

The very air we breathe is poisoning us. This is what politicians must do to fix it

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26 JANUARY 2017 • 10:17AM



The Great Smog of 1952. Sorry, 2017 CREDIT: TOBY MELVILLE/REUTERS

If you're a Londoner experiencing aching sinuses, an odd taste in your mouth or difficulty breathing, you're not alone. The capital has just been through several days of very high air pollution.

The causes of the most recent episode were the usual: a lack of wind to blow away the build-up of noxious gases and small particles of matter that London generates on a daily basis. The still, cold weather has not only been freezing our bones but trapping pollution. There was a contribution from wood burning on Sunday (the air quality experts at Kings College London confirm it was from open fires, not stoves as widely reported, and, naughtily, in areas where smoke is restricted).

Smouldering logs are a red herring in the long term, though. London's pollution comes primarily from diesel vehicles.

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Diesel produces less carbon dioxide than petrol but is far worse in terms of nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter – tiny particles that embed themselves deep in our lungs. Air pollution exacerbates asthma, bronchitis and heart problems, as well as stunting children’s lung growth. It’s also responsible for shortening the lives of 9,500 people in London each year.

Let’s be clear: this isn’t a problem that only shows up once or twice a year. Pollution monitoring stations in London regularly reach their annual limits within a couple of weeks; roads are filthy year round because of all that diesel. Oxford Street and Brixton Road are some of the worst streets in the world for nitrogen dioxide. So what’s to be done?

The first thing is to get rid of diesel from our roads. During recent bad air pollution spells, other major cities (see Paris, Madrid and Oslo) banned some or all cars from their centres. That’s something Mayor of London Sadiq Khan should be implementing here.

Longer term, Khan’s plan to buy no new diesel-only buses from 2018 is welcome, as are grants to black cab drivers to help them replace the oldest models. However, there’s room for improvement with the Ultra Low Emission Zone. It doesn’t come into force until 2020 and only covers the central and relatively small Congestion Charge Zone, which will do nothing for those living, working or learning near the city’s major traffic arteries. And if Khan wanted an immediate deterrent, he could consider a higher congestion charge for the worst polluting vehicles – but again, this only covers central London.

Cleaner buses would be a start

Khan could also act now to stop air pollution worsening in south and east London by cancelling plans for the Silvertown tunnel, which is expected to increase pollution on approach roads. Building more roads – which only encourages more traffic – is a backwards step. London does need more river crossings, particularly in the east, but they should be public transport. Get as many people as possible out of their cars to reduce congestion and pollution, from brake dust and tyres as well as fumes.

Consumers play a role. Until relatively recently, people were advised to opt for diesel over petrol cars based on fuel efficiency and CO2 emissions. But that has increased the proportion of particulate-emitting diesel vehicles in traffic – and after the VW Dieselgate scandal, drivers can't even be sure that their cars aren't pumping out more pollution than they thought. The way forward has to be hybrid or electric, plus the necessary infrastructure for charging, and perhaps a government buy-back scheme for high emitting cars.

There are a few prettier methods of dealing with air pollution, and that's to soak it up with plants. If we can't stop pollution getting into the air, trees and green walls can mop up pollutant gases and particulates. They don't scrub the air squeaky clean, but greening up our streets can make a dent while we tackle the problem at the heart.

The real Great Smog of 1952

But there's no point this being just a London phenomenon. About a third of our pollution comes from the continent, as air moves back and forth across the Channel. Brexit isn't going to exempt us from the European air mass, we will still be affected by fossil fuel burning in the Ruhr as well as our own coal-fired power stations. We can take all diesel vehicles off the streets, but if there is not a concerted joint effort to switch to cleaner fuels everywhere we're still going to inhale particulates.

It took the Great Smog to clean up London's air in the 1950s. Modern pollution is invisible, so there won't be a parallel pea-souper to cause a public outcry. The danger is that politicians, afraid of upsetting drivers (who complain, loudly and at the ballot box), will push hard decisions down the line and hope the market provides.

We're about to have to write our own air pollution standards (at the moment, they come from the EU). So which way will we go? We need quick and decisive action to deal with the silent killer all around us so we can breathe easily.

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