

## Idaho GOP post-session query: Butch who?

By Jim Fisher  
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Butch Otter emerges from the worst session of the Idaho Legislature in decades still governor, but not leader of his party. Most of his fellow Republicans brushed him off like so much dandruff on their lapels, and it's hard to see him exercising much power again in the near future.

Otter's failure to wring even a face-saving pittance of the gas tax increase he made his first legislative priority stems partly from his own clumsiness. He staked his status on an initiative he should have known he was destined to lose in a House driven by right-wing, anti-tax ideologues. And by the time he resorted to the one big stick any chief executive has, the veto stamp, he was losing people who had stood by him earlier.

Those people included House GOP leaders, who half-heartedly supported a gas tax hike earlier in the session - notably without persuading their committee heads to do the same - but then openly defied him, to the point of declaring the session over and adjourning before the Senate and the state constitution permitted them to.

In the end, the purported compromise Otter agreed to, providing \$50 million of the \$174 million in road money he originally sought, some from smoke and mirrors and none from the gas tax, was more an instrument of surrender. The party members who had handed him an arresting defeat at their state convention in Sandpoint last June, unseating the Republican chairman he credited with making Idaho "the reddest of the red states," had taken the wheel and shoved him to the pavement.

All that remained was to declare Otter, the former libertarian who once would have been among the tax-fighting rebels, a RINO, or Republican in name only, the term they use to disparage party members who might win general elections but fail to toe the anti-government line.

And Sen. Monty Pearce of New Plymouth, one of only seven Republicans to vote against the tax in the more moderate Senate, came mighty close.

"I am worried we are seeing a real philosophical disconnect," Pearce said of Otter after speaking at a May 4 anti-tax rally in the capital. "He's not in touch with his past."

Republicans now head into an election year patrolling the perimeter of a small-tent party. Whether the activists fighting to close their primaries to all but publicly registered Republicans win in court or not, the question applied to GOP office-seekers next year will be not whether they can win in the general election but whether they are pure enough to wear the party mantle.

The same year, the U.S. Census Bureau will undertake a process bound to produce a less rural, more moderate Legislature, and probably party organization, than prevails now.

But prevail it does. And when it looks for leadership, it looks to someone other than Butch Otter. - J.F.