

“The politics of slander and abuse hides reality from us”

We live in a post-liberal world, but mainstream parties are in denial, says Phillip Blond. The political philosopher ponders policy, populism and the changed landscape of European politics

Words by Alice Wright



Many people say there is a lack of ideology in the main political parties, and that think tanks don't have the connections they once did. Why is this? Ideology hasn't caught up with the new realities. Broadly speaking, since Mrs Thatcher we've been governed by economic and social liberalism. As a governing approach, that has failed to secure people both economically and culturally. Whether you are left or right wing, you're still governed by liberals. Often now you are governed by both economic and social liberalism together, whereas previously the left was socially liberal and the right was economically liberal. Now they have essentially unified.

What is interesting about European populism, about Brexit, about Donald Trump, is that standard parties don't recognise this new reality. That's why the connections between ideologically founded organisations and political parties are somewhat severed – because ideologically formed organisations are mostly of the past. They are all liberal. The world we are in, I'd argue, is post-liberal, but we don't yet have post-liberal policies to address the needs of those that liberalism left behind.

You touched briefly on lobbying. What are think tanks' relationships with lobbying? The difference between lobbying and what think tanks do is that lobbyists take direction from those that pay them and think tanks generally don't. They say, “You can fund this piece of work but it has to be in accordance with our principles and we will try to describe a greater good of which you are a part.” That allows think tanks, whether left or right, to formulate policy. Unions fund left-wing think tanks and left-wing think tanks formulate pro-worker ideas. The problem in Britain is that nobody funds policy, so government can't generate policy. And government never pays for think tanks' policy work, which is a terrible mistake, so policy work is often under-funded and under-researched.

What about the criticism that think tanks, being unelected, have too much influence on policy? What is the alternative? Elect the think tanks? If you believe in a free society, you've got to have an idea that people can associate to advocate and create new ideas. Otherwise everything is run by the state, meaning all ideas are run by the state – the approach of the Soviet Union.

Academics are increasingly encouraged to apply political ideologies and ideas to practical scenarios. Are we therefore seeing a conflation between academia and policy that may step on the toes of think tanks? No, I think the reverse. Other than a handful of academics, such as Matthew Goodwin on the right or Jonathan Portes on the left, very few are involved in public policy. It is difficult to work with academics at universities, because they are not focused on anything outside of their institutions. All the rewards lie within academia. Every good think tank needs 20 or 30 academics working with them to generate new ideas. But it is like pulling teeth getting good academics to work with policy organisations, because what they're interested in is their next book or academic paper. We need more of them in public policy.

If you went into parliament, what areas of policy would you focus on? What is most interesting about modern Britain is that we tackle the problems that are most important to the upper middle class but never the problems that are life and death to working class people. So we go on and on about gender, predominantly for upper middle class women, when outside of pregnancy it's not clear that they pay any type of penalty at all. Most of any gender pay gap is a pregnancy gap – and we do deal very badly with pregnancy and its impact on women.

But the single biggest penalty is a class penalty. We have no cultural movement to address the penalty of class – even in the Labour Party. Labour is now more middle class, more highly educated and living in the big cities than the conservative parties. Our whole policy environment is pseudo; it's all about things that don't matter and ignoring the things that do, and that's because liberals make up 10-12 per cent of the population but something like 95 per cent of the governing class.

So you feel we have a crisis of representation within parliament? We do, but it's not about how many female MPs we have, or how many black MPs we have or how many gay MPs we have, it's about the fact that most of them are liberal, most of them have the same value set and most of them have the same response.

You've worked in Hungary. Do you think its values are more communitarian than those of the UK? I'm interested in Eastern European populism. Everybody just focuses on migration, and I never thought that could explain the popularity of parties like Fidesz or Law and Justice. So I'm interested in what are they doing that commands 80 per cent of the population, which is unheard of. What are their social policies that secure and protect people? If liberalism brings insecurity, then what are the social policies that bring security, but don't condemn you to non-innovative, static, 1970s socialist policies? The politics of slander and abuse hides reality from us.

Do you think there is anyone in the UK who is tackling this ingrained liberal approach head-on? Dominic Cummings, perhaps? What's really interesting about Dominic Cummings is [this]: what does he want? He's clearly a clever man but I'm unclear about what he wants.

Do you think there is any country that has adopted a post-liberal agenda and structure that is working? Eastern Europe is working very well in terms of standard metrics – employment growth, distribution of growth. It's early days but it is working. I think that someone like Trump, horrific figure though in some ways he is, is half-right on some things, which is why he's popular. Such as China being the threat. Nobody has an account of Trump in which he is actually quite clever and lucid, which clearly he must be amidst the clear evidence of derangement. 🇺🇸