IPPR

A NEW POLITICS
FOR THE ERA OF ENVIRONMENTAL BREAKDOWN

DISCUSSION PAPER 4

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ABOUT IPPR

IPPR, the Institute for Public Policy Research, is the UK's leading progressive think tank. We are an independent charitable organisation with our main office in London. IPPR North, IPPR's dedicated think tank for the north of England, operates out of offices in Manchester and Newcastle, and IPPR Scotland, our dedicated think tank for Scotland, is based in Edinburgh.

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SUMMARY

Environmental breakdown is accelerating and poses an unprecedented threat to our political system. This system is a key enabler of environmental breakdown, the major drivers of which include chronic short-termism, a failure to recognise and act on systemic problems, and a failure to integrate environmental concerns throughout policy. This challenge comes at a time when our domestic political system has come under exceptional pressure as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and decades of growing inequality. In addition, the UK faces a number of other disruptions in the decade ahead in the form of Brexit, an ageing population, automation, and the combined rise of digital platforms and the fragmentation of media and pervasive misinformation.

A new progressive politics in response to environmental breakdown is needed to achieve more sustainable, just and prepared outcomes at home and abroad. It is a politics that must enable a more productive, equal and sustainable relationship between the market and the state. It must prioritise – above all else and in response to the growing risk of global cataclysm – a rapid shift in the economic paradigm, bringing human activity to within environmentally sustainable limits while narrowing inequality, improving quality of life, and becoming better prepared for the accelerating consequences of environmental breakdown. It must be more democratic and accountable. More representative and diverse; more resilient and long-term.

Accordingly, we develop proposals for a new model of domestic politics, one which is capable of better responding to environmental breakdown. Foundational to any such model is the need to re-build public trust in collective action and expand the political mandate for the actions needed to address environmental breakdown. We propose a new politics that is green, local and inclusive. We argue that to achieve this will require: a radical decentralisation of power across the whole of the UK; new deliberative processes which genuinely engage the views of the public and incorporate their views more directly into decision-making, including a government commissioned, nationwide, citizens' assembly on environmental breakdown to conclude ahead of COP26; and new institutions that are able to embed the systemic and long-term thinking and understanding that is so essential to addressing environmental degradation and building a world that is sustainable, just and prepared.

ABOUT THIS PAPER

This is the fourth in a series of short discussion papers. This series seeks to inform debate over the relationship between policy and politics and environmental breakdown, supporting education in economic, social and political sciences. This paper explores the challenge to the political system in the UK from environmental breakdown. The UK is used as a case study to explore how an individual nation can contribute to developing a politics fit for the conditions of environmental breakdown. In doing so, it seeks to help advance environmental improvement and sustainable development, and to relieve poverty and disadvantage.

This discussion paper series is the final part of a major IPPR research programme – *Responding to Environmental Breakdown* – that seeks to understand how to realise a more sustainable, just and prepared society in response to environmental breakdown. The scope of this project is global but uses the UK as a case study to explore the major issues and policy responses. *Responding to Environmental Breakdown* is part of IPPR's wider work on environmental issues, which includes the landmark *Environmental Justice Commission*, which will help develop the ideas and policies to bring about a rapid green transition that is fair and just.

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INTRODUCTION

Mainstream political and policy debates have failed to recognise that human impacts on the environment have reached a critical stage and are eroding the conditions upon which socioeconomic stability is possible (Laybourn-Langton et al 2019). These impacts are not isolated to climate breakdown and encompass most other natural systems—including soil, biodiversity and the oceans—driving a complex, dynamic process of overall environmental breakdown that has reached dangerous levels. The consequences include growing economic instability, social volatility, and conflict. In all, environmental breakdown impacts all areas of policy and politics and increases the chance of the collapse of social and economic systems at local, national and even global levels. The historical disregard of environmental considerations in most areas of policy has been a catastrophic mistake.

Within the UK and globally, the consequences of environmental breakdown fall hardest on communities and countries who are both least responsible for the problem and least prepared for its increasingly severe effects. Environmental breakdown interacts with other inequalities, such as class, ethnicity and gender, making it a fundamental issue of justice (CEJ 2019). Environmental breakdown is a result of the structures and dynamics of social and economic systems, which drive unsustainable human impacts on the environment (Laybourn-Langton and Hill 2019). While providing high living standards for many people, these systems preside over large social and economic inequalities and fail to adequately provide for all. By driving environmental breakdown, these systems are eroding the conditions upon which human needs can be met. Therefore, in response, two overall socioeconomic transformations are needed that will make societies more:

- **sustainable and just**, bringing human activity to within environmentally sustainable limits while tackling inequalities and improving quality of life
- **prepared**, increasing levels of resilience to the impacts of accelerating environmental breakdown.

This discussion paper explores the implications of environmental breakdown for political systems and the dynamics that result, from the tone and form of political debate to the electoral prospects of ideological movements. We argue that political systems are dangerously unfit to manage the pervasive complexity of environmental breakdown, to act to realise a transformation in social and economic systems, to handle the implications of such rapid changes to the structure of societies, and to do so over a period in which the destabilisation brought about by environmental breakdown will rapidly grow.

