

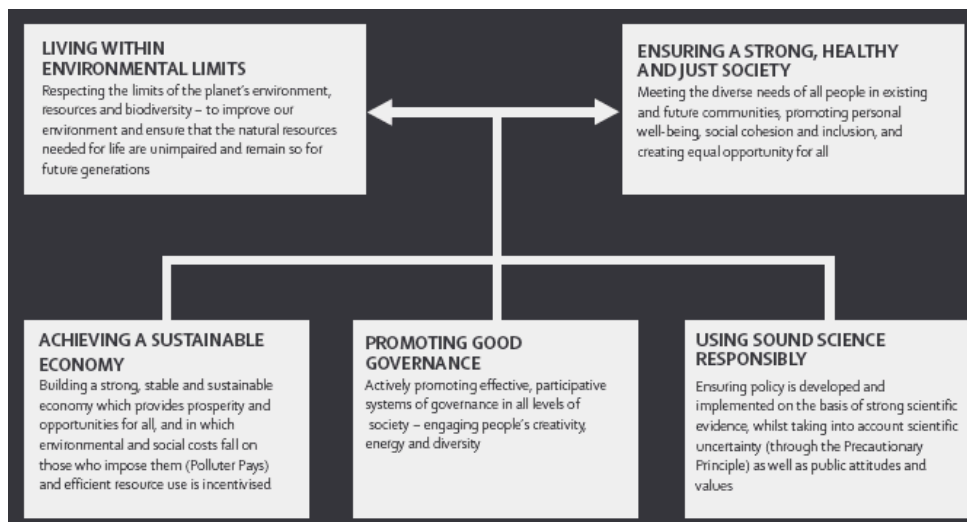
My view on the desirable future for the Earth in approximately 2050, and the best pathways to reach this future...

Whenever an individual agrees wholeheartedly with a government, alarm bells should perhaps ring, but maybe sometimes they can converge on a good thing. In 2005, the UK Government defined a framework for a sustainable future that both looks like it contains the essential elements for a good world and looks like it could be workable in the real world.

The top-level goal is to ensure a strong, healthy and just society that lives within environmental limits: people and the rest of nature in a balanced, interconnected relationship. This relationship is mediated by good governance, “sound science” (the responsible use of available knowledge resources), and an economy that delivers prosperity and opportunity for all. We can quibble over details of the *Securing the Future* strategy (figure below). For instance, should scientific evidence give way to public attitudes? Is “promoting” good governance the same as actually having it in place? Is stability an essential feature of a good economy? Who are the polluters who should pay? But on the whole, I find it hard to envisage a desirable future that does not have these five elements at its core, in this “socio-ecological” configuration.

I think we already have most of what it will take to deliver this goal. Economists and politicians are articulating new ways to define prosperity and wellbeing – and recognising that we need to *do* just that, in practice, not only in theory. Among the upsides of global communications, more open, participatory approaches are possible at all scales of governance, and closed, totalitarian approaches have become more visible and perhaps less enduring. Embracing our cultural and political diversity may be helpful in building a resilient (global?) society. We can observe and understand the natural world around us in unprecedented ways, and have already grasped the magnitude of past damage to our environment, and the pressure on our own life-support systems.

So where are the pitfalls in the pathway? I’m a scientist so I spot the scientific pitfalls. We don’t understand the socio-ecological system very well – not as an interdependent and dynamic entity, although there are communities that understand its two components fairly well. We can’t predict it. (Dare we try?) We have tended to avoid discussing where that kind of activity would lead us – too metaphysical, too political. Too difficult, given the language and culture barriers between the separate expert communities. In holding onto the idea that science might be “value free”, most scientists are out of the habit of reflecting on whether their knowledge is good, or the uses it’s put to are right (of course there are some who are expert and manipulative players of the political game. That’s a separate pitfall...). That reflection is vital, and it needs to be part of the dialogue of wider society too, not closed away in ivory towers of learning.



Securing the Future, UK Sustainable Development Strategy, HM Government 2005

ps: I’m not a government scientist, and I wasn’t involved in developing this framework!