

# POLITICS OF MANUFACTURING

In the approximately 15 years that I have been writing editorials for *Gear Technology*, I've purposely avoided certain topics. Sex, religion and my own used gear machinery business are among the subjects that have always been off limits. But with this issue, I'm going to break one of my long-standing taboos by talking politics.

It's not politics in the usual sense of partisan debate between Republican and Democrat. It's not about my stance on government regulation, health care reform or environmental legislation. This is politics on a more general level.

For a long time I've felt that Americans don't have enough exposure to or understanding of the importance of manufacturing and industry to the overall well-being of our country. Fifty years ago, people lived and worked around factories. People lived in towns where things were made. Today many of us live in suburbs and work in offices. The only time most of us interact with manufactured goods is when we buy them.

Part of the problem is image. The media has portrayed factory work as dirty, boring and dead-end. But the fact remains that industry is as important to our economy today as it was 50 years ago. Unfortunately, many Americans are too far removed from actual manufacturing to understand that much of our country's strength comes from our ability to create wealth out of raw materials.

The manufacturing perspective is even less well represented among our elected officials. Since *Congressional Quarterly* began tracking the previous occupations of members of Congress in the 1950s, lawyers have always been the biggest group. In today's Congress, they make up 42% of the total. Businessmen and bankers make up the next big chunk, with 40% of the total. But people with a manufacturing background are only a small, unidentified portion of this 40%. Most of the rest are from banking, finance and major corporations.

At some point we have to ask ourselves whether the right mix of people are making the rules, whether the right experiences, backgrounds and mindsets go into the decision-making processes that affect all of our lives. After that, we have to ask ourselves if there's anything we could or should be doing about it?

This brings us to politics on a more personal level. A young man that I've known for the last couple of years has decided to run for the U.S. House of Representatives in the upcoming November election from his district in the Niagara Falls area of New York. Chris Collins, who was president and majority owner of Nuttall Gear, recently sold his company and has decided that the best use of his experience and talent is to try to help influence the direction of our country and our society by running for Congress.

Collins began his career in the gear industry with Westinghouse Electric, where he worked his way up to manager of gear products for their Electric Motor & Gear Division in Cheektowaga, NY. He served in that post from 1979 until 1982,

when he arranged the leveraged buyout of the gear division and moved the operations to Wheatfield, NY.

The new company was named Nuttall Gear, after the original company founded in 1887 by R.D. Nuttall in Pittsburgh, PA. Westinghouse had bought the original Nuttall Gear in 1928.

While few of you will be in a position to actually vote for Collins, I hope that you see the worth of having a businessman, a gearman, and most importantly for me, someone from industry, representing a perspective in Congress that is seldom voiced among a population of lawyers and professional politicians. Collins has had to find ways to make a payroll, keep customers happy, be sensitive to his employees and grow a business all at the same time.

There has always been a great fear of turning over the reins of government to wealthy special interest groups. Thoughts of robber barons and the "military industrial complex" come to mind. Selling his gear company has certainly afforded Collins some measure of personal wealth. He has even backed his campaign with some of his own money. But the mid-sized business represented by the 130-employee operation Collins left behind is a far cry from the mega-corporations so often the target of anti-business-in-Washington sentiment. The fact is, more Americans work for small and mid-size



companies than for large ones. According to the 1992 U.S. Economic Census, more than 50% of the work force is employed by firms with fewer than 500 employees. The background and ideas Collins could bring to the table might provide some much needed balance to what has for a long time been a very lopsided Congress.

I can't speak to Collins's stance on specific issues. From my viewpoint, it doesn't much matter whether he is Republican or Democrat (Republican, for the record). But I can tell you that he has been very closely involved with subjects that are important to me personally and to the industry I am part of.

I also can't tell you what to do with your money. Political contributions are a very personal business. But the chance to have in Congress a friend of manufacturing in general and of the gear industry in particular might be an investment worth making.

Michael Goldstein,  
Publisher & Editor-in-Chief