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Title: The Nascent History of Steady State Politics

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Abstract: The Conference on Economic De-Growth is a rare event in which the majority of conferees are well-versed in the conflict between economic growth and environmental protection prior to attending. Conferees are also aware of the crucial role of environmental protection in national security, social equity, and international stability. Therefore, the conference affords the unique opportunity of immediate and unencumbered discussion of politics and policies for de-growth toward a steady state economy of appropriate (ideally optimal) size. The purpose of my talk is to summarize the nascent political efforts toward a steady state economy, such that we may effectively identify the next steps. Generalities in the abstract will correspond to specific entities and events during the talk.

As with many movements toward public policy reform, that toward a steady state economy has an academic origin and phase. For the past several decades, the steady state economy has been hitched to the wagon of ecological economics, which at most universities must be pulled through the landscape of neoclassical economics and business schools. Some wagons have sunk in the mud, but more are getting to higher ground. Also, in more recent years the steady state economy has been finding an academic “home away from home” in the numerous natural resources departments and schools in which the steady state economy is readily identified as a requirement for resource conservation and ecological integrity. International development programs are also engaging steady state economics in recognition that the poverty problem cannot be solved through global economic growth, which at some point becomes “uneconomic” and eventually becomes biophysically impossible.

Concurrently with these developments in academia, there have been nascent political efforts toward a steady state economy. As is common with new, complex challenges for public policy, steady-state politics are yet in the position-taking or coalition-building phase, which precedes electoral politics and policy reform. Such efforts have included the formal adoption of positions and resolutions on economic growth by professional societies and other organizations, formal support for such positions by individuals, and formal endorsement of positions by non-governmental organizations and even some business firms. The resulting, loose-knit coalition has helped to empower a small number of political parties and candidates to develop steady-state political planks, and to defuse the fallacious “win-win” growth-conservation rhetoric of other politicians.

On all fronts, in and out of academia, the movement toward de-growth and the steady state economy is growing and intensifying. Climate change (in a 95% fossil-fueled economy), Peak Oil, and the rampant growth of China and India are changing the political landscape quickly and dramatically. Yet an iron triangle of economic growth and a gauntlet of political economy awaits the degrowth/steady-state movement. What we have on our side is sound science, escalating evidence, and common sense.