



THE POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE FROM THE GLOBAL TO THE LOCAL

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I'd like to start off with a question: what does 'sustainable development' mean, or what does it mean to you, what do you think it should mean? And I would like you to think about other questions such as: what exactly do we mean by 'sustainable'? What is it that we want to 'sustain' when we talk about sustainable development? Is it the kind of lifestyle that we have in Europe? Is it the kind of lifestyle we have somewhere else in the world? Should we be trying to get lifestyles in the world to the same level that they are in Europe, for example? What is it that we want to sustain when we say we need to have sustainable development? And what does 'development' mean to you? Does it really just mean economic development? Should it mean something broader? Should it be about how we feel? Our well-being? Should it be about our health? Should it be about our happiness? What kinds of lifestyles should we be sustaining? The ones of the people who are richer, the ones of the people who are poorer, the ones of the people in the middle? And where should this idea of sustainable development apply? So, if there's a certain kind of lifestyle we wish to sustain, should that be the same all over the planet? Should we all have an equal level of sustainable development, or should there be room for some differences? I'd like to hear your thoughts about that. Please, feel free to express your opinion.

Daniela (Trento): I could break the ice, if you agree. The word 'development' is tricky because it seems to refer to unlimited growth and we don't really know where we're going with this growth. So, sometimes I think that the idea of putting a limit on development should also be considered. The combination 'development' and 'sustainable' is also tricky and it sounds a bit hypocritical, because we all know that our resources are limited and that we cannot develop forever. And for these reasons, how can we speak about 'sustainable development'? The notion in itself sounds a bit hypocritical. I have always thought of the word 'sustainable' as related to the environment – we can develop provided that this kind of development or maintenance of the status quo can be sustained by the resources we are using at the moment. But we all know that we're over-using these resources.

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Prof. Parks: Thank you, that's an excellent ice breaker. I think this already starts to reveal some of the major questions, such as the political questions around environmental protection etc.

Kabir Sharma (Sonthofen): In my opinion, sustainable means that we give nature back what we take from her and that, for example, we keep the natural resources in balance. In our city, for instance, we had a special occasion the day before yesterday – we planted trees in places where we trees had been cut down and that was, in my opinion, 'sustainable' because this way we keep the forest in balance – we plant as much as we take and, in doing so, we keep a sort of balance. And this apply also to the economies. The economies should also be sustainable, in my opinion. For example, the CO2 emissions of every country should be at zero level. On the question of 'sustainable living', I think that having a perfect sustainable lifestyle is not possible, but I think that we can get close to a sustainable lifestyle, for example by changing our behaviour into actions that are beneficial for nature, by making small sacrifices in our daily life such as riding a bicycle instead of driving a car – small steps. And the last question, I think it is also very interesting, but in my opinion 'sustainable development' cannot be the same all over the world, for example, there are different natural environments (e.g. deserts vs. forests) as well as cultures and levels of education. For this reason, I think that we should all have a sustainable way of thinking, but it should be differentiated according to countries because that is what the world is about: individuality, pluralism, different ways of doing things.

Prof. Parks: Thank you so much, that's very useful. We've already brought up a lot of different issues to do with sustainability. Moving on, I will try and touch on some of the difficulties, issues and aspects of the idea of sustainable development, which is an extremely broad concept. We have a lot of ideas about what to sustain, how to sustain, the levels of responsibility for achieving sustainability – so we've heard about government action, we've heard about individual choices, we've heard about problems in the international system, but also about how there is a tension in 'sustainable development' between the idea of unlimited growth (particularly, economic growth) and the idea that we can't continue doing this.

To this end it is important to look a little bit at the history of where sustainable development comes from. One of the first major international conferences in the history of environmental governance, where we started to see the idea of sustainable development appearing, was not so much amongst heads of government at this stage, but between lots of diplomats, representatives of States, etc. and that's the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, which was held in 1972 in Stockholm.

