

Driving up demand for electric cars

It is not clear whether Europe's car industry will play a leading role in the move away from oil, writes Jennifer Rankin

When the Geneva motor show opens today (3 March), electric cars will have a starring role. Chevrolet, Citroën, Mercedes, Mitsubishi, Nissan, Peugeot, Renault and Toyota all plan to show off their electric models, as the race to market heats up.

The proliferation of models shows how, in just a few years, electric cars have gone from being an eccentric daydream to one of the biggest ideas for the future of transport.

The car industry accepts that transport must move away from oil. Industry executives now talk about "when", rather than "if", diesel and petrol will be replaced by electricity and hydrogen as the way to fuel a car. In a report released at the start of this year, an expert group, which included the car industry, concluded that transport needed to be oil-free and mostly emis-



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ing, more affordable car battery, as short-life, costly batteries are the main obstacle to acceptance by customers. The European Council for Automotive R&D wants to see European research funds directed at improving the durability and performance of batteries.

Westgeest says that 90% of car journeys would be possible using current battery technology, but he acknowledges that there is still "some anxiety about longer distances" that the industry needs to address.

However, the cost of batteries may remain an obstacle to wider take-up of electric cars. Although battery costs are likely to fall, electric cars may remain more expensive than conventional vehicles for the next two decades, according to a report by Transport and Environment, a green transport campaign group.

The report reaches what seems a counter-intuitive conclusion: it argues that policymakers should focus attention on the old-fashioned internal combustion engine if electric cars are to succeed. Only by increasing fuel-efficiency standards for petrol engines and raising taxes on polluting fuels will the industry be given the certainty to invest in expensive low-carbon technologies, it says.

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