



**BRINGING
POST-GROWTH
RESEARCH
INTO POLICY**

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Summary

Drawing lessons from a six-month project funded by the Laudes Foundation, as well as from a wider review of evidence, this report analyses the barriers to bringing postgrowth research into policy. It concludes by making recommendations—to academic researchers, politicians and their staff, and funders of research and advocacy—on the keys to doing this more effectively.

Its key findings divide into two main themes: a structural focus on tackling overarching barriers to the influence of postgrowth arguments, and a tactical focus on ways in which to amplify the influence of individual pieces of research.

The structural dimension: key messages

- Research which questions an overarching political goal of growth faces high barriers to achieving political influence, and there remains a disconnect between the seriousness of key environmental challenges and the rhetoric and priorities of politicians.
- However, framing ‘growth dependency’ as a public policy problem has strong potential to influence political debate in new ways. By identifying growth as both a dependency and one which is fundamentally unsustainable, this critique may be able to frame growth as a dangerous addiction—one that politicians could and should help society to kick.
- More widely, postgrowth research can help to build the conditions for an expansion of its own political influence—for example, by helping to expand the public’s notions of the ‘way of life’ that they want to see preserved by the state.

The tactical focus

- Academics can boost the effectiveness of their research by utilising the language of government and playing to politicians’ need for policy solutions and arguments they can use in debate.
- Rational argument and well-evidenced research is not enough on its own; political influence requires some form of emotional engagement with the public.
- Effective research-based policy requires partnerships between researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and the public. Policy proposals have a better chance of success when backed up by both an inside track approach (involving behind the scenes discussions with government officials and politicians) and an outside track approach (involving public campaigning).

- There are different types of ‘policymakers’, with different interests and relationships to power—and academic researchers should vary their communication strategies accordingly. In many cases, politicians themselves are seeking to influence other politicians in power; here there may be particular potential for mutually beneficial relationships between politicians and academics.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, we offer the following recommendations:

To academic researchers

1. Academics should take communications with politicians seriously—it is a vital area that, while separate to core research skills, is important for achieving influence. When seeking to influence politicians, it is good practice to frame one’s work as answering a political question they are interested in. Academics ought to seek out the possibility of partnership with ‘policy brokerages’ that communicate research to political audiences, and seek feedback from politicians and their staff on the best approach to communicating research.
2. The most effective strategies for influencing policy will aim for both an inside track approach (seeking private meetings and ongoing relationships with policymakers in power) and an outside track (applying political pressure by engaging the public in campaigning). Similarly, academics might most effectively develop both short-term strategies, aimed at influencing particular policy decisions, and longer-term strategies, aimed at shifting understanding among politicians or the public on the need for larger-scale changes. In the latter respect, researchers might like to explore the potential of framing ‘growth dependency’ as a public policy problem, and framing postgrowth-inspired policy proposals as solutions.

To politicians and their staff

3. Politicians who are seeking to advance the case for environmental and wellbeing policy can boost the authority of their advocacy by showing they have the respect of highly credible academic experts. Politicians and their advisers could profit from forming relationships with ‘policy brokerages’ (which could be parliamentary bodies, such as the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, or could also be external bodies, for instance specialised communications units at universities) and using these contacts to actively seek out promising research in advance, and to form productive relationships with key academics.

4. When it comes to environmental policy, politicians often 'take' rather than 'make' the agenda, accepting a conventional line on the boundaries of 'acceptable' policy discussion. But the conventional forms of politics are in conflict with the urgent need for environmental action. Politicians themselves might like to explore, in partnership with postgrowth researchers and advocates, the potential to make arguments for significant change, based on the framing of 'growth dependency'.

To funders of postgrowth research

5. To maximise the impacts of their interventions, funders ought to make sure they take evaluation of the projects they fund seriously. This is key to learn lessons about what led (or did not lead to) positive impacts, and use those findings to inform future funding decisions.
6. Funders can also explore the potential impacts that they can lead to by doing more than funding. For example, funders may be in a prime position to sponsor or insist on partnership working between academic researchers and others (e.g. policymakers, practitioners, and the public) to develop research-based policy that has a higher chance of being implemented successfully.

Introduction

This report comprises a ‘meta report’ for the Laudes Foundation on a six-month project, beginning in spring 2021, aimed at communicating research to politicians at Westminster on the economics of a post-pandemic recovery and a transition to a just, regenerative society.

Funding for this project by the Laudes Foundation has allowed the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP) to expand on its existing relationship with the UK Parliament’s All-Party Parliamentary Group on Limits to Growth (the APPG). This work has resulted in two major reports to date—one on tackling ‘growth dependency’ in the financing of social care, the other on the fiscal and monetary policy needed for funding a post-pandemic recovery and the transition to net zero.¹

This report

This report comprises a final element in the project. Its brief has been to reflect on the project as a whole, and to draw on wider evidence, in order to draw conclusions on the process of bringing postgrowth research into the policy domain.

It has three main aims:

- 1) *to establish the nature of the challenge* for researchers in working with politicians, and for interested politicians in seeking to influence government policy, to promote ideas based on the theme of the limits to growth;
- 2) *to discuss case studies of success and failure in relation to that task*; and
- 3) *to synthesise a set of recommendations* about the most promising ways to frame and communicate postgrowth research for achieving political influence, attuned variously to funders, academic researchers and NGOs, and politicians and their staff.

What makes this a ‘meta report’ is the way in which it examines the very purpose of the project as a whole: bringing postgrowth research into policy. It not only looks at the challenges in doing this effectively but draws lessons—for academic researchers, politicians, and funders alike—on how to approach this task better in the future.

¹ Additionally, there has been a third strand of outputs, organised under a strand entitled ‘Critical Response’. This work has involved boosting the capacity of the APPG secretariat, with the aim of aiding APPG members in their efforts to progress a postgrowth agenda within Parliament. In particular, following an APPG briefing on indicators of sustainable prosperity, the secretariat assisted APPG members in calling for the Government to introduce a ‘Beveridge Report for the twenty-first century’, and produced a briefing paper and associated media content critically assessing the Government’s new system of ‘outcome delivery plans’ for managing the delivery of its policies.

The problem

The starting point for this report is that there is a long-standing problem with the goal of bringing postgrowth research into policy, and that it needs to be faced in order to generate smart approaches towards overcoming it. To appreciate the scale of the problem we need to go back half a century to the publication of the report after which the APPG was named.

In 1972 a team of MIT systems analysts produced *The Limits to Growth*, a report commissioned by a group of environmentally-concerned intellectuals calling themselves the Club of Rome.² This work combined empirical data drawn from economic statistics with a computer model of the interactions between economic growth (as measured by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)) and environmental quality. The conclusions it drew were stark: that if then current trends were maintained, the negative feedbacks of growth—in the forms of pollution and the exhaustion of natural resources—would lead inexorably to global economic collapse. In their ‘Commentary’, the Club of Rome’s executive committee expressed their alarm at the report’s conclusions—but also their hope that its message would ‘mobilize forces’ of social and political change and thus achieve ‘significant redirection’ of the global economy within the decade.³

These hopes were to be disappointed. Despite the best efforts of the Club of Rome in placing the report in the hands of global leaders and public officials, and despite its far-reaching influence on the debate about economic growth, its direct influence on policy outcomes has remained marginal.⁴ Though some have questioned it, no government either in the UK or elsewhere has actively renounced the pursuit of economic growth.⁵ Environmental exploitation has carried on apace. The latest study revisiting the data confirmed in 2021 that actual trends in resource use and pollution were in line with the *Limits to Growth*’s scenarios of forthcoming collapse, generating lurid headlines even in the mainstream tabloid press.⁶

This story highlights an important lesson. The idea of there being environmental limits to economic growth is a hard one for political systems

2 Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (London: Earth Island, 1972).

3 Alexander King et al., ‘Commentary’, in *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, by Donella H. Meadows et al. (London: Earth Island, 1972), 193.

4 Christian Hunold and John Dryzek, ‘Green Political Strategy and the State’, in *The State and the Global Ecological Crisis*, ed. John Barry and Robyn Eckersley (London: MIT Press, 2005), 78.

5 Vaclav Smil, *Growth: From Microorganisms to Megacities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 495.

6 Gaya Herrington, ‘Update to Limits to Growth: Comparing the World3 Model with Empirical Data’, *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 25, no. 3 (2021): 614–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jiec.13084>; Stacy Liberatore, ‘MIT’s 1972 Prediction of Society Collapsing Could Happen by 2040’, *Daily Mail*, 14 July 2021, sec. Science, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-9788957/MTs-1972-prediction-collapse-society-track-happen-2040-study-reveals.html>. See also *Limits Revisited* by Jackson and Webster (2016): <https://limits2growth.org.uk/publication/limits-revisited/>.

the world over to swallow—meaning that even the most compelling research on the subject may not be enough to translate into political action.

But we could also find another narrative in this same history. Away from the corridors of power, the *Limits to Growth* report has been a hugely influential piece of research: selling more than 30 million copies, its credo of ‘infinite growth in a finite system is impossible’ has become a core principle of the environmental movement.⁷ Its ongoing resonance can be seen in today’s environmental activism—witness Greta Thunberg’s condemnation of ‘fairy tales of eternal economic growth’ in a famous 2019 speech at the UN.⁸ Inspired by the message of the *Limits to Growth*, a new economics has been led to focus, not only on limits in themselves but on how we may flourish within them. Wellbeing has thus been proposed as a political goal to supplant the endless pursuit of growth.⁹ Today, this new approach to political economy is more readily summed up under the banner of ‘postgrowth economics’.¹⁰

Within the political mainstream, meanwhile, if the pursuit of GDP growth is yet to be dethroned as a political goal, then elements of the postgrowth agenda have certainly broken through over the five decades since the *Limits to Growth* came out. Within the UK the most prominent example has been the Climate Change Act 2008 and the policy architecture of carbon budgets this has created: while not focused on limits to economic growth *per se*, this political framework is built out of research into environmental limits and the need to live within them.

The lessons we might learn from this historical background are as follows. In the first place, it is clear that effective political action to help us live well within environmental limits depends on good quality scientific and social science research. But it is also clear that research is not enough to necessarily translate into political action on its own. This is largely because of the mainstream political resistance to the idea of giving up on growth overall. Nonetheless, there is still hope for progress in policies at both a large and small scale, if postgrowth research can be framed in a way that cuts through and is accompanied by effective political campaigning and support.

The question of how postgrowth research can help to overcome the political resistance to questioning growth is the focus of this report.

⁷ James Connelly and Graham Smith, *Politics and the Environment: From Theory to Practice*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 52–53.

