



Beware of binary thinking – a single alternative fuel may not be the panacea some seek

In the critical quest for decarbonisation of shipping, our guest author, Martin Crawford-Brunt, advocates for broader thinking in how to reach the goal. He cautions – Don't let the great get in the way of the good as we transition to a zero-carbon emission future.

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We find ourselves in an era of unprecedented change and transformation. Rather than change being constant, as some would suggest, it may be accelerating for many of us instead.

Collectively we face a growing obligation to make a bigger contribution towards emission reduction and ultimately the decarbonising of shipping and global supply chains.

Following COP26 both government and big business have become increasingly clear and aligned on the imperative to reduce emissions in supply chains and the opportunity this represents to meet their net zero pledges and societal expectations.

While we are becoming increasingly clear on why emission reduction is essential and what needs to be done to tackle climate change, we are still very far from understanding or agreeing how this will be done in practical terms quickly and who should pay.

This tension between profit, people and planet builds daily and this has become evident in the growing disconnect between the communicated ambition on emission reduction and the day-to-day reality of delivering this in companies at the operating level. There are however many examples of departments and employees who are still actively incentivised through their bonuses to act counter to the publicly stated emission reduction goals.

It is all too human to revert to our natural inclination when we are stressed to selectively filter the options or short cut the answer. This ultimately leads to distilling our options into a binary choice, “this or that” and if it’s one of them then it can’t also be the other at the same time. For example, some consider any near-term optimisation of the existing fleet to reduce emissions now, to be in conflict somehow with finding the perfect solution for decarbonisation through cross sector collaboration, innovation, and alternative fuels.

How can this make sense when every ton of fuel saved today reduces absolute emissions immediately and reduces the need for expensive removals or other carbon risk reduction measures?

The truth however may simply be that these alternatives don’t reside on the same timescale and that reducing emissions in the near term is actually far more challenging than talking about the future. This requires uncomfortable and pointed conversations to commence internally and honestly within companies, then expanded meaningfully across key stakeholders including many who are presently outside our industry.

To find practical solutions to these challenges and opportunities requires brave and open leadership. We need to realise that pushing the risk and cost onto the next guy in the chain solves nothing. In fact, this sort of “CYA” as this is sometimes abbreviated, often based on “leverage” or “scale”, undermines trust and destroys the opportunity for a win/win outcome.

This requires a wider perspective and an open mind to be more accepting of novel solutions. These might at first, not pass the “purity test” or alternatively may appear to be in competition with other ideas through the trap of binary thinking. However, by consciously building a more collaborative culture in order to uncover the “art of what is possible to execute now” for that particular business all parties are more able to identify ways to reduce risk while testing and refining alternatives.

We should therefore not let great get in the way of good on our journey. Small but incremental advances in optimisation should not be discarded just because they don’t solve the whole problem in one step.

To fully decarbonise sea transportation will of course require the introduction of truly green fuels. The fuel used must also be available, competitive, safe, and accepted by local authorities. While the last point is often overlooked or underestimated the first two are market factors which are largely out of our direct control.

Given the present limited supply of truly green fuel, on a well to wake basis, these molecules will go to the market most willing to pay or the one least able to substitute its fuel. This is frankly unlikely to be the shipping industry and these green fuels won’t remain affordable if the demand, from other industries outside shipping, like aviation, public transport, and trucking, outstrips supply.

What is not immediately obvious, particularly to those new to our industry, is that the only truly common denominator is that the assets all float and are moveable. The longer you work in this industry the better you begin to understand the many exceptions. Think about the great diversity of end customers served by sea transportation or other aspects of the marine industry across the many different trades, routes, ship sizes and segments.

It is likely that we will see new fuels introduced within specific markets and trade lanes, as for example proposed during COP26 through the Clydebank Declaration. Necessary scaling may be further supported by alignment between groups of producers and offtake customers as we saw in the early days of implementing LNG as fuel for shipping.

We should avoid our natural inclination to drop into binary thinking or to short cut the answer without taking a wider and informed scientific perspective. For all the reasons above, a single fuel for the maritime industry may end up representing a danger to decarbonisation and is not the panacea some seek.

For more information about the Clydebank Declaration, see Gard's Insight article – “[After COP26 - where are we with decarbonisation of shipping](#)”

About the author: Martin Crawford-Brunt was CEO of RightShip before founding [Lookout Maritime](#) in April 2021. He currently serves as the strategic lead for carbon at the Baltic Exchange and is a member of the Baltic Exchange Council focused on emissions. The views expressed are those of the author.

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