

Otter's cronyism front and center

Chuck Malloy/Lewiston Tribune

This year's gubernatorial race comes down to whether Idaho voters care about crony capitalism, where political cronies and campaign donors profit under the name of "serving the public's interest."

Democratic challenger A.J. Balukoff is using the stretch run of this campaign to bring up two glaring examples - the Corrections Corporation of America's failed private-prison management effort and the \$60 million broadband contract, which has turned into a nearly \$80 million tab for Idaho taxpayers.

Both matters involve people or entities that have donated generously to Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's campaign.

This isn't exactly an "October surprise," since the CCA fiasco, especially, has been in the news lately. And Balukoff isn't the first gubernatorial candidate to raise issues regarding CCA and broadband contracts. State Sen. Russ Fulcher, who challenged Otter in May's Republican primary, also touched on those issues.

The difference is Fulcher didn't have the money to make a stink last May; Balukoff does, and he's flooding television screens with ads and newspapers with press releases.

Balukoff has struck a nerve. After Balukoff ran ads about the CCA, Otter responded with an ad of his own - basically calling Balukoff a liar.

Balukoff is taking a risk. If negative ads work - and history suggests that they do - then the final round of ads will be a big reason why he wins. Or, it can backfire on him if he's bombarding voters with information that is far too complicated to digest. There is nothing simple about the issues he's presenting, and Otter supporters couldn't care less.

Otter's campaign also has taken a negative turn, mostly using the traditional rhetoric that Republicans use against Democrats. He paints Balukoff as a spend-happy liberal who wants to bleed Idahoans with higher taxes and compromise our Second Amendment rights - which probably ruffles more feathers than higher taxes. The ads falsely assume that a Democratic governor has any influence over a Republican Legislature.

There's not much Balukoff can do that the GOP hasn't done to itself. Otter and Republican leaders in the Legislature already have established a statewide health exchange program, a centerpiece of Obamacare. They have given their backing to Common Core education standards, a favorite of the liberal social engineers. Balukoff probably will take the lead in promoting Medicaid expansion if he wins, but that's no culture shock to Republicans. The Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry - the right arm of the Otter campaign - already is on the front row of support for that issue.

If Balukoff wants to invest through the roof on education and bring Idahoans to their knees with higher taxes, good luck getting those proposals through the Legislature. The coffin for those ideas is waiting in the House Revenue and Taxation Committee.

Balukoff already has support of those who want more money for education, and Otter - who is practically a folk hero in the rural communities - has that vote locked up. Balukoff is going after independent, or undecided, voters by centering on the scandals that have given the Otter administration a black eye.

Recently, Balukoff sent out a news release demanding Otter to "come clean" over the \$60 million broadband contract and "immediately release to the public and the media all records pertaining to the CCA case."

Yeah, right. The governor isn't going to "come clean" on those issues, or anything else. Otter is not going to be accountable, because he doesn't have to be accountable - which is what crony capitalism is all about.

There's an old saying that applies to this administration: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The broadband contract and the CCA disaster are products of the culture that's in place and stands to grow with four more years of power or maybe more.

Otter says he will not seek a fourth term, but during the primary campaign he also said he would not dismiss the idea of seeking a fourth term. So, what version do we believe? Since there's no sign of his health slipping or money drying up, Otter is well positioned to stay in office for as long as he wants.

Or, until voters take him out.

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