⁸ Greta Thunberg, Speech at the UN Climate Action Summit 2019, 23 September 2019, <https://youtu.be/u9KxE4Kv9A8>.

⁹ See Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁰ Tim Jackson, *Post Growth: Life after Capitalism* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2021).

Structure of this report

In addressing this question this report draws on a review of trends in postgrowth research which has the explicit aim of influencing policymakers; a literature review into existing attempts to address this and similar questions; interviews with politicians and political staff; a roundtable event with participation invited from a wide network of researchers and stakeholders; and self-reflections on the other outputs within this project. This report is structured as follows:

- *Section 1* presents an overview of recent currents in postgrowth research, framed to influence government policy.
- *Section 2* sets out a brief review of existing ‘meta-level’ research on influencing policy through postgrowth research.
- *Section 3* discusses the perspective of politicians and those who work for them.
- *Section 4* presents insights from the network of CUSP researchers and fellows, and reflects on the influence and lessons learned from this project’s main outputs.

Finally the report offers some conclusions and recommendations—aimed separately at academic researchers, advocacy groups, politicians, and funders.

1. The postgrowth research offer: prescriptions for ‘growth dependency’

At the outset of this report it would be worth asking: What is postgrowth research? What, for that matter, does ‘postgrowth’ mean exactly?

At its loosest, ‘postgrowth’ can be used as an umbrella term to cover any variety of thought that advocates transition from an economic system based around pursuing unending GDP growth, to one which is limiting its environmental impacts within safe planetary boundaries.¹¹

In some contexts, ‘postgrowth’ is contrasted with ‘degrowth’, the latter being viewed as a politically more radical or hardline articulation of the same underlying analysis.¹² There is often a high degree of overlap between them both, however, both in terms of personal collaborations and of the concepts used in argument.¹³ While this document will use ‘postgrowth’ to identify its defining perspective, it aims to broadly include the perspective of researchers who would more often identify with ‘degrowth’. In a similar fashion, it intends, within its postgrowth framing, to broadly be applicable to those who identify with concepts such as steady state economics, doughnut economics, wellbeing economics, and sustainable prosperity.¹⁴

As for postgrowth *research*, this can have a general application, potentially referring to work from within environmental science (for example, research that informs the case for limiting human activities within planetary boundaries), sociology and psychology (for example, research into the subjective benefits of a transition to more sustainable lifestyles), and economics and political science (for example, research on the political and macroeconomic barriers to a postgrowth transition, and how these might be overcome).

This report focuses largely on this third dimension, concentrating on the interface between research that seeks to influence established centres of political and economic power, and those elements of political and economic institutions which show interest in seeking to engage with such research. In

¹¹ Post Growth Institute, ‘About Post-Growth Economics’, Post Growth Institute, accessed 18 December 2021, <https://www.postgrowth.org/about-post-growth-economics>; The Steady State Manchester team, ‘What Do We Mean by Post-Growth?’, *Steady State Manchester* (blog), 29 July 2013, <https://steadystatemanchester.net/2013/07/29/what-do-we-mean-by-post-growth/>.

¹² André Reichel, ‘Postgrowth and Degrowth—André Reichel’, 11 March 2016, <https://andreireichel.de/2016/03/11/postgrowth-and-degrowth/>; Thomas Wiedmann et al., ‘Scientists’ Warning on Affluence’, *Nature Communications* 11, no. 1 (December 2020): 3107, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-16941-y>.

¹³ Tim Jackson, Giorgos Kallis, and Riccardo Mastini, ‘Beyond the Choke Hold of Growth: Post-Growth or Radical Degrowth?’, *Green European Journal*, 9 November 2018, <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/beyond-the-choke-hold-of-growth-post-growth-or-radical-degrowth/>.

¹⁴ Lorenzo Fioramonti, et al, ‘Wellbeing economy: An effective paradigm to mainstream post-growth policies?’, *Ecological Economics*, vol. 192, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2021.107261>.

particular, it highlights the exciting potential in a recent theme in such engagement: the study of ‘growth dependency’.

Growth dependency

Why are governments around the world still pursuing GDP growth as an overarching policy goal—despite decades’ worth of arguments and evidence that this often works against human wellbeing, and is increasingly incompatible with environmental limits? ‘Growth dependency’ is a concept which examines this precise question, focusing on the requirements of the capitalist system and of the state that coexists with it.

In some ways, this concept has a long history. It has been a staple of Marxist and green political thought for many years to point to the existence of ‘growth imperatives’ within the capitalist system. It has long been argued, for example, that on economic grounds, capitalist firms require growth since this is the source of ongoing profits; that on financial grounds, the economy as a whole requires growth since this is needed to pay back the interest on the credit which finances investment; and that on economic and social stability grounds, growth is required to create new jobs to mop up the unemployment created by the endless drive for increased productivity.¹⁵ In our current economic and political system, public finances depend on growth to maintain spending on public services, especially in the context of an ageing society and concomitant¹⁶ rises in demand for health and social care services.¹⁷ Given the systemic need for ongoing GDP growth, it is not hard to see why there would be a concerted push back from powerful forces against calls for action on the limits to growth.

Something new seems to be brewing, however, in the form of a recent wave of reports, academic papers, and political discussions that can be brigaded together as belonging to the critique of growth dependency. Recent examples include:

- the IPCC including extended discussions of postgrowth and degrowth ideas in 2022 as part of its Sixth Assessment Report;¹⁸

¹⁵ Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth—Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow* (London: Routledge, 2009/2017); Richard McNeill Douglas, ‘Could Capitalism Survive the Transition to a Post-Growth Economy?’, in *Facing Up to Climate Reality: Honesty, Disaster and Hope: Honesty, Disaster and Hope*, ed. John Foster (London: Green House, 2019), 15–34.

¹⁶ Government Office for Science, *Future of an Ageing Population*, 2016, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/816458/future-of-an-ageing-population.pdf; Dorothée Rouzet, et al, ‘Fiscal challenges and inclusive growth in ageing societies’, *OECD Economic Policy Papers*, No. 27, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1787/c553d8d2-en>.

¹⁷ Jonathan Porritt, *Capitalism as If the World Matters* (London: Earthscan, 2006), 271.

¹⁸ H.-O. Pörtner, et al (eds), *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, in press).

- the EU's 8th Environment Action Plan, agreed by the European Council in December 2021, which features commitments to bring member states' consumption of resources within planetary boundaries and to introduce an indicator set to measure progress in wellbeing that goes 'beyond GDP';¹⁹
- the introduction of a quality of life framework that seeks to go 'beyond GDP' by the Canadian Department of Finance in its April 2021 budget;²⁰
- Norway's announcement in July 2021 that it was developing a national wellbeing strategy, recognising that 'GDP is an insufficient metric for good lives';²¹
- New Zealand's launch in October 2021 of an updated Living Standards Framework, using indicators of wellbeing to guide economic policy;²²
- a debate on the need for a wellbeing economy in the UK Parliament in November 2021, following a petition which gained nearly 70,000 signatures;²³
- the launch of an inquiry in November 2021 by the Environmental Audit Committee of the UK's House of Commons into how to 'move away from GDP as the primary indicator of prosperity';²⁴ and
- a 2021 briefing by the European Environment Agency, drawing attention to the incompatibility of ongoing GDP growth and environmental limits, and promoting postgrowth thinking as an alternative.²⁵

These developments build on other announcements in recent years, such as a 2020 paper by the European Economic and Social Committee, calling for the EU to adopt a 'precautionary approach' in which social stability does not

19 Council of the European Union, 'Press Release: 8th EAP: Member States Endorse Provisional Political Agreement Reached with Parliament', 10 December 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/12/10/8th-eap-member-states-endorse-provisional-political-agreement-reached-with-parliament/>.

20 Department of Finance Canada, 'Measuring What Matters: Toward a Quality of Life Strategy for Canada'.

21 Wellbeing Economy Alliance, 'Norway Announces New National Wellbeing Strategy', weall.org, 26 August 2021, <https://weall.org/norway-announces-new-national-wellbeing-strategy>.

22 The Treasury, 'Our Living Standards Framework' (Government of New Zealand, 28 October 2021), <https://www.treasury.govt.nz/information-and-services/nz-economy/higher-living-standards/our-living-standards-framework>.

23 UK Government and Parliament, 'Petition: Shift to a Wellbeing Economy: Put the Health of People and Planet First', Petitions - UK Government and Parliament, 26 September 2021, <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/580646>; HC deb, 'Climate Goals: Wellbeing Economy', accessed 17 January 2022, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2021-11-30/debates/5159DD63-D112-4D03-AE68-57A6A63F8659/ClimateGoalsWellbeingEconomy>.

24 Environmental Audit Committee, 'Press Notice: Can the UK Economy Take Greater Account of Natural Capital?', Aligning the UK's economic goals with environmental sustainability: Inquiry, 30 November 2021, <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1668/aligning-the-uks-economic-goals-with-environmental-sustainability/news/159271/can-the-uk-economy-take-greater-account-of-natural-capital/>.

25 European Environment Agency, 'Growth without Economic Growth', Briefing, Narratives for Change, 12 November 2021, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/growth-without-economic-growth>.

depend on GDP growth;²⁶ a national framework of wellbeing indicators to guide policymaking, launched by the Icelandic government in 2019; a 2018 report commissioned by the German Environment Ministry, which articulated a ‘precautionary postgrowth’ approach to achieving wellbeing within planetary boundaries;²⁷ the UK’s Ministry of Defence reflecting ‘the postgrowth challenge’ in its 2018 review of global strategic risks;²⁸ and a major Postgrowth Conference, held by the European Parliament in 2018.²⁹

Such efforts in turn build on initiatives a decade or so ago, such as the French President’s Commission on alternative measures of economic performance, launched in 2009; Tim Jackson’s report *Prosperity Without Growth* for the UK’s Sustainable Development Commission, also published in 2009; and the German Bundestag’s Enquete Commission on ‘Growth, Well-being and Quality of Life’, which ran from 2011 to 2013.³⁰

Research for policymakers

There are perhaps three aspects to this discourse that mark it out as something new and promising. First, in keeping with the reformist orientation of much postgrowth thinking, this discourse stands out for its sense of dialogue between researchers and campaigners on the one hand, and politicians and public agencies on the other. This is reflected in the extent to which postgrowth ideas have been given a platform by government agencies and EU institutions.

