



Up in Smoke

Burned • Sam McBride • Merrion • 2019 • £16.99

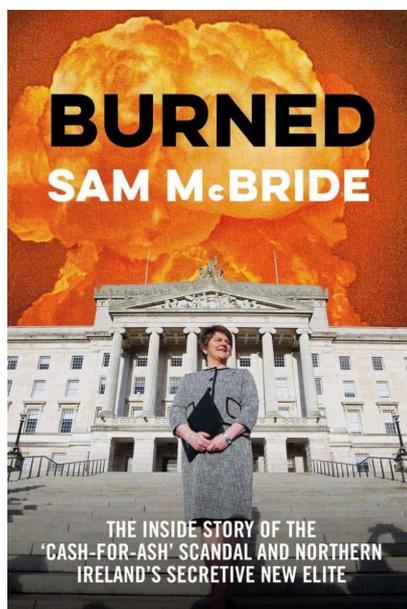
Tom Woolley

SAM McBride's book *Burned* about the RHI Cash for Ash scandal is a work that should be read by everyone in Northern Ireland. It shines a spotlight on how the main political parties operate but also exposes the most amazing levels of incompetence and disorganisation among the ranks of senior civil servants. However, while well written it can be hard going at times as McBride forensically and sometimes tediously takes apart what happened and cleverly combines information from the public inquiry and other sources. Keeping up with the many people involved and the complexity of the funding arrangements is hard work at times, but it's worth persevering.

As an energy efficiency expert myself, I spend much of my time campaigning for better insulation. It is not sexy, however, and men are attracted by techy solutions like solar panels, wind turbine, heat pumps and wood pellet boilers. A recent conference in the Titanic Centre about climate change was hugely dominated by men in suits looking out for the next profitable technology. While hundreds of the suits stayed in the main hall to salivate over heat pumps, heat networks and burning hydrogen, a handful of mainly women attended my smaller seminar on insulation and energy efficiency. No one mentioned RHI.

Many years ago, I argued with energy 'experts' that wood pellets were not carbon negative. The energy needed to dry the wood and transport it around the country is made worse by the fact that wood pellets are imported from the USA where ancient woodland is being clear felled to meet the demand. The UK Government ignored this and established a subsidy scheme called the renewable heat incentive (RHI) to encourage the installation of pellet boilers to heat homes and businesses. This scheme has suffered abuses in England as well as Northern Ireland, and OFGEM was put in charge of paying out the new subsidies. OFGEM is the energy regulator in England with an important role to look after consumers but it has also been, quite wrongly, given a role to promote RHI and other questionable schemes.

McBride explains in painstaking detail how civil servants in Stormont designed a scheme with OFGEM to promote pellet boilers in Northern Ireland. They thought the money for this would come from the UK treasury and was thus 'free money', and so they created a scheme which meant that boiler users would be paid substantially more to run the boilers than it would cost. This absurd subsidy became a gravy train for businesses who borrowed huge sums from the banks to heat poultry sheds and other premises, covering bank loans and providing huge profits due for the next 20 years. The term *cash for ash* was coined not by a clever journalist but by the companies promoting and installing boilers.



It's not clear whether the full extent of the scandal will ever be known. How many poultry sheds were actually heated 24/7 with the doors left open? Instead McBride gives a balanced account of how, while subsidies were making masses of money for a handful of farmers and businesses, many of the participants were honest and genuine and have suffered severe financial losses.

Civil servants began to realise that the scheme was racking up huge payments of public money but they continued to promote it with the enthusiastic participation of Stormont politicians, mainly in the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). As the scandal emerged, these politicians sought to blame the officials and even their own special advisers (SPADS). McBride's book documents many melodramatic events that occurred when politicians like Jonathan Bell and Arlene Foster fell out in a very

public way. So extensive is the chicanery exposed by McBride that it cannot be covered in this review. Overpaid, unaccountable SPADS; civil servants who didn't keep minutes; DUP politicians who used hotmail email accounts so there would be no official record; and so on and so on. The behaviour of civil servants who passed information to businesses rather than politicians to warn them to get on the bandwagon before the scheme was shut down is clearly exposed.

Of particular interest to humanists are the accounts of the close relationship between civil servants and politicians through their religious affiliations. Prayer meetings and discussions of religious faith was part and parcel of normal political discourse among the DUP and senior civil servants. McBride was aided by a regular arrival of brown envelopes containing emails which seemed to originate from the DUP in an effort to shift blame onto colleagues.

An official inquiry chaired by Sir Patrick Coghlin should have reported by now. Full disclosure of what went on should have ended the career of politicians like Arlene Foster, but external political events in Westminster and delays to the publication of the report until 2020 have given her and other politicians breathing space.

McBride touches on other scandals and particularly interesting is the role of the huge agribusiness of Moy Park, which is owned by Brazilians, in its ability to call the shots in government. What is remarkable in McBride's story is that the politicians and civil servants have largely got away with wasting vast amounts of public money without any disciplinary action. Some of them have even been promoted!

• Tom Woolley is a former Professor of Architecture at Queen's University, Belfast, and co-author of *Thermal Insulation Materials for Building Applications*.