“[T]he weather in the week that preceded the smog of 1952 was relatively good. Each day had its gentle breezes and glimpses of sunshine, but by Thursday 4 December the conditions began to deteriorate. The winds became slacker, the air damper and the skies grey. A slow-moving anticyclone came to a halt over the city of London. By Thursday evening it was evident that London would be very foggy.

When Friday came the scene was positively Dickensian. There was:

fog everywhere, fog up the river where it flows among the green aits and meadows – fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gun-whales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little ’prentice boy on the deck

The fog was thicker on that Friday morning than many people could ever remember. Through the day it steadily grew even thicker. In the afternoon people were already experiencing discomfort, and noticing the choking smell in the air. Those who walked about in the fog found their skin and clothing quite filthy after a short time. By Friday night the treatment of respiratory cases was running at twice its normal level and the anticyclone had stalled completely. A million chimneys poured smoke out into the foggy stagnant air. It became ever more polluted as Londoners tried to dispel the cold and gloom.

On Saturday the fog was still there. No breezes had come to drive it off. Gradually, with visibility near zero, the transport system began to grind to a halt. People continued to suffer and some died. As with the fog of 1873, prize show animals had to be destroyed. On Sunday the fog continued and so did the deaths. The emergency services were no longer able to respond in any effective way. It is doubtful whether many people perceived the nature of the calamity that had befallen them. The Victorians would have known that such fogs are killers, but they had become uncommon in the twentieth century. When Monday morning came conditions seemed slightly better and the transport services gradually came to life, although delays abounded. On Tuesday the Great Smog was over.

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When Parliament gathered after the Christmas recess, government ministers were subjected to a barrage of questions. There seemed little enthusiasm on the part of the government for new legislation and ministers drew attention to the powers local government bodies had under the Public Health Act 1936. The smog could not be ignored, however. It became the subject of investigations by the Beaver Committee in 1953, whose final report appeared in 1954. It was not particularly innovative, but important nonetheless, as it drew together much of the thinking on smoke abatement that had accumulated over previous decades. Continual pressure in the months that followed meant that the government was not allowed to neglect the report.
Possible government lethargy in enacting the recommendations of the Beaver Committee was forestalled when a Clean Air bill was privately introduced in the House of Commons by Gerald Nabarro, only to be withdrawn when it was clear that the government was committed to a bill of its own. The government’s bill was debated in late 1955. It was criticized by both the Opposition and by Nabarro as being too weak. The hand of the Federation of British Industry was claimed to be at work in its drafting. It gave industry seven years before complete compliance was necessary. ‘Practicability’ and ‘reasonableness’ continued to be dominating features of the legislation. Local authorities would not be compelled to create smokeless zones. During the elections, both parties supported air pollution reform and the new government enacted the Clean Air Act of 5 July 1956.

Perhaps the most radical element of the Clean Air Act of 1956 was that for the first time legislation attempted to control domestic sources of pollution as well as those of industry.

As can be seen in the long struggle for cleaner air, there was a need to raise public awareness of its importance. It had been no use for a few idealistic activists to press for change: it had to be supported by the public at large. After all, public liberty is infringed by the desire for clean air, so it is necessary that the population at large is aware that the sacrifices are small compared to the great advantages of a cleaner atmosphere. The smog of 1952 had made the disadvantages of polluted air so obvious that it was clear to the political parties as they fought the election that action on the issue would receive broad public support.

Naturally it was not simply idealism that finally won over a sceptical public and Parliament. There had been a great deal of enthusiasm for change among smoke abatement societies of the nineteenth century. Even the smog of 1952 would not have been a successful ally, had it not been for the changing social conditions. If servants had still been available to clean out dirty grates and stoves, who would have pressed for change? Had electricity or gas not been reasonably priced, who would have pressed for colder homes by banning the fuel [coal] which would heat them cheaply and efficiently?"