

Toward a Simple Common Agenda

By Peter Montague*

“The first step down the road to mental peace is to obtain a precise description of what the future is likely to look like. Then to accept it. And finally to stop grieving.”
– Jorgen Randers, *2052; A Global Forecast for the Next 40 Years*.

Sometimes this world can seem overwhelming. In the USA, the news seems to be dominated by stories of greed, cruelty, racism, woman-hating, and reckless disregard for the natural world – especially among our leaders and their camp followers.

For me, the antidote is a strong belief that another world is still possible. And we have what’s needed to make it happen. We still have free speech and we (most of us, anyway) still have the vote. Plus, the people on “our side” outnumber the opposition; if this weren’t true, the opposition wouldn’t be trying to **suppress the votes** of the young, the old, the poor, the disabled, and the non-white. If our opponents held a majority, they would be turning out the full vote, not suppressing it.

So, we are a majority and we have the tools we need to make new policies at every level of governance. Why haven’t we done it?

One reason, I’m convinced, is that we have never developed a simple common agenda for “our side.” Our opponents, on the other hand, succeed politically because they agree on a few common principles, which are...

1. They want to **eliminate majority rule** permanently, to allow **a super-rich few** to decide who can run for office and who can vote;
2. They want to cut taxes to shrink government “to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub,” as anti-tax strategist Grover Norquist **famously said**. They want government to be able to accomplish almost nothing except (a) to retain an active military presence **in 80 countries simultaneously** and (b) to guarantee that corporations are free to export capital (and therefore jobs) everywhere in the world, without limit. Sometimes they call it “free trade” and sometimes they call it “globalization,” but it always means the same thing: **government rendered powerless** to impose conditions on the export of corporate capital (and jobs) worldwide; and
3. They want to **prevent the working class** from joining together to improve wages and benefits. Modern-day **union-busting** began with Ronald Reagan, and today the constant threat of your job moving overseas helps keep workers quiet as their wages **stagnate or decline**. To “divide and conquer” the working class, the powers-that-be

use relentless misinformation, misdirection, and dog whistles to stir latent racism (“welfare queens driving Cadillacs”), which divides the working class *and* **discredits the liberal government policies** that could empower workers and help their families.

Their simple 3-part agenda is sufficient to weld the right-wing into a coherent political force. They may disagree on many things, but they stick together on their 3-part agenda and it gives them tremendous clout. Oh, and it’s not just Republicans who favor this agenda; there are plenty of Democrats who (secretly or not) favor all or parts of it too.

It would be presumptuous and wrong for a lone individual like myself to pretend to know what “our side” should adopt as the core elements of a common agenda. To be legitimate, a common agenda could only be hashed out through an organized process involving many facilitated meetings, face-to-face and/or web-based, that include people from different geographic regions, political jurisdictions, histories, ethnicities, age-groups, skin-colors, gender identities, religions, classes, and more. True diversity is our greatest strength. In such meetings, the historically downtrodden among us should be privileged. As part of the process, we could arrange ongoing trainings for ourselves, to develop our listening skills, our consciousness of institutional isms (race, class, sex, and more), and our participation protocols for reaching consensus on sticky issues.

Despite my reluctance to claim to know what’s needed, I do know this: For the past 30 years I have been lucky enough to work closely with grass-roots groups fighting to protect their communities against bad proposals (such as garbage incinerators, pesticides sprayed across the landscape, mountain-top removal mining, toxic landfills, radioactive waste, privatization of water supplies, and more) This is where I learned the strength and durability of real democracy. In my experience, if a majority of ordinary people are given true facts (“true” meaning “verified”) and the power to decide, far more often than not they will make decisions that protect their communities, their children, and their futures.

While working with grass-roots groups, I have also had the privilege of being part of the Science & Environmental Health Network (SEHN). For more than 25 years this little think-and-do tank has been helping grass-roots groups change the terms of the debate by exposing the BS that gets thrown at them, such as “Our risk assessment proves that this toxic-waste incinerator is safe.” Or, “The future is far off, so you should worry about today and let the future take care of itself.” Or, “This is complicated, so you ladies should leave it to the experts.”

As global warming comes upon us like a freight train, in the next few decades the world will not end but the world as we know it surely will. Like you, I mourn that loss. But I also know that **life will go on**, and we today have an opportunity and an

obligation to make the best of it *for everyone* and for the natural world. How can we do that?

For me, personally, the top priority will be to restore good government, to restore the integrity of our democratic republic because I trust the democracy of ordinary people. Here, as always, SEHN has focused on fundamentals, asking, “What is government for?” and reminding us that government derives its “just powers from the consent of the governed” (as the **Declaration of Independence** phrased it).

Consent be damned: “Nobody cares what you think unless you’re rich.”

