

Unexpected

The first decennium of the twenty-first century will not enter the historical records as an era of unparalleled growth and technological development, particularly in the fields of information and communication, but rather as the decade of undaunted short-term thinking. The total bankruptcy of former centrally-planned economies around 1990 fostered a mindset in which the vast majority of people embraced the intrinsic superiority of capitalism, and this whilst just two decades earlier any welcoming of the free market as an economic construct for guiding mankind's support and demand behaviour was considered most politically incorrect.

And in the wake of almost unrestrained faith in the benefits of private initiative, corporate expansion and shareholders value, Alexander the Great-type managers grasped their chance to clamber to the executive top of corporations. As you know, Alexander the Great, led by blind and excessive ambition, took just over ten years (334 - 323 BC) to conquer a tremendous territory covering Greece, Egypt, Little Asia and the Middle East. The disintegration of this vast empire after his death in 323 BC took less than a decade. The similarities between his *modus operandi* and the behaviour of some contemporary executives are striking.

One of the main characteristics of short-term thinking is the hoisting to the zenith of instant gain while any associated long-term loss is either neglected or rigorously denied. Once these phenomena have presented, the label 'unexpected' becomes a frequently applied adjective. Take as example the public-transport cost-reduction efforts made in many countries by reducing the number of guards on trains and buses. The unwanted side-effect was not only an increase in fare-dodging, but also violence. Somehow it had been forgotten that checking the validity of tickets was a minor task compared to the effective presence of staff as shield against hostile passengers. Public transport was abandoned on a massive scale in favour of the private car, resulting in unexpectedly congested roads. What was won? You never see calculations of such negative spin-offs.

Short-term thinking in the economic wild-west period of the nineties triggered government agencies into transmuting themselves into privatised companies in the naïve belief that fair price-setting would be the automatic harvest of free competition. One unexpected outcome was that former government officials became transformed overnight into chief executive officers (CEOs) and so, in deference to their augmented standing, felt obliged to double or even centuple their own salaries. Murphy's Law dictates that everything that can go wrong, will. And how very wrong it all went! Instead of competence, haughtiness and verbal domination came to count, fostering the seed of a worldwide economic mess. It is time Alexander the Great-type ruling of the world be exchanged for good governance.

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