

Abstract

This thesis demonstrates, in Chapter 1, that there is significant scientific evidence that the current form of global economic development is unsustainable. Whilst much of the general public assume that concerns and debates about the sustainability of development are relatively new, Chapter 2 shows that concerns debates about the sustainability of development have a long history. This thesis shows in Chapter 2 and 3 that debates about the sustainability of development have significantly mattered to the course of modern human history and quality of life for over a hundred years. This thesis, in Chapter 2, shows that, by 1909, that enough of the key understandings and ideas and enough new emerging technologies needed to define and pursue purposefully sustainable development were known. Chapter 3 considers what have been some of the major barriers to sustainable development. An historical perspective is used to help explain why so little progress has been made on many of the sustainability debates over the last hundred years. Chapter 3 shows that one of the main barriers to the implementation of sustainability has been vested interests and their sustainability blocking coalitions which have been very effective in preventing governments from progressing sustainability policy. The thesis shows that it is rare for purposeful sustainability policy and institutional reform ever to occur without a fight from those vested interests, who either will be, or perceive that they will be, negatively effected. This thesis seeks to offer a resource with information and strategies to help address and overcome such vested interests and their blocking coalitions.

Chapter 3 shows how there are patterns to how these sustainability blocking coalitions seek to undermine and prevent progress on sustainable development. Chapter 3 provides an historical perspective which shows that these blocking coalitions have sought to stall progress on sustainable development by arguing that sustainable development will harm business competitiveness, economic growth and lead to job losses. Thus this thesis focuses on these centrally important sustainability debates about whether achieving the goal of sustainable development will help or harm business competitiveness/profitability and economic growth and led to job losses.

The thesis also focuses on these centrally important sustainability debates because the issue of whether or not economic growth and sustainable development can be compatible goes to the heart of the sustainability debates initiated by Limits to Growth in 1972 and further developed by the Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*. This thesis also focuses on these debates because they are at the heart of differences between the key environmental discourses as shown by Dryzek in his 1997 publication *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*. These “growth debates” are also important because they address the key claim of ecological modernisation. As Dryzek stated “Much of its (ecological modernisation’s) appeal lies in its promise that “we can have it all: economic growth, environmental conservation, social justice”¹. This thesis examines in Chapters 5-8 whether we can indeed have it all as

¹ Dryzek, J. (1997) *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

described by Dryzek. *The key hypothesis of this thesis is whether or not environmental protection, economic growth and social justice can be compatible and under what conditions is the achievement of this compatibility most likely?* The intent of this thesis is to make a substantial advance on this question. In so doing the thesis seeks to also make a contribution to debates on whether or not it is possible to achieve a “green” form of economic growth – referred to as “Green Growth”?²

This thesis defines the range of goals for environmental and social sustainability to create a sustainable society based on the Earth Charter. The Earth Charter is chosen as a comprehensive list of sustainability goals because of the extensive global process under which it was created and reviewed. The thesis investigates to what extent pursuing the environmental and social sustainability goals of the Earth Charter correlate with economic growth? This thesis acknowledges that the implementation of some aspects of the Earth Charter will involve significant investment costs and harm economy growth but the thesis shows that the implementation of many of the other goals of the Earth Charter positively correlate with economic growth better than “business as usual.” A key finding of the thesis is that, whilst a transition to sustainable development will involve upfront investment, social and political costs, numerous studies now show that these costs of early action will be far less than the costs of inaction. Such studies show now that, lack of action on major sustainability issues like climate change and peak oil significantly threaten long term global economic growth.

Thus the thesis demonstrates that there is potential for the implementation of sustainable development, wisely applied, to result in better social and environmental outcomes in every respect whilst still ensuring strong economic growth this century and beyond. Hence the conclusion of this thesis is that social justice, environmental protection and economic growth can be compatible through the necessary political will, with active and meaningful business and community engagement, underpinned by purposeful sustainability policy and educational reform. This conclusion is contested by a number of academics who blame economic growth for the current environmental crisis and social ills This thesis responds to these academics by arguing that the current unsustainable nature of economic growth is a symptom of more fundamental causes and drivers of un-sustainability. This thesis argues that the current form of economic growth is unsustainable due to market, informational and institutional failures, rebound effects, a failure to mainstream sustainable design, rising global population plus a rapid expansion of unsustainable western consumption patterns globally. This thesis argues that, only by recognising this and focusing on the necessary changes needed to mainstream sustainability design, education, policy and institutional changes can the current unsustainable forms of development be turned around to become sustainable. Once it is understood that economic growth per se is not the problem then this helps to clarify what society needs to focus on to achieve the goal of sustainable development. This thesis argues that if we make the mistake of simplistically blaming economic growth for the current unsustainable form of economic growth then this plays into the hands of anti-

² Ekins, P (2000) *Prospects for Green Growth: Economic Growth and Environmental Sustainability*, Routledge Publishing London, New York

sustainability blocking coalitions main argument, namely that social and environmental sustainability initiative will harm the economy too much and are therefore too costly to undertake. This thesis, by clearly differentiating between economic and physical growth, focuses on how best to decouple economic growth from negative social and environmental pressures. This thesis demonstrates that it is possible to cost effectively achieve significant decoupling of economic growth from environmental pressures including greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, freshwater withdrawal, air pollution, waste and hazardous waste production.

This thesis thus seeks, by providing significant evidence for decoupling, to help move the “growth” debates forward and encourage a focus on what changes to technology and design, what changes to policy and institutions will lead to a significant and cost effective decoupling. This thesis brings together literature in Chapters 4-8 which demonstrates that there exists still, twenty years on from the publication of *Our Common Future*, significant potential to decouple economic growth from physical throughput and environmental pressures through eco-efficiencies, eco-innovation, whole system design, sustainable consumption and policy and institutional change. The thesis seeks to show that such decoupling can be a useful part of broader strategy to achieve sustainable development as long as rebound effects are minimised through effective policy. This thesis brings together much evidence to support this hypothesis. Having said that it is beyond the scope of one thesis to provide a complete overview of all the technological, sustainable consumption and policy advances which will assist nations achieve decoupling. Hence this thesis provides a sample of technical, sustainable consumption and policy advances whilst referencing much more comprehensive sustainable technology and policy publications. This thesis presents a broad, integrated approach, bringing the three pillars of sustainability - environment, society and economy - more closely together than in much other work, and supports this with a new synthesis of empirical evidence. The thesis also presents an overview of the case that to date there has been significant underinvestment in key social sustainability goals such as poverty reduction and mounts the case for greater levels of such investment by demonstrating their positive effects from a humanitarian and economic point of view.

This thesis is grounded theoretically in the tradition of “strong” ecological modernisation. This thesis shows how a stronger form of ecological modernisation can assist to advance and resolve long standing sustainability debates. Finally, this thesis is not simply theoretical. As part of the practice of the thesis, the author has co-founded a new “anti-blocking coalition” sustainability think tank, The Natural Edge Project (TNEP) (www.naturaledgeproject.net). This new think tank is putting to put into practice many of the operational actions, such as improving education for sustainable development, recommended by this thesis to help create conditions within which ecological modernization is more likely to progress in Australia.