

# The 'population bomb' will only explode if we rely on government to defuse it

FREE RADICAL  
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Prince William has been woefully misunderstood. His fretting about the "terrible impact" of Africa's growing population on wildlife last week was criticised as Neo-Malthusianism of the worst sort: a misanthropic lament at there being "too many people in the world". But read his words closely and you'll see it was nothing of the sort. Avoiding the hateful nostalgia of those who would rather Africa poor, empty and undeveloped, so long as carbon emissions are lower and there are enough wild animals to keep safari tourists happy, his simple point was that there are consequences to a larger population and it's sensible to mitigate them.

If only Stephen Hawking were so reasonable. The cosmologist has taken a keen interest in the apocalypse of late, and has said that the world is in danger of "self-destructing" unless the global population stops increasing "at an alarming rate".

Coming from a scientist, this is bizarre. As the economist Bjørn Lomborg points out, having peaked in the Sixties, the global rate of population increase is now at its lowest in 65 years and growth is likely to end altogether by the end of the century. Fine, it is now increasingly focused on Africa and the Middle East. But from Thomas Malthus to Paul Ehrlich, every previous population panic has turned out fine, with people sufficiently ingenious in everything

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from food production to environmental stewardship to thrive, however many of us there are.

More worrying is that extreme pessimism such as Hawking's is now so entrenched in the West. This is partly a function of the strength of the green movement, which becomes more despairing of human life by the day. But in Britain there is a further cause: statism.

Have you ever heard someone complain about the impact of immigration on supermarket queues? Me neither. It's no coincidence that our anxieties about overcrowding and population growth, whether driven by immigrants or native births, are exclusively focused on areas that are run by, or governed by, politicians.

Packed trains? Our rail network is tied up in knots by regulation. Can't get a GP? The NHS is pitiful at responding to changes in demand, with increasing numbers of patients now choosing to get treated overseas. No school place in your area? While free schools mean that capacity can be opened up more flexibly, we're still too reliant on top-down decision-making. The housing market, which no one can sensibly describe as free, is incapable of providing enough homes to meet demand.

Prince William is right: defenders of a rising population can be as guilty of wishful thinking as its opponents are of apocalypticism. If you are going to have more people, they need homes, schools and infrastructure, and we must provide them in a way that won't cause irreparable damage to the environment. There are downsides to a larger population, just as there are astonishing upsides. But we'll get only the former if we expect government to mitigate the consequences.



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