

Wasden said what Otter might have meant

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

When Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter last year told the Associated General Contractors of Idaho that "gettin' me re-elected" was the biggest challenge facing the Gem State, he wasn't necessarily wrong.

Had he said Idaho's May 20 GOP primary is as consequential as any election could get, nobody would have argued with him.

Had Otter said the choice facing Idaho voters is whether to substantially alter the philosophy of Idaho's governing party for the next decade, he would have met with near unanimous agreement.

Instead, he stumbled over a joke on the way to making a gaffe.

Speaking to the Tribune Wednesday, Attorney General Lawrence Wasden did not repeat Otter's error.

"It is a fight, really, for the heart and soul of the Republican Party," Wasden said. "Are you out there on that far edge, or are you rational? I certainly hope that the rational message comes forward."

In what seems like a high water mark for the rebellion within Idaho's GOP, the hard right has challenged the establishment with its own slate of candidates. Among them are Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, against Otter, Eagle attorney Chris Troupis against Wasden, and Idaho County Commissioner Jim Chmelik against Lt. Gov. Brad Little. Come the day after the election, Idaho may be facing the prospect of former House Speaker Lawrence (Boss) Denney supervising its elections as the GOP's choice for secretary of state and former Constitution Party secretary John Eynon overseeing its schools as the Republican choice for superintendent of public instruction.

No matter how much the dominant political institution veers off into the right ditch, Idaho's GOP is Idaho government. Voters won't desert it. Remember how they overwhelmingly repealed the GOP's education reform package - dubbed the Luna Laws in honor of lame duck state schools Superintendent Tom Luna - in 2012? Yet, they then turned around and re-elected the same Legislature that had put them through so much trouble.

But the gas is leaking out of the Tea Party balloon. If these Idaho candidates gain traction this year, they could be around for some time. If not, odds are they won't be back. So Idaho finds itself at the crossroads between:

- People who believe it was a mistake to ratify the 17th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and thereby allow voters to pick their own U.S. senators - and those who think the issue was correctly settled early in the last century.

- Those who believe so strongly in the need to stop federal spending that they're willing to sabotage an Idaho economy that can't survive without it and others who recognize the realities of a rural, Western state dependent upon Uncle Sam.
- Political activists who believe in a steadily narrowing circle of party regulars deciding who is a real Republican and who deserves the party's nomination - and a broader group who would leave that choice to the widest coalition of voters possible.
- Advocates of the latest Sagebrush Rebellion, who argue the state can compel the federal government to relinquish its lands in Idaho - and those who see folly in the logic and a larger danger were the plan ever to succeed. Assuming ownership of those lands would be so expensive the state would have no alternative to selling off the state's birthright of public access to the highest private bidder.

Boiled down, Idaho's six-year-long GOP civil war is a choice between those who see the world as they wish it to be - and those who see it for what it is. Wasden articulated what Otter no doubt wishes he had - provided he first took some time to think about it. - M.T.