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1. Car-makers must now come clean on diesel; Strict US pollution checks look to have exposed the charade of the European stance on green driving

Car-makers must now come clean on diesel; Strict US pollution checks look to have exposed the charade of the European stance on green driving

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Body

Few things get up the noses of Euro-greens more than the American car. Huge, filthy and unsophisticated gas-guzzlers; eight miles to the gallon, mobile smog machines. Look at Los Angeles! You can hardly breathe the air. Not like here, with our small, efficient, clever little Eurohatches - cars made by the likes of Volkswagen.

But it has probably escaped the attention of the Euro-greens that the only Western cities these days with a severe smog problem are this side of the Atlantic. On hot summer days Paris has to ban half the cars in the city from taking to the roads. Air pollution levels in London are off the scale and more than 7,000 people in Britain die every year as a direct result. Americans, in contrast, stopped dying of smog a generation ago, when the smog laws swept the filthiest vehicles into the scrapyards.

The reason? Europe's love affair with filthy diesel cars, buses and trucks. Now, thanks to the Americans, Europe's dirty little secret is out. This week, the US pollution watchdog, the Environmental Protection Agency, said that it had evidence, from a study by scientists at West Virginia University, suggesting that Volkswagen, one of the world's largest carmakers, has been massaging the figures in order to pass America's tough anti-smog laws.

Computers in its "TDI"-badged diesel cars on sale in the US have, it is alleged, been programmed to detect when the car is being tested under laboratory conditions, and to alter the engine management software to reduce emissions. When the car is driven in normal use this device switches off, and emissions soar - by as much as 40 times for some pollutants, including nitrogen oxides. This presumably allows the car to perform as well as advertised - and the environment can go hang.

If the EPA's findings are proved, VW faces fines of \$18bn and will have to recall 500,000 cars. It is not clear whether the same alleged fiddles have been used on VW diesels sold in Europe, although stories have emerged in the past year that many diesel cars on sale are far filthier than their makers claim.

According to Cynthia Giles, assistant administrator at the EPA, "using a 'defeat device' in cars to evade clean air standards is illegal and a threat to public health". It is hard to imagine any eurocrat coming out with plain speaking like that - not after the billions paid in subsidies to Europe's carmakers during the mad dash-for-diesel of the past few decades.

That it has taken the Americans, lovers of the gas-guzzler, to blow away the charade that is the European take on

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green driving is deeply ironic. And the reason this has happened is all down, in the end, to a bitter debate among environmentalists about what is more important: "the planet" or human lives.

Twenty years ago, when it came to road vehicles, Europe's greens, and then its civil servants and politicians, decided that the lives of 23rd-century polar bears were more important than the lungs of children walking our streets today. Laws were passed that determined a vehicle's green credentials solely on the basis of carbon dioxide emissions. Carbon dioxide, though harmless in the concentrations emitted by any vehicle, is the gas that causes global warming.

In Europe, diesels do relatively well (although the gap between them and petrol engines has narrowed to a sliver). In America, the decision was made to assess cars according to all the pollutants they emit, not just CO2.

Here, diesel engines, which emit a foul cocktail of carcinogens and irritants, including benzene, soots, nitrogen oxides and tars, do very badly. Hence the temptation to, er, modify the engines a bit so they pass.

America saw the light when it comes to diesel decades ago. The city of Los Angeles' bus fleet, several thousand strong, is now entirely diesel-free. Compare this with London, the vast majority of whose 8,600 buses are diesel-powered.

In Europe, our filthy air is a direct result of the game of mutually assured deception played by the carmakers and the taxmen, whereby tax breaks are determined entirely by CO2 emissions. The bureaucrats set emissions and consumption targets, and the carmakers, allegedly, cheat their way to meeting them (I have no doubt that, if proved guilty, VW is not the only manufacturer with a case to answer). Company car fleets often comprise only diesels, because of the carbon tax dodge.

The only way out for VW, which says it is investigating, is to reprogram all those cars so they comply with America's emissions laws - in the real world. This will, inevitably, hit performance and economy hard. Slow, dirty and not as frugal as claimed, that is the reality of diesel driving. But it has taken the land of the Humvee and the Ford Mustang to prove the point.

COMMENT on Michael Hanlon's view at www.telegraph.co.uk/comment

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