

Commentary Chris Carlson

Comeuppance for the Great Nonini?

Chris Carlson in the Lewiston Tribune

Shame on Kootenai County Republican state Sen. Bob Nonini. It was bad enough that the ethically-challenged legislator from District 3 appeared to go unpunished by the Senate leadership for his role in helping to secure contributions and contributing himself to Tea Party challengers to Republican incumbent state senators such as Shawn Keough from Sandpoint and Dean Cameron from Rupert.

The latter two are two of the hardest working members of the Joint Finance and Appropriations Committee and are veteran, reasonable, caring and listening legislators. Nonini last year, in an apparent effort to curry favor with then-House Speaker Lawrence Denny and the Tea Party types, conspired with, among others, Avista lobbyist Neil Colwell to secure and send some substantial contributions to challengers to incumbents in his party.

Nonini had to know he was putting at risk his ability to work with his future colleagues should he fail, but apparently didn't care. Colwell at least received a dressing down from his superiors at Avista and CEO Scott Morris drove to Sandpoint to meet personally with and apologize to Keough and Reps. Erik Anderson and George Eskridge for the perfidy and stupidity of their lobbyist.

Rumors circulated before the session that the GOP Senate leadership, capably led by Senate Pro Tempore Brent Hill and Majority Leader Bart Davis, planned to deny Nonini any committee assignments and ban him from the Republican caucus. Nothing of the sort happened, however.

Unlike Nonini, Hill and Davis are honorable men. Initially it looked like they were letting Nonini's stupidity go unpunished. Subsequent events, though, may dictate a different conclusion.

Nonini was pushing hard on a bill that would have diverted \$10 million from the already underfunded budget for education. The funds instead would be directed to parents and others as a tax credit for scholarship money they may have paid to send a child to a private school.

Nonini said taking a kid out of the public classroom and incentivizing parents to send him to a private school would save money. Come again? The operations and maintenance cost for the school remain the same whether there are 25 students in the class or 24. Hill, an accountant by training, stood up in committee and demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt how little math Nonini "mastered" while being educated in the Wallace school system.

When Hill was done taking apart Nonini's faulty logic and his math, the committee voted 7-2 not to introduce Nonini's bill.

Others suggested Nonini should find a copy of Idaho's Constitution and carefully read (I started to write "reread" and realized I was making a heck of an assumption) Article 9, section 1 and 5.

Section 1 says the Legislature is obligated to establish and "maintain a general, uniform and thorough system of public, free common schools." Nothing in there about private schools, is there?

Section 5 says no public dollars shall be allocated "in aid of any church or sectarian or religious society, or for any sectarian or religious purpose to help support or sustain any school, academy, seminary, college, university or other literary or scientific institution controlled by any church, sectarian or religious denomination whatsoever." Sounds pretty clear to me.

So just who was Nonini carrying water for on this kind of thing? Remember the most famous thing said about Watergate? Follow the money. In particular the money Nonini raised to go along with his contributions to the Tea Party challengers to incumbent Republicans.

Look at the public disclosure filing and one will have a pretty good idea who he reportedly was trying to assist.

Lobbyists and other legislators in Boise also point to Dr. Laura Finman as a possible beneficiary in some way. The Great Nonini still is reportedly irate that his strong effort to get Finman appointed to the State Board of Education a couple years back was thwarted by Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter selecting state Sen. John Goedde's candidate.

Such cynicism is not warranted, you say? Maybe, maybe not. If you subscribe to any of Idaho's major dailies or to the Spokesman-Review because you enjoy Betsy Russell's excellent reporting, you'll never hear Nonini's side of the story - and not because he has been frozen out by them.

Quite the contrary. He refuses to respond to any of the media's questions because for some reason the mainstream media has been unfair to him and biased in its reporting. Maybe it is just a case of the shoe fitting. . . .

I don't use the phrase "ethically challenged" lightly. Look for yourself at the record contained in the Idaho Supreme Court Data Repository.

Here are the case numbers:

- CV 1996-0006260, Bonner Properties vs. Robert P. Nonini.
- CV 1992-0089158, Coeur d'Alene Adjustment Bureau vs. Robert Nonini.
- CV 1992-0088598, Met Mortgage Finance, Inc. vs. Robert Nonini.

Go to the Courthouse, look them up and peruse the contents. Then draw your own conclusions here also.

Perhaps, after all, the Senate leadership did see fit to punish him for his perfidy, and just bided its time. Perhaps they did the old "let him walk out on a limb" and then cut the limb off. If so, hats off to them if the senator got the message.

Bottom line: A message was delivered that most everyone is reading as a sharp rebuke and the taxpayers don't have to worry about his diverting \$10 million from public education for private education, do we?

Carlson, a retired journalist who served as press secretary to for Idaho Gov. Cecil D. Andrus, lives in Medimont in Kootenai County.