

OffTheCuff Special**RED TORY:****Phillip Blond's fear of 'Broken Britain'**

A Review by Don Milligan¹

The feckless are perhaps more visible than they were in the past. They have certainly alarmed Phillip Blond who evidently believes that the feckless, and fecklessness in one form or another, has now infected the entire society. As a consequence he thinks he is facing the “wholesale collapse of British culture, virtue and belief.” (Blond, 2) His analysis is unexceptional in blaming the decadence and decay of Britain on the individualism and hedonism of ‘The Sixties’, which he contends has gone hand in hand with the growth of consumerism, unregulated ‘market madness’, and the intrusion of the state into more and more areas of social life. The upshot as far as Phillip is concerned has been the disintegration of civil society.² He offers almost apocalyptic assertions concerning Britain’s brokenness; it is a Britain in which drunkenness, swearing, loss of faith in tradition, disorderly schoolchildren, welfare dependency, consumerism, the decay of voluntary associations – and the engorgement of civil society by the state – has resulted in the collapse of Britain’s democracy and of her culture and society.

His rebarbative prose is littered with hyperbole, unsupported generalisations, and forceful assertions of all that Phillip knows “intuitively” to be true; his intuitions are, by the way, “universally shared”. (Blond, 1-3) Consequently, he feels no need to support his prognosis of the maladies afflicting the country with evidence or argument. All is known to be true in advance. Everybody already knows, intuitively, both the nature and scale of the problem, and the medicine that must be administered. It is Phillip’s task to simply bring this all out into the open and to prescribe the course of treatment. The solution he seeks is nothing less than the remoralisation of “Broken Britain”

¹ Phillip Blond, *Red Tory: How the Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It*, London: Faber and Faber, 2010.

² Blond attempts to use some of Robert Putnam’s rather more developed ideas and insights in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

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through the restoration of civil society, the renewal of education, the formation of virtuous individuals, and the full engagement of front-line leaders in the public and private sectors to meet the challenges presented by newly stimulated “proactive users and shapers of service”. (Blond, 172-3; 254)

Blond’s account of the process of moral decline is sternly ideological. Despite his theorising upon the deleterious role of the “Market State”³ he attributes the decline of civility to the manner in which liberalism has been articulated by what he calls in that familiar phrase, “the liberal elite”; it is the culture of individual rights that has resulted in the attenuation of common values and public virtue. As a result he has little to say about the extraordinary changes that have destroyed the traditions, which he fondly imagines held society together prior to 1960. Consequently, it is probably worth considering some of the issues around which Phillip Blond’s fears and remedies coalesce.

The Underclass

Since the inception of capitalism there has always been a layer of people within, or even positioned below, the working class who were notable by their exclusion from much of the cultural and economic life of the society. In the past they were called the *lumpen proletariat*, the *poor*, or the *residuum*. Today, they are called the underclass, the socially excluded, ‘pond life’ or a fistful of other insulting names. These people occupy their position at the very bottom of society for a host of reasons, but most prominent among these, is the assertion of their incompetence, ignorance, improvidence and irresponsibility. They are widely seen to be the architects of their own misfortune, and are often despised and shunned as freeloaders, benefit scroungers and cheats, by the mass of working class people in Britain.

Throughout most of the nineteenth century this layer of society, in the context of penal Poor Laws and the absence of much “Outdoor Relief”,⁴ formed a kind of criminal underclass

³ See Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War Peace and the Course of History*, 2002, London: Penguin, 2003, pp.213-253.

⁴ The principal purpose of the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 was to prevent the able-bodied poor from receiving assistance without incarceration in a workhouse. Many did all they could to remain free – even if that meant attempting to live without Poor Law Relief.

living on its wits by peddling and dealing in rags, bones and all the other detritus of respectable society; they lived by gambling, theft, and prostitution, in vast slums beyond the reach of most of the institutions of the working class. Indeed they were specifically barred from the new working class housing being erected for the industrious poor.⁵

However, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century as the industrial working class and the sheer scale of capitalist enterprise grew these great slums were punctured and broken up by town and borough councils, by railways companies, and by speculative ventures in land and in construction. During this period great working class neighbourhoods and industrial districts absorbed the feckless, the disorganised, and the frankly criminal within their midst. From this time onwards until the late nineteen fifties the underclass, call it what you will, were submerged within working class communities. Consequently, they more or less disappeared from view – they lost their conspicuous role in frightening the wits out of respectable middle class society – because they were informally policed and regulated by the ideas, attitudes, and institutions of the respectable working class who they were compelled to live amongst. The kind of industrial working class which arose after 1865 or 1870 developed consumer co-operatives and big trade unions which eventually embraced labourers and even casual day labourers in a matrix of social institutions, which along with sporting clubs and nonconformist churches, provided a measure of social discipline which it was difficult for the disorderly and the improvident to ignore entirely.

