



In Search of ‘Good’ Energy Policy: *The Social Limits to Technological Solutions to Energy and Climate Problems*

EPRG Working Paper 1520

Cambridge Working Paper in Economics 1537

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Energy policy is an area traditionally defined as being about three competing policy objectives. These are: security of energy supply; low and affordable energy prices; and minimising the environmental impact of energy production and use. Every country on the planet has some combination of these three policy objectives at the heart of its energy policy.

Energy policy is important, because of the economic significance of energy within individual economies. Expenditures on energy can be around 10% of GDP (for example the UK) and are subject to significant volatility due to changes in international commodity prices. For energy exporting countries, energy can be a significant share of GDP, tax revenue and exports, making these countries particularly vulnerable to the state of the global energy market. In line with this energy companies are significant entities within national economies, partly due to the capital-intensive nature of much of the energy sector and existence of significant economies of scale. In electricity and gas supply there is the scope for the exercise of significant market power, which is why electricity and gas networks have been long subjected to economic regulation and / or government ownership.

This paper seeks to explore the nature of ‘Good’ Energy Policy by offering a multi-disciplinary social science and humanities - anthropology, history, law, geography, philosophy, theology and the visual arts, inter alia - perspective on policy making. The objective in doing this is to understand how to get from where we are today to a ‘better’ energy policy. We do this in the context of recognising that energy is not the only policy and energy policy objectives may need to be traded off with the desire to promote other ‘good’ policies in health, education or welfare etc.

We begin by discussing what we mean by ‘policy’. We then go on to characterise and challenge the technologists’ approach to energy policy. Next we discuss some key intellectual starting points that explain why policy making in this area is so difficult, namely the meaning of ‘good’ and ‘just’, the role of vested interests (or legacy investments), the

failure of prediction, the persistence of ‘bad’ and difficulty of ‘good’ policies and the fact that democracy and public consultation are messy. We then turn to a set of multi-disciplinary social science and humanities perspectives on energy policy that together form promising areas for research. These are: perception; quantification; well-being; public trust; role of the state; competence and hubris in delivery; and parallels with healthcare. We close by discussing how these perspectives can illuminate whether a policy is ‘good’, ‘bad’ or something in between.

We argue that developing ‘good’ energy policy is not straightforward because policy implementation is rarely as simple as technologists would like to portray it. Policy implementation can be subjected to analysis; but comprehensive analysis of how to do ‘good’ policy is multi-disciplinary in scope. We have discuss common start points from a social science and humanities perspective and introduced a set of promising research themes that suggest how we might go about comprehensively analysing any actual or proposed policy can be subjected.

In closing we offer some encouragements from other areas of public policy *and* from energy. ‘Good’ policies would seem to exist. For the UK, some of the recent ones might include: the successive raising of pension age to 67 for both men and women, from 65 for men and 60 for women by 2028; mass media anti-drink driving campaigns; and a smoking ban in all public places. In energy, the UK Clean Air Act of 1956, the US EPA’s Acid Rain Programme’s sulphur trading scheme from 1995 and EU Emissions Trading Scheme (EU ETS) from 2005 are candidates for ‘good’ policy.

These policies seem to share common characteristics that explain their successful enactment. These include good use of quantitative evidence to show the benefits to society of each, which seems to have been in line with – or below - subsequent performance; extensive stakeholder engagement and positive public support; and due attention to the fairness and distributional issues involved. Given that some of these policies will take many years to be fully realised and involved controversial and economically significant issues, they offer some encouragement that progress with ‘good’ energy policy is possible.

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Publication November 2015
Financial Support HEIF, In Search of ‘Good’ Energy Policy