

Morning again in Idaho? More like midnight

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

To hear Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's latest campaign commercial, it's virtually "morning again" in Idaho.

Unemployment is down.

The economic outlook is healthy.

The state is a great place to start a business.

He's kidding, right?

It's bad enough Otter constructs this edifice on the flimsiest of claims:

- Two forecasters - Moody's Analytics and Kiplinger's - say Idaho will grow jobs by 2 percent this year - ahead of the national average and among the top 10 states. Forecasts? Really? This from a governor who disregarded his own economists' forecasts two years running?
- Among those giving Idaho a healthy economy index is the American Legislative Exchange Council - the engine of conservative, starve-the-beast policies that have raided Idaho school budgets and handed over tax cuts to Otter's corporate cronies.
- Idaho has nowhere to go but up. When the Great Recession struck, Idaho's employment rate collapsed earlier, faster and deeper than just about any other place.

Worse, the governor ignores - forgive the pun - the elephant in the room. Yes, Idahoans are going back to work - but they're making far less money.

Idaho has become a haven for low-skill, low-wage jobs. WhiteCloud Analytics CEO Bob Lokken calls this kind of economy a "death spiral."

This year, Idaho is No. 2 for the share of its workers making minimum wage. Last year, it was tops in the country.

It's second only to Mississippi in having the lowest per capita incomes in the country. When Otter took office, Idaho was ahead of seven states. And Mississippi will overtake Idaho. Ten years ago, Idahoans were making 10 percent more; today they're only 2 percent ahead.

Median household incomes look a tad better - Idaho is ahead of nine states - until you sort through the fact that Idahoans have larger families. If you're comparing apples to apples and look at households where two people work, Idaho comes in dead last again.

The Post Register's Bryan Clark documented that Idaho's incomes had stagnated the last 15 years while workers in seven of every eight states - including Montana, Oregon, Utah and Washington - all made gains.

Extrapolating those trends forward, ECONorthwest - in a study commissioned by the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation and the Idaho Charter School Network - predicts substantially more impoverished households and a significant drop in middle- class households by the time Otter can expect to finish his third term in 2019.

It's not morning again Idaho. It's dark and getting darker.

"Idaho has lost its mojo," says Michael Ferguson, the former state economist whose forecasts Otter ignored.

Such ads ring hollow to Idahoans, who understand they're not better off than they were eight years ago when Otter was first elected.

And the governor ought to know better than to open this conversation.

On the eve of the May 20 Republican primary election, the governor claimed to have achieved the goal of expanding Idaho's economic output to \$60 billion. But when you factored inflation into the equation, it turned out Idaho's GDP had declined \$500 million below the level Otter inherited when he took office in 2007.

That was all Otter's GOP rival, Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, needed to hammer the governor on his economic record. Fulcher ultimately lost, but he performed better than expected by carrying Otter's base in Kootenai, Canyon and western Ada counties.

Find something else to talk about, Gov. Otter.

The economy isn't exactly your strong suit. - M.T.