

# hybrids, EVs and greenwashing



As the much-anticipated Transport Decarbonisation Plan is released,<sup>1</sup> we can see that low-emission vehicles are put forward, by the motor manufacturers and even central government, as the primary solution for moving towards greater environmental sustainability in transport. The message is that we should buy hybrid or electric vehicles (EVs) to resolve the climate change problem: we can maintain and even increase our levels of mobility if we use low-emission vehicles. A more critical reading would

view this as a neo-liberal, motor-manufacturer-led hijack of the environmental agenda (with central government effectively captured and following this position), subverting the policy solution into a consumer-led process.

A large part of this narrative, as presented to government and the public, is produced through car advertising. This includes associating the vehicle with environmental themes and images to artificially enhance the image of a brand. We can see three key environmental discourses at play: the vehicle giving access to the open landscape; the vehicle as the solution to climate change; and the simplicity of the EV solution. This article looks at each of these in turn.

## Discourse 1 – Access to the open landscape

This is a classic discourse, used since the early days of motorisation from the early 1900s. In such advertising the car is positioned on a usually empty road, in the midst of a beautiful landscape, such as a mountainous or hilly area, and sometimes even an empty cityscape. The goal of the messaging is to suggest that the car gives you unhindered access to these landscapes, reinforcing the power and dominance of humans – and the vehicles they drive – over nature.

In Fig. 1 a Land Rover is pictured, somewhat improbably, on the top of a mountain, above text reading 'There aren't many things that can stand in the way of the Land Rover Discovery ... [with its] best-in-class off-road capabilities [to help] follow the road less travelled'. The sky is blue, the landscape is beautiful, and the vehicle is foregrounded on a carpet of grass, looking towards and presented in the same colour as the mountains to promote association. 'Success' is related to off-road driving.

## Discourse 2 – The solution to climate change

More insidious is the positioning of the car as 'clean' and 'green' and the solution to the climate change problem. The messaging found in the print adverts shown in Fig. 2 is that we can maintain our driving behaviours as long as we use low-emission vehicles, and the climate problems will be resolved. The Toyota Prius has, for two decades, been advertised as a 'breath of fresh air' where 'today's

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ISN'T ALWAYS A ROAD**

**LAND ROVER**  
ABOVE & BEYOND

**LAND ROVER DISCOVERY. WINNER OF AUTO EXPRESS  
LARGE PREMIUM SUV OF THE YEAR.**

There aren't many things that can stand in the way of the Land Rover Discovery. Not with its best-in-class off-road capabilities, ingenious driving technologies, and overall comfort and versatility. Some of the toughest critics around the world agree and have named Discovery winner of the Auto Express Large Premium SUV of the Year. Here's to always following the road less travelled.

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Official NEDC Equivalent (NEDCeq) Fuel Consumption for the Land Rover Discovery range in mpg (l/100km): Combined 20.8-37.7 (19.8-7.5). CO<sub>2</sub> Emissions 224-197 g/km. The figures provided are NEDCeq calculated from official manufacturer's WLTP tests in accordance with EU legislation. For comparison purposes only. Real world figures may differ. CO<sub>2</sub> and fuel economy figures may vary according to wheel fitment and optional extras fitted.

Fig. 1 Access to the open landscape – magazine advert for the Land Rover Discovery, 2019

Source: Advertising Archives



**Fig. 2 The solution to climate change – magazine adverts for the Toyota Prius, 2010 (left), Saab 9-3 Turbo, 2010 (centre), and Lexus RX400h, 2007 (right)**

Source: Advertising Archives

environmental thinking will inspire tomorrow's technology'. The Saab 9-3 Turbo can 'lower emissions... [with] no omissions'. Some of the large sports utility vehicles (SUVs) are even advertised using supposed green credentials. An example is the Lexus RX400h, where an appropriate vehicle purchase will lead to 'low emissions... [and] zero guilt'.

