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Throwing the baby out with the bathwater?

As John Swigert Jr, aboard Apollo 13, reputedly put it: "Houston, we have a problem." Today's problem is grounded in road transport technology, and the issue is political ideology and economics. With the emergency budget now laid bare, and savage cuts clearly in control, we can be fairly confident that government funding is not going to be forthcoming to support either the development or uptake of technologies likely to deliver anything like the carbon emissions cuts needed to meet European targets for LCVs and HGVs.

In a few short months, the Low Carbon Vehicle Partnership (LowCVP) will present its initial report on green opportunities for transport, as sanctioned by the previous government. It will reveal that technologies likely to fly unassisted – meaning that operators could reasonably expect them to pay for themselves in two years – are close to market and typically yield at least a 2% reduction in CO₂ emissions and fuel consumption. But that's hardly a hugely impressive gain.

LowCVP's report will also suggest that more aggressive technologies, capable of delivering in excess of 5% improvement (such as full hybrid systems, energy recovery flywheel equipment, turbo compounding and light-weighting), are mostly at the earlier stages of development and would probably have to be incentivised to stand much chance of early commercialisation.

Interestingly, the partnership's study (page 7) has separately mapped current technologies to the drive cycles of long-distance HGVs, inter-city trucks, city delivery vehicles and RCVs (refuse collection vehicles). That exercise concludes that the easier technologies – aerodynamics, low rolling resistance tyres etc – are only applicable to long distance and inter city applications. Both the city delivery vehicle and utility truck categories are more likely to benefit initially from engine stop-start systems, mild hybrid technologies, automated manual transmissions etc.

They might also benefit from some of the dual-fuel engine developments, currently being undertaken largely by technology fledglings, with support, in some cases, from enlightened hauliers, and, in others, from OEMs with an eye to future markets rooted in green credentials (page 10). And there are the various fuel intervention and nanotechnology opportunities.

But where are we likely to find the cash required to bring on these more advanced solutions? Jonathan Murray, deputy director of LowCVP, puts it plainly: "Our advice to government will be, if you want to achieve aggressive reductions in CO₂ and fuel consumption, then you will need to introduce schemes based on grants, enhanced capital allowance, RCPs [reduced pollution certificates] or VED relief."

He would, he says, also like LowCVP's programme to continue into 2012, as originally intended, with the objective of helping to drive Department for Transport budget and strategy thinking, and eventually detailed green transport policies.

Government would benefit and so would operators, says Murray, pointing to a prototype computer model, developed around current combustion engines and drivelines, in readiness for technology accreditation. With the newer technologies plugged in, fleet managers would get a useful resource capable of matching technology selections to their operational needs.

But going green costs money. Money we don't have.

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