

Looking for Mr. Balukoff; have you seen him?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

There's a Democrat running for Idaho governor.

His name is A.J. Balukoff.

Anybody seen him, lately?

Anybody heard from him?

After all, here's a fellow virtually unknown outside the small circle of people who follow his work on the Boise School Board.

And he's had opportunity after opportunity to spotlight the waste, fraud and abuse swirling in and around Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter.

Otter waited until the last possible minute to concede private management of Idaho's violence-plagued "gladiator school," the

Idaho Correctional Center, had to end. Rather than get to the bottom of how much the ICC contractor, Corrections Corp. of America, bilked Idaho taxpayers for unworked shifts, Otter rebuffed Attorney General Lawrence Wasden's call for a criminal investigation.

What about that, Mr. Balukoff?

In year eight of Otter's tenure, Idaho has been transformed into the Appalachia of the West. Under Otter, incomes fell further and faster in the Gem State. Clearly, Otter's penchant for lowering corporate taxes hasn't trickled prosperity down to the masses.

Anything you want to say, A.J.?

Otter's best buddy and former Administration Director Mike Gwartney so gummed up the works that the state is out \$14.5 million - and maybe another \$13 million - in federal funds to keep the Idaho Education Network afloat.

In his budget, the governor deliberately chose against putting more money into chronically underfunded schools and paying employees a meager increase - and instead parked it in a savings account.

And while he holds a separate office, Treasurer Ron Crane - who got caught trying to cover up how he lost at least \$10.2 million of tax dollars on a poor investment - is part of the GOP team.

Chime in here anytime, Mr. Balukoff.

How about Otter's willingness to put big issues - whether to expand Medicaid to about 100,000 low-income adults, which could save taxpayers \$90 million, or doing something about Idaho's crumbling transportation system - on the backburner in the name of "gettin' me re-elected"?

Or the governor's various missteps - from his insensitive remarks about Idaho's emerging anti-gay reputation to his declaring that U.S. District Judge B. Lynn Winmill, a native Idahoan, doesn't share "all of the enthusiasm for the marketplace and freedom that we do in Idaho"?

Anything?

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Balukoff?

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Granted, there's a primary election between now and May 20 that will determine whether Balukoff faces Otter or his Tea Party challenger, Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, in November.

And to some extent, Balukoff's relative obscurity reflects changes in his campaign organization.

Still, these are absolute political gifts he's squandering:

- The opening to introduce himself to the voters during the time when the Legislature focuses public attention on state issues.
- The opportunity to demonstrate to Idahoans he's engaged.
- The ability to showcase GOP infighting and a governor preoccupied with what he's least good at - governing.

If he waits until spring to take on Otter, Balukoff will find the public attention splintered, the GOP united and an opponent fired up for what he does better than just about anyone else, running for office. - M.T.