Who’ll lead low-carbon transition?

NO CLEAR WINNER:

Both hybrid and electric vehicles will take to the road and there’ll be a variety in long run, says an expert from London

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WOULD hybrid or electric vehicles take the lead in the transition towards low-carbon vehicles on the road? There will not be a clear winner but there will be a variety of such vehicles on the road in the long-term, said Prof Ricardo F. Martinez-Botas from Imperial College of London.

Electric or hybrid vehicles can make it to the local road in a bigger and faster way if public vehicles adopt the technologies first.

To Martinez-Botas, an integrated approach, with the government taking the lead, is the way forward to bring about these important changes to road transport technology.

Hybrid cars can do well on roads in the cities as they are 20 per cent to 25 per cent better than the conventional vehicles, which run on fossil fuel.

But on highways, they are only as good as the latest diesel-technology run vehicles.

“Hybrids may rank among the best as the technology is almost there but improvements are necessary, especially with regards to the battery, which represents the cornerstone of electrification,” he said in a recent interview here last week.

Martinez-Botas, who has been deeply involved with the research on road transport emissions, said there must be “relentless” investment in battery technology so that the industry has a firm plan to reduce carbon intensity.

“Government fleets are an excellent idea as the first takers in low-emission vehicles and it can influence buses and taxis,” he said.

“Passenger car-centric Malaysia, with its stable energy supply and security, could be an example to the rest of the ASEAN region,” he said.

Martinez-Botas, however, warned that it could be a long wait as the process of electrification through public charging points could pose a problem.

Government intervention is necessary to lend support to infrastructure for the uptake of such technology so that customers do not get disillusioned as it would then affect the commercialisation.

The eco-car segment is still green and the opportunities are high for countries like Malaysia to be a leader than a follower of low-carbon transport system, he said.

He is not in favour of tax breaks to motivate public participation, saying there must be a more serious alternative, otherwise the bubble for low-carbon vehicles could burst.

The increasing number of electric vehicles on the road showed more are engaged with the technologies.

Renault has launched five electric vehicles, with positive projections. They are seeing some increases, while in the case of Asia, new technologies by Honda, Toyota and Nissan are focused on hybrid vehicles.

At the end of the day, it is the market that will dictate, said Martinez-Botas, who was in town to present a talk on low-carbon transport technology towards 2050.

Imperial College has a collaboration with Universiti Teknologi Malaysia on student exchange under the banner of sustainable energy, which includes transportation and low-carbon vehicles.

Martinez-Botas, who also sits on the Proton Technology Advisory Council, said the national car company wants to be in the green car space as was clearly seen during its participation in the Future Challenge in the UK last year.

The Proton Exora Range Extender Electric Vehicle (REEV) won the Best Overall Extender Range/Plug-in Hybrid Vehicle and the Most Energy-Efficient Multi-Purpose Car-Prototype awards, which was the largest live demonstration of electric, hybrid and low-emission internal combustion engine passenger cars. In 2010, the Exora REEV also won in the “Best E-REEV Vehicle” category.
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