During the 1950s, after seventy or eighty years in existence, this world began to break up not, as Phillip Blond would have it, because of the establishment of the welfare state, but because of the wholesale reorganisation of the working class required by capital, and by the growth of material prosperity amongst the working class. These two forces: firstly, the transformation of the

⁵ The Peabody Donation Fund was established in 1862 and its first housing development was opened in Spitalfields in London in 1864. "Someone in steady, albeit humble, employment, who could pay his rent regularly, was the ideal tenant", Liza Picard, *Victorian London: The Life of a City, 1840-1870*, London: Phoenix, p.58. The rules were strictly applied. There were a plethora of such initiatives during the second half of the nineteenth century aimed at improving conditions; the most famous perhaps was the Guinness Trust established in 1890.

labour process, and secondly, the growth of disposable incomes, began to change the world, which had been ushered in during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, beyond all recognition.

The rapid growth of managerial, supervisory, and administrative functions led to large increases in white collar occupations, and to the spread of clerical and non-manual labour from the lower echelons of the middle class into the working class. By the late fifties this was a harbinger of much larger changes, which were to develop during the sixties and seventies (including the wholesale process of deindustrialisation towards the end of the last century). Together with these changes in the structure and the cultural circumstances of most working people came a growth in real wages and a process of enhanced social differentiation within the working class.

From the late fifties onwards skilled workers and the most energetic and resourceful members of the working class began to buy cars and houses, to move physically beyond the restrictions of the close industrial communities in which they had grown up. Increasingly, their children would go to college and even to university as entrance to the labour market demanded higher levels of education and training. This process saw the gradual desertion of traditional working class neighbourhoods and public housing projects and estates, by the resourceful and the fortunate, leaving behind the low waged, the unskilled, the elderly, the chronically sick, and the feckless: the improvident, the freeloaders, the benefit cheats, and the petty thieves and small-time drug dealers.

This process of social differentiation and geographical separation has resulted in a situation in many of our towns and cities in which many hardworking but low-paid and unskilled workers are now compelled to live in neighbourhoods composed entirely of poor people in which the uncouth, the bullies, and the frankly criminal, rule the roost making the lives of the vulnerable, the elderly, and the respectable poor a dangerous nightmare. These developments were compounded during the eighties and early nineties by the process of deindustrialisation supervised by the *blue* Tories in which mining and much heavy industry was simply closed down; with it went many relatively unskilled manual jobs, condemning large numbers of older men to life on incapacity benefits. The children of many of these workers have fallen inexorably into the class of persons without

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the social and practical skills necessary to enter the labour market.

Phillip Blond attributes much of this to what he even-handedly calls “The Errors of the Right” in which the form of social welfare adopted by both Labour and Conservatives in the forties and fifties, failed “to re-engage and even re-unite capital and labour” by failing to inculcate a sense of common purpose. (Blond, 116) The consequence of his rather narrow and singular view of the profound structural changes, which have shaped the country over the last fifty years, is the advocacy of an equally narrow and singular process of moral rearmament and the growth of charitable endeavour.

The Disappearance Of Deference

So, since the seventies and eighties the underclass has, so to speak, come out of hiding, and it is true that ignorance, incivility, and aggression now blight the lives of many who live in the poorer parts of our towns and cities. By extension, this development is often assimilated into a quite different phenomenon in which rudeness and incivility is thought to be permeating the entire society. This, however, has much to do with the widespread adoption of informal dress for almost all occasions, casual modes of speech, and the abandonment of forms of address which acknowledge the social status of those addressed. Consequently, my students address emails to me with “Hi” or “Hiya” or on extreme occasions as “Dan the Man” or some similar impertinence – or indeed with no salutation at all. In person they call me “Don” or “Mate”. Girls often sign off with rows of kisses.

