

Five minutes with Phillip Blond: “We’re looking at a complete collapse of standard left and right ideologies”

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*Traditional political and economic models have been challenged by their inability to predict the financial crisis and their failure to bring about a return to prosperity. In an interview with EUOPP’s Managing Editor Stuart Brown, **Phillip Blond** discusses the collapse of left-wing and right-wing ideologies, the new majorities that may take their place, and why despite the EU’s failings, becoming the leading power in Europe still offers Britain its best route to leading events on the world stage.*



You’ve previously stated that the financial crisis has illustrated the bankruptcy of left-wing and right-wing political ideologies. Why have traditional ideologies failed?

I think it’s very clear that we’re looking at a complete collapse of standard left and right ideologies across many countries in Europe. We’re in a situation where the left, in order to achieve its end – chiefly greater equity and a stake for the poor in society – only has the state as its means of delivery. But the state is failing.

It’s clear that the welfare state, as a model, isn’t going to secure equality or the universality of outcomes. This is because the state is misdesigned: it’s centralised, it’s standardised, and it can only conceive of universality as one model, with the same thing delivered in the same way to everybody regardless of their need. This means that the real needs of those at the bottom are never met.

So the state doesn’t deliver equality, but what it does do is cost people enormous amounts of money through taxation. As the burden of taxation shifts away from the very wealthy on to ordinary middle class people, it becomes intolerable economically. The fact that it doesn’t deliver in terms of outcomes means that it’s impossible to defend socially.

However by the same token, the programme of the right has also completely failed. The critique of the state by the right has some purchase, but the solution of neo-liberal markets has failed to deliver. It hasn’t created mass prosperity; it’s created an enormous concentration of wealth. On the watch of the right, the promise of free markets has seen the reality of market capture by oligopolies, cartels and monopolies. Corporations can effectively avoid tax by transfer-pricing, domesticating losses and exporting profits.

So we’re in a situation – and I think Thomas Piketty’s [latest book](#) explains this very well – where all of the dominant trends show that we’re not heading toward equality, and neither the left nor right have the answer to the radical economic inequity that we face. Piketty suggests that only the collectivisation brought about through war can deliver this, but as we don’t want war due to the excessive cost in terms of human lives and treasure, we’re in a genuine policy lacuna.

What kind of ideology do we need in Europe?

I work across Europe in various countries and what I see developing is a new majority. That majority isn’t addressed by the standard left or right, but it is made up of people abandoned by the orthodox ideologies. The people abandoned by the orthodox right are genuine conservatives, often social conservatives, who are by no means racist or xenophobic, but believe in family relationships, institutions and tradition. You see this in the [demonstrations](#) in France, or in the support for UKIP in the UK, where people feel there is nowhere for a standard conservative voice anymore. They feel repudiated and laughed at by social liberals who advocate, as far as they can see, the dissolution of the family, widespread migration, and any practice that people enjoy as somehow self-evidently good.

Now on the left there is a substantial population emerging that has no economic stake in our society and can't see itself as having an economic stake. Even welfarism is something that they feel can't deliver security for themselves. They see that whether under the watch of the left or the right, they will always be poor, they will always be excluded, and they won't have an economic future.

It perhaps won't surprise you to know that I think the future majorities will therefore be composed of those who are socially conservative and the economically marginalised. This is what 'red Toryism' always hoped to speak to. The trouble is that the only people who are reacting to this are the fascists. You see it with Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, or the Front National in France. You have some anarchic left/right crossovers like Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy, but nihilism generally leads to fascism, as we know from Germany.

So if this new majority isn't to turn to fascist politics, which in the end is only offering another combination of the same failed agenda, it's vital that we come up with a new ideological offer. I think that's imperative for the social, economic and political stability of Europe.

It could be argued that the European Union simultaneously represents a process of centralisation and a commitment to free market economics. In a sense does the EU therefore combine both of the problems you identify in left and right-wing ideologies?

In many ways, yes. What I've often argued is that liberalism is the great unacknowledged problem in our society. Liberalism, when it was previously linked with the enlightenment and all kinds of human advancement, always existed as a kind of tertiary outcome of prior, almost conservative beliefs. The idea that slavery is wrong, for instance, was based on a Christian idea of equality. But once you have a liberalism that is unhinged from other value bases, you have no value base and liberalism essentially becomes the pursuit of personal autonomy.

If it were just that, it wouldn't be quite so damaging, but the really damaging aspect of liberalism is that you think everybody else is like you. So you move from your own assertions into universal assertions. Indeed if you look at the example of Jean-Jacques Rousseau you find that embodied in one single figure. Rousseau began with the idea that society is something which corrupts individual authenticity – that everywhere puts you in chains – and yet he concluded with the idea of the 'general will', where we require a form of political authority that collectivises and standardises everybody.

So what people don't recognise enough is that liberalism of this sort has two opposing outcomes, extreme collectivism and extreme individualism. And what we do have in Europe is an extreme form of collectivism: centralisation, governed by elites at the centre, with gestures toward subsidiarity, but no real subsidiarity, certainly not economically. Alongside this we also have neoliberal politics that lead to neoliberal economics.

