

Governors, not headlines, make a state's image

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Gov. C. L. (Butch) Otter's protest notwithstanding, Idaho does have an anti-gay reputation.

If you doubt it, consider the governor's reaction to this Feb. 12 Idaho Statesman headline: "Otter says Idaho's anti-gay reputation is not hurting business." The headline referred to Otter's comments to the Idaho Press Club.

"I do not accept the premise," Otter told the Statesman's Dan Popkey. "Idaho does not have an anti-gay reputation is what I'm saying! You guys are dead wrong on that."

Listen for yourself: www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeiKuMJXob8&sns=em

As the newspaper conceded, nobody has polled the rest of the nation about how it perceives the Gem State. But it's not for a lack of effort that Idaho has acquired its image:

Exhibit 1 — For eight years, the Legislature has refused to even consider extending anti-discrimination protection to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

Exhibit 2 — The current Legislature flirted with a bill that would have sanctioned discrimination against gays and lesbians on the basis of a sincerely held religious belief.

Exhibit 3 — By a massive margin, Idahoans voted in 2006 to enshrine in the state constitution second-class citizenship for gay couples who want to get married.

Exhibit 4 — Idaho's dominant Republican Party passed an anti-gay marriage platform plank. And its central committee last summer called on lawmakers to overturn the decision of seven cities, including Moscow, that extended human rights protections for all their citizens.

Could that contribute to Idaho's anti-gay reputation?

Exhibit 5 — In 2006, then-Congressman Butch Otter — along with his seat mate, Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, — supported a federal constitutional amendment imposing a ban on gay marriage.

Exhibit 6 — During the 2010 campaign, Project Vote Smart reported Otter opposed "adding the words" to Idaho's Human Rights Act.

Exhibit 7 — On Nov. 7, Sens. Mike Crapo and James Risch, both R-Idaho, voted against banning on-the-job discrimination against the LGBT community. Three years earlier, the two Idahoans voted against allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military.

Exhibit 8 — Worried the U.S. Supreme Court is about to recognize gay marriage, Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, is sponsoring a bill that gives organized religion a pass on respecting those constitutional rights.

Exhibit 9 — Caught up in a 2007 gay sex sting in the Minneapolis airport bathroom, former Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, famously protested: “Let me be clear: I am not gay. I never have been gay.” That he pleaded guilty to the offense was beside the point.

With the exception of Craig — who resigned and then opted to serve out his term — not one of the party apparatchiks or politicians responsible for those actions has paid a price with the electorate. Far from it. They’ve been rewarded with public support.

Exhibit 10 — Defending Idaho’s image, Otter says the Gem State is no worse than the other 28 states that do not guarantee civil liberties on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Certainly, it’s no better. Why doesn’t Otter enhance Idaho’s standing? Why not take some positive steps?

Maybe he could follow Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum’s lead and drop Idaho’s defense of its gay marriage ban in the federal courts.

If that’s too big a leap, how about reversing his earlier 2010 stance? He could join former Gov. Phil Batt in calling on the Legislature to “add the words.”

At least he’d lean on lawmakers to hold a hearing — while standing up for the seven cities that acted on their own. How about encouraging more of them, including Lewiston, to follow suit?

Or at minimum, he’d invite some of the people protesting legislative indifference to come down to his office for a heart-to-heart talk.

None of which would change Idaho’s reputation overnight. But it would accomplish a good deal more than bitching about an unflattering headline.