

get the politicians spending our money on the scale needed to trigger a fresh round of innovation. For now, the politicians are more scared of other things, including the risk of running out of the public’s money. (That’s where being burdened with large and inflexible welfare states may be stifling innovation.)

Anyone who thinks that technological innovation driven by market forces alone will solve a problem on the scale of climate change is deluding themselves. Market players aren’t willing to take big enough risks to effect the genuinely transformative changes. Only governments do that. At the moment, the one government that is investing on a significant scale in green technology is China. This spending is driven by fears of popular unrest in response to the very high current levels of pollution. In many parts of China ordinary citizens have been living with filthy water and toxic air for a long time, and there are signs that they are not prepared to put up with it for much longer. The Chinese government is worried about what some future environmental disaster might do to its hold on power. But Chinese government spending will not be enough to make the difference on its own, and for now Western governments do not face the same kind of fears. So they are holding off. Things will probably have to get worse before they have a chance to get better. As yet, climate change hasn’t got politically scary enough: there needs to be a greater threat of violence. That’s the truly scary thought.

GOOGLE VS. GOVERNMENT

States can do plenty of things that business organisations can’t. States fight wars; Google doesn’t, and not just because the company motto is ‘Don’t Be Evil’. Google lacks the organisational capacity and the coercive authority for war. It couldn’t fight one even if it wanted to. A state – the United States – put a man on the moon, another massively costly enterprise that had all sorts of unexpected technological spin-offs. Google might like to do something as ambitious, but it wouldn’t dare be so reckless with its cash. (The Apollo programme cost well over \$100 billion in today’s money; the space shuttle programme cost twice as much, or more than half the current net worth of Google.) States – thanks to their tax-raising powers – are able to pool resources on a scale that not even the biggest businesses could match.

But businesses can do plenty of things that states can’t. Google has just come up with a self-driving car that actually works. It has married its mapping technology to its super-smart computers to produce a machine that performs a complex task far more safely than any human being could manage. Google’s self-driving cars don’t crash (so far). It is hard to imagine a government programme resulting in a self-driving car that doesn’t crash. Governments tend to screw up complex, open-ended tasks like that. (The mission to put a man on the moon was complex, but it wasn’t open-ended: it had a straightforward, hard-to-miss target in the moon itself.) Governments don’t build good cars. The hopelessly inefficient and unreliable bangers turned out by the communist states of Eastern