**The Ulez Front in the Climate ‘Culture War’**

Philip Hammond

Is opposition to the extension of London’s Ultra-low Emissions Zone a symptom of the ‘culture wars’ or a sign that environmental policy and communications suffer from a democratic deficit?

Many commentators were dismayed that the extension of London’s Ultra-low Emissions Zone (Ulez) became a ‘culture wars’ issue in the July 2023 Uxbridge by-election (Harvey 2023). Academics joined in, warning that “net-zero policies are the next target of right-wing populism and culture wars” (Atkins 2023). A perceived cultural division on climate policy is not confined to the local issue of London’s Ulez — *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman (2023) similarly argues that “climate is now a culture war issue”, for example — and nor is it entirely new (Hoffman 2012). Yet the specifics of today’s Ulez debate can clarify the broader dynamics of climate politics and communication.

**Culture war?**

Casting issues in terms of ‘culture wars’ often produces more heat than light: the clash of values is rarely well-defined; each side blames the other for starting it; each accuses the other of conspiratorial thinking. Politics has increasingly taken this form over the last decade or so largely because of elite incomprehension at populist revolts against technocratic, expertise-led governance. From that perspective, opposition to Ulez seems ridiculous. As one observer sardonically remarked, “Fringe rightwing conspiracy theorists...view walking around your neighbourhood breathing in fresh air as the latest terrifying assault on our freedoms” (Shadijanova 2023). The benefits of official policy are seen as so self-evident that opposition must be motivated by extremist ideology, disinformation or conspiracy theories.

Viewed from the other side, policies such as Ulez appear as top-down impositions that restrict individual liberty and avoid democratic accountability. In pursuit, supposedly, of a greater good, scare-mongering publicity campaigns are used to induce fear and delegitimise dissent. Since policies are seen to be cooked-up and enforced without open democratic contestation, they are often understood as the outcome of malevolent elite scheming. According to *The Daily Sceptic*, for instance, Ulez is “just a very small part of a much larger programme to control how our rulers believe we should live our lives” (Craig 2023). As evidence, the article points to London Mayor Sadiq Khan’s leading role in C40 Cities, a “global network of mayors of the world’s leading cities that are united in action to confront the climate crisis” (www.c40.org).

**Conspiracy hunting**

Proponents of the Ulez expansion have tended to smear and discredit their opponents. Mayor Khan claimed that protestors included “anti-vaxxers…Covid deniers, conspiracy theorists and Nazis”, for example (Simpson 2023a). The claim was echoed by the BBC, which characterised protestors as “far-right conspiracy theorists”, though it later backed down after complaints (Simpson 2023b). A BBC whistle-blower claimed the broadcaster was also colluding with Khan to limit criticism of Ulez, imposing a mandatory editorial referral on all Ulez stories. The senior news producer who leaked the details alleged that the BBC was “saying one thing publicly…while asking staff to act in another way and control the narrative” (Maddox 2023).

Even more damagingly, it emerged that official narrative control was misrepresenting the scientific basis for the policy. A study by researchers at Imperial College (Ma et al. 2021) suggested that in combination with other policies the existing Ulez had contributed to better air quality, but had itself afforded “only small improvements”, the greatest of which was a “reduction of less than 3% for NO2 [nitrogen dioxide] concentrations”. Deputy mayor Shirley Rodrigues wrote to a different research group at Imperial (which had received nearly £1m in funding from the mayor’s office), saying she was “really disappointed” with the findings and asking for help to counter them (Rufo 2023). This repeated a pattern from 2018, when Rodrigues wrote to researchers at Queen Mary University of London asking them to “reword” their study’s finding that there was “no evidence” of health benefits to children from London’s Low Emissions Zone (Knapton 2023). After the Ulez expansion went ahead, a fact-check by Channel 4 News calculated that, on the mayor’s own data, it would “add just 13 minutes to the life expectancy of the average Londoner in 2023” (Lee 2023).

As this indicates, suspicions about elite machinations may not be as far-fetched as the ‘conspiracy theorists’ label is intended to imply. Take *The Daily Sceptic*’s claims about the ambitions of C40 Cities, for instance. The organisation’s own website notes that in his capacity as C40’s Chair Khan is “committed to align C40’s budget and staffing behind efforts to tackle air pollution worldwide” and quotes him as hoping to “fashion a new world after the pandemic”. A 2019 report from C40 Cities, [*The Future of Urban Consumption in a 1.5°C World*](https://expose-news.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Arup-C40-The-Future-of-Urban-Consumption-in-a-1-5C-World.pdf), outlines several targets for ‘consumption interventions’ to reduce carbon emissions by 2030. These include ‘dietary change’, with a ‘progressive target’ of 16kg of meat and 90kg of dairy consumption per person per year, and an ‘ambitious target’ of zero meat and dairy consumption; eight new clothing items per person annually (three for the ‘ambitious target’); and a reduction in private vehicle ownership to 190 per 1,000 people by 2030, with the ambitious target of zero private vehicles. In this context, it does not seem unreasonable to characterise Ulez as “part of a much larger programme to control how our rulers believe we should live our lives”. Indeed, others reached similar conclusions about C40’s agenda (Kessler 2023, La Terriere 2023).

