The triple dysfunction hypothesis only looks at trouble and does not attempt to indicate the positive contributions of the five elements of the electoral process that it is based on. This search for weakness is crucial because, as observed in §2.1, private and public goods usually compete with each other for the resources required to provide them. These resources may be human, artificial or natural and any failure by government may be taken advantage of by interests that want to use them to produce private goods, which may then create an underprovision of public goods.

To begin to see how pronounced triple dysfunction might be and to help recognize the situations where it would be costly, several possible characteristics of public goods issues are now suggested as being likely to produce some failure of democratic responsibility towards public goods. This failure includes lack of consideration of the interests of external states, groups and individuals, which is a failure not only because inconsiderate behaviour damages the interests of others, but because it invites reprisal.
4.1 Issue characteristics that create problems for liberal democratic governments

It is suggested that the following eight characteristics that may be found in issues concerning public goods are likely to cause liberal democratic governments to neglect or mismanage these goods. The first five characteristics are suggested to have this effect because triple dysfunction tends to make democratic government ignorant (see Figure 2.1, p. 126). The last three — pervasiveness, competitiveness and ‘externalizability’ — are suggested to evoke dysfunction even if these governments are well-informed, because they are likely to lack the high degree of responsibility (also in Figure 2.1) required to effectively address issues with one or more of those three characteristics. The more of these eight characteristics that occur in any one issue, the more it will tend to be mismanaged by democratic governments, because of the ignorance and irresponsibility that their triple dysfunction generates.

1. Complexity. Issues with this characteristic may have long causal chains, feedback loops, or be part of an interrelated web of issues. Social and ecological systems are rich in feedback and web structure, but as politicians tend to use short, linear thinking for easy comprehension by electors (H. Muir 2008, 41), their ‘solutions’ to social and environmental issues may make them worse (e.g. Forrester 1971; Yaffee 1997).

2. Abstraction. Constructive social, economic, environmental and international policies may be ignored by politicians focused on more material monuments to achievement such as buildings, bridges, trade profits and quick employment, because the visual, monetary, or personal impact of these immediately impresses constituents (Bennett 2008, 2–3). Abstract social problems such as the development of equality, public trust, community solidarity, public rationality and education tend to be too cerebral for easy communication to a largely disengaged electorate. Problems of risk are abstract when presented in statistical terms,
so people and societies are inclined to ignore events with low short-term probability even if this becomes very high or certain over the longer run. Psychologist Elke Weber (cited in Bennett 2008, 2) states that for ‘most of us, risk is not a statistic. Risk is a feeling…If I feel scared, that overshadows any amount of pallid statistical information.’ Abstract risks can therefore lead to disastrous inaction if they have high stakes, such as with nuclear proliferation, terrorism, hurricanes, floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, pandemics, global warming and space weather events such as coronal mass ejections (for a discussion of these see Brooks 2009).

3. Obscurity. Obscurity describes situations that societies have no previous experience of, or they have forgotten, or, as Weber (cited in Bennett 2008, 3) observes, they do not recognize because humans have not evolved an innate response to the situation, through lack of evolutionary experience. Lack of recognition may also occur because electors who are not focused on governance do not recognize the issue as a public goods problem. Another form of obscurity is imperceptibility of the development of the problem, variously known as ‘landscape amnesia’ and ‘creeping normalcy’ (Diamond 2005, 425), the ‘shifting baseline syndrome’ (Arbesman 2012, 38) and the ‘boiling frog syndrome’. Lack of an obvious threshold or deadline for action may also amount to obscurity. Climate change presents this type of vagueness. An example of creeping normalcy being overthrown by the arrival of a threshold to produce an active democratic social choice is given by the Tasmanian issue of whether to dam the Franklin River for hydro-electricity. The physical start of dam construction scheduled for late 1982 presented citizens with a dramatic deadline that galvanized civil disobedience, ultimately protecting the river. That threshold spurred into action a very direct democratic social choice by the people that may otherwise not have been made.

Another galvanizing effect in the Franklin River dam issue was the fact that the crisis was directly attributable to people. These can easily be demonised, such as business people asking
for cheap electricity (‘greedy capitalists’) and politicians and engineers wanting to build monuments to themselves (‘hubris’, ‘empire-building’, ‘political dinosaurs’). Psychologist Paul Slovic (cited in Bennett 2008, 3–4) provides another example of this emotional responsiveness to human actors by contrasting the muted response of the US to hurricane Katrina of 2005 with the far more significant and long-lasting response to the 9/11 terrorist attack in 2001. Although it may have been contributed to by anthropogenic global warming, Katrina was an act of nature and therefore failed to trigger the millennia-old fear of having our homes and lives invaded by strangers that was evoked by 9/11. Evolutionary psychologists point out that a major part of our environment of evolutionary adaptation (EEA) was a social existence of dependence on, and vulnerability to, other people. This situation created an ‘evolutionary ‘ratchet” or ‘evolutionary arms race between manipulation and mindreading’ (Orbell et al. 2004, 3, 13) that produced ‘the extraordinary sensitivity humans have to other humans’ (Smith 2006, 1021). As this sensitivity to others appears to be a predisposition 'hardwired' into our biology’ (Smith 2006, 1016) it will express itself in democracies. As we have predicted, democratic polities have a tendency to be irresponsible and ignorant, so we might expect such hardwired instincts in the people to prevail without their appropriateness being examined for each issue. Conversely, the appropriateness of inaction may not be examined if human predispositions are not aroused by an issue because it is unlike those that were crucial in our EEA. Such an issue can therefore be classed as having ‘obscurity’. Global warming has this characteristic, as noted by Andrew Simms, policy director for the UK New Economics Foundation.

In their inability to take action commensurate with the scale and timeframe of the climate problem, the [UK] government is mocked…by Britain’s own history…The challenge is rapid transition of the economy in order to live within our environmental means, while preserving and enhancing our general wellbeing. In some important ways, we’ve been here before and can learn lessons
from history. Under different circumstances, Britain achieved astonishing things while preparing for, fighting and recovering from the second world war [sic]. In the six years between 1938 and 1944, the economy was re-engineered and there were dramatic cuts in resource use and household consumption. (Simms 2008)

4. Temporal remoteness of consequences. Issues with this characteristic are long-term problems. Slovic (cited in Bennett 2008, 3) notes that it is ‘a very well established fact about human behaviour that we discount future negative outcomes a great deal, especially if it means having to postpone some immediate positive benefit’. As discussed above in §2.6.1, Marsh and Yencken analyse the impact of this issue characteristic of democratic government in Into the Future: The Neglect of the Long Term in Australian Politics.

