

IN DEFENCE OF ADAM SMITH
RESPONSE TO BLOND, 'RISE OF THE RED TORIES'

Kieron O'Hara

University of Southampton

Web exclusive for *Prospect* Magazine

For the original article, and several other responses, go to
<http://blog.prospectblogs.com/2009/02/09/red-toryism-the-backlash/> and
http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=10608

Before I wave my quibbles around, I should begin by enthusiastically welcoming Phillip Blond's stunning riff. I have argued for a while that the Conservatives should dissolve and reconstitute current party lines by reaching beyond 1979 into their back catalogue of philosophies and ideologies, and Blond's analysis-cum-road-map, a mix of decentralisation, flattened hierarchies and suspicion of big business, is a splendid attempt to do just that.

Such a realignment would hardly be unprecedented – Quintin Hogg wrote about the apparent oddness of Conservatives fighting “Socialists who attack *laissez faire* from almost exactly the same angle as the Conservatives in 1848,” and the 60 years that separate us from Hogg's *Case For Conservatism* nearly match the 70 between him and Disraeli.

It is no criticism of a bold statement to say that it has provoked disagreement – in my case intellectually, strategically, pragmatically. Intellectually, the resurrection of Burke is very welcome, but I can't say I am comfortable with sending Adam Smith to the naughty step along with Mill and Gladstone. Smith's importance to the liberal tradition is patent, but his reinvention as the Godfather of neo-liberalism caricatures a many-faceted and sensitive thinker. The author of *The Wealth of Nations* also produced *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, lest we forget. It is hard to see him applauding capitalist gigantism, he didn't to my knowledge anticipate the growth of multinational corporations, and his idea of social good was pretty well-developed.

The economic mechanisms he described were designed for a world of imperfect people, but were founded on a philosophy of what we now call 'corporate social responsibility.' He wrote that “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but to their self-love.” So true – but that implies neither that the butcher's and the baker's self-love should ultimately lead them to work behind a counter at Tesco for the minimum wage, nor that the brewer ought to sell up to Scottish & Newcastle. No: properly understood and rescued from the neo-liberals, Adam Smith should be harnessed in support of Blond's localist asset-owning communities.

Strategically, we are missing the global perspective. Blond may regret the birth of the liberal Behemoth, but born it has been and any ideology crafted for the 21st century has to pay it lip service. There is no mention in Blond's piece of climate change, and the

corresponding need for adjustments to our models of production and consumption. His communitarianism would probably have some effect merely by dampening down rampant consumerism, but there is surely more to be said. To his eternal credit, David Cameron has reinvigorated the conservationist strand of Burkean thinking, but even he erroneously, perhaps mendaciously, links it with the prospect of greater prosperity – “green growth”. One does not have to be CEO of Exxon to be dubious about that.

Technology cannot be ignored – the Web has created a new world of communication and noise, stimulating ideas and spreading fashions. I do not think this has led to levelling down or homogenisation, and the Cameroonian idea of the ‘Post-Bureaucratic Age’ trades on the possibilities of low-friction information transfer. But equally the localist will need to adapt – mere geographical contiguity cannot be a basis for shared interests, and it would be a severe mistake to take a ‘community’ to be an unproblematic unity in a connected world.

Finally, the pragmatic angle. Salisbury once wrote that the hardest thing for a government to do was nothing. In a world of 24/7 media coverage, that is even truer, and we have seen in the last few weeks how dangerous it is to be labelled the ‘do-nothing party.’ Blond’s model requires a quite proper recognition that the state must withdraw from a number of areas where it holds sway, so when problems arise and Paxman and Humphrys demand glib answers, the Red Tory must be brave enough to admit (what is often true) that his or her intervention would be counter-productive.

Furthermore, a positive account of the merits of liberalism – explaining why people shop at Tesco, borrow money they can’t pay back, drive polluting cars, vote for liberals against communitarians – must be appended to Blond’s philippic. And those merits, where possible, must be adapted and absorbed into any new world. We want the new communities to turn against banks and faceless business, not gays or those from ethnic minorities. Will this vision worry women who feel liberalism has helped advance their independence?

Blond’s road map is interesting, challenging and a welcome addition to ideological debate. But without more detail we can’t be sure it marks the route to electoral victory or a just, equitable and harmonious society quite yet.

Kieron O’Hara is a senior research fellow at the University of Southampton, and author of *After Blair: David Cameron and the Conservative Tradition*.