I think the great tragedy of the European Union is that it has lost its real foundation, which was the German Rhineland, social-market, ordoliberal model of people like Walter Eucken and Wilhelm Röpke. That's now been lost by Europe. And if you look at how Europe has behaved over the issue of debtor and creditor states, you don't see any of that operative there at all. This sort of approach is driving too many countries toward the economic margins and it's helping to license political extremism.

It's hard to see how the European Union, which was founded on the idea of social and political stability, can deliver on that under its current auspices, both in terms of its collectivist element and its individualist practice.

These are underlying problems that the EU has to deal with, but how should Europe seek to address some of the specific threats it faces, such as the Eurozone crisis or foreign policy issues of the kind we've seen in Ukraine?

It's a very difficult question because I think what we're going to see is that countries will increasingly want national lines in the sand when it comes to integration. But what we're witnessing with the European Union is a global institution struggling to be born, where the institutional roadmap doesn't in any real way pay attention to the

individual needs of its members. I don't see how that can be particularly stable.

I think the most worrying thing that's happening in Europe is the collapse in the distinction between the institutions belonging to the EU and those belonging to the Eurozone. The failure to preserve this distinction essentially creates an 'in' or 'out' scenario which is largely foreign to European political history. We've always created national exceptions, which nonetheless prove the rule. Unless we can create that for nations in Europe we'll find that de-globalisation, which is the process that I think is going on, will result in individual countries trying to take more and more national decisions.

Now for those in the Eurozone, what's likely to happen in my view is that they will create insurgent populations that increasingly can't cope with the ten years of economic stagnation that southern Eurozone states, in particular, look like experiencing. In those states I think you're going to see an increasingly Eurosceptic stance taken as citizens decide they can't cope with this.

I've always believed that the euro is not going to deliver on what it promised. Monetary union is actually a fundamentally destabilising factor and until economies are unified, or until we have political solidarity that allows us to operate differently, the euro will be the primary agent of EU instability in the years to come. As a result what we have is a situation where the means we have employed have disrupted the end that we want. If the end goal is European political and social stability, then the greatest disruptive influence is the euro.

Now the political buy-in from so many countries is so large that I suspect the euro will survive in the medium term. The cost of that to the EU in terms of growth and social solidarity may be very large indeed, and the threat politically – particularly on the borders of Europe with Russia and Ukraine, although it could just as easily be the Baltic states or the rise of Islamism in North Africa – is that we're not going to be equal to the problems that we face. And if the EU isn't equal to the threats it faces then it's not clear it will survive those threats.

Alongside the Eurosceptic political movements that have emerged across Europe, another trend we have witnessed is the increase in independence/separatist movements, such as those in Catalonia and Scotland. If the EU is incapable of dealing with the threats you have discussed are we likely to see the rise of nationalism and separatism as an alternative?

What's happening in the world is that globalisation is producing de-globalisation. So what we're finding is that the stresses produced by globalisation are so extreme in terms of politics, economics and people's hopes and dreams that we're reverting to ever more primitive forms of identification in order to deal with it.

Now of course these forms of identification fundamentally don't deal with the underlying problems. Scottish nationalism is the worst response to globalisation because it will cut Scottish people off from the multiplier platform that the Union is for their goods and services. It's also historically false: a separate Scotland contradicts the political unity that there has always been across this island nation. But we are in a world where all of the great ideas have died. So people don't unify at the ideological level any more, instead they unify at ever more primitive levels.

What we're seeing with the 'opting out' and 'opting in' situation is that just as Scottish independence is a negative and backward looking break that can only damage Scotland and the rest of the UK, the idea to 'opt out' of European integration isn't founded on a positive vision. It's founded on a negative response to European attempts to be equal to the tasks they face – and obviously in many ways they're failing.

But the real problem for those who argue for the UK leaving the European Union is why it doesn't consign us to a less than splendid form of isolation. If we did leave we would very likely in my view cease to be a power that matters. And the argument that's not made for the European Union is that Britain could lead Europe. Britain is in fact a more natural leader of Europe than Germany.

Britain could do something that it's strategically never done before, which is that rather than ensuring a divided Europe to allow Britain to rule the rest of the world, as it did during the British Empire, it could rule through and with

Europe and thereby help influence and shape the rest of the world. This is a fundamental geostrategic shift that British minds have to take on board, but I think that it's possible and most people recognise it when it's explained to them.

I think the path to Britain's power in the 21st century is through becoming the leading power in Europe. And in effect we will be the leading power in Europe – by any number of measures we'll have the most powerful economy and we'll have the largest population, assuming Turkey doesn't join. Europe still controls a third of world trade and if Britain were to lead in Europe we would still have a place at the world table, which is where the overwhelming majority of British people would want to be.

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About the interviewee

Phillip Blond – ResPublica

Phillip Blond is the Director of ResPublica and the author of *Red Tory: How Left and Right have Broken Britain and How we can Fix It*.



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