5. Spatial remoteness of consequences. Problems of this type are geographically distant from decision makers and thus often easy to neglect (Diamond 2005, 424–25).

6. Pervasiveness. The size of an issue, or habituation of citizens to it, may require a massive effort by democracies to generate the political will needed to manage the problem. This includes making sure that most citizens are informed and concerned as well as mutually supportive, so they have the solidarity that enables them to take responsibility and produce effective collective action. Confusion in democracies about who directs public policy hobbles their capacity to create solidarity, with the result that pervasive problems such as overpopulation, species extinction, risks of pandemics and global warming are likely to produce dire consequences before the political will to confront them can be generated. Authoritarian regimes may find it easier to forestall such calamities — if they anticipate them, and if they choose to act. An example of this facility is the ability of China to introduce strong measures to control the birth rate in order to limit overpopulation, in contrast with the inability of demo-
cratic India to make such a resolute attempt to face the same problem (see §4.2.1 below).

7. Competitiveness. Rivalry over issues that divide the community can be magnified to a destructive degree by excessive competition between politicians in representative democracies (Dahl 1998, 150, 154–55). This may inhibit responsibility towards public goods, as described in §2.3. The difficulty that all nations have in acceding to calls for secession appears to demonstrate this as these situations are competitive, with separatists competing with the tribal instincts of the rest of the nation, which tells people that the members of their group must be loyal and show solidarity. It appears that one of the causes of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda was exacerbation of Hutu–Tutsi rivalries by the competitive struggle of democratic politics (Courtemanche 2003, 191–93). Ecological geographer Jared Diamond (2005, 317–8) supports this view by stating that, in addition to desperate competition for land because of overpopulation, genocide resulted here from hatred and fear deliberately fostered by the political elite in order to retain power.

8. Externalizability. ‘Externalizability’ is used here to indicate the openness of a problem to interpretation by citizens and their political agents that it does not exist, or that it is caused or permitted by something outside them or the groups with which they feel some affiliation, when it is either those citizens or their groups that are partially or wholly responsible for the problem. Two examples of groups that may have this role are political parties and nations. Such irresponsible denial of a problem or misinterpretation of its cause is here called externalization. One form of this is conspiracy theorizing, in which citizens blame evil intentions in others instead of blaming the circumstances in which those others are placed, or blaming themselves or their group. For example, the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 was blamed by many Americans on greedy bankers rather than on themselves for electing politicians who advocated deregulation of the financial market (Stiglitz 2010, 6). Three ways of external-
izing are: (a) psychological denial, which is usually avoiding the anticipation of a painful outcome by refusing to recognize reality; (b) groupthink, in which ‘the need for mutual support and approval may lead to suppression of doubts and critical thinking’ (Diamond 2005, 435–36); and (c) avoiding responsibility by neglecting to anticipate the subsequent effects of the immediate results of attempting to solve a problem. As discussed later in §5.4 this last form of externalization (i.e. not ‘thinking beyond stage one’) is very common, no doubt largely because ambiguous delegation gives little incentive for either citizens or their political agents to thoroughly think things through. An example is given in §4.2.3, in which the provision of the public good of full employment is doggedly attempted by externalizing much of the solution from politics to the market. For the adverse implications of this and other externalizations of associated problems, see §5.3. In that case study, externalization produces feedbacks that stop problems from being solved.

The openness of an issue to the lazy, impulsive or wishful thinking of externalization may depend to a large degree on whether it has any of the preceding seven difficult characteristics. For example, complexity may invite neglectful thinking or obfuscation by blaming others rather than confronting reality. Similar responses may be encouraged by abstraction, obscurity, temporal remoteness, spatial remoteness and pervasiveness. Competitiveness may present a more direct motive for externalization. However, although externalization is often encouraged by these characteristics in an issue (e.g. denial by pervasiveness; groupthink by competitiveness; and neglecting to fully anticipate the chain of consequences by complexity, abstraction and obscurity), it may also depend on other characteristics of the issue, such as its social context making it attractive for other agents to be portrayed as responsible and its capacity to evoke horror or contradict a world view, as this can arouse denial.

Externalizability invites the irresponsibility that is predicted here for liberal democracies by triple dysfunction. Confusion of directorship and fierce competition for votes give politicians strong motives to respond to externalizable issues by choosing
'solutions’ that do not require effort or sacrifice by their electors, regardless of whether they cause the problem, or contribute to it, or are best placed to fix it. This propensity to externalize solutions is likely to be considerable, for evolutionary psychology indicates that the capacity for deceiving not only others, but also oneself, is highly developed in humans (Trivers 1991). Politicians will therefore be supported in their externalizing by the egoistic and pro-social predispositions of each citizen to do it as well.

A powerful motivation for the wishful thinking in which people externalize solutions to problems is their inclination to reject evidence that clashes with their world view. Slovic (cited in Bennett 2008, 5) explains that people ‘do their best to hold onto their worldviews … because so much of their personal identity and social networks are tied up in maintaining [them]’ He notes that the two world views with the most influence on perception and action appear to be the egalitarian and the hierarchist (Bennett 2008, 4). The egalitarian world view is a preference for a society where wealth, power and opportunity are broadly distributed and the hierarchical world view is a preference for leaders on top and followers below. Slovic observes that what...
A COMMENT ON THESE EIGHT CHARACTERISTICS. It was predicted in §2.5 that triple dysfunction would produce government failure mainly in strategic policy. The eight troublesome characteristics of issues described here support that prediction as they are more likely to be found in strategic than in tactical and operational issues. This means that the ignorance and irresponsibility generated by triple dysfunction is more likely to produce neglect in addressing issues that are strategic, than in addressing those that are tactical or operational.

