

Otter ensures equality for all (straight folk)

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Among the darker hours of Ronald Reagan's presidency was Reagan's move to neuter the role of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission by appointing to it people with low regard for enforcement of the nation's civil rights laws. It made Reagan look like a throwback to the days of Jim Crow.

That was more than two decades ago. More recently, Idaho's governors have accomplished the same thing with their appointments to the state's Human Rights Commission.

They're still doing it. Last week, the Idaho Senate confirmed Gov. Butch Otter's reappointment of a commissioner whose qualifications for the post appear to be her longtime Republican activism, not her commitment to equal treatment for all.

In fact, Ruthie Johnson of Hayden Lake was among those commissioners who voted against recommending that gays and lesbians get the same protection from discrimination in hiring, housing and the like that others have. Johnson, now 85, spent 24 years as a local staff representative of Sen. James McClure, and lately has been among those Republicans seeking to close their primary elections to all who do not publicly register as party members.

Johnson was first appointed to the commission by Otter's predecessor, Dirk Kempthorne, and now Otter has given her a second term.

He was able to do that only because the Senate's Republican majority is as blind to equality for all as Otter is, though. Democrats understandably questioned Johnson's fitness for the post, and her appointment was confirmed on a party-line vote.

Asked early this month if employers should be permitted to discriminate against homosexuals, Johnson replied, "If someone comes to work dressed in drag, they should be able to fire them."

That did not answer the question, of course, so Johnson later added that she doesn't think it's right for employers to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation.

That's no more responsive to the original question, however. For the real answer, you must turn to Johnson's February vote to change the commission's historic

support for including sexual minorities under the protections afforded women, disabled people and members of racial, religious and ethnic minorities.

Thinking something is not right is one thing. Prohibiting it is another. Johnson explained her refusal to support such a prohibition by saying it could lead to same-sex marriage, which she opposes.

Legally, she's wrong. No law, whether supported by the commission or not, can override the ban on same-sex marriage Idahoans wrote into the state constitution by amending it. All her participation in the 5-4 vote against extending the state's anti-discrimination law did was to put the commission on record opposing equality for homosexuals in the workplace, in schools, in the housing market and in public accommodations.

Johnson hasn't offered a good explanation for that, and there's no excusing it. Yet for some reason, Butch Otter does. - J.F.