

ULEZ Spearheads Anti-green Backlash

Jack Pease's Air Quality Blog

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Air Quality Consultants (AQC) is delighted to share some typically insightful thoughts from our friend Jack Pease.

In this blog Jack discusses the rising tide of anti-green policies.

These are Jack's words and not those of AQC.



About Jack:

Jack Pease graduated as a Civil Engineer working for British Rail then became a journalist writing on the construction, transport, oil and truck industries before becoming editor of the Air Quality Bulletin and Noise Bulletin newsletters in 1998 until very recently.



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ULEZ Spearheads Anti-green Backlash

The recent Uxbridge by-election for Boris Johnson's former Parliamentary seat has proved a turning point. Opposition to ULEZ secured a victory for the ailing Conservatives, throw in low traffic neighbourhood (LTN) anger and the entire green agenda risks becoming derailed.

Last weekend saw some backtracking on the ULEZ (widened grants) and LTNs (a review) and all this comes on top of much wobbling from both Tories and Labour on wider green policies such as oil drilling, fossil fuel cars and heat pumps. Parties appear to have decided that with 18 months to go before an election, the lowest common denominator is the way forward at least as far as the environment is concerned.

It is not entirely clear whether the extension of culture wars to environmental matters came before or after this political wobbling. Green refuseniks seem encouraged by their successes on the ULEZ and LTNs - horror at Just Stop Oil and now Greenpeace tactics is polarising the debate. And if you can't sell climate policies as much of Europe and the wider world swelters and burns - then when can you?

And it all looked to be going so well. Councils had by and large managed to introduce low emission zones without too much fuss. Sure, Manchester delayed due to an impending backlash but Birmingham and Bristol got schemes in place that included cars without a major furore. Sometimes (eg Leeds) even the very threat of a low emission zone led to fleets being cleaned up disrupting the business case for the zone which could then be dropped.

Opponents of the ULEZ do not appear to have explored this point. The vehicle fleet in the relatively affluent London and Home Counties is relatively new - hybrid and battery cars are the norm for relatively wealthy new buyers. Trucks are already subject to the M25-wide ULEZ and are very clean indeed. Vans less so, they are costly to replace and artisans are not awash with cash.

The recent legal challenge against the ULEZ failed as it focussed merely on whether consultation was sufficient. There is a huge danger that if the ULEZ is delayed the business case will be eroded - delays in the Manchester zone are surely leading to much head-scratching for those preparing what will be needed there with cars becoming increasingly clean.

The steady fleet clean-up is an overlooked policy success but it does cause problems if tailpipe air pollution is used as a proxy for tackling climate change. Few members of the public understand the difference between air quality and climate change emissions and it is far easier to tolerate costs and personal inconvenience if the local environment is the beneficiary. Problems abroad and in the future are not vote winners.

This is why traffic reduction is so important - experts know - but rarely admit - that cutting traffic is the only sure fire way to tackle both air pollution and climate change. But attempts to introduce road pricing (Edinburgh and Manchester - both rejected it in local polls) are even more politically toxic than Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and the ULEZ. Both road pricing schemes were sold to residents on the basis of reduced pollution - take away that justification and it becomes a very hard sell. Ironically the last minute widening of ULEZ subsidies by Sadiq Khan will likely inflame early adopters who forked out for new vehicles and now miss out on the subsidies available to late adopters.

So how should environmental campaigners, air quality experts and transport planners react to all of this? The General Election is 18 months away and it is probably a bad time to moot any new environmental initiative which will become toxified by the wider political backlash on the ULEZ, LTNs, net zero, heat pumps etc.

Also some humility might be needed. We made the assumption that Boris was wrong to postpone the 2009 extension to the congestion charge and low emission zone, and we despaired at endless Defra dithering on air quality. What if their caution was wise lest taking action too early derailed the entire progressive environmental policy (as the Edinburgh and Manchester vote derailed road pricing for decades)?

Over the next 18 months it is almost certain that deadlines will slip for the likes of fossil fuel car sales and heat pumps. Natural England will be told to withdraw objections to new housing due to diffuse nutrient pollution and the push to build in city centres with relaxed planning rules may weaken air quality objections for housing along busy roads. All this is too complicated for Labour to pledge to reverse.

What is bizarre about such backtracking (this week Business Secretary Kemi Badenoch says that banning fossil fuel car sales will harm the UK economy) is that British and European business leaders are crying foul about the huge US green deal (Inflation Reduction Act) which is spending \$370bn precisely on stuff that the UK is abandoning. Green spending must be sold as a positive and not lazily peddled as a negative.

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