4.2 Three cases of irresponsibility by liberal democratic governments

The eight characteristics of difficult issues described above may produce a degree of failure by democratic government that varies from issue to issue according to the strength of these characteristics in each issue. As triple dysfunction produces a degree of irresponsibility and ignorance in government it tends to focus democracies on providing those public goods that are, from the citizen’s perspective as an individual, personally and immediately important. Examples of such goods are the availability of work, a prosperous economy, good public educational and medical facilities and freedom from crime. The irresponsibility of triple dysfunction will also incline democracies to aim for quick results by treating symptoms rather than underlying causes, so most government failure will occur in the provision of public goods that are net benefits only over the long term. This patchiness and the delayed effects of failure conceals much of it from many citizens. Other government failures that citizens may overlook are problems for minority groups within their polity and problems in their nation’s relationships with other nations. These group-based issues may be spatially remote from most citizens and often characterized by competitiveness and externalizability, both of which invite citizens to react instinctively towards members of other groups with indifference or even antagonism.
Three public goods issues of strategic significance that are often mismanaged by democracies are now described, to see how significant such government failure can be and whether triple dysfunction appears to explain it. Triple dysfunction will be indicated when one or more of its three components (ambiguous delegation, excessive competition and excessive compromise) appear to contribute to, or cause, the failure. The three strategic issues selected here are overpopulation, global warming and unemployment. Their management strongly affects the per capita availability of natural capital (defined in §2.2.3.2, *Distraction by advertising*) and this common thread is pursued further in Chapter 5 by analysing a fourth strategic public goods issue, the problem of democratic governments inflaming the wants of their citizens so that sooner or later they become frustrated by limits to their natural capital.

This focus on natural capital may seem curious to those who have not given much thought to sustainable development but it is essential when the sustainability of civilizations over decades, centuries or millennia is being considered. On such time scales, cultures can evolve and economies adapt to focus on whatever is most useful, be it services, intellectual property, commodities, manufactured goods and so on. But quality of life will always depend to a large degree on the ratio of natural capital to population, for this gives people their biophysical requirements of space, land, fresh water, clean air, a stable and amenable climate, wildlife, fisheries, wilderness, ecological capacity to assimilate wastes, and many other renewable and nonrenewable assets. If this ratio is high, then these things will be perceived as abundant and those that are marketed will be more affordable for citizens. Because the ratio of natural capital to population is a matter of strategic policy, issues that affect this ratio are used below in this section and in Chapter 5 to test triple dysfunction theory. As that ratio is of great importance to people, these tests also indicate that eliminating triple dysfunction is crucial for their welfare.

It is interesting to note that after the following three cases of government failure had been written, Jeffrey Sachs indepen-
dently drew attention to two of them — global warming and unemployment.

Climate science tells us unequivocally that we need to ‘decarbonize’ much of the energy system by the middle of this century. Yet advanced techniques for extracting fossil fuels — fracking, new deep ocean drilling and the like — dominate today’s economic and political discussion. These measures may temporarily boost the economy but they would end up crowding out investments in low-carbon technologies. A boom in fossil fuels is bound to be a dead end. Short term priorities and long-term needs are at odds.

This disconnect also exists in the realm of jobs policy. Youth unemployment is stuck in the stratosphere because conventional jobs have succumbed to advances in information technology, robotics and outsourcing, leading to lower employment and a decline in earnings among unskilled youth in particular. In response, economists obsess about policies to manage [consumer] demand. But that will not address these structural changes. New strategies in education and training, and in smoothing the tricky school-to-work transition, are also needed.

These examples illustrate the difference between mainstream economics and the policies that are needed to deliver sustainable development... Mainstream economics divorces the short term from the long term. There may be big problems ahead — climate change, food scarcity, demographic shifts and poorly trained young people — but macroeconomists prefer to improvise today and worry about the future later. That approach also suits politicians, aligning the policy cycle with the electoral cycle. But it is not a recipe for producing robust, inclusive growth. (Sachs 2013, emphasis added to highlight a crucial strategic aspect)

We now inspect this chapter’s three cases of failure in strategic policy, to gauge their significance and assess whether triple dysfunction is the culprit.
4.2.1 Size of population
The reluctance of democracies to take the problem of overpopulation seriously is consistent with triple dysfunction, as it is both ignorant and irresponsible. This reluctance has been noted by a host of observers (e.g. Butler 2004, 194; Attenborough 2011, Sulston 2012). After a surge around 1960–70 in public concern about growth of the human population, which was largely stimulated in 1968 by Paul R. Erhlich’s *The Population Bomb*, interest then began to subside and overpopulation is now, in effect, a politically incorrect topic. That attitude has been called the ‘Hardinian taboo’ in memory of ecologist Garrett Hardin (n.d.), who noted that

Pacific islanders apparently have no hesitancy in explicitly giving taboo as a reason for stopping a discussion. By contrast, Westerners, with their cherished tradition of free speech and open discussion, would be embarrassed to say (for instance), ‘We will not discuss population because it is under a taboo’. Instead, they change the subject.

The Director of the UK Science Museum, Chris Rapley (2006) has observed that

so controversial is the subject [of population size] that it has become the ‘Cinderella’ of the great sustainability debate — rarely visible in public, or even in private. In interdisciplinary meetings addressing how the planet functions as an integrated whole, demographers and population specialists are usually notable by their absence… Unless and until this changes, summits such as that in Montreal (‘Beyond Kyoto’) which address only part of the problem will be limited to at best very modest success, with the welfare and quality of life of future generations the ineluctable casualty.

The very personal basis of this taboo is described by World-Watch vice president Robert Engleman (2008):
Discomfort with the topic is everywhere, not least among environmentalists, who grapple daily with the ways human beings are altering the natural world… Who wants to reduce humanity to a number, or to see themselves as one? And population trends touch on some of the most sensitive issues in our experience: sex, race, childbearing, family size, abortion. Yet anyone paying attention to human-induced climate change or the ongoing surge in global energy and food prices must sometimes pause to think about just how many we are.

As predicted by the ambiguous delegation and excessive compromise of triple dysfunction, in democracies such personal sensitivity and aversion will be transmitted to politicians with little of the reflection or critical thought that might control it for the common good. Perhaps this is why democratic governments are unable to develop rational policy responses on population.

