly hope that the discussion continues!

Mark Burch

Thanks Ann and Rebecca and all for including me in this conversation. It was stimulating. All light...Mark Burch

Peter Brown

Thanks for this opportunity Ann--many thanks.

Seth Klein

Thanks all.
- Seth