Political systems are already struggling with a range of disrupting factors, from high inequality to demographic change. Into the future, regressive political movements are well placed to capitalise on growing destabilisation, with negative consequences for a proactive, equitable response to breakdown. Using the UK as a case study, this paper concludes by exploring how our politics can become robust to compounding environmental breakdown, including through democratic reform, devolution of power to regions and localities, and the adoption of a new progressive political narrative.

1.
THE UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGES OF ENVIRONMENTAL BREAKDOWN FOR POLITICAL SYSTEMS

Environmental breakdown poses a number of acute and unprecedented challenges for political systems, the key actors operating within them, and wider political dynamics. Four of these are outlined below.

THE COMPLEXITY OF THE PROBLEM AND UNDERSTANDING IT

Environmental breakdown is widely recognised as 'the toughest, most intractable political issue [that] we, as a society, have ever faced' (Kalmarck 2019). It is highly complex and uncertain, encompassing a range of negative impacts from critical local environmental degradation to the destabilisation of global biogeochemical cycles, such as the carbon or nitrogen cycles (Laybourn-Langton et al 2019). Change in environmental systems is occurring at speeds unseen before in human history – or in some cases not seen in millions or billions of years – and is accelerating. Tipping points – when natural systems are pushed beyond the threshold of their stable state, causing abrupt and possibly irreversible changes in the functioning of these systems – are at risk of being triggered, or may have already occurred, threatening cascading, unmanageable environmental breakdown (Lenton et al 2019). Political systems and actors, having developed under relatively stable conditions, struggle to identify and understand complex, systemic, fast-moving issues. Reasons for this include: that government action is often disaggregated by discrete policy areas, disfavouring systemic competency; the gap between perceptions of effect and cause leading to lower concern and salience of environmental breakdown as a political issue; that electoral cycles often discriminate against longer term thinking; and that environmental issues have traditionally been perceived as largely independent of mainstream political thinking (Willis 2018).

ATTRIBUTION PROBLEMS

The disconnect between cause and effect presents a major challenge. The connection between toxic waste seeping from a pipe into a river and polluted water is immediate and obvious, but the link between driving a petrol car and the warming of the seas is less so. While concern about climate breakdown has reached record highs in the UK in recent years, a quarter of UK adults still believe the threat of climate breakdown is over-exaggerated, despite all of the scientific evidence to the contrary (Ibbetson 2020).

The distance between cause and effect is not just an issue of awareness but a fundamental dislocation between those most responsible and those most impacted. The impacts of environmental breakdown are increasingly being felt in all countries, but the most significant consequences are felt by those communities and countries who are least responsible for the problem. The Paris Agreement of 2015 provides much of the international framework for determining responsibility for current greenhouse gas emissions, but there is no legal architecture at the international level which allows for appropriate enforcement. Moreover, there is little recognition of or action on the interconnected legacy of imperialism, global economic systems, and the under-development and power imbalances faced by countries in the global south (Laybourn-Langton and Rankin 2019).

The consequences of environmental breakdown will disproportionately fall on younger and future generations. This is a result of the myopia that pervades economic and social decision-making. Measures of success are often short-term,

ranging from two to five-year election cycles to quarterly reports in business. As a result, political systems are almost structurally incapable of managing the risks of issues like environmental breakdown. Philosopher Roman Krznaric has described how we treat the future as 'empty time', similar to the approach of colonising powers who depict areas they wish to control as 'empty places' (as cited in Pembroke and Saltmarshe 2018). As Beatrice Pembroke and Ella Saltmarshe (ibid) of the Long Time Project have put it, 'our short-termism means we are effectively colonising the future, prioritising our own short-term gains over the future collective good.'

DIFFICULTY CONCEIVING OF AND MAKING SYSTEMIC CHANGES

Environmental breakdown is a crisis of social and economic systems, not simply of discrete or micro-scale behaviours (Laybourn-Langton and Hill 2019). Prevailing models of economic development around the world are founded on unsustainable resource use, including the combustion of fossil fuels and overexploitation of soils. Slowing environmental breakdown will require rapid structural changes to these systems, realising a 'fundamental, system-wide reorgani[s]ation across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values,' as the UN's Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services has concluded (IPBES 2019).

As the failure to act on environmental breakdown shows, political systems and actors can struggle to identify systemic socioeconomic problems, to conceive of and win support for these changes, and then to rapidly enact them (Helm and Hepburn 2009). Barriers to change include: the power of actors with a vested interest in continued environmental destruction; inertias between human impacts on the environment and the resultant breakdown masking the severity of the situation to voters; and a prevailing political-economic paradigm among elite opinion that discriminates against key institutional drivers of structural change, particularly the state (Laybourn-Langton and Hill 2019). Furthermore, while structural change could produce significant co-benefits for societies – ranging from public health improvements to reduced inequality – these changes have to occur at a scale, reach and speed unprecedented outside of wartime mobilisation, if at all. The distribution of the resultant rewards and costs will have impacts on the power balance of societies, and so policymakers will have to contend with a range of competing interests that could act as a barrier to implementing and sustaining rapid structural change.

