SOLAR IMPULSE PILOT DEFENDS UK SUBSIDY CUTS

News / Personalities

Bertrand Piccard, the mastermind of a solar-powered attempt to circumnavigate the globe, draws fire after backing government decision to cut solar panel subsidies by 65%

Bertrand Piccard , the pioneer of a solar-powered attempt to fly around the Earth, has defended a decision by David Cameron's government to cut subsidies for householders installing solar panels by 65%.

A cap on subsidies has fanned industry fears that the rate of domestic solar panel installations is set to halve, and the government admits that more than half the UK solar industry's 32,000 jobs could be lost.

But Piccard, a high-profile entrepreneur, pilot and chairman of the Solar Impulse project, said that cutting solar subsidies could be a clever way of directing money to more profitable means of cutting emissions.

"Subsidies have always been a problem," he told journalists at the launch of a new clean public transport campaign in Brussels. "Sometimes a clear legal framework obliging the transformation to new technologies is more profitable than subsidies because it obliges everyone to do it."

"From what I have heard, David Cameron is very committed to reduce his country's CO2 emissions," he added, "and that public commitment is going in the right direction."

Piccard has achieved celebrity status among European clean energy enthusiasts for his privately

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financed solar flights which have criss-crossed Europe, the US and Asia.

His Solar Impulse 1 plane completed the world's first 26-hour diurnal solar journey in July 2010 and a Solar Impulse 2 aircraft aims to finally circumnavigate the globe in July, when it flies from Hawaii to Abu Dhabi via Europe.

However, some in the solar industry questioned Piccard's competence to comment on policy issues as vexed as public support for renewable energy.

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"Bertrand is a heroic figure who is doing an amazing service to the solar industry but on this occasion he clearly doesn't know what he's talking about," said Jeremy leggett, founding director of Solar Century, a a major UK solar power company.

"He is favouring an ambush feed-in-tariff cut that has undermined the confidence of an entire solar investor base – not just in the UK but more widely – and caused carnage to the industry."

Piccard's view that solar support should be transitional is not controversial, despite the far higher subsidies that fossil fuels continue to receive. But with solar unlikely to fall below the cost of gas before the decade's end, timing is crucial in such decisions, Leggett said.

"As a pilot, Bertrand should know that if you want a steady descent and good landing, you don't cut your engines when conditions are not predictable," he told the Guardian.

The UK government though welcomed the high profile endorsement. "We continue to support the low-carbon sector but this needs to be driven by competition and innovation, not subsidies," said a spokesman for the Department of Energy and Climate Change. "As the cost of technologies comes down so should the consumer-funded support."

The Solar Impulse project works with several private companies including ABB, Google and Solvay to raise funds for its mission. The aircraft's experimental flying lab has helped develop new polymers, solar cell films and insulation materials.

Its next challenge will be the delivery of a solar-powered high altitude telecommunications platform that functions as a "pseudo-satellite". Negotiations with countries and investors to spark the project to life are ongoing, Piccard said.

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