

# Your Future Is Whatever You Make It, So Make It A Good One – Dr Emmett Brown

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**Nearly 50 years ago the New Zealand Planning Act of 1977 established a ‘Commission for the Future’. Amongst other functions, the Commission was tasked with ‘promoting discussion and education about the future’.**

In 1980 the Commission conducted a survey of attitudes to living standards as part of a programme to encourage public input in futures planning<sup>1</sup>. This survey asked the public to evaluate four possible scenarios of future NZ society. These showed different combinations of economic living standards (quantity of life) and social-environmental living standards (quality of life).

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.mcguinnessinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/PastFuture-Thinkers\\_AttitudestotheFuture1980.pdf](https://www.mcguinnessinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/PastFuture-Thinkers_AttitudestotheFuture1980.pdf)

## Scenario 1

Strong emphasis on growth in economic living standards / No emphasis on growth in social-environmental living standards.

## Scenario 2

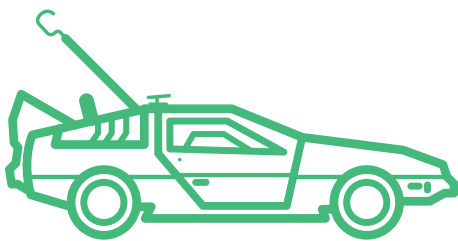
Moderate emphasis on growth in economic living standards / Limited emphasis on growth in social-environmental living standards

## Scenario 3

Limited emphasis on growth in economic living standards / Moderate emphasis on growth in social-environmental living standards

## Scenario 4

No emphasis on growth in economic living standards / Strong emphasis on growth in social-environmental living standards



To see how our views of the future have changed, and to see how they compare between New Zealand and the United Kingdom in 2024, truwind Research First partnered with Public First and re-ran the 1980 survey.

This updated survey results are:

	1980 NZ Rank	2024 NZ Rank	2024 UK Rank
Scenario 1:	4	3	3
Scenario 2:	1	1	1
Scenario 3:	2	2	2
Scenario 4:	3	4	4

	1980 NZ	2024 NZ	% point change	% proportion change
Scenario 1:	7%	18%	11%	+157%
Scenario 2:	59%	48%	-11%	-19%
Scenario 3:	21%	26%	5%	+24%
Scenario 4:	13%	8%	-5%	-38%

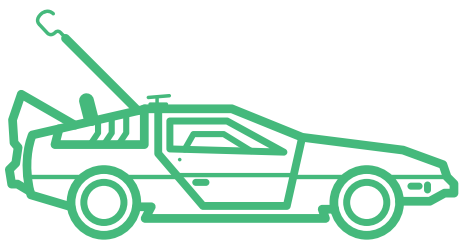
### The NZ results:

- In 1980 New Zealanders clearly favoured Scenario 2 (‘moderate growth in economic living standards and limited growth in social-environmental’). Scenario 1 (‘stronger economic emphasis and no social-environmental focus’) was least preferred.
- 44 years later, Scenario 2 is still favoured but the least preferable is now the opposite of Scenario 1: no economic emphasis and strong social-environmental focus (view 4).
- This table shows that while the change in absolute scores are modest, the proportion of change for Scenario 1 and 4 are significant.

### Comparing the NZ results with the UK results we see:

- Broadly speaking, most of the UK population feel a similar way to most New Zealanders. The most popular option was scenario 2, selected by a majority of UK respondents (54%, 6% more than those who preferred this option in New Zealand).
- Similarly, the second most popular option in the UK was scenario 3, preferred by just under a quarter (24%). Combined, this shows the vast majority (78%) of all UK respondents as ‘moderates’ in terms of prioritising economic living standards or social-environmental living standards.
- At the less-popular end of the scale, scenario 1 was selected by one in six in the UK, and scenario 4 was the least popular, selected by around one in seventeen.

	2024 NZ	2024 UK	Dif
Scenario 1:	18%	15%	3%
Scenario 2:	48%	54%	6%
Scenario 3:	26%	24%	2%
Scenario 4:	8%	6%	2%



# The Bigger Picture

What these 2024 data show is that there is little support for an economic degrowth agenda in either New Zealand or the UK. In NZ support for degrowth declined by 38% between 1980 and 2024 while support for growth increased by a whopping 157%.

A majority of respondents preferring scenario 2 is perhaps not surprising. Post-pandemic, both countries have been experiencing cost of living crises, with many people and families feeling the pinch. Politicians regularly emphasise the importance of economic growth for improving living standards. Prioritisation of economic living standards, with half a mind on social-environmental standards, is therefore perhaps to be expected.

## **Associate Professor Mike Grimshaw from the University of Canterbury identifies what the results show about changes in political preferences:**

“The symmetry of change in relative rankings would suggest that at the political margins NZ is slightly more ‘hard right’ and ‘green left’ than the UK, while in the wide centre the UK is slightly more ‘centre-right’ and NZ is centre-left (just).

The rise in preferences for strong economic growth at the expense of an emphasis on social-environmental growth reflects an anti-Labour government turn in NZ; a turn against the policy focus of the Ardern-Hipkins governments. The data shows that there is no societal or political appetite (nor political capital) for degrowth in economic terms. This is why NZ First continues to play a coalition role, as they have since 1996, as they straddle scenarios 2 & 3.

The fall out of preferences around the scenarios provide signals about the way NZ might vote if there were an election soon:

- Lack of support for scenario 4 shows the Greens will struggle to win and maintain anything that gets them out of minor party status. The 13% siding with scenario 4 in NZ in 1980 was the Values party legacy.
- Those choosing scenario 3 are typified as the ‘green-ish economy, urban voter’. They don’t want economic growth at the expense of the socio-environmental but do believe there needs to be managed and controlled economic growth. Centrist, urban and well off, they will favour greenish technologies and sustainability in industry.
- Support for scenario 2 was maintained but with a significant drop. Given NZ’s political history since 1980, it makes sense that some of this group have swapped to a strong focus on economic living standards.”

## **Rhiannon McQuone from Public First provides a UK perspective:**

- “Given the new Labour Government’s mission to “secure the highest sustained growth in the G7”, and rhetoric around fiscal responsibility in order to secure people’s living standards, they are driving the country towards scenario 2. This priority is mirrored in a majority of their voter base (55% of Labour voters in the survey believed scenario 2 to be the right way to go).
- This tactic is even more popular among the Conservative voter base, with this scenario selected by three fifths (60%) of those intending to vote that way, if there were an election tomorrow. This reflects the centre-right stance that Mike identified.
- It is clear, however, that this direction will not be as popular outside of the dominant Parties. Amongst Green voters, there is support for scenario 3. In the Liberal Democrat cohort, sentiment favours scenario 2 but there is also a clear movement towards scenario 3.”
- In a tighter than usual fiscal environment, balancing economic goals against socio-environmental goals is a very live political question. Is it possible to achieve enough sustained growth to fund the expansive (and expensive) investment needed in the infrastructure required to achieve net zero? What difficult choices might be needed on social good measures against a broader ambition for fiscal stability? Balancing both sides of the scenario is no easy task – as policy makers in both countries are finding out.