

A Community Energy Revolution?

Or: Join me in proving Kafka wrong

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The UK now has some serious aspirations on community energy. All the major political parties, and lots of local authorities, see community energy, defined loosely as greater community involvement in generating, selling, buying and saving energy, as the way forward. Ed Davey, the minister responsible, has summed up this ambition neatly: ***“I want nothing short of a community energy revolution.”***



One of the perils of being a minister is that your quotes come back to haunt you. But let me take that term, revolution. It's a loaded term. It conveys radicalism, drama and change, which is why it is catnip to politicians like Davey.

But revolutions are also about struggle, oppression and violence. I have form on revolutions. As a political scientist, I've studied them – and I've even lived through one of these ones pictured on the left. So what can we learn from real, tumultuous, red-blooded revolutions that might help us to understand what we really want to happen with community energy?

Revolution is the birth of something new.

First, revolution is the birth of something new. As Lenin told us over a hundred years ago, we need a vanguard. So who are the proletarians of the

community energy revolution? We're doing quite well here. There are revolutionaries in every patch. Brixton and Oxford have pioneering schemes, but we'd expect that from stormy cities and bolshy students. We have revolutionaries in bucolic backwaters too – Bath; Dumfries; even Godalming. Wherever next? Tunbridge Wells?

And the revolutionary fervour is infiltrating the establishment. The Community Energy Strategy may not be quite as catchy as the Communist Manifesto, but it sets out a clear sense of ambition, and some potentially far-reaching changes to the way that communities generate and sell energy,



connect to the grid, and so on. Just one example: the government is proposing that all new renewable energy developments offer a part share in ownership to local communities. This is significant stuff. We see local authorities joining the fray too, signing up with community groups to offer energy services to local people.

Revolution is the overthrow of something old

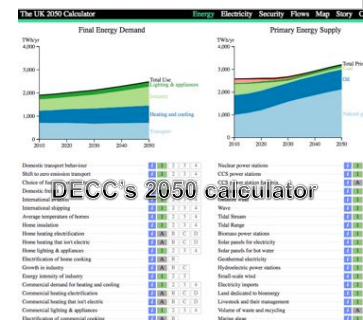
But revolution is not just the birth of something new. It's also the overthrow of something old, like the French aristocracy. And I think that here, we've been a bit more coy. We're all very keen to support community energy but we haven't been so explicit about what we'd like to see less of. If we're serious about this revolution, we can't be too polite. We have to accept that changes mean different businesses, different profit models.

There are vested interests who just don't want to see this change. And the current market, policy framework and financial systems support the status quo, making it hard for our plucky revolutionaries to break through.

Are the Big Six the doomed aristocracy? Some NGOs think so, with vociferous campaigns against dominant corporate power in energy. But some utilities are adapting, providing expertise and finance to community energy schemes, and thinking through new business models.

Above all, if we want to see carbon benefits from our efforts, we don't just need to do more good stuff like renewables, we need to do less bad stuff like fossil fuel generation. My friend and colleague Mike Berners Lee's excellent book, the Burning Question, explains why.

Renewables just soak up extra demand unless we keep the fossil fuels in the ground. The burgeoning fossil fuel divestment lobby could do worse than joining forces with the community energy pioneers – so that both sides can talk about a serious alternative to the status quo. Community groups in Oxford have done just that, seizing upon the closure of Didcot Power Station, and planning to replace its output with locally generated renewables and energy saving.



Revolution is a change in economy, society and culture

Next, as Marx reminds us, revolution is a change in economy, society and culture. Yet energy policy is ruled by the myth of 'substitution and efficiency' – the assumption that we'll carry on using energy the way we do now, but just generate from renewables and be more efficient. This is the assumption behind DECC's models, for example. The question of what



we use energy for is largely ignored. But as my colleagues at Lancaster University's DEMAND Centre make clear, this makes energy policy and models loaded and subjective. As they write, "policies that are designed to deliver similar services but with less energy are anything but 'neutral'. Like it or not, they play an important part in reproducing the status quo and in sustaining and legitimizing contemporary material arrangements and practices."

Surely the biggest promise of community energy is that it offers a radically different set of energy behaviours. Local energy ecosystem in which local actors – local authorities, communities, commercial operators – between them provide supply, demand reduction, and carbon literacy.

Unfinished revolutions are dangerous things

The last insight from revolutionary theory is that unfinished revolutions are dangerous things. We have to ask ourselves whether politicians want to have their cake and eat it. Supporting community energy, up to a point, but keeping it niche, and not seeing its wider potential. Giving financial incentives to community energy while not tackling the massive implicit subsidies to fossil fuels that our current system hides so well. Talk about transition and revolution but stop just when it gets interesting.



And we do see signs of this. Three examples spring to mind straight away: first, the regulator Ofgem tells us that they can't discriminate between different 'types' of customer. So they can't treat community energy projects any differently than commercial projects when it comes to grid connection, for example. But this implies that doing something to promote community energy would somehow be favouritism, when the truth is that the system is stacked against them. Second, the Green Investment Bank's reluctance to help finance community energy projects. And third, the financial regulator's recent refusal to allow renewable energy groups to register as co-operatives, because they don't sell energy directly to their members. The reason that they don't sell? Er, that would be the horrendously complicated regulation which means that it cost half a million pounds and several years' work to become an electricity supplier.



What I see when I look at community energy is indeed an unfinished revolution. There's promise, to be sure, but we don't yet know if it will be realised. That's why I want you to join me in proving Kafka wrong:

"Every revolution evaporates and leaves behind only the slime of a new bureaucracy"