

HOW CAN WE PUT A POSITIVE SPIN ON SOMETHING A CAMERA WILL NEVER SEE?

In just five years legislation should consign fuel poverty to history. But will the public funds be made available for this commitment to be honoured? And will the government be in breach of the law it championed?

Every single serious analysis reaches the same conclusion. The most cost-effective policy for addressing every single goal of energy policy is to eradicate the profligate use of fuel. Consequently every policy-maker states the now ritual obeisance to achieving a “step change in energy efficiency.”

But still it doesn't happen. Why not? We all know we have the technologies ready to deliver the same life-styles as today, using a tiny fraction of the fuel we now burn. Much of this would be at negative cost. Even at the now vanished world of oil trading at \$30 per barrel of oil, an immediate cut of 25% in consumption would be incredibly cost-effective.

Take the latest International Energy Agency (IEA) scenarios. Between now and 2030, if present trends continue, in the European Union alone a mind-boggling 1.8 trillion – yes, trillion – dollars will need to be spent on new energy supply investments, of which 75% would be in the electricity sector.

The most cost-effective way of addressing this, the IEA argue, would be by eliminating 60% of that consumption growth. Via better energy efficiency.

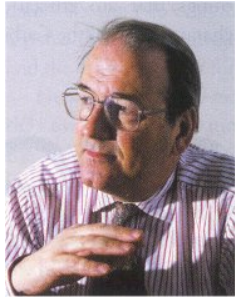
Why should these supply “investments” be halted, rather than be satisfied via non-fossil fuel power or via fuel-switching? Basically because it is twice as cost-effective in macro-economic terms to ensure we consume less. Rather than build more and more.

The question is, how do we make this happen? After all, it is a potential identified first over a quarter century ago. A potential that keeps growing. But a potential that simply isn't being realised.

I suspect that the single biggest problem facing turning this vast untapped “resource” called energy saving can be simply defined. It is perceived as a negative concept. Not a positive concept at all.

Consider. Who are the heroes of companies? The employee who starts a new product line; or the employee who ensures the boiler valves are working? Yes, we know that the latter ends up benefiting the shareholders' interests far more. But are such people really getting their just rewards? How often do the achievements resonate out of the boiler-room, and into the boardroom?

Similarly, where is the political kudos in promoting a negative? Where are the photo-opportunities in promoting energy efficiency? We are all familiar with film of politicians wearing hard-hats opening oil-rigs, or even off-shore wind-farms.



But when did you last hear about a politician inspecting a well-insulated loft?

Actually it isn't even for want of trying (occasionally). I recall when the present Prime Minister offered a photo-opportunity, of him ostensibly installing insulation into a cavity wall of a home in his County Durham constituency. No pictures appeared in any national media at all. Indeed I think that the local TV news accorded the event all of ten seconds of airtime.

Why? Because he was effectively seeking to publicise something entirely invisible. After the insulation has been installed, it is entirely hidden from the naked eye. Ironically, this very invisibility is the bane of life for those anxious to warn us of the threats caused by pushing ever-increasing amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Because of course such emissions are, by definition, completely invisible to either the naked eye, or the camera.

I felt that this dichotomy was crystallised for me when a BBC TV film crew from Newsnight came to my office earlier this year, to film an interview with me. Talking heads alone are anathema to TV producers. Something visible was needed beside or behind me. There were no turning windmill blades or

‘WE ARE ALL FAMILIAR WITH FILM OF POLITICIANS WEARING HARD-HATS OPENING OIL RIGS OR EVEN OFFSHORE WINDFARMS. BUT WHEN DID YOU LAST HEAR ABOUT A POLITICIAN INSPECTING A WELL-INSULATED LOFT?’

stirring seas to film.

Suddenly the producer looked delighted. “We can film that steam pollution pouring out of the building into the air outside”. I had to break it to him gently that the whole idea of high efficiency condensing boilers is that they really are supposed to plume: hence, “condensing”. The film clip was inevitably shorter.

This “negative” problem is equally true for those in the investment community. Shares in renewable energy companies have soared of late, as portfolios managers seek to include companies that are likely to prosper from the concern with climate change. But yet, as the IEA show, for every pound spent on renewables, it makes sense as Western economies to be spending three pounds on improving energy efficiency.

If that is so, then logically there ought to be big City bucks, ploughing money into those industries that make the relevant kit, provide the relevant services. I see absolutely no sign that investment analysts have even begun to identify such sectors as a genuine long-term investment opportunities.

Absent this, making energy efficiency the priority which all these macro-studies conclude, will continue to be just a mantra that gets chanted. And the opportunities to transform economies into genuine low-carbon ones are lost, over and over again.

This must not continue. We have to find ways of turning the abolition of energy profligacy into a positive message. Not a double negative. ■

FURTHER INFORMATION

Andrew Warren is Director of the Association for the Conservation of Energy
www.ukace.org