

LeBeau's message, not his language, wreaked havoc

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Alex LeBeau is taking a breather as president of the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry, the state's most powerful lobby.

It's hard to believe all this happened because LeBeau laced an email with profanity. Granted, it was clunky and inartful. LeBeau ought to leave swearing to the professionals. You know - people such as Samuel L. Jackson or Joe Pesci - who use the F-bomb the way others compose poetry.

But American politics, from the top of the food chain to the bottom, is replete with salty language. Harry Truman or Lyndon Johnson could make Pesci blush and nobody tossed them out of the White House for vulgarity.

Of course, putting anything in an email is hazardous to your political health. But a lot of people trip over that basic mistake.

And the object of LeBeau's scorn - state Sen. Jeff Siddoway, R-Terreton - is hardly a sympathetic figure. Over the years, controversy has followed Siddoway as a member of the Idaho Fish and Game Commission and as a lawmaker who frequently blurs the line between his personal interests and those of his constituents.

No, LeBeau is in hot water because he committed the cardinal sin of lifting the hood and exposing IACI's engine.

This is not the "voice of business in Idaho" that once employed people such as Pat Harwood or Steve Ahrens. They held the line on tax increases, but they also promoted more generous education spending and a prosperous economy for all.

As the Idaho Statesman's Bill Dentzer noted, all that changed when LeBeau came aboard about a decade ago. Spiked membership fees purged smaller players from IACI's membership rolls, leaving behind Idaho's mega corporations such as Simplot, Micron and Idaho Power.

LeBeau pursued a single-minded strategy to win tax breaks for those corporations - chief among them the millions in property taxes big businesses pay on equipment.

And he injected IACI into electoral politics with its own political action committee, the Idaho Prosperity Fund.

Democratic gubernatorial candidates Keith Allred in 2010 and A.J. Balukoff in 2014 felt its sting. But the Prosperity Fund wasn't above sending a message to an uncooperative Republican - whether it was former Senate tax committee Chairman Tim Corder, R-Mountain Home, in 2012, or former House Local Government Committee Chairwoman Lenore Hardy Barrett, R-Challis,

last year. In Barrett's case, the IACI political apparatus distorted her record and accused the hard-core anti-environmentalist of being - of all things - a wolf sympathizer.

So when Siddoway announced he would block virtually any tax cut until Idaho pays teachers a competitive wage, LeBeau went on a tear:

"Suckaway can eat a dick and hug a teacher. How f***ing stupid. Let me see. Make me and my committee completely irrelevant for the foreseeable future. Jesus! People have no f***ing vision or forethought. Doucher. Regardless we will drop some s*** in his lap - just to be dicks."

How LeBeau expressed himself didn't matter so much. Here's what he was saying: IACI could care less about teachers or the state's school system. All it prized was getting its tax cuts and if Siddoway stood in the way, he could be removed - just like Corder, just like Barrett.

Worse, people were looking at LeBeau's superiors.

Among them were Mark Benson, vice president for public affairs at Potlatch Corp., Matt Van Vleet, Clearwater Paper's public affairs vice president, and Regence BlueShield President Scott Kreilling. So last week, the IACI board put LeBeau on a 30-day suspension. No one's sure if he'll return or for how long.

But do you really believe an IACI board that gave LeBeau its marching orders for the better part of a decade is going to change its tune?

Or do you think it will simply find someone else to sing it? - M.T.