

Rollback: What's Missing from Big Business

While there's much to like in Tyler Cowen's *Big Business*, I doubt it will inspire anyone. Why not? Because he spends a whole book praising business, but almost totally ignores an obvious question: "If business is so great, why should we settle for 'containment' of anti-business policies, rather than full-blown 'rollback?'" If Tyler means what he says, it seems like he'd want to free business from (some of) the shackles of government regulation – and hand (some) government functions over to the private sector. Yet by my count, *Big Business* contains just one use of the stem "deregulat" and just one use of the stem "privatiz." What accounts for these baffling omissions?

The obvious answer is that Tyler wants to stop a witchhunt, not start a crusade. But that just pushes the question back a step. If business is so great, why *not* "crusade" on its behalf?

One story is that Tyler actually agrees with many popular complaints about business; he just thinks they're one-sided. But if that were true, you would have expected him to spend much more time meeting the critics of business halfway. He rarely does. Tyler spends most of *Big Business* listing anti-business arguments and explaining why they're flat wrong. Indeed, I occasionally thought the anti-business arguments were better than he does.

A better story, perhaps, is that Tyler is ever-mindful of "backlash." He's worried that despite the merits of deregulation and privatization, a forthright defense would upset the polity so much that we'll actually abuse business more than ever. While this is theoretically possible, it seems paranoid. The most likely scenario by far is that *Big Business* – like virtually all books – has no practical impact at all. So why not stand up and speak the whole pro-business truth loud and proud, rather than self-censoring?

My final story is that Tyler has succumbed to status quo bias. He favors the business that we've got, but fears the business that we could have. But if this were so, why didn't he just write a book called *Status Quo: Love Letter to the World as It Is*? He's definitely up to the task.

Which story about the curious absence of rollback in *Big Business* is right? Probably all to some extent, plus some others I haven't thought of. Your thoughts?