Second, and relatedly, this research has a focus on the practical need for policy development—something highlighted in Jackson’s insistence that elaborating the features of a viable postgrowth economy is a task that is ‘precise, definable, meaningful, and pragmatic’,³¹ and in the applied focus taken in a 2021 paper by Walker, Druckman, and Jackson on the challenges of envisaging welfare systems without growth.³² This spirit is also reflected, for instance, in the concrete policy recommendations of the 2018 German Environment Ministry report. In an overarching sense this report advocated

²⁶ European Economic and Social Committee, ‘The Sustainable Economy We Need’, Own Initiative Opinion, 23 January 2020, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/sustainable-economy-we-need-own-initiative-opinion>.

²⁷ Ulrich Petschow et al., ‘Social Well-Being within Planetary Boundaries: The Precautionary Post-Growth Approach’ (Umweltbundesamt, October 2018).

²⁸ CUSP, ‘Global Strategic Trends: MOD taking note of the Post-Growth Challenge’, 15 October 2018, https://cusp.ac.uk/themes/aetw/gst_postgrowth/.

²⁹ CUSP, ‘Rethinking Economic Policy in the EU: First Post-Growth Conference Hosted at EU Parliament, Brussels 18-20 Sept 2018’, *Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity* (blog), 12 September 2018, <https://cusp.ac.uk/themes/aetw/postgrowth2018/>.

³⁰ Reinhard Loske, ‘Post-Growth Thinking as a Resource for a European Union of Sustainability’, CUSP Working Paper, 27 November 2018, <https://cusp.ac.uk/themes/aetw/wp15/>.

³¹ Jackson (2009), *Prosperity without Growth*.

³² Christine Corlet Walker, Angela Druckman, and Tim Jackson, ‘Welfare Systems without Economic Growth: A Review of the Challenges and next Steps for the Field’, *Ecological Economics* 186 (1 August 2021): 107066, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2021.107066>.

the adoption of policies which are future-proofed against the possibility that economic growth might not be achievable in the same way that it has been historically. As for specific policies to reduce growth dependency, the report suggested shifts in taxation from labour to pollution (which would divert incentives away from labour-saving capital investments and towards less-damaging patterns of production and consumption), and the introduction of a universal basic income. It also suggested new models of pension provision, healthcare, and social security which would rely less on economic growth.

A third aspect of the discourse on growth dependency is its focus, not only on environmental limits to growth, but on inherent difficulties in maintaining growth rates because of declining productivity and demand in mature economies—what has been called ‘secular stagnation’. This means joining in debates within mainstream economics, not only on the slowdown in growth but also on the rising inequality that has resulted from political attempts to increase growth (or at least to increase the share of wealth going to capital-owners, in the absence of a growing economy overall)—developments associated with the rise of political populism and social instability.³³ In this way, the critique of growth dependency unites the stark warnings of environmental science with the most immediate concerns of mainstream politics. Its message to politicians is that they need to wean society off its growth dependency, not only because this is needed to stay within planetary boundaries, but because growth may be giving out anyway.

The overall thrust of the growth dependency critique is to present postgrowth ideas as key to making public services and society as a whole more resilient in the face of economic and environmental shocks.

Naming the problem

To be sure, the critique of growth dependency is still fighting against the political and economic orthodoxy.³⁴ But there is rich potential in this form of postgrowth research. Identifying growth dependency as a systemic problem for public policy works both as a diagnosis of a condition and something that, by that diagnosis—i.e. by naming it, bringing it out into the open—helps to provide the possibility of treating it. In particular, it offers

³³ Tim Jackson, ‘The Post-Growth Challenge: Secular Stagnation, Inequality and the Limits to Growth’, *Ecological Economics* 156 (February 2019): 236-246, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2018.10.010>; Tim Jackson, ‘Beyond Redistribution—Confronting inequality in an era of low growth’, Policy Briefing for the APPG on Limits to Growth (2018): <https://cusp.ac.uk/themes/aetw/briefing-paper-no2/>.

³⁴ Petschow et al., ‘Social Well-Being within Planetary Boundaries: The Precautionary Post-Growth Approach’, 22; Loske, ‘Post-Growth Thinking as a Resource for a European Union of Sustainability’, 19–22. For the controversy in play, see also this fierce high-level debate at the 2019 Brussels Economic Forum between Tim Jackson and Valdis Dombrovskis (Vice-President, European Commission), Nadia Calviño (Minister of Economy and Business, Spain), Gita Gopinath (Chief Economist, International Monetary Fund) and Riccardo Illy (Chairman, Gruppo Illy): https://cusp.ac.uk/themes/aetw/tj_eubf19vid/.

politicians a tool for asserting a greater sense of control over the public policy environment in which they operate. Too often the overarching priority of growth is understood as something unquestionable, in the face of which politicians stand helpless. By identifying growth as both a dependency and one which is fundamentally unsustainable, this critique may be able to frame growth as a dangerous addiction—one that politicians could and should help society to kick.

2. What existing research can tell us

This section summarises some relevant findings from existing research which may be useful for postgrowth researchers to reflect on, as they seek to influence policymaking with their work. The first set of summary findings (findings 1 to 5) focuses on existing research by CUSP researchers both on the political resistance to the idea of limits to growth, and suggestions of ways in which postgrowth research may play a role in helping to break through such resistance. The second set of findings (findings 6 to 9) summarises research (e.g. from within the social science of ‘Knowledge Transfer’) which looks more generally at the relationship between research and policy implementation.

Summary of lessons from existing research

Tackling political resistance to postgrowth research

1. Research which questions an overarching political goal of growth, or which implies radical changes to taken-for-granted aspects of Western lifestyles, faces high barriers to achieving political influence.

Tackling climate change entails radical change to high-carbon, high-consumption economic systems: as Tim Jackson has argued, economic (GDP) growth in developed economies is incompatible with climate stability.³⁵ This creates enormous problems for mainstream politics, since citizens in richer countries are so accustomed to high-carbon lifestyles that it is very difficult for them to envisage a low-carbon society. The inertia of the system, combined with lobbying from fossil fuel interests, militates against change.

Mainstream politics generally recognises ‘sustainability’ to mean the preservation of an existing order of consumption and expectation of future affluence, rather than a more radical reordering of ‘business as usual’ economic life. As CUSP research fellow Daniel Hausknost has analysed it, governments have for decades been better suited to tackling local and immediate environmental problems than international and diffuse ones.³⁶ Since the 1960s many governments have adopted environmental policies (in effect, expanding the ‘welfare state’ to become the ‘environmental state’). This has had a double function: to protect many citizens from direct harm and to protect their material standard of living. What states have so failed

³⁵ Jackson (2009), *Prosperity without Growth*.

³⁶ Daniel Hausknost, ‘The Environmental State and the Glass Ceiling of Transformation’, *Environmental Politics* 29, No. 1 (2 January 2020): 17–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2019.1680062>; Daniel Hausknost, ‘Greening the Juggernaut? The Modern State and the “glass Ceiling” of Environmental Transformation’, in *Ecology and Justice: Contributions from the Margins*, ed. Mladen Domazet (Zagreb: Institute for Political Ecology, 2017), 49–76.

to do is successfully address overarching problems—notably, climate change—which are both dispersed and where solutions might interfere with people’s material expectations. As material consumption overshoots the limits to growth, environmental sustainability is increasingly at odds with the ‘the way of life’ in economically-advanced societies—but mainstream politics is reluctant equally to implement environmental measures that would threaten that way of life, and to admit that such measures may be essential. For Hausknot, this reluctance to admit the unsustainability of consumerist lifestyles is what constitutes an invisible barrier (glass ceiling) to more radical environmental policy.

2. There remains a disconnect between the seriousness of key environmental challenges and the rhetoric and priorities of politicians.

In her in-depth study of engagement with climate change by MPs in the UK, CUSP fellow Rebecca Willis finds that politicians are neither rewarded nor pressured enough to support strong action on climate change.³⁷ MPs repeatedly report that climate change has been very low down on the list of issues raised with them. Among politicians themselves it is not seen as the kind of issue on which to make one’s political reputation: ‘It’s just not a serious sort of Cabinet issue for the big bruisers.’³⁸ Climate change is such a big, complex issue that no politician is able to lead a campaign to fix it, and then claim credit for having delivered.

Where politicians do talk about climate change, they often shy away from trying to build support for radical action. None of the MPs in Willis’s research has advocated radical change to the capitalist economic system. Even MPs who are convinced by the need to respond to climate science with radical policy told Willis they are often self-conscious about being seen to have ‘a bee in their bonnet’. Some politicians try to portray climate change as a manageable problem with a range of upsides (e.g. win-win investments in green jobs), while others try to advance the climate agenda by stealth—e.g. by campaigning on other agendas (such as improving local public transport) that might help to tackle climate change indirectly. The problem with such strategies, Willis finds, is that, by downplaying the radical nature of the challenge, they also undermine any calls for radical policy responses.

3. The relationship between research, policy, and outcomes is far from straightforward; in some cases, research can even impede the development of effective policy.

³⁷ Rebecca Willis, *Too Hot to Handle? The Democratic Challenge of Climate Change* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020), <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/too-hot-to-handle>.

³⁸ Willis, 57.

Research can be used by government departments as a *replacement* for action, co-opting researchers into a process that forestalls change.³⁹ The UK Government has published numerous reviews that have concluded on the advantages of environmental fiscal policy, for instance, but very few of their repeated recommendations have been acted on. For Willis, governments have effectively used these independent reviews as a way of buying time, and claiming that they are about to act—just as soon as more evidence is in. For Hausknost, meanwhile, the early challenge of environmentalism, exemplified by the *Limits to Growth* report, spurred policymakers to clean up local environments, which satisfied many people’s concerns and thus lessened the political pressure for more radical efforts. To have influence, environmental researchers then had to present ideas that were practical, as defined by policymakers—in other words, solutions deemed compatible with overarching political priorities. In this sense, ‘ecomodernist’ research that suggests economic growth can be reconciled with environmental protection may crowd out the political space for postgrowth research.

4. Postgrowth research can help to build the conditions for an expansion of its own influence.

Postgrowth research and advocacy can also influence politics indirectly, through helping to inform and change public attitudes. This could have the effect of shifting the political terrain such that more radical research and policy proposals become considered by the political mainstream. For Hausknost, postgrowth research could play a role in breaking through the ‘glass ceiling’, if it is able to expand people’s notions of the ‘way of life’ that they want to see preserved. Currently, the state has to sustain too many things at once: economic growth, the prosperity of citizens, and the life support functions of the biosphere. In order to protect the latter, it would arguably have to let go of the first (growth) and radically redefine what prosperity means. This is precisely the project at the heart of postgrowth research, notably that of Tim Jackson.⁴⁰

There is a need for symbolic policies that are not only good in their own right, but also invoke a mythic sense of meaning that opens up new political possibilities: Willis defines ‘symbolic policies’ as practical measures which encapsulate a vision of wider change. Taking bold action on climate change could, by having tangible impacts, help to shift perspectives towards treating climate change both as a political priority and as an issue where practical action was possible.