People who have strong interests in public goods that are vulnerable to population pressure, such as environmentalists and green politicians, appear to have quickly recognized this irresponsibility of the political system. They have found that talking about physical and social carrying capacities and suggesting corresponding limits to populations arouses political scorn. However, their resultant aversion to trying to reduce growth of population may not be entirely due to the obstacle of lack of thought encouraged in citizens by the ambiguity of delegation and then given political expression by excessive compromise. Excessive competition may also be seen to play a part, for example in the following account by Mark O’Connor and William Lines (2008, 11) in Overloading Australia: How Governments and Media Dither and Deny on Population. They observe that

more than a decade ago, Labor strategist Gary Johns, the former Special Minister for State, identified high immigration and the lack of a population policy as key reasons for the Keating [Labor] government’s fall. As Johns put it, ‘The Australian population has overwhelmingly disapproved of the level of immigration to Australia under both Labor and Coalition administrations for many years.’
In his analysis, Johns endorsed a recommendation by Doug Cocks that Australia should aim to stabilize population at between 20 and 23 million, with immigration kept to about 50,000 a year. To introduce such a policy might be difficult, said Johns, but it was a potential election-winner for Labor. It would be ‘overwhelmingly positive in national interest terms’ and would also show respect for the electorate’s opinion.

But even with victory at stake, did Labor have the ‘ticker’ to take on the immigration lobbies? At the Labor Party’s national conference in Hobart in 1998, Kim Beazley, Labor’s then leader, broke through the Keating era’s wall of silence, and promised that Labor would give Australia a population policy.

Unfortunately, Beazley was soon trimming his rhetoric in other directions, so that at business dinners and fund raising occasions he gave the opposite impression: that Labor’s new population policy would be one of rapid growth … Before long, Beazley was talking of ensuring that we reached 50 million people. No doubt his director of campaign funding was breathing easier.

This account indicates that although Australians have some concern that there are — or soon may be — too many of them, their politicians sense that they are more personally concerned about their employment and income and therefore want economic growth. At the same time, politicians want financial and other support from business in their campaigns for re-election and this also compels them to promote economic growth, which is easily done by encouraging immigration. The vote-getting motivation that drives this blend of policies is basically the excessive competition of triple dysfunction.

Another indication of democratic dysfunction in the choice of the size of Australia’s population is that this failure appears to have been quickly recognized by the two political parties with very strong reasons to speak out about the pressure of population on limited natural resources: the environmentally concerned Australian Democrats and Australian Greens (O’Connor and Lines 2008, 166–75). By 1984, racist interpretations and the personal implications of the issue had made population too
The paralysis had been observed in 2002 by the Australian Minister for Immigration Philip Ruddock (2003, 108): ‘Two population inquiries in the past decade have…highlighted the very limited range of policy levers available for governments to influence population size…we have a very limited capacity to ensure any particular population target is actually delivered.’ The inquiries Ruddock referred to were that of the National Population Council in 1991 and that of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Long Term Strategies (into ‘Australia’s Population Carrying Capacity’) in 1994. These were not the only ones. In 1975 the ‘Borrie Commission’ reported for the Commonwealth Government on population policy and then issued a supplementary report in 1978.

In recent years net overseas migration into Australia has been rising, reaching a record level of 253,400 in the year ending December 2008 (Australian Government 2010) that provoked public expressions of concern at the population exceeding 40 million by 2050. Although arrivals of refugees as ‘boat people’ create intense political debate, the annual maximum was 6,535 in 2010, whereas the official Australian refugee intake is approximately 14,000 per year (Economist 2011). In April 2010, the federal government announced it was to have yet another inquiry into the desirable future size of the population. Submissions closed in 2011 and, in the words of economist and agricultural scientist Doug Cocks (2012, 28), who has carefully studied Australia’s carrying capacity, this was ‘an inquiry which, in the blink of an eye, produced a 150 page masterpiece of glossy spin and bullshit. Talk about groundhog day. Very little has changed in 20 years’. Although the 1994 Committee had stressed ‘the dire need for a solid and comprehensive data base from which to
project in detail the consequences of various population sce-
narios’ (Newman 1994–5), the government has subsequently
done no research into the desirable ratio of sustainable natural
capital to population and ignores contributions of this type such
as those of Cocks. He initially wrote a report for that Commit-
tee (see Cocks 2012, 28) and then, in view of its unwillingness
to deal with the problem, put the issue before the public with a

The aversion of politicians in democracies to limiting the
size of population may be seen in the contrast between the re-
sponses made by China and India to their population problems.
The authoritarian regime in China implemented a one-child-
per-family policy in 1979, whereas democratic India has been
unable to respond so decisively to the same challenge. As Za-
karia (2003, 251) observes: ‘India has been unable to engage in
sustained reform largely because its politicians will not inflict
any pain — however temporary — on their constituents.’ In 2008
the Chinese government estimated that by the middle of that
year the country would have had a population of 1.6 to 1.7 billion
without this policy, instead of the 1.3 billion it had at that time.
China has thereby ensured that its growth of GDP produces a
greater per capita increase in wealth than India has been able to
achieve (as noted later in §7.3 under the heading ‘PO2’, providing
for a 1% per annum growth of population can consume more
than 12% of GDP). China has also increased its per capita wealth
with less decrease in per capita availability of domestic natural
resource, than it would have done with a larger growth in popu-
lation (for a discussion of this effect, see §5.3). The Economist
(Economist 2009, 31) reports that cutting the fertility rate (the
number of children that an average woman has during her life)
from, say six down to two, can help an economy in several ways.
First, it increases the size of the workforce relative to the num-
bers of dependent children and old people. Part of that effect is
that when women have fewer children to care for it is easier for
them to engage in paid work. Another way in which lowering
the fertility rate helps the economy is that with fewer depend-
ents households have more money for savings, which can be in-
vested, producing capital. In addition, minimizing growth of the population maximizes per capita growth of capital, which is part of the per capita increase in wealth referred to above in comparing China with India. Economist Hu Angang (Economist 2009, 31) of Tsinghua University has estimated that half of the increase in Chinese GDP from 1978 to 1998 came from the per capita rate of accumulation of capital.