Quite evidently, the manner in which people think about their teachers has changed. Students readily acknowledge one’s superior knowledge or understanding, but they do not take it for granted, and will consequently only defer to one when it is demonstrably warranted. This is indeed the same with hierarchies of all kinds – their functional utility will be acknowledged – but most modern people do not accept that other people are in any general sense worthy of greater respect or deference just because of their position within a hierarchy. This is an intrinsically alarming state of affairs for Phillip Blond who believes that:

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Historically however, we now know that our elders (who for the most part are our betters) are right. (Blond, 2)

He is talking here about when:

Our parents will tell us that things truly were better before: that children really were polite, that people really did know their neighbours, and that, yes, whole families really did stay together and form lasting bonds with their relations. (Blond, 2)

Phillip does not acknowledge that one of the reasons that many people stayed together in the past was because they could not afford to do anything else. Society was so arranged that divorce for most people was hard to get, or expensive, or both. With most jobs and almost all professions closed to married or divorced women the options for separation were, quite apart from the stigma involved, few and far between. With growing prosperity, contraception, and with most jobs and professions open to women, it is hardly surprising that divorce and separation should greatly increase. People do not believe that their own satisfactions should automatically come second to the fulfilment of some abstract duty. They have no problem belonging to what Phillip Blond calls “a culture of self-indulgence” (Blond, 17).

Incidentally, he does not seem to be aware that around six million people in the UK care full time for disabled, frail, or elderly relatives without pay and with little support from the welfare state.⁶ Indeed he appears to be blithely unaware of the proliferation of charity shops all staffed by volunteers, of hundreds of thousands of fun runners, sponsored for this that and the other, activities in which literally millions of people raise hundreds of millions of pounds for charitable ventures of all kinds. Blond, like Tory leader, David Cameron, and the fundamentalist Christians of the Centre for Social Justice,⁷

⁶ The Princess Royal Trust for Carers <http://www.carers.org/news/over-3-million-carers-in-the-uk-have-wanted-to-walk-away.1357.NW.html>, accessed May 5, 2010.

⁷ Philippa Stroud is the Executive Director of the Centre for Social Justice. She is also infamous for praying over lesbians and gay men in order to cast out their demons. This is sometimes disputed. But, what is not in doubt is that this woman is a fundamentalist Christian committed to opposing equal rights and equal treatment for homosexuals.

appear to believe that there is a truly limitless capacity for expanding charitable activity, in blatant disregard for the gargantuan efforts already made running everything from lifeboats, rural fire services, cancer research laboratories, rescue helicopters, to shelters for the homeless and day care centres for the elderly.

In my “Broken Britain” people look after each other, they often help complete strangers, and are polite and courteous to each other most of the time. Often in the hustle and bustle of city life conduct can be cursory or off-hand, but most of us are psychologically robust enough to encounter brusque treatment without concluding that we are experiencing “social collapse” in a “post-cultural” and “post-democratic” world. (Blond, 8)

The old cultural homogeneities have been broken up not simply by a process of social differentiation within the mass of the working class, but also by immigration in which people from all over the world have come to live in most of Britain’s towns and cities.⁸ These newcomers have for the most part adapted well to our tradition of orderly queuing, and even to our cult of excessive politeness. However, their presence has helped to undermine well-established codes of deference to recognisably superior or deserving members of the white middle class, which depended upon modes of cultural cohesion and common assumptions that have simply vanished.

Incivility

To these disconcerting changes must be added the growth of swearing, drunkenness, and bawdiness, which have come hand in hand with the other changes in manners that have alarmed Phillip Blond. Swearing, does seemed to have increased throughout British society, particularly among young people, and most shockingly to those of us born long ago, among

⁸ At present around eight million out of 62m people in Britain were born abroad. See ‘Population by Country of Birth & Nationality’, July 2008 to June 2009, Office of National Statistics, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=15147>, accessed May 5, 2010. Most of the children and grandchildren of these people were born in the UK and they in their turn often use languages and live in cultures quite different from those associated with the far more homogeneous country of the forties and fifties of the last century. So the percentage of people in Britain who have little or no connection to the Great Britain beloved by Phillip Blond is considerable.

young women who can now be heard *effing and blinding* with a fluency, which in the past favoured by Phillip Blond, was found only in the all-male world of dockyards, engineering workshops, and the taproom of 'low public houses'. These disconcerting developments have been accompanied by an increase in the tendency of young men and women to get wretchedly drunk and to disport themselves in all sorts of disarranged conditions in town and city centres throughout the country.

