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National conservatism is a danger to the UK economy

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Westminster regularly imports the worst American narratives into British politics. The latest is the birth of a British “national conservatism,” an echo of the eclectic “postliberal” movement of Catholic integralists, anti-globalists and Donald Trump supporters who go by that name stateside.

Next month, the Edmund Burke Foundation hosts its first London “National Conservatism” conference. [Michael Gove](#) and [Suella Braverman](#), the Cabinet ministers, will speak, as will [Jacob Rees-Mogg](#), Lord Frost and Nigel Biggar, the academic. A striking line-up, considering demagogues such as Viktor Orban, the Hungarian prime minister, and Josh Hawley, the senator for Missouri, have spoken at equivalent meetings in Rome and Miami. Which raises the question: do the British speakers understand what they are associating themselves with?

Like traditional conservatives, the American “nat cons” believe in national sovereignty, the dangers of socialist planning and the need to protect national institutions. Like modern leftists, they labour under the misapprehension that since 1980 we’ve lived in a *laissez faire* economy that’s responsible for most social ills and none of the period’s successes.

The nat cons therefore ditch a principled commitment to free markets and limited government to champion instead a state pursuing the “common good” or “national interest”. These subjective terms are a moveable feast, but usually get equated with a nostalgic vision of manufacturing industries and single-earner families as the bedrock of flourishing societies.

To deliver this, the nat cons favour increased protectionism, less immigration, breaking up Big Tech companies, empowering workers in boardrooms and unions and more generous welfare for families with children. In short, it's right-wing progressivism, the only difference from social democrats being the rationale and choice of groups favoured by government largesse and protections.

Indeed, the nat cons actively embrace state power. Competition with China and the threat of the radical "woke left" at home supposedly justifies an aggressive government to "reward friends and punish enemies". Gone is the liberal ideal of the state as neutral referee. Conservatives must use government power to win the culture wars.

In the United States, of course, there's a religious, Catholic aspect to this that won't appeal here. Almost by definition, "national conservatism" will differ across countries. Our commentariat will resent its anti-cosmopolitanism, but, given the current hostility to market economics, that aspect will receive less critical scrutiny than it should.

Really this is a tired, historically ignorant narrative that has little to say about Britain's biggest challenges. If more industrial planning and 1970s labour market institutions are the answer, what exactly is the question? Nat con economics often feels like an anti-liberal flex, rejecting both leftist liberal ends and free-market means, with little clarity on metrics of success for its own agenda.

Helpfully, the American nat cons themselves admit the risks inherent with their impulses. Senator Marco Rubio of Florida says government efforts to re-shore supply chains would sacrifice economic efficiency (making us poorer), something a stagnant Britain can ill afford. Bob Lighthizer, Trump's trade representative, says higher consumer prices are a feature of protectionism, not a bug.

Tucker Carlson, a national conservative Fox News host, professes that government activism will increase the risk of cronyism. It also gives more powers to a state bureaucracy that isn't conservative and will be run by left-wing governments, too. National conservatives seem surprised that President Biden's administration is distributing funds under the country's bipartisan semiconductor industrial policy with conditions that push progressive social goals. They shouldn't be.

Despite these warning signs, national conservatism is ascendant on both sides of the Atlantic. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher approached the Soviet threat confident about the superiority of open economies and liberal values. National conservatives' big vision to "beat" China and the progressive left is to govern more like them, albeit draped in their own flag.

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