ABILITY TO WITHSTAND GROWING DESTABILISATION

The impacts of environmental breakdown on societies and economies are expected to become more frequent and more severe – which is a result of the high levels of environmental breakdown already underway. Even if far more action were taken, natural inertias create a dangerous 'stopping distance' between human action and environmental reaction. For example, even if global greenhouse gas emissions were eliminated by the mid-part of this century, temperatures could still continue to rise (IPCC 2019). Crucially, a similar problem exists within human systems, constraining the response. All economies are, by their very construction, currently dependent on the continuation of environmental destruction. Thus, there also exists a stopping distance between decisions to end environmental degradation and the eventual achievement of sufficient levels of sustainability.

As a result, rapid, systemic socioeconomic changes will have to occur over a period in which environmental breakdown will get worse. The risks associated with worsening environmental breakdown are systemic, cumulative, non-linear; they span local to global geographies, multiply many other risk factors, and encompass both sudden, high-impact events and gradual, 'slow burn' disruption (Laybourn-Langton et al 2020). In the extreme, this saturating destabilisation increases the chance of the collapse of social and economic systems at local, national and even global levels. Environmental breakdown thus presents decision-makers with a new domain of risk of unprecedented complexity and severity over a period in which they will have to undertake rapid systemic change.

2.
THE UK'S POLITICAL SYSTEM IS DANGEROUSLY UNPREPARED AND EXPOSED

In this section, we use the UK as a case study to better understand the capacity of its political system to respond to the challenges of environmental breakdown.[1] We identify factors, many of which are shared by comparable countries, that may enhance or limit the response to environmental breakdown. Ultimately, we conclude that the UK's political system is dangerously exposed to, and unprepared for, the threat posed by environmental breakdown, and insufficiently capable of realising the large co-benefits of organising society in more sustainable, equitable and resilient ways.

Some progress has been made in recent years within the UK political system that has enhanced the UK's ability to respond to environmental breakdown, including the following.

- **Increased awareness and understanding of the problem:** Concern about climate breakdown remains at a record high. Three quarters (74 per cent) of UK adults describe themselves as being concerned about climate change and nearly a third listed the environment as one of the top three issues facing the country (Ibbetson 2020). The growing concern among the UK public has been driven in large part by the growing activism among younger generations and new movements like Extinction Rebellion. As has been the case for a while, a majority of members of parliament and mainstream politicians espouse the need for action on environmental issues.

- **Recognising climate breakdown as a systemic problem:** Some progress has been made in terms of recognising environmental breakdown as a systemic problem. The Climate Change Act 2008 placed a boundary constraint on the contribution of UK economic activity to climate breakdown and it also created the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) as an independent, statutory body, to advise the UK and devolved governments on emissions targets and report to parliament on progress made, including on preparing for and adapting to the impacts of climate change.

- **Recognising wider impacts:** The government has targets or goals, some of which are legally binding, for a range of areas of environmental concern, including greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity and pollutants. More targets are proposed in the government's environment bill.

- **Democratic reform:** To secure the collective action at the scale required will necessitate the restoration of public trust in government but this

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1   The threat to international politics is discussed in another briefing paper in this series (see Laybourn-Langton and Rankin 2019).

will not happen without sufficient democratic reform. Recent reforms include the devolution of power to city regions and the recent adoption of deliberative democracy practices. Six UK parliament select committees commissioned a nationwide 'citizens' assembly' on climate breakdown, the Scottish government has launched a similar assembly on the future of Scotland (Scottish Government 2019), and a number of local and devolved authorities are undertaking similar processes in relation to climate breakdown. The pathbreaking Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 imposes duties on all public bodies in Wales, and a Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, who acts as a guardian for the interests of future generations, has been established (Anderson 2018, Welsh government 2015).

Overall, however, a number of major inadequacies hamper the UK's ability to respond to environmental breakdown.

- **An overly centralised political system:** The UK is one of the most centralised and regionally unequal states among comparable countries (CEJ 2018; Raikes 2020). Economic, social and environmental policy is predominantly made in Whitehall, and its remoteness limits understanding of the assets, capability or challenges of the diverse nations and regions of the UK. While Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have achieved a degree of devolution, only Scotland has won any significant economic powers. Fewer powers – economic, social and environmental – are available at the regional and local level in England. No other country tolerates the inequalities of power and prosperity that divide England and the UK more generally.

