

Book Review: Rough Guide to the Energy Crisis

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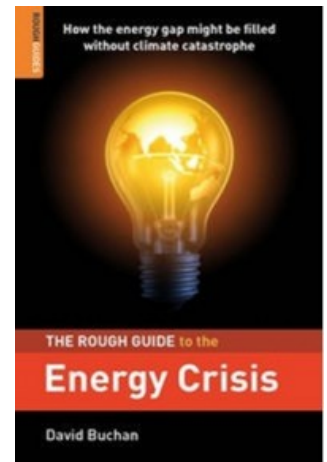
*David Buchan's latest book provides a comprehensive guide to the energy pitfalls and possibilities facing the UK, as reviewed by **Philippine Rudolf**.*

Rough Guide to the Energy Crisis. By David Buchan. Published by Rough Guides. October 2010.

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There are many reasons why it is vital for the UK to move towards a low carbon economy: the most powerful one being the immediate need to respond to climate change by curbing our emissions. The unequal distribution of resources across the globe, the resulting power inequalities, and the effect of fluctuating oil prices on the global economy all additionally contribute towards a major push in exploring the alternatives. All of these issues form the looming global energy crisis, covered comprehensively in David Buchan's *Rough Guide to the Energy Crisis*.

Buchan's main argument is that the transition to a low carbon economy has been slowed down by the nature of the energy industry itself, with its long-term investments and public interest considerations. The situation is further aggravated by the demand from emerging economies for energy in their quest for growth. Discussing the scientific, economic and political factors that impact on the energy sector, this slim but thorough book leaves few issues uncovered; from energy monopolies, to smart grids, to the resource curse and even energy conspiracy theories.



Buchan addresses the origin and means of generating energy and provides an overview of all conventional sources of energy from oil to uranium, as well as renewable technologies and current developments. The mechanics of each technology, the costs of extraction and conversion and relative contribution to meet the UK's energy needs are all explained in detail. Technologies are further put into context by considering the existing power relationships and involved stakeholders. Buchan concludes that due to the great convenience of oil, gas, and coal, the transition to a new energy era in a "habitable climate" in democratic societies requires popular mobilisation led by green pressure groups. While the adjustment of the price of carbon to reflect its full environmental and social cost would be the most effective policy, such measures are politically unfeasible. For now, Buchan firmly believes the primary objective should thus be the discontinuation of polluting coal as an energy source. Further, popular momentum is needed to provoke change in public behaviour and to cultivate greater awareness of energy efficiency.

The reader may feel optimistic about Buchan's proposed intermediate solution of widespread smart grids to optimise energy demand and supply, combined with a mix of relatively clean gas and nuclear power to meet both our energy needs and to reduce our carbon emissions. However, the need for public pressure and direct action from green groups, a prerequisite for Buchan for the dawn of significant policy changes, make this conclusion somewhat unsatisfying as it requires green pressure groups to endorse nuclear power. Nuclear power remains the elephant in the room due to its unpopularity arising from the perceived risks, costs and difficulties of nuclear waste management. A primary source in Buchan's work is Stephen Tindale, former head of *Greenpeace* who now lobbies for nuclear power, which indicates that green groups may be willing to embrace nuclear power in the future. As a result of Tindale's input however, it would be wise to treat the book as a work of journalism rather than as a neutral encyclopaedia-style presentation of the issue. After all, many would agree that an embracing of nuclear power by *Greenpeace* may be unlikely given that the organisation's founding myth is closely tied to the opposition to nuclear weapon testing.

Bringing together the power relationships of energy politics and the challenge of climate change partly confirms popular criticism of the role of power politics and economic motivations that hinder significant action on climate change. However, given that these obstacles are unlikely to disappear, attention to them is needed in order to devise a realistic strategy that the UK can begin to implement now. This contextualisation makes the *Rough Guide to the Energy Crisis* a solid basic source of information to indicate the complexities involved in changing how the world sources and consumes energy.

Philippine Rudolf is a PhD student at the Department of Government at the London School of Economics.