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Long live the engine

The major German trade show IAA, whose developments are summarised starting p22, is usually seen as indicating the future direction of the industry, though when exactly those developments will reach these right-hand drive shores is a moot point.

Even though decarbonisation was the dominant theme, internal combustion engines were a hot ticket. Not for diesel, but an altogether lighter fuel: hydrogen. It is also being discussed closer to home (Bedford), as Ben Spencer reported last month (www.is.gd/udabet).

No wonder. Hydrogen engines offer the industry a way to maintain intact 150 years of internal combustion development, production and operational expertise - while providing a fuel that is sufficiently carbon-zero to satisfy public-sector decarbonisation requirements. In Europe, VECTO regulations threaten truck suppliers with heavy penalties unless they reduce the overall carbon emissions from the balance of products sold. In the UK, non zero-carbon HGVs of all sizes will be banned for sale after 2040.

The key isn't that hydrogen is greener overall, but that it is zero-carbon in use. (Its carbon profile happens to be the reverse of hydrocarbon fuels, whether fossil or bio-derived, which emit most of their carbon when they are burned.)

There's a bit of poetic justice here. The UK government clamped down hard on transport because, it said, of its outsize carbon footprint. Hydrogen engines offer the potential for the industry to meet that challenge without completely transforming, certainly in comparison to battery-electric vehicle or hydrogen fuel cell technology.

It's important to point out that doing so would require the development of a new, energy-intensive and probably expensive supply chain to generate sufficient quantities. But that wouldn't be the problem of the transport industry, as the rules are written now.

If this scenario does come to pass, what will have been accomplished? Laws originally intended to save the planet will have only had the effect of shifting the real burden of decarbonisation somewhere else.



Will Dalrymple
Editor

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