As the presidential election draws near, I've become astonished at how little the environment seems to matter. Based on the three debates it sits in back of the political bus, far behind the seats for national economy, taxes, medical reform, foreign policy and the sharing of power. I'd like to see it move up to the driver's seat and take us where we need to go.

Last week, I heard the distinguished ecologist, George Woodwell speak to the University of Connecticut. He believes as I do, that our national government needs reinvention to prevent the impoverishment of our shared planet for the next generation.

Woodwell struck me as an old school conservative. At 82, he stood straight as a board, wore a navy blue blazer and tie and delivered his message without fancy media. He attended the oldest school in our nation, Boston Public Latin School, before Dartmouth College, Duke University, the U.S. Navy and Brookhaven National Laboratory. Since 1975, he's been creating, leading and advising programs at the Woods Hole Research Center, as well as being a scientist, an international leader in global ecosystem research, a member of multiple select academies and the recipient of many national awards. For more than six decades he's been a steady pillar of the (science) establishment. He's earned the right to be listened to.

His unwavering message is steady as a drumbeat, one I've been hearing since the mid-1970s. Our present system of government -- what he calls a "corporatocracy" -- is promoting drastic biophysical degradation of the planet. He believes that clean air, clean water, a livable habitat and a functional planet should be birthrights. He used the word crime to describe our national failure to honor the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, a magnificent treaty we signed in 1992, but have ignored for two decades.

Reflecting on our government's failure sent me to my dictionary for a proper definition of the root problem: capitalism. There, I learned that it means three basic things. First, it's mostly about private ownership. I have no problem with this, because governments are notoriously wasteful of resources, and sluggish to change. Secondly, it's about letting the free-market decide what works and what doesn't. I'm all for this too, because it maximizes choice within the broadest field of competing alternatives. In theory, the best way of doing something is rewarded with the largest share of the resources. This is a perfect parallel to Darwinian natural selection.

It was the third, historic aspect of capitalism that stopped me cold. Unlike earlier systems, capitalism used its excess profits to enlarge productive capacity rather than investing it in economically unproductive enterprises such as palaces or cathedrals.

Everything clicked into place. The voters, to whom the debaters cater, confuse the machinations of capitalism, which are good, with its goal, which is now untenable at the global scale. The machinations, which involve private gain and open markets, are vastly superior to the alternatives of socialism or totalitarianism. But the goal of getting extra to have extra to get more extra, is axiomatically anti-ecological. Capitalism requires growth. Ecology, at least at the carrying capacity of any system, requires a steady state balance between inputs and outputs.

That companies and national economies have competed with each other was a good thing. The problem today is that the sum of all economies is competing with the geo-systems, plants and animals that regulate planetary health, and are winning unfairly. Our depleted fish-stocks, salinized soils, melting glaciers, drought-stricken farms, carbonic seas, polluted waters and wildlife populations are losing fast.
Except for some new cosmic dust and gas lost to space, Earth is a closed system with respect to mass. It's a zero-sum game. Depending on whom you believe, Earth is either at or well beyond the point of equilibrium, where growth can't be sustained. The time has come to revert to the medieval model and rebuild. That rebuilding will create millions of jobs and give our best young minds something more valuable to do.