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On Toronto's waterfront stands a mighty wind turbine, its blades rotating lazily in the breeze (at least sometimes). It's a monument to good intentions and civic virtue. The Mayor loves it. The Premier loves it. All governments love wind power, because it makes them look so green. David Suzuki, the patron saint of environmentalism, compares wind turbines to medieval cathedrals - the highest expressions of human achievement. Wind is clean, sustainable, renewable, free. Who could possibly object?

The citizens. Last night in Toronto, hundreds of anxious folks jammed a meeting called to discuss plans for a massive wind farm along the shore of Lake Ontario. They fear the 90-metre turbines will chop up birds, disrupt migration routes, destroy views, lower property values, even make them sick.

NIMBYs? No doubt. But they have a lot of company. Across Canada, Britain and Europe, a growing protest movement is arguing that wind farms are no good for the environment.

Here's another reason not to like them. Wind power can't survive without massive subsidies, courtesy of you and me. "If these hidden subsidies were taken away, there would not be a single wind turbine built in Britain," says David Bellamy, a well-known environmentalist who has been tramping the Scottish countryside to oppose a massive wind project there.

Subsidies might be okay if wind could help replace conventional energy one day. It can't. "If the whole of Wales was covered with wind turbines, the nation would generate only a sixth of the U.K.'s energy needs," says Prof. David MacKay, a physicist at Cambridge. He's all in favour of clean, renewable energy. But he's done the math.

The biggest problem with wind is that it doesn't always blow. There are lots of days when Toronto's monument to civic virtue couldn't even power my toaster. Inconveniently, these times of low production tend to coincide with times of high demand. So no matter how many turbines you put up, you always need backup power. Usually that means fossil fuel, or, in Ontario's case, nuclear.

The biggest advertisements for wind power are Germany and Denmark. Germany has more wind turbines than any other country in the world, and Chancellor Angela Merkel has draped herself in green. But wind energy can't replace conventional power there either, so Germany is also building dozens of new coal-fired power plants. Denmark, with the largest offshore wind farm in the world, brags that 20 per cent of the electricity it generates comes from wind. But more than half its wind power is exported, because that's the only way the system can work.

Here at home, wind companies have been scrambling to get their share of \$1.5-billion in federal subsidies for clean energy. On top of that, they get a premium when they sell the power. Ontario pays them 11 to 14 cents per kilowatt hour. Conventional energy goes for about half that price.

“Ontario is turning to wind turbines to help create jobs and power a green energy future,” brags a government press release. But wind companies are chasing another green. The biggest wind project in the world, on the Thames Estuary, nearly collapsed last spring when a major backer, Shell, pulled out. Shell said the “incentives” were better in the United States.

Fortunately, a lot of wind companies won't survive the recession. One big Canadian firm, EarthFirst, is under court protection. Wind companies need a huge amount of credit, which has dried up. Expensive wind power makes a lot less sense with oil back around \$50. And the global slump will do more to cut greenhouse gas emissions than all the wind turbines and solar panels David Suzuki can dream of.

When will we stop pouring billions into wind? I have no idea. Politicians really love their turbines. Meantime, that soft whooshing sound you hear is your friendly green government, vacuuming money out of your pockets.