

War of the worlds:

Championing sustainable development in contested times

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Background

Two major but conflicting conceptual influences emerged into the policy arena and wider public understanding during the 1980s, the influence and pervasion of both spreading globally in the following decade.

The first of these influences was monetarism. Business models and underlying assumptions about resource flows took root and accelerated from the dawn of the European Industrial Revolution. At this time, the global population stood at around 77 million (less than one-hundredth of the current human population of 8.3 billion), and local depletion of energy-dense fuels and other minerals as well as resources such as forest products could be compensated by appropriation from a wider world perceived as boundless in an era of geographical prospecting and empire-building. Manifestation of some of the more gross environmental, nuisance and health impacts arising from wealth-generating industrial activities led to the enactment of successive legislation from the time of the UK's Alkali Act 1863: the world's first industrially focused regulation.

In the 1970s, a trend towards progressive commercial liberalisation under a free-market capitalism model was substantially accelerated by the work of US economist Milton Friedman, 'liberating' profit-making from government intervention through deregulation and wider fiscal and other policies rejecting state control. Collectively termed 'monetarism', this approach won Friedman a Nobel Prize in 1976 and had significant influence on US policy under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, in the UK during Margaret Thatcher's tenure as Prime Minister, and reshaped modern capitalism at a pan-global scale significantly through the expanding influence of multinational corporations.

Neoliberalisation was to change our understanding of money, reframing its primary purpose as investment to make more money in a deregulated state in which environmental and social concerns were largely reconceptualised as net costs and constraints. The systemic entrenchment of monetarism is evidenced in such everyday experiences as money deposited in a bank account from which interest payments are insulated from the costs of any collateral environmental and societal damage incurred in the generation of profit from investments.

The second major conceptual influence emerging throughout the 1980s was that of sustainable development. It had been recognised in the preceding decade, for example with formation of the Ramsar Convention, that ecosystems were also socio-economic systems. The Ramsar Convention, signed in 1971, explicitly recognised that the sustainability of the world's wetlands depended on 'wise use' by those inhabiting them, as a prior 'fortress conservation' model of incarcerating them behind barbed wire was manifestly failing. This conceptual approach to interdependence of ecological, economic and social development fed through to the 1981 World Conservation Strategy and onwards, with the 'triple bottom line' model achieving wider societal and political awareness following publication of 'Our Common Future' (the 'Brundtland Report') by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987.

Ironically, the entrenchment and pervasion of monetarism occurred in an era of heightening statements of commitment to sustainable development. A great deal of rhetoric flowed in the following decades about a systemic commitment to sustainable development, all the while the wrecking ball of monetarism prising apart short-term profit-taking from environmental and social considerations whilst headline metrics such as GDP (gross domestic product) were concerned only with financial throughput as if that were a proxy for lasting societal wellbeing, security and opportunity.

Attention has more latterly been paid to environmental economics and also ecosystem services, terms and ways of thinking emerging also from the 1970s and gaining traction since the 1980s, seeking to recognise the wider non-financial values of natural, human and social capitals. Often, attempts to express these wider values in monetary terms have failed to reflect that they are inherently incommensurable with money, constituting primary capitals underpinning the generation of financial capital but also of intrinsic value. Nonetheless, despite its many imperfections, the capitalist model has permeated much of the world setting down deep political roots, so representation of value in an increasingly viable form remains significant in terms of resolving conflicts between money-based policies and proclamations of a commitment to reorient society onto a sustainable pathway of development.

The resurgence of neoclassical markets

In the light of this uneasy co-existence and fractional resolution of policies founded respectively on monetarism and sustainable development principles, contemporary political shifts either side of the Atlantic give major cause for concern. These are not entirely divorced from wider geopolitical shifts, though these are not the focus of this discussion.

The withdrawal of the US from the World Health Organisation, its intent to pull out of the Paris Agreement on climate change, cancellation of international aid programmes and withdrawal of support from security agreements in Europe are part of a wider and still unfolding package of measures unilaterally rejecting consensus about a need to tackle environmental and social threats on a global stage. Box 1 lists a subset of withdrawals by the US from globally relevant and national social and environmental programmes in the first four weeks of Trump's second presidential term.

