

Contents

- 1. “A history of the human mind”**
- 2. What is degrowth and can it save the planet?**
- 3. News items from Reuters Sustainable Switch, August 2024**
- 4. Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment: Submission on the second emissions reduction plan consultation, 26/08/2024**
- 5. National Land Transport Programme 2024-27**
 - 5.1 Programme content**
 - 5.2 Comment**

1. “A history of the human mind”

Paul Ham supported by the guardian.org, 31 Aug 2024.

Paul Ham is author of *The Soul – A History of the Human Mind*.

Having written 10 histories of war, I’d become inured to the idea that war is probably inevitable and violence intrinsic to human nature. I no longer believe that. Spending six years writing 260,000 words on the history of the human mind has compelled me to contemplate the possibility of a new path for humankind free of the terror that drives violent nationalism, religious intolerance and ideological madness.

And it has changed me from being a minstrel of doom into a steely eyed optimist.

Our beliefs are the engines of history, and the genesis of those beliefs can be traced to the great prophets, theologians and philosophers whose visions have held us in their thrall for more than 2,500 years.

The history of war shows with terrifying clarity the extent to which those beliefs– no matter how irrational, fantastic or plain groundless –

periodically gripped the collective mind and hurled us into conflict, revolution and chaos, and how we've always been willing to slaughter each other in great numbers in the name of those beliefs.

Sapiens first started carving axes and fashioning spears and killing one another some 70,000-80,000 years ago, in southern Africa. The idea of peaceful cooperation was alien to those warring tribes. The Western conscience, the inner voice of restraint, is a recent whisper on the plain of time. The mental arbiter of our good and bad actions emerged only about 5,000 years ago. In psychological terms we've barely emerged from the Neolithic.

Our minds are in the foothills of their mental evolution. And to me, now a long-range optimist, that is a great source of hope. Out of those hills a new human mind is emerging, liberated from the barbs of centuries of fear and hatred and the shackles of religious prophecies, national myths and ideological determinism. We're learning, very slowly, undetectably, through bloody trials and ghastly errors, to coexist in some kind of harmony that tolerates different faiths, ideas and beliefs.

Realists will disagree. They'll dismiss as a romantic ideal the possibility of peaceful coexistence (I concede that unity is neither feasible nor desirable). They'll cite the vicious wars in Gaza and Ukraine as further proof that humankind is beyond redemption and that we're hopelessly locked in a Hobbesian forever war.

Elsewhere, many are returning to their nationalist and ideological fantasies. Words like freedom, honour and sacrifice are being leached of meaning and once again dragooned into the service of god and country. Recently, I heard an English boy tell a BBC presenter that he'd like to die with honour in a war with Russia. The presenter and everyone laughed. It was as if the Somme and Passchendaele had never happened.

Must we endure another typhoon of blood before we relearn the ancient lesson – that violence begets only violence?

We're reliving the existential despair that periodically fragments human society whenever the economy fails most people and rewards the least deserving. In such times, we see, as night follows day, the zombie-like return of tyrants and demagogues, who promise fresh utopias and blame powerless minorities for all the woes in the world, while ignoring the root cause, economic injustice.

For all that – and some will dismiss me as naive and sentimental – I believe in sapiens' journey towards that higher consciousness, of living in peaceful coexistence, even if the path is going to be long and fraught. But it must

happen because we have no choice, just as the Catholics and Protestants had no choice than to sign the Westphalian peace treaty that ended the thirty years' war in 1648. The alternative was mutual destruction.

For all its flaws, and violent exceptions, the peace between those two branches of Western christendom persisted, showed that warring faiths could live in the same village without being seized by the urge to bash each other's brains out. The Westphalian peace has largely held and helped to inspire the creation of a world based on rules and mutual tolerance after the end of the second world war.

If that sounds impossibly idealistic, note that in history the hope of a peaceful world order often prevails. To cite three more examples: within 300 years the Romans abandoned, for better or worse, their gods and adopted Christianity. In 1945, the Japanese ended centuries of feudalism and established a democratic system with promising results. In 1991 South Africa dismantled the tyranny of white supremacy and three years later held multiracial elections.

Must we endure another typhoon of blood before we relearn the ancient lesson – that violence begets only violence? Many self-described realists reckon we must. They say we're stuck in a dialectic of eternal conflict, which promises only constant war and anarchy. For them, war is rooted in the clash of ideologies that perpetuate the rise and fall of monarchies, theocracies, empires and tyrannies ... and all in the name of a god, a prophecy or a utopian state.