- **Inadequate institutional capability:** Social infrastructure such as the availability of public services and social networks is a key determinant of a community's vulnerability to environmental breakdown (Preston et al 2014). However, austerity has led to an erosion of the capacity and scope of public and local authority services (NAO 2018) which in turn limits the capacity of the poorest communities who depend on these services to respond to and recover from the impacts of environmental breakdown (Corfe and Keohane 2017). The effects of environmental breakdown could cause more local economic disruption, raising demand for local authority services, which have been scaled back and remain chronically under-funded. Within central government, decision-making related to environmental breakdown is inadequate, with the remit of the CCC mainly limited to climate breakdown (Laybourn-Langton et al 2020). While a cabinet sub-committee has been set-up on climate breakdown (Prime Minister's Office 2019) there is little evidence to suggest a cross-government systemic approach in response to the enormity and urgency of environmental breakdown.

- **Failure to fully act on equity implications of historical contribution**: Contribution to aggregate environmental breakdown is a function of cumulative degradation, including the stock of greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere. There is little to no explicit recognition of the UK's large cumulative contribution to climate and wider environmental breakdown, as evidenced by the failure of the government to adopt an emissions reduction target based on historical contribution (Laybourn-Langton and Rankin 2019). Moreover, the interconnection between environmental breakdown, Britain's imperial history, and its role in the development and entrenchment of an environmentally and socially extractive global economic system is largely missing from mainstream political discourse (ibid).

- **Trust in government:** Trust is essential for effective governance and successful implementation of public policy (Smith and Mayer 2018). The lack of trust in government could present a key barrier to effective environmental action. Some evidence suggests that trust is particularly important when accurate

information about the severity of potential risks is 'unknown or perhaps unknowable' (ibid) and environmental breakdown is an example of this type of risk. The public are often less willing to support policies or societal changes where the risks are less well known. In the UK, only 36 per cent of the general population trust the government 'to do what is right' (Edelman 2020a)[2] and more than a quarter of Britons think the risks posed by climate breakdown are probably being over-hyped, despite scientific consensus to the contrary (Ibbetson 2020).

- **Democratic division and deficit:** The vote to leave the European Union has helped to reshape the democratic landscape in the UK which was already divided by age, class and region. There continues to be significant democratic tensions between the UK government and devolved governments, and the Scottish independence movement has gained increasing support in recent months (Curtis 2020). Attitudes to specific issues such as migration are sharply divided by age, class and region (Range 2019). This division could hamper the process of developing and delivering the rapid policy changes needed to respond to environmental breakdown.

- **Traditional marginalisation and segmentation of environmental issues:** Until relatively recently, environmental issues have often been seen as for 'outsiders' and not something discussed 'as part of the political mainstream' (Willis 2018). In some respects, this is changing, with climate and environment issues becoming more prominent issues of concern.

- **Lack of political culture that identifies and seeks to address long-term and/or systemic problems:** Short-termism remains endemic within the UK political system with political parties focussed on short-term election cycles. Even where long-term issues are identified, in the case of social care for example, electoral politics often undermines any attempts to implement an appropriate policy solution (Quilter-Pinner 2019). There are very few mechanisms which act as a catalyst towards the identification of, and solution to, long-term systemic problems.

These factors are also related to other major trends or events that are posing profound challenges to the UK political system. These include:

- demographic change, power imbalances between younger and older voters, and the requirements of an aging population
- the constitutional implications of Brexit
- high levels of inequality, including across incomes and regions, and systemic inequalities impacting ethnic groups and genders
- the inadequacy of the prevailing neoliberal political-economic paradigm and the associated narratives, assumptions, policies and power structures that dominate contemporary political and economic thinking (Laybourn-Langton and Hill 2019)
- the marginalisation or even exclusion of certain groups resulting from the aggregate systemic outcomes
- the impacts of technological change on the labour market and access to socioeconomic opportunities, among other factors
- the fragmentation of media markets and the consequences for shared access to information and the development of a collective political narrative and imagery.

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2   The same survey was carried out after the Covid-19 pandemic began, seeing a record rise in trust of 24 per cent (Edelman 2020b) but there is evidence to suggest such increases are temporary (Fletcher et al 2020).

LESSONS FROM THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

The coronavirus pandemic has tested political actors in their ability to understand and respond to a major systemic shock. In some ways, the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic are akin to those that are increasingly resulting from environmental breakdown. It is imperative that lessons are learned from this period to inform the response to environmental breakdown. We can already draw a number of insights from the pandemic that are useful for developing a politics capable of responding to environmental breakdown. These include the following.

1. **The nature of risk.** The pandemic has resulted in significant and often unprecedented health and socioeconomic damage, and questions have been raised over the state of the UK's preparedness for pandemic threats. This has increased the profile of risk in political discussion, which is important in general terms, with risks – whether relating to finance, public health, or the environment – often absent from mainstream political discussion. But it is particularly important in the context of the domain of risk imposed by environmental breakdown. The world is becoming more destabilised and so public discussion of the associated risks and mitigating measures is necessary and overdue. The pandemic highlights how severe global shocks are possible and can be made more likely by human activity, an insight particularly relevant to environmental breakdown. However, recognition of the growing potential for large-scale catastrophic events should not distract from understanding how environmental breakdown is creating a more generally destabilised world (which in itself makes negative events more likely and severe).