³⁹ Willis (202), *Bristol University Press | Too Hot to Handle?*

⁴⁰ Jackson (2009), *Prosperity without Growth*; Jackson (2021), *Post Growth*.

5. Experiments with different forms of democracy could help to open up new possibilities of political action.

The system of representative democracy may actually be impeding political action on climate change: Faced with the scientific (and everyday) evidence of the climate breakdown unfolding in front of us, Willis believes most people would support truly decisive measures to tackle it. The problem is they are not given this option by mainstream politicians. Her suggested solution is to press for *more* democracy—such as deliberative forums in which power is held by citizen participants, and which can give those politicians who want to challenge current power structures the evidence and political cover to do so.

Wider findings on the relationships between research and policymaking

6. Academics can boost the effectiveness of their research by presenting their work in a form that politicians can relate to, and which offers policy arguments and solutions they can utilise.

In a paper on translating research on environmental sustainability from academia into local government policymaking, Zborel *et al.* note three primary challenges:

- *The inability of more research to generate consensus.* Often, the conclusions of academic research call for more data rather than offering a concrete step forward toward consensus, while different researchers may offer conflicting conclusions. This can create a ‘paralysis of analysis’, reducing the relevance of research to policymaking.
- *Mismatched timelines.* Academic research programmes tend to operate over multi-year time frames that may run too slowly to inform decisions on local government programmes.
- *Translating research into the language of policymakers.* Local politicians are unlikely to read academic literature, while many academic researchers are untrained in succinctly communicating their research insights directly to policy audiences.⁴¹

These findings are echoed by other studies.⁴² Recommendations for framing research for policy impact made in these studies include: expressing the outcomes of research in the form of a narrative that focuses on real-life impacts and examples of local communities; presenting tightly-written, well-digested evidence, with well-focused conclusions; and proposing

⁴¹ Tammy Zborel et al., ‘Translating Research to Policy for Sustainable Cities’, *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 16, no. 6 (2012): 786–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1530-9290.2012.00565.x>.

⁴² For example, S. Gentry, L. Milden, and M.P. Kelly, ‘Why Is Translating Research into Policy so Hard? How Theory Can Help Public Health Researchers Achieve Impact?’, *Public Health* 178 (January 2020): 90–96, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2019.09.009>; Ross C. Brownson and Ellen Jones, ‘Bridging the Gap: Translating Research into Policy and Practice’, *Preventive Medicine* 49, no. 4 (1 October 2009): 313–15, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2009.06.008>.

concrete policy solutions, not just defining problems or concluding on the need for more research.

7. Rational argument and well-evidenced research is not enough on its own; it needs politically savvy communication and ultimately political advocacy in order to influence government policy.

An influential account of how political change occurs has been put forward by political scientist John Kingdon.⁴³ Kingdon objects to popular/naïve accounts of policymakers developing solutions based on the best available evidence, in response to problems as they become aware of them. Problems, Kingdon observes, are a necessary but not a sufficient cause of political responses; he identifies three ‘streams’ which all have to align to result in political action:

- First, there needs to be a *problem*—and this needs to be communicated to policymakers, whether via statistical data, media comment, or events (often some form of disaster) which impose themselves on the collective or national consciousness.
- Second, there needs to be a *policy*, a proposed answer to the problem; in practice, there may be a number of rival policies for the same problem, with their sponsors—or ‘policy entrepreneurs’—jockeying for influence. Suggested policies may circulate for years, kept alive by think tanks, backbench or opposition politicians, and campaigning organisations, without being taken up by those in power.
- Third, there needs to be a set of *political* actors, with the power to support and enact a policy; this depends on shifts in power arising from elections, changes in national mood, and popular campaigns.

Kingdon’s argument is that it is only when all three streams align that a window of opportunity opens and meaningful political change may become possible.

For CUSP co-investigator Philip Catney, who has drawn on Kingdon’s three streams framework extensively in his own research, academics are generally not involved in the politics stream; rather they are working on technical solutions in the policy stream. In his observations of UK policymaking, those politicians and civil servants in power within the politics stream will look to cherry pick the academic research they think will support their political goals, and will tend to listen to sources of research they are already familiar with. Academic researchers on their own find it difficult to get a hearing with policymakers; greater potential influence comes from having one’s findings amplified through ‘policy brokerages’—either units within or collaborations between universities, dedicated to communicating research to policy

⁴³ John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 2nd ed. (New York : HarperCollinsCollege, 1995), <http://archive.org/details/agendasalternati00king>.

audiences (such as the Universities Policy Exchange Network, or UCL's Policy Impact Unit), or third-party bodies, summarising research for policymakers (such as the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology).

Beyond the communications work of policy brokerages, research in the wake of Kingdon's theory also highlights the need for political advocates ('policy entrepreneurs') to help keep policy proposals alive within political discourse until the moment when political circumstances (for example, a change of government) become more favourable.⁴⁴ To focus on a recent example in the UK, a sugary drinks levy was first floated then ruled out by the Coalition Government in 2014, before being adopted by the Conservative Government in 2016.⁴⁵ Gentry *et al.* credit committed public health advocates for keeping this idea alive within political discourse, meaning that it was an available option for policymakers to consider following a change in government.⁴⁶ Such examples (and the logic of Kingdon's original analysis) make clear that the greatest potential impact on policymaking comes from political campaigning and elections, which can change the political complexion of those in charge of the policy stream (or can widen the scope of policies they feel to be politically 'acceptable').

8. Effective research-based policy requires partnerships between researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and the public.

Where research-based policy is adopted, a number of studies suggest that it is more likely to be successful if developed in partnership, both with practitioners who will implement it on the ground, and citizens who will use or be affected by it.⁴⁷ One impact highlighted of developing policy in partnership with practitioners would be to help researchers to conduct policy-relevant, solution-focused research, and to be prepared with digested evidence for when the policy environment is amenable to such an evidence-informed idea. Related to this is the suggestion that such partnership work can help overcome any cultural disconnects between researchers and policymakers, which might negatively impact on the potential influence academics might exert. Perhaps most importantly, working with the public

⁴⁴ Jenny Bird, 'Connecting research to policy is complex, unpredictable and time consuming – so should we expect academics to do it on their own?', *LSE Blogs: Impact of Social Sciences* (blog), 27 September 2021,

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2021/09/27/connecting-research-to-policy-is-complex-unpredictable-and-time-consuming-so-should-we-expect-academics-to-do-it-on-their-own/>.

⁴⁵ Recent research suggests that the sugary drinks levy has helped to reduce purchases of sweet soft drinks since its introduction. See David Pell *et al.*, 'Changes in Soft Drinks Purchased by British Households Associated with the UK Soft Drinks Industry Levy: Controlled Interrupted Time Series Analysis', *BMJ* 372 (10 March 2021): n254, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n254>.

⁴⁶ Gentry, Mildon, and Kelly, 'Why Is Translating Research into Policy so Hard?'

⁴⁷ Gentry, Mildon, and Kelly; Miles Parker *et al.*, 'Identifying the Science and Technology Dimensions of Emerging Public Policy Issues through Horizon Scanning', *PLOS ONE* 9, no. 5 (30 May 2014): e96480, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0096480>; Brownson and Jones, 'Bridging the Gap'; Kathryn Oliver and Annette Boaz, 'Transforming Evidence for Policy and Practice: Creating Space for New Conversations', *Palgrave Communications* 5, no. 1 (December 2019): 60, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0266-1>.

is argued as having threefold benefits: a 'normative' rationale (allowing the public to have a say on issues that affect them); an 'instrumental' rationale (facilitating learning on the part of citizens about the world in which they live); and a 'substantive' rationale (improving the quality of policy decisions by bringing new forms of knowledge to bear on the policy-making process).⁴⁸

9. Research funders have a significant role to play beyond the provision of finance.

Funding organisations can play an important role in helping to create partnerships, notably between researchers and practitioners, and tasking them with focusing jointly, from their differing perspectives, on a single issue. For example, McLean *et al.* focus on the role of research funders in aiding knowledge translation (of health research) into policy and practice. One of their key findings is the paradoxical one that while funders are concerned to get research evidence into practice, they rarely seek evidence on the effectiveness of their own efforts as funders (or what they might do differently to boost the influence of their funding interventions). The authors find that one of the key impacts that funders can have is through linking researchers to research users.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Parker *et al.*, 'Identifying the Science and Technology Dimensions of Emerging Public Policy Issues through Horizon Scanning', 2.

⁴⁹ Robert K. D. McLean *et al.*, 'Translating Research into Action: An International Study of the Role of Research Funders', *Health Research Policy and Systems* 16, no. 1 (24 May 2018): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-018-0316-y>.

3. Views of politicians and political staff

For this report four experienced political operatives were interviewed—two politicians (Joan Walley, former MP and Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee; and Dr Jane Davidson, former Welsh Assembly Member, and Minister for Environment in the Welsh Government), and two senior political advisers (a former ministerial special adviser; and Laura MacKenzie, senior parliamentary adviser to Caroline Lucas MP). Each has contrasting perspectives on the relationships between environmental research and politics. This section presents a thematic analysis of the most prominent or repeated points concerning the interface between postgrowth research and policymaking that came up in these conversations. Brief summaries of their individual contributions are set out in Appendix 1.

1. Academics who wish to influence policy need to find the language of the government of the day (and that of the opposition parties) and play to their need for answers.

From her perspective as a former minister in the Welsh Assembly Government, Jane Davidson is clear that researchers should study the government's agenda (and that of opposition parties) and translate their findings into language that speaks to it. This does not mean they have to agree with the ideological direction of the government overall, or that they cannot propose radical policy measures. What it does mean is presenting one's research as answering a question the government is asking. If you can make a clear case to ministers / civil servants / special advisers that you have some answers that are useful to them, then you will be invited in for a discussion. It's those academics who are clever at this form of presentation that get heard. In all this it's important to remember that you cannot just raise questions and complications; politicians are hungry for answers. Finally, as both Jane Davidson and Joan Walley, former Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, argue it is important to seek to influence, not just individual ministers and their departments, but the platforms of political parties. Postgrowth researchers should be looking to exploit opportunities to get sustainability issues into the policy pipeline via forthcoming election manifestos.

2. There are different types of 'policymakers', with different interests and relationships to power—and academic researchers should vary their communication strategies accordingly.

