

Europe must now come clean on diesel

America's tighter pollution checks reveal a long-term deception on emissions by European carmakers

By Michael Hanlon

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Few things get up the Euro-Green nostril 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 and clever little eurohatches - cars made by the likes of Volkswagen.

But it has probably escaped the attention of the eurogreens 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 Britons die every year as a direct result of vehicle-derived air pollution. Americans, in contrast, stopped dying of smog a generation ago, when the smog laws swept the filthiest vehicles into the scrapyards.

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The reason? Europe's love affair with filthy diesel cars, buses and trucks. And 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 has good

evidence, from a study by scientists at West Virginia University, that Volkswagen, one of the world's largest auto-makers, has been cheating 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 alter the engine management software to reduce emissions.

When the car is driven in normal use this “defeat 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 proven, VW faces fines of \$18bn and will have to recall 500,000 cars. It is not clear whether the same cheats have been used on VW diesels sold in Europe, although stories have emerged in the last year that many diesel cars on sale are far, 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 car makers during the mad dash-for-diesel of the last few decades.



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That it has taken the Americans, lovers of the gas-guzzler, to blow away the charade that is the European take on 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 future 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. And carbon dioxide, although harmless in the concentrations emitted by any vehicle, is the gas that causes global warming.

Here, 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. And 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 has a bus fleet 2,400-strong; a mere 150 of these are now diesel powered (the rest are driven by natural gas or electricity). Compare this to London, where nearly all 6,800 buses are diesel-powered.

In Europe, our filthy air is a direct result of the game of mutually-assured-deception played by the auto-makers and the taxmen, whereby tax breaks are determined entirely by CO₂ emissions. The bureaucrats set emissions and consumption targets, and the car makers, allegedly, cheat their way to meeting them (I have no doubt that, if proven 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 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's the reality of diesel driving. But it has taken the land of the Cadillac Escalade and Ford Mustang to prove the point.