Today in the U.S., the majority does not rule, and ordinary citizens cannot easily give or withhold their consent for particular policies. Regular people have only two ways to change policy: (1) to sue in court (if they afford a long, expensive, time-consuming fight) or (2) take to the streets in large numbers. Our system of government has degenerated into what’s called an oligarchy, meaning **rule by a super-wealthy few**.

In 1996 the serious satirist Lewis Lapham, who was then editor of *Harper’s* magazine, described our **two governments** – the *provisional government* that we elect every few years, and the *permanent government*, which operates behind the scenes and never has to explain itself to the voters:

“The permanent government, a secular oligarchy... comprises the Fortune 500 companies and their attendant lobbyists, the big media and entertainment syndicates, the civil and military services, the larger research universities and law firms. It is this government that hires the country's politicians and sets the terms and conditions under which the country's citizens can exercise their right – God-given but increasingly expensive – to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Obedient to the rule of men, not laws, the permanent government oversees the production of wealth, builds cities, manufactures goods, raises capital, fixes prices, shapes the landscape, and reserves the right to assume debt, poison rivers, cheat the customers, receive the gifts of federal subsidy, and speak to the American people in the language of low motive and base emotion.”

It is our “permanent government” (better-known today as the “**deep state**”) that has produced the **Seven Big Problems** that we now face *and* has prevented the “provisional government” from enacting real solutions. In other words, to be blunt about it, the leaders of our “permanent government” – the smartest, best-educated, wealthiest and most powerful white men the world has ever known – are ruining the planet as a place suitable for human civilization and have been doing so for decades. Of course, this does not mean they are bad people. (OK, some of them **are** bad people.) Although many of them may dislike and distrust democracy, surely none of them ever intended to destroy the living earth. It’s just that the logic of their enterprise

has prevented consideration of any real alternatives. Living in their bubbles of wealth and privilege without benefit of the combined wisdom of ordinary people, they have made many ruinous decisions, some, perhaps, even fatal for civilization. That remains to be seen.

How do we know that majority rule is dead and “consent of the governed” is on life support? In 2014 Martin Gilens of Princeton University and Benjamin I. Page of Northwestern published **a major study** of 1,779 policy proposals between 1981 and 2002. Gilens had amassed data showing what the poor, the middle class, and the rich thought of these 1,779 policy proposals. The Gilens-Page study concluded, “...our analyses suggest that majorities of the American people have little influence over the policies our government adopts.” Journalist Kevin Drum summarized the Gilens-Page study **more bluntly** (but just as accurately): “Nobody cares what you think unless you’re rich.”

There’s plenty more evidence that the “consent of the governed” and “majority rule” are no longer working principles for our government:

73% of Americans believe global warming is happening and two-thirds (62%) of Americans believe humans are causing it. **Even larger majorities** think global warming will harm people in the U.S. (65%), the world’s poor (67%), people in developing countries (68%), plant and animal species (74%), and/or future generations of people (75%).

Global warming has been the subject of numerous reports and warnings for **at least 50 years** or **even longer**, and during all that time even our mostly-wealthy-white-male elected officials have failed to support adequate solutions. Instead they have consistently worked to create “economic growth.” Out of desperation to protect their futures, children in the U.S. have now been forced **to sue** their own government in court, demanding policies to curb global warming, to preserve a livable tomorrow.

76% of Americans **favor higher taxes** on the super-wealthy. But in 2018, once again, Congress **cut taxes** for the richest few.

68% of Americans think **drug addiction** is a “very big” problem. Yet the government’s “war on drugs” – which has **failed for 40 years** – continues unchanged.

70% of Americans say the **affordability of health care** is a “very big” problem. Yet the U.S. health care system remains **the most expensive** among the world’s 11 richest nations, *and* it produces the worst health outcomes.

63% say the **affordability of college** is a “very big” problem. Yet college **remains unaffordable** for most low- and middle-income families.

77% of **the public** say “there should be limits on the amount of money individuals and organizations” can spend on political campaigns and 67% say “**ethics in government**” is a “very big problem.” But Congress is still wallowing in corrupt cash, letting **lobbyists write laws**.

To restore “the consent of the governed” as a working principle, we would have to **make corruption illegal**, getting private money out of our elections and out of law-making and policy-making. To fix money-in-politics, Congress (and every state legislature) could and should pass the **American Anti-Corruption Act**. The Act doesn’t require us to amend the Constitution, and it’s perfectly legal.

Getting private money out of our elections, legislatures, courts, and policy-making bodies is the one reform that makes all other reforms possible. Together, we can **unrig the system**. After that, all other reforms become possible and “the consent of the governed” and majority rule can be restored.

What is government for?

