

Bidding farewell to fossil

Out of the Box

Tony Chan Fan-cheong is president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He has spent his life pursuing his dreams relating to teaching and research, and has unique views on education, scientific and technological development, and nurturing the young.



I RECENTLY CAME across a newspaper article reporting on a potential ban on all fossil fuel cars in China.

There is no fixed timetable yet on the ban, but the news of China contemplating such a move has sent shockwaves to the car manufacturing industries right away, and stock of some electric vehicle makers went up immediately.

An impending ban from China, of course, signals that the country finally is willing to join other countries in the world to fight carbon emission – which leads to global warming and damage to our environment.

Several European countries have recently announced measures to phase out fossil fuel cars: Holland and Norway have already set targets to ban fossil-fuel cars by 2025, with sales after that deadline limited to electric and plug-in hybrid

vehicles. France announced that it would ban sales of petrol and diesel vehicles by 2040 to reduce air pollution and become a carbon-neutral country by 2050, and the UK soon followed suit.

Last but not least, Germany, home to so many world-renowned automakers, is expected to tighten sales of diesel cars soon.

China is the world's biggest car market, with nearly 200 million registered vehicles by the end of last year. Only a fraction of those cars are new-energy vehicles, which speaks volumes on the monumental task ahead if officials are to make electric vehicles the new norm.

According to reports, Chinese buyers accounted for 53 percent of the 774,000 electric cars sold worldwide in 2016, and industry forecasters say China needs to make 750,000 new-energy vehicles next year just to meet market demand.

The status quo is shaking, and I see a sea change coming on the auto-scene. The challenge ahead for China is gargantuan: there will be a rising need for technology, especially in car batteries, a demand for better infrastructure to accommodate the switch, and more important, consumer mind-set would have to change to the green side to make things possible.

Expectedly, there will be pushbacks

from automakers and perhaps the related interested groups, which would cast a shadow on how things would unfold next. A plan like this requires strong national leadership and long-term planning – it won't happen if left to only market forces.

I am most impressed by the will and conviction shown by Chinese leaders in tackling air pollution head-on.

In addition to cleaning up the air in its own cities, China seems to want to become a responsible stakeholder in the fight against global warming and climate change. In contrast, recent news in Hong Kong seems to be in the other

direction.

The removal of electric car tax incentives by the new government shocked many (regardless of who is the supplier), and Uber, whose concept of sharing existing cars (and hence limiting pollution in an indirect way, as they are mass transportation means) is still considered illegal.

While we preach a greener way of living and claim to welcome innovation, some of our policies seem to be in direct contrast to that stance.

I am not holding my breath to see a similar announcement to ban fossil fuel cars in Hong Kong in the near future.

I hope China's plan is not just talk. It is not necessarily the easiest way, but probably the right way, when it comes to car emissions and the fight against global warming.

The growing number of such plans globally can serve as an inspiration for Hong Kong: in addition to balancing interests from existing industries and newcomers, we have to think and plan strategically with our city's long-term interest in mind.

If Hong Kong claims to be a truly world city, we should be ready to join forces with others to deal with problems on a global scale.

Are we ready to play our part to mitigate global warming and build a cleaner environment for all?

