Postliberalism could reshape the Conservative party

The intellectual movement of postliberalism is gaining attention and is likely to play an important role in reshaping the Conservative party's future. ***Paul Kelly*** *traces postliberalism's development, from the philosophy of John Gray to figures like Patrick Deneen and argues that while all postliberals agree on their diagnosis of liberalism's self-destruction, they offer different visions for the future.*

As we enter an election year and the expected collapse of the current Conservative government, we are already witnessing the ideological realignment of the party. In this context, attention is turning to the phenomenon of postliberalism, a term being used in op-eds, current affairs magazines and across social media, from left to right, to describe a new political movement. Think tanks and opinion-entrepreneurs seek to own and direct this new political movement and shape the policy agenda of the next governing, or more likely, opposition party in the UK.

Postliberalism is not a uniquely British phenomenon. It's most recently associated with the American political thinker and commentator Patrick Deneen, whose 2018 book Why Liberalism Failed? was given worldwide publicity through its acknowledgment by President Barack Obama. The core belief of postliberals is that the political ideology of liberalism is self-undermining. As Deneen says "Liberalism has failed – not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself. It has failed because it has succeeded". The rest of the theory of postliberalism is an explication of this claim, an account of how it has failed, and more problematically what must be done about that failure. Liberalism fails because it relies on a social theory that undermines the very institutions that are necessary to sustain its conception of morality and order, namely political trust, contract, and the rule of law. All postliberals agree on the analysis that liberalism is its own worst enemy, but they differ significantly on what must be done to overcome the challenge.

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itself.

The origins of postliberalism

Deneen is one of the most significant and articulate voices in postliberalism, but he did not invent the position nor was he the first to raise the problem of liberalism being self-undermining. Prominent British postliberals such as Philip Blond, Adrian Pabst, John Milbank and Lord Maurice Glasman have made the same argument and politicians as diverse as Labour's John Cruddas and the New Conservative Danny Kruger are also significant postliberal thinkers. Yet the originating postliberal voice in the UK was John Gray, the political thinker, commentator and former LSE and Oxford professor.

Gray had been an important conservative thinker coming from the new right with his works on liberal political theorists such as Hayek, Popper, Berlin and the conservative Michael Oakeshott. At a time when the post-Thatcher language of Hayekian neo-liberalism was sweeping all before it, and the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 led Francis Fukuyama to detect the end of history or at least the final triumph of liberal ideology as the only language of politics and policy, Gray turned against neo-liberalism in his book False Dawn in1998. He argued that the unfettered free market and globalisation undermined the very foundations of a modern open market economy, basically making a

version of the argument that neoliberalism undermines itself. His analysis was originally acknowledged in Tony Blair and Anthony Giddens's Third Way, before New Labour reconciled itself to liberal globalisation. Then came the financial crash of 2008 and the subsequent decades of austerity.

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The thirteen-year Blair-Brown experiment had seemed to contradict Gray's pessimism, but by the time of the 2008 crash and the following decades, many have come to see the uncritical faith in a weightless knowledge economy with high levels of internal migration from declining industrial to university towns, and the consequent collapse of communities, as the origins of the contemporary social and economic crisis. The weightless global economy, or the idea that the new economy is about intellectual capital and not machines as well as labour mobility and economic migration, all of which wrought social disruption and the flight of jobs and hope beyond our borders.

As politicians and thinkers sought to respond to this challenge there emerged movements such as Red Toryism with Philip Blond, Maurice Glasman's Blue Labour and some variants of the philosophically light, Big Society agenda. All of these groups began from a communitarian critique of the ideology of neo-liberalism and its obsession with individualism. Instead, they sought a political economy that recognised ideas such as the common good which had been eviscerated, as Gray had warned, so that communities were powerless when work disappeared, and young people left never to return. What was lost, as postliberals such as Pabst, Glasman and Milbank acknowledged, was not just economic goods like work but an entire moral ecology of community, shared values and patriotism – for some the idea of work, family, faith and flag. The new desiccated liberal order appeared to offer liberation and diversity in its privileging of autonomous individuals, but instead it unleashed the chaos of a moral, cultural and political order without values. For Conservatives this was illustrated by the apparent assault on traditional marriage and gender rights, but on the left, it was also shown by the denial of the dignity of labour, skilled manufacturing and opportunities in declining communities as well as an absence of national pride.

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The three strands of postliberalism

Postliberals broadly agree on the social critique of liberalism and its negative impact on society. As such they accept much of the national populist analysis of commentator such as Matthew Goodwin but differ from him on his account of the nature of the common good. Pabst, and Cruddas are Catholics who are influenced by Catholic Social Teaching, as is Maurice Glasman although a Jew. Milbank similarly draws on the riches of contemporary theology. Conservatives such as Kruger take a more Victorian approach to the disciplining power of morality and family. The diversity of philosophical and political sources within the postliberal movement is astonishing and is often barely coherent as it seeks to avoid the trap of individualism and political compromise. Yet the rejection of the unbound individual are at the heart of postliberalism.

I see the movement as having three interconnected strands of ideas: the national populist, the common good communitarian, and the common good absolutists. These three streams form the faces of a trinity and manifest themselves in different combinations in different postliberal thinkers or theories. Until recently the authoritarianism of common good absolutism was more prevalent in the US amongst writers such as Deneen or Adrian Vermuele, but it is becoming increasingly prevalent amongst conservative postliberals in the UK such as the New Conservatives or the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship in their assault on “woke”.

As a response to political, social and economic crisis, postliberalism is a powerful way of separating party-political agendas from the failed past of exhausted parties. But whether it can muster the strength to offer a coherent way forward that does not collapse into mere nostalgia for a world we have lost, or more worryingly a political agenda of populist authoritarianism, is a more serious question. Consequently, postliberalism offers a challenge to political theorists who wish to think beyond the confines of liberal philosophical ideas and to a political movement which seeks to reorient the discourse of political parties. Alternatively it might yet inspire a renewal of liberal political theory and practice, as illustrated by writers such a Danial Chandler in his book Free and Equal,

who is rediscovering the liberal political theory of Rawls as part of a renewed agenda for the centre left.

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