

Disconnect in Globe's Reporting on Oil, Hybrids

Rob Abbott, CMC

Friday's edition of *Report on Business* in the *Globe and Mail* contained two articles that underscore how far we have yet to travel if we are to wean ourselves off oil – and in doing so, forge an exciting new future of cleaner air, healthier people, and new types of economic opportunity.

In “India tells West: Take our oil, please”, we were told that Indian Oil Minister, Mani Shankar Aiyar, is criss-crossing the globe (no doubt burning many barrels of oil) in an effort to encourage oil and gas investment in his country. Soaring economic growth in India is creating a huge appetite for energy. Nothing wrong with that, but why is the default position oil? Okay, I know that demand for energy in India far outstrips the supply of clean, green energy alternatives. And of course, with an estimated ¼ trillion barrels of oil and gas just offshore, India sees a comparatively easy solution. Economy growing like a rocket, and with it the need for energy? No problem, we've got boatloads of oil just offshore. The problem is that exploiting the oil and gas perpetuates a global malaise – reliance on an energy source that is shredding our planet's life support systems through climate change, and accelerating the deaths of thousands of people each year who choke on the emissions of cars and trucks, particularly in the world's cities. Why not position oil and gas as a transition fuel for India and earmark a portion of the profits from its use for investment in cleaner alternatives? I have nothing against Minister Aiyar stumping for investment, but I'd like to see him and his colleagues frame the energy problem more strategically.

In many respects, the same thinking that has spurred oil and gas investment at the expense of other energy options cropped up in the other ROB story, “Hybrids won't dominate market, study predicts”. Here, the good people at J.D. Power & Associates told us that despite increasing popularity, hybrid vehicles will peak at roughly 3% of the U.S. automobile market by 2010. Regrettably, the article didn't tell us anything about the method used to generate that estimate, but no matter, if it's even close to being accurate, we've got a problem, a big one. Why is it that lifestyle aspirations and choices in the U.S. (and I would argue Canada is similar) run against nature? The answer must be more than a failure to “get the price signals right”. On a global scale, we have failed as a society to make the connections between social and economic well-being and nature both obvious and important to more than a green constituency. And so it is that India is shopping around for partners to exploit oil and gas while hybrid vehicles that might help shift society onto a cleaner, healthier trajectory languish.

I would have hoped that by now it was obvious that the complex patterns of interaction that characterize biological and human systems cry out for new ideas. Evidently, there is still much to be done. Accordingly, as a country, and as a participant on the global stage, Canada must begin to dramatically increase the “nature literacy” of people here at home and around the world. To paraphrase our own Rick Mercer in his delightful series of commercials promoting Canada's 1-tonne challenge to reduce greenhouse gases, “if we could see greenhouse gases, we'd be screaming for change”. We need to make people aware of the true costs of energy and point out that non-carbon alternatives are available that won't cramp anyone's style. More to the point, we need to start thinking about hybrid and other technologies as something more than novelties or curiosities – they're going to fuel the future, but only if we start to think of them in that light.

Rob Abbott is a certified management consultant and the Founder of ABBOTT STRATEGIES, which consults on strategy and sustainability to a wide range of companies, governments and NGOs globally.