



I know this doesn't sound like

a post about environmental law and policy, but bear with me. There is a connection.

Donald Trump ran for president largely on the claim that his experience as a businessman, and lack of experience as a politician, qualified him to shake up Washington. Just enough people in just enough states bought that claim to give Trump an electoral college win.

Trump himself has no experience in the public sector. As he prepares to take over the Oval Office, he is doubling down on the idea that outsiders should run government. Of the 16 "cabinet-level" ([as characterized by Politico](#)) picks announced so far, I count 6 with no public-sector background (Steve Mnuchin, Treasury; Rex Tillerson, State; Wilbur Ross, Commerce; Andy Puzder, Labor; Ben Carson, HUD; and Reince Priebus, White House Chief of Staff, who has been a long-time political operative but apparently not a public employee except as a short-term law clerk). If you include the Administrator of the Small Business Administration as a cabinet-level position (as [the Obama White House does](#)), you can add another, Linda McMahon. And if you see Steve Bannon, whose position didn't exist in the Obama White House, as a kind of co-chief of staff, the total grows to 8. By contrast, the current cabinet includes only two people without prior government experience (Sally Jewell, Interior, a special case if there ever was one, since she came from a business which profits when public lands are open for recreation; and Penny Pritzker, Commerce). I count military service as public sector experience, but if you don't you should add one on the Obama side (Robert McDonald, Veteran's Affairs) and three on the Trump list (James Mattis, Defense; John Kelly, Homeland Security; and Michael Flynn, National Security Advisor).

Does the private-sector tilt of the incoming administration matter? I think it does, for several reasons. A couple of those reasons have been widely recognized.

First, there's the revolving door problem. Appointees who come from (let's just say) the fossil fuel industry and expect to go back to that industry after a few years in government have a conflict of interest that can't be solved by divesting assets prior to entering public service. Even with the best of intentions, it would be only human to unconsciously shade policy choices in favor of potential future employers or clients.

Second, there's the very different employment culture. In the private sector, top-down governance structures are common. CEOs are accustomed to being able to tell their entire organization what to do, without much pushback from underlings. But in the government, no one is the unquestioned boss. Everyone in the executive branch, including the president, has to answer to funders in Congress as well as to the media (mainstream and otherwise) and interest groups. Much of what they say is open to public scrutiny, through FOIA. And most of their workers are protected by civil service laws from retaliation for public or private disagreement with the agency's policies or its head.

But there's a more fundamental problem with private-sector minds running the public sector, which hasn't been sufficiently highlighted. That's that the private sector and the public sector have fundamentally different goals. Success on one side doesn't necessarily equate with even understanding what success means on the other side.

The private sector focuses almost exclusively on growing short-term profits for its shareholders. There's nothing inherently wrong with that; corporations can provide valuable vehicles for aggregating capital. But the private sector can't substitute for government's role, which is very different. The public sector expresses and implements our most cherished community goals. Business is about doing well for yourself. Government is about doing well for the collective. Those are very different things, and individuals steeped by long practice in the norms of business don't necessarily understand the importance, or even recognize the existence, of collective interests.

Trump's touted working-class supporters might be thinking about that difference now, as they contemplate the nomination of fast-food CEO and critic of raising the minimum wage Andrew Puzder to be Secretary of Labor. Making a lot of money for a restaurant chain is definitely not the same thing as maximizing employment or protecting workers.

Which brings us to the environmental connection. Environmental protection is by its very nature a collective benefit endeavor, putting the interests of the group ahead of those of individual businesses and emphasizing the long term over the short. Trump and much of his leadership team show no sign of understanding the importance of collective values, or even of industry internalizing its costs, so perhaps it's not surprising that they seem so ready to

put the short-term interests of the fossil fuel industry ahead of the long-term interests of the country and the planet.

Okay, I'm really reaching here, but maybe there's a very small silver lining in the fact that three of four key environmental appointees (Scott Pruitt, EPA; Rick Perry, Energy; and Ryan Zinke, Interior) actually do have public service experience. The exception? Rex Tillerson. While the environment may not be the first thing on the Secretary of State's list of priorities, it's an important part of the portfolio. John Kerry, with a career in public service, realized the importance of the Paris agreement on climate change mitigation, but also of ocean protection and other necessarily global efforts. Tillerson can see how accession to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea could help US business interests; as Exxon CEO he supported accession in 2012. But I'm not optimistic that he'll see the value of protecting the public goods of the natural world, especially if that conflicts with the short-term, individualistic value of maximizing extractive interests.

Although I disagree with most of his policy positions as I've seen them reported, I've actually got more hope for Ryan Zinke, who seems to understand the inherently collective value of federal landownership. At least one might hope for a constructive discussion with him of the full range of values at stake in policy decisions.