

Gimme some of that old-time environmental religion

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Hallelujah, brothers and sisters! We are not alone! We are marching together, arm-in-arm, along the path of righteousness to the beat of a mighty drum. Zero waste is not a dream! Our zeal will make it real! See how the Great Satan of Incineration trembles at our approach!

It wasn't a tent in rural Georgia, rather a union hall in Oshawa, but the spirit was alive Thursday night when more than 300 local people gathered to consider a plan to build a giant garbage incinerator on the shore of their lake.

What a treat they got. There is no more rousing preacher in the church of the environment than Dr. Paul Connett, a Cambridge-educated chemist who gained international renown 20 years ago for research on the potential health effects of an identical incinerator proposed across the lake in upstate New York. Effortlessly deploying every oratorical trick known, he lifted the rafters with his denunciation of the hell fires that burn bright with recyclables while belching poison.

The audience of ordinary Oshawans was quiet and attentive as he began, obedient attendees at the local lyceum. They were standing and singing by the end.

The Oshawa revival felt exactly like that legendary meeting 10 years ago in Richmond Hill, the first great bugle blast against well-laid plans to pave the Oak Ridges Moraine - and the launch of a government retreat that quickly became a rout.

The difference today is that the incinerator proposal will most likely collapse under its own weight. There is no shortage of face-saving excuses for local politicians looking to flip-flop in accordance with their constituents' increasingly vocal demands. Apart from a dozen other difficulties, they haven't even considered the cost of the thing.

"We haven't got the business case yet," Ajax Mayor Steve Parish complained in an interview. Preliminary estimates suggest why. "When we do get the business case, it's going to say that this is going to cost two to three times as much as conventional landfilling," he continued. "This thing is going to dispose of waste for \$175 to \$200 a tonne walking away, and we can probably landfill it for \$65 to \$75."

The proposal to build a mass-burn incinerator on Lake Ontario is so backward and stupid in so many ways it's hardly worth fighting. But as Dr. Connett demonstrated with such spirit, killing the beast is an important and joyful ritual.

"Fight political pollution!" he urged, cannily targeting the most obvious local emitter - Durham Region chairman Roger Anderson, the unelected driving force behind the incinerator - for special scorn.

Earlier in the week Dr. Connett enraged Mr. Anderson by referring to the consultants, bureaucrats and politicians in the incinerator racket as "suckling pigs." Undeterred, Dr.

Connett repeated the charge with gusto Thursday night, lambasting the self-dealing "consultitudes" who design and defend incinerators.

"Think of this incinerator as a big suckling pig," he exhorted. "The suckling pig comes into town and all the little piglets run up and suck off the public teat. Suck, suck, suck! And taxpayers are going to be ripped off for 35 years.

"How do I know that?" he asked. "Because I've watched this process for 23 years and it disgusts me."

There's almost an embarrassment of evidence to back up the charge in Ontario. Different players have switched from bureaucrats to consultants in the middle of the process of designing regional incinerators. Consultants become developers of projects they have already deemed, as consultants, to be safe.

Even Durham flinched this week when a firm named AMEC, which had done a study on the potential health effects of the incinerator for Clarington, the host municipality, showed up on the short list of five potential developers for the thing.

Both of the two firms once assigned to defend the public interest in various incinerator projects in the region are members of the Canadian Energy-from-Waste Coalition, which lobbies aggressively to build incinerators. It is necessary to say "once" because most of their pet projects are near death and Niagara Region just fired its burn-brained consultant because of the egregious conflict.

The only reason why the Anderson incinerator hasn't already collapsed is because of the man himself, a dominating figure who runs the region without the guidance of a pesky electorate. Every other leader in the Golden Horseshoe, acutely aware of public opinion, has backed away from incineration. Durham stands alone, and it's an ugly sight.

But not for long.

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