In California, two women who have risen to the top ranks of the business world have positioned themselves for entry into the top ranks of government as well, as California's governor and one of its two United States Senators. Another has positioned herself to become a United States Senator from Connecticut.

All three -- Carly Fiorina and Meg Whitman in California and Linda McMahon in Connecticut -- still face large hurdles in November's general elections, but they are serious candidates with reasonable prospects. And all three have based their campaigns on a common attribute. No, not the fact that they are women -- after all, Connecticut has a woman governor and both of California's current U.S. Senators are women. What Fiorina, Whitman, and McMahon all tout as the credential that proves their superior qualification for high office is the fact that all three are highly successful in ... business.

I have no serious problem with any of the three: in California, in particular, the women, Fiorina and Whitman, face Democratic candidates (Barbara Boxer and Jerry Brown) whose loss would do no great harm to the nation. I do have a problem, however, with the continued promotion of business success as a qualifier for public office. Success in the market is not an automatic
disqualifier for public service, but it is a far different undertaking with
different purposes and different values. And to suggest that government
needs people experienced in business reminds me of the old feminist saw that
a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle. In fact, business and
government -- while there may be skills involved that are translatable and
useful as one moves from one sphere to another -- are in some ways polar
opposite undertakings.

The business of business is business and the goal of business is to earn a profit
in the provision of goods and services. The business of government is service
-- well managed, one hopes, and not wasteful, but never at a profit. There is
no such thing as government money. Governments have no money; they
have only what they take from their citizens, either in taxes or by inflation.
And if government accrues profit it can only have done so by taxing too much
or eroding the value of the citizens' income and savings -- in either case doing
harm, not good, to the people who have created it for the advantages such a
common effort is presumed to bestow.

Businesses seek maximum efficiency; governments seek sufficient efficiency.
We might well save a considerable amount of money by delegating our
national security to mercenary armies drawn from other countries (as
opposed to keeping a high-cost standing army and paying U.S. wages to
private combat zone contractors), thus erasing the need to maintain a
perpetual and costly military infrastructure. We could assign the processing
of Social Security checks and welfare payments to low-wage workers in
Madras or Oaxaca. State governments could close welfare offices and require
that all transactions with government be conducted electronically, with no
recourse to potentially sympathetic human beings. These are choices
governments make reluctantly and businesses make routinely.

Consider the question of earned merit. In business, very much a merit-based
enterprise, one's employment is continued so long as he or she maintains sufficient production. Producers continue to receive paychecks; non-producers are cut loose. That may seem unfair to the bleeding-hearted, but it is productivity that provides profit and insufficient productivity that drains profit and therefore survivability. Distinguish that ethic from the commitment of government to provide a safety net for those who are, quite often due to no fault of their own, non-productive members of society (at least as measured by the workplace). In business, the non-productive are cut loose; in government, the non-productive are cut checks. That is because the society as a whole, with the full support of Republicans and Democrats alike, believes widows, orphans, the mentally or physically infirm deserve sustenance and protection. Men and women whose careers are in business may, in fact probably do, share that belief, but it flies directly in the face of a belief in maximizing profit and winning bonuses but cutting loose the deadwood.

I do not mean by this to suggest that the corporate experience is, or should be, an impediment to elective service. It does mean, however, that candidates for public office should not hold out that expertise in business as a primary qualification for election. Yes, okay, so you've run a company and you've made money; it'll look good in your obit. But it is important to spell out how that experience translates into meaningful preparation for service in government. Granted, it may curb the temptation to be profligate, and that's a definite plus, but government is about security (military capacity and homeland security at the federal level; police operations at a state and local level). It is not about your entity (the government) making a profit but about helping to ensure that the government's economic policies are not inimical to others making a profit. It is not about slashing spending but about meeting society's obligations with efficiency and accountability. For business, forests exist as a source of lumber; for society, forests exist as a source of pleasure.
Business and government are not opposites, but they are distinct; the mindset is necessarily different; the understandings are different; the obligations are different. Whether you cheer for these three women, and others like them, to win or lose in November, we should demand of them a downplaying of the business credential and a focus on how they would meet the actual challenges of governance on the specific terms of public, not private, service.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MICKEY EDWARDS spent 16 years in Congress and 16 years teaching at Harvard and Princeton. He is a director of The Constitution Project and wrote Reclaiming Conservatism.