Town and city centres in Britain were in the past not simply the home of grand public buildings, corn markets, cotton exchanges, theatres, the site of banks and of the offices of lawyers and accountants, they were the home of department stores and of the superior shops and the most luxurious cinemas. During the nineteen fifties these spaces were dominated by the middle class. Town centre shop opening hours ensured that they were closed when most working class people were at their leisure; working class people were paid weekly in cash and did not have chequebooks or bank accounts. Most working class life and consequently, most working class drunkenness and disorderly conduct, occurred in resolutely proletarian neighbourhoods far from the saloon bars, banking halls, theatres, the Kardoma Cafés, and the Clarence or the Imperial Hotels of the city centre. That was the fifties.

These days' working class *oiks* stride into the poshest shops and even buy things with scant regard to the discomfort, which their vulgarity might cause the staff or their more appropriate customers. It is not uncommon for working class people to book into hotels in our larger cities in order to '*Make a Night of It*'. Large numbers of people have definitely become assertively drunken and bawdy in city centres at weekends in ways, which in the past were restricted to moments of permissive disorder, like the Relief of Mafeking, the ending of the First World War or VE Day.⁹ This is all, no doubt, partly the effect of the decay of deference, the relative cheapness of alcohol, widespread contraception, legal abortions, and many other factors that demand lengthy sociological investigation that evidently lay far beyond the intuitions of Phillip Blond concerning the decline of

⁹ The 'Relief of Mafeking' during the Boer War on May 17th/18th, 1900 was marked like that of the night of the Armistice on November 11, 1918, and the Victory in Europe on 8 May 1945, with vast celebrations, accompanied by considerable drunkenness and lewd behavior.

family life and larger numbers of people choosing to live alone. What they are *not* caused by, however, is the collapse of Britain's culture or civilization.

Indeed, bawdiness and drunkenness is an integral part of our life and culture and has been for some considerable time. From the rumbustious ale house of fond memory, extending back in the Tory imagination from the village inn back to time immemorial, and forward to the disorderly pubs, gin palaces, and work's outings and jollies of the industrial age. It is entirely true that alcohol consumption has risen to insupportable levels, and lower levels of public drunkenness and violence would be welcome, but nothing that Phillip Blond has to say about the problem comes close to presenting a solution.

The Red Tory Solution

Phillip Blond likes socialism's "concern with social justice" and he agrees with the "ethical critique of unrestrained capitalism". (Blond, 25-6) The "Broken Britain thesis" is vital:

. . . . because it establishes the crucial link between the failure of the social relationships and civic institutions on the one hand and the issue of socially just outcomes for the bottom 20% of society on the other. (Blond, 75)

This means that he is opposed to the development of unrestrained and irresponsible debt, he favours various forms of profit sharing and shared management and cooperative schemes; 'thinking globally but acting locally' sums up his conception of a morally responsible market in which small family firms should be favoured as a bulwark against the evils and arbitrary power of monopolies and cartels. It is in fact very like the vision of feudal socialism depicted by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*.

As the parson has ever gone hand in hand with the landlord, so has clerical socialism with feudal socialism.

Nothing is easier than to give Christian asceticism a socialist tinge. Has not Christianity declaimed against

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the state? Has it not preached in the place of these, charity and poverty, celibacy and mortification of the flesh¹⁰

This is a vision of the future in which the functions once performed by the Squire and the Vicar of our “organic culture” (Blond, 9), or the mechanics institute, the trade union, and the friendly society of the working class (Blond, 15), will be performed by the voluntary institutions of a revived civil society. It is a mode of society sustained by a revival of family life and of civic values by “bold political leadership and a radical new localism that puts power into the hands of associative groups.” (Blond, 80). Above all, the proper ‘organic’ relationship between rights and duties, between individuals and communities, between the state and the market, will be restored by:

The revival of the associative society . . .

