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Bown previously served as senior economist for international trade and investment in the White House on the Council of Economic Advisers and most recently as a lead economist at the World Bank, conducting research and advising developing country governments on international trade policy for seven years. Bown was a tenured professor of economics at Brandeis University, where he held a joint appointment in the Department of Economics and International Business School for 12 years. He has also spent a year in residence as a visiting scholar in economic research at the World Trade Organization (WTO) Secretariat in Geneva, Switzerland.

Bown is also currently a research fellow at the Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR) in London and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Since 2011 he has codirected, with Petros C. Mavroidis of Columbia Law School, an annual program of scholars providing legal-economic assessments of WTO case law and jurisprudence that are published with Cambridge University Press.

Bown received a BA in economics and international relations from Bucknell University and a PhD in economics from the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

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