

# Woodings nudges Denney into the light

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Idaho Republicans fired the first salvo late last week.

Why, they wanted to know, was Democratic gubernatorial candidate A.J. Balukoff allowing the state Democratic Party to cover his campaign staff payroll?

If true, Balukoff was guilty of breaking Idaho's campaign finance laws, which cap contributions to a candidate at \$10,000.

Idaho Democrats were accusing the GOP of stage-managing a pseudo-event. Rather than Democrats paying his staff, Balukoff had contracted with the party to administer a payroll he had financed in advance.

All of which fell in the lap of Secretary of State Ben Ysursa Monday.

After conducting some fact-finding, chief deputy Tim Hurst said Balukoff's story checked out.

"It's part of the contract that he has with the party," Hurst said. "I don't see a violation there."

He then shrugged it off as the kind of campaign back-and-forth you'd expect to see during the silly season leading up to an election.

"It's just that time of year," Hurst said.

If it was good enough for Hurst, it was good enough for Idaho GOP Executive Director Dave Johnston: "If the secretary of state is satisfied, we're not going forward with it."

In case you missed the moral of this story, it comes down to the trust Idahoans have placed in the impeccable impartiality and expertise of Ysursa's office.

Like his predecessor, Pete T. Cenarrusa, Ysursa is a Republican. But you would be hard-pressed to find a hint of partisanship in how the office has managed elections, campaign finance and Sunshine laws.

For the sake of argument, assume the reverse.

Say Idaho's secretary of state was in the care of a hyper-partisan Republican. Would you expect him to discredit his own party's charges against the Democratic nominee?

Or imagine the office were held by an equally partisan Democrat? Would the public accept his word that his own party and candidate were in the clear?

Ysursa is retiring at the end of this year. So the major question in the campaign to succeed him is which candidate - Rep. Lawrence (Boss) Denney, R-Midvale, or Rep. Holli Woodings, D-Boise - would most closely follow his example?

Here's one clue: This week Woodings stepped forward and promised to retain the staff that has worked under Republican secretaries of state.

Actually, the Democratic candidate is merely continuing a precedent first set in 1967 by Edson Deal.

Deal was Idaho's first Republican secretary of state in eight years. He maintained the Democratic staff he inherited - sending the message that he expected his office and staff to stand apart from petty politics.

What about Denney?

When told about Hollings' idea, he said, me too.

"I think for the continuity of the office, I think you should keep the staff intact," he told the Idaho Statesman.

Keep Denney's record in mind.

His conduct as speaker of the Idaho House was so ethically challenged that his own party booted him out from the top House leadership post.

He sued Ysursa in an effort to neuter the independent citizens redistricting commission and bend it toward his gerrymandering ways.

Denney is the author of legislation that closed the GOP primary election to all but registered Republicans.

His political allies include Lou Esposito of Eagle, whose tenure on the 2011 redistricting commission left the process gridlocked, and former Sen. Rod Beck, R-Boise, who led the fight to close the GOP primary.

And when he first broached the topic of running for the office against Ysursa a year ago, Denney said, "I've been sensitive to the wishes of my party and for the most part have always followed the Republican platform."

In case that was too subtle, House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, chimed in: "I think Ben's gotten sideways with the party on some issues."

Before Woodings spoke up, many feared someone like Esposito or Beck would wind up at Hurst's desk.

So here's the question: Had Woodings not forced him into it, would Denney have agreed to continue a Republican tradition begun nearly 50 years ago?

Of course not. - M.T.