Might the world wake up and realise that many of the horrors of the past 3,000 years were driven by our belief in fairytales and chimeras? That the state to which we pledged an oath of allegiance was an odious dictatorship built on a utopian myth? That the coming of a messiah and an afterlife were fantasies conjured by our ancestors? That the idea of the nation-state was a nostalgic dream, unworthy of our sacrifice?

We created the gods to fill the void that reason couldn't reach. We asked them to answer those fathomless questions: Who are we? Why are we here? I'm strangely confident that one day in the distant future we'll settle those questions without the need of gods, national myths or brutal ideologies. And that we'll live for the sake of this world rather than the mirage of the next.

2. What is degrowth and can it save the planet?

Matthew Taylor Guardian Environment correspondent, 27 Aug 2024

Jason Hickel, the author of *Less is More*, is one of the leading lights in a growing post-growth or degrowth movement. Its proponents argue that economic success cannot be measured through the crude metric of gross domestic product (GDP) and that there needs to be a managed reduction in growth in carbon-intensive countries and industries.

“Growth simply means an increase in aggregate production, as measured in market prices,” says Hickel. “So, according to GDP growth, producing £1m worth of teargas is considered exactly the same as producing £1m worth of affordable housing or healthcare.”

Hickel says that what matters in terms of social progress is not aggregate production but the production of specific goods and services that are necessary for improving people’s lives and achieving ecological goals – and a reduction in overall growth in high-emitting sectors and countries.

“Every time a politician says they want more economic growth, we need to ask: growth of what and for whose benefit?”

Opponents of the post-growth movement counter that a shrinking economy would be socially destructive, leading to a rise in unemployment, a reduction in tax revenue and therefore less money available for public services. This, they argue, would lead to increasing levels of hardship and destitution, which is already hitting marginalised communities the hardest.

However, economists in the post-growth movement say a planned and purposeful reorganisation of the economy would benefit the vast majority of people. According to their vision, this could entail an organised downsizing in production of things such as mansions, SUVs, industrially produced beef, cruise ships, fast fashion and weapons – all of which are profitable to capital but ecologically destructive. At the same time, there should be a massive increase in investment in what would benefit people the most, from healthcare, public transport and renewable energy to affordable housing, nutritious food and regenerative agriculture, which offer less profit but are also less ecologically destructive.

Hickel says no high-income country is “even close” to meeting their Paris climate change obligations, with even the best performers on course to take more than 200 years to cut emissions to zero at existing rates of mitigation.

“It is a recipe for disaster. Much faster mitigation is needed. So, we need two things. One: rich countries need to reduce total energy use ... Two: we need public investment in renewable energy deployment.”

He says that although renewables are cheaper than fossil fuels, there is still less private investment flowing into renewables than is needed because they are not as profitable for big investors as fossil fuel projects. “We need public investment in renewables, and credit guidance to reduce investment in fossil fuels and redirect it instead to a green transition.....”

Big questions for post-growth economics

While the degrowth movement has gained a foothold among economists and ecologists in the global north, there has been a degree of scepticism among academics and activists in the global south. Many thought the idea was all well and good for developed economies, which already had the capacity to meet the basic needs of their populations. In developing countries, they argued, the picture was different, with development and growth still required after centuries of exploitation.

But according to Morena Hanbury Lemos, an ecological economist from Brazil, that has been slowly changing. Lemos, who is at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, says initially the movement was “very much focused on – and quite insular about” the consequences of growth for Europe and the global north, but that the seeds of a more global outlook were present even then.

She says many post-growth advocates now recognise two things: first, that a new form of sustainable non-destructive growth is still required in many areas of the global south to meet people’s basic needs and, second, that expansion in the global north has always been based on the destructive exploitation of people and resources, particularly in the global south.

“We have been using the slogan recently ‘degrowth in the north and delinking in the south’,” she says. “Delinking in the south means moving away from this relationship of dependency, where economies in the global south are subordinated to the interest of economies in the global north, where they must do whatever capital requires.”

But there are other big questions facing the idea of a post-growth economics. Many argue that rewiring the global capitalist system and taking on the vested interests and elites that benefit from it is hardly going to be quick.

The economist James Meadway, who hosts the Macrodose podcast, says the escalating climate crisis means there is not time to plan a utopian vision of

a perfect world that can be achieved in 30 years' time. Instead, we should be arguing for practical measures that can be taken now and are "steps along the way" to more fundamental change.

"The point we're at now, the question is how do we build a life raft ... not how do you design a future utopia," he says. Meadway says the tax system, if resourced properly and underpinned with some degree of global coordination, could start to redress runaway inequality and ecological destruction.

