



Welcoming remarks by Eric Menzer

2010 YorkCounts Summit

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We Must Keep Pressing

Last week, in his column in the New York Times, conservative columnist and commentator David Brooks wrote about the recent work of a British political writer named Philip Blond, whose ideas about politics and community are influencing the Tory Party – the conservatives in Great Britain.

Brooks wrote of the disaffection that seems to be sweeping this country. He called the United States in 2010 a “broken society.” He wrote, “The public has contempt for the political class. Public debt is piling up at an astonishing pace. Middle-class wages have lagged. Unemployment will remain high. It will take years to fully recover from the financial crisis. This confluence of crises has produced a surge in vehement libertarianism. People are disgusted with Washington. The Tea Party movement rallies against big government, big business and the ruling class in general. Even beyond their ranks, there is a corrosive cynicism about public action.”

But rather than just piling on the scorn, Brooks talks about an alternative to what he calls the “Libertarian response” – that is, the response that simply rejects the community in addition to rejecting government and finds refuge in an “every man for himself” approach.

Drawing upon Blond’s work, Brooks suggests that the root of our crisis is in two failures – a failure of the welfare state, and a failure of big business. The problem with both

of these institutions, Blond argues, is not one of their inherent nature. Even the most ardent conservative would concede the need for basic government functions such as defense and infrastructure. And the most ardent liberal is still a consumer and typically an employee of private enterprise.

The problem, Blond argues, is with the “BIG” part – big government and big business. Echoing shades of Robert Putnam, who visited York a number of years ago and who wrote about “social capital,” Blond calls for a rebuilding of what he calls the “civil state.” He writes that the fundamental crisis is one not of the institutions themselves, but the separation of people from the institutions, which have gotten so big as to render the individual detached and un-influential.

Blond envisions moving from a political culture based on individual choice to one oriented around what he calls relationships and associations. In his writing, Blond talks about strengthening local banks, funneling more government aid through local charities, engaging colleges with their communities, and setting up local capital funds so community associations could invest in local enterprises. And as I read all of this in Brooks’ column last week, it struck me – what Blond and Brooks are describing is YorkCounts.

One of the questions we face a lot at YorkCounts is one that we worry that people will ask us – that is, “Who asked you?” Who asked you to determine what the community’s needs are? Who asked you to declare that concentrated poverty is the root cause of the academic challenges in the York City School District? Who asked you to try to start a York County health Department? Who asked you to organize a Stay in School initiative?

Who asked you what you think matters? Who do you think you are?

Well, I’ll tell you who we are – we’re people who don’t think that government has all the answers – or all the responsibility. And, we’re people who – when we say that – think

there has to be more than just a rejection of government – there has to be a productive alternative. We’re people who care about what happens here on the ground in York – regardless of whether folks in Harrisburg or Washington are paying attention. We’re people who are volunteering our time and energy to build relationships and create associations – to create a thread that connects businesses to nonprofits, educators to economic developers, and health care institutions to government. And yes, sometimes we’re the people who do want our government to do more – when we think that would result in a long-term benefit to people’s quality of life, or the quality or cost-effectiveness of the services that only government can provide.

I’m sure I don’t need to work very hard to convince you that York County is a fundamentally conservative place – in our politics, in our values, and in our occasional resistance to change. But what is really fascinating is that York County is a place that has produced a remarkable series of largely private social initiatives – be it the rebirth of the community foundation, the amazing series of community investments completed by Crispus Attucks, Judge Uhler’s groundbreaking truancy initiative, our amazing library system, the United Way’s Focus on our Future efforts – and YorkCounts itself. Every one of those things I mentioned is viewed as a model statewide. So I would venture to say that we’re the kind of conservative place that David Brooks and Philip Blond would recognize when they call for moving from a political culture based on individual choice to one oriented around relationships and associations.

I had the honor of becoming chairman of YorkCounts shortly after the Metro-York recommendations were released to the public in 2007. During these past two years, I have watched with pleasure as some of those initiatives have taken off and have begun to yield fruit. The recent approval of the York Academy Charter School on a combined 24-3 vote of three school districts is certainly the most visible. And I venture to say that if you’d asked people to bet on that result 12 months ago, you would have gotten few takers. We should

take heart not only in the substantive achievement here – a new school - but also in the breakthrough the volunteer leaders achieved with these three government bodies.

But let's be clear: One victory does not make a transformation. Much important YorkCounts work has not yet found community champions. What we have accomplished so far is just a down payment on what still needs to be done to address the fundamental challenges that confront local municipalities, school districts, employers and citizens across York County every day.

Even on opening day of the York Academy, we will still have a community far too divided into haves and have-nots along racial and class lines. For all of the breaking down of barriers we have seen – and all you have to do is look at school enrollment figures in Central, West York, and other districts to see that the change is very real – opportunities for kids born into urban poverty in York County are still far too limited.

Frankly, at times chairing this organization has been very frustrating. Not because of the organization itself – we have a great Board and staff and I love this work. But rather because at times we feel like the voice just crying in the wilderness – unheeded at best as naïve do-gooders, derided at worst as scolding elitists.

But at the end of the day, that's OK, because YorkCounts was born for the tough problems. We were created to shine a light on numbers that sometimes we would rather not see. We were created to ask questions that make us a little uncomfortable. We were created to work on problems that one organization can't solve alone. Remember our "inside" slogan - if it sounds easy, it's probably not worth the time and energy of YorkCounts.

Yesterday, I turned the gavel of leadership of the YorkCounts Board to Loren Kroh – an accomplished business and civic leader in York County. He has just finished leading our Board

members in a focused strategic planning process to set our direction – and you'll be hearing more about that in a few minutes. So I step aside from my Chairman role very confident that YorkCounts is in good hands, and genuinely excited to support Loren and the rest of the Board and volunteers as we tackle tough challenges – without waiting to be asked.

Thank you.