It is easy when using terms such as 'influencing policy' to think of 'policymakers' as a monolithic bloc, synonymous with 'government': those with the power to implement the proposals set out by academic researchers—if only they can be reached and persuaded. In reality, as these four political insiders make clear—both through their own examples, and

from their observations of the political system—‘policymakers’ are anything but a monolithic bloc. Within government there are ministers, civil servants, and special advisers; in Parliament, there are backbenchers, opposition parties, and cross-party committees; nationally, political parties have their own forums for developing policy platforms. In many cases, politicians themselves do not have direct access to power—if they are backbenchers, in opposition, or even if they ministers of departments that have less influence on government policy than others (notably the Treasury, which has often constrained the influence of the environmental agenda within the UK Government). What this means is that often the politicians that researchers may be seeking to influence are themselves in a not dissimilar position, in terms of themselves seeking to influence others who wield political power. This, in turn, provides us with another model of ‘influencing policy’, one in which politicians and academic researchers can form mutually beneficial alliances: researchers providing intellectual credibility to policy arguments and politicians amplifying campaigns to galvanise political support for policy proposals.

In addition, as both Jane Davidson and senior parliamentary adviser Laura MacKenzie make clear, discussion about influencing ‘policymakers’ should not be restricted to thinking about ministers at Westminster. There are separate sets of policymakers within local authorities and the devolved nations: there might easily be more scope for getting postgrowth research taken seriously at those levels than at Westminster right now. Lessons in influencing policy could also be learned from the EU, where there is a strong postgrowth approach from the European Parliament in support of the EU’s 8th Environmental Action Plan.⁵⁰

3. Though composed of backbenchers, select committees have real power—and researchers can maximise their influence with them by following simple rules.

As the former special adviser we spoke to emphasised, select committees really do have power. For senior civil service and senior staff at agencies and quangos, select committee hearings can be ‘make or break’ events for their careers. While indirect, in the sense that they scrutinise government policy rather than make it, their influence on future government policy can be significant.

Former select committee chair Joan Walley provides the following advice for academics and campaigners seeking to engage with select committees. The first rule is to focus clearly on framing the evidence they submit to the needs of the committee. In submitting written evidence, it is also important to be

⁵⁰ European Parliament, ‘Legislative Train Schedule: 1 A Green New Deal’, European Parliament, 20 November 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train>.

clear that one would welcome the opportunity also to give oral evidence—which will have much greater impact. Contributors should not assume that members will read their written evidence, but in any case should tailor it as much as possible to the committee members and the inquiry questions. Written evidence should be presented in such a way that it is aiming to frame the recommendations of the inquiry. When giving oral evidence, the key is having a clear message to impart. If it is possible to suggest a committee take evidence in situ, outside Westminster, this can give a hearing bigger impact, both with the members themselves and with the media and public in that area.

Joan Walley also suggests that committee members and external campaigners can work together to boost the influence of oral evidence sessions, for instance by promoting the live-stream of committee hearings. As an example, an advocacy group might ask people who had signed one of their petitions to follow a hearing, and promote this message to the MPs taking part. In her view, knowing that people were watching and really paying attention to what was being said would help MPs to focus on an issue and seek to make an impact on it.

4. Academic expertise can be vital to the credibility and effectiveness of politicians who are themselves trying to influence political debate and government decisions.

As minister, Jane Davidson established the Welsh Climate Change Commission, with the design of embedding academic expertise at the heart of policymaking. As she explains, this was important for underlining the credibility of the proposals for government policy that would arise from its work. Individually, as well, she argues that politicians who are seeking to advance the case for environmental and wellbeing policy can boost the authority of their advocacy by showing they have the respect of highly credible academic experts. One of the early lessons she learned when working with academics as a minister was how the timescales of research and politics can be totally misaligned: it was a lot easier to incorporate academic research into her political work once she started to look at research proposals. Doing this enables a politician to see what research is going to be conducted, and when the results might be ready—and thus build it into the development of policy. Doing this as a minister generated a massive amount of goodwill among academics, who were thus eager to collaborate.

This emphasis on the quality of academic research is echoed by Joan Walley. She highlights the Environmental Audit Committee report on pollinators as a good example: this translated high-quality academic research on

neonicotinoids into political terms that captured people's interests.⁵¹ She argues that reports such as this illustrate the fact that politicians cannot just rely on emotive messages; if they are making arguments which fundamentally appeal to the science, they have got to be evidenced-based.

5. At the same time, research based on evidence and rational argument is not enough on its own; political influence requires some form of emotional engagement with the public.

Joan Walley cautions that the influence of Brexit and other populist movements has made it harder for environmental research to achieve political consensus based on the strength of its scientific evidence. The question 'How can research influence policy?' assumes a politics of good faith—i.e. a level playing field of ideas, in which proposals that were strongly supported by evidence and rational argument would have a good chance of influencing political debate. Increasingly in the wake of Brexit, she wonders if this is an assumption one can make within the UK. It is not yet known the extent to which Brexit-supporting interests might swing their attention to anti-environmentalist campaigns, but there is certainly a risk this kind of emotional, identity-based politics could affect environmental policy. She is clear on the need to ensure there remains space for common dialogue on environmental policy across political or cultural divides.

For Jane Davidson, too, it is important for academic researchers to think about how to communicate with sections of society that may have different class and cultural sensibilities. As she reminds us, it's easy for policy discussion about sustainability issues to remain an elite discussion: there are some issues and policy proposals which may be widely accepted within circles of academic specialists, but which may make for a less comfortable discussion when engaging with the general public.

Laura MacKenzie observes that to be politically influential, research may often need to be translated into proposals that include solutions and can be communicated in a way that connects with the audience and engages them also on an emotional level. It's important not to assume that rational argument and well-supported evidence will necessarily be enough to translate into popular or political support for a policy proposal (something which even experienced politicians sometimes forget). Meanwhile, within postgrowth research there can sometimes be a focus on what is wrong with the current system; but as she argues, if we want politicians to be engaged, we need a 'so what', an idea of what the Government can do about the problem.

⁵¹ Environmental Audit Committee, 'Pollinator and Pesticides' (House of Commons, April 2013), <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmenvaud/668/668.pdf>.

6. There is a mismatch between the priorities and language of conventional politics on the one hand, and the urgency of climate crisis and language of postgrowth research on the other: this is a challenge for both politicians and researchers to confront.

As Laura MacKenzie explains, it is not straightforward to get politicians interested in an explicitly postgrowth research agenda. This is both because this is a more abstract set of ideas than other issues, and because it is not really on the political agenda already. It's important to recognise that even climate change does not always translate into the highest 'inbox pressure' for MPs compared to more 'immediate' issues, even on the environment (bee-killing pesticides and fracking being specific examples). It takes concerted effort from campaigners to mobilise public interest in a topic, so that it feeds through into MPs' priorities.

The former special adviser explained to us that the language of 'postgrowth' or 'limits to growth' has extremely limited resonance within frontbench teams, in government or opposition. Notably, Tim Jackson's *Prosperity without Growth* report for the Sustainable Development Commission was read widely by senior people in government around 2009. In the immediate aftermath of the financial crash, however, it was thought entirely counter-productive by essentially all senior voices within the Labour Party to suggest that they should go into a general election not being committed to driving up economic growth.

For Jane Davidson, postgrowth researchers might have to think about translating their ideas into another form in order to win more political influence, not least with the current UK Government. 'Postgrowth' is not a term that will work with this Government; Boris Johnson's rhetoric is full of references to growth. Presenting research that talks about wellbeing, and wellbeing economics, may have more practical success. There is also a lot of potential for postgrowth ideas to be presented under this Government's banner of 'Build Back Better'. Talking about future generations may also have a cross-party appeal (it should appeal to Conservatives, given Burkean rhetoric about a contract between the generations). It might thus be possible to find effective political support for the creation of a UK version of the Welsh Future Generations Commissioner.

For Joan Walley, the ordinary ways of doing politics are sometimes in conflict with the urgent need for environmental action. On the one hand, she agrees, there is room for an iterative approach to using research to influence politics. As one example, she notes a private members bill on nutritional food, whose presentation gave a platform to arguments based on scientific evidence; while this was talked out and rejected by government MPs, this is an issue that will come around again and such work will help pave the way for success in the future. With many political issues you have

to go through this process of getting things on the agenda, having them rejected, but then working to build a momentum so that this becomes a case which is eventually conceded by the government. But on the other hand, when it comes to the environment, you don't have that luxury of being able to wait; you need to get to a situation where policy changes come about immediately once issues are recognised as requiring a serious policy response. Yet here, the time horizons of conventional politics are in conflict with the urgency with which we need to act. This, she suggests, is where the UK stands in real need of its own equivalent to the Well-Being of Future Generation Act in Wales, something which would ensure there was a political focus on the long-term interests of the nation and its citizens into the future.

4. Views of postgrowth researchers and advocates

Reflections from postgrowth researchers and advocates from across the CUSP network were gathered for this report in two ways. The first was a roundtable discussion on the challenges of and techniques for using postgrowth research to influence policymaking; the second a set of self-reflections on the experience of presenting research to parliamentarians and the media, from a CUSP project funded by the Laudes Foundation.

Roundtable discussion with the CUSP network

On 14 September 2021 CUSP advisers, fellows, and researchers, and contacts from wider networks were invited to participate in a roundtable discussion, held virtually and under Chatham House rules, on the themes of this report. Further details about this roundtable, are presented in Appendix 2. Below is presented a thematic summary of key points to emerge from this discussion:

1. Postgrowth researchers need to reflect on how the premise of their work challenges dominant ideas about political reality.

Over several decades our prevailing ideas of political reality in liberal-democratic-capitalist states have been extensively shaped according to a certain vision of liberty. This was recognised and promoted notably by the neoliberal economist, Friedrich von Hayek: In this vision of liberty, only political action from governments (or direct action by political campaigners) is perceived as infringing on people's freedom, while the constraints imposed by the market are seen as part and parcel of unquestionable reality. An underlying aim of postgrowth research ought to be to reframe perceptions of reality and liberty, in turn showing how the market itself is a product of human design, imposing its own constraints on people in certain ways. Translating postgrowth ideas into political action first means challenging these 'limits to change'.

2. Achieving political influence for a postgrowth agenda requires a collaboration between researchers, campaigners, and politicians.

It's this kind of collaboration that's needed to try to shift the boundaries of political reality. The nature of such collaboration means people can specialise in what they're good at, and work together to complement one another: the first job of academic researchers, for instance, is to produce good research—others can play their roles in communicating it. Overall, a collaborative group needs to pursue both an inside track (private discussions and briefings with politicians and civil servants) and an outside track approach (engaging people in public campaigns). An inside track approach on its own can be useful, but without a public dimension to such engagement, it is unlikely to translate into real action. Meanwhile, an

outside track approach on its own can generate a lot of civil society engagement, but without the inside track ambition and contacts it struggles to make progress within the sphere of government and electoral politics. Ideally, one would bring both an inside and an outside track approach to bear on the same issue.

