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## Nod to business gets mixed reaction

By: [Glenn Thrush and Darren Samuelsohn](#)  
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The nomination of green businessman John Bryson as commerce secretary was greeted with cheers from environmentalists, a guarded reaction from business — and a whole lot of Googling.

White House officials cast the choice of the obscure former utility executive, who helped found the Natural Resources Defense Council, the influential environmental group, as part of President Barack Obama's ongoing effort to build a stronger relationship with business. That effort has included the appointment of former banking executive and commerce secretary Bill Daley as White House chief of staff and General Electric CEO Jeff Immelt to head Obama's competitive council.

The olive-branch strategy seemed to pay quick dividends Tuesday, in the form of a supportive statement from U.S. Chamber of Commerce Chairman Tom Donohue, a long-time Obama antagonist who praised Bryson's "extensive knowledge of the private sector" while adding, "[w]e hope Mr. Bryson will be a strong voice for American businesses."

The National Association of Manufacturers, another key industry group, echoed those sentiments, citing Bryson's apparent backing of pending U.S. trade deals in Panama, South Korea and Colombia.

But business lobbyists and executives were less effusive in private about the 67-year-

old New York native, expressing surprise Obama would pick a relative unknown whose main claim to fame was his role in NRDC — and a tough tenure guiding Edison International through California's energy crisis a decade ago.

"He's more of a green guy than a business guy," one top business association official

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told POLITICO. "He's pro-trade, which is great. But nobody's blown away."

Bryson's low profile is a marked contrast to outgoing commerce secretary Gary Locke, a former Washington governor who is leaving to become Obama's ambassador to China, as well as former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson and retired New Hampshire GOP Sen. Judd Gregg, who both passed on the job when Obama was first assembling his Cabinet.

But considering the Obama administration's turbulent relationship with private business groups, Bryson's cloak of invisibility might be an asset.

"How do you spell his name?" asked Daniel Griswold, director of a trade policy center at the libertarian Cato Institute – echoing other experts on international trade, a main focus of the department Bryson would run.

"The reality is that it doesn't really matter who the commerce secretary is," Griswold added. "[U.S. Trade Representative] Ron Kirk is really the point man on the free trade agreements, and the feeling in the business community is that he's been pretty good – for a Democrat."

On the other side of the ideological spectrum, one liberal think-tanker asked, "He picked John Dyson?" – a reference to the better-known former New York development official and current chairman of Milbank Capital Management.

"He's fine," the person added after reading

Bryson's Wikipedia entry.

Environmentalists, on the other hand, needed no introduction. He's been one of the green movement's steadiest supporters in the business community for decades, most recently serving on an energy and climate change advisory panel for the United Nations' secretary general".

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In late 2008, Obama transition officials interviewed Bryson as a possible energy secretary just in case things didn't work out with Nobel laureate Steven Chu, a Democratic official said.

"People gravitate to John. He's a natural leader," said Gray Davis, the former Democratic governor of California and a longtime Bryson ally. "They like being around him. I think he'll be one of the two people the president continually seeks advice from. You like being around John. You like his views. They're well considered. They're direct and to the point. I don't think he'll just be another cabinet officer who doesn't weigh in. I think he'll have a powerful voice in the corridors of power."

Obama, speaking briefly in the State Dining Room on Tuesday, said, "John is going to be an important part of my economic team, promoting American business and American products across the globe... By working with companies here at home and representing America's interests abroad, I am confident that he is going to meet the goal that I set of doubling our nation's exports."

In picking him, Obama eschewed bigger names – Google CEO Eric Schmidt was briefly in the running – and sought to dodge controversy, even though Senate Republican hinted they might hold up Bryson's nomination.

In March, 44 Senate Republicans wrote to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) vowing to block any nominee until Obama put the free trade deals up to a vote. The

president supports the deals, but has been working slowly through details, cognizant of the domestic political backlash if the agreements are regarded as unfavorable to U.S. workers.

After Obama named Bryson, a spokesman for Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell emailed reporters to "remind" them of

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Republicans' plans. "This should not be a difficult decision for the president, particularly when the President himself agrees with us that these agreements will create jobs here in America," said Don Stewart, the spokesman.

"We think that it would be folly to hold up a nomination so important as the commerce secretary for any reason," White House press secretary Jay Carney later told reporters.

By late Tuesday, however, conservative were seizing on Bryson's cap-and-trade views as a possible source of opposition. In recent years, Bryson had been speaking up on the need for federal regulations on carbon, calling House Democratic energy legislation "moderate," according to news accounts.

House Oversight and Government Reform Committee Chairman Darrell Issa (R-Calif.), a frequent Obama critic, opened another front, calling Bryson's nomination "deeply out-of-touch with our current energy challenge."

"Another green evangelist pushing failed talking points on the cap-and-trade energy tax and European style gas prices is not who most Americans want to have at the helm of efforts to expand trade and grow our economy," Issa said in a statement.

Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.), a climate change skeptic, called Bryson the "founder of a radical environmental organization" and accused him of pushing a "job killing" environmental agenda.

Green groups laughed off such talk, arguing that Bryson, like many business and utility leaders, is firmly in the mainstream.

"Here in California, the esteem with which John Bryson is held extends far beyond his leadership at Edison," said Araceli Ruano, Senior Vice President and California

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Director for the left-leaning Center for American Progress:

“His service on boards related to everything from foreign affairs to underprivileged youth has not only made him one of the brightest stars in civil society but will serve him well as Secretary of Commerce.”

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