

## **'Politics, Incompetence and Impotence: The Dirty Reality Behind Air Pollution'**

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Our right to clean air? It's been a victim of party politics and playground point scoring in the UK.

Now with the General Election looming, where are we in terms of the policy and promises for tackling air pollution?

Across the spectrum of climate tech solutions, air quality innovation has been an outlier. Maybe because air pollution is invisible. It doesn't elicit the same human reaction as other visceral man-made damage like bleached corals in the Barrier Reef or piles of fashion waste in Indonesia.

Or maybe because air pollution most deeply affects under-represented, deprived communities, without a voice or platform for protest.

***But air pollution is visibly, physically and politically - a huge health and social justice crisis.***

7-9 million deaths, including 600,000 children, are attributed to air pollution each year; more than AIDS, war and malaria combined. According to the UK Government's All-Party Parliament Group on Air Pollution, 64,000 premature deaths are attributed to air pollution each year. In fact, in a landmark case ten years ago, Ella Kissi-Debrah was the first child in the UK to have "air pollution" listed as a cause of death on her death certificate.

75% of places in the UK have illegal levels of pollution and £20 billion is lost every year from lower productivity and ill health caused by air pollution.

**If you are black, asian or from an ethnic minority, you are 3 x times more likely to breathe illegal levels of air pollution but you are least likely to contribute to it.**

If you are an expectant mother with a consistent exposure to PM2.5 during pregnancy, you have an increased risk of premature birth, stillbirth, child mortality and decreased average birth weight.

So much about air pollution is out of our control but in 2023, we used our specialist skills in accelerating profitable, investible startups combatting the triple planetary crisis (climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss), to make a difference to air quality.

We designed and launched the first ever [Breathable Cities](#) startup accelerator programme, aiming to support 11 promising UK startups (and one NGO) to build scalable businesses that each in their own way reduced or prevented air pollution in cities.

Our diverse startups addressed air pollution from a number of angles; from domestic solutions using AI and machine learning to predicting asthma attacks in children; drive-in-drive-out solutions that transformed diesel buses to electric ones in 2-3 days. Advertising columns that filtered polluted air in transport hubs to retrofittable solutions that prevented non-exhaust and tyre wear from choking up our streets. You can find out more about their stories [here](#).

In October 2023, the Breathable Cities Demo Day presented a range of innovative solutions to industry and investors.

***At that point, the public conversation around air quality had already become politicised, and to a point, weaponized.***

The upcoming London Mayoral Elections were positioned as the ULEZ (ultra low emission zone) Elections. Sadiq Khan had put air quality front and centre of his campaigning, based on his personal experience developing asthma late in his life caused partly by marathon training on London's polluted roads.

His Conservative adversary, Susan Hall attacked the "war on motorists"; vowing to scrap 20mph zones to "keep London moving", "cease enforcement of the expanded Ulez on day one", and to fight the fictitious "pay per mile" scheme she claimed Khan would bring in (despite repeated respites from Khan that it didn't - and would never exist).

Fast forward a few weeks; Khan won the May election, confidently so.

***But in the Conservative corner, despite the promise of a clear plan, bold action and a secure future, the outlook for tackling air pollution looks positively opaque, weak and precarious.***

Neither environment or climate feature at all in the Tory manifesto (despite the opportunity it could bring to our economy and growth, a stalwart of Tory rhetoric for decades). The future began to look bleak: Susan Hall, the Conservative Mayoral Candidate, put a tsunami of misinformation about air quality front and centre of her campaign. When In April DEFRA discretely withdrew £6m Local Air Quality Grants funding earmarked for local councils, the Tory's outlook seemed fixed.

***Focus, priority and solutions around air quality, air pollution and its impact on health will continue to decline should Rishi Sunak win the election.***

What about the Labour corner? Initial support for Khan's ULEZ ambitions were hit when Labour's outwardly facing support dimmed somewhat. Their Swansea West MP, Geraint Davies had spearheaded Labour's position on air quality. However he is currently suspended from the party while it investigates disputed allegations of "completely unacceptable behaviour" by the MP. Whilst the Labour party do have clean energy as part of their election manifesto pledges. Air Quality? Still searching.

The green shoots of optimism, at least, is that Labour have seen the link between jobs and a focus on sustainability. The outlook of air pollution under Labour? A bit more positive, based purely in the hope that they have more of a focus on supporting the NHS, more marginalised communities, and a bit more focus on 'green'. Let's see.

So in short, is there a strong directive for tackling air pollution either way? It's not looking great. ***But why does this matter?***

***This matters because strong leadership is needed to confront the most challenging of problems, particularly one so invisible, insidious and systemic as air pollution. It's a health and industrial problem.***

At the London Climate Tech Show recently, I led a talk about **'The Dirty Reality Behind The Fight To Clean Our Air'**. I shared many of the reasons why clean air innovation doesn't receive the support and attention it should. And why change is way too slow.