Which would then

. . . . bring with it a revival of those flourishing relationships that make up a society, and which both empower and protect the individual from the arbitrary sway of external power. For a free society demands an account of the common good that is cultivated organically from within rather than imposed arbitrarily from without, and it is this that trumps both the extreme individualism and the statist authoritarianism of liberalism. (Blond, 153)

What Blond is advocating is a utopian project woven from assertions concerning the virtues of social cohesion, discipline, and social responsibility, which he imagines characterised life in Britain before 1965. His comparative statistics concerning what he regards as key indicators of social breakdown are not placed within a coherent historical account of the development of modern Britain. Consequently, he does not compare the treatment of mentally or physically disabled people, or of homosexuals, or of black people, or unmarried mothers, or of their bastard offspring, or of women in general, or of the poor in

¹⁰ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1848, translated 1888, London: Verso, 1998, p.64.

particular, in the halcyon days of social cohesion, in the twenties, thirties, forties, or fifties.

An indication of Phillip's selective memory and of his selective methods are given by his praise for France, Germany, Japan, and Spain who are all, in one way or another, praised for the coherence of their constitutional arrangements and ways of life which have preserved their traditional values against the demands of the market. (Blond, 6-8) This is an imaginary world in which the manifest problems of other societies magically disappear in this holidaymakers' impression of places nicer and more civilised than life is at home.¹¹ The racism, the severe social, economic, and legal inequalities, of other societies are, like those of Britain *Before The Fall* (engineered by the liberal elite and the welfare state), entirely absent from the Red Tory view of the world.

The truth that Britain is manifestly a better educated, better dressed, better housed, healthier, safer, and a more prosperous place, than it was when deference reigned, when the city centres were salubrious enough for the likes of Phillip Blond, and the underclass were kept firmly in line by the working class is quietly ignored. This truth is, of course, of no concern to a Red Tory. They want the old days back. They want self-reliance and good behaviour to rule. In order to get that they want to roll back the state, they want to abolish welfare dependency and to replace benefits, claimed by all as a right, with charitable allocations made with due regard for the difference between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor.

What the *Red Tory* analysis does not do, and cannot do, is take stock of our problems dispassionately and consider ways in which, by cutting with the grain of contemporary manners towards a more egalitarian and progressive spirit, we can create policies which will enhance social solidarity within the society that we actually have in front of us, rather than attempting to

¹¹ Indeed Phillip Blond is so eager to demonstrate that the population of the lowest tier of government in Britain is 24 times larger than in Germany and a staggering 74 times larger than in France – UK government being so remote from the people – that he has to follow up his amazing figures by absurdly conceding that “this example ignores English parishes” (Blond, 6). However, if the Civil Parishes of England and the Community Councils of Wales are taken into account the population of the lowest tier of government in the UK is larger than France's but smaller than that of Germany's. One has to conclude that the regional differences in Scotland and Northern Ireland simply flummoxed Blond.

force it back into an orderly and organic past imagined by those fearful of the heterogeneous hubbub of modern life.

The only ‘red’ thing about ‘Red Toryism’ is Phillip Blond’s preparedness to sing the praises of the old working class, and to attack ‘market madness’. His call for socially responsible capitalism has arrived just in time to coincide with public outrage about the nature of the economic crisis. His project of rolling back the state and placing all emphasis on the need for discipline – the education of virtuous citizens – the need for voluntary endeavour – has arrived just in time to coincide with massive attacks upon public spending necessitated by the bailout of the banks. The essence of his position is to call for cuts in public spending and the abolition of entitlement with regard to welfare payments. He wants a *real* material stick and an ideological or *spiritual carrot*. This is what makes his account resolutely reactionary.

Consequently, the Red Tory analysis will do great damage to our society, but it will fail, because it is rooted in an aspiration for a form of society which not only never existed, but simply could not exist today, because Britain’s fundamental demographic, economic, and cultural arrangements, simply leave no room for schemes dreamed up by the members of a latter day Primrose League¹² or the awful clerical reaction of Hilaire Belloc, G. K. Chesterton, or Phillip Blond.

¹² The Primrose League was founded by, among others, Lord Randolph Churchill, to promote and popularize both loyalty to the Empire and the principles of ‘one-nation’ Conservatism in 1883.