Another indication of the aversion of democracies to dealing with growth of population appears to be that ‘the role of rapid demographic change in China (from large to small families, with an average of two or fewer children) is rarely credited as central to the Chinese economic miracle’ (Butler 2004, 193). Instead, for example, Mahbubani (2008, 67–78) ascribes China’s economic effectiveness relative to India as due to China making much better use of the abilities of its citizens. Under communism the Chinese had eliminated class distinctions, whereas in India the caste system continued to block much of the population from educational, political and economic participation. So when Deng Xiaoping, as chairman of the Communist Party of China, decided in 1978 to convert China’s command economy into a market economy, the country was able to develop quickly. Deng’s pragmatic insistence on meritocracy in both the Chinese Communist Party and business greatly assisted this process. From 1980 to 2005 China’s economy grew at an average of 9.5 per cent per year, compared with India’s 5.5 over the same period (Gittins 2006).

The omission by observers in democracies of crediting population control with a role in China’s economic success may be another indication of triple dysfunction, for the effects of ambiguous delegation may have taught these democratic observers not to expect a policy problem to be solved by citizens making the necessary sacrifice, which in this case is restricting the size of their families. Liberal democracies tend not work in that way, except in desperate emergencies such as war. It is usually only in a sudden life or death crisis for a group (such as when outsiders threaten it) that the human solidarity reflex is aroused to the extent that individuals willingly acknowledge that each
of them must pay a price for the common good. Only in such unusual occasions can citizens overcome ambiguous delegation by shouldering their social responsibility.

The following grim perspective on the importance of the democratic failure to address population growth may be worth keeping in mind. It was offered by someone who thought a lot about the future, the prolific author of science fiction, Isaac Asimov. When asked by political journalist Bill Moyers, ‘What do you see happening to the idea of dignity to human species if this population growth continues at its present rate?’, Asimov replied:

It’s going to destroy it all … Democracy cannot survive overpopulation. Human dignity cannot survive it. Convenience and dignity cannot survive it. As you put more and more people onto the world, the value of life not only declines, it disappears. It doesn’t matter if someone dies. (Moyers 1988)

4.2.2 Global warming
A striking example of democratic irresponsibility is the response of the United States to the reality and prospect of global warming. Most other liberal democracies also react to this issue with some irresponsibility, as indicated by their deficient performances on Kyoto targets, by the EU taking thirteen years after the 1992 Framework Convention on Climate Change to implement a dysfunctional Emission Trading Scheme and by democracies refusing to provide leadership at the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit, at its sequels in Cancun 2010 and Durban 2011 and also at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (the 2012 Rio+20 Earth Summit). However, these failures may be seen as less reprehensible than that of the US as that country was the world’s pre-eminent emitter of greenhouse gases while the problem developed and the US continues, together with China, to emit more of these gases than other countries. Until December 3, 2007, Australia had followed the US in refusing to sign the Kyoto protocol. At the end of the Bush administration in 2008 the US had no intention of ratifying the Kyoto Protocol on
global warming and offered no credible alternative procedure. At the time of writing, it retains much of that attitude because of Republican intransigence, although President Obama is trying to change it with regulatory restraints on emissions and his agreement with China’s President Xi Jinping of November 2014 to combat climate change, which they reaffirmed in September 2015. In view of the history of scientific knowledge on this issue, it is arguable that by 2008 the response of the US was 20 years behind where it should have been (Stern 2009). Global warming has been known to be a high probability, extremely high-stakes risk for more than 30 years. In 1979 the US National Academy of Sciences warned that a ‘wait-and-see policy may mean waiting until it is too late’ (Environmental Defense 2003). International recognition of the problem prompted the formation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988, and the urgency of the need for preventive action was emphasized in 1990 with a declaration by 49 Nobel laureates, 700 scientists and the IPCC (Environmental Defense 2003).

This issue has always been recognized as politically very difficult to tackle, but each year of procrastination multiplies the magnitude of the task of curbing greenhouse gas emissions. It raises the speed at which that must be done to stop the warming and increases the cost of reforming economies that grow more dependent on emitting these gases with every year that passes. This failure of government is actually worse than a failure to face global warming as it is also a failure to deal with acidification of the world’s oceans and with ‘peak oil’ — the prospect that world production of oil is currently near its historical maximum and within a few years will enter an accelerating decline while demand continues to rise. That third failure has recently been masked by the prospect of new drilling and ‘fracking’ technology that opens up vast reserves of oil and gas from shale and coal seams. However, studies show that the production rate of each fracking well declines quickly so this technology may not be able to prevent peak oil (Strahan 2012).

As the country that has emitted the most greenhouse gas, consumes the most petroleum and is also the wealthiest and
most technologically advanced, the US has the greatest responsibility to lead in forging the transition to carbon-free energy. That revolution requires new systems of supply, distribution and consumption which are extremely difficult to establish against the competition of cheap fossil fuels. The Obama administration is starting to address this situation with many billions of dollars being poured into reducing greenhouse gas emissions and by stimulating scientific research, but this reversal may not be sustained and developed as opposing political voices are very strong.

A few details of the history of the US response to global warming illustrate its irresponsibility, while also indicating that triple dysfunction is the cause. At the 1992 Rio Earth Summit in Brazil, US President George H.W. Bush (cited in McKibben 2005) appeared to follow the unconscious directorship of US citizens (which would be a case of confusion from ambiguous delegation), as well as the interests of his financial support base (a case of the pressure from excessive competition), when in response to suggestions that emissions of CO₂ be controlled he declared that ‘the American way of life is not up for negotiation’. The following Clinton administration talked in a more environmentally responsible way, but had basically the same approach (McKibben 2005). In July 2001, George W. Bush’s Press Secretary Ari Fleischer was asked if the new President would call on US car drivers to reduce fuel consumption to help tackle global warming. He replied:

That’s a big no. The President believes that it’s an American way of life and that it should be the goal of policy makers to protect the American way of life. The American way of life is a blessed one.
(cited in Miller 2001)

But in 2006, as the impending oil crisis became obvious to growing numbers of electors, America’s ‘addiction’ to foreign oil was at long last acknowledged by President G.W. Bush (krt-Washington, 2006). This was 27 years after President Carter tried to tackle the problem by asking voters to take responsibility for
susceptibility to dysfunction: types of issue

