

NATIONAL REVIEW

Prince William Is Wrong to Hate the Private Space Race

He represents an anti-innovation environmentalism that is blind to the benefits our new space age will bring.

Andrew Follett

October 19th, 2021

The British Prince William really wants self-made billionaire space entrepreneurs such as Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk to stay grounded.

The Duke of Cambridge, who's second in the line of succession to the British throne, attacked the billionaire space race last week, claiming that the world's greatest minds should be more focused on saving Earth from global warming rather than looking beyond it.

The Duke cited a “rise in climate anxiety” among young people around the world whose “futures are basically threatened” by global warming. “We need some of the world's greatest brains and minds fixed on trying to repair this planet, not trying to find the next place to go and live,” William said a day after Bezos launched Captain Kirk *Star Trek* actor William Shatner into space.

Let us put aside the fact that Shatner said his trip to space made him much more interested in taking care of the planet.

And let's ignore for a second the irony of self-made billionaires such as Bezos and Musk, who came from little and earned their money by offering stellar services like Amazon and PayPal to the world, being lectured by someone born into wealth and privilege.

The idea that billionaires in space aren't helping people on Earth — ironically often expressed by iPhones tweeting via satellite connections that depend upon aerospace technology — is just demonstrably untrue.

It is of course true that many young people are anxious about global warming. A recent poll found that 39 percent of young people even “feel uncertain” about having children because of the phenomenon. Prince William’s own brother, Harry the Duke of Sussex, has implied that having more than two children would be irresponsible in the face of climate change and assured the public that he will limit his own reproduction accordingly. (His words may have been a subtle swipe at Prince William, who has three children.)

To be blunt, while global warming is certainly a real problem, giving up on space exploration or one’s dreams of starting a family are not exactly rational responses. But such extreme reactions are sadly the predictable results of an intense propaganda campaign conducted by people like the Duke of Cambridge.

The duke is basically making two arguments. First, that climate change will result in an apocalyptic crisis that will make Earth uninhabitable and force humanity to look for a new planet to call home. Second, that Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk could meaningfully affect the planet’s thermostat if only they abandoned space travel to focus on Earth. Both of those claims are wrong.

Consider the charge of apocalypticism. The current scientific consensus of the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is that global warming will be nowhere close to world-ending and that we have already seen about 30 percent of the damage that global warming will cause by 2100.

Some remaining voices of relative reason on the political left, such as the writer Scott Siskind, have pointed this out, noting that the average person in the developed world is unlikely to notice much of an effect. He also quotes the IPCC saying that a runaway-greenhouse effect turning the Earth into a copy of Venus “appears to have virtually no chance of being induced by anthropogenic activities.” Giving up on space travel or forgoing childbearing on the theory that the Earth will shortly become a desertified hellscape of a planet is scientifically absurd.

The IPCC predicts that the average global temperature will increase by a couple of degrees Celsius and that sea levels could rise half a meter by 2100. That could no doubt result in some serious disruptions, particularly to coastal communities, but it isn’t exactly justification for the apocalyptic claim by young progressives that the world itself will *end* in ten years. The claim also isn’t helped by the fact that environmentally minded alarmists have been making the same prediction for decades, and their warnings of literal Armageddon never quite materialize.

Secondly, there’s the claim that Bezos and Musk could meaningfully alter the global thermostat if only they invested in environmentalism. Bezos publicly says he funds his space company, Blue Origin, with \$1 billion per year. Musk’s SpaceX generated \$2 billion in total revenue in 2018. These companies are relatively comparable to the cost of funding the British monarchy (including Prince William’s lavish lifestyle). That cost is estimated at almost half a billion dollars annually, with the Crown Estate expected to bring in \$1.2 billion annually from leasing out offshore wind farms. It must take some degree of cognitive dissonance to think going to outer space is a waste of money but funding the pomp and circumstance of the British monarchy is commonsense spending.

Meanwhile, Musk's electric car and battery company, Tesla, which has the potential to help reduce harmful emissions that contribute to climate change, had \$31.5 billion in total revenue. So Musk's companies are arguably already generating 15 times more wealth dedicated to solving environmental problems than to space exploration.

Even so, just one proposal by environmentalists to solve global warming, the Green New Deal, had an estimated price tag of \$93 trillion. You don't need to be a rocket scientist to calculate that Blue Origin and SpaceX combined could operate for 31,000 years on that kind of budget. So the argument that they're diverting significant sums of money from solving global warming is rather ridiculous.

Indeed, the entire global space industry is valued around \$420 billion, which pales in comparison with the global environmental industry's value of \$1.12 trillion. The notion that investment in space is crowding out environmental investment is just . . . out of this world.

And this is all assuming that space exploration wouldn't generate technological spinoffs applicable to planet-side environmental efforts, which historically hasn't been the case. Heck, the lithium-ion batteries in Musk's Tesla cars and solar panels actually originated with the space program. Shatner and Bezos previously stated that the flight represented a "baby step" toward relocating polluting industries to space, a long-term goal of the Amazon billionaire.

Perhaps instead of hoping these billionaires stay grounded in the name of phony environmentalism, we should wish them the best in their quest for the stars while they continue to improve life here on Earth as well.