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## THE POLITICS OF POLLUTION

*This paper first appeared in the Autumn edition of the 'Skeptical Intelligencer', 2014, p 1-2.*

### **'Bollocks'**

*(Tweet by Mayor of London Boris Johnson in response to a scientific investigation showing that levels of nitrogen dioxide pollution in Oxford Street are the highest in the world.)*

### **'We have got to get rid of all this green crap.'**

*(Statement attributed to UK Prime Minister David Cameron concerning the problem of high energy bills.)*

When I was a little boy, living in a small industrial town in the Pennines, I would look up at the surrounding hills and see them as blue. Now they appear in glorious green and have done so for many years. But back then there was so much smoke in the air from factories and domestic chimneys that the hills took on a bluey-grey hue when viewed from the valley below.

Politicians in this country only became seriously committed to improving air quality in the 1950s when the nation's capital (and other cities) suffered sustained periods of being enveloped in smog so dense that at times visibility was officially recorded as nil. From December 1952 to March 1953 in Greater London 12,000 more residents than usual died owing to smoke and coal fumes which were unable to disperse upwards through the heavier colder air. Despite this, politicians and other officials were reluctant to accept that so many people could die simply from breathing dirty air (specifically sulphur dioxide), or that if they were dying, anything could be done about it, at least without great economic cost. In response to a parliamentary question in which it was pointed out (strictly speaking not quite accurately) that in the previous month more people had expired from breathing the polluted air of London than had been killed on the nation's roads the previous year, the then Minister of Housing Harold Macmillan replied, 'Members can't blame my colleagues for the weather' and rejected calls for legislation. What he did do is revealed in a confidential memo uncovered in the 1990s stating:

*Today everybody expects the government to solve every problem. It is a symptom of the welfare state. For some reason or another 'smog' has captured the imagination of the press and people.....Ridiculous as it seems I suggest we form a committee. We cannot do very much, but we can seem to be very busy and that is half the battle nowadays.*

And later:

*There are some small things which we can do. We can gain popularity by them. The masks etc.*

He then proceeded to ask the NHS to provide for the distribution of 3 million useless face masks.

In fact it was eventually established that air pollution cost the country hundreds of millions of pounds a year and it was comparatively cheap to do something about it. The Conservative MP Mr (later Sir) Gerald Nabarro (he with the handlebar moustache) put down a private member's bill which led to the Clean Air Act of 1956.

But now it seems that the air we breathe in our cities is polluted by another deadly gas: nitrogen dioxide from vehicle emissions. Researchers from Kings College London set up a monitoring station on Oxford Street which found a peak level of nitrogen dioxide at 463mg<sup>3</sup>, more than 11 times higher than the European Union's safe limit of 40mg<sup>3</sup>. The monitoring station also found that average levels of nitrogen dioxide were 135mg<sup>3</sup> – almost four times the EU limit. But Mr Johnson is having none of this (*see note 1*).

Pollution due to vehicle emissions is a proven and serious public health hazard and the levels that we are having to endure are scandalous. Yet, as with pollution from the burning of coal in the 1950s, there seems to be a reluctance to acknowledge the scale of the problem or a fatalistic attitude that there is nothing we can do about it. Some writers have suggested this is because this form of pollution is invisible and its effects are not immediate, but I'm not so sure about this.

My wife and I live close to two primary schools and during term time many of the parents deliver and collect their children in their huge status-symbol cars. At such times the surrounding roads are congested with these parked vehicles and the air that the children are breathing must be thick with exhaust fumes. Yet I see some parents leaving their engines running while they sort out their children, gossip with other parents, use their mobile phones,

and so on. Now, a while ago there was a proposal to erect a mobile phone mast close to one of the schools. The radiation from mobile phone masts is invisible and undetectable by the human senses AND there is no reason why it should pose a health risk AND, unlike car emissions, there is no good evidence that it does so. Yet immediately, posters appeared on trees, lampposts, etc. decrying the proposal and warning parents that the safety of the masts for children's health had yet to be proven (admittedly this objection was given lower priority than the effect on house prices). So in this case invisibility and undetectability clearly did not militate against any concern about the effects of a supposed pollutant.

Maybe what does dilute concern is when the pollutant is a product of our own valued possessions or activities. Or perhaps, if we are like Messrs Johnson, Cameron and Macmillan, we want to protect our political reputation.

#### **Note**

1. Ironically, a new high tech London bus, trumpeted by Mr Johnson as 'the cleanest and greenest bus of its type' and dubbed 'the Boris bus', has just been found to be no more economical on fuel than other modern hybrid buses costing £40,000 less (see:

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/environment/article4224019>).

#### **References**

Boris Johnson: 'bollocks' to say Oxford Street has world's worst pollution.

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jul/18/boris-johnson-bollocks-oxford-street-worlds-worst-pollution>

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