

## **CHANGE:OPINIONS**

*The London Society aims to provide a platform for the debate on how London ought to develop, and to go with our theme of 'change' in 2021, we will have a strand of articles on the blog called "Change: Opinions" – polemical pieces that make a case for a radically changing some aspect of the status quo or of received wisdom.*

*Here, **Jon Burke** formerly a Hackney Councillor, and the Cabinet Member for Energy, Waste, Transport and Public Realm, argues that on environmental, medical and social grounds, drastic action has to be taken against the motor vehicle in London.*

*If you have a piece that you would like to submit, please email [blog@londonsociety.org.uk](mailto:blog@londonsociety.org.uk)*

### **There is no 'war on cars' in London, but perhaps it is time for one.**

When confronting the failure of successive Governments to respond to the growing threat of German rearmament in the 1930s, Winston Churchill described it as 'the decade that the locusts hath eaten'<sup>1</sup>. Though there are significant differences between those troubled years and our own times, there are also striking similarities.

If ever there was a decade of wasted time and squandered opportunities to address London's ballooning surface transport emissions, and the associated social, environmental, and public health crises; if ever there was a decade of collective political denial in the face of this glaring problem; it was the one we've just seen out.

Despite increasingly ambitious national decarbonisation commitments and the passing of many 'climate emergency' motions in the capital's Town Halls, we look back on a decade in which the number of miles driven on London's roads each year increased by a staggering 3.9 billion<sup>2</sup>. And despite grandiose environmental pronouncements, almost 400 million more litres of fossil fuels were being burnt by motor vehicles on London's roads in 2019 than in 2009.

It is a sobering thought that London took 100 years to get to 20 billion miles driven by motor vehicles, and less than ten years to increase that by more than 15%<sup>3</sup>. More sobering still is the fact that, until the advent of Covid-19, London's councils had overwhelmingly failed to take radical action to retard this growth.

And it is not just the quantitative aspects of London's addiction to cars that are so damaging, there are major challenges in terms of the kinds of vehicles on our roads, the geographical distribution of journeys, and their distance:

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<sup>1</sup> Winston Churchill, HC Deb 12 November 1936, vol 317 cc1081-155

<sup>2</sup> Department for Transport, *London Road Traffic Statistics – 1993-2019*, ONS code: E12000007

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

- Sales of space-dominating SUVs, which are designed for off-road driving, now make up 40 percent of car sales in the U.K. In 2019, over 150,000 new cars were sold that are too big to fit in a standard parking space<sup>4</sup>.
- since 2009, London's neighbourhoods have absorbed the *full* increase in miles driven on the capital's roads; while, since 2006, the number of miles driven on London's main roads annually has fallen by 800 million<sup>5</sup>, demonstrating the profound impact that Waze and other 'satnav' technology have had in turning our communities into giant bypasses for the benefit of individual drivers<sup>6</sup>; and
- 50% of car journeys in the capital are for distances of less than 3km<sup>7</sup>.

Thousands of Londoners die prematurely every year due to air pollution<sup>8</sup>, yet land transport emissions have continued to increase, both as a share of the U.K's emissions – 22% come from the land transport sector<sup>9</sup> – and in absolute terms.

Yet, despite the alarming impacts that motor vehicles impose, denial abounds. Perhaps the most striking similarity with the 1930s and our own time is the hostility shown to uncomfortable truths and necessary change. The politician willing to tell drivers things that they do not want to hear needs to be prepared for sustained attack.<sup>d</sup>

Despite the extensive – and increasingly obvious – environmental, public health, and social impacts of motor vehicles, there is an extremely vocal, if not particularly numerous, group of people engaging in criminal damage<sup>10</sup>, online abuse and threats of violence towards elected officials who have implemented measures which are designed to eliminate through-traffic and local car journeys that could otherwise be walked, cycled, or undertaken by public transport.

### **Cars and the public health crisis**

Looking at the health impacts of air pollution in London – a large proportion of which is generated by the operation of motor vehicles, through the particulate matter they generate via road wear, tyre abrasion, brake wear, and through their tailpipe emissions - we would have to conclude that emergency action to curtail the number of cars on our roads is not only required, but that it is long overdue.