2. **Exponential problems and responses.** The pandemic is an example of a problem that grows exponentially and overwhelms the capacity of a society to respond, with rapid community transmission leading to intensive care requirements in excess of existing capacity. Conversely, the speed and size of the emergency actions undertaken by governments and other actors are on a scale previously seen as politically unthinkable. Similarly, environmental breakdown is an exponential problem, with the destabilisation it brings already overwhelming the capacity of some communities and countries to respond, and, in turn, requires an exponential response. The pandemic proves that such a response is possible, but also highlights the limitation of current institutional capabilities in conceiving of and delivering this response.

3. **Systems and interconnection.** The pandemic emphasises the interconnection between people and places through socioeconomic systems. Covid-19 is a zoonotic disease, with its development and transmission likely related to environmental degradation (UNEP 2020). The infection spread through globalised transport systems and the resulting health impacts stressed the integrity of supply chains, including as a result of self-isolating workers. Knock-on economic impacts included a stock market crash, loss of revenue, and lost jobs. Throughout, systemic inequalities partly determined the survival prospects of certain groups (PHE 2020). Into the future, the failure to support public health responses in other countries increases the chance of mutation and subsequent global outbreaks. Prior to the pandemic, political discussions rarely reflected the foundational importance of systems and the consequences of interconnection across societies. Systemic thinking and action are crucial to responding to environmental breakdown, as well as pandemics,

and should be foundational to the political imagination and the organisation of policymaking.

4. **Efficiency and fragility.** Prior to the pandemic, political discourse often centred on efficiency and rarely broached issues of resilience. The pandemic is exposing the inadequacy of this approach. The critical lack of capacity in under-resourced health systems or the instability in supply chains and financial markets are proof of the fragility of modern socioeconomic systems, and that they have favoured efficiency at the expense of resilience (Laybourn-Langton et al 2020). The destabilisation brought by environmental breakdown will test socioeconomic systems to breaking point and so resilience should be prioritised across all areas of policy.

5. **Collective action and trust.** Collective action is crucial to delivering an effective response to the pandemic, at all scales – from community mutual aid groups to the actions decided at international fora. Strong levels of trust are a foundational requirement for such action. Trust in key institutions and certain vectors of expertise has fallen over the last decade, partly as a result of the perceptions of politicians and politics in general, and the pandemic is testing trust between certain groups, improving or degrading it. Similarly, high levels of trust and collective action are required to realise the rapid transformations needed to slow environmental breakdown and to ensure societies are robust to the growing destabilisation it will bring.

6. **The role of the state.** The pandemic has highlighted the unique and essential role of the state as a protector and as an agent of change – from mobilising critical healthcare capacity to underwriting private sector wages. Over the last 40 years, political narratives have underplayed this critical role and have often sought to reduce the state's role and capacity (Laybourn-Langton and Hill 2019). The pandemic invalidates the more extreme version of 'small state' arguments. Similarly, responding to environmental breakdown requires increases in state mobilisation and intervention. Within this, political debates should still focus on the appropriate role of a larger state; for example, in the case of the pandemic, test and trace requirements have raised concerns over the enduring impacts of increased surveillance and data collection on civil liberties.

7. **Economics in society.** The pandemic is shifting mainstream political narratives around the relationship between the economy and society. Containment strategies to minimise pandemic health threats have often come at the expense of economic activity; reducing infection rates replaced compounding economic growth as the primary measure of political success. Prior to the pandemic, political narratives and policies did not always explicitly favour such a hierarchy. For example, evidence of the growing negative public health consequences of fiscal consolidation had little impact on the austerity agenda during the 2010s. In contrast, during the height of the pandemic, the prime minister directly repudiated frames associated with the political-economic orthodoxy of the last four decades, including that 'there is no such thing as society,' and has promised to '[look] after the people first,' in response to the perception that '[the government] bailed out the banks and didn't look after the people who really suffered' (Belger 2020). In general, the pandemic response proves that economic policy can change rapidly and in ways considered 'radical' only moments before. The threat posed by environmental breakdown requires that these shifts in political-economic narratives and action should endure beyond the pandemic.

3.
WORSENING ENVIRONMENTAL BREAKDOWN COULD SHRINK THE SPACE FOR PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

Into the future, a range of political trends could damage the prospects of progressive responses to environmental breakdown. We define progressive responses as those seeking a more sustainable, just and prepared world; that is, those acting to slow environmental breakdown and prepare for its increasingly destabilising effects while concurrently maximising socioeconomic benefits and addressing injustice and inequality. The political trends that could increasingly discriminate against a progressive response include the following.

- **Worsening destabilisation**: Even with rapid, system-wide action, environmental breakdown will get worse over the coming decades. As a result, the destabilisation of social and economic systems is likely to increase markedly over that period, spanning local to global levels.

