Light Bulbs and the Madness of Energy Efficiency Regulations

A European criticism of the recent light bulb ban put in place in the European Union.

Europeans (like Americans) choose to buy ordinary light bulbs around 9 times out of 10 (European Commission and light industry data 2007-8). Banning what people want gives the supposed savings that are "good for them"—no point in banning what people don’t want!

If new LED lights—or improved CFLs etc—are good, people will buy them—no need to ban ordinary light bulbs (little point). If they are not good, people will not buy them—no need to ban ordinary light bulbs (no point). The similar case of the arrival of the transistor didn’t mean that more energy using radio tubes were banned…they were bought less, anyway.

"Market failures" keep being cited as a reason for efficiency regulations. In other words, consumers don't act as they are "supposed to", in preferring cheap but inefficient products.

Certainly, ordinary light bulbs are cheap—no crime—but you don’t keep buying cheap products that do not meet your expectation. Ordinary light bulbs, for example, have many advantages including broad spectrum light quality, appearance, versatility with dimmers and sensors, quickness to come on in the cold, and are easy to make bright, including in small sizes.

Conversely:
People don’t avoid "energy saving" lights (CFLs, LEDs) just because they are expensive. If that were true, no other expensive alternative products would be bought either. Think of imaginative advertising that sells long lasting batteries (Duracell/Energizer bunnies) or washing up liquids
"expensive to buy but cheap in the long run!" As it is now, certainly in Europe, CFL and LED manufacturers rely on boring public campaigns - and the ban - to shift their product.

Yet, from various research it can be seen that most households have indeed tried CFLs—maybe they don’t want a house full of CFLs or LEDs, maybe they like a bit of variation (different light suit different locations, see http://ceolas.net/#li9x)—maybe, shock horror, they just don’t like CFLs!

Consider more closely this notion among politicians that "everyone should buy

something just because it is efficient". Certainly, they might improve, as promised, but CFL manufacturers themselves can inform on and promote that—just like any other business does.

Efficiency is one advantage a product can have. Not only can inefficient products have other advantages, they have to have them,
or they would not survive on the market. Our inspired politicians are banning everything from types of building to washing machines to computers, TV sets, plasma screens etc based on efficiency criteria. Unfortunately, appearance, construction, performance as well as price—and indeed savings—can be tied in with advantages of inefficient products. See: http://www.ceolas.net/#cc2x

There is another question that should be asked: What is the actual need to save energy? Advice is good and welcome, but bans are another matter…Consumers—not politicians—pay for energy, its production, and how they wish to use it. There is no energy shortage—on the contrary, more and more renewable sources are being developed—and if there was an energy shortage, the price rise would lead to more demand for efficient products anyway—no need to legislate for it.

As for light bulbs, the supposed savings of a ban don’t hold up, for many reasons, as anyone interested can see from http://www.ceolas.net/#li13x onwards.

Brief examples:

Effect on Electricity Bills
If energy use does indeed fall with light bulb and other proposed efficiency bans, electricity companies make less money, and they’ll simply push up the electricity bills to compensate, in covering their fixed overheads. They can't just (like politicians seem to think) "save a power station". Now, marketplace competition might have prevented such price rises—but power companies often have their own grids with little supply competition, grids that moreover have to be maintained at fixed costs. Energy regulators can hardly deny any such cost covering exercise—supposed money savings then affected.

Conversely:
Since energy efficiency in effect means cheaper energy, people simply leave appliances on more than before, crank up the heat of boilers etc., as shown by recent Scottish and Cambridge research (in the case of CFLs they’re supposed to be left on more anyway, to avoid cutting down on their lifespan)—supposed energy savings then affected.

The fact that CFLs are not as bright as stated is another reason against supposed savings. A simple comparison test was recently described by a British newspaper: ht tp://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/eu/6110547/Energy-saving-light-bulbs-offer-dim-future.html. Also, since lifespan is lab tested in 3 hour cycles, any increased on-off switching reduces it, as does (as said) leaving the lights on to combat it.

More: CFLs typically have a "power factor" of 0.5
Power companies therefore typically need to generate more than twice as as much power than what your electricity meter - or CFL rating - shows, taking everything into consideration. Of course you end up having to pay for this anyway, in electricity charges being higher than they otherwise would have been. Without going into technicalities, this has to do with current and voltage phase differences set up when CFLs are used. There is nothing new or strange about this. Industries are today penalized if they present such a work load to the power station.

The only significant "energy saving" going on here is in the mental activity of politicians in Brussels...London...Dublin...Washington...and the journalists uncritically regurgitating everything thrown at them aren't much better, either.

Emissions?
Does your light bulb actually give out any gases? That's right: It's not like a car is it? Yet, cars that release large amounts of CO2 aren't banned (in fact in Europe they are often taxed for emissions - hang on to that thought). Power stations might not give out any CO2 gas either: Why should emission-free households - like in Sweden and France (or much of Washington state, as hydropower, and nuclear powered US regions) be denied the use of lighting they obviously want to use? Low emission households already dominate some other regions, and will increase everywhere, since emissions will be reduced anyway through the planned use of coal/gas processing technology and/or energy substitution.

The Taxation alternative
A ban on light bulbs is extraordinary, in being on a product safe to use. We are not talking about banning lead paint here. This is simply a ban to reduce electricity consumption (whether viable or not).

Even for those who remain pro-ban, taxation to reduce the consumption would be fairer and make more sense, also since governments can use the income to reduce emissions (home insulation schemes, renewable projects etc) more than any remaining product use causes such problems. A few euros/dollars tax that reduces the current sales (EU like the USA 2 billion sales per annum, UK 250-300 million pa) raises future billions, and would retain consumer choice. It could also be revenue neutral, lowering any sales tax on efficient products. When sufficent low emission electricity delivery is in place, the ban can be lifted
www.ceolas.net/LightBulbTax.html [1]

Taxation, it should be said, is itself unjustified for similar reasons to bans. It just has, in comparison, advantages for all concerned. Of course, an EU ban is underway, but in phases, supposedly with reviews in a couple of years time. Maybe as the ban draws nearer in the USA and Canada, lessons can be learned from what is happening over here?

For further information see www.ceolas.net [2], some sections of which are linked in the text.

Links:
[1] http://www.ceolas.net/LightBulbTax.html
[2] http://www.ceolas.net