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<sup>4</sup> DeSmog, Ban Advertising of Polluting SUVs – Report, 03.08.20

<sup>5</sup> Op.cit *London Road Traffic Statistics – 1993-2019*

<sup>6</sup> Carlton Reid, 'Rat-running' increases on residential UK streets as experts blame satnav apps, *Guardian*, 25.09.20

<sup>7</sup> Transport for London, *Technical Note 14*

<sup>8</sup> London Councils (2018), *Demystifying Air Pollution in London* (full report)

<sup>9</sup> Climate Change Committee (2020), *The Sixth Carbon Budget, The UK's path to Net Zero*, p.95

<sup>10</sup> Madeleine Cuff, Hackney Council calls on Met Police to stop Low Traffic Neighbourhood vandals and protect road closure schemes, *INews*, 20.11.20

Long exposure to air pollution can contribute to a number of illnesses, such as asthma, pulmonary disease and lung cancer. Scientists know this; politicians know this; and, with the recent ruling that air pollution was a contributing factor in Ella Kissi-Debrah's death, the public now know this<sup>11</sup>.

Air pollution in London contributes to the premature deaths of 9,400 Londoners a year, at a cost to the NHS of between £1.4 and £3.7 billion<sup>12</sup>. Air quality can also have lifelong impacts. One study, published in *The Lancet*, which monitored lung function in London boroughs such as Hackney and Tower Hamlets, found that "that diesel-dominated air pollution in cities is damaging lung development in children, putting them at risk of lung disease in adult life and early death"<sup>13</sup>. Professor Chris Griffiths, who led the research, said: "This reflects a car industry that has deceived the consumer and central government which continues to fail to act decisively to ensure towns and cities cut traffic"<sup>14</sup>.

Air pollution in our cities also disproportionately affects groups such as the working class and minority ethnic communities<sup>15</sup>, which are already impacted by a wide variety of other social inequalities. And it is clear that [electric vehicles are not going to save us from these problems](#).

Motor vehicles also present a significant risk to the safety of Londoners. In 2019, there were 25,341 reported collisions in London, resulting in 125 deaths, 3,780 serious injuries, and 26,102 slight injuries<sup>16</sup>, and as the overloaded main road network has displaced billions of driven miles onto London's residential streets, road danger in our neighbourhoods has significantly increased. As the Mayor of London's Walking and Cycling Commissioner, Will Norman, notes:

*"...as traffic on residential streets has increased, so has the number of collisions. Sadly, over the last decade, the number of walking & cycling casualties on neighbourhood streets increased by 38% - almost double the 21% increase on main roads."*<sup>17</sup>

### **Cars and the climate crisis**

The increase in miles driven on London's roads over the past decade also has significant implications for the U.K.'s ability to hit its legally-binding decarbonisation targets. Locally, this is also presenting London councils – such as Hackney, which is seeking compliance with the IPCC's 1.5C higher confidence thresholds – with significant challenges in meeting their own decarbonisation targets..

The Climate Change Committee's (CCC) December 2020 6<sup>th</sup> Carbon Budget is clear that the U.K cannot meet its legally-binding decarbonisation commitments without drastically curtailing surface transport emissions. Technology alone cannot deliver the scale of reductions required. , The CCC are clear that, In addition to the full electrification or other tailpipe decarbonisation of every car by

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Laville, Air pollution a cause in girl's death, coroner rules in landmark case, *Guardian*, 16.12.20

<sup>12</sup> Op.cit *Demystifying Air Pollution in London*

<sup>13</sup> BBC, *Pollution linked to 'stunted lung capacity' in London schoolchildren*, 15.11.18

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Sam Wong, *Ethnic minorities and deprived communities hardest hit by air pollution*, Imperial College News, 26.01.15

<sup>16</sup> Transport for London – Casualties in Greater London during 2019 – Data Release

<sup>17</sup> <https://twitter.com/willnorman/status/1338454313241284611>

2050, we need to reduce the amount of miles driven on our roads by a minimum of 17% against 2017 levels. In London, that equates to some 3.8 billion miles<sup>18</sup>.

However, instead of taking its lead from climate science, the automotive industry continues to market ever-larger, more energy-intensive motor vehicles, leading to a significant increase in sales of SUVs and in associated emissions; between 2010 and 2018 “SUVs doubled their global market share from 17% to 39% and their annual emissions rose to more than 700 megatonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, more than the yearly total emissions of the UK and the Netherlands combined”<sup>19</sup>.