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At that conference, we start to see the beginnings of what then turns into international environmental governance. 1972 is a moment where we are starting to see some signs of détente in the Cold War and it's a point in time where we start to see attention to the environment as one of the very few themes in international relations where States from all blocks were able to find the space to come together and begin to speak. But obviously this is also a moment when we begin to understand that something is changing in our climate and in our environment which is due to the way that our economies develop and the ways that we affect the natural environment. So, we begin to get evidence of the hole in the ozone layer, we're talking at this point about global warming. We are also a few years after the first missions to the moon, which is when we see this very iconic photograph called Earthrise, the first time that we had seen the Earth as a single thing. All of these things play a big role in the fact that we have this first huge international meeting in Stockholm in 1972 to start talking about how to tackle problems in changes to our natural environment. There had been predecessors to that, but the politics around this meeting has very much to do with many of the ideas that you've already brought to the table when thinking about sustainable development. How do we protect the environment in a world where different States have different interests, different levels of economic development, where we're coming out of a long period of often European-led colonial invasions in many countries of the world? How should different countries take different levels of responsibility or the same level of responsibility for trying to respond to this question that has global consequences for all of the people who live on the Earth? And there are different ideas that are coming up at this time and continue to come up, different discourses, if you like, of environmental politics. This is not an easy thing to debate, it's not an easy thing for States to decide, because States have to, at least on paper, try to think about what the best thing for their own citizens. States are not easily built for thinking about how to resolve questions to humankind as a whole. So, there's no easy answer to this general question of how do we act to protect the environment in the early 1970s. Different countries have very different views, different needs and very different priorities in terms of their developmental needs.

In 1983 the United Nations decided to set up, as it often does, a kind of committee where they could talk about these problems and get expert advice. They set up the World Commission on Environment and Development, which is the body that came up with the idea of sustainable development. They did so building on previous work by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and in 1987 they published a famous report, which is now known as the 'Brundtland report', after the person who headed up this Commission, who was at that time the Prime Minister of Norway. This very significant report defines sustainable development in the following way:

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‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’.

When this idea was put forward, other ideas were also being discussed on the international scene. One of them, in particular, was a movement amongst developing States calling for a new international economic order according to which it is necessary to provide for the needs of the poorest people in the world and we need to tackle environmental damage, but the best way that we can do that is by reducing overconsumption, so the tendency of people in the global North and in more developed countries to consume more than they need and to consume a lot of luxury goods as well. These two pushes underpin the idea of sustainable development: on the one hand, we want to make sure that we can continue our lifestyle in developed countries, on the other hand we want to address the needs of the poorest people and patterns of consumption coming from developing countries.

And sustainable development tries to respond essentially to everything that is being demanded at this time. It comes with three pillars - social justice, environmental protection, and economic development. It's very interesting that many of us now really think about sustainable development as being continual economic development that doesn't damage the environment. But the idea of social justice in sustainable development is also addressed in Agenda 2030, but perhaps not in the common imagination - we don't think about social justice as part of sustainable development perhaps as much as we should or as much as was originally intended. And apart from resting on three pillars, this idea of sustainable development also seeks to underline the fact that these aspects are interrelated. You can't have real environmental protection or successful environmental protection without addressing justice issues. This idea that we have different cultures, different environments that we live in or different connexions to nature, different standards of living, attention to justice issues about access to nature, about being able to continue to use certain resources in sustainable ways - we can't really do that unless we also speak of social justice. We can't also continue to have economic growth that ignores the rights to social justice and environmental protection. All of these things are interdependent in the notion of sustainable development. But if you don't tackle all of them, you are very unlikely to achieve the ultimate goal. And this goal is not so clear either. Sustainable development is something that we want to achieve, but there's no real end goal there. There's a problem that economic growth should be continual but always sustainable and that there are some issues involved in that. But social justice is perhaps the one that drops out of the idea of sustainable development over time or is perhaps the part of sustainable development that has been less successful or has had less attention paid

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to it. And this is clear when we think about how this idea takes shape in terms of international governance and international policies over time.