He began by explaining that he had decided to look beyond energy because ‘the true problems of our Nation are much deeper.’ The energy crisis of 1979, he suggested, was merely a symptom of a far greater crisis …

In short order, Carter then proceeded to kill any chance he had of securing reelection. In American political discourse, fundamental threats are by definition external … That the actions of everyday Americans might pose a comparable threat amounted to rank heresy …

The nation as a whole was experiencing ‘a crisis of confidence … growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation … too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns’ …

Carter outlined a six-point program designed to end what he called ‘this intolerable dependence on foreign oil’ …

Although Carter expressed confidence that the United States could one day regain its energy independence, he acknowledged that in the near term ‘there [was] simply no way to avoid sacrifice’ …

The response to his address — instantly labelled the ‘malaise’ speech although Carter never used that word — was tepid at best …

As an effort to reorient public policy, Carter’s appeal failed completely. Americans showed little enthusiasm for the president’s brand of freedom with its connotations of virtuous austerity. Presented with an alternative to quantitative solutions, to the search for
‘more’, they declined the offer. Not liking the message, Americans shot the messenger. Given the choice, more still looked better …

Far more accurately than Jimmy Carter, Reagan understood what made Americans tick: They wanted self-gratification, not self-denial … Whereas President Carter had summoned Americans to mend their ways, which implied a need for critical self-awareness, President Reagan obviated any need for soul-searching by simply inviting his fellow citizens to carry on. (Bacevich 2008, 32–41)

For a description by Bacevich of the American quest for ‘more’, see §5.2.1 in the next chapter. The democratic failure to act on energy that Carter attempted to correct appears to be due to confusion about who directs, i.e. ambiguous delegation. It is primarily the people who are confused in this way, but Carter was also confused in that he did not recognize the depth of their confusion and therefore the strength of their consequent disen-gagement.

President G.W. Bush’s acknowledgement in 2006 that the US was addicted to foreign oil differed from Carter’s by allowing for this democratic flaw. As the people were the directors he could not, and therefore did not, ask them to help (by conserving energy). If he had, the ambiguity of electoral delegation would have frustrated an exceptionally conscientious minority who complied while the rest chose not to. So Bush externalized the responsibility for solving the energy issue: he pushed it away from a confused, impotent system of government by giving nonconfrontational incentives to business to rescue the US with new sources of energy. Bush also continued this dysfunctional behaviour with his proposal for a counter-Kyoto AP6 group, which did not specify limits for carbon emissions (Hamilton 2007). This is consistent with the performance of the White House over the previous two decades, in which it had suppressed, altered or dismissed a dozen major reports on climate change, including the September 2002 annual report of the EPA in which the entire section on climate change was deleted (Flannery 2005). Such behaviour may be partially understood as excessive competition coercing successive administrations
to avoid alienating their ill-informed constituencies by asking them to pay for action on global warming. Ambiguous delegation also plays a part by inviting voters to remain unprepared for their democratic responsibilities and ready to vote for politicians who do not disturb their somnolence.

In his 2006 movie An Inconvenient Truth, Al Gore despaired at the inability of democracies, especially his own, to face global warming. Staff writer for the New Yorker Elizabeth Kolbert (2006) lamented the studied inaction of the Bush administration on this issue: ‘It may seem impossible to imagine that a technologically advanced society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself, but that is what we are now in the process of doing’. The head of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies, James Hansen (cited in Herrick and Owens 2006), has assessed that if greenhouse gas emissions are not being curbed and reduced by 2015, there is a strong chance that positive feedbacks will tip the planet into an irreversible runaway global warming sequence. He warned that the Bush administration is blocking the transmission of this message to electors. By doing this, Bush was (in effect) recognizing ambiguous delegation and declining to try to remove the ambiguity. By this interpretation, Bush’s recognition told him not to disturb the people by pointing out their responsibility to perform as directors of their democracy by paying their share of the costs of halting global warming. Bush’s political experience would also have attuned him to excessive competition, conditioning him to avoid losing votes by confronting voters with their responsibilities. As pointed out above, President Carter appeared to be less politically perceptive, which would have made him less acutely aware of the ambiguity of delegation, of the threat of political competition and of the need for compromise. He came to Washington as the ultimate political outsider, having served only one term as governor of Georgia, thus apparently never mastering the arts of inspiring the people, of working with Congress, and of working with his own party (Kuttner 2008, 55–57).

A well-known aspect of democratic performance on global warming is the manipulation of policy by sections of the fos-
fuel industry such as ExxonMobil, who are more concerned about their immediate sales prospects than the future of society (e.g. Bull 2007; Hamilton 2007). These special interest groups distort public information and offer incentives to politicians to bias policy, with the result that Mark Chandler (cited in Williams 2006), a palaeoclimatic modeller at the Columbia University Center for Climate Systems Research, observed: ‘we are not getting our politicians to vet their comments based on science … Instead we have a situation where our scientists are having to worry about what they say — can you see me sweating right now?’ Hansen (2006, 12) evinced this fear by invoking the protection of the First Amendment of the US Constitution before warning of the dire consequences of greenhouse gas emissions. However, some fossil fuel-dependent companies are very concerned (either for society or for their public image of social responsibility or for future profits from their investments), so they warn government and the public about the need to limit greenhouse gas emissions. Their long-time horizons for returns on capital expenditure (for example a 50-year life for a coal-fired power station) encourage them to try to get sound public policy developed, as a more reliable basis for investment. A scathing Washington Post op-ed (Worldwatch 2006) has noted that business activism may offer the best hope of moving the US government to address global warming, observing that several large companies are pushing the UK government to increase its efforts to reduce carbon emissions. Cinergy, a corporation that operates nine coal-fired power plants in the US, asked President G. W. Bush to regulate its industry for greenhouse gas emissions (Fonda 2006). Linda Fisher, DuPont’s chief sustainability officer, reports: ‘We learned that we have to be ahead of legislation’ (cited in Kluger 2007, 42).

