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Empowering Electricity — Co-operatives, Sustainability and Power Sector Reform in Canada

By Julie L. MacArthur
UBC Press, Toronto, 2016.

The enticing title of Julie MacArthur's book promises valuable updates on progress in community energy in Canada, rich in energy assets and with a strong co-operative sector. There have been very few published attempts at reviewing the state of play in the community energy movement in the UK. Therefore, the book is a timely analysis of the impact in a nation further down the path to co-operative energy. As the cover note says, the growth of locally owned and democratic energy co-operatives has made real progress in the face of the mega-companies' hold on the market. In the UK, bodies such as Community Energy England and the development co-operative Energy4All have made progress, but the UK energy co-operative sector remains tiny. This book documents the inroads into the energy sector in Canada, and throughout the book there are useful tables, appendices and a massive reference list, with many papers cited from Europe. Personal contacts are also listed.

Julie MacArthur has frequent digs at the big energy companies, the equivalent of the 'Big six' in the UK. The message is that there are now hundreds of democratic, community energy co-operatives in Canada, aiming to change the way energy companies are motivated and run. EPG — "Empowered Participatory Governance" is the author's answer. The key elements are: 1. Policy impact, 2. Education, 3. Asset ownership and control, 4. Networks and 5. Participatory and anti-capitalist norms. The eponymously-titled Chapter 9 analyses the impact in respect of each of these elements. Attempts by the big financiers to "Greenwash" their activities also get short shrift from the author.

Investors in community co-operatives are seldom motivated by financial return, they know it is good for local people and good for the planet, sentiments that are alien to the Financial Conduct Authority in the UK. However, "The rising profile of coops and the social economy in many countries around the world suggests that we may be seeing many more of these organisations in the future. Co-operative ownership structures, even in technologically complex and financially challenging sectors like electricity, are both possible and desirable, despite their challenges. When contradictions arise between the direction of public policy and the values and opinions of members of the public, the co-operative model is one mechanism through which collective action and mobilisation can be pursued. However, significant economic and political challenges confront the community power sector. Scaling up into an empowering and sustainable Canadian power alternative is unlikely without a strong public power movement that includes provincial, municipal, First Nations and co-operative ownership". There are many more passages that reflect on the healthy growth in the co-operative sector, but noting the institutional resistance, and from my point of view, include the co-operative sector in the UK, where doubts exist about the validity of energy co-operatives. We are democratic and our members participate in many other ways, not least helping to create new co-operatives in an ever-changing political climate.

The extent to which the book delivers its promise depends on how it is to be used. It is not a page-turner. The average of at least four polysyllabic words in each sentence make it an extremely difficult read. However, the meticulously researched material, clearly a labour of love and commitment, is a milestone in recording the recent history of community energy. Overall, the book deserves a place in every university library as a source book for students of the

renewable energy sector. In addition, there is the strong political drive behind Julie Macarthur's magnum opus. She is passionate about co-operatives, ownership and local control, set against the context of trying to reduce global CO₂ emissions. This makes a more complete and compelling picture of the motives behind the book, to influence discussion and help grow the sustainable energy sector through shared democratic ownership, motivated by political rather than financial gain. The value of the book is as a milestone in recording the state of play in Canada, but the justification of the co-operative model of company governance and the political significance of the movement is the achievement of the book.

The Reviewer

Richard Scott is founder member and chair of Baywind Energy Co-operative.