

# BOOK REVIEW

## Power Politics: Political Encounters in Industry and Engineering

By Francis Tombs

Published by I.B.Taurus & Co.Ltd 2011

We have all come to rely on electricity being available on demand and in an ideal world one would like to think that the Government had a duty to ensure the country enjoyed a secure and continuous supply of electricity, a duty second only to the security of the state. In this entertaining new book Lord Tombs explains how, on the contrary, political decisions by successive governments since the war “have resulted in a situation where the reliability of electricity supply throughout the UK will be in serious jeopardy for many years to come”. Lord Tombs is particularly well qualified to make such a judgment.

Born in Walsall he left school at 15 and started work at GEC in Birmingham. After gaining his qualifications in electrical engineering, followed by a degree in economics and accountancy and a distinguished career in industry he eventually became Chairman of the South of Scotland Electricity Board, the larger of the two electricity supply boards in Scotland, and later became Chairman of the Electricity Council.

His advice was then sought (but seldom followed) by a succession of energy ministers who sought to re-organise the industry by apparently relying on political dogma (sometimes nationalisation, sometimes privatisation) rather than using technical knowledge and experience.

He now sits as a Cross Bench Peer in the House of Lords.

The first chapter is an account of how the re-organisation of the electrical supply industry was mis-handled after the war. Before the war the construction of the National Grid in the 1920s and '30s, which allowed for the first time the nation-wide transmission of electricity, had been a major technical achievement which replaced the previous system of expensive and inefficient local generation and distribution.

In 1947 the Government nationalised the industry under the control of the British Electricity Authority. The subsequent Conservative government followed the recommendations of the Herbert Committee of 1957 to separate generation (in England and Wales) from distribution and sales. Lord Tombs describes this as an “odd” decision which was “entirely political, with little or no thought for the practical managerial consequences”.

Thus was created the Central Electricity Generating Board, which had a monopoly of generation until privatisation in 1988, and 12 local boards responsible for the separate job of distribution and sales. Lord Tombs identifies one consequence of this inefficient arrangement in that the CEB promoted the construction of “gold plated” power stations in this country which the contractors found were not competitive for overseas customers.

His recommendation was to implement a Bill which proposed the formation of an Electricity Corporation with a potential division into five autonomous and competing divisions each large enough to finance and build large power stations. But apparently the Conservative Government of 1979 found it politically impossible to implement this proposal which had been favoured by the previous administration, and they chose a different route for privatisation, one consequence of which has been that a number of our electricity utilities have passed into foreign ownership.

The advent of cheap gas was probably a mixed blessing. Gas fired power stations are quick and cheap to build but we have very little gas storage capacity to cover interruptions in supply and the reliance on one fuel (which we now have to import) has led to a decline in our traditional industries building turbo-generators and combustion plant, which we will have to buy abroad in future.

Lord Tombs is also critical of the Labour Government’s “love affair” with wind power which he describes as expensive to build and their potential value has been greatly exaggerated. He quotes the Government’s estimate of the subsidy required by wind power, £30 billion by year 2020 (“a stealth tax in all but name”) and says it is a sum more than sufficient to meet the cost of replacing the nuclear power stations.

He sees the “visceral opposition of the Labour Government to nuclear power and the accompanying obsession with wind power” as a threat to our future supplies, and for the solution he says “we sorely need a technically competent and independent body capable of long-term strategic planning for a national electricity supply”.

This chapter should be essential reading for all interested in our electricity supply, especially the young, to explain why we are in the present situation and what to avoid in the future.

The political horizon is too short for an industry which has to plan for 30 years ahead, and at the end of this book the reader is left with the clear conviction that planning the national electrical supply system is best guided by engineers.

**Robert Freer**