In contrast with the failure of federal US policy on global warming, California has a more constructive approach, which nevertheless also appears consistent with triple dysfunction. In September 2006, Governor Schwarzenegger approved the Global Warming Solutions Act, which requires a 25 per cent cut in the state’s greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 and 80 per
cent by 2050. In doing this he virtually defied his own party, as the bill received only a single Republican vote (Breslau 2007). Early in 2007 he issued an executive order requiring a 10 per cent reduction in the carbon content of all transportation fuels by 2020. Schwarzenegger (cited in Breslau 2007, 70) regarded federal denial on this issue as ‘embarrassing’ and observed that what ‘we’re basically saying to the federal government is ‘Look, we don’t need Washington’…let us let the world know that America is actually fighting global warming’. Several other US states are taking a similar line, although not to this degree. Schwarzenegger’s approach reflects both his long-standing concern for the environment and his confidence in the ability of technology to solve problems. But an enabling factor may be what New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson (Breslau 2007, 70) terms Schwarzenegger’s ‘star power’. His popularity as a former macho muscle-man and film star may give him a freedom to choose policies that would cripple the electoral prospects of politicians without such a backup source of public approval. However, journalist Karen Breslau (2007, 72–73) notes

there is concern that his approach places too little emphasis on the need for Americans to reform their consumption habits, from running their air conditioners around the clock to driving (yes) their suvs. ‘He likes to give the impression that you can have it all,’ says Bill Magavern, a Sierra Club representative in Sacramento. ‘He is overly optimistic about the ability of the market to solve our problems.’

So although it looks as though ‘star power’ in a politician may enable him to withstand the pressure of triple dysfunction’s excessive competition to some degree, that pressure may still make him espouse populist policy. And this is often dysfunctional, for the ambiguity of delegation encourages citizens to think that they do not have to give careful consideration to public affairs.

Australian federal government behaves in a similar way to that of the US. An illustration was given by ‘The Greenhouse Mafia’ on ABCTV 4Corners (Cohen 2006), in which former Cli-
mate Director for the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO), Graeme Pearman, stated that ‘scientists are no longer as free to speak as they were’. Barrie Pittoc, former CSIRO Climate Impact leader, backed this up: ‘I was expressly told not to talk about … how you might reduce greenhouse gases’. In the same program, Guy Pearse, former speechwriter for an Australian Minister for the Environment, claimed that ‘greenhouse policy is being driven by the mining and energy sectors.’ This irresponsibility by Australian government has been summed up by Tim Flannery (cited in Hodge and Wahlquist 2006, 8).

What we do with coal is shovel it out of the ground as quick as we can, contribute to a global pollution problem, and then say we don’t want to have anything to do with the international treaty that is meant to deal with this problem, which is Kyoto. We do the same thing with uranium. I just think that is morally abhorrent and very, very wrong.

Such behaviour appears to show ambiguous delegation facilitating the expression of the egoistic interests of disengaged electors, while excessive competition between politicians does the same for the narrow interests of wealthy special interest groups. Responding to this government failure, the president of Australasian BP, Gerry Hueston (The Mercury 2005, 4), appealed to his industry to work together to develop renewable alternatives to hydrocarbon fuels: ‘My view is that we are running out of time to deal with the environmental consequences of fossil fuels much faster than we are running down our stocks of them.’ The Business Council of Australia has indicated a similar concern about deficiencies in public policy by calling for more effective strategic planning in politics (Marsh and Yencken 2004). So we see a few attempts by Australian private enterprise, whose role is to supply private goods, to try to do government’s job as well, that of providing public goods. As with Du Pont’s Linda Fisher, some Australian businesspeople realize they must intervene to try to produce a stable and productive environment for their
investments. But part of their reaction may also be social responsibility: Business managers are members of the community and as they are often comparatively well informed they may develop concerns for society’s future well before the average voter perceives those problems.

A complaint by the former Beatle, Paul McCartney — later to be echoed by environmental writer George Monbiot (2015) — provides another indication of triple dysfunction in responses by democracies to global warming. McCartney was reacting to the situation reported in 2006 by the United Nations that, world-wide, cattle-rearing generates more greenhouse effect through methane emissions than the carbon dioxide emitted by transportation.

The biggest change anyone could make in their own lifestyle would be to become vegetarian ... It’s very surprising that most major environmental organisations are leaving the option of going vegetarian off their lists of top ways to curtail global warming. (cited in Reuters 2008)

By staying silent on vegetarianism, environmental NGOs (ENGOs) avoid confronting their members and supporters with the challenge of a very personal discipline. Perhaps they recognize that such advocacy risks damaging their causes by asking more of people than many will tolerate, especially if they have no assurance that most citizens will join with them to make their effort effective. ENGOs’ avoidance of asking people to become vegetarian may also indicate that they recognize politicians in democracies are in a similar position. They too cannot ask citizens to pay significant additional personal costs for public goods, especially if most of them have little appreciation of the need for these goods (which produces the ‘excessive’ in excessive compromise) and no assurance that an effective majority will respond to the appeal (as ambiguous delegation does not make it clear to all citizens that they are jointly responsible for public policy). The same situations were observed above for both environmental organisations and politicians on another very
personal issue: size of population. These two examples of policy paralysis indicate that citizens of democracies are (1) divorced from feeling responsible for crucial public goods, which gives them a tendency (2) to be ignorant of those goods and of their needs for them, while (3) politicians follow this irresponsibility and ignorance. This is triple dysfunction, as the first and third of these circumstances would be respectively produced by ambiguous delegation and excessive competition, while as noted above, the second is what produces the ‘excessive’ in excessive compromise.

4.2.3 Unemployment
When a lack of employment is significant, the almost invariable response of liberal democratic governments is to externalize their responsibility to provide the public good of employment for all, by looking outside the political world of electors and politicians to the world of industry and commerce for an answer. They do this by trying to produce more economic growth, in order to provide more work, which hopefully will produce jobs for those who need them. Private enterprise welcomes this approach, for it means more profit. And pleasing private enterprise seems good to politicians, for it funds much of their election campaigns and runs most of the media. Pleasing business is thus at least partly a response of politicians to the competition between them.

