

FITs, PV and the UK: The Bigger Picture

Miguel Mendonça

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A response to the current feed-in tariff/ PV debate in the UK

If the question is, what is the cheapest method of saving a ton of carbon today, then solar PV is not going to be the answer. If the question is instead, how do we solve the challenge of sustainability, then solar PV has a major part to play. Therefore, I do not have much to say directly on cost arguments. With tongue in cheek however, I might invite all those who oppose solar PV on the grounds of cost to spend the next year buying only the cheapest food, alcohol, clothing and household goods. They may quickly come to the conclusion that value is not found in cost alone.

Imagine if we had never invested in computer or mobile phone technology because of cost. And that is the point – some things are worth paying more for because they make our lives better, and we can all participate and help push society in a new direction. If ever there was a need to do so, and a time to do it, it's now. Achieving true sustainability requires shifts in almost everything we do. This level of undertaking, in scale and complexity, means teamwork, a sense of common purpose, and unleashing all our human ingenuity, energy and goodwill. People must be facilitated, empowered and engaged – willing and able to be a part of the solution. As things stand it is hard for most of us avoid simply being a part of the problem. We talk of “fighting climate change”, but it is really ourselves, our beliefs, our systems and our lifestyles that we are in conflict with. Politicians know this, and therefore find it particularly difficult to come up with solutions that are both politically deliverable and truly effective, especially when compromised by the power and influence of corporate lobbyists.

But this is where FITs come into play. Solar panels and wind turbines in the cityscape and landscape are adverts for action. They demonstrate that we are implementing working solutions. Other countries are leading the way. They are building new industries, delivering energy security, and safeguarding business continuity and local authority service delivery. This is something that each nation has to do; it is not optional. Without underpinning our economies with renewable energy, we cannot be sustainable. A fossil fuel and nuclear energy system is inherently unsustainable as it runs on finite resources, vulnerable to sudden cost escalations and political gamesmanship. This can never be the foundation of a safe and stable economy, and therefore society. Local, small-scale generation – and PV has ease, efficiency and

rapidly falling costs in its favour – allows people to become aware of and engaged in sustainable energy production, saving and use. That is progress.

Whilst it is a risky strategy to push all this on the basis of the financial incentives – because you are effectively saying ‘money is good’, not so much ‘sustainability is good’ – it is still a strong driver, and in this economic climate people are looking for good investments. What we require therefore, and many major investment banks have attested to this, are clear policy signals. But we need signals which point all of society in the same direction, and help sustainability become politically, economically, socially and culturally embedded. Over time, the quantitative change – the number of sustainable investments and activities of all kinds – can become a qualitative change, and we can create the opportunity for more ‘sustainable’ social values and a sense of positive ethical responsibility to emerge. This is not idealism, this is practicality.

The main problem with this theory of change however, is that it will probably take too long. It is difficult to imagine that we have time to turn the cultural tanker around. Our values are rooted in self interest rather than social goods, all of which is politically and economically driven and reinforced. A vicious circle. The last thing on the political agenda today is creating policy which demonstrates care for those distant from us in space and time. This seems to upset, among others, people who are desperate for work today, and particular sections of the media. And both business and politics are, perhaps more than ever, almost pathologically short-term in their interests. It is simply not a system set up to ensure our future, and our efforts so far cannot possibly add up to enough in time, on climate change, biodiversity loss or resource security.

To make the breakthrough, past the sceptics, deniers and vested interests, we therefore need a total commitment from government on the sustainability agenda. Business and the public must receive the right incentives and signals, the messages which continually reinforce the fact that we are all going to take on this challenge together. We need an end to mixed messages, and a shift to policy which favours the long-term needs of the many over the short-term wants of the few. Among other things, this means prioritising the transition to an energy system running on free, benign, domestic fuel.

Feed-in tariffs are a proven method of rapidly delivering the largest volume of this renewable energy at the lowest cost, and they build in a bigger stakeholder group for greening the economy and creating a sustainable society. Green industries and jobs, tax and subsidy shifting, new technologies and markets, new approaches in agriculture, biological carbon sequestration, water, transport, the built environment, industry and waste – these areas and more can help create economic opportunities which simultaneously reinforce support for a green economy, drive down prices, breed more innovation, raise awareness, and create more economic opportunities, and so on. A virtuous circle. This is the big picture, and it is what really matters

today. This is a viable political strategy that can have enormous positive impacts at the social and cultural level, and create a sustainable economy. There are plenty of things in the world which are worth paying more for, and this is one of them.