3. Achieving impact does not stop with influencing policymakers or even seeing policies enacted: policy has to follow through into effective action.

A lot of attention is focused on how to produce research that influences the policy process, but relatively little on the next stage—i.e. once you've influenced politicians and got the government to adopt a policy, how do you make sure it's actually implemented effectively? How do you ensure that it manages to influence the public in the ways you originally intended? Political action can't stop at the policy stage—you need to follow it through into effective social action.

4. The Laudes project work with the APPG on Limits to Growth has created productive opportunities for successful collaboration between academic researchers and parliamentary staff.

Working closely together, MPs' staff and CUSP researchers have been able to hone research into briefings and events that have both advanced new ground in argument and attracted political interest. This experience has expanded the perspectives and insights of those who have worked together on these events.

5. Politicians need researchers to present answers, not just ask questions.

Despite the need of course to study the system dynamics in order to find levers for change, quite often in postgrowth research there's lots of focus on what's wrong with the current system; but if you want people to be engaged, you need a 'so what', an idea of what people can do about the problem. Also, academics need to be bolder about some of their conclusions: language that suggest tentative conclusions and limitations to research, and conclusions that more research is needed, will suggest to politicians that findings are not strong enough to act on.

6. 'Policymakers' are not all one thing: who's in power really matters.

You can't ignore the importance of political ideology in terms of how politicians will perceive research, what they will do with it, how they will interpret or misinterpret it—a key understanding for academics when presenting research within a political context. We need to move beyond an assumption that self-evident rationality will carry the day. Which political parties are in government plays a big role in the potential influence of

postgrowth research. At the same time, political tribalism on the part of environmental campaigners can be an enemy of progress: it's important to seek to present research as persuasively as possible within the relevant political context you're seeking to influence.

7. Framing postgrowth ideas is important to their influence.

The terms 'postgrowth' (and, more, 'degrowth') can put some people (both politicians and the public) off, meaning research won't get a wider hearing. Lots of people care about their local environment, their local experience and access to nature: if academics could engage with that more, they could create more space for greater questioning of a 'growth at all costs' paradigm. It's important to seek to promote more positive messages about alternatives to growth. At the same time, it's important not to dilute your message too much, as this would mean failing to advance this agenda politically. And fundamentally there may be limits to advancing positive messages, in the sense that the postgrowth case is often about advancing alternatives which are not in a simple sense materially better than conditions we experience now, but better than they would be in the absence of decisive action.

8. Audit and performance indicators are an important element in implementing postgrowth policies, though in other cases new forms of assessment may need to be developed.

Ensuring organisations report on their impacts and sustainability strategies, and that public bodies report on the success of their policies against performance metrics, is an important way of driving real change through a system. At the same time, the insistence of government departments on tangible metrics of success can embed within it an underlying commitment to material growth (i.e. needing to see ongoing progress in the numbers). Where postgrowth policy results in less activity (less consumption, for example), this may be hard to capture in numbers, in turn making it less influential as a policy. Postgrowth researchers need to reflect on this.

9. The key to political progress may lie in the growing recognition of environmental limits as an unquestionable feature of reality, something that mainstream politicians across party and ideological divides will all have to respond to.

Climate crisis, via the flooding and fires we see on the news and experience at first hand, is becoming an unquestionable fact that increasingly cannot be denied. The potential is there for perceptions of political reality to change with it.

10. 'Postgrowth' as a set of ideas is very much confined to wealthy nations, and does not have much resonance in the Global South.

Researchers seeking an international political influence, or seeking to influence their government's approach to international trade and foreign policy, need to understand how to frame their research within a multinational context.

CUSP 2021 Laudes-funded project: self-reflections

One of CUSP's main Laudes-funded activities in 2021 was the *Tackling Growth Dependency* project, led by Tim Jackson and CUSP researcher Christine Corlet Walker. This project outlined a proposed framework for identifying, understanding and overcoming growth dependencies in the welfare state overall.⁵² It then focused on growth dependency in adult social care, producing a policy briefing paper launched at a public meeting of the APPG on Limits to Growth.⁵³ Subsequent outputs developed from this work led to a number of impacts in the media and Parliament. This included featuring in the *Guardian* and a BBC Panorama programme,⁵⁴ as well as being referred to in the second reading of the Health and Care Bill in the House of Lords.⁵⁵

Reflecting on the challenges and successes in bringing research on growth dependency into political debate in this project, Christine Corlet Walker highlighted three main learning points.

1. There may be tensions between presenting research that offers something new (in order to expand the terms of political debate in a postgrowth direction), and shaping research to align with current political priorities (in order to gain a more immediate hearing).

While being discussed in Parliament and on BBC One was a significant success in terms of influencing policy debate, in reaching these audiences this research focused down on the more immediate, tangible aspects of growth dependency that were already on the political radar in some respect (namely financial engineering by large social care investors). By not stressing an overarching critique of growth dependency, this research was able to progress further and faster on specific policy proposals around de-financialising care. However, potentially an opportunity was lost to make

⁵² Christine Corlet Walker, Angela Druckman, and Tim Jackson, 'Welfare Systems without Economic Growth: A Review of the Challenges and next Steps for the Field', *Ecological Economics* 186 (1 August 2021): 107066, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2021.107066>.

⁵³ Christine Corlet Walker and Tim Jackson, 'Tackling Growth Dependency: The Case of Adult Social Care', Briefing Paper, An Economy That Works, July 2021, <https://limits2growth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/APPG-Policy-Briefing-No-4-1.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Christine Corlet Walker, 'Predatory Financial Tactics Are Putting the Very Survival of the UK Care System at Risk', *The Guardian*, 10 August 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/10/predatory-financial-tactics-survival-uk-care-system-at-risk>; 'Crisis in Care: Follow the Money', *Panorama* (BBC One, 6 December 2021), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0012cbj>.

⁵⁵ Hansard HL Deb vol 816 cols 1875-1877 (7 December 2021).

broader and more radical policy calls, and to increase awareness of some of the core theoretical postgrowth underpinnings behind the social care policy proposals.

2. To gain wider influence it may be a necessary challenge to find a common language with politicians who span political divides, but without compromising on message.

Working with a cross-party forum like the APPG on Limits to Growth means thinking carefully about language and framing. This is so MPs from all parties can give research a fair hearing on its own terms, without perhaps immediately reacting to specific words or framings that are already heavily politicised (e.g. the question of nationalising the care service).

3. It is useful for researchers to understand the challenges for politicians in focusing on themes that range beyond short-term political issues.

It was revealing on this project to grasp how challenging it is to help MPs focus on the importance of a longer-term, postgrowth vision in a world where they are constantly bombarded by news items and research that are absolutely *immediately* pressing. It is inevitably challenging to find space to talk about a sustainable vision of the future economy, when this is competing with COP26, COVID-19, and Brexit-induced staff shortages. To create space and attention for more visionary work in politics is challenging but essential; building an intimate understanding of the challenges faced by politicians should help postgrowth researchers frame their work in the best way possible to achieve influence.

Conclusions and recommendations

This report is inspired by a double problem. In its overarching form, this is the same problem identified in the 1972 *Limits to Growth* report: wealthier societies, such as the UK, are dependent on literally unsustainable ways of living, and stuck in a political system in which an impossibly endless pursuit of growth seems entrenched in the structures of power. In the particular form highlighted here, meanwhile, the problem can be phrased like this: postgrowth research, which offers to help policymakers find ways to wean society off its dangerous dependency on growth, finds a hard time gaining influence, precisely because of the structural bias in the political system against radical arguments which question the goal of growth.

Drawing on the experience and contacts of the CUSP network of researchers and fellows, this report has sought to distill insights from the worlds both of academic research and frontline politics. It has aimed to cast light on the barriers faced by those seeking to use postgrowth research to influence policy, and to suggest ways in which these might be overcome.

The findings generated from this work have tended to divide into two main themes, one concerning structural issues, the other tactics (a digest of summarised findings is set out in Appendix 3). The first theme has focused on the structural bias of the political and economic system towards the dogmatic pursuit of unlimited growth. A key argument here is that politicians are increasingly needing to turn beyond orthodox economic policies that have held sway for decades—meaning we may now be experiencing the conditions for postgrowth research to have its ‘political moment’.

Notwithstanding the seemingly intractable bias towards growth, there is a threefold pressure for new political thinking. This arises, first, from the increasingly obvious irreconcilability of ongoing growth with environmental limits, not least urgent decarbonisation targets; second, the increasingly-remarked divergence between growth and wellbeing, the way in which growth is no longer felt by many people to be improving their lives; third, the declining economic potential for more growth, leading to increasingly desperate policy measures aimed at giving it a boost. In this context, postgrowth research—especially where it names the problem as one of ‘growth dependency’, thereby framing the ‘business as usual’ pursuit of growth as the risky option—has the potential to be recognised as providing policy solutions to a number of overarching problems.

The second theme that has emerged from this work concerns a tactical approach towards maximising influence within the political system. Findings here emphasise the mutual benefits for politicians and academics of working in partnership, and valuing each other’s expertise.

Fundamentally, new policies depend on good-quality research to help design and argue for them; while, to flip this around, in order to be heard and used by politicians, research needs to be framed so as to make clear that it is answering political questions.

Building on these conclusions, the following recommendations are suggested:

To academic researchers

1. Academics should take communications with politicians seriously—it is a vital area that, while separate to core research skills, is important for achieving influence. When seeking to influence politicians, it is good practice to frame one’s work as answering a political question they are interested in. Academics ought to seek out the possibility of partnership with ‘policy brokerages’ that communicate research to political audiences, and seek feedback from politicians and their staff on the best approach to communicating research.
2. The most effective strategies for influencing policy will aim for both an inside track approach (seeking private meetings and ongoing relationships with policymakers in power) and an outside track (applying political pressure by engaging the public in campaigning). Similarly, academics might most effectively develop both short-term strategies, aimed at influencing particular policy decisions, and longer-term strategies, aimed at shifting understanding among politicians or the public on the need for larger-scale changes. In the latter respect, researchers might like to explore the potential of framing ‘growth dependency’ as a public policy problem, and framing postgrowth-inspired policy proposals as solutions.