**Serving the public?**

Attending Climate Week in New York the month after the Ulez extension, Kahn took to X (formerly Twitter) [to argue that](https://x.com/MayorofLondon/status/1703706907918152072?s=20) “The most disadvantaged Londoners are suffering the worst consequences of air pollution and the climate crisis”. He wanted, he said, to emphasise “how important it is to put people at the heart of tackling these twin crises”. Yet acting on behalf of the vulnerable is not the same as acting democratically, and when people were explicitly asked about the expansion of Ulez, they opposed it. In the [consultation](https://ehq-production-europe.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/a2137abe211c05fa5bd2cddcf64a497aa522b75f/original/1669212579/af1dd51b8aa03467166805bcffa78e52_appendix-f-aecom-consultation-report-proposals-for-the-ultra-low-emission-zone-expansion-in-2023-and-shaping-the-future-of-road-user-charging.pdf) conducted by Transport for London in 2022, 59% of the public opposed the policy (rising to 68% when responses from campaigners were excluded).

Anti-Ulez groups such as [Stop-ULEZ](https://stop-ulez.com/) and [Truth About ULEZ](https://truthaboutulez.co.uk/) highlight various problems, including its cost (often understood as a ‘tax-grab’ by the mayor), and the traffic-camera surveillance regime. The core issue, though, is the lack of democratic mandate — which is why the Uxbridge by-election, widely interpreted as a revolt against Ulez, seemed so worrying. Perhaps the clearest example in this respect is the Together Declaration, which originated in opposition to Covid-19 vaccine passports (https://togetherdeclaration.org/about/). It has since taken up other issues, including Ulez, through which a “draconian, controlling relationship [has] formed with our elected representatives”, entailing an “uninvited restructuring of the social contract”.

A democratic deficit, rather than a culture clash, is at the heart of the conflict over Ulez and other climate policies. Britain’s Net Zero policy, adopted in 2019, was not part of any political programme or manifesto offered to the public, for example. Rather, it emerged from an unaccountable quango, the Committee on Climate Change, and passed into law in a matter of weeks. Whatever one thinks of the policy, Britain’s Net Zero law clearly bypassed the sorts of democratic decision-making processes that would normally be expected to precede a government passing legislation with such far-reaching implications.

**Communications control**

In line with such top-down policy-making, officialdom’s approach to climate communications has long preferred ‘nudge’ messaging to open debate and rational argument. The aim, as a Cabinet Office paper explained in 2010, is “changing behaviour without changing minds” (Dolan et al. 2010). The same year, this strategy became institutionalised in UK governance with the establishment of the Behavioural Insights Team, which continues to advise government — including on “How to Build a Net Zero Society” using “incentives” and “nudges” (Park et al. 2023).

A similar ethos informs broadcasting. All UK broadcasters are members of the environmental organisation Albert, for example, whose ‘[Planet Placement](https://wearealbert.org/editorial/why/)’ initiative counsels programme-makers how to “shift mindsets and make positive environmental behaviours mainstream” by “creating content that normalises sustainable behaviours”. Sky even commissioned its own report from the Behavioural Insights Team on “nudging viewers to decarbonise their lifestyles” via programming that “makes viewers…less likely to argue with information they initially disagree with” (Londakova et al. 2021). Meanwhile BBC Verify, like other projects such as the [Trusted News Initiative](https://www.bbc.co.uk/beyondfakenews/trusted-news-initiative/how-to-tackle-climate-disinformation) or [BBC Reality Check](https://www.bbc.com/news/59147659), hunts down “climate change denial” on social media networks (Silva and Ahmed 2023).

The problem, for those who wish to control the narrative, is that social media and alternative websites provide a forum for open debate and diverse views — at least for now. Lurid colours on weather maps, scary names for summer heatwaves, or the official announcement of the era of ‘global boiling’ are [routinely questioned and mocked](https://dailysceptic.org/2023/08/02/is-the-era-of-global-boiling-really-upon-us-the-climate-fear-mongers-are-in-danger-of-becoming-a-laughing-stock/) on social networks. Dissident scientists such as Professor Judith Curry — formerly chair of the School of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at Georgia Tech and a fellow of the American Meteorological Society, who was effectively hounded out of academia under pressure from activists (Rose 2015) — find a wide [audience on social media](https://x.com/curryja). In this context, characterising disagreement over environmental policies such as Ulez as a ‘culture war’ waged by ‘extremists’ is not a description so much as an attempt to quash dissent.

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