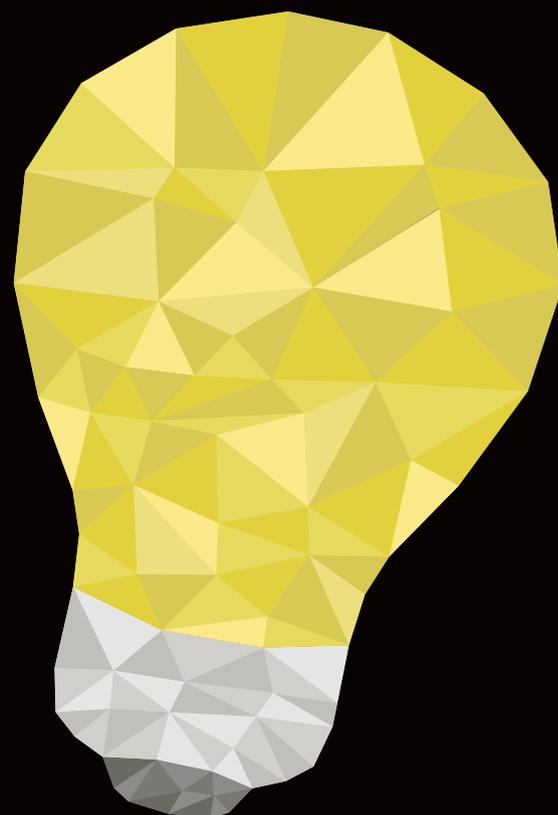


POWERLESS

'WE'VE GOT TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THIS. IT CANNOT GO ON. IT MUST STOP.' SO! WHAT IS OUR RICHARD RANTING ABOUT THIS MONTH?



IF ONE NATIONAL NEWSPAPER is to be believed, by the time you are reading this the country will be plunged into the coldest winter in decades, with birds falling frozen out of the air, ice parties on the Thames (and even the Wensum), and brass monkeys throughout the region suffering traumatic castration.

This predicted big freeze coincides with the iniquitous decisions made by one power company after another to put up their charges by 10 percent or more. This has particular relevance for us at the moment as we have just had an electricity bill so large that if it had it been received by one of the Eurozone countries, it would have caused another Euro crisis. Sadly we do not have the luxury of that nice Ms Merkel to bail us out.

As we have a disabled member of the family and a hydrotherapy pool to heat, our power bills have never been cheap, but now they are through the roof.

If we had a choice about power suppliers (not just the opportunity of switching between equally expensive utility companies) I would not be so concerned. But none of us has any effective choice, so I am on a mission. I have a double motive for saving on bills: to avoid bankruptcy and to decimate the profits of the greedy. Here's how.

At night our house used to look like an ocean liner about to set sail. Now, if you can see the glimmer of a low wattage bulb through any window it means we have too many lights on. The tumble dryer has been disconnected and we now have one of those racks on pulleys that enable damp clothes to drip on you as they dry. We are re-learning the noble art of washing the dishes without help from the mothballed dishwasher. As we live in a thatched house we have drawn the line at candles, so we creep around with torches. The ghosts and the cats are intrigued.

An apple tree blew over in a gale recently. Our normal response would have been to cut it up and dispose of it. Not now. We have built a log store out of discarded pieces of timber. It leans slightly but will keep the rain out and in about two years time we will have some nicely seasoned logs.

During the cold weather we plan to dress as Eskimos and may build an igloo in the living room. The house has such poor insulation that whenever we try to get warm we merely heat Norfolk. We considered going back a few hundred years and inviting our sheep in to the house to snuggle up to us. But we have other plans for them...

We would all be much more healthy (I tell myself bravely) if our homes were a lot colder. Germs love central heating just as much as the rest of us, but if our homes are like iceboxes those little microbes will soon become discouraged.

There is other science behind this too. Recent research suggests that bright light in the evenings or night upsets our bodies' production of the hormone melatonin which in turn can increase the risk of diabetes and cancer. And it is not only house lights that are the culprit: tablets and computers have the same effect.

So, the advice is: turn down those lights in the evening and switch off your computers.

Others have bolder ideas for doing down the power companies – such as a power off strike by consumers for a whole 24 hour period: nice idea but unfortunately impossible to achieve because many people (the elderly, the disabled, the ill) must have power. We must find other ways to reduce their profits. Enter the Barr Plan.

We have a dozen fit sheep. They are (or claim to be) permanently hungry. At a secret location in Norfolk a giant treadmill is being constructed with 12 harnesses and buckets and an interesting arrangement of gears connected to a generator. When it is finished the sheep will be put into the harnesses. The buckets will be filled with their favourite food and placed just out of reach. Even intelligent sheep such as our own will not be able to resist. In no time the treadmill will be revolving at full speed. At the same time the lights in the house will glow bright and fan heaters will blow out heat.

And speaking of blowing out, here is stage two of the plan: sheep are also very good at producing natural methane. A development of this scheme will also involve tapping this extra source of power (though politeness prevents me from describing the exact way the methane will be harvested). All I will say is that my project will add a whole new meaning to the expression 'wind farm.'

Warm wishes for Christmas!