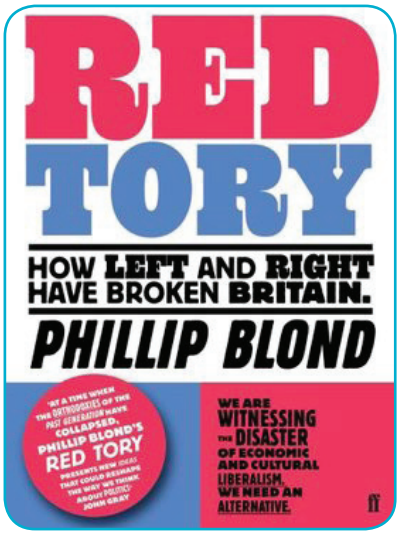
Red Tory: How left and right have broken Britain and how we can fix it



Phillip Blond
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Not long ago people were saying that politics was dead. The great ideologies were no more. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, we had entered a new era, where politicians were only arguing about what worked, not about principle.

And yet deep shifts in culture have been occurring. Many of the readers of this magazine will have noticed the decline in local community life across the UK in the last 30 years. How are we to understand this? In conjunction with Robert Putnam and many others, Philip Blond speaks of it in terms of a weakness in 'civil society', which he defines as everything that is 'not reducible to the imposed activities of the central state or the compulsion and determination of the marketplace'. By paying serious attention to the structure of society in terms of power and relational life, Blond is able to show how both right wing and left wing policies have contributed to the decline in our, once vibrant, local community life. Blond understands our current society to be hollowed out. The great emphasis on individualism, on the one hand, developing alongside an increasingly authoritarian and intrusive state on the other. It is to him we owe much of the thinking behind the phrase 'Big Society' and the new political apposition of 'Big Society' and 'Big State'.

For example, he shows how the right wing, neo-liberal, economic policies of the Thatcher and Reagan era created a global financial system that was no longer constrained by simple national regulation. As a result, London became an international financial centre and the government gained from considerable tax revenues. Such 'goods' came at the price of an invasion of market-type thinking into all parts of society with an emphasis on the individual person as consumer and progress being defined solely through GDP. New Labour, according to this analysis, accepted the economic 'realities' of the new order, cosseting the people of the Square Mile, with the intention of using the taxes generated by the financial houses in London to strengthen the public sector. For them, this meant a policy of interventionism, which we have all come to recognise, with its all-pervasive targets and centralised bureaucratic accountability. Such then is the 'Big State' we have come to experience with its blend of dominant market ideology and the frustrations of the nanny state. From the right, we have experienced the invasion of the market and consumerism into every area of life and thinking, while from the left, we have doctrinaire policies about rights and choice coupled with big government spending. Together, right and left have systematically homogenised and emasculated civil society.

Blomd's take on our history is important and exemplified by his review of the working class during the industrial age. He charts the move into cities and the vigorous grassroots activity that resulted in the formation of cooperatives, as well as political movements like the London Correspondence Society. It is when he gets to the welfare state that he becomes truly controversial. Some would see the welfare state as the pinnacle and a great triumph of the cooperative movement, but Blond argues that it was a false move, because it removed a sense of motivation through active involvement and

fostered state dependency. This develops into a general critique of the collectivist policies of the doctrinaire left wing and their concepts of public ownership, because they undermine civil society. Others might argue that once you have chased the population off the land and into the cities, and developed an economic system which demands a certain level of unemployment, then you have created conditions whereby state-coordinated welfare systems are essential to any just culture.

Nevertheless, we may agree implicitly with the idea of a 'Big Society', but wonder how it can be implemented. We might see that it is needed. We might extol Edmund Burke's 'little platoons' of diverse local groups and associations that make up an essential and enriching component of a good society and a balance against overweening state power. But how do we get from here to there?

The heart of Blond's ideas in the 'how to' section of the book is to rebuild a culture of virtue. It is to pay attention to virtue as the means by which any good society holds open a conversation about what is really good. He invites us to honour people of virtue, who help us consider what we should be aiming for as a society. He speaks of the inspirational schoolteacher or energetic priest, who helps us to form our first ideas of what is good. Blond sees such virtue-based leadership as an essential component in a democratic society, encouraging people, through a process of 'formation' to the place where they can take part in a constructive democratic conversation. Such thinking may resonate with and affirm the role of those who try to articulate the faith and its application to society. Blond is also positively affirming of the role of faith in the process of school education. He writes, 'religious ideas of a transcendent God seem to be uniquely able to achieve both a sense of objective truth and to sustain an educational balance between child and teacher'. This culture of virtue will be established, he says, by means of a wholesale redistribution of power from state to citizens.