To politicians and political advisers

3. Politicians who are seeking to advance the case for environmental and wellbeing policy can boost the authority of their advocacy by showing they have the respect of highly credible academic experts. Politicians and their advisers could profit from forming relationships with ‘policy brokerages’ (which could be parliamentary bodies, such as the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, or could also be external bodies, for instance specialised communications units at universities) and using these contacts to actively seek out promising research in advance, and to form productive relationships with key academics.
4. When it comes to environmental policy, politicians often ‘take’ rather than ‘make’ the agenda, accepting a conventional line on the boundaries

of 'acceptable' policy discussion. But the conventional forms of politics are in conflict with the urgent need for environmental action. Politicians themselves might like to explore, in partnership with postgrowth researchers and advocates, the potential to make arguments for significant change, based on the framing of 'growth dependency'.

To funders of postgrowth research

7. To maximise the impacts of their interventions, funders ought to make sure they take evaluation of the projects they fund seriously. This is key to learn lessons about what led (or did not lead to) positive impacts, and use those findings to inform future funding decisions.
8. Funders can also explore the potential impacts that they can lead to by doing more than funding. For example, funders may be in a prime position to sponsor or insist on partnership working between academic researchers and others (e.g. policymakers, practitioners, and the public) to develop research-based policy that has a higher chance of being implemented successfully.

Appendix 1: Interviews with politicians and political staff

For this report we interviewed four experienced political operatives—two politicians, and two senior political advisers—each with contrasting perspectives on the relationships between environmental research and politics. A thematic analysis of their views as a whole was presented in Section 2. Here we outline in more detail the individual contributions of each.

The select committee chair

Joan Walley was Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent North from 1987 to 2015. She served on the House of the Commons Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) between 1997 and 2015, becoming its Chair in 2010. Following her retirement from Parliament she served as Chair of the Aldersgate Group⁵⁶ between 2015 and 2021. On the role played by select committees and backbench MPs in drawing on evidence to influence the policymaking process, she highlighted the following points:

- **To be an effective influence on government policy, parliamentary scrutiny needs to be well-resourced and able to range beyond departmental silos.** The abolition of the Sustainable Development Commission in 2010 has left a gap in the resourcing of public research and policy development in the field of sustainable development in England. It's important that the resourcing of support and research for Parliament on sustainability issues is improved. The cross-government nature of environmental policy also needs to be reflected in the structures of parliamentary scrutiny.
- **The influence of Brexit and other populist movements has made it harder for environmental research to achieve political consensus based on the strength of its scientific evidence.** The question 'How can research influence policy?' assumes a politics of good faith—i.e. a level playing field of ideas, in which proposals that were strongly supported by evidence and rational argument would have a good chance of influencing political debate. Increasingly in the wake of Brexit, this is not an assumption one can make within the UK. We don't yet know the extent to which Brexit-supporting interests might swing their attention to anti-environmentalist campaigns. There's little political space for reasoned argument on Brexit, and there's a risk this kind of emotional, identity-based politics could affect environmental policy. It's important

⁵⁶ <https://www.aldersgategroup.org.uk/our-aims>.

to ensure there remains space for common dialogue across any of these political or cultural divides.

- **The influence of Parliamentary committees over government policy can be enhanced by training, co-ordination, and communication with the public.** The chair of a committee plays a key role in deciding which topics it will examine; their effectiveness could be improved by receiving training on good practice, for instance working with committee members and advisers to determine which topics to examine. The overall influence of scrutiny would be enhanced if there were more co-ordinated planning across committees, so as to ensure they are complementing one another. Committee members and external campaigners can boost the influence of oral evidence sessions by promoting the live stream of committee hearings—for instance, an advocacy group could ask people who had signed one of their petitions to follow a hearing, and promote this message to the MPs taking part. Knowing that people were watching and really paying attention to what was being said would help MPs to focus on an issue and seek to make an impact on it.
- **Academics and campaigners need to focus clearly on framing the evidence they submit to the needs of the committee.** In submitting written evidence, it is important to be clear that one would welcome the opportunity also to give oral evidence—which will have much greater impact. Contributors should not assume that members will read their written evidence, but in any case should tailor it as much as possible to the committee members and the inquiry questions. Written evidence should be presented in such a way that it is aiming to frame the recommendations of the inquiry. When giving oral evidence, the key is having a clear message to impart. If it is possible to suggest a committee take evidence in situ, outside Westminster, this can give a hearing bigger impact, both with the members themselves and with the media and public in that area.
- **Good quality research is essential to environmental policymaking.** The EAC report on pollinators was a good example of translating high quality academic research on neonicotinoids into political terms that captured people’s interests.⁵⁷ Reports such as this illustrate the fact that you can’t just rely on emotive messages, on their own they aren’t going to sway anything: if you’re making arguments which fundamentally appeal to the science, they have got to be evidenced-based.
- **It is important to seek to influence political parties, not just the government of the day.** Under the Westminster system the main

⁵⁷ Environmental Audit Committee, ‘Pollinator and Pesticides’.

opposition party is a government-in-waiting. While they cannot implement any policies directly, if they adopt a policy in opposition they will be able to implement it should they be successful at the next general election—and in the meantime, by campaigning on it, may be able to pressure the existing government to adopt something similar. Smaller political parties may similarly be able to get a policy idea onto the political agenda, even if they are not in a position to implement it. Even parties that are in office may have routes into policymaking that look ahead to their next election manifesto, that are separate to the policymaking processes of the government itself. Researchers should look to exploit opportunities to get environmental issues into these policy pipelines.

- **Influencing government policy can be an iterative process, requiring perseverance.** Rejection of a policy proposal by the government at any one time does not mean that the underlying research has been wasted, or that a proposal will always be rejected. To take one example, there was a private members bill on nutritional food, whose presentation gave a platform to arguments based on scientific evidence; while this was talked out and rejected by government MPs, this is an issue that will come around again and such work will help pave the way for success in the future. With many political issues you have to go through this process of getting things on the agenda, having them rejected, but then working to build a momentum so that this becomes a case which is eventually conceded by the government.
- **At the same time, we need to accelerate policy development when it comes to the environment—yet the time horizons of conventional politics are in conflict with the urgency with which we need to act.** For governments to change the overall direction of economic and environmental policy, and thereby to reconsider what is meant by prosperity, requires a politics that focuses on long-term goal-setting—yet this collides with the preoccupation of politicians in wanting to legislate for outcomes which are immediately apparent. Time is not factored into conventional political decision-making, and all the more so in a society where the culture demands instant results and people are impatient with the promise of long-term solutions. Politicians all too often only have their eye on the short term, meaning their horizon does not really extend beyond the next election and getting reelected. This is where the UK stands in real need of its own equivalent to the Well-Being of Future Generation Act in Wales, something which would ensure there was a political focus on the long-term interests of the nation and its citizens into the future.

The Welsh minister

Jane Davidson was Welsh Assembly Member for Pontypridd from 1999 to 2011. Between 2007 and 2011 she was Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing in the Welsh Assembly Government. During this time she proposed what became the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which requires public bodies to consider the long-term impacts of their policies, and places sustainable practice at the heart of government.⁵⁸ Reflecting on her experience working with academic researchers as a minister, she highlighted the following points:

- **Academic expertise can be vital to the credibility of politicians who are themselves trying to influence political debate and government decisions.** As minister, Jane Davidson established the Welsh Climate Change Commission, with the design of embedding academic expertise at the heart of policymaking. This was important for underlining the credibility of the proposals for government policy that would arise from its work. Individually, as well, politicians who are seeking to advance the case for environmental and wellbeing policy can boost the authority of their advocacy by showing they have in turn the respect of highly credible academic experts. This underlines the importance for a politician in ensuring the researchers they are drawing on are highly credible in their field. Politicians also need to aim for a wide collaboration across a field, rather than just working with a small number of individual researchers; this helps to ensure that the ideas they are drawing on have a broad credibility and are more likely to influence government officials.
- **Politicians can get more out of academic research by building relationships with academics and becoming familiar with academic culture and practices.** One of the early lessons Jane Davidson learned when working with academics as a minister was how important it is to understand that the timescales of research and politics can be totally misaligned. She found it a lot easier to incorporate academic research into her political work once she started to look at research proposals. This enabled her to see what research was going to be conducted, and when the results might be ready—and thus build it into the development of policy. Doing this generated more goodwill among academics, who were thus more eager to collaborate.
- **If done inflexibly or to excess, academics' reservations about the limitations of their research will place a limit to its influence on policymaking.** Papers reflecting scientific language about confidence in

⁵⁸ National Assembly of Wales, 'Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015', 2015 anaw 2 § (2015), <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/2/contents/enacted>.

forecasting and attributing climate impacts can cause problems for politicians who want to be able to communicate to the public in more unequivocal terms, so as to galvanise support for taking bold, practical action. The Welsh Climate Change Commission had to learn how to deal with this issue when scientists working with the Commission expressed reservations about communicating what certain studies were saying (since these were still ongoing studies, and they did not want to anticipate their final conclusions).

- **Academics who wish to influence policy need to find the language of the government and play to its need for answers.** Researchers should study the government's agenda (and that of opposition parties) and translate their findings into language that speaks to it. This does not mean you have to agree with the ideological direction of the government overall, or that you cannot propose radical policy measures. What it does mean is presenting your research as answering a question the government is asking; otherwise it won't achieve influence. If you can make a clear case to ministers / civil servants / special advisers that you have some answers that are useful to them, then you will be invited in for a discussion. It's those academics who are clever at this form of presentation that get heard. In all this it's important to remember that you cannot just raise questions and complications; politicians are hungry for answers. Seeking to influence the platforms of political parties, rather than just an individual politician, can help to magnify the influence of your research and make it more sustained.
- **Postgrowth researchers might have to think about translating their ideas into another form in order to win more political influence, not least with the current UK Government.** 'Postgrowth' is not a term that will work with this Government; Boris Johnson's rhetoric is full of references to growth. Presenting research that talks about wellbeing, and wellbeing economics, may have more practical success. There is also a lot of potential for postgrowth ideas to be presented under this Government's banner of 'Build Back Better'. Talking about future generations may also have a cross-party appeal (it should appeal to Conservatives, given Burkean rhetoric about a contract between the generations). It might thus be possible to find effective political support for the creation of a UK version of the Welsh Future Generations Commissioner.
- **Academic researchers need to focus (just as politicians need to) on communicating with the public, both to inform and to help build popular support for their policy proposals.** It's easy for policy discussion about sustainability issues to remain an elite discussion. There are some issues and policy proposals which may be widely

accepted within circles of academic specialists, but which make for a less comfortable discussion when engaging with the general public. It's important for academic researchers to think about how to communicate with sections of society that may have different class and cultural sensibilities. Potentially academic centres such as CUSP could expand their role, and engage directly with the public, via forms of deliberative democracy. This might have the potential to galvanise interest and deliberative cooperation in policymaking, so that academic researcher centres not only seek to understand the basis for a sustainable society but help to become an agent in its delivery.

