

George Monbiot

---

# Malignant Growth

14th October 2022

An obsession with economic growth is driving us towards catastrophe.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 12<sup>th</sup> October 2022

As a founder member of the “Anti-Growth Coalition”, I’m delighted to discover how fast it has, ahem, been growing. From small beginnings on the political margins, our grouping, [according to the prime minister](#), now ranges across most political parties, the trade unions, remainers, media pundits, in fact just about everyone in the UK who isn’t a swivel-eyed neoliberal headbanger.

For many years, a small band of us “voices of decline” and “enemies of enterprise” who “don’t understand aspiration” have been trying to point out that increments in gross domestic product do not equate to increments in happiness. We have argued that no one wins the human race. We have [sought to explain](#) that what mainstream economists call progress is what ecologists call planetary ruin. We’ve contended that infinite growth on a finite planet is a recipe for catastrophe. I hope Liz Truss is right to claim that so many people now accept our arguments.

Even if this coalition is not yet as broad as she suggests, she seems determined to widen it. Her plans to rip down planning controls, to cut public services, deregulate business, crush protests, unleash exploitation and destroy economic security, all in the name of boosting the rate of economic growth, could scarcely be better calculated to reveal the difference between GDP and prosperity.

Is our prosperity enhanced by increasing the volume of shit in our rivers and [on our beaches](#)? No. It may boost the profits of the water companies and the remuneration of their directors, very little of which – unlike the effluent they release – will trickle down into our lives. Will a [new roadbuilding programme](#) enhance our lives? Not if, as [new roads always do](#), it pushes congestion to the next bottleneck, while increasing noise, pollution and the destruction of landscapes. Will we be happier if the regulations protecting workers

and consumers are stripped away? No. We will find that our health, wealth and wellbeing decline, even as the companies exploiting us become richer. Our lives do not grow in these circumstances. They are shrunk by poverty, pollution, poor health and exploitation.

As a wide range of [academic studies](#) and [national statistics](#) show, the connection between economic growth and general prosperity in rich nations broke down years ago. The [economic anthropologist Jason Hickel](#) points out that many countries with a much lower GDP per capita have [longer life expectancies](#) and better education than the United States. Why? Because, rather than allowing the rich to capture the [great majority of economic growth](#), countries such as South Korea, Portugal and Finland invest sensibly in public services. That's not to say they spend more, but that their investments are aimed at general prosperity, rather than prosperity for a few. The US spends four times as much on healthcare as Spain does, yet lives there, on average, are five years shorter.

[A study of 10 European nations](#) published last month found that changes in happiness could best be explained not by varying rates of economic growth but by varying levels of spending on public welfare. Who would have guessed that economic security and strong public services make us happier? Anyone except Liz Truss and her [Anti-Life Coalition](#).

Truss may be right, in some cases, to claim that ripping down environmental protections could boost the rate of growth. For example, [an analysis this week by Carbon Brief](#) suggests that if Conservative governments had not destroyed the programme of home energy improvements, abandoned the rule that new homes should be zero carbon and banned new onshore wind turbines, we would now import 13% less fossil gas, saving around £5bn. That's £5 bn in spending that would be shaved off our GDP. Truss's refusal to launch an [energy-saving campaign](#) has a similar effect. Such a campaign could save, according to Labour, £8.4bn, which means £8.4 bn cut from GDP. But no one in their right mind would claim that dependency on Russian gas, [leaky homes](#) and fuel poverty enhance our wellbeing.

She may boost growth by [ripping down planning controls](#) and creating “investment zones” in our national parks. But any trade-off between quantity of life and quality of life will deliver, at best, mixed effects on our prosperity. Given that one of the constraints on housebuilding [she wants to remove](#) is the requirement that some homes are affordable, we'll reap little but harm.

But, for Truss and those around her, growth is an end in itself, the equivalent of Mao Zedong's production targets, entirely divorced from utility. To serve this holy data point,

we must toil ever harder and destroy ever more of the world on which our lives depend. Previous generations of economists [foresaw a time](#) when so much wealth was generated that we would scarcely need to work. Well, we have reached that level, but we are working so hard that [millions are in danger of burnout](#).

Why? Because growth has been used by successive governments as a substitute for distribution. Truss's claim that we can "grow the pie so that everyone gets a bigger slice" is not just pie tomorrow instead of pie today but, given existing trends, pie in the sky. Since the mid-1970s, the rich have been taking ever more of the pie, while other people's earnings [have stagnated](#). In the same speech, Truss promised both that "economic growth will mean we can afford great public services such as schools, the police and the NHS" and that she will "keep an iron grip on the nation's finances" to create a "lean state". Guess which promise will be broken.

Growth is used to crush our aspirations for a better life. You want higher wages? Sorry, that means discouraging foreign investment and therefore restraining growth. You want fair rents? You're impeding circulation. A habitable planet, you say? You're a voice of decline.

Prosperity in a rich nation is much less about ongoing rates of growth than the distribution of power. This is why, in one of the wealthiest nations on earth, millions now [depend on food banks](#). Almost everyone would be better off if we adopted an economy based on [private sufficiency, public luxury](#), rather than Truss's vision of private opulence, public squalor.

Her "pro-growth" agenda performs the same role as tax cuts for the very rich. It's a transfer of power to the wealthiest people, among whom are the bosses of corporations headquartered abroad, ruthless foreign oligarchs and British plutocrats who channel their money through tax havens. In other words, it is a further manifestation of the class war the rich are waging against the poor. Growth, in her vision, is not a promise. It's a threat.

[www.monbiot.com](http://www.monbiot.com)

POSTED IN ECONOMIC JUSTICE, ENVIRONMENT AND THE NATURAL WORLD

Follow George on Twitter  
Get the latest articles by email

© 2022 George Monbiot  
Site by Borderleft

 