

How many people can name the head of EPA or even know the official title of that office? About 5% of the population, would be my guess. Apart from Scott Pruitt, who became famous for his \$20,000 phone booth, few people outside of the field could name any previous holder of the office. Michael Regan seems to be doing a great job there right now, but hardly anyone knows his name, and hardly anyone had heard of him before his appointment. I’d bet that even among members of the Washington press corps he’s an obscure figure.

Not that I’m casting aspersions! The number of people who’ve heard of me is orders of magnitude lower. (People in glass houses, and all that.) But my point is that people talk constantly about faceless bureaucrats, and one of the reasons for that is that for, all intents and purposes, there’s no “face” at EPA.

It’s true that cabinet members as a group aren’t all that famous, but if you look at Biden’s cabinet, there are other cabinet members who have some standing as public figures. Gina Raimondo at Commerce was a governor, Pete Buttigieg at DOT was a presidential contender, and Merrick Garland was a Supreme Court nominee. There are governors and members of Congress who have made reputations for themselves on environmental issues, but they don’t end up heading EPA.

So why not? One possibility is that they don’t want the job. Being a cabinet member is less appealing than it used to be. More bluntly, it’s kind of a crappy job. You sit through hearings being screamed at by members of the opposing party; you get overruled by mid-level White House staffers; and the pay isn’t great. At least if you’re in most cabinet-level jobs you get to be called Mister or Madame Secretary, but at EPA it’s “Administrator,” a title carrying less than zero prestige.

The other possibility is that they’re not asked, because the job is conceived of in purely managerial terms, as bureaucratic as the job title suggests. If true, I think that’s a shame. Someone with some degree of standing would be in a much better position to represent the agency to the public and the press – putting a face on the agency. And someone with congressional experience might have the kinds of relationships on the Hill that could help build support for the agency. You can’t blame people for thinking the bureaucracy is faceless when they never see a face to put with the name.

I’m not saying that it would be a terrible idea to appoint an academic — me, for instance — or an accomplished EPA careerist. But there could be some real benefits to appointing a governor or a well-known member of Congress.