Even when it is not stated openly, most people (including most people in government) assume that the purpose of government is to promote economic growth (meaning “more stuff”). There was a time when government made everyone better-off by promoting economic growth, but that time **has passed**. Growth is now ruining the planet as a biological platform that can sustain human civilization and life itself. We are all familiar with a few examples: **global warming**, rising **sea levels**, decimation of **forests** and **the ocean**, insect **infestations** and **extinctions**, unprecedented **wildfires**, permanent disruption of the **global water cycle**, and accelerating **loss of species**. The human economy has grown so large that it has exceeded the limits of nature’s bounty.

The global economy is five times the size it was **50 years ago**. At this rate it will be 80 times that size by 2100. As a result, a decade ago a major international study concluded that at least 60% of Earth’s ecosystems **had already been degraded**. The natural world renews itself but only so fast. At present, humans are using up the Earth’s resources **about 50% faster** than they renew. Put another way, we would need 1.5 planet Earths to satisfy humanity’s current annual needs and wants (resource supply, waste absorption, and space for human infrastructure). Perpetual growth on a finite planet is not sustainable, and whatever is not sustainable will not be sustained.

As the chaos and costs of global warming finally become intolerable (probably around 2040 or 2050), today’s dominant ideology – pursue happiness through perpetual fossil-fueled growth – will slowly be replaced by the much more modest societal goal of “sustainable well-being.” We will eventually develop a **steady-state economy**, one that makes life better for everyone without constantly producing “more stuff.”

Governments and civil society will aim to improve everyone's health and satisfaction and will get serious about protecting the living earth, our *essential* common inheritance, which **sustains human civilization** and all of life. Most societies will get good at measuring their "**footprint**" against the limits of use and abuse that **ecosystems can tolerate** without collapsing.

The public trust doctrine

To help governments make this crucial shift in perspective from promoting growth ("more stuff") to promoting sustainable well-being ("less but better stuff, more evenly distributed"), we can all hold government accountable for fulfilling its primary duty: to protect our common health and common wealth, all the things we share together – air, water, soil, wild things, watersheds, roads, bridges, accumulated human knowledge, the principles of probity and fairness in decision-making within a democratic republic, human rights, the consent of the governed, and so on. This duty of government is embodied in the "Public Trust Doctrine."

The Public Trust Doctrine is **a legal doctrine** handed down to us from Roman law, through English law, into the law of the 13 original colonies and now the states.

The public trust doctrine asserts that the sovereign (in our case, representative government) has an inalienable duty (a duty that cannot be denied or given away) to protect the common wealth. As trustee, government must protect the trust assets (nature, human health and humanity's common wealth) for the trust beneficiaries (present and future generations). Government even has a duty to protect the trust assets from harmful actions by the beneficiaries themselves, and so from time to time government must limit some of the prerogatives of private property in order to protect the commons for present and future generations.

In carrying out its duty to protect the public trust, government has a duty to anticipate harm, to look ahead to protect the trust against impending threats. (This requires decision-making via the **precautionary principle**.) If government waits until harm can be demonstrated beyond doubt, then it will be too late -- the trust property will be damaged and government will have failed in its duty as trustee.

The public trust doctrine casts government in a heroic role as guardian of the future, for all of us, for all time.

Houston, we have a problem

In coming decades, the world economy will still produce wealth, though at a slower pace than the recent historical average, perhaps **doubling in size** in the next 40 years. And use of that wealth will still be divided between immediate *consumption*

(producing satisfaction now) versus *investment* (in infrastructure and research) to produce future satisfaction. Presently, 75% of a year's global wealth is consumed; 25% is invested. In future, the proportion going to investment will have to increase substantially to offset losses from depletion of natural resources (for example, minerals, fresh water, and fish), environmental pollution (toxic chemicals, nitrogen fertilizers), ecosystem destruction (loss of forests, wetlands, ocean life), and climate change (**crop losses**, heat waves making **some regions uninhabitable**, coastal **cities flooded**, and so on).

With more going to investment and less to consumption, many people's wages will stagnate or decline, probably for generations. As we know from the Obama-Trump years, if government does not level the playing field, economic stagnation in a **neoliberal dog-eat-dog world** will stir political confusion and ugly passions as people in declining circumstances seek someone to blame for their misery. Clever, cynical leaders – the mostly-white-male elites who created today's **major problems** – long ago perfected the art of “divide and conquer” by shifting blame onto “the other” – brown people, foreigners, liberals, gays, women, and the poor – in short, everyone but themselves. And many **hapless victims** of **neoliberalism** have been fooled – at least temporarily – into going along.

But people are not stupid. If we can get private money out of politics and policy, the majority among us will vote to restore a decent society that provides satisfaction to nearly everyone. The biggest losers in the coming transition will be the super-rich, so they will fight it to the death, meaning the death of civilization. To avoid this catastrophe, our side can use a simple, common agenda. If environmentalists and liberals (and **principled conservatives**) got **together** and all of us (and all our organizations) devoted just 5% of our available time to getting private money out of politics and policy – we could win. Another world really *is* still possible.

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