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Phillip Blond: Red Tory Comes To America

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Distinctly Catholic

Phillip Blond, author of *Red Tory: How the Left and the Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It*, will be giving a talk at Catholic University next Tuesday. Responding to Blond will be noted political thinker William Galston of the Brookings Institution and Cong. Jeff Fortenberry (R-NE). The event is free and open to the public and you can register for it, and find out details of time and place, by clicking [here](#).

Blond reaches back to the distributism of Chesterton for his critique of modern political culture. And, like Chesterton, he yearns for some of the social cohesion that has been viscerated, he argues, by both the left and the right. The centralizing tendencies of the left have led to the concentration of power in London, destroyed both local control and, consequently a sense of local responsibility, all the while ignoring the importance of virtues. The Left promised liberation but, in Blond's reading, it did not deliver much in the way of human freedom but did result in a marked increase in human misery with broken families, the obliteration of intermediate social organizations, and a legal culture that is allergic to responsibility and addicted to rights. The Right delivered, in the form of Thatcherism in the UK, a spread eagle capitalism that also concentrated power in London, albeit in the banks and stock exchanges not the parliament, big box stores put local enterprise out of business, and a financial over-class emerged that has become the chief welfare recipient of the state in times of economic trouble. As David Brooks wrote in an essay on Blond, "The free-market revolution didn't create the pluralistic decentralized economy. It created a centralized financial monoculture, which requires a gigantic government to audit its activities. The effort to liberate individuals from repressive social constraints didn't produce a flowering of freedom; it weakened families, increased out-of-wedlock births and turned neighbors into strangers." Sound familiar?

What is interesting indeed is that Blond turns to a group of essentially Catholic ideas and Catholic

thinkers to address the plight to which our political and socio-economic cultures have been brought. His preference for local control over government and markets embodies the traditional Catholic idea of subsidiarity. Just as powerfully, he questions one of the central myths of modern capitalism, the idea that competition is the best, indeed the only, way to adjudicate results. In a debate with Maurice Glasman, Blond wrote: "You fixate and fetishise economic conflict of a particularly 19th-century kind, and can see no way past it. This does not mean that I deny the existence of powerful vested interests—particularly around who owns and who labours—but I can at least conceive of alternatives. As a result, it is my politics that truly threatens, rather than confirms, illegitimate advantage and the monopolisation of wealth." I would submit that one has no further to look than Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* to find a similar call to move beyond the crippling belief that competition is the only model for economic and social growth. Ideas of solidarity and cooperation, indeed of gratuitousness, find little or no expression in our contemporary world. If they had, would we have landed in this terrible economic crisis?

Indeed, Blond, like Benedict, argues that if the power of human choice is the only thing that matters, than the world we have is the one we deserve. But, humans deserve better. Blond forcefully argues that we must find a way to include the true social and environmental cost in the price of goods and services, a novel and significant idea on its own. Yes, you might be able to buy that box of Doritos more cheaply at Wal-Mart, but if Wal-Mart and other big box stores put all the small retailers downtown out of business, what is the real cost of those Doritos? Will Wal-Mart pay for the lost jobs when the mom-and-pop retailers close? What about the declining neighborhoods? And, how do you put a price on the loss of a neighborhood? What happens to a culture in which people are reduced to a herd of consumers and are no longer neighbors?

Blond had stirred the waters of political theory in the UK. And, his influence extends beyond the walls of the Academy: Blond has been a driving force behind UK Prime Minister David Cameron's "Big Society" agenda. It is fascinating to me that at a time when compassionate conservatism is thoroughly dead in the U.S., it has found new expression in the UK. But, of course, conservatism in the UK has always had a different flavor. It has been some time since the Church of England could be accurately described as "the Tory Party at prayer," but it is the case that, among other differences, American conservatives have always been so closely tied to the moneyed interest they have lacked the time or the inclination to read Edmund Burke. Put differently, Michele Bachmann said she liked to read von Mises at the beach on summer holiday, not Conor Cruise O'Brien's magisterial biography of Burke, *The Great Melody*. It will be curious to listen to Galston and Fortenberry engage some of these differences between the two great English-speaking democracies.

One can be forgiven for being suspicious of calls for a "third way" in political life. Sometimes these turn into mere political marketing ploys. But, is it not interesting that those thinkers who are most influenced by Catholic ideas, men like E.J. Dionne on the left and Michael Gerson on the right, are the same thinkers most capable of recognizing the excesses found among their ideological allies? Dionne calls out the excessive libertarianism of the left on social issues and Gerson calls out the excessive libertarianism on economic issues. Here, in Blond, we find another first-rate thinker, from a different political world, who also turns to the riches of Catholic thought for a remedy to what ails modern society. Catholicism remains, as Chesterton observed, a new and dangerous thing. I hope to see you at CUA on Tuesday - and bring your questions!

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