He adds that as the climate crisis worsens, the market system in critical sectors, from food to energy and water, will struggle to cope, making large-scale intervention by public bodies unavoidable to protect society at large.

"Whether people like it or not there is a reality that is going to get forced on us ... At that point the question will be, can you build some sort of public authority which starts to redesign those food systems, those energy systems ... which starts to make them more resilient to climate shocks, more fit for purpose to create and maintain the kind of society we want."

Hickel rejects the argument that planned, targeted degrowth is unrealistic: "What is unrealistic is to assume that our existing economy, which is failing in both social and ecological terms, is going to magically solve the crises we face." He agrees there must be space for growth in the global south and says economic shrinkage on its own will not be enough to address the crisis we face.

A central plank of his argument is the need for a jobs guarantee linked to "necessary public works to improve people's lives, reduce emissions" and that creates "work that pays living wages". All of this can be afforded in rich, developed countries with monetary sovereignty, such as the UK or the US, he says. "Any government that has sufficient monetary sovereignty can mobilise public production directly, simply by issuing public currency to do it. As Keynes pointed out: anything we can actually do, in terms of productive capacity, we can pay for."

The risk of inflation can be avoided "by scaling down less-necessary production", he says.

He also advocates for a new form of radical economic democracy. "Many of us live in democratic political systems where we get to elect public officials from time to time. But when it comes to the economic system, the system of production, not even a pretence of democracy exists."

Hickel says that what is produced is "controlled overwhelmingly by capital" with major financial firms, commercial banks, large corporations and elites

deciding “what we produce, how we use our collective labour and resources, and how the yields of our production shall be distributed”.

If workers and citizens had more say over what is produced, he says things would look very different. “We already know from several empirical studies that under democratic conditions people prioritise social and ecological goals.”

3. News items from Reuters Sustainable Switch, August 2024

EU lawsuit on GHG emissions

In a case before the Court of Justice of the European Union's General Court, non-profit groups Climate Action Network and the Global Legal Action Network argue that current national limits on greenhouse gas emissions for sectors such as transport and agriculture are unlawful.

The campaigners said the thresholds would fail to cut Europe's planet-heating emissions fast enough to meet the Paris Agreement's goal to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (about 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels. The court has given the case priority status, meaning it could be heard in 2025.

Anti-green energy backlash in Europe

The EU lawsuit comes as Germany's far-right AfD party is trying to pick up rural voters who oppose the growth of wind energy in regions such as Thuringia and Saxony. This anti-green sentiment echoes a broader popular backlash in Germany and elsewhere in Europe against the costs of the transition to green energy amid an economic slowdown.

Antarctic concerns

The campaigners' warnings come as nearly 1,500 academics and researchers specializing in Antarctica gathered in southern Chile for the 11th Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research conference this week to share their findings on the ice-covered continent which is rapidly changing.

There were first-hand accounts from researchers about heavy rainfall, intense heat waves and sudden Foehn (strong dry winds) events that led to mass melting, giant glacier break-offs and dangerous weather conditions with global implications. Scientists wondered whether these events meant Antarctica had reached a tipping point, or a point of accelerated and irreversible sea ice loss from the West Antarctic ice sheet. While some

say the climate changes are already locked in, scientists agreed that the worst-case scenarios can still be avoided by dramatically reducing fossil fuel emissions.

Namibia oil field

Over in Namibia, Portugal-based Galp discovered that the Mopane field could hold at least 10 billion barrels of oil and there has been interest from at least 12 other oil majors. The Namibian economy is heavily dependent on mineral exports including diamonds and rare earths. But following recent discoveries, energy could eventually overtake mining in terms of significance to the middle-income country's economy.

Norwegian gas exports

As Namibia prepares to ramp up its fossil fuel production, Norway has been increasing its pipeline gas exports to Europe. Following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and reduced shipments of Russian gas, Norway has become Europe's largest gas supplier. As of the end of July, Norwegian piped gas volumes totalled 70.2 billion cubic meters (bcm), compared with 64 bcm for the same period last year, said Frode Leversund, CEO of system operator Gassco.

Canada Wildfires

In Canada, a study published in the journal Nature found that the wildfires that swept Canadian woodlands last year released more greenhouse gases than some of the largest emitting countries. Typical emissions from Canadian forest fires over the last decade have ranged from 29 to 121 megatonnes. But climate change, driven by the burning of fossil fuels, is leading to drier and hotter conditions, driving extreme wildfires. The 2023 fires burned 15 million hectares (37 million acres) across Canada, or about 4% of its forests. The carbon released in last year's wildfires exceeded those of seven of the 10 largest national emitters in 2022, including Germany, Japan and Russia the study found.

4. Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment: Submission on the second emissions reduction plan consultation, 26/08/24

The Commissioner has made a submission on New Zealand's second emissions reduction plan (ERP2) outlining how the plan's 'least cost approach' risks passing on undue costs to future generations.

He describes ERP2 as a mixed bag of policies designed to deliver the minimum reductions required, and possibly not even achieving that.

“There is a very real risk that New Zealand won’t even meet the first or second budget with the policy mix that is proposed. The projected reduction only just adds up and margins are thin, with no allowance being made for uncertainties surrounding policy measures.”

If the budgets are not met, then future generations will carry the burden of meeting those targets.

Of greatest concern is the plan’s reliance on the New Zealand Emissions Trading Scheme (NZ ETS), which in its current form suppresses carbon prices, discourages gross emissions reductions and incentivises the planting of large areas of land in pine forests.

When the NZ ETS was established, forestry offsets were intended as an interim measure to buy New Zealand time to develop new, low emissions technologies. However, in the decades since, these technologies have not eventuated and instead forestry offsets have effectively become a cheaper option for fossil fuel producers to deal with their emissions.

The Commissioner is concerned that ERP2 does not sufficiently consider the long-term risks of allowing unlimited forestry offsets. These include:

- the loss of productive land and the impact of afforestation on rural communities
- large areas of land used for forestry offsets will be locked up in perpetuity, removing the option of alternative future land uses
- the future costs of maintaining a permanent, much larger forestry estate in a warming world
- the Crown carrying an implicit liability if those forests, which need to be permanent, are deforested or damaged by pests, diseases or natural events
- uncertainty generated by forests registered in the NZ ETS under stock change accounting affecting supply and price in the NZ ETS
- the impact of unlimited offsets on NZ ETS auction revenue and prices, including surpassing the carbon price below that needed to drive gross emissions reductions and uptake of new technologies.

The Commissioner has made a series of recommended changes to the plan. These include:

- decoupling forestry from the NZ ETS and using alternative incentives to drive afforestation
- building a much greater margin of error into emissions budgets

- preparing an energy strategy to address long-term issues facing the energy sector
- encouraging the uptake of existing and affordable emissions reduction technologies for transport, energy and agriculture through complementary policies
- imposing a departure levy from New Zealand to fund solutions for aviation emissions.

5. National Land Transport Programme 2024-27

5.1 Programme Content

The government’s strategic priorities for the land transport system are set out in the Government Policy Statement on land transport 2024 (GPS 2024). GPS 2024 focuses on a transport network that supports economic prosperity by enabling people and freight to move around efficiently, quickly and safely.

The National Land Transport Programme (NLTP) is a 3-year programme of prioritised activities with a 10-year forecast of revenue and expenditure. It’s prepared by NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi (NZTA) to give effect to the GPS and reflects a partnership between NZTA (which invests NLTF funding on behalf of the Crown), and local government (which invests on behalf of ratepayers). The 2024–27 NLTP includes activities from the Rail Network Investment Programme (RNIP), as approved by the Minister of Transport, to support the rail freight network, along with various activities that are part or fully Crown funded.

The NLTP discusses the four Strategic Priorities in GPS 2024. These are economic growth and productivity, increased maintenance and resilience, safety, and value for money.

Strategic Priority 1: Economic growth and productivity

The overarching priority for investment is to support economic growth and productivity. Central to this strategy is the Roads of National Significance (RoNS) programme. The RoNS are described as “strategic corridors that will support economic growth by enabling new housing areas for population growth and key links to export markets.” “They’ll also improve safety, help to get goods to market more efficiently and effectively, and will build greater resilience into the roading network.”

The RoNS are:

- Sh1 Whangarei to Port Marsden
- Alternative to Brynderwyn Hills
- Warkworth to Wellsford
- Mill Road Stage 1
- East-West Link
- SH16 Nort-West Alternative Highway
- Hamilton Southern Links
- SH1 Cambridge to Piarere
- SH29 Tauriko West
- Takatimu North Link Stage 1 (Crown funded)
- Takatimu North Link Stage 2
- Hawkes' Bay Expressway
- Petone to Grenada Link Road and Cross Valley Link
- SH1 Second Mt Victoria Tunnel and Basin Reserve Upgrade
- Otaki to north of Levin (Crown funded)
- SH6 Hope Bypass
- SH1 Belfast to Pegasus Motorway and Woodend Bypass

Strategic Priority 2: Increased maintenance and resilience

The focus of the strategic priority will be on fixing potholes and maintaining state highways, and local and rural roads to a high standard.

