

Comment

One man's quixotic quest for a greener future

OPINION

Julian Critchlow

How, as a prosperous westerner, do you free yourself from the guilty knowledge that your bequest to planet earth will be a hotter and less hospitable climate? In the hours between breakfast and lunch, Britons and Americans are responsible for more carbon emissions than someone living in India is likely to produce in an entire day. European governments hope to reduce this deadly toll by offering big subsidies for measures that will lessen our dependence on fossil fuels. Billions have been spent, yet progress is slow.

For more than two decades I have been helping utility companies around the world make electricity generation cleaner. For most of that time, however, my personal environmental credentials have been a muddier shade of green. The guilt began at home (a draughty 19th-century house heated by oil, one of the dirtiest-burning fuels) and it followed me everywhere I went in my petrol-guzzling car. Heating homes and getting around accounts for more than half of the energy used in Britain. Spurred on by my wife, our family asked ourselves: how little could we use?

Our first step was choosing a sustainable form of heating. My wife was keen on subsidised solar panels, but I could not in good conscience spend thousands of taxpayers' pounds pointing photovoltaic cells at London's gloomy skies. Instead we chose two air-source heat pumps to provide heat and hot water.

At the time there were no subsidies for these gadgets, which work like air conditioners in reverse – heating the building and making outside air a bit

colder. Worse, no local heating engineer had even heard of them; we pitched in to send our tradesman on a training course organised by the Swedish manufacturer. One thing he learnt was that we would need a "three-phase" industrial-grade electricity supply – which doubled the system's cost and wrecked the economics. But we were on a mission.

The system worked for a day; then it stopped. Daily calls to Sweden resulted in software updates, which in turn revealed further flaws. Then the manufacturer closed for Christmas, leaving us without heat during one of the coldest winters on record – a reminder of the difficulties that come with new technology. After six months, we had everything running smoothly, but now the

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numbers on our electricity meter were ticking up so fast that our supplier's billing system declared that we had the decimal point in the wrong place.

Next we needed a more sustainable form of transport. With my 50th birthday looming, I test drove an electric car and fell in love with the acceleration that takes your breath away, and automation that nearly drives the car for you. The sticker price was a shock, even with a government rebate. But, in the grip of obsession, I rationalised it as a green investment. Waiting for delivery gave us time to install the government-subsidised charging point. Unfortunately our home's souped-up electricity could not deliver the needed 32 amps, so I had to pony up again for thicker wires.

The new wheels arrived in time for my birthday, and my wife whisked me

away for a surprise weekend getaway at a hotel chosen for the charging point on its front wall. Alas, it turned out to be a three-pin socket, no use to my car's type 2 connector. The real surprise of that weekend turned out to be our tour of the car parks of Bracknell. We finally found a public charging point at a local supermarket, and had a coffee while the car picked up juice. By the time we returned to the hotel, we had exactly the same range as when we left two hours earlier.

Even an ardent enthusiast, one willing to invest time and money to live a greener life, will find it hard to make the technology work. Policy makers recommending energy efficient measures should walk a mile in my shoes – or at least drive around Bracknell's car parks. They would see their own policies in a new light. We spend billions building offshore wind farms, which have to be shielded from the salty sea air and connected up with expensive subsea cables. But we overlook public infrastructure that would bring heat pumps within reach of every household, cutting energy use for heating by two-thirds. We subsidise electric cars, but forget the fast charging points that would make them more useful.

I do not know how far this green odyssey will take us, but that does not stop me dreaming. This year I have arranged a holiday in France, where I plan to tour the country's charging points. If it works, then I will have driven all the way on clean electricity. If it does not, I will be stranded by the roadside trying to work out the polarity of the charging station. As those who strive for a greener future know only too well, plenty of first-world problems remain.

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