

Politics is a dangerous game for business

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I watch with semi-detachment the energetic manoeuvrings of entrepreneurs and executives around the world of politics. Why do businessmen (and women) strive so hard to get close to ministers and political parties? Do they have public service in mind? A deep urge to be at the centre of things? Or do they think such influence can benefit their commercial interests? Perhaps they just want a knighthood or a peerage as a bauble, the next achievement in their career plan? How many have unadulterated motives?

My six years at Channel 4, a public corporation controlled by the state, have made me jaded when it comes to seeing government in action. Ministers come and go, while civil servants try their best, but the system is flawed: legislation appears to be a process of petty ritual, procrastination and compromise. Politicians seem obsessed about staying in power and keeping their seats, often to the exclusion of the noble intentions they once had. Everything takes far too long, decisions are watered down, and fear of negative publicity infects the entire circus. Meanwhile, state control too often means the malign influence of regressive trade unions, and perverse incentives.

Successful entrepreneurs believe in swift action, minimal debate, the profit motive and empowering their staff: none of them exactly classic features of the public sector in motion. But vanity and perhaps a touch of altruism still compels many tycoons to want to mix with policymakers. Many of them crowded up to Manchester earlier this month to meet with the Conservatives, the next likely British ruling party – lobbying, schmoozing and donating. Did they get what they wanted?

I suspect most business leaders are calculating in their ambitions. They are only willing to back the winning team, and will switch their allegiance to whomever holds power, or appears likely to seize it. Recent years in Britain have seen all manner of exotic creatures hanging around the New Labour machine while they hold office. The growth of outsourcing has created huge profit opportunities to those servicing the state. In return for all manner of support, various business leaders suddenly discovered their socialist roots.

But power is inexorably seeping away from Gordon Brown and his followers, and so their friends in commerce are deserting them, like cads leaving a haggard old lover for a younger mistress. The business bosses no longer have to pretend to believe in a philosophy of redistribution and big government. They can revert to more predictable views, and campaign for lower taxes and deregulation – like any rational capitalist.

I believe the public realm could do with greater input from experienced managers and wealth creators. But do those in the private sector queuing up to be parliamentary candidates realise how their every transgression will be raked over by the media? Do they understand how low MPs and peers have sunk in the public's esteem? Fresh talent is surely needed in central government; I hope the aspirants are prepared for the sacrifices and concessions. We need to believe that reinvention can deliver improved results and credibility for parties and democracy.

If successful individuals want to give something back, there are myriad opportunities away from Westminster. You can start a charity or a social enterprise, or serve as a magistrate or a prison visitor, or become a trustee of a hospital or a school governor. Such avenues offer independence, and dispel any suspicion that there is self-interest or megalomania at work.

I accept that British politics has nothing on the seething horrors of Italy, say. And our expense scandals and cash for honours appear small change compared to levels of corruption in public life in many other western nations. The intersection of business and party politics remains a

dangerous place. I do not wish to discourage enlightened citizens from the private sector entering public life with worthy objectives; but they should be aware that even idealistic behavior can be misinterpreted by a sceptical public.

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