



## Editorial

# Ignorance of the basics

## a poor foundation for decision making

**A**s energy prices rise, energy is becoming a hot topic across society, and not only among those that work in the sector. In many countries, there are major national policy and public debates on the price surges, the gathering storm of climate change and what should be the priorities for power generation. Big public debates will require deep public knowledge.

How informed is society in your country? In mine, the UK, I'm not sure the answer is encouraging. I recently asked a few friends who have no professional involvement at all in the energy sector to give the relative shares of the different fuels used in the overall national power generation portfolio, choosing from gas, coal, oil, nuclear and renewables. Both got it completely wrong, the main error being that they thought oil was the leading fuel for power generation. In fact it's the lowest by some distance.

In discussing one of the new offshore wind farms that are beginning to pepper the UK coastline, there was genuine uncertainty from one of the two about how the electricity was transmitted onshore from the wind turbines. It was thought that with so many advances in technology these days, there may be some sort of wireless transmission through the air. Having picked myself up off the floor, I explained a little about how these things really worked.

Before speculating about the intellectual quality of my friends, you should know that they are both reasonably bright people, successful in their own professions and examples of the type of person who one would normally expect to participate in a 'national debate', whatever that is.

Try a similar exercise in your country. While the results may not be quite so dire as my small experiment summarized above, it is probably a safe bet that knowledge of some key aspects of your own national debate will probably be insufficient, sometimes even woefully so. The far more worrying thing is that the journalists and policymakers who are responsible for shaping and making energy policy

often have some fairly large gaps in their own understanding.

Here are some examples of things that should be much better understood before important strategic decisions are taken in the energy field. Test your energy minister with the following:

- What is the average share of consumer electricity prices (all consumer types) that is accounted for by network costs?
- Is it cheaper to build a new 1,000 MWe power plant or to reduce baseload demand by the same amount?
- Taking both demand- and supply-side options, what are some of the least-cost means of reducing carbon emissions in the electricity sector?
- What are the life-cycle carbon emissions from a nuclear power plant?
- To what extent does the price paid for electricity by domestic (and many other) consumers go up at times of peak demand?
- What are the energy losses from the network at these times?

The list could go on and on, and it is probably safe to believe that many of the key people involved in key policy decisions haven't got a clue what the answers are, let alone the significance of the questions.

That's not exactly a heart-warming thought to take with us into 2006.

**Michael Brown**

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