1. **Suffering is marginalised.** Particularly the people making the policy decisions. They are not those most impacted and affected by air pollution. Quite simply they do not live on the busy roads or in the poor areas of a city. They are not suffering. At least not yet.
2. **Inadequate leadership.** Our government - today's, and inevitably our post-July one, whatever party - lacks ambition, creative policy, adequate funding direction and future-focused planning. Neither party in the UK is taking the lead in treating air quality as a global health crisis, and instead focusing on micro-budgets and micro-impact.

Despite extensive pushback, criticism, and politicisation, Sadiq Khan's ULEZ scheme *is* what we need to be doing. However, we need the government to create the infrastructure and funding around such initiatives to create the public transport infrastructure, adequate replacement-vehicle funding, and education. Trying to fix air pollution in silo is setting it up to fail.

3. **Reposition air quality cost.** Focusing on climate resilience and air quality as a cost burden *rather than* a giant economic opportunity in fixing it. This approach is hampering investment, stifling job creation and innovation.
4. **Lonely and isolated.** Air pollution as an issue sits alone. Government leaders talk a lot about net zero gains and goals but don't include tackling air pollution within that vision or ambition.

According to Dr Soumya Swanimathan, former Chief Scientist at the World Health Organisation, we need to realise that everything in this climate emergency is interconnected. *"Climate change is causing extreme weather and fuelling wildfires which further pollute the air and exacerbate the warming of our planet. Whilst healthcare workers may be at the sharp end (of air pollution impact), the responsibility to act falls heavily on policy makers, governments and development funders to enable the action we need"*.

We need systemic change to public transport, health, local funding, industry, construction and building design. A local council air quality budget is so insignificant that on its own, it won't change anything.

5. **We are not creating the environment for industry to help.** We need ambition, commitment and consistency. Changing policy (such as our recent policy u-turn on shifting back to 2035 for new electric sales, and the discrete removal of larger pots on air quality funding by Innovate UK) means that industry cannot make longer term plans to electrify their fleets if policy keeps changing.

Restrictive regulation *can* enhance innovation *if* we put the right funding, tax incentives, rigour and consistent policy approach behind it. Without commitment and consistency, we cannot expect industry to help us.

6. **Air quality has become weaponized.** Some politicians, particularly in the UK, are using the debate about air pollution as a tool to create polarisation, derision and distraction. To undermine opposition rather than create resolution.

The aforementioned ULEZ scheme is a great case in point. Championed by Labour London Mayor Sadiq Khan, ULEZ was introduced as a way to reduce emissions by removing older polluted vehicles from London's roads. And evidence shows that has reduced PM2.5 by 19% and NOX by 26%.

And yet it's become a controversy and has been touted by political opponents as the 'poor tax' because it targets those on low incomes, most likely to own older vehicles. What's more, the £2,000 scrappage

compensation scheme is inadequate for replacement vehicles with even further allegations that it's a cash grab strategy by City Hall.

LTNs or Low Traffic Neighbourhoods are another example. Designed to encourage more walking, cycling and limit driving in general, the scheme was launched in 2020 with £225m funding and an estimated 30 LTNs are now in operation in the UK. And yet their introduction has been fuelled by argument.

Resistance centres around the fact that the scheme has been poorly planned and in fact, ends up pushing traffic elsewhere - not reducing traffic. There are also accusations there has been a lack of community engagement in decision-making and the new road schemes cause delays for emergency services.

7. **Credible data is hard to find.** We are drowning in politically charged, ambiguous data. No one single source of data represents a universal truth and this makes decision making challenging and conspiracies easy.
8. **Startups and innovators struggle to launch.** The startup landscape is TOUGH for founders and investment is even tougher to come by. It's why there are so few of them - despite the size of the problem. Read more about this investment challenge [here](#).

### **So what can we do?**

**Breathe.** Seriously. Walk around your city centre, busy B-road, and just inhale; taste and be conscious of the quality of air around you. The likelihood is that to date, you haven't noticed quite how bad the air is.

**Measure.** There are plenty of air quality measuring platforms, sites, and maps available online. Look for the pollution spikes from weather, traffic, idling traffic, and try to avoid poor air quality where you can.

**Demand Action.** Vote. Demand that your party or local council has adequate policy and thinking in place for their clean air policies. Ask your local councillors hard questions. Sense check that they have; is their LTN adequately planned? Are they aware of the implications? Have you pushed for better public transport in the area as an alternative to public transport?

**Support** There are some incredible innovators tackling air pollution. But they need help to scale and access to financial support.

If you're interested in hearing more about our work tackling air pollution across the world. Please contact me [paul@growthstudio.com](mailto:paul@growthstudio.com)