The alternative to producing more economic growth in order to minimize unemployment is to share more equitably whatever work already exists (e.g. Bosch 2000), but this is usually ignored by politicians because it requires them to internalize the issue within politics by organizing that sharing. This would have them asking the majority of electors to change their lifestyle by earning less income through working fewer hours, days or weeks, so that the minority that are unemployed may have a share. It also appears to require politicians to ask businesses to reorganize themselves to facilitate the sharing of work. That appearance is created by ambiguous delegation, because this leaves citizens free to assume that it is not them but politicians
who are responsible for public goods such as the availability of work. Excessive competition between politicians supports that appearance by coercing politicians to avoid pointing out to citizens that in a democracy it is citizens who are ultimately responsible for public goods. Politicians usually do not risk losing votes at the next election by asking electors to pay personal costs for public goods, such as the time and effort of contributing to public campaigns to get businesses to provide more part-time work.

So both politicians and citizens externalize the problem from democratic politics, by trying to expand the economy instead of by sharing employment. Ambiguous delegation and excessive competition thus produce the absurdity that the introduction of labour-saving technology is used to make people work as much as before and possibly even more (an effect described below in §5.3.1 as ‘affluenza’), rather than to give them more leisure time. As ambiguous delegation allows citizens to avoid taking on the responsibility for eliminating unemployment, it may also allow them to develop a culture of complaint, in which they react to difficult personal circumstances by blaming politicians instead of dealing with these situations themselves. Citizens might assume this responsibility by being more appreciative and supportive of government unemployment benefits, by regarding changes of work as a normal occurrence that may happen several times during their life (and thus being more prepared to relocate or retrain for future employment) and by demanding that their politicians organize incentives and opportunities for work-sharing.

Excessive compromise also plays a part. Most citizens do not think enough about unemployment to realize that work sharing is a practical solution to the problem that can also improve their quality of life, both in the short term via the work-leisure balance of the individual and in the long term by limiting impacts on natural resources (as discussed in the next chapter). So mass opinion neglects this option and excessive competition coerces politicians to implement the neglect.

Economist Herman Daly has emphasized the adverse impact on quality of life of the inflexibility of working time, calling for
restrictions on advertising so that it no longer drives people to spend more and therefore to work long hours.

For the Classical Economists the length of the working day was a key variable by which the worker (self-employed yeoman or artisan) balanced the marginal disutility of labour with the marginal utility of income and leisure so as to maximize enjoyment of life. Under industrialization the length of the working day became a parameter rather than a variable (and for Karl Marx was the key determinant of the rate of exploitation). We need to make it more of a variable subject to choice by the worker. And we should stop biasing the labor-leisure choice by advertising to stimulate more consumption and more labor to pay for it. Advertising should no longer be treated as a tax deductible ordinary expense of production. (Daly 2009, 4)

Economist Robert Skidelsky and his son, philosopher Edward (2012, 208–11) also argue for an end to the tax deductibility of company spending on advertising. They note that if ‘advertising inflames our tendency to insatiability, there is a strong case for restricting it’ and point out that many European countries already do some of this. By distorting the public good of choice between work and leisure, advertising causes many other public goods to be neglected, as discussed previously in §2.2.3.2 and later in §5.3. Economist David George calls this distortion the creation of ‘unpreferred preferences’ and, in considering how it may be corrected, notes that a

step that must precede public action is a growth in public understanding that unbridled persuasion can be harmful … A first step in correcting for market inefficiency in the shaping of tastes must thus be the project of convincing contemporary society that the evaluation of tastes is a coherent and legitimate exercise. Only then will the spreading legitimization of market forces be slowed and will concrete steps emerge for the efficient channelling of the forces of preference creation. And only then will private desires to work long hours be lessened. (George 2000, 138)
Tim Jackson (2009, 180) sees work sharing as essential in providing the public good of economic sustainability. ‘In an economy in which labour productivity still increases but output is capped (for instance for ecological reasons), the only way to maintain macro-economic stability and protect people’s livelihoods is by sharing out the available work.’ Jackson notes that reduced working hours are usually beneficial for other reasons as well, such as increasing labour productivity and improving the work-life balance. However, it only tends to succeed under certain conditions. Sociologist Gerhard Bosch (2000, 185) observes that experience in Germany and Denmark shows that a fundamental precondition for reducing working hours is ‘a stable and relatively equal earnings distribution. Neo-liberal policies of income differentiation undermine attempts to redistribute working time because employees are unwilling to accept reductions in their hours’.

Daly calls for the US to tackle this problem, not only with legislation that may limit perceptions of inequality by minimizing advertising (as quoted above), but also with legislation that limits inequality itself, by mandating:

a minimum income and a maximum income … Complete equality is unfair; unlimited inequality is unfair. Seek fair limits to the range of inequality. The civil service, the military, and the university manage with a range of inequality of a factor of 15 or 20. Corporate America has a range of 500 or more. Many industrial nations are below 25… A sense of community necessary for democracy is hard to maintain across the vast differences current in the US. Rich and poor separated by a factor of 500 become almost different species. (Daly 2009, 3, 4)

As discussed later in Chapter 8, conservatives are relatively unconcerned about—and even supportive of—inequality. That disposition makes them a major political obstacle to work-sharing as a remedy for unemployment and they may be strengthened in this by their resistance to change inclining them to oppose the industrial changes that work-sharing would require.
Bosch (2000, 192–93) warns that a number of such changes are necessary to allow additional employment to be created from collective working time reductions and elective shorter working time options.

The necessary conditions under which employment expands must be created. These conditions include an active training policy, wage increases in line with productivity gains, the standardization of actual hours worked, the reduction of differences in hourly rates for full-timers and part-timers, better social security for flexible working lives, a change in the deep-seated full-time culture in the workplace and social security contributions that are proportional to the paid hours of work. Many of these conditions can be met only if a consensus can be forged between the social partners, as in the Netherlands or in Scandinavia.

Bosch adds two other conditions: That sharing employment purely by increasing the proportion of part-time workers is difficult to sustain in the long run; and working time reductions must be achieved by work reorganizations that improve efficiency in order to succeed in a global economy where competitors are using longer working hours. All these difficulties mean that if a democratic government is to manage its economy to provide employment for all without relying on endless growth, then it must be very competent and therefore, on this analysis, virtually free of triple dysfunction.