



4th August 2017
By George Monbiot,
published in the Guardian 2nd August 2017

Pollution Solutions

Electric cars address only a small part of the problem – we need to rethink the whole crazy transport system.

We tell ourselves that we cherish efficiency. Yet we have created a transport system whose design principle is profligacy. Metal carriages (that increase in size every year), each carrying one or two people, travel in parallel to the same destinations. Lorries shifting identical goods in opposite directions pass each other on 2000-mile journeys. Competing parcel companies ply the same routes, in vans that are largely empty. We could, perhaps, reduce our current vehicle movements by 90% with no loss of utility, and a major gain in our quality of life.

But to contest this peculiar form of insanity is, as I know to my cost, to be widely declared insane. Look at how advertising is dominated by car companies, and you begin to understand the drive to ensure that this counter-ergonomic system persists. Look at the lobbying power of the motor industry and its support in the media, and you see why successive plans to address pollution seemed designed to fail.

Suggest a neater system, and you will be shouted down by people insisting that they don't want to live in a planned economy. But in this respect (and others) we do live in a planned economy. These days transport planners make a few concessions to cyclists, pedestrians and buses, but their overriding aim is still to maximise the flow of private vehicles. Rather than encouraging the more efficient use of existing infrastructure, they keep increasing the space into which inefficiency can expand.

The government's new pollution plan notes that its actions will be limited, as **"we must maintain discipline on public spending"**. Yet it sustains what **the Department for Transport boasts** is the *"biggest upgrade to roads in a generation"*. Launched in 2014, at the height of David Cameron's austerity programme, this plan promised to *"triple levels of spending by the end of the decade"*, with £15bn for 100 new road schemes.

New roads do not solve traffic congestion. They exacerbate it. By increasing flow in some parts of the network, they **generate bottlenecks** in others. Governments then seek to bypass the bottleneck, creating a worse one further along the system. It doesn't matter how often and how powerfully **the induction of traffic by roads** is demonstrated (the first findings **were published in 1937**); the programme persists.

No holistic solution to the multiple problems caused by this planned chaos can be contemplated, as efficiency would be injurious to special interests. Success is measured by miles travelled, rather than needs met. It's like measuring the health of the population by the weight of medicines it consumes.

No sacrifice, in lives, land or gold, is sufficient to appease the metal god. A **new subprime crisis**, involving cars rather than houses, threatens to help catalyse another crash, as the personal contract plans under which most cars are now bought load some households with impossible debts.

But yet again the government avoids fundamental questions about how and why we use transport, and whether we could do it better, like the plague. It has proposed **the narrowest of all possible responses** to the high court ruling that obliges it to take action on nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) emissions.

It claims that “*exceedances in NO₂ are highly localised – limited, for the most part, to a few problem roads rather than an entire town or city centre.*” But given that there are tens of thousands of roads in the UK, and **only 300 air quality monitoring sites**, not all of which measure NO₂, how on earth does it know?

Local authorities will be allowed to introduce clean air zones – by far **the most effective and cost-efficient measure** – only when other (mostly useless) options have been exhausted. Efficiency must in all cases be discouraged. As soon as **“legal compliance is achieved”**, these zones must be removed.

Legal compliance is not the same as public safety, especially if it's based on limited measurements. NO₂ emissions are just one component of pollution. Another is particulates, to which, **according to a government paper**, “*there is no known safe level for exposure*”. Should the government not do everything it can to address the assault on our bodies, rather than the minimum required to avoid another defeat in court?

But fear not: by 2040, no new diesel or petrol vehicles will be sold in the UK. This, apparently, is the appropriate timetable for responding to what **a parliamentary committee calls** a “*public health emergency*”. A child born today will be 23 by the time this policy matures: by then the damage to the development of her lungs and brain will have been done. And the switch might have happened anyway, without the government's help. **Volvo has announced** that it will sell only electric or hybrid-electric cars from 2019 onwards. **The Dutch bank ING predicts** that all new cars in Europe will be electric by 2035. Let no one accuse this government of ambition.

Even if this policy were enacted more swiftly, it seeks to ensure that nothing else in our extravagant system changes. Electric cars solve only part of the problem. They occupy less air, but just as much road and parking space. The resources required to manufacture them – and the volume of mines and ports and processing plants that wreck rare habitats around the world – might even intensify. While the total carbon emissions and air pollution caused by electric cars will be lower than those the fossil system produces, **electricity use will have to rise**. If you are among those who support electric cars but oppose nuclear power, you may have to reconsider one of your positions.

So let's explore some pollution solutions that change this ridiculous system, rather than extending it indefinitely. Why not – through shifting road space from cars to bicycles in the form of safe cycle lanes – aim to make cycling the main form of urban transport? Why not launch a scrappage scheme that trades cars for public transport tokens? Why not implement **the ingenious plan** proposed by the economist Alan Storkey, for an intercity coach service that's as fast and convenient as private transport, but uses a fraction of the road space?

In other sectors, progress is marked by reducing the volume of a system while enhancing its utility. Why does the same principle not apply to transport?