

# Progress and new products



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For most of my life so far I have been used to the great advances that have come from better technology and from the competitive choices free enterprise has offered us. I was an early adopter of an office computer, the mobile phone, home computer, better cars and a range of new home products to make the chores easier and to improve the look and efficiency of the household.

Today we are witnessing a number of new products pushed upon us by government. Some of these top down products do not offer the same improved performance that we are used to in each new generation of device. I have recently looked at the way the electric car does not offer anything like the same flexibility and performance as a modern diesel or petrol car when it comes to range and to refuelling. As a result manufacturers are finding it difficult to sell large numbers.

There is then the curious case of the digital radio. My FM radios were good. They gave good reception. They were easy to operate, with an on off switch and a tuning knob with display that meant you could get quickly and easily to your chosen station. The BBC and the government then told us we had to move over to digital radio. To make us do so the quality of the FM gradually deteriorated, forcing us to buy a product we otherwise did not want. I have two digital radios, I dislike them both. Their reception quality is not as good as my FM used to be before they started the changes. I frequently have to redirect the wire aerial to try to get a better signal. When a plane goes over there is interference. It does not work in my study at all. When I unplug the radio it loses all its tuning. It takes for ever to re set the tuning which has to be done digitally by constant pressing down on a button whilst it moves slowly through the ranges.

I am the constant recipient of calls telling me I need to have a smart meter fitted. No-one ever tells me why this is a good thing for me. I am well aware of my electric bills, and have a way of managing my use of power. If I want to see how much I am using I can see that from the current meter, but it is commonsense based on knowing how many appliances you are running at any given time. The best way to persuade people to take on something new is to explain why it will improve their lives, not by badgering them.

Some of the freely chosen new private sector products also fail to impress. At home I have a conventional electric cooker. I switch it on and turn a knob

to the desired heat level, and get instant results. The oven has a temperature control and a knob to choose how hot you want it to be. It is easy and clear. In my flat someone before I bought it had fitted a glass hob with digital control. When you switch on the power you get a flashing set of displays. You then have to hold your thumb on the right part of the hob and hope it will then switch itself on. Often it does not want to and it can take time to catch it in the right way before it bothers to switch on. Then you have to grapple with the same defective system to try to get the individual hot plate to go on, with frequent attention to the right spot on the hob to try to get the plate up to a hot enough setting. If you are tired and hungry and want to heat something up it is frustrating and often fails to work promptly.

I was recently told I had to accept a new phone in my Parliamentary office. I said I did not want one and thought it a waste of money, but they switched phones when I was out of the office anyway. The new one blots out part of my computer screen when I am working if the phone rings which is annoying. It requires pressing buttons to hear a call as well as picking the hand set up. Why?

Those who innovate need to test out how people will use their products, and ask if their innovation does really make something better. To sell us electric cars governments and manufacturers need to get them closer to the specifications we enjoy in our current vehicles. To make us happy with many ordinary domestic products rediscovering the simplicity of the physical switch and knob would make life better. Digital is great for word processing, communications and electronic transactions, but that does not mean everything has to be done by touch screen and digi numbers.