

Children pay price of gettin' Otter re-elected

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

If "gettin' me re-elected" were not the primary thought in his head, here's how Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter might have handled the exodus of Central American children streaming into the country.

He'd soberly frame the issue as a humanitarian crisis. These are not illegal immigrants seeking prosperity in the north. These are refugees. For anyone willing to listen, he'd share the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report, which found 58 percent of the children interviewed left Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala to flee violence.

Advocates for these children say conditions at home are so bad that anywhere from 40 to 60 percent of them could qualify to remain in the United States.

Such a governor would acknowledge the grisly statistics: In Honduras, a nation of 8 million, 1,013 people under 23 were murdered last year. Honduras averaged 90 murdered children each of the first five months of this year - and that rate spiked to 102 children killed in May. During the seven years leading to 2012, the murder rate for women and girls increased 346 percent; for men and boys, it jumped 292 percent.

In El Salvador, the rate of people who "disappeared" jumped 93 percent last year.

He'd share stories about children facing a "join or die" threat from deadly drug cartels. He might cite author Sonia Nazario's July 11 report in the New York Times. She interviewed Christian Omar Reyes, an 11-year-old whose father was murdered by gangs and whose mother fled to Florida. "I'm going this year," Reyes told Nazario.

Or he might talk about 14-year-old Carlos Baquedano Sanchez, who told Nazario he barely escaped being raped at the age of 9 and has seen three people killed right in front of him.

And such a governor would remind everyone that America's insatiable demand for illegal drugs is the root cause for all this suffering.

A governor interested in something more than getting re-elected wouldn't let up on the federal government. He'd demand congressional Republicans and the Democratic White House reform the law signed by President George W. Bush that encourages these children to seek haven here.

But he'd also rally Idaho's faith-based community and its nonprofits to do their part. He remind the state of its proud tradition of accommodating refugees, whether they came from Southeast Asia in the 1980s or Bosnia in the 1990s.

In short, he'd echo Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber, who said: "These children are fleeing their homeland because of overwhelming violence and economic hardship, and they do not deserve to

become political fodder. Oregon has been a welcoming home to unaccompanied minors and refugee children, and will continue to do so while we wait on Congress to adopt more responsible immigration policies."

But that's not what Idaho's governor did.

Not even waiting to learn that eight children had found shelter somewhere in the Gem State, Otter sought to pre-empt the federal government from using Idaho as a "destination or staging area." He resorted to the usual dog whistles: Illegal immigrants. Barack Obama. States' rights. Federal mismanagement. In the faces of these children, Otter saw not refugees but an "influx of unaccompanied and illegal immigrants."

As politics goes, it was pitch perfect. Declaring Idaho off limits to an abstract federal scheme gives Otter standing to at least talk about something other than how Idaho's economy has stagnated while cronyism has flourished on his watch.

It allowed him to rally the nativist wing of his party that nearly booted him out of office in the May Republican primary and remains in revolt to this day.

But just once, don't you wish Otter had more on his mind than "gettin' me re-elected"? - M.T.