

Batt: 'If backing equal protection makes me a RINO, so be it'

BY PHILIP E. BATT

Former Idaho Gov. Phil Batt delivered these remarks Wednesday evening at the Canyon County Lincoln Day Banquet in Nampa.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of my inauguration as governor, the first Idaho Republican governor in the previous 20 years.

Our party was becoming resurgent during that period. But it followed many years of floundering around trying to find itself.

Fifty-one years ago, in 1964, our Canyon County organization urged me to run for the Legislature, and I gave it a shot — staying with it until being elected governor in 1994.

But Republicans were not always strong. In 1984 Democrats held three state offices. By 1990, the Idaho Senate was tied 21 each with Lt. Gov. Butch Otter breaking the ties.

After serving in both bodies of the Legislature and as lieutenant governor, I ran against Gov. John Evans (1982) and was narrowly defeated. I then volunteered to be state party chairman.

I toured the state for months organizing, organizing. Our appeal was that we welcomed all as long as they wanted limited, economical government. We filed for nearly every slot. We won big time, and we have won ever since. But our appeal has recently changed, and I think we will pay a price for it.

Now, we must declare our allegiance to party principles in order to vote in the Republican primary. These principles are supposedly set by the state convention and include such things as going back to the gold standard or having our Legislature choose our candidates for the U.S. Senate. I don't endorse such things and most Idahoans don't. But we have to go through this mockery of support if we want to vote in the Republican primary.

In the State Senate in 1970, I held informal hearings for the entire session and authored Idaho's first comprehensive Civil Rights bill. I'm proud we can call it a Republican measure in the spirit of our revered founder, Abraham Lincoln.

Now, we think it's OK to kill a Civil Rights expansion on a party-line vote. It's not OK and we'll regret it.

Nobody has really explained to me why a gay person can't order a hamburger or rent a room from somebody who serves everybody else. Some opponents of Add the Words say that their religion will not allow it. Write an exemption, as long as it's not just an excuse. Others say it's government intrusion. Would it be OK to deny women the right to vote because it's government intrusion? Would it be OK to deny blacks a hamburger and a room because it's government intrusion? I can see why some individuals would vote against Add the Words. But to party-line kill it without explanation — COME ON!

My gay grandson was tormented enough in High School that he dropped out, took his GED and moved to San Francisco. He waited tables and did other odd jobs until he became a California citizen. Then he went through their marvelous schools, graduated and obtained good jobs in software design and analysis. He now makes a lot of money and is being courted by Apple and Google. His sister, who is not gay, followed him to California and is pursuing a doctorate degree at USC. Neither will be returning to Idaho except for visits and this is not only my loss but it's your loss, too. Of course, many others are harassed and bullied too, and we all fight that. But, in this case, we're saying it's OK to pick on gays, we don't want them anyhow.

I've been called a RINO (Republican in name only) by some people. I don't mind. If my interest in civil rights bans me from present day Idaho GOP, so be it. Some think it does, most do not.

When I became governor, I started searching for ways to save money. I told all my directors to find methods for providing services with fewer employees and to report it to me each month. When I finished my term we had fewer employees than when I started. I reduced Idaho's state property tax by \$40 million.

I was tight. But do I reflect on that as my legacy? No, and the public doesn't either. They'd rather talk about my uphill, successful effort to cover farm laborers with workers compensation, or my contract with the federal government to keep nuclear waste from being stored over the Snake River Aquifer, or my help through monthly meetings in transforming Idaho's Indian tribes from being poverty-stricken to moderate recovery.

I'm proud to be an Idahoan, and I'm proud to be a Republican, and I'm proud of my efforts at building this party as a fiscally conservative, but welcoming, organization that will tolerate social views not glued to history.

I'll be 88 years old next month. I remember some things that are much better now. When I went to basic training at Biloxi, Miss., blacks got off the sidewalk so whites could go by. They not only went to the back of the bus, they were shoved to the back of the bus.

When I took my good friend and business partner, Kay Inouye and his wife Mary, to my Caldwell Elks Club, they were refused admission because they were not white. I dropped my membership. Their policy changed. I applied for readmission and was greeted by 14 black balls. Now that's all changed, a relic of the past. There used to be signs in the windows of Wilder bars: "No Mexicans." They're gone, a relic of the past. There used to be Nazis in North Idaho. I helped chase those scumbags out.

Most overt discrimination is gone, but some remains. Gays are still regarded as weird freaks of nature by some, and it is certainly the critic's right to do so, but to party-line vote against equal protection is not in the history or tradition of our wonderful organization.

Call me a RINO if you want, I'm still proud to be a Republican and a good one. But for those of you who still favor discrimination for no good reason — think about it. Could you be the RINOs?

Philip E. Batt was governor of Idaho from 1995 to 1999.