

Otter needed Lanza inside his tent, not out

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Nobody described the idea of keeping your friends close but your enemies closer more colorfully than President Lyndon Baines Johnson.

Asked about his decision to keep J. Edgar Hoover as FBI director, LBJ famously told the New York Times: "It's probably better to have him inside the tent pissing out, than outside the tent pissing in."

Which brings us to Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter.

Last week, Otter's State Board of Education appointee Richard Westerberg yanked Idaho education activist Mike Lanza from the governor's education reform task force. Lanza had signed up as Democratic gubernatorial hopeful A.J. Balukoff's communications director and education adviser.

"The governor and the board expressed concern that the task force should not be used as a political forum," Otter's spokesman Jon Hanian told the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell. "We believe politics should be kept out of this process. Mr. Lanza has announced, and it is our understanding he is, the communications director for a candidate running for governor. Mr. Lanza's organization can still have a seat at the table. We have asked him to provide a replacement."

Who are they trying to kid?

Politics is what got us here in the first place.

As co-founder of Idaho Parents and Teachers Together, Lanza led the successful ballot rebellion against the package of heavy-handed, anti-teacher overhauls Otter and state schools Superintendent Tom Luna rammed through a compliant 2011 Idaho Legislature.

By margins as large as 2-to-1, voters repealed the Otter-Luna package by referendum - the first time that's occurred since 1936 - handing Otter the biggest drubbing of his 40 years in public life and effectively ending Luna's political career.

What Otter did next was smart. He got the biggest table he could find and invited everybody on all sides of Idaho's education wars - teachers, parents, school board members, administrators, business people, legislators, Republicans, Democrats and Lanza - to take a seat.

Bringing Lanza on board lent instant credibility to Otter's task force. Lanza's side had won the 2012 election. The governor's side had lost.

And it succeeded. Where Luna and Otter had stirred up legions of angry teachers, parents and voters for having excluded them from the 2011 process, this task force reached consensus on 20 pieces of reform - many of which found approval in the just-concluded legislative session.

As that task force settles into the work of implementing and refining the package, Otter is not so much making an example of Lanza as he is making an exception of him.

If supporting Balukoff disqualifies Lanza, what about the three Democratic legislators or the Idaho Education Association representatives still serving on the task force? You can bet by the fall they won't be helping Otter win a third term.

If groups such as the IEA, the Idaho School Boards Association or Idaho Business for Education can pick their own representatives on the task force, why must Idaho Parents and Teachers Together send a substitute for Lanza?

If working for the political opposition is so toxic to the governor, why did Otter agree to continue meeting with state Senate leadership when one of its members, GOP Caucus Chairman Russ Fulcher of Meridian, is challenging him in the May 20 Republican primary election?

By being so thin-skinned, Otter is hurting his own education task force. Removing Lanza strips away the veneer that the panel's work transcended partisan politics in pursuit of reforming Idaho's beleaguered public schools.

And Otter is hurting himself. It cost him little to have Lanza among two or three dozen people debating what was best for Idaho's schoolchildren. Had Lanza disrupted the task force or used it as a forum to promote Balukoff, the public would have caught on soon enough.

Now Lanza is free to stand outside

Otter's political tent and - well, you get the idea. - M.T.