Things don't go particularly fast after 1972, but we do have various intergovernmental agreements that address the hole in the ozone layer (the Montreal Protocol) and various other treaties. As a global approach, however, we really have to wait for the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War around 1990/1991, when a global space of debate is created. In 1992 we have another key meeting held in Rio that is known, more popularly, as the Earth Summit, more officially as the UN Conference on Environment and Development. Economic development is at the heart of the debates and there are still pushes from more developing countries that they have a right to development. These countries claim that they should be able to continue to develop their economies, to serve social justice needs within their countries, and to have the chances that the industrialised developed countries of the global North have had. So, what we see coming out of this big meeting is the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities', which was formalised in particular in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). And the idea of differentiated but common responsibility is that all countries in the world need to act to protect the environment and to prevent further damage, but that developed countries bear more responsibility for having created this problem, and therefore they have more responsibility to pledge more money, to pledge more in terms of cutting on CO2 emissions and helping developing countries to cut their CO2 emissions as well. The principle is therefore absolutely accepted in international law.

At this point we also see lots of other developments, e.g. we see big treaties coming out from this meeting in 1992, the so-called 'Rio Treaties'. Among them is the UNFCCC, which is the one that gets most attention, but there are also a lot of other treaties that are equally important, like the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification. Finally, we also get an agreement to set up the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, which shows that sustainable development, as an idea, is consolidating, is becoming a guiding theme for these big treaties.

We also see important interstate declarations coming out of the Rio Conference. We see, for instance, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, which has 27 principles about how we should protect the environment and very clearly reflects the language and the ideas of the Brundtland report. We also see a document called Agenda 2021, the forerunner of Agenda 2030, a non-binding action plan on sustainable development, containing some goals that the UN and other organisations wanted to hit. These declarations conveyed a very broad idea of sustainable

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development, but at the same time there was a little bit of narrowing down the notion to more specific goals, including the reduction of CO₂ emissions by the industry. This is extremely important, of course, but it's only one part of the puzzle. Cutting down CO₂ emissions also means understanding how those emissions are measured and who can measure them because it takes a lot of capacity to do these measurements, and also, a lot of responsibility about how to help developing countries also cut their emissions. Not to mention the fact that that could be read precisely as a way of trying to keep control over those countries and their development, as a way of continuing to operate in countries that had previously been exploited and controlled in ways that are not perceived as very fair, and as a way of stopping those countries from developing.

After 1992 these international multilateral interstate meetings were held every ten years. So, in 2002 the Rio +10 World Summit on Sustainable Development was held in Johannesburg, and in 2012 we had the Rio +20 meeting. However, not very much came out of these meetings. While these multilateral agreements, which are the places where international environmental governance is done, laid down rules that States were then supposed to implement to protect the environment, they have not had the effects that they were supposed to have. There is a lot of debate about whether that is a problem with implementation – in other words, we have the right rules, but we don't apply them properly – or whether the rules themselves are not strong enough or not going far enough in their own content. Over time some sort of disillusionment came to be seen in the field of international environmental governance, in particular as far as the treaty on climate change was concerned.

In 2009 a meeting of the climate change treaty States was held in Copenhagen which was seen as extremely disappointing. For the first time, there was no universally agreed, final outcome – the participating States weren't able to agree on what they wanted to do and how they wanted to hit the emission reductions targets that they had agreed upon previously in the so-called Kyoto Protocol. This is when an attempt was made to revitalise the idea of sustainable development, trying to convince people that sustainable development is something that can work. And this happened around the idea of the 'green economy'. If we look at the literature, the idea of the green economy has been sold as a synonym of sustainable development, but dressing it up a bit in order to push it forward because the notion of sustainable development was stagnating. In terms of politics, however, green economy very clearly *is* about the economy and not about social justice. The idea was that we need some kind of economy that doesn't damage the environment, but all of those questions of social justice seemed to take a back seat. And this was one of the main reasons why the meeting was also accompanied by huge protests by citizens and a lot of civil society groups.