- **Growing discontent**: Even without the destabilisation brought by environmental breakdown, socioeconomic factors driving discontent among populations could increase. These factors include inequality, the effects of automation and other technological change, and stagnation – of living standards in particular, and economic stagnation in general (WEF 2020, MOD 2018).

- **Eroding cooperation**: High levels of cooperation are a necessary condition for effectively responding to environmental breakdown. Yet recent economic and political developments have eroded trust and cooperation, a trend which is likely to continue (Laybourn-Langton and Rankin 2019, WEF 2020). Into the future, the continued failure to act on elements of environmental breakdown could further erode cooperation as adequate action becomes increasingly impracticable. For example, the UN has concluded that global greenhouse gas emissions must fall by 7.6 per cent each year between 2020 and 2030 in order to limit the temperature rise to 1.5C (UNEP 2019). This is already very difficult for many nations. Continued increases in emissions mean the required yearly emissions reductions will increase, accentuating inequalities between those most responsible and able to respond and the rest, and exacerbating already acute perceptions of injustice, both within and between countries.

These trends are highly interdependent. Worsening destabilisation, such as shocks to financial systems or food price rises, could increase political discontent or force nations to adopt a protectionist economic and geopolitical stance, crowding out cooperation. In such a world, political actors could face a set of incentives that discriminate against progressive politics. For example, while these trends are the common symptoms of systemic destabilisation driven by environmental breakdown, the discrete manifestation of such trends— from food shocks to conflict between communities or countries—could, by their nature as emergencies, prejudice against recognition of and action on the root causes of these symptoms. In this case, political actors could be incentivised to focus on opprobrium or blame levelled at those implicated in short term events. This drives a vicious cycle, in which political action prioritises responses to proximate causes of immediate events.

The increasing severity of these events could favour regressive political responses, as populations seek protection from threats, real or perceived. In turn, this could lead to greater demonisation and exclusion of certain groups, increased incidence and severity of conflict, the crowding out of action on environmental breakdown, and further empowerment of elite vested interests, who are most able to further their agenda under conditions of destabilisation.

A range of political actors could find it difficult not to be pushed toward exhibiting this behaviour or to being supplanted by increasingly regressive political forces who exploit fear and uncertainty.

Migration issues provide an illustrative example. Ethno-nationalist political forces in Western nations—those propounding a nationalist politics founded on ethnic identities—have framed the recent increase in global forced migration as a serious, even existential threat to these countries (Ratkovic 2017, Davis and Deole 2017). These narratives defy the fact that relatively few displaced people seek refuge in Western nations and, overall, migration can provide economic and social benefits to countries in excess of the cost of accepting and hosting them (ISPI 2017, Vargas-Silva and Sumption 2019). These misconceptions have been exploited to win concessions from the political mainstream and have helped drive the militarisation of borders in Western countries and the growing hostility of migration policy (Arci 2019, Akkerman 2018).

These dynamics are set to get worse. Environmental breakdown is readily identified as a factor determining rates of forced migration by governments and multilateral institutions – both directly, as a result of environmental disasters and slow burn environmental stress, and indirectly, as a driver of conflict and multiplier of destabilisation (Estevens 2018, GCM 2018). The implications of increases in forced migration, real or perceived, against the backdrop of increases in general destabilisation, could undermine arguments for the acceptance and humane treatment of refugees in particular, and the electoral chances of progressive politics in general.

A range of mainstream political actors are already responding to elements of the incentive structure that could be imposed by environmental breakdown, or are making decisions that could enable more regressive political responses as destabilisation grows. EU leaders make rhetorical commitments to rapidly reduce environmental impacts yet have proven unwilling or unable to attempt systemic changes across economies (GNDE 2019). Meanwhile, these leaders have been influenced by regressive narratives on migration, with results including the 'externalisation' policy of the EU, by which the responsibility for the management of flows of displaced people is outsourced to non-EU countries. In the USA, the current administration seeks to limit environmental action, has taken an openly hostile stance on migration, eschews norms of international cooperation and favours militarisation.

Across Europe, mainstream far right political parties are increasingly accepting environmental science and seek to answer destabilisation with exclusion and the establishment of ethno-states, including Rassemblement National, led by Marine Le Pen. In the 2019 European parliament elections, a leading party figure said that, '[b]orders are the environment's greatest ally; it is through them that we will save the planet' (Mazoue 2019). In the extreme, violent ethno-nationalist frames relating to environmental breakdown have been used by high profile mass murderers as ostensible justification for their actions and are pervasive on extreme right online fora (Darby 2019). While there is little or no common agenda across these groups, the behaviours they exhibit could become mutually reinforcing as environmental breakdown accelerates and societies come under compounding stress, shrinking the space for progressive political discourse.

