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The road to 'effectively' zero emissions strategy: Driving the electric vehicle market

Written by Josh White on 20 July 2018



Somewhat obscured by the dramatic developments within the Cabinet that took place simultaneously on Monday 9 July, the long awaited (and frequently delayed) Road to Zero Emissions strategy was published by the Department for Transport.

In the build up to its publication, many stakeholder groups had been critical of the Government's handling of the strategy. Leading these critiques was the BEIS Select Committee, who gave a notable grilling to Richard Harrington, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for BEIS, and Richard Bruce, Director of Energy, Technology and Innovation at the Department for Transport during an oral evidence session in June, as part of the 'Electric Vehicles: Developing the market and infrastructure' inquiry.

During the session, MPs grew increasingly frustrated while trying to extract information from Harrington and Bruce on what the commitment made in the Grand Challenges policy paper to make the UK's car and van fleet 'effectively' zero emissions by 2040, actually meant.

"It means the fleet will be effectively zero emissions" - Bruce told the committee, which, unsurprisingly, provoked ire from members.

After further probing, the committee found that whilst a zero emissions target for 2040 existed, non-zero emissions vehicles were still likely to be available to purchase after this date. This, MPs concluded, 'effectively' constituted no target whatsoever.

Given the lack of assurance out of government on any meaningful commitments to developing the EV market, expectations were low ahead of the Road to Zero Emissions publication. To this effect, some industry and environmental groups began mockingly referring to the strategy as the 'Road to Nowhere'.

Industry has, nonetheless, shown significant confidence in the future of the EV market. In late June, it was announced that BP would purchase the UK's leading EV charging company, Chargemaster in a deal coming to approximately £130m. The question, prior to the Road to Zero Emissions strategy publication, was whether the Government would match this ambition and confidence in their policy proposals.

The answer? Yes. Well, sort of.

The Government did make a series of well received proposals and commitments on charging infrastructure and R&D funding, but there was a selection of notable absences which left stakeholders with a sense that the strategy represents a missed opportunity.

Perhaps the key absence, was a definitive answer on the 2040 target to end the sale of non-zero emissions cars and vans. The Government have backtracked from the Grand Challenges commitment to 'effectively' end the sale of non-zero emissions cars and van by 2040, to now 'wanting' to end the sale of such vehicles by 2050.

To quote member of the BEIS Select Committee, Peter Kyle MP, "That is not a target".

The language used serves to leave the Government with a get-out clause should they later deem the target unachievable, and it makes no assurances on sales of conventional hybrids and very short-range plug-in hybrids.

Further to this, the strategy lacks any new consumer incentives to drive the sale of electric vehicles. Stakeholders had hoped the Government would look to follow the example set by countries such as the Netherlands, who supported their EV market through a bevy of incentives such as parking benefits and subsidising the cost of full electric taxis and vans. Instead, the strategy promised only to maintain the current plug-in car grant initiative until at least 2020. Richard Harrington had previously suggested that the Government would not rule out increasing the price of combustion engine vehicles through the tax system to help stimulate the sale of electric vehicles.

Looking forward, key EV developments on the horizon include the Royal Assent of the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill, which will give further weight to some of the commitments on charging infrastructure development made in the strategy, and the publication of the BEIS Select Committee EV inquiry report, which is anticipated to be published in coming weeks.

Overall, one can expect the committee's report to support the Government's intent behind the Road to Zero Emissions strategy but critique the overall policy management of the issue and missed opportunities to stimulate the critical EV market.

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