

Common Sense

Germans are harmony-driven people. They love consensus and they try to give everybody a voice before they come to a joint decision. The best example in the recent past is the so-called "Kohlekommission" coal commission, "Growth, structural change and employment". The 28-member committee representing business, unions, scientists and climate NGOs came up with a package to exit the burning of lignite coal latest by 2038. For that the German tax-payer will have to pay some 90 billion Euros just to make sure nobody will feel any pain. In the three affected regions in East and West Germany, 20,000 people are working in the industry and over the next 20 years, 2 billion Euros are allocated annually to ease their suffering. This is a nice Euro 200,000 per capita/year. With another 700 million Euros per year, the structural change in the regions shall be supported. Should the energy prices go up for a period of seven years, 2 billion Euros annually would be available to balance this as well. And whenever a coal-power plant is closed earlier, another hefty compensation is the sweetener.

Germany certainly is a rich country and since it will breach its own CO2 emission reduction targets set in Paris for 2022 and played a main role in the UN Climate change conference COP24 in Katowice, the pressure to do something fast was certainly immense. But different to the sudden and non-negotiated exit from nuclear power in 2011 after the Fukushima disaster that basically was paid by the share-holders and the staff of the German nuclear industry groups like RWE, EON, and ENBW or Swedish Vattenfall this time the disruption is supposed to be non-hurting. Strangely enough there would have been a best-practice, a blue-print available that could have been the guiding principle for a smooth, fast and much cheaper exit from the devastating burning of lignite and this is the British model of "Coal Exit". Now Brexit may have a lousy image in Germany but the coal-exit would have been a wise way to follow. Introduced on the 1st of April 2013 and not an April's fool day joke at all, it managed to reduce the share of coal from 40% of the electricity production to 7% in 2017 and a total exit by 2025. The coal price floor system CFS basically forced the CO2 emitters to pay Euros 20 per ton to the exchequer and thus compared to gas, coal became unattractive. As per a study of the RWTH Aachen, the German gas industry would be in a position to save 70 million tons of CO2 by 2020 and thus take care of 40% of the volume the German climate protection plan has targeted for the energy sector for 2030. One of the critical arguments of the government and the industry is that reliable and constant energy supply cannot be guaranteed by volatile renewable energy sources but only with the burning of coal. Gas as the other option supposedly is too expensive. Obviously the now agreed exit from coal does not come for free either and the immediate shift to the much cleaner gas worked well in the UK so why not in Germany? One of the partners in the coal commission, BDI the German Association of Industry bodies even came to the conclusion that a reduction of CO2 emissions to the tune of 80 – 95% by 2050 would not be a disaster but rather an opportunity and increase GDP by 0.4 to 0.9% annually. For the NGOs in the commission like BUND (Friends of the Earth Germany) or DNR (German Alliance for Nature Conservation) the results were not fully satisfying but at least a beginning to the end of burning lignite for energy production.

Another commission is the national platform "Future of Mobility". The EU Commission took Germany to the European Court of Justice for ignoring the NO2 emission norms. It is now high time to act and in December the EU went a step further and introduced new NO2 limits for new passenger cars. By 2030 the emissions have to be 37.5% lower than 2021 and for light commercial vehicles by 31%. When in one of the working groups of the mobility commission recommendations were made to increase taxes and introduce a speed-limit, the Federal Minister for Transport rejected that as being against common-sense. Considering that Germany is the only developed country that does not have a speed-limit and only in countries like North Korea, Somalia and Afghanistan one is still also allowed to drive as fast as one wants, one wonders whose common-sense is the Minister talking about. With the introduction of the WLTP the Worldwide harmonized Light vehicles Test Procedure all new cars need a new certification and many of the OEMs are struggling to get the testing done in time

and cannot deliver brand new models. The lab-based WLTP is complimented by a Real Drive Emissions test system on the road (RDE). Even the latest Euro 6 cars are permitted to breach the NOX limit of 80 mg. that has to be reached in the lab by more than 100% until beginning of 2020.

So how, if not with the price or a speed-limit, should the limits be adhered to? The problem is that neither the politicians nor the industry seem prepared to listen to the people properly and use common-sense. A vast majority of the Germans support the "Energiewende" and the protection of the environment from climate change. The unusual dry summer has made it more than obvious that something is going wrong. The dramatic decline of insects, the missing of birds, the melting of the glaciers in the Alps and the Himalayas with an unprecedented speed and the rise in numbers and force of thunderstorms unfortunately are no fake news but reality. People know that and are prepared for a change. They just need guidance. In all the discussions about the exit from coal and how long the old polluting power plants would still be needed to supply the energy demand a serious saving discussion seems to have missed.

While in the industry energy efficiency maybe high on the agenda and companies like BASF or DHL plan to be carbon-neutral by 2030 and 2050 respectively, in the private households there is still a long way to go. And it could be so easy. Most of the deep-freezers are still virtual electricity guzzlers. With modern exchange pumps for the heating system most households can not only save thousands of Euros but one could also spare a few power plants. A no-brainer one should think. Here are only indeed two options to convince the common man or woman, price or force if common-sense does not prevail. Unfortunately the seriousness of the situation has not yet been realized. Everybody is still happy in their comfort zone and those who should know that a real Energiewende is required to avoid a climate disaster do not dare to speak the truth. Do they all wait for disaster to happen? Do they think it is easier to get the change going then?

Disruptions like the reunification of Germany, the democratization of Eastern Europe, the two Gulf wars, the Euro, the financial or the refugee crises were managed and life went on for most of the people. So why not take some drastic and appropriate steps before it is too late? Cities like Paris, Madrid, Rome, Brussels and Copenhagen restrict individual passenger cars and improve public transport and cycling. Why not the German capital Berlin, where people are suffering under the worst of traffic jams in all of Germany? When discussing a speed-limit in Germany it is like talking about the gun law in America, German politician Cem Özdemir was saying. The Germans should basically relax or "entschleunigen". Cruising in Switzerland or France or Denmark with the speedometer is so relaxing. Saving energy, protecting the environment, not over-spending can actually be quite satisfying. In Germany we are luckily far away from having to fight for survival. We do not need to get our satisfaction from consuming, wasting and spoiling. We have the privilege to consume only what we really need, waste nothing and preserve the environment. Like Kindergarten, Autobahn and Lederhosen, Energiewende has become an English word. Now the exit from coal could be a real Energiewende into renewables, efficiency and less is more.

It was big news that last year the electricity production in Germany was covered by 40% from renewables. This is certainly an achievement. Unfortunately electricity is only one part of our system to supply the energy required in total. Only 20% come via electricity where as 37% come from burning oil mainly for transport and households and 25% from Gas. Therefore only about 14% of our total energy consumption is covered by renewable energy. And this is why urgency is the need of the hour.

"The house is on fire and you are wasting our future", said Greta Thunberg to a confused and irritated assembly of the world's business leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos where she went all the way by train from Sweden. Growth, structural change and employment were the parameters for the coal commission. Growth as such is not a value anymore. If at all it is sustainable growth, growth in air and water quality, growth in quality of life. Maybe happiness should be our guideline like in the hill state of Bhutan, the northern neighbour of India or in Denmark, the northern neighbour of Germany.