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Do you like broiling in the dark? Come to Ontario!

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FROM TUESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

My husband and I are a perfect match in every way except one. He likes it hot, and I do not. We have a running battle over air conditioning. He likes to set the thermostat at 26. If I reset it to 21, he starts shivering and puts on a sweater. Then he re-resets it to 27. He seems to think this will make the house warm up faster.

These days, we can't keep the house cool anyway. Yesterday, the humidex reached 42, a temperature so high I don't dare translate it into real degrees. The CN Tower has disappeared behind a haze of smog. Power consumption in Ontario is breaking records, and the authorities are warning that, if we don't turn down the air conditioning, we could be in trouble.

My husband is delighted. Now, he's not a curmudgeon. He's a good citizen.

The government has lots of other tips for the conscientious public. It wants us to run our dishwashers in the middle of the night, draw our curtains, and hang our laundry out to dry. These conservation measures will cut our energy use by at least 0.001 per cent, and everyone will feel good.

The trouble is, another 100,000 people are moving into the Toronto area this year. Most of them want to keep cool, too. The City of Toronto has even declared that air conditioning is a basic human right. It wants to make landlords install it for all their tenants, even though we'll probably have blackouts if the tenants actually use it.

You might think supply and demand would be a good way to get people to conserve energy. But we don't believe in that here. Instead, our province keeps the price of power artificially low. Yesterday, the electricity authority was importing electricity for about 19 cents a kilowatt hour and selling it to residential consumers for 5.8 cents.

If you think this is a funny way to avoid blackouts, you're right. But the only thing the politicians fear more than blackouts is a public enraged over their hydro bills. For years, the public has been trained to believe that cheap electricity is also a basic human right and that, if they don't like their hydro bill, they can complain to their MPP. Now, it's impossible for any politician to tell the awful truth. One day, the bills will come due; but, by then, the politicians hope, they'll be someone else's problem.

Naturally, we all want our government to be environmentally responsible. And so we're happy that it's going to shut down all those dirty old coal plants. That way, we can import energy from other people's dirty old coal plants. Never mind the pollution that drifts across the border and settles like a gentle cloud on our fair city. It's not ours.

Some of our dirty old coal plants are actually quite clean, thanks to new technology. But we're going to shut them down anyway because our government is allergic to the word "coal." It prefers to build new natural-gas plants at huge expense. Then there's really friendly energy, like wind. Everybody loves wind. If only we could get the wind to blow. Unfortunately, it hasn't done that all summer. Maybe we could find a way to recycle the hot air from Queen's Park.

"We don't pay the bills. We shut down the clean plants. And we build astronomically expensive new ones," says Energy Probe's Tom Adams. That's our energy policy in a nutshell. Also, our transmission lines are running out of capacity. So even if our neighbours keep selling us their surpluses, we might not be able to get it here.

But the government can't afford to admit that the blackouts it's warning us about are policy-induced. It would rather blame the victims -- i.e., us. If your lights start flickering, don't blame them. Blame yourself, for being a greedy energy hog. And if you like it cool, like me, you're out of luck. Turn the thermostat up high and suck it up.

By the way, if you want to make absolutely sure your power stays on, here's another tip: Buy a generator.

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