

Britain Joins the Shift to Electric Cars

The drive to switch to electric cars went a mile further last Wednesday when Britain joined France in pledging to end the sale of new gas and diesel cars by 2040. Norway and India have also said they want to get rid of gas and diesel cars, and at least 10 other countries have set targets for electric cars. All that is good news for the planet and for human health, even if caveats and challenges abound.

Cars powered by gasoline or diesel are major polluters. The Volkswagen emissions scandal in the United States put to rest the long standing European faith in diesel as a more environmentally friendly fuel, not least because it generates large quantities of health-threatening nitrogen oxides. VW's extensive efforts to conceal the true extent of that pollution has now turned consumers against the fuel.

Still, attractive as it sounds, switching from petroleum to electricity for cars is a formidable task. Plug-in electric vehicles are still a tiny market centered in only 10 industrially advanced countries, and even there the infrastructure is small. A huge increase in electric cars would require many thousands of new charging points, an upgrade in generating capacity, improved batteries and new sources of government income to replace lucrative fuel taxes.

Much depends, too, on where the electricity comes from. If it comes from coal-fired plants, there could be a net increase in the greenhouse gases that are warming the planet; if from natural gas plants, a modest net decrease; if from carbon-free sources like wind and solar power, a huge net benefit. President Trump's antagonism to the Paris climate accord and his affinity for fossil fuels demonstrate the difficulty of making this shift; and despite Volvo's exciting announcement that it will make only electric or hybrid cars as of 2019, many manufacturers may well resist abandoning the engines they have spent the past century perfecting.

Yet electric cars — notably those made by Tesla, which unveiled its new, mass-market Model 3 sedans on Friday — have demonstrated that they can be every bit as comfortable, powerful and fun to drive as gasoline-powered cars. The targets set by Britain, France and others are bound to spur further innovation that will lower prices and address the greatest weaknesses of plug-in cars: relatively limited range and long charging times.

In addition, putting more electric cars onto the streets is arguably a good way to raise public consciousness about steps people can take to clean the air they breathe while also reducing greenhouse gases. Most people do not spend a lot of time thinking about how their electricity is generated, but they are likely to notice a plugged-in car on their street and, eventually, improvements in air quality. Once people are aware of that, they could well support shifts to cleaner fuels in other forms of transport, like planes and trains.

Bringing people around is a big challenge in the fight against climate change. That's one reason the announcements by Britain, France, India and Norway are important, and the more governments that follow suit, the better.