

An incinerator on our lake just doesn't stack up.

JOHN BARBER jbarber@globeandmail.com

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Our poor lake. Drive east to see how badly we have used it, despoiling what should be the soul of this whole place, our epic waterfront, with some of the most polluting factories in Canada. Then weep to learn the primitive rulers of these tragic borderlands have done it again - deciding this week to fill one of their last unspoiled slices of Lake Ontario shoreline with a huge, mass-burn garbage incinerator.

You have to know what you're looking for to find the Darlington nuclear complex, but this new beast with its towering concrete stack and greasy yellow plume will announce itself proudly for miles around, signalling can-do Toronto's ambitious entry into the cutting-edge smokestack economy. An overweening emblem of consummate backwardness.

This is how we've always done things hereabouts, ever since we kicked the last Frenchman and his Indian pals out of Frenchman's Bay. We went to live on our waffle grid to the north and used the lake as a shitter. It's amazing how strong local tradition can be.

But the location of the Durham Region burner is merely symbolic. Considered in light of prudent, responsible 21st-century waste management, it is beyond belief.

Forget for a moment the inevitable air pollution such facilities cause. Set aside the huge risk regional taxpayers are taking as Durham's would-be partners and enablers back away from this increasingly obvious boondoggle. Ignore the onrush of new evidence showing the overwhelming environmental and economic superiority of alternative strategies.

Our rustic neighbour's biggest problem could be finding a supplier of such outdated technology. They could end up in China.

Pardon me, that's not fair. The Chinese have come to their senses, adopting mainstream waste-management policy with typical authoritarian éclat. Acknowledging waste diversion - not waste disposal - as the prime goal of their new policy, they just banned plastic bags. Following that with a ban on yogurt tubs could be enough in itself to destroy the logic of even the dirtiest mass-burn incinerators in China.

Mass-burn incineration becomes economic only when conducted large scale. As a result, Durham is specifying a facility that is far larger than it needs - especially so now that York Region has broken away from the partnership - in the hope it can find more paying customers to help amortize the enormous cost.

Why would they pay a premium to burn their garbage now that there is so much more space available in Ontario landfills, the result both of new approvals and aggressive diversion programs?

And what happens when (not if) Ontario bans plastic bags and all that other packaging that is unnecessary and polluting but boasts such high calorific content? Led by Toronto, progressive municipalities provincewide are leaping on the waste-diversion bandwagon. The local supply of combustibles is drying up faster than the Aral Sea.

The less material there is to dispose of, the less fuel there is to feed the fire, and the more risky it becomes to build a mass-burn incinerator - the kind that needs a heavy diet of recyclables to stay happy and keep its sponsors solvent.

One imagines the last entrepreneur of the whale-oil lighting business. He probably thought there were plenty of customers left, too. Maybe he even got some rubes to pay for the final doomed factory.

That mighty stack will be the most fragile monument ever erected on our polluted shores. A single, sensible, proven policy change - requiring householders to put out garbage in clear bags so collectors can reject those containing recyclables, for instance - will bring it crashing down.

But first, somebody has to be reckless enough to build the thing.