When taking into account the emissions scandal, when automotive manufacturers such as Volkswagen fitted equipment to deceive regulators, it’s clear that the industry cannot be trusted to deliver the technological advances required and more stringent regulation of the industry is required.

While the Government’s recent announcement that it would ban the sale of petrol and diesel vehicles beyond 2030 is welcome, both the timeframe and proposed exemptions – such as ‘self-charging hybrids’, which former Transport for London Board Member Michael Liebreich describes as “a fossil-fuelled car being marketed to people without knowledge by people without ethics”<sup>20</sup> – are clearly not ambitious enough.

### **Cars and the social crisis**

The impacts of London’s growing addiction to driving are not merely limited to air pollution and planet-roasting CO<sub>2</sub>; they can also be measured in the safety of Londoners to traverse their, and on the social lives of our cities.

The impact of car culture on the destruction of established communities, with their deep social networks, is well-established. Urbanists like Jane Jacobs, who chronicled the destruction of America’s established urban communities at the hands of planners commented that “not TV or illegal drugs but the automobile has been the chief destroyer of...communities”. The extensive body of academic literature on social isolation, unemployment, criminality, and a whole range of negative social phenomena arising from the displacement of communities to accommodate car culture would appear to support this view.

The social impact of ‘car gluttony’ is also well-established in the literature, which confirms that the number of friends and acquaintances reported by residents was significantly lower on streets with higher volumes of motor traffic; that the extent of people’s ‘home territories’ diminished as motor traffic increased; and that individuals’ perceptions of road safety in their neighbourhood are disproportionately influenced by the traffic conditions on their street of residence, especially affecting the degree of independence granted to children<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Op.cit *The Sixth Carbon Budget, The UK’s path to Net Zero*, p.101

<sup>19</sup> Niko Kommenda, SUVs second biggest cause of emissions rise, figures reveal, *Guardian*, 25.10.19

<sup>20</sup> <https://twitter.com/mliebreich/status/1328088169213026311?lang=en>

<sup>21</sup> Hart, Joshua; Parkhurst (2011), Graham, Driven to excess: Impacts of motor vehicles on the quality of life of residents of three streets in Bristol UK, *World Transport Policy & Practice*, ISSN - 1352-7614

Car culture is not only bad for our health and the environment, it is a poison coursing through the veins of our neighbourhoods, slowly killing the rich social life of our cities.

### **What should we do?**

As has been noted by academics working on the issue of car dominance, “the tools exist to reclaim urban residential neighbourhoods from traffic, but this will require considerable political will.”<sup>22</sup> That will is currently being tested to the point of destruction in London, as the Taxi industry and various anti-Low Traffic Neighbourhood campaigns undertake legal action against both City Hall’s and local authorities’ plans to improve road safety, reduce air pollution, and address surface transport emissions<sup>23</sup>.

The political will of local authorities is also being tested by the anti-Low Traffic Neighbourhood vandals destroying the infrastructure designed to support these measures, such as planters, cameras, and traffic monitoring equipment<sup>24</sup>; the failing courage of Councillors under the threat of deselection by vocal, and often unrepresentative, advocates of the status quo within their own Parties; and the intimidation and death threats targeted at the democratically-elected Councillors delivering on their manifesto commitments<sup>25</sup>.

But, politicians – and particularly Councillors, who have to manage the local road transport network – should beware the temptation to acquiesce to calls from a vocal minority to reverse measures aimed at curtailing the dominance of cars. As a matter of good democratic practice, administrations elected to improve air quality and road safety should deliver their manifesto commitments; they should also deliver policies underpinned by evidence and which are proven, time and time again, to be popular with the public; and they should ‘stay the course’ because there are few other options available. This is illustrated by the fact that the opponents of such measures have consistently failed to offer any meaningful alternative.

Undoubtedly, zero-tailpipe emission vehicles will play an important role in urban transit; additional safe active travel infrastructure is also welcome; and investment in clean, low-cost public transport is essential, but these controversy-free measures are simply not enough, as the Climate Change Committee make clear. The plain fact is, there isn’t a city in the world that has halted the march of the private motor vehicle without placing restraints on where cars can go. A decision not to pursue demand-side policies is a decision to abandon meaningful efforts to address global warming, air quality, and road safety issues.

