

Saving humanity: Here's a radical approach to building a sustainable and just society

May 19 2023, by Mark Diesendorf



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Collectively, we are driving Earth and civilization towards collapse. Human activities have [exceeded planetary boundaries](#). We are changing the climate, losing biodiversity, degrading land, contaminating freshwater, and damaging the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles upon which we all depend.

We ask how this could happen. Also, why democratically elected governments ignore the wishes of the majority of their people. Why some governments continue to export fossil fuels despite commitments to climate mitigation. Why some go to war in distant lands without any debate in parliament or congress. Why some give tax cuts to the rich while those on the dole struggle below the poverty line.

The answers to these questions all come down to one thing: decision-makers and influencers are captured by vested interests. That is the inconvenient truth revealed in [our new book](#), *The Path to a Sustainable Civilization: Technological, Socioeconomic and Political Change*. But these forces can be overthrown.

We argue it is not sufficient for citizen organizations and governments to address specific environmental, [social justice](#) and peace issues. It's certainly necessary, but we must also struggle for systemic change. This means challenging the covert driving forces of environmental destruction, [social injustice](#) and war, namely, "state capture" and the dominant economic system.

It's 90 seconds to midnight on the [Doomsday Clock](#), so there's no time to waste.

Confronting state capture

[Political scientists](#) and [political economists](#) argue governments, public servants, the media and indeed the majority of decision-makers and influencers become captured by vested interests.

This is known as [state capture](#), where state means the nation-state. The captors include fossil fuel, armaments, finance, property and gambling industries.

State capture can also involve foreign governments. There is justifiable concern in Australia and elsewhere about [subversion by the Chinese Communist Party](#).

Yet there is little discussion of the fact that, since 2015, [six "retired" US admirals](#) worked for the Australian government before the [AUKUS](#) announcement on nuclear powered submarines.

State capture could explain why Australia's defense is being shifted to the South China Sea [under US sovereignty](#).

Confronting state capture involves reversing several undemocratic practices. Of particular concern is the [funding of political parties](#) by corporate interests as well as the [revolving-door jobs](#) between government and corporate interests.

There is also the concentration of media ownership and the influence of [so-called "think tanks"](#) funded by vested interests.

The first step is to set up coalitions or networks to oppose the power of vested interests. This would bring together diverse civil society organizations with common interests in democratic integrity and civil liberties.

One example is the [Australian Democracy Network](#), which campaigns for "changes that make our democracy more fair, open, participatory, and accountable". The Network was founded in 2020 by the Human Rights Law Centre, the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Australian Council of Social Service.

Challenging economic ideology

Conventional [economic theory failed us](#) when it came to recovery from

the [Global Financial Crisis](#) of 2007–09 and the [COVID pandemic](#). Nevertheless, many governments still accept its prescriptions.

The dangerous and destructive myths of conventional economics include the claims that:

- economic theory can treat the natural environment as an infinite resource and infinite waste dump
- endless economic growth on a finite planet is feasible and desirable
- wealth trickles down from the rich to the poor
- well-being and welfare can be measured by GDP
- government intervention in the market must be avoided.

Although these myths have been refuted many times, even by [world famous economist Joseph Stiglitz](#), they still determine much government policy.

Australian economist Steve Keen first published [Debunking economics](#) in 2001. The financial crisis of 2007 gave him plenty of material for a revised edition in 2011. Richard Denniss gave us [Econobabble: How to Decode Political Spin and Economic Nonsense](#) in 2021. Yet, as John Quiggin so eloquently puts it, dead ideas still stalk the land ([Zombie Economics](#)).

They have devastating impacts on our life support system (the biosphere) and social justice. One of the principal destroyers of our planet is excessive consumption, especially consumption by rich individuals and rich countries.

A more appropriate economic framework for human and planetary well-being is the interdisciplinary field of [ecological economics](#).

Unlike neoclassical economics, ecological economics gives priority to ecological sustainability and social justice over economic efficiency. It works towards a transition to a steady-state economy. That is, one with no global increase in the use of energy, materials and land, and no increase in population.

Since planetary boundaries have already been exceeded and low-income countries must develop, social justice demands that the [rich countries](#) undergo [planned degrowth](#).

On the pathway to a sustainable civilization, environmental protection and social justice must be addressed together. Because the rich are responsible for the biggest environmental impacts, reducing the gap between rich and poor is critical.

[Universal basic services](#) such as improved public health, education, housing and transportation—and a government-funded [job guarantee](#)—can achieve greater equality and give people incentives to support the transition.

Citizen action

Why would governments free themselves from state capture and discard economics ideology? Former US President Franklin D. Roosevelt once told a delegation: "OK, you have convinced me. Now get out there and make me do it!" In other words, pressure from voters is needed to make [government](#) action politically feasible.

That's why we need citizen-based environmental, social justice, [public health](#) and peace groups to form alliances to challenge the overarching issues of state capture and flawed economics ideology.

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