Hybrid cars: profitable for carmakers but not very green

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Fast-forward 20 years and battery technology has improved dramatically; EVs are affordable. Last week it emerged that plug-in hybrid electric vehicles (PHEVs) aren't very green. The sales pitch had been that motorists could use "clean" battery power for city trips and dirty petrol for longer trips. This promised sustainable travel without the anxiety of a limited range. But real-world tests, by the European non-profit Transport and Environment, show that PHEVs emit just 19% less carbon dioxide than petrol and diesel cars – far short of the 75% claimed in the lab.

Hybrid vehicles are, however, very profitable. Carmakers can charge top dollar for what are essentially re-engineered petrol cars with a battery locked on. They also remain attractive to policymakers. By weakening electric vehicle targets, the UK government risks a scandal in pushing hybrids that emit five times more CO_2 than claimed.

Europe is a battleground between climate necessity, commercial reality and political influence. Four big European automotive companies avoided more than €5bn in fines because emissions compliance was not judged on real-world data. Switching to electric cars seems an obvious step. Yet former Renault boss Luca de Meo said earlier this year that EVs won't be the dominant technology in Europe for two decades. It's that Europe's carmakers are keeping profits rolling in by squeezing cash from hybrids and petrol cars.

The UK has just become the largest international market for China's BYD, the world's bestselling electric carmaker. And that's without benefiting from the government's new EV subsidy scheme, which excludes Chinese-made vehicles for environmental reasons. In Europe, where Elon Musk's far-right political views have undermined Tesla brand loyalty, its new cheaper model will have to compete with Chinese EVs that sell for less than £20,000.

Yet even BYD may face its own estimation. Its competitive edge rests on low-cost lithium iron phosphate batteries. If Toyota delivers on its promise to manufacture solid-state batteries for commercial use by 2027, it could leave rivals behind by delivering safer power packs, faster charging and longer range. Whether it serves society depends on the wiring of the system. Markets reward what's profitable, not what's sustainable or equitable.

Which brings us to the real question: should cars, however low their emissions, remain the dominant form of transport? Relying solely on EVs risks a future of congestion and road fatalities – about 30 lives are lost every week in Britain. It also overlooks planetary limits. The global north cannot monopolise critical minerals to electrify car fleets while producing nations are left behind. A just transition means not only cleaner cars but fewer of them, as well as real benefits for resource-rich countries. Ultimately, we must shift away from a carbon-intensive economy. Key to that will be reshaping urban life around mass transit, not pretending that the current model can persist, albeit with different engines. (468 words)