Fundamentally, if we are serious about addressing the public health, environmental, and social effects of car culture, Road User Pricing, Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, safe cycling infrastructure;

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ed Sheridan, Anti-LTN campaign group issues formal legal challenge to Hackney Council, *Hackney Citizen*, 14.01.21

<sup>24</sup> Op.cit, Hackney Council calls on Met Police to stop Low Traffic Neighbourhood vandals and protect road closure schemes

<sup>25</sup> Holly Chant, Hackney councillor receives death threat over road closures, *Hackney Gazette*, 28.09.20

Controlled Parking Zones, the limiting of parking permits by height, weight, and length, the systematic removal of private parking infrastructure on public land, and the delivery of bus gates and prioritisation to the exclusion of private motor vehicles will have to happen. Politicians who suggest otherwise are misleading the public.

However, another challenge faced by politicians attempting to address the domination of the car – and an explanation for why supply-side measures such as new cycle lanes and better public transport alone will be unsuccessful – is that the private motor car is not merely a means of ‘getting from A to B’; it has a much stronger psychological hold on our individual collective imaginations.

As Wilkinson and Pickett note in the *The Spirit Level*, we can directly correlate the propensity for driving large, aggressive vehicles to the prevailing level of income inequality in a society<sup>26</sup>, demonstrating that the, increasingly large, private motor vehicles being driven on our roads are indeed meeting a need, but one unrelated to transport. Automotive industry advertising clearly targets those psychological needs extremely effectively, which is why there have also been calls on the Government to ban marketing of the most polluting motor vehicles<sup>27</sup>.

Politicians should also see this difficult period of change as a chance to radically transform the public realm for the benefit of all. This was the motivation behind the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Streets programme I pioneered in Hackney, which – in the first example – involves the removal of more than one hundred metres of carriageway, to be replaced with a new neighbourhood park, incorporating new trees and play infrastructure, a School Street, electric vehicle charge points, and bike storage, all in exchange for around 25 parking spaces. In a borough where circa 70% of households don’t own a car, but are deficient of private green space, the creation of new neighbourhood parks is clearly meeting the needs of a much broader range of residents.

By viewing our streets as a huge untapped source of life-enhancing public goods, rather than merely a resource primarily for the benefit of drivers, London also has an opportunity to address its poor reputation for ‘liveability’, before other European Cities – such as Paris, which is busily reimagining its public realm under the visionary leadership of Mayor Anne Hidalgo – begin luring the talent that has made the capital such an international success story in recent decades. As I noted in the *Financial Times*, “Transport policy isn’t merely about transport – it’s about seeking to operate cities in ways that are more human [in] scale and are objectively proven to attract the kind of people who make those cities successful.”<sup>28</sup>

The tale of surface transport in London, particularly over the past decade, is a vast increase in miles driven on its roads annually, and an increasing propensity to drive larger, objectively more dangerous SUV-type vehicles. If a war has been initiated, it is undeniably by the motor vehicle on Londoners and, due to a conspiracy of silence from politicians, regulators, and a media dependent upon automotive industry advertising, the car has been winning.

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<sup>26</sup> Wilkinson and Pickett, *The Spirit Level*

<sup>27</sup> Op.cit, *Ban Advertising of Polluting SUVs*

<sup>28</sup> Martin Sandbu, How to make cities more liveable after Covid-19, *Financial Times*, 23.11.20

The intransigence of opponents to any measure limiting the dominance of cars; the wilful disregard for the safety of the public by a rogue automotive industry; and the retrograde attitudes of politicians who pass climate emergency motions in parliament and council chambers only to retreat at the first sign of opposition, is a familiar tale of a creeping threat wilfully ignored, which allows us to consider again parallels with the 1930s.

As noted in the introduction to Richard Overy's own account of the 1930s, *The Morbid Age*, politicians and elements of the public can attempt to fence themselves off from reality, but reality cannot be detained indefinitely.

Only by placing limits on what kinds of motor vehicles can use our streets, where they can go, and at what speed, will we begin hand our cities back to *all* their residents. Attempting to do so is, and will continue to be, contested fiercely by all those who benefit from the status quo – the fossil fuel industry, the automotive industry, the 'way-finding app' developers, a media compromised by the need to attract lucrative advertising revenues, and drivers themselves .

There is no 'war on cars' in London, but all the evidence suggests that the major environmental, public health, road safety, and social problems they create means waging one may be the only way of defeating their stranglehold on life in the capital.



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