In terms of economics, Blond commends an economic subsidiarity, with economic life being organised and provided at the most local level possible. He is radical here as well, pointing to models of community supported agriculture, to community land trusts and local finance initiatives as models for renewal of civil society. He looks for a diverse, local and values-based economy, where mutuality and values, like Fairtrade, work together with a concern for quality.

And he denies that self-interest should be the only coordinator of economic activity.

I guess that I have written enough for readers to discern whether or not to read this book. I am not a Tory by inclination and hesitated in my appreciation of it, because it affirms so much of David Cameron's thinking. Yet I found it truly enlightening and encouraging. It left me wondering where Phillip Blond came from? It turns out that he was a lecturer in Philosophy and Theology and did a PhD in theology with John Millbank. From a position of relative obscurity, his writings were noticed and he was suddenly launched into the full glare of public attention. Perhaps that is also a story in where true vision arises?

Sometimes, as I was reading the book, I felt I was listening to Samuel, dismayed by the developments of his own time and mourning the 'big state' that would come if the people had a king 'like all the other nations' (1 Sam 8ff.). Those with an appreciation of Solomon and the Davidic line may, of course, have other ideas.

Chris Sunderland

The Partisan series

Available at www.susa.info/resources/partisan

The Bible speaks to politics because God is interested in government – the right public ordering of our relational priorities. But what about party politics? Can the sovereignty of God extend to these often disorderly, and self-evidently sectional squabbling compacts? Is it possible to demonstrate the signs of the Kingdom amid the tribalism of political parties? Commanding our loyalty, they can often be places that both express and suppress religious identity. Whether we like it or not, political parties dominate politics in the UK and are set to do so for the foreseeable future. As collegiate enterprises, they have traditionally provided a political focus for joining broad sets of ideas around a unifying theme or common vision for society. In recent years, as the inspiration of great political ideals has waned, they have become more complex and even contradictory vehicles for representation. This offers new challenges and opportunities for Christian engagement in politics.

At fringe events at the recent party conferences, Bible Society launched three publications – extended essays to meet these challenges. This is the first phase of the *Partisan* project – a developing resource on Christianity and British political parties initiated and funded by the Bible Society, and produced and delivered in partnership with the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics (KLICE). The aim of the project is to stimulate new and robust Christian political reflection within British political parties. It has been launched at a paradoxical time. Presently, the public role of religion in the UK is both expanding and deepening. At the same time, it is attracting fierce criticism from increasingly assertive secularists. This makes the need for fresh insight on how Christianity relates to British parties an urgent priority.

The first phase of the project concentrates on the three largest parties – Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat – but our hope is that a later phase will engage other parties as well, and from all four nations of the UK. This phase has developed with the invaluable help of the three Christian party political groups within the parties concerned – the Conservative Christian Fellowship, the Christian Socialist Movement and the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum. These essays represent part of a conversation that has been going on for many years among party political Christians, and as 'critical friends' of the parties, the authors addressed the role of Christianity within them. Stephen Backhouse, Paul Bickley and Joshua Hordern engage, appreciatively but frankly, with the history, theology and broad policy orientations of the party traditions to which they were assigned. This involved identifying the characteristic historical and contemporary 'gifts' given by the Christian faith to the party tradition in question, and also to employing insights from Christian political theology to confront the party's vulnerabilities or 'Achilles heels' where they were found. Discursive, rather than definitive, each booklet offers a particular (theological) reading of the history and contemporary condition of the political party concerned.

It is hoped that the *Partisan* project will bring fresh theological depth, self-awareness, and critical potential to conversations already under way about the contribution of Christian faith to British party politics. Recognising that Christianity has made notable – at times perhaps even decisive – contributions to the thinking and practice of the parties, it challenges the secularist myths about the privatisation of faith. Importantly, the booklets also offer food for the journey for those already working within British political parties, and inspire others to consider entering the party political fray themselves as a constructive, honourable and missional arena of authentic Christian citizenship – for the common good of the whole nation.

Dave Landrum, Senior Parliamentary Officer, Bible Society