

Municipal Energy Transition in the UK – Investigating New Forms of Public Ownership at the Intersections of Market, State and Civil Society

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TO CITE

Reynolds, L. (2023). *Municipal Energy Transition in the UK – Investigating New Forms of Public Ownership at the Intersections of Market, State and Civil Society*. 20. https://paris.pias.science/article/EneTran_2016_05_municipal-energy-transition-in-the-uk

PUBLICATION DATE

23/05/2016

ABSTRACT

Les territoires de la transition énergétique : Allemagne, France, Royaume-Uni. IEA de Paris, 23 mai 2016 - Session 2 - Royaume-Uni

2015 saw the development of a new trend in the UK, of ‘energy municipalisation’, with the entry of five local authorities into the electricity supply market. These are the first of their kind in the UK since 1948, when around 400 local and municipal energy companies were abolished by the post-war nationalisation of the industry.

Following the German re-municipalisation example, this new UK trend is advocated by its proponents as an alternative to an increasingly unsatisfactory privatised system dominated by large corporate actors, and also to the earlier post-war nationalised and centralised system. Public ownership at the city level is advanced as being best suited to optimise affinities between an emerging smart and ‘distributed’ low-carbon energy system and existing traditions of localised public service governance. Whilst this is frequently presented as a ‘de-privatisation’, paradoxically this new route to public ownership in the UK is opened up by energy market liberalisation, a move which attempts to encourage increased competition between new entrants.

Based on recent fieldwork, this presentation will outline the different models adopted by these 2015 pioneers, and explore the rationales key proponents advanced for these projects. Each new municipal energy company was found to advance a mixture of environmental, social and economic rationales, which were presented as key markers of differentiation from the purely commercial rationales of existing large energy market actors. Yet these new municipal public enterprises also enter into a competitive market place. This poses acute questions about the relationship between ‘municipal energy democracy’ as an innovatory niche and the existing marketised sociotechnical regime.

The presentation will explore these tensions within the framework of the three ‘governing logics’ of energy transition identified by the UK ‘realising transitions pathways’ consortium. It will conclude with a discussion of how UK energy municipalisation operates at the intersection of these three transition logics, of state intervention, market competition and civil society participation.