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The meeting also marked the beginning of the road for the definition of the Sustainable Development Goals, which make up Agenda 2030. In this huge list of sustainable development goals we do see a much broader idea of sustainable development. Sustainable development is about education, is about gender equality, is about reduced inequality. This view of sustainable development looks more like those three overlapping circles – economy, environment and social justice. However, when we talk about environmental governance, the social justice part tends to disappear a little bit and I think that's something we should all reflect upon as we think about what we need to change in international governance in order to hit the goals that we have set ourselves. I have also put a link on this slide to an extremely useful website which is called SDG Tracker (sdg-tracker.org) and will tell you how we are doing in terms of progress on these many different sustainable development goals, which are themselves broken down into a number of different tasks.

One of the things that is spoken about in politics around these sustainable development goals is how easy or difficult it is to understand how we are doing on them, because some of them are very hard to measure.

So, where do we end up? We've already said that we are not doing very well on environmental protection, neither in terms of biodiversity, neither in terms of climate change. The Covid-19 pandemic has been directly related to both climate change and biodiversity losses and this is very likely to happen again if we don't begin to act more seriously to contain global warming to 1.5 degrees. The IPCC, which is the International Panel on Climate Change, a scientific 'think tank' of the United Nations Climate Change Treaty that compiles the best quality research by climate scientists from throughout the globe, reports about our progress on climate change. The picture given in the latest report is not good: our treaties are not working, our national implementation is not working, the glaciers are melting, the sea ice is disappearing, the sea levels are rising and CO₂ concentration is still very high. We did see some small progress during the pandemic due to lockdowns, but since reopening it actually seems that we've lost ground overall on all of these points and that things are effectively worsening.

So far we have been talking about the idea of sustainable development as being broad and difficult to pin down, but also as something that has shaped international politics about climate change and about environmental protection. One thing that we often forget, or that perhaps we don't know or are not aware of, is that there are a lot of different ways of thinking about the politics of climate change and the politics of the environment. This is one attempt to think about environmental politics that was put

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forward by a very famous scholar, John Dryzek, who mapped out different environmental political thinking and different environmental political approaches over time, but based on different kinds of ideas. Of these, just one is sustainable development and it's not even the only one in the section of thinking about sustainability, but it's the dominant discourse of our time, it's the dominant political approach to environmental politics. The problem is that sustainable development doesn't seem to be working. It's a lovely idea that we can serve all of these goals at the same time, that we can have social justice, economic development, and environmental protection. However, there are a lot of approaches to environmental politics that are less sanguine, less convinced that all of this is achievable at the same time. According to other discourses, perhaps we need to redefine our ideas of well-being in ways that put environmental protection at the top of the pile. As a matter of fact, the idea of economic growth has become as important and often more important than environmental protection over time. This is not the case in treaties on environment protection, but it is the case in numerous international trade laws. At this stage, if we don't put environmental protection before concerns about economic growth, we are likely not to contain global warming to 1.5 degrees. Moreover, according to other political thinkers, many of our political problems around polarisation, i.e. around very starkly different ideas about how we should run our societies, are also due to the fact that we haven't paid enough attention to social justice in international and national politics and that the gaps between the rich and the poor are widening, a lot of the problems of the poorer people, both in developed and in developing countries, are very much tied with being at the sharp ends of experiences of climate change. In other words, the people who live close to big power stations, close to airports, close to rubbish dumps, close to sources of pollution of different kinds are also those that are not being served well in terms of social justice. John Dryzek claims that, in view of the many different political discourses at hand, we are perhaps giving too much space to the idea of sustainable development and we should leave some space for other ideas as well, because not all ideas in the field of environmental politics are incompatible. Perhaps we need to think of how to make decisions about environmental protection more participated, of having more voices come in, more experiences of what it's really like to live with the impacts of climate change or biodiversity loss come into the decision-making process. We could make it less about just what States want and more about what people need in terms of living in ways that allow them to protect the environment because they have their basic social justice needs met as well. According to Dryzek, a good way of getting these ideas into the system comes from what he calls green radicalism. And radicalism here is not 'radical' in the sense of extreme or outlandish or strange. 'Radical' here is more about not accepting the idea that we should always have economic growth. It's about

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rejecting perpetual economic growth as a baseline for everything that we do in politics.