4.
A NEW MODEL FOR POLITICS IN AN AGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL BREAKDOWN

In this section, we use the UK as a case study to better understand how one nation could reform its political narratives, institutions, and culture to contribute towards building a more sustainable, just and prepared world. The foremost challenge in forging a new model of politics capable of responding to environmental breakdown is restoring trust in collective action, and a prerequisite for this will be the restoration of trust in government. Greater trust is needed to realise a political mandate for the rapid, system-wide action needed to address environmental breakdown and manage its increasingly destabilising impacts. To expand the political mandate, the narrative and policies of this agenda must move beyond a focus on 'necessity, efficiency and efficacy' (Willis 2018). This will require a new progressive political vision and policies for a 'new abundance' in which socioeconomic activity occurs within environmental limits, acts to improve equity, and ensure preparedness for growing destabilisation.

A NEW POLITICAL NARRATIVE

Narratives and language are essential components of any political-economic paradigm, helping to describe and justify its worldview and actions (Laybourn and Hill 2019). A new political and economic narrative will be central to building trust in collective action and increasing the political mandate for policies to address environmental breakdown, and for maintaining collective action on slowing environmental breakdown as destabilisation grows. This will require a shift from the key narrative elements of the current political and economic paradigm, which emphasise individual success and responsibility alone, to one which emphasises the need for collective and systemic change and the pursuit of wider societal goals. Such a narrative shift should also focus on the following.

- **Telling the truth**. There needs to be improved public communication of the unprecedented environmental breakdown already underway, the rapid structural changes needed to lower the risk of the most catastrophic outcomes, the role people and communities can play as part of a collective effort, and the likely destabilisation that will occur even with rapid change.

- **A new abundance**. Political narratives should promote a new sustainable conception of abundance throughout society and economy that realises a positive correlation between human progress and environmental sustainability, maximising the co-benefits of action to slow environmental breakdown and prepare for its accelerating consequences.

- **Community action**. This effort should be rooted in local communities, connecting the story of global and national efforts to a local context and activities. The emergence of mutual aid groups and other local care efforts in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic are a heartening example of the desire in communities to act collectively, and the social infrastructure built by such groups should not be allowed to atrophy.

- **Recognise injustice and agency**. Political narratives should recognise all experiences and histories that have brought us to this juncture, including those traditionally marginalised or excluded, both at home and abroad, and ensure that greater effort is made to foreground these perspectives in political discourse.

- **Empower young leaders**. Younger and future generations face an unprecedented leadership challenge and are already having an impact on

political discourse. Their perspectives should be better accommodated – they will be the leaders who will have to deal with an unparalleled failure by current and previous leaders to protect planetary stability.

SHARING POWER

Substantive devolution to the cities, towns and rural areas of the UK is essential in offering an avenue for democratic renewal and rebuilding public trust in collective action. Evidence shows that local policymakers are more accountable and transparent, are able to give a higher level of attention, responsiveness and insight, and are more efficient coordinators of economic policy within local areas (Raikes 2020). Policies to achieve this include the following.

- **Devolved responsibility for action on environmental breakdown:** Local authorities across the UK are not required to make a contribution to national targets on greenhouse gas emissions (Willis 2018), let alone take wider action on environmental breakdown. Despite this, many local authorities across the country have declared climate emergencies and are putting action in place to reduce their emissions. These efforts should be recognised but it is also clear that they are not enough. The UK government and devolved nations should set targets for local authority and combined authority areas so that cities, towns and rural areas can make a full contribution to the net zero transition.

- **Resources and powers to match new responsibilities:** Even in the absence of new devolved responsibilities and targets associated with environmental breakdown, there is an overwhelming case for the devolution of political and economic power across the UK. If one of the central tasks of responding to environmental breakdown is to build trust in government and collective action, then devolution can be a significant contributor to that task. The devolution necessary to achieve this will include:[3]

  - the rolling out of a comprehensive devolution process for England, which will entail the development of a coherent plan for a devolution parliament
  - the devolution of substantial fiscal powers in phases
  - the development of a locally led regional tier of government through the devolution of powers to regions that complement those of combined authorities. As more powers are devolved, regional and local governance should evolve
  - the devolution of economic powers to city regions and nonmetropolitan areas. Such devolution must be combined with greater citizen involvement (see section below)
  - the permanent reform of the central, regional and local relationships through a new constitution.

DEMOCRATIC REFORM, VOTING AND PROCEDURAL JUSTICE

Covid-19 has posed unprecedented challenges to government at all levels. Rebuilding in the coming months and years will be a significant task, both from the effects of the virus but also to tackle the significant weaknesses and unfairness in the economy that it has exposed. Yet the challenge of environmental breakdown is even greater.

However, at a time when trust in government and in collective action is needed most, it has consistently been at record lows. An all-society response is needed to a unique, historic and systemic threat. Doing so will require a healing of divisions across UK society and the creation of a more inclusive, engaging and deliberative form of democracy. Policies to achieve this should include the following.

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3   For more information see Raikes (2020).