Within the US itself, stated intentions to ramp up extraction of oil and other primary industries display at best ignorance, and at worse cavalier disregard, about the adverse implications for environmental stability and the health and equity impacts that will ensue. The refocus on maximisation of short-term return on profit without regard for collateral environmental and social consequences is also evident in cancellation of policies and initiatives seeking greater social equity betraying a cavalier disregard to future generations and global cooperation around daunting challenges. Monetarism rules supreme once again, with the withdrawal or undermining of programmes not generating short-term profit, with many companies following suit.

Box 1: Withdrawals from social and environmental commitments by the Trump presidency

- As just one example, a speech by President Donald Trump at Mar-A-Lago on 18th February 2025 listed a range of US-funded development initiatives that would be axed under an Executive Order disbanding the USaid programme including, as just one example, *“\$25million to promote biodiversity conservation and protect licit livelihoods to promote socially*

*responsible behaviours in the country of Colombia... for something that nobody ever heard of*¹. Though just one of many cited examples of slashes for former USaid investments, many of them with bigger price tags, is particularly worrying given the final clause “...for something that nobody ever heard of”. Does this mean that the President and his team has ever heard of biodiversity conservation, licit livelihoods, socially responsible behaviours? And where is the challenge from within the political leadership and wider media to this manifest ignorance and narrow-mindedness?

- The US has also in 2025 withdrawn by presidential decree on 20th January 2025 from the World Health Organization (WHO)².
 - A presidential decree ‘rejects and denounces’ the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)³.
 - Another presidential decree announces withdrawal from the Paris Climate Change agreement⁴.
 - A further decree abandons all DEI (diversity, equality and inclusivity) programmes⁵ in the US, amongst other retractions from multinational agreements and domestic environmental and social protections in pursuit of a narrow model of ‘growth’.
- The US has also avowed ‘reindustrialisation’, largely resurrecting old industries including polluting activities such as fossil fuel extraction under the president’s repeated mantra of “drill, baby, drill” that targets not just US production but global development of coal extraction, the dirtiest of all fossil fuels, supported by climate-sceptic US energy secretary Chris Wright⁶.

The UK is no model of robust commitment to sustainable development with a ‘growth, growth, growth’ agenda including relaxations in prior net zero and other environmental commitments as well as social constraints including limiting objections to planning proposals, all with worryingly naive neoclassical resonance. The building of a third runway at Heathrow Airport had formerly been opposed on the basis of incompatibility with the Paris Agreement, yet approval appears to have now been steamrollered through for narrow financial reasons. A similar heavy-handed approach to approval of proposals for a second operational runway at Gatwick Airport and expansion of Luton Airport seems to be following suit. Commitments to achieving ‘net zero’ climate-active emissions also appear to be under threat, ignoring the costs inherent in potentially existential climate instability and the lost opportunities of stimulating ‘clean technology’ investment.

¹ Forbes Breaking News (2025) Trump Brings The Receipts To Read Off Shocking List Of Taxpayer-Funded Government Programs. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51gv4Kzasnl&t=265s> (Accessed 26 March 2025).

² The White House (2025) Withdrawing the United States from the World Health Organization. The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/withdrawing-the-united-states-from-the-worldhealth-organization/> (Accessed 26 March 2025).

³ Segal, M. (2025) U.S. Rejects UN Sustainable Development Goals. ESGTODAY. <https://www.esgtoday.com/u-s-rejects-un-sustainable-development-goals/> (Accessed 26 March 2025).

⁴ The White House (2025) Putting America first in international environmental agreements. The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/putting-america-first-in-international-environmental-agreements/> (Accessed 26 March 2025).

⁵ The White House (2025) Ending radical and wasteful government DEI programs and preferencing. The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/> (Accessed 26 March 2025).

⁶ Milman, O. and Noor, D. (2025) Trump’s ‘drill, baby, drill’ agenda could keep the world hooked on oil and gas. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/12/trump-fossil-fuels-oil-and-gas> (Accessed 26 March 2025).

The Government has suggested that hard-won progress resulting in a legally mandated requirement for biodiversity net gain (BNG) may be abandoned as a constraint on built development. We have also seen relaxation of long-held limitations of development in green belts, conveniently and ambiguously reframed as 'grey belt' in a revision to the National Planning Policy Framework to release formerly protected land perceived as a constraint "*...to deliver the Government's commitments to achieve economic growth and build 1.5 million new homes*"⁷. Whilst there may be a case that some appeals against development proposals are based on the 'Nimby' (not in my back yard) effect, a statement that all objections need to be limited so as not to constrain the holy cow of the 'growth' agenda ignores the fact that some have very real environmental and/or social cases to answer.