Images are invariably backgrounded with beautiful landscapes, clear skies, and associated green or blue colouring. These types of vehicles have apparently 'lowered [carbon dioxide] emissions by billions of pounds'. Yet the comparator is not given and is, presumably, the petrol-vehicle alternative rather than more use of public transport, walking, or cycling. Means-goal: if you purchase this vehicle you are a forward-looking motorist, helping to resolve the climate change problem. Unwritten consequences: carbon dioxide emissions would be much lower if you used public transport, walked, or cycled.

The carbon dioxide emissions from hybrid or electric vehicles are much dependent on energy supply, usage, and even vehicle-charging behaviours – simply buying a new vehicle does not mean that your carbon dioxide emissions will decrease.

The advertising can be contrasted with the actual environmental performance of the vehicles. The high-performance cars and SUVs have very high carbon dioxide emissions, often over 200 grams per kilometre, and the supposed green SUVs are in the high 180 grams per kilometre range. The hybrid electric cars have reduced emissions to less than 100 grams per kilometre, particularly when plug-in

and electric driving are used. But these figures reflect test cycle driving, whereas on-road driving conditions are more fuel consumptive, with higher emissions. Lifecycle emissions are dependent on the overall electric supply, including whether renewable energy is used at source. Hence much of the carbon dioxide emissions performance, and particularly the rhetoric surrounding this, is little more than product positioning. Travel by walking, cycling and public transport is always a much better choice in terms of carbon dioxide emissions, but of course remains undiscussed in the advertising.

### Discourse 3 – The simplicity of the electric-vehicle solution

Some of the recent adverts position plug-in hybrid vehicles and EVs as the easy solution to the environmental problems being faced globally.

The Audi Q7 shown in Fig. 3 is powered from a simple household plug. This is possible, but usually there is a specific and quicker charging point used for vehicles, available at extra cost. The empty background and low-saturation colours accentuate the dominant vehicle and charging lead. Claim: hybrid vehicle technology can very simply resolve the climate change and wider environmental problems. Means-goal: all we need to do is purchase the latest vehicle and plug it in; we can still maintain our current mobility patterns. Unwritten consequences: reducing carbon dioxide emissions from travel is much more complex than this, involving the built form, infrastructure for public transport, walking and



**Fig. 3 The simplicity of the EV solution – magazine advert for the Audi Q7, 2016**  
 Source: Advertising Archives

cycling, complemented by low-emission vehicles powered by renewable energy supplies.

Relying on low-emission vehicles has potential problematic social equity impacts. For example, the cost of new low-emission vehicles is very high, available only to higher-income groups. Vehicles are better charged at home, but this requires a drive on which to park – not available for many households. More vehicles on the street, even if they are cleanly fuelled, will not resolve wider issues such as community severance and traffic casualties.

The end result is that the vehicle adverts are examples of environmental greenwashing – expressing environmental concerns as a cover for the actual product. Low-emission vehicles, via green consumerism, are put forward as the response to climate change. Individuals are more likely to choose one product over another if they are associated with positive imagery, such as environmental features. Hence many motor manufacturers use positive environmental association in seeking to benefit from perceived green purchases.

Indeed, car advertising is very successful at this, with a number of memorable and well developed adverts used over the years. Research has examined some of the themes utilised, including aligning the car purchase with access to the open landscape, the solution to climate change, and the simplicity of the electric car. The means-goal is to buy the car and resolve the environmental problems, but the more complex lifecycle, adaptation, behavioural and social equity issues are overlooked.

Central government has been captured in this process – maintaining the motor manufacturers’ narrative in policy documents. The central role that public intervention could and should play is ignored. The provision of new public transport, cycling and walking infrastructure, with high-quality and extensive networks, is required alongside compact urban centres – and the public need to be involved in the debate to help shape and support the policy proposals. A strengthened participatory and deliberative approach to decision-making can be used to discuss and debate policy measures. The Transport Decarbonisation Plan is unfortunately fatally flawed: green consumerism is unlikely to be enough.

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**Note**

- 1 *Decarbonising Transport: A Better, Greener Britain.* Transport Decarbonisation Plan. Department for Transport, Jul. 2021. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/transport-decarbonisation-plan](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transport-decarbonisation-plan)