- **Embedding deliberative processes in the political process:** Citizens' juries and citizens' assemblies provide space for citizens and experts to explore complex issues, understand and debate evidence and agree and propose solutions. While there has been increasing interest in their use, they have not yet been formalised into our democratic processes. The UK government and devolved nations should legislate to formally incorporate these processes into the decision-making process for determining carbon budgets and how to meet them. Combined and local authorities should also commit to the same at the local level. These are not proposed as a replacement for electoral politics but as a complement to them.

- **A climate assembly on environmental breakdown:** The Republic of Ireland and Iceland have utilised citizens' assemblies to assess constitutional questions, Ireland and France have undertaken assemblies on climate, and the UK parliament has itself commissioned a climate assembly. But the issue of environmental breakdown is greater and more significant than any considered thus far by such a deliberative process. Yet its complexity, systemic nature and the level of risk it implies means an expansive deliberative process is required to help understand the risks associated with environmental breakdown, as well as to determine the means of achieving a sustainable, just and prepared economy and society. Following its response to the recommendations made by the UK parliament's climate assembly, the government should found a citizens' assembly on environmental breakdown to begin in early 2021 and report in November, just ahead of COP26.

- **The 'long-time' citizens' assembly:** Environmental breakdown is the clearest example of the short-termism of our political system. In addition to the above, we propose the creation of a long-time citizens' assembly[4] as a practical means of cultivating long-termism within the policymaking process. Put on a statutory footing, the assembly would convene circa 100 members of the public from across the UK, every five years, who would put themselves in the shoes of citizens 50 years into the future. The assembly would consider evidence and policy proposals to secure a sustainable, just and prepared world for citizens then and in the future.

PREPARING FUTURE LEADERS

The median age of a European leader is 52, and so assuming a continuation in current political trends, the millennial generation will reach positions of leadership in the late 2030s and into the 2040s. By this point, the global mean temperature rise is anticipated to be between 1.5C and 2C, exacerbating worsening breakdown in other natural systems. Progressive millennial politics is already having an impact, spurred on by a growing recognition of a climate emergency. But fighting for 2C in a 1.5C world will be vastly different from fighting for 1.5C in a 1.2C world. And fighting for 2.5C in a 2C world, even more so. It is unclear whether aspirant leaders in the millennial and other younger generations are prepared for these challenges, to the extent that they can be. In response, the UK government should commission a global study of the leadership challenge being bequeathed to millennial and young generations and what rapid action can be taken now to support them, alongside expediting action to slow breakdown and be better prepared for its consequences.[5]

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4   This proposal takes inspiration from the Future Design project led by Tatsuyoshi Saijo who has developed processes for Japanese municipal policymakers to put themselves in the shoes of citizens from the future (2060).

5   This study should act as a complement to the recommendations explored in another discussion paper in this series (Laybourn-Langton et al 2019).

CHANGING STRUCTURES IN GOVERNMENT

Changes in the structures of government that recognise and adapt to the systemic risks posed by environmental breakdown will be essential. In previous reports[6] in this series and across IPPR's work, the following policies have been proposed to achieve this:

- **a net zero and just transition delivery body**
- **net zero and just transition delivery plans for all government departments**
- **a minister for the sustainable development goals**
- **a council for the response to environmental breakdown**
- **an office for future generations.**

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6   Further information on these recommendations can be found in Laybourn-Langton et al (2020) and IPPR (2020).

5.
CONCLUSION

The UK's political system has come under sustained and unprecedented pressure over the past decade or more, partly as a consequence of unforeseen events but also due to more predictable and, in some cases, self-inflicted wounds. Pressures have included the financial crisis and expenses scandal of the late 2000s, the era of prolonged austerity and the vote to leave the European Union in the 2010s, and now, as we begin the 2020s, the Covid-19 pandemic. But none of these events compare to the challenges posed by environmental breakdown.

We find ourselves at a critical juncture. Environmental breakdown carries with it unprecedented risks and threats and responding to it will require rapid, structural change to social and economic systems of a scale and pace unseen in human history. To respond effectively, domestic political systems need to be capable of recognising and understanding systemic threats and delivering the necessary collective action to respond. Yet we find that the UK's political system is largely unprepared and exposed to the threats posed by environmental breakdown. It is overly centralised, lacks institutional capability and has a political culture that is unable to identify and address long-term and systemic issues. Unsurprisingly perhaps, it is also lacking in the essential commodity needed to tackle environmental breakdown – public trust in government and collective action.

Low trust and growing destabilisation resulting from environmental breakdown could embolden regressive politics, fracturing and stalling mitigation efforts. In the extreme, this could critically threaten humanity's collective ability to stabilise the biosphere in the coming decades, a catastrophic outcome that genuinely threatens the viability of organised civilisation in the coming decades. So it is imperative that the UK play its part by urgently seeking to reform its political narratives, institutions and culture to combat environmental breakdown and help build a more sustainable, just and prepared world. This will require restoring trust in collective action, and crucially, government, and the expansion of the political mandate for action to address environmental degradation. Both will require effective government but also a new progressive vision for a new politics – one that is green, local and inclusive, and that can deliver policies which can achieve sustainability but also a new abundance for all.

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