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To burn or not to burn is not even the question

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JOHN BARBER Burn or bury? That big question is getting a good workout this week, what with Premier Dalton McGuinty saying burn, baby, burn and Mayor David Miller digging deeper into the city's newly acquired Green Lane landfill site.

Even comic-relief Councillor Rob Ford got into the act. "It burns me up when we are not getting an incinerator but we are spending \$220-million on a landfill," he declared yesterday.

Unfortunately, few of the serious champions make much more sense when they engage in this sharply polarized debate. One side -- as exemplified yesterday by the Premier -- proffers an exaggerated, context-free vision of groovy Europeans who generate vast amounts of energy while magically making their garbage disappear by burning it. And although Mayor Miller's decision to buy a landfill was mainly expedient -- and hugely opportune -- it springs from old fears about incineration that new technology has clearly laid to rest.

And we haven't even begun to inject global warming into the mix -- something environmentalists certainly noticed. "It is truly outrageous that the Ontario government is fast-tracking these controversial changes despite the fact that these incinerators produce 33 per cent more greenhouse gases per unit of energy than coal-fired power plants," said Anastasia Lintner of the Sierra Legal Defence Fund.

But the most important point environmentalists made this week is that incineration versus landfill is simply the wrong debate in Ontario today. Both sides agree that the three R's of waste diversion constitute a far better strategy than any disposal option. And if you really want to know where Ontario lags behind the Europeans, it's here.

"Waste management must be led by policy, not technology," environmental lawyer Maureen Carter-Whitney wrote in a timely paper on the incineration debate, published this week by the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy. She warned that the technological debate threatens to overshadow the need for clear policy and tough regulation of waste management.

"The provincial government must quickly take measures to ensure that incineration does not become a technical fix that ultimately leaves Ontario without a commitment to diversion, and in worse shape over the long run," she wrote.

The opposite just happened, of course: The provincial government is rushing to embrace incineration even as its already tepid commitment to diversion cools.

Having announced a plan three years ago to ensure 60 per cent of municipal waste is diverted by 2008, the government has done little or nothing to follow up, according to Ms. Carter-Whitney. Given the province's lack of strategy and action, Environmental Commissioner Gord Miller called the 60-per-cent target a "pipe dream" in his most recent annual report.

Does anybody remember the Waste Diversion Office? Established to develop new programs to supplement blue-box recycling, it hasn't come up with a single one. Since the days of Mike Harris, all innovative diversion efforts -- especially Toronto's green- bin program -- have originated locally. Unlike the Europeans, we still have no product stewardship or excess-packaging laws.

The big news here is a deposit system for liquor bottles that simply duplicates existing municipal recycling programs.

Pardon me: The really big news is that dozens of Ontario municipalities are now rushing to embrace incineration, sucked ahead by the policy vacuum, as the province winks and yawns. Many will stop short when they come to understand the true costs of high-tech incineration, which are played down by promoters, as well as its marginal utility as a way to generate electricity. But one thing seems certain: There will still be a whole lot of garbage lying around Ontario when the time comes to burn it.

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