

Statements about being realistic about technology, alternative energy, and sustainability

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Dear Colleagues,

I have often described politics as the art of choosing which of several impossible outcomes you most prefer. It is important to envision good outcomes. It may be useful to strive for them. But it is important to be realistic. The recent discussion about technology, alternative energy, and sustainability are based on several implicit assumptions, which I believe are unrealistic. At the risk of being an old grump, and recognizing my own limited vision, I list here some statements that I believe from the study of science, history, and human nature to be realistic..

#1: There is no possibility that the so-called renewable energy sources will permit the elimination of fossil fuels and sustain current levels of economic activity and material well being. The scramble for access to declining energy sources is likely to produce violence.

#2: The planet will not sustain anywhere close to 9 billion people at living standards close to their aspirations (or our views about what is fair).

#3: Sustainable development is about how you travel, not where you are going.

#4: The privileged will not willingly sacrifice their own advantages to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor (witness the US.) They will lose their advantages, but unwillingly.

#5: The rapidly approaching climate chaos will erode society's capacity for constructive action before it prompts it.

#6: Expansion and efficiency are taken as unquestioned goals for society. They need to be replaced by sufficiency and resilience.

#7: History does not unfold in a smooth, linear, gradual process. Big, drastic discontinuities lie ahead - soon.

#8: When a group of people believe they must choose between options that offer more order or those affording greater liberty, they will always opt for order.

Unfortunately so, since its will have grave implications for the evolution of society's governance systems. Dictators will always promise less chaos than democrats.