Strategic Priority 3: Safety

This includes delivering safe road infrastructure plus Investment towards road policing and enforcement, fixing potholes and increased levels of road maintenance.

Strategic Priority 4: Value for money

This includes getting the most from existing infrastructure, and the use of technology “before we look to build new”. A no frills approach is to be adopted.

Delivery and Funding Prioritisation

The RoNS are to be delivered in stages over a 10-year period. Tolls are to be considered. The Fast-Track Approvals Bill and the speed with which

alternative funding and financing can be confirmed will also influence the RoNS roll-out.

An Investment Prioritisation Method (IPM) is to be used to ensure funding for the National Land Transport Programme (NLTP) is prioritised and distributed nationally to give effect to the GPS. The IPM's criteria are weighted to emphasise the GPS overarching strategic priority of economic growth and productivity. The other 3 GPS strategic priorities are weighted equally in the IPM.

NZ's transport challenges

The NLTP 2024 states that the most significant transport challenges facing New Zealand are:

- Maintaining existing networks.
- Providing basic access to opportunities and enabling the movement of freight around the country.
- Resilience to natural hazards and climate change.
- Congestion and capacity constraints, especially in large and growing cities.
- Reducing the level of harm to people and the environment.

Public Transport

The key focus for investment in public transport infrastructure will be:

- The completion of construction through to operation of the Eastern Busway (stage 2 and 3).
- Improvements to support 'Day 1' City Rail Link operations such as new rail rolling stock and level crossings removals.
- Planning and start of construction of the Northwest Rapid Transit corridor linking Auckland's city centre and Brigham Creek Road along the SH16 motorway corridor. Budget 2024 identified a \$1 billion tagged contingency to ensure sufficient (capital) funding is available to support the Northwest Rapid Transit corridor.
- Progress the delivery of the Lower North Island Rail Integrated Mobility.

Rail Network

The Rail Network Investment Programme (RNIP) produced by KiwiRail sets out planned network maintenance, management, renewal and improvement work on the national rail network over a 3-year period. The next RNIP will be approved later in 2024 following further analysis.

The Crown will continue to provide direct Crown funding for rail in addition to the RNIP. The Crown is committed to funding:

- the City Rail Link, Auckland
- upgrades to the Auckland Metro Network, ready for day-one City Rail Link operations
- the new Drury rail stations, Auckland
- the electrification of the rail network from Papakura to Pukekohe, Auckland.

5.2 Comment

The NLTP 2024 prioritises investment in what are referred to as Roads of National Significance (RoNS) as it is required to do by the Government Policy Statement 2024-2027. The decision on which roads are defined to be of “national significance” in the GPS 2024 was essentially a political one and does not appear to have been based on economic cost benefit analysis.

A key effect is to direct much of the funding from the National Land Transport Funding which is not required for maintenance (including “pot-holes”) towards road network improvements over the next 10 years. By doing so, it reduces the funding available for alternative forms of land transport.

The NLTP 2024 has nothing to say about the critical importance of reducing the transport sector’s greenhouse gas emissions, and has no policies specifically directed at reducing private vehicle travel or reducing the freight sector’s reliance on fossil fuels. In effect, climate change is something to react to and prepare for. Its causes, and the need for the transport sector to urgently, significantly and consistently reduce its carbon footprint are ignored.

The NLTP states that “In major urban areas, it’s particularly important for investment in infrastructure and services to be accompanied by better

integration between transport and land use, managing demand and making the most of the existing networks through initiatives like road pricing.” These statements do not fit well within a document that places a strong emphasis on road construction to reduce travel times. Nothing is said about encouraging higher density urban development served by quality public transport with a land use form and associated road network that encourages walking and cycling for short trips. Instead, the NLTP 2024 appears likely to facilitate road-based residential development in outer suburban and rural areas adding to car dependency and urban sprawl.

Rail network investments are dealt with in the Rail Network Improvement Programme which has yet to be finalised. The NLTP 2024 includes reference to those rail projects for which funding is already committed, but little else.

The NLTP 2024 includes cycling and walking projects previously committed for funding, but explicitly excludes new projects. The justification given is that overall strategic direction of the GPS prioritises economic growth through road capacity expansion and travel time improvements.

Ross Rutherford

ESR Newsletter Editor,

4 September 2024