



The Centre For Business Relationships,  
Accountability, Sustainability and Society

## Comment and Analysis

Conspicuous minimalism: The curse of our  
times?



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Conspicuous minimalism: the curse of our times?  
Dr Peter Wells

In an era of eco-austerity there can be little doubt that outward and flagrant manifestations of wealth, status and power are at best tasteless and at worse highly divisive and provocative. Not only is there widespread public concern over apparently inexplicably high rewards and bonuses for certain classes and professions in society, be they footballers or bankers, there is also a detectable undercurrent that the worst excesses of consumption are no longer to be admired but are in fact repugnant.

But as a society we remain relentlessly materialist, and the enduring nature of that materialism is evident in the ways in which it has metamorphosed into something in touch with the Zeitgeist but irredeemably reactionary. That new 'something' is conspicuous minimalism, which arises out of the basic observation that in a materialist society it is the relatively wealthy who can afford the latest piece of eco-gadgetry; a manifestation of the more pervasive concept of the 'green premium' whereby products and services with environmental credentials are typically seen as more expensive than those equivalent products and services that lack such credentials. While there may be some dispute with this idea of a green premium, there seems to be strong sense in which the 'have your cake and eat it' school of thought will allow materialism to continue, albeit somewhat ameliorated by the constraints of environmental performance, and that the green premium is a necessary consequence of the unequal distribution of wealth in society.

Two recent examples are perhaps pertinent as illustrations of this theme: solar panels and electric vehicles. In the case of solar panels, which in deepest Wales (with possibly one of the greyest skies in the world where drizzle is not so much a description of the weather as a pervasive condition of life) is marginal at a technical and economic level for households, the provision of government incentives means that those people with a) their own house and b) a spare £12,000 or so, can benefit from a very generous and long-term government subsidy to install such panels. The funding for this scheme is coming from increases in the electricity tariffs for the population at large. In other words, it is a classic regressive measure that potentially extracts money from the poorer sections of society (non-house owners, or house owners without capital resources) and transfers it to those with a house and sufficient liquidity to invest a large sum of money. These panels are of course gleaming, bright and most importantly highly visible statements of environmental intent that makes a statement to the wider world about the (superior) worthiness of the inhabitants. At a time when the interest on savings is in any case a mute testimony to the failure of monetarism, the worthy wealthy are hardly going to need convincing.

With respect to electric vehicles it is likely that they will, at least at first, be considerably more expensive than 'traditional' cars. Perhaps they will be £10,000 more expensive than the average £12,000 car. The government in the UK has already promised initial subsidies of £5,000 per car with some major vehicle manufacturers offering models from around 2012 onwards. Meanwhile, local authorities, retail outlets, employers and others are falling over themselves to offer preferential and privileged parking spaces reserved for electric cars and their recharging needs – often

at zero cost and vying with disabled person parking spaces for proximity to the destination. Most households have a used car, bought three or more years after the first user bought it new because by then the worst pain of depreciation is over. This silent majority has no chance to step into an electric vehicle, but must stand idly by as those wealthy enough to do so are simultaneously offered free parking and premium access.

In both cases the happy and wealthy conspicuous minimalist can bask in the warm glow of an easy conscience while others around them continue to do the 'dirty' thing and emit greenhouse gases while simultaneously subsidising the tiny elite of conspicuous minimalists. It is a remarkable testimony to the enduring and adaptable character of our materialist culture, and also perhaps a warning to those who thought that green consumerism could form the vanguard of comprehensive social change under the banner of sustainability. Conspicuous minimalism may be a transient phase, a brief sidetrack from the mainstream business of buying our way into economic growth and the flagrant flaunting of our success while we temporarily adopt the sackcloth and ashes appropriate to privation and austerity. It may be the zenith of hobo chic epitomised by distressed jeans, distressed furniture and even more distressed credit card accounts. On the other hand, it could become entrenched as more vulgar displays of wealth, power and privilege find new expression.

Once one starts looking for conspicuous minimalism, it is evident everywhere, from the smug cyclones of a Dyson vacuum cleaner to the sleek 'worthier than thou' functionality of the latest Amazon Kindle™ conspicuous minimalism combines superiority of riches with a satisfied righteousness that successfully banishes any residual guilt the happy minimalism may have accrued. In reality, we have yet to escape the endless search for social positioning that epitomised the Victorian era – we have simply developed it into a much more sophisticated art form. The underlying story is one that many environmentalists tend to forget: eco-efficiency without social justice cannot deliver a sustainable society.