Meanwhile, controls on the adverse environmental consequences of farming activities appear to be under review, and water service company bills have risen by a record percentage as a reward for manifest historic failures to invest in infrastructure whilst water service companies have taken money out of the businesses in the form of substantial, often tax-free dividends much of which flows overseas to foreign owners.

The need to invest more in defence consequent from US withdrawal of support for Europe is not inherently contentious, but raiding the UK's already much-depleted international development budget to make up a great deal of the shortfall is a signal of growing unilateralism this side of the Atlantic as well as naivety that failure to support international development needs can deepen instabilities in turn increasing the need for defence expenditure. Sadly, this is not new as, in 2013, the then UK Prime Minister David Cameron was reported via sources in his own Conservative political party to have ordered aides to "*...get rid of all the green crap*" from energy bills in a drive to bring down costs, abandoning a hollow promise to run the greenest government ever⁸.

Powerful multinational businesses, such as BP, rowing back on investment in renewable energy generation to chase the dollar through a refocus on searching for and extracting fossil fuels, spread this message of short-termism and self-interest around the globe, much as such institutions did in the 1980s, spreading the mantra of monetarism. The influence of narrow monetarist thinking still runs deep in the minds of many political elites, and is embedded deeply in many business assumptions and norms as well as shareholder expectations.

Sustainable growth

In short, we are facing a resurgent era of unconstrained neoliberalism, rolling back environmental and social protections hard-won over a half-century. Let us be absolutely clear that this cannot lead to the shiny outcome of 'growth' it claims to serve. The growth agenda and sustainable development may be misrepresented as in opposition by those who are ignorant or wilfully self-regarding with respect to short-term profit-taking, but the reality is that they are close bedfellows. At its core, sustainability simply means the capacity to continue. If development practises undermine the social

⁷ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2025) Consultation outcome: Proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system. Gov.uk. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system> (Accessed 26 March 2025).

⁸ Mason, R. (2013) David Cameron at centre of 'get rid of all the green crap' storm. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/nov/21/david-cameron-green-crap-comments-storm> (Accessed 26 March 2025).

and environmental capital upon which they depend, there is no way that this self-extinguishing trajectory could be genuinely construed as growth.

The roots of trees and grass, and the base of food webs, are essential foundations for stable ecosystems. They are also the nourishing foundations of secure and continuing flows of natural resources located in stable regimes in value chains are vital for sustainable growth. Wider dimensions of sustainable development are not merely germane but vital to securing a trajectory of growth that does not ultimately exhaust itself. Dissociating 'growth' from foundational sustainable development principles is, ultimately, an oxymoron.

The contemporary world is far removed from the massively lower population levels and perception of resource limitations at the outset of the Industrial Revolution, from which many assumptions still underpinning industrial and agricultural policies and associated markets are still substantially unreconstructed. There is though now unprecedented awareness and scrutiny of the environmental and social consequences of resource use. We also live with accepted or mandatory standards, such as ISO14001 or the EU Corporate Social Responsibility Directive, designed to enhance value chain sustainability.

Interestingly, compliance with these standards by business practices may now inherently conflict with sourcing from not only currently known pariah regimes but those withdrawing social and environmental protections. It is possible that leadership from multinational businesses, whether defensively or as a matter of values-led commitment with foresight about how future markets will be shaped by changing environmental norms, could play a significant role in resolving the potential growth/sustainable development dichotomy in terms of determining with whom they decide to procure and trade.

In a world facing climate, biodiversity, pollution, equitable and other grave challenges at truly global scale, for which solutions necessarily requiring global collaboration, sustainable development is the ultimate democratic goal, potentially uniting us as an antidote to self-regarding unilateralism trends.

The role of the environmental sciences

Science is concerned with a quest for understanding and the application of best consensual knowledge to guide wise decision-making. The environmental sciences address a broad sphere of interests in processes and consequences in all environmental media and natural resources as well as for human health and broader dimensions of wellbeing. The environmental sciences are therefore foundational to understanding and policy formulation for sustainable development, including thereby inherently for durable growth. They represent the knowledge, and quest for improved knowledge, of the things that bind us as a collective human society.