And this is why I wanted to talk a little bit about activism in these last few minutes. If we're not doing well and we need to get some new ideas, maybe we should be looking at activism, and maybe we should be thinking also about how activism, and environmental activism in particular, has already contributed to the way we tackle environmental problems. Today I have already talked about the international level, but of course this is something that happens at local level and at national level and regional level as well. So here I just want to draw your attention to the story of environmental activism, which is something that perhaps we don't talk about much. It's very in fashion at the moment to talk about youth activism, 'Fridays for future', Greta Thunberg, etc., but there's a long history behind that that is important to take a look at. So, if we look already from the 1800s into the 1900s, we start to see the beginnings of environmental activism in the terms of conservationism. And this is a very organised, very middle- to upper-class kind of approach according to which we need to protect wild nature, we need to make sure that certain species are protected, we need to have pristine nature in certain places in the world so that we can still experience what that pristine nature is. And of course, this is a time when industrialization is kicking off and big cities are starting to appear, and when getting access to green spaces becomes something of interest. What comes out of those movements are the so-called 'fortress approaches' to nature conservation. And this might be a little controversial, but it basically argues that national parks are problematic. National parks are about keeping people out, and often the creation of national parks in many countries has been about displacing and moving people out of certain areas. Certainly, in North America, where First Nations and indigenous Americans have been concerned, and definitely in many experiences in Africa, where people have been moved out of areas that have then been fenced off and created as protected areas, national parks, etc. It is clear at this point how the national politics links into the international politics. Despite being aware of the importance of environmental protection, the developing countries are sceptical due to the bad experiences they had in the past. This is when a more disruptive wave of environmental activism emerges, with groups like Greenpeace, who at their beginnings were out in boats getting in the way of nuclear testing. And this a time when the idea of environmental protection linked to ideas of peace – which is also about social justice –, and came about in a big wave of social mobilisation around the end of the 1960s, with people being anti-nuclear, pro-peace and particularly opposing the war in Vietnam and the use of napalm and Agent Orange in Vietnam. It's also a time when our ideas of citizenship and who is included and who is given attention and rights in society were being redefined, with the emergence, in particular, of second-wave

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feminist women's movements, movements for gay rights, etc. In the third wave of environmental activism we have the emergence of global environmental governance. Things get much more organised again, we have lots of big NGOs that are created at this point and that really engage with UN meetings, the Rio Treaties and their processes, and with the idea of sustainable development and the opportunities that it gives them to have a voice inside these processes. So, they're trying to shape these processes at least until around 2009-2010, when we start to see this moment of disillusionment, the realisation that perhaps this system isn't working in the way that we wanted to. And that brings us more or less to the present day in terms of environmental activism. In Europe, we have talked a lot about youth environmental activism, which is a wonderful thing. We've seen the school strikes, which perhaps some of you here have participated in, and the marches for the climate. But if we look at it in a wider view, what we've seen very much is a reclaiming of the idea of sustainable development and a relabelling of it as environmental justice or climate justice. And I think this is a concerted push by activists to reclaim the idea of social justice as absolutely crucial to achieving environmental protection. So, the environmental justice movements that we see today have definitely worked hard to try and rebuild bridges with other kinds of activist groups, particularly indigenous peoples groups, environmental racism movements, parts of the global justice movement and, of course, the young people as a voice that has not had much space in formal terms in environmental politics over time. That's where we are in the history of environmental activism, which mirrors and interacts with the more formal kinds of interstate politics that we see in the negotiation of treaties and their implementation as well as multilateral diplomacy over time.

