**Lancaster with and without electricity: reflections on the Dynamics of Energy, Mobility and Demand**

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Here are some reflections on my experiences and conversations with people about the past few days when the Lancaster electricity grid as a whole and in parts failed and electricity flows then rematerialized.

The Dynamics of Energy have been not in their usual pattern – whilst gas flowed through pipes, and piles of wood continued to find their way into wood burners, electricity in mains supply wires disappeared, reappeared, came and went in some places and not others. This chaotic absence and presence of mains electricity had implications for other energy flows - petrol stations shut down then reopened, then kept running on generators; natural gas flowed as far as central heating boilers but not into them as electric controls went still; propane in gas canisters emerged from cellars and sheds and off the shelves of camping stores to become useful in unexpected times and places. The electricity stored in many thousands of batteries (torches, bike lights, radios, computers, cars) across the City similarly became unexpectedly important, often depleted, recharged, depleted, every mini and mobile electricity flow proving significant in the absence of its grid-bound version.

The Dynamics of Mobility shifted too. Trains to Lancaster stopped running, then restarted, then stopped again as trains ran through the station on powered overhead cables, but didn’t stop because the station buildings were electrically dis-functional. Passenger safety trumping their mobility. On the city streets petrol and diesel powered traffic flowed if anything more vigorously (at least after the initial flood induced chaos) despite the absence of working traffic lights, street lights, illuminated signs or similarly electrified parts of the road infrastructure. Mobility trumping safety. Cars and coaches replaced trains and unexpected mobility pathways were set in pursuit of food, matches, a warm pub, a mobile phone charging opportunity, the refuge offered by homes of relatives or friends in still electrified locations (or to check up on those who weren’t). Other planned pathways were disrupted, normally shared spaces outside of the home closed in the absence of light, warmth, security, safety, the means of providing entertainment or for paying for it. Walking at night became a torch lit parade of sometimes uncertainly available destinations.

The Dynamics of Demand could but only be re-patterned as well. If supply makes demand its absence can also temporarily frustrate its realisation, or shift it in time and space. The demand for light was still present, but expectations of its normal means of provision were immediately confounded. That light demand generally found some other means of supply, but only partially, unevenly, marginally, and expectations were consequently reworked. Light becoming localised, pragmatically functional, immediate. The demand for hot water was still present and could find its realisation in some gas-fired places, not in others, some uses replaced (cold for hot) others deferred (a shower tomorrow rather than today). Demand response of a radical kind was evidently being practised and patterns of time-use rejigged – longer sleeping? more reading? less TV watching? more praying?

Then as mains electricity returned, in an unstable way, normal patterns and rhythms returned, in an initially unstable way. Demand was evidently still there, embedded in practices as entities that could now be performed again as normal. But entirely ‘as normal’? According to the paper ‘*on Wednesday Electricity North West confirmed that planned power cuts were not needed in Lancaster and the surrounding area, after customers saved enough energy to secure supplies*’ (Lancaster Guardian 10/12/15; 6). Did they? Supply is based on expectations of demand, just as demand is based on expectations of supply. In what terms was expected demand less than usual? And why is ‘saving’ the language that is used to understand this? We can’t now know what exactly went on, but aggregate consumption was surely diminished by the forced ‘closure’ of flooded offices and businesses, blocks of flats by the river that couldn’t be occupied and other temporary re-patternings of demand, maybe as much as by any active sense of ‘saving’ by responsible customers.

*Lancaster looking towards Morecambe from top of Moorgate – with and without grid electricity (note the small patches of generator powered light)*

