

More Optimism Needed

Recently a student **found plans** for a nuclear powered interplanetary space vehicle developed by British Rail in 1970-73. This vehicle would have used nuclear fusion initiated by lasers as its power source.

Cynical 21st-century folk rubbished the idea:

"I thought it must be a joke at first," the student who found the plans said yesterday. "It is amazing that British Rail actually developed these plans. They obviously believed people would be transported around space to different planets in the future..."

We, on the other hand, are astonished that there exist scientifically literate people who believe that they won't.

Michel van Baal, from the European Space Agency, based in Holland, said: "I have had a look at the plans, and they don't look very serious to me at all. It is based on a fusion process that doesn't exist yet and if it would, would need an unbelievable amount of energy..."

And this objection does not look serious to us. Does a spokesman for the European Space Agency really think that because the vehicle would be powered by a fusion process that does not yet exist, the designs for it are worthless?

Mr van Baal has ruled out in advance a possible means of reducing the cost of space travel not because of evidence but because of pessimism.

It so happens that physicists at Berkeley are working on producing **nuclear fusion** using **lasers** and making this technology **commercially viable**. Suppose that Mr van Baal is right and this technology can't be used for space travel. Then by investigating its viability we shall rule out one possible means of interstellar travel and focus our resources elsewhere. And if he is wrong then this investigation will lead to improved space travel. If humankind does not spread out into the universe then sooner or later we will be destroyed by an asteroid or some other catastrophe. Optimism will not guarantee survival but it is the only possible route. Pessimism will certainly destroy us.

If only the mainstream institutions of today had the optimism – and

the gumption – displayed by British Rail in 1970.

Tue, 05/02/2006 - 20:30 | [permalink](#)

Why don't we have the same op

Why don't we have the same optimism and gumption today? What happened?

-- Elliot Temple
[My Blog](#)

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Tue, 05/09/2006 - 20:59 | [reply](#)

British vision for space travel powered by fusion

We have become mentally lazy, is what. Not only is this sad, it spells doom for us as a species. Perhaps the controversy about nuclear power in the eighties is what derailed further development of this technology as well. Too many people tend to dismiss technologies out of hand, when problems with them develop.

by [P Smith](#) on Sat, 05/20/2006 - 15:04 | [reply](#)

Why do you think people have

Why do you think people have become mentally lazy? (not saying i disagree, just asking what you think the cause is)

-- Elliot Temple
[My Blog](#)

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Sat, 05/20/2006 - 17:42 | [reply](#)

Optimism

Optimism is a wonderful thing but vigilance is to.

by Richard Hernon Jr. on Sat, 05/27/2006 - 01:54 | [reply](#)