

SAMPLE CHAPTER

The Energy Trap

*Why the renewable energy transition
can't work – and what can*

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Prologue

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Prologue

Fortunately, there aren't many threats in our lives that can kill large numbers of people, and most of them sound like Hollywood disaster movies: tsunamis, escaped viruses, asteroids, volcanoes.

So it's surprising that one of the biggest threats we now face comes from an area of life we thought we'd thoroughly mastered – one that, for over a hundred years, has delivered rising prosperity, increasing lifespans and the elimination of famine from the developed world: our energy system. That energy system, on which billions of lives literally depend, is now being dismantled – with confidence, with public money and with almost no scrutiny.

Think that's an exaggeration? Here's an example. Roughly half the world's population – four billion people – depend for life on food grown with fossil fuel-based fertilisers. There aren't any significant stockpiles of either food or fertiliser. So if we were to stop oil and gas production today, as some climate activists demand, then within a decade, hundreds of millions of people would starve to death. Yet that is precisely the direction in which the

energy policies of advanced industrial countries like the United Kingdom now point.

The effect, for those with eyes to see, is rather like looking out of the window of your aircraft and noticing someone methodically sawing through the wing. You want to turn to the people around you and say: ‘Can you see what’s happening? We have to stop this.’

And that is why I wrote this book.

I wrote it because too many people can’t yet see the saw. Worse, quite a few have been persuaded that sawing through the wing is a good idea – that the energy system must be sacrificed to save the climate.

There are many excellent books about energy systems. I’ve noted a few in the ‘Further Reading’ section. They run to hundreds of pages, they’re written for specialists and they sit unread on shelves while the policy rolls on. What’s missing is something shorter and sharper – a friendly guide that gives you the minimum set of facts you need, with references so you can check the claims yourself, written by someone who understands the subject and wants to explain it clearly. That’s what this book tries to be.

And why am I the person to write it? Let me tell you a little about my journey. My father never quite understood my career, and I can’t blame him – I didn’t plan it. But it produced an unusual combination of education, knowledge and experience that turns out to be what you need to understand this subject. My first degree was in Electrical Engineering. After serving in the Royal Air Force, I took

another in Petroleum Engineering and, armed with that, joined a large oil and gas company and spent two decades managing projects around the world.

Large oil companies have a habit of throwing unexpected things at you. One day I was writing briefings for senior people at Headquarters. ‘Now see here, Lyon. We keep getting these questions at shareholder meetings about something called “Peak Oil”. Give me the bullets. I’ll fire the gun. Write me a memo.’ I started writing the memo. The memo turned into a master’s degree in Energy Economics and a good understanding of the relationship between the energy system and the financial system (spoiler: we get it backwards).

That’s the journey. Electrical engineering gave me maths, physics, chemistry and electrical systems. Petroleum engineering showed me what it takes to keep the energy flowing. Energy economics revealed the central error: the assumption that low-quality energy – diffuse, intermittent, hard to concentrate – can simply replace high-quality energy because the price is right.

Draw a Venn diagram of those three, and right in the centre is one of the biggest threats of our lifetimes: the policy of dismantling our energy system before anything remotely adequate exists to replace it. I read the early proposals for a ‘renewable energy transition’ as they were beginning to circulate in policy circles, and couldn’t believe my eyes. Then I looked at who was writing them: people with no training in physics, no engineering, no understanding of power

systems, no experience of producing energy and no grasp of the economics of finite resource extraction. A policy consensus formed by people who understood none of the disciplines needed to evaluate what they were proposing. They didn't know what they didn't know – and they didn't know that they didn't know it.

But this book isn't for them. It's for you – the person on whom this policy is being inflicted. You're perfectly capable of understanding what's happening if someone takes the trouble to explain it clearly.

You may not be fully aware yet of your dependence on the energy system and the significance of what is being done to you. That's understandable – until now, it's worked so well that you've never had to think about it. But that is also what makes it a trap – you cannot see it until you try to leave it, and by then the options have narrowed. This book is my attempt to show you the trap.

I've taken a lot of care to make it short. You can read it in three cups of tea and half a packet of biscuits. But when you're done, you'll understand more about energy than most of the people making energy policy. And you'll be able to say, 'I can see what's happening; we have to stop this', to the people with the saw.

Thank you for reading. I'll see you on the other side.

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