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Shocking delays on electric car

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"Who killed the electric car?" many people wonder. A decade ago or so, GM and Ford were trumpeting their electric models, including in partnership here with Hydro-Québec, only to ditch their limited production with little, or confused, explanation.

One common answer blames "the oil lobby," but no such conspiracy theories are needed to understand the myriad roadblocks faced by Canada's own ZENN ("zero emission, no noise") car. An all-too-familiar tangle of federal and provincial red tape is what's keeping it off the roads in this country. And yet several thousand ZENN vehicles have been sold around the world. It's time for Canada to authorize electric vehicles, with certain safeguards.

ZENN Motor Co.'s cars are electric, silent and made in St. Jérôme. With that kind of pedigree, why is the ZENN barred from Canada? Its low speed, says Ottawa.

But that bureaucratic claim is, we think, what lawyers call capricious and arbitrary. If safety issues arising from its 40-km/h maximum speed are really the criterion, Ottawa and provinces should also ban bicycles, tractors, scooters and other fragile light slow vehicles.

Last November Transport Canada issued the Zenn the required National Safety Mark, approving the vehicle for use across Canada. But things are never simple in our federation. The final say on which vehicles can ride on which roads rests with the provinces. Quebec, British Columbia and Ontario have all voiced their support - but have done nothing concrete yet, unlike, say, California or dozens of countries where the car is sold.

Second, the apparent seal of approval from Transport Canada turned out to have been much less than that. After the safety mark was issued, the department bizarrely changed longstanding norms, rendering its earlier approval worthless.

Why is this so difficult and taking so long? ZENN is not the answer to all the world's car-pollution problems, and makes no claim to be. It looks like a Smart car with a slightly longer tail-end, but its battery plugs into a regular electric socket and can be fully charged in four hours.

Its stated objective is very Canadian: Its limited range and power make it the ideal vehicle to go to the corner store and get a case of beer, says Zenn founder Ian Clifford. He means by that that it's ideal for short trips. And given that much, if not most, driving that we do consists of short hops of a few minutes, ZENN and many others like it could find a firm place in the market, and contribute to the fight against greenhouse gases.

Ottawa and the provinces should either explain exactly why they are keeping such vehicles off the roads, or else get out of the way and let them be sold.

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