The financial crisis of 2008, the need for environmental protection and the phasing out of nuclear energy have prompted a renewed discussion of our notion of progress. A new Bundestag Committee of Enquiry on “Growth, Prosperity and Quality of Life” is just one of many signs that our society is increasingly facing up to the meaning and importance of growth in terms of sustainable prosperity.

Before 1968 and even after 1980 hardly anyone questioned where progress was leading to because the answer was obvious: more prosperity – and faster. While prosperity is still today a desirable goal, people also want security, a stable environment and of course a more just society. Experience shows that the market alone cannot provide these things. The climate situation and the bitter realisation that nuclear energy as a catch-all solution is not an option, is forcing us to think of new guiding principles for the market.

The objective here is not to hinder progress but to steer it in a meaningful direction. Professor von Weizsäcker’s answer to this dilemma is strategic improvement of resource productivity. This could almost become a measure for the new technological progress.

In purely technical terms a fivefold increase of resource productivity is undoubtedly achievable. Viewed over the long term there is no reason why a twentyfold increase should not be possible. This is the premise of a newly published book “Factor Five” by Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker written in collaboration with Karlson Hargroves and Michael Smith. It addresses first of all four sectors, some of which are regarded as particularly difficult, namely transport, industry, agriculture and buildings. Where buildings are concerned, the word has meantime got around that a passive building uses only about one tenth the energy of a conventional...
In the case of the other sectors, the efficiency strategy builds on hundreds of small improvements, which taken together ultimately add up to a factor of five spread over the whole economy. In short, if a fivefold increase in resource productivity doesn’t become reality, it won’t be because of technical barriers.

After completing his secondary school education in 1958 in Göttingen, Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker studied chemistry and physics in Hamburg, graduating with a degree in physics in 1966. He obtained his doctorate, on form recognition by bees, in 1968 at the University of Freiburg in Breisgau under the supervision of Bernard Hassenstein.

From 1969 to 1972 Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker was scientific advisor at the Protestant Institute for Interdisciplinary Research in Heidelberg. In 1972 he was appointed Professor of Biology at the University of Essen and between 1975 and 1980 served as President of the University of Kassel. In 1981 he took up the post of Director at the United Nations Centre for Science and Technology in New York and between 1984 and 1991 served as Director of the Institute for European Environmental Policy (Bonn, Paris and London). From 1991 to 2000 he was President of the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy.

From January 2006 to December 2008 Professor von Weizsäcker was Dean of the Bren School of Environmental Science and Management, University of California, Santa Barbara. Since that time he has been working, as he puts it himself, as a "freelancer".