What's the point of thinking about activism, about protest even? According to John Dryzek, activism might be a new source of ideas. But what's the real point? When you protest, you don't really see immediate effects. You go out on a climate strike, but when you wake up the next morning nothing has really changed, right? Over time, however, what we see is that States and international organisations have to respond in some way to what people actually want. And people organise in different ways – it could be a company that has needs, it could be a bunch of students who get together and go on a march, it could be an NGO that has a petition, it could be all kinds of different things. And what we see over time is that there is a 'give and take', a kind of negotiation about what it is our State governments and our international organisations should be doing for us. So, when we protest, we don't tend to see immediate change, but we see a pattern of change over time. On this slide there is a very old example from the UK – the Chartist movement. The Chartists were around in the mid-1800s and they wanted vote for working men, they wanted a secret ballot. These are things that are now fundamental rights and are considered completely normal in democratic

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countries. Another example is the suffragettes, and the suffragists as well, who were throwing themselves under fewer horses but were still an important part of the movement demanding women's votes; women have not had the right to vote and continue not to have the right to vote in some places across the world. These are relatively recent changes, if we consider the long march of history. And they are changes that I would challenge you to claim would still have happened without people being disruptive and without people claiming for that change through different kinds of activism. Another example: the civil rights movement in the United States, asking for equal rights for people of colour in the United States. Again, I would challenge you to claim that this would have happened without individuals like Martin Luther King, without Rosa Parks and her demonstration on the bus. Sometimes we need to demand things if we want them to change, and we need to demand them of our States and of our international organisations as well. Which brings us to why perhaps it's interesting to think about activism today, and why we are seeing a real resurgence of activism, particularly in Europe. These photos are examples of more disruptive protest techniques, of Extinction rebellion, of the school strikes for the climate. But we also see a huge rise in other kinds of civic activism. You may have heard of famous court cases in the Netherlands, in particular the Urgenda court case, in which the Dutch government was held legally accountable for not taking sufficient action to prevent dangerous climate change and foreseeable harm to its citizens, and the recent ruling against Royal Dutch Shell according to which companies also have to take responsibility for hitting CO2 emissions reductions. Those court cases, which we call 'climate litigation', have often been brought by civil society activists, by NGOs, by concerned citizens. Activism, therefore, is more than simply saying, 'I'm gonna cycle to work, I'm gonna do what I can in my individual life to make this change happen'. Activism is rather about demanding for States to do better in certain fields. And I think this is fundamental. We can change things in our individual life, but without changing some of the structures and assumptions about economic growth, well-being, etc. that we have, we are very unlikely to hit the goals of sustainable development. And sometimes activism can help contribute to change those things. And activism is not just going out and protesting, but it is doing all kinds of other things as well as – signing petitions, writing letters, joining a local committee, planting a community garden, all of these things are activism and can send a message in different ways to decision-makers about how we think decisions should be made and how we think we should be participating in decisions.

So, where might some new ideas be? How might we be able to think about beginning to either get the existing rules to start working, but also to think about new rules or new ways of taking decisions that might take us further on down this route? What are environmental activists actually asking for? One thing that comes up a lot in European

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protests about the environment is that we want more participation in the decisions that get taken. Think about the meetings in Glasgow – there were huge demonstrations and there were huge amounts of people saying ‘They won't let us in, they won't let us see the decisions being taken, we want to have a voice in this’. And groups like Extinction Rebellion, for example, are actively asking for citizens’ assemblies, so assemblies of ordinary citizens that make suggestions that will have to be taken up by decision-makers in different countries, and we've seen citizens’ assemblies in the UK, in Scotland, in Ireland, in France, etc. At European level, right now, they are looking for citizens to give them ideas about the climate pact. We see a lot of different things: leaving resources in the ground, divestment, stop having companies that are engaged in polluting industries sponsoring universities, for example; we want to stop having packaging, so you might have activism that involves taking something out of the packet in the supermarket and leaving the packet behind as a way of saying – ‘Stop putting this into useless amounts of plastic and paper’. We see big movements around locally sourced food, shorter supply chains, which is very much about biodiversity, but also transport pollution. We see all kinds of claims here, we see groups of people forming energy communities and building small dams, for example, to provide energy to their local community or solar panels. There are lots and lots of things going on in the field of activism and also in terms of actually doing environmental protection in an activist way and they might be good sources of inspiration when we try to think about how we can change the systems so that they work better for us, so as make sure that we don't go past this tipping point.

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