

Meaningful public consent: the missing ingredient in UK energy policy governance

Simon Roberts, 2014



CSE's Chief Executive, Simon Roberts, was one of a panel of experts who presented their views on the future of the energy system at the 'Progressive Energy Governance' conference at the Royal Society, London on 13 June 2014.

Organised by the University of Exeter, the event was billed as an exploration of "The key governance challenges that the UK energy system is currently facing, along with potential solutions".

In all, over 20 experts shared their thoughts on the problems faced by the energy system as currently constituted, and how these might be overcome. These presentations were designed to stimulate wider discussion amongst the conference participants and beyond.

Simon was one of around 15 who were invited to take part in the 'Energy Den' where presentations were limited to just seven minutes, strictly enforced. He spoke on 'Meaningful public consent: the missing ingredient in UK energy policy governance',



arguing that ‘unless we take steps to secure a new level and quality of public consent we’ll fail spectacularly in our goal of a secure, affordable, low carbon energy future’.

We’ve had a great deal of positive feedback on the thoughts laid out in Simon’s presentation, which we’ve reproduced below.

My missing ingredient in the governance of UK energy policy is what I call “meaningful public consent”.

Or put a different way, unless we take steps to secure a new level and quality of public consent for the transition to a secure, affordable, low carbon energy system, we will spectacularly fail to achieve that goal.

This is because public involvement and consent is the bedrock upon which the success or failure of any policy or programme will be determined.

It is particularly true of energy policy. Why? Because:

1) People pay for it through their bills and taxes.

So they will increasingly resent and react against initiatives which ramp up costs without delivering benefits which they understand and value. The phrase ‘green crap’ comes to mind.

2) People host much of it in their communities and on their landscapes.

Wind farms, pylons, district heating, biomass conversion – it all has to happen somewhere. And people will resist having things ‘done to them’ on the basis of decisions taken without their involvement which demonstrate little by way of local benefit.

3) And they need to do it themselves.

The transition requires changed behaviours and investment decisions from everyone. Smart meters, demand response, housing refurbishment. People will need to accept being convinced, cajoled, or controlled into these changes.

I believe that we have collectively failed over the last two or three decades to sustain and nourish public understanding and consent for the energy system transition we need.

Indeed, in that time, whatever sense there was of collective responsibility for enabling our energy needs to be met has been eroded.

It has been eroded by developers and policy makers taking public consent largely for granted. They assumed it was the same as planning permission. And they took the view that they were ‘on the side of the angels’, and ‘doing the right, low carbon, thing’.



“Whatever sense there was of **collective responsibility for enabling our energy needs to be met has been eroded”**

And it has been eroded by the dominant, neo-liberal framing of the public’s role in our energy system simply as consumers with varying levels of buying power. Not active citizens connected with one another, with views and influence.

The old approach has failed

We currently have a technocratic approach to energy policy governance. Centralised and expert-led, it has established carbon budgets, renewable energy targets, energy efficiency programmes, energy market reform and smarter grid initiatives. All with barely a nod to public involvement.

This technocratic approach clearly works for a while, surviving off some general public sense that ‘something must be done’ and ‘it’s good for you/the planet’ arguments. But it ultimately loses traction, gets spat out. Fails.

The technocratic approach reached its apotheosis for me about six years ago. This was when I witnessed renewable energy developers on the then government’s Renewables Advisory Board arguing that all renewable energy projects larger than 1 MW should be determined by the Secretary of State for Energy. Why? Because local processes were getting in the way of progress.

That didn’t happen (two of us on the board suggested it might ultimately backfire). But that same developer arrogance probably helped to ensure that a whole edifice of pro-renewables regional targets and planning policy was subsequently largely swept aside with the change of government.

This technocratic approach is also built into the design of supposedly consumer-facing initiatives like the Green Deal. Launched and re-launched, only to find that the public is deeply unimpressed and unengaged by a programme which the technocrats insist has removed all the barriers to their participation. One can’t help feeling that smart meter roll-out is next in line.

Meaningful consent

So what does meaningful consent look like and what needs to happen to establish it?

The meaningful consent is much richer than the desiccated version emerging from the planning system. It embraces:



- **A sense of involvement in, and understanding of, decisions being taken locally.**
- **A feeling for the character and value of the local landscape and built heritage and what protecting it means in its broadest, long term sense.**
- **An appreciation of the way in which a locality can contribute to cutting carbon emissions, the options available and the trade-offs.**
- **An understanding of who pays for, and who gains from, projects being considered.**

Judging by the brilliant work done on public attitudes by Nick Pidgeon's team at Cardiff University, I believe this public understanding and consent exists. Their work reveals that the public shares a sense that the energy system needs to change. And that people can participate meaningfully in discussions about its implications and the policy choices involved. And they make good choices.

The consent we need exists. But it's latent. A potential. A seed in barren ground. It needs stimulus and nourishment to come to life.

What does that nourishment look like in practice? A project we have been running at the Centre for Sustainable Energy called PlanLoCaL* has been trying it out on a small scale. It starts with two fundamental premises:

First, that every locality has a duty to make an appropriate contribution to national targets and system changes – there is no 'somewhere else'

Second, that, given good technical information, people can be trusted to make sensible, decent choices

Through our framing of the central question, we quietly confront meetings of local people with the need to consider how what happens in their locality is addressing national and global challenges.

Putting it differently

The usual framing is "What are you going to do about cutting carbon emissions?" That often prompts a defensive response, bringing up the government's need to act, China's growing emissions and, often, Jeremy Clarkson. So we've been asking a different question.

"How can we best make our contribution to a low carbon future round here?" That embeds a sense of local agency and provokes a completely different response.

People start exploring options and understanding impacts, costs and benefits. They



discuss their own perspectives of local landscapes and built heritage. They talk about the trade-offs such as between, put very simply, exploiting a renewable energy resource and preserving a view. And they start talking about how they can make sure that more of the benefits of change accrue locally.

This is what we've been calling 'low carbon localism' and it could be triggered by a step as simple as putting low carbon issues on the 'must do' part of the Neighbourhood Planning agenda.

We think it's the stimulus and nourishment needed for public understanding and consent to flourish. It's not a nice-to-have extra but a necessary condition – the core ingredient – to underpin the change that's needed.

* The spirit of PlanLoCaL is alive and well in [Future Energy Landscapes](#).



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