

Storming the Gem State's castle of indifference

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Monday, 44 Idahoans presumed to shut down the state Senate.

They blockaded the doorway, bringing that chamber to a standstill for three hours until they were arrested for trespassing and removed.

That is not how we do business in the Gem State.

Ours is a society of conformity.

We shrink from confrontation.

We follow the rules.

We defer to authority.

Some would call that conservative.

Others might define it as docile.

Whatever your persuasion, however, this is disturbing.

It goes against our grain.

When we see people assaulting our cherished symbols of statehood and self-rule, we get viscerally provoked.

This is not entering the Statehouse - the people's house - to change the law.

This is breaking the law.

This is not staging a protest march in the streets or even a political rally on the steps of the Capitol.

This is an insurrection inside the Capitol.

If the dispute behind it was a routine policy dispute - inadequate school funding, failure to fix Idaho's highways, the raiding of the state treasury to benefit Idaho's comfortable elite or even the failure of this state to alleviate the suffering of 100,000 Idahoans by the willful failure to accept Medicaid expansion - such excess would be a display of disrespect.

This is not about policy.

This is about fundamental morality.

This is not politics as usual.

This is a matter of conscience.

For the record, the people running this state have said it's fine with them if an employer terminates a worker because he's gay - or just gives off the wrong vibes.

The people in charge of Idaho have given permission to the landlord who evicts a couple from their apartment because they're lesbians - or he believes them to be.

The authorities of Idaho are content to allow a shopkeeper to humiliate a person deemed to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

That's because Idaho's human rights law has a glaring omission. Long ago, this state decided a just society would not tolerate discrimination on the basis of race, sex, color, national origin, religion, age, mental or physical disability. But that law says nothing about sexual orientation or gender identity.

For eight long years and in growing numbers, the people of this state have - respectfully - asked their elected officials to remedy that deficiency in the fabric of justice.

Over time, they've been joined by seven Idaho cities - among them Moscow, Coeur d'Alene, Boise and Idaho Falls - that have passed their own discrimination bans.

Whether it's polling that shows two-thirds of ordinary Idahoans think it's wrong to discriminate or the uncommon eloquence of former Gov. Phil Batt on behalf of updating the Human Rights Act he championed a half-century ago, it's clear who is on the right side of history.

And who is not.

Yet for eight long years, the people of this state have been offered the pronouns of procrastination and the verbiage of political cowardice.

A political establishment that has time for all manner of folly - nullifying the U.S. Constitution, putting concealed weapons in the pockets of intoxicated college students and encouraging bigots under some curdled and twisted notion of religious freedom - does not have even one morning to listen.

To the tales of discrimination. To the fear of exposure. To the temptation to simply leave Idaho and its troubles behind by crossing a border into a more enlightened state.

When the people who take an oath before God to act on behalf of the people refuse to listen to a plea for basic human dignity, what are you supposed to do?

You do what 44 brave Idahoans did Monday.

You storm the castle of indifference.

You sound the alarm with Idahoans.

And in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau and Martin Luther King Jr., you stand up for justice and suffer the consequences.

The shame wasn't that 44 Idahoans shocked our senses.

The shame was that there weren't 4,400 more of them. - M.T.