Science also holds a mirror up to assumptions that narrow, financially blinkered models of 'growth' are automatically societally desirable or sustainable. It is essential that scientific realities underpinning the value generated by protection or regeneration of natural resources and other ecosystem processes, as well as societal infrastructure and understanding, are brought to bear upon decisions relating to whether something represents growth or, alternatively, the longer-term creation of disbenefits and liabilities and the unravelling of future security and opportunity. The championing of robust environmental science is an antidote to, and the basis for calling out, 'fake news' and the 'post-truth agenda' raised as justifications for the world's retrograde steps.

Standing up for the importance of environmental science as a robust evidence base for policy formulation and delivery to meet human needs ethically, responsibly, safely and efficiently at this contested time is vital. It is entirely relevant to a wisely conceived model of growth, also informing the basis of good business as sustainability pressures will increasingly impinge on former freedoms whilst also presenting new profitable opportunities in a much-changed world.

Promotion of scientific evidence is increasingly vital in the 'post-truth' world in which we find ourselves, wherein Ideological diktat determines what leaders elect or choose to believe, dismissing inconvenient realities as 'fake news' whilst unfounded assertions go unchallenged by an increasingly sycophantic media and with fact-checking abandoned by social media platforms currying favour with new political elites.

Manipulation of accepted societal norms is warping reality, including a resurgence of neoclassical ideas that misrepresent ethical and environmental protections as anti-growth. Whilst social media has positive roles to play in democratising knowledge and making it readily accessible and communicable, it has also enabled a tsunami of untruthfulness, frequently now unchallenged or else uncritically accepted with the filters now removed from many social media platforms, promulgating misinformation (content that is incorrect), disinformation (content that is wilfully incorrect) and conspiracies. And, with people increasingly reliant on social media as a principal information source – 56% of internet users in 16 countries frequently use social media as their primary source of news despite 68% indicating that disinformation was widespread on these platforms⁹ - unchallenged media can become pipelines for pervasion of unchecked opinions masquerading as 'facts' that further train internet search algorithms and artificial intelligence on an increasingly unreliable stock of what is and what is not verifiably true.

The more pervasive the misinformation and disinformation, the greater they will be promulgated digitally, tainting opinion and acceptance of self-interested deceptions. The underpinnings of environmental and other forms of science have never been more necessary as a robust foundation for society to draw together to address the many linked and daunting sustainability-related crises it now faces.

Championing progress towards a sustainable future

Let us not understate the reality: the resurgence of monetarism and dilution of societal and environmental protections is a war of two world views that have been in uneasy coexistence and partial accommodation over the past five decades.

Ultimately, environmentalism and a wider commitment to advancing sustainable development never was a mere 'job', but a values-led mission. A great deal of the progress we have achieved over the past half-century has been because public disquiet was focused, often by NGOs, to challenge and reshape mainstream norms. Don't expect to get paid to rock the establishment, but a trace of progress – bans on damaging pesticides and chemical weapons, child labour in supply chains, conflict minerals, non-recyclable single-use plastics, and many more besides – often had their roots in civil outrage.

⁹ IPSOS (2023) Elections & social media: the battle against disinformation and trust issues. IPSOS. <https://www.ipsos.com/en/elections-social-media-battle-against-disinformation-and-trust-issues> (Accessed 26 March 2025).

Now is the time to make voices heard; to stand up as a champion for the environment and its vital supportive capacities. It is essential that a concerted voice is raised to bring pressure to bear on policymakers from local to national and intergovernmental scales to champion the foundational importance of the environment and the needs of the diverse people who depend upon it now and into the future, such that growth is framed as optimally and sustainably beneficial and not just favouring a privileged few with short-term profit disregarding net societal costs and consequences.

The evolving concept of sustainable development, most simply appreciated as a pathway of development that does not ultimately extinguish itself through ecological collapse and societal breakdown, is a vital agreement that has been accepted and enshrined in rhetoric around the world, if not put into proportionate action. Though not initiated by it, understanding of sustainable development was most prominently framed and brought to global awareness by the 'Brundtland Commission' report 'Our Common Future' produced by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987¹⁰, later endorsed at the 1992 'World Summit' in Rio de Janeiro. The framing of the 'Brundtland definition' of sustainable development, "*...development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*", contains a deep and explicit commitment to intergenerational equity. This is a potent antidote to short-termism and is also neutral with respect to geographical range.

We owe it to ourselves and on behalf of future generations to stand up to champion and defend this ideal and its underpinning scientific realities in the face of this contemporary 'war of the worlds'.

¹⁰ WCED (1987) Our Common Future. Oxford University Press: Oxford.