The special adviser

We spoke to a former special adviser (Spad) who was familiar with environmental as well as other policy areas. Their experience not only reflects on the relationship between researchers and policymakers, but highlights the fact that the term 'policymakers' covers a multiplicity of different agents—individual ministers, with their own briefs and career ambitions; special advisers, working directly to their minister; policy civil servants, working in different departments; and scientific and technical experts within the civil service:

- **Special advisers are key figures within the policymaking process, translating policy advice (which may itself be based on academic research) into political terms that make sense to a minister.** During their time in government, their role was to view whatever went through the Secretary of State's office through a political lens: to assess and advise on the political implications and risks/opportunities of policy development. Their role also had a cross-government aspect—e.g. to apply the same political sensibility to environmental aspects of policy that went to ministers in other departments, and to provide support to them. The key considerations on which they would offer advice were the views of stakeholders, primarily backbench MPs; and the expected reaction to policy announcements by the Opposition. In the run up to the general election, the focus of their role was to help to work on their party's manifesto. This involved working with other Spads across government to come up with strategic approach to the environment for the next Parliament, connecting micro-level policies with macro-strategy and narrative.
- **The influence of special advisers depends partly on their own personal qualities but chiefly on the relative political power of their minister.** Individual Spads will be listened to by ministers, especially as they prove their judgement and performance during difficult episodes; in recent years, for instance, Spads at Defra have gone

on to work in No 10, as their handling of the media has been well-valued. Overall, however, for academics seeking to communicate to Spads, their influence will be largely determined by the status of their minister.

- **Environmental policy has often been constrained by the influence of the Treasury.** Typically, in discussions about environmental policymaking for the future, Treasury officials would focus almost exclusively on how the policy was to be paid for—rather than work back from the picture of the future they want to see, and then try to work out how to get the funding for it to work.
- **The language of ‘postgrowth’ or ‘limits to growth’ has extremely limited resonance within frontbench teams, in government or opposition.** Tim Jackson’s *Prosperity without Growth* report for the Sustainable Development Commission was read widely by senior people in government around 2009. In the immediate aftermath of the financial crash, however, it was thought entirely counter-productive by essentially all senior voices within the Labour Party to suggest that they should go into a general election not being committed to driving up economic growth. The ongoing centrality of growth to political discourse can be observed from the emphasis on economic growth from the current Labour front bench team, as well as across the mainstream political spectrum.
- **The influence of select committees should not be underestimated.** For senior civil service and senior staff at agencies and quangos, select committee hearings can be ‘make or break’ events for their careers. Environmental researchers and campaigners should understand that select committees really do have power. They should also remember that influence on environmental policy can come from more than the specifically environmental committees (i.e. the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee or Environmental Audit Committee). For example, the Treasury Select Committee has pushed a lot of the agenda on climate change and financial disclosures.

The parliamentary researcher

Laura MacKenzie has worked directly to Caroline Lucas MP (chair of the APPG and member of the Environmental Audit Committee) for seven years as her senior parliamentary adviser, recently combining this with one day a week supporting the APPG secretariat. Her experience reflects on the needs and perspectives of prominent backbench MPs—who aim to influence policy led by ministers from another party—and the staff who advise them:

- **Discussion about influencing ‘policymakers’ should not be restricted to thinking about ministers at Westminster.** It’s

important for academic researchers as well as campaigners to think about which policymakers they want to influence, since how to translate postgrowth research into policy will depend a great deal on the audience. In addition to ministers in the UK Government, it can be useful to focus on the perspectives of civil servants and backbench MPs of the governing party or the opposition; each group will have its own set of interests. Opposition MPs, while they have no direct influence on government policy, can still exert an influence—by working in cross-party forums (select committees, APPGs), by amending legislation, by developing their own party’s platforms, and by shaping the public and media debate. Then there are separate sets of policymakers within local authorities, cities, and the devolved nations: there might be more scope for getting postgrowth research taken seriously at those levels than at Westminster right now—progress is already being made. Lessons in influencing policy could also be learned from the EU, where a strong postgrowth approach from the European Parliament has resulted in significant progress going ‘beyond-GDP’ as part of the EU’s 8th Environmental Action Plan.⁵⁹

- **It is not straightforward to get politicians interested in an explicitly postgrowth research agenda.** It is not easy for MPs to relate to postgrowth ideas, both because this comes across as a more abstract set of ideas than other issues, and because it is not really on the political agenda in Westminster, or obviously related to issues that are. It’s important to recognise that even climate change in general terms does not always translate into the highest ‘inbox pressure’ for MPs compared to more ‘immediate’ issues, even on the environment—bee-killing pesticides and fracking being specific examples. It takes concerted effort from campaigners to mobilise public interest in a topic, so that it feeds through into MPs’ priorities.
- **Influencing policymaking requires strategy, resources, and collaboration.** Exerting influence needs both an inside track (working with politicians and civil servants) and an outside track (e.g., involving a media and campaigning strategy). It’s important to have reasonable expectations for how much influence can be achieved in relation to resources available for advocacy via the inside track and campaigning via the outside track. Influence can be magnified by working in partnerships (e.g. between academics, civil society organisations, supportive businesses, and politicians). It could be useful to consider if there are ways of translating postgrowth research into more tangible or immediately relevant policy issues. An example, both of building coalitions and converting postgrowth ideas into specific policy terms, can be seen in the Better Business Act campaign to amend the

⁵⁹ European Parliament, ‘Legislative Train Schedule: 1 A Green New Deal’.

Companies Act: this aims to change the legal primary purpose of corporations away from exclusively pursuing growth in profits.

- **To be politically influential, research needs to suggest solutions and be communicated in a way that connects with the target audience and engages them on an emotional level.** It's important not to assume that rational argument and well-supported evidence will necessarily be enough to translate into popular support for a policy proposal. Even in experienced politicians' speeches on environmental issues there is often still an appeal to self-evident rationality, an assumption that there is an obviously rational policy choice that will naturally carry the day. That's important but it's not always enough. Meanwhile, within postgrowth research there is sometimes be a focus on what is wrong with current system; but if we want people to be engaged, we need a 'so what', an idea of what the Government can do about the problem. When working with academics, one of the main messages politicians receive is 'we need more research'—but what politicians hear from that is that these findings are not strong enough to act on.

Appendix 2: CUSP roundtable

On 14 September 2021 we invited CUSP advisers, fellows, and researchers, and contacts from wider networks to participate in a roundtable discussion, held virtually and under Chatham House rules, on the themes of this report.

The questions put to participants were as follows:

- 1) What are the main challenges for academics and NGOs in seeking to communicate postgrowth research (e.g. economic and social research which questions the ongoing pursuit of economic growth, and which suggests policy solutions designed to foster a sustainable prosperity) to politicians and public authorities? What would researchers most find helpful, either from funders or the politicians and public officials who they work with?
- 2) What are the main challenges for politicians, who are interested in this agenda and receptive to such research, in influencing party leaderships and government departments? And what do interested politicians most want from academics who are producing research on this agenda?
- 3) What good case studies are there of success in seeking to achieve political influence for postgrowth research?
- 4) What are the key recommendations for conducting and communicating postgrowth research that achieves political influence, specifically for a) social scientists, and academic centres/think tanks that communicate or campaign on their work; b) interested politicians and their staff; and c) funders who want to support postgrowth research that makes an impact?
- 5) Are there overarching theories of political change that would help us in this case – i.e. by addressing the processes by which research into policy problems and solutions turns (or does not turn) into actual government policy?
- 6) Is there anything we can learn from other fields – e.g. the study of how the results of medical research are or are not taken up by medical practitioners and the public?

Appendix 3: Digest of summarised findings

What existing research can tell us

Overcoming growth dependency: tackling political barriers to the postgrowth argument

1. Research which questions an overarching political goal of growth, or which implies radical changes to taken-for-granted aspects of Western lifestyles, faces high barriers to achieving political influence.
2. There remains a disconnect between the seriousness of key environmental challenges and the rhetoric and priorities of politicians.
3. The relationship between research, policy, and outcomes is far from straightforward; in some cases, research can even impede the development of effective policy.
4. Postgrowth research can help to build the conditions for an expansion of its own influence.
5. Experiments with different forms of democracy could help to open up new possibilities of political action.

Wider lessons: good practice strategy and tactics for boosting the influence of policy research

6. Academics can boost the effectiveness of their research by presenting their work in a form that politicians can relate to, and which offers policy arguments and solutions they can utilise.
7. Rational argument and well-evidenced research is not enough on its own; it needs politically savvy communication and ultimately political advocacy in order to influence government policy.
9. Effective research-based policy requires partnerships between researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and the public.
10. Research funders have a significant role to play beyond the provision of finance.

Views of politicians and political advisers

1. Academics who wish to influence policy need to find the language of the government and play to its need for answers.
2. There are different types of ‘policymakers’, with different interests and relationships to power—and academic researchers should vary their communication strategies accordingly.
3. Though composed of backbenchers, select committees have real power—and researchers can maximise their influence with them by following simple rules.

4. Academic expertise can be vital to the credibility and effectiveness of politicians who are themselves trying to influence political debate and government decisions.
5. Research based on evidence and rational argument is not enough on its own; political influence requires some form of emotional engagement with the public.
6. There is a mismatch between the priorities and language of conventional politics on the one hand, and the urgency of climate crisis and language of postgrowth research on the other: this is a challenge for both politicians and researchers to confront.

Roundtable discussion

1. Postgrowth researchers need to reflect on how the premise of their work challenges dominant ideas about political reality.
2. Achieving political influence for a postgrowth agenda requires a collaboration between researchers, campaigners, and politicians.
3. Achieving impact does not stop with influencing policymakers or even seeing policies enacted: policy has to follow through into effective action.
4. The Laudes project work with the APPG on Limits to Growth has created productive opportunities for successful collaboration between academic researchers and parliamentary staff.
5. Politicians need researchers to present answers, not just ask questions.
6. 'Policymakers' are not all one thing: who's in power really matters.
7. Framing postgrowth ideas is important to their influence.
8. Audit and performance indicators are an important element in implementing postgrowth policies, though in other cases new forms of assessment may need to be developed.
9. The key to political progress may lie in the growing recognition of environmental limits as an unquestionable feature of reality, something that mainstream politicians across party and ideological divides will all have to respond to.
10. 'Postgrowth' as a set of ideas is very much confined to wealthy nations, and does not have much resonance in the Global South.