

Mulling murky motives as session grinds to a close

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

BOISE - It was 31 years ago this coming week when Winston Smith began his life of crime.

Returning to his small London flat one evening, Smith quaffed down a burning cup of gin and stepped into an alcove where he could work unobserved. Taking a large, blank book from a desk, he opened it to the first page and wrote, "Down with Big Brother."

The date was April 4, 1984.

Many of us here in the Ministry of Truth share the fact-starved sense of desperation that drove Smith to commit his subversive act in George Orwell's "1984." It's at this point in the Idaho legislative session when we feel most in the dark. We know things are happening - decisions being made, options discarded - but they often take place behind the scenes. And when the decisions are explained, if they're explained, we know the answers won't be enlightening.

To figure out what's really going on, we're left looking for clues and subtle hints. We have to read the tea leaves.

A few examples:

Play ball

On March 12, a Senate concurrent resolution was referred to the House Agricultural Affairs Committee. Nothing has happened with it since.

The resolution blocks efforts to lift an import restriction on domestic elk. Idaho elk ranchers want the change, saying the restriction keeps them from improving their herds. Sportsmen opposed the move, citing concerns about meningeal worms.

The parasitic worm is endemic to Eastern North America. There's no evidence it's in Idaho now, but it could be imported by infected domestic elk. If it then escapes into wild moose, elk and deer populations, Idaho Fish and Game Director Virgil Moore said it will likely never be eradicated, putting the state's \$300 million hunting industry at risk.

If the House doesn't approve the Senate resolution, the import restriction will be lifted. House Agriculture Committee Chairman Ken Andrus said he's waiting to get the OK from his leadership team before taking up the measure.

Hmmm. That's interesting.

In his dingy little alcove, Winston Smith might notice that House Majority Leader Mike Moyle is a strong proponent of tax cuts. Moyle's been stymied this session by Senate Local Government and Taxation Chairman Jeff Siddoway, who says teacher pay should be raised first.

But Siddoway is also an elk rancher and he wants the import restriction lifted.

Hmmm.

Smith could be reading way too much into this. Andrus is already on record opposing the import restriction. Maybe that's all that's going on maybe.

Where there's smoke, there's distrust

From the beginning of the session, legislative leaders have said this is the year for transportation funding. Everyone's committed, never been more enthusiastic, yada, yada, yada.

Yet here we are, a week or so from adjournment, with nothing to show for it.

Given their obvious disagreements about how to raise transportation revenue, lawmakers could have tried a shotgun approach: Throw out multiple bills - one raising the fuel tax, one raising registration fees, one tapping general funds, and so on. Send them all to the floor, have an up-or-down vote, and at the end of the day whatever's left is your transportation package.

But that's not what happened. Instead, they tried the hairball approach, pasting several proposals together in complex, multi-issue bills: Would you prefer the sales-groceries-fuel-flat tax option, or the fuel-electric-transfer fee-general fund masterpiece?

It makes one wonder if fixing roads is really the priority here.

Smith, for example, surely noticed that Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter barred using general funds for transportation in his State of the State address - yet every proposal that has come forward so far (until Wednesday) taps the general fund to a greater or lesser degree.

With a shotgun approach, the governor could easily veto specific bills he doesn't like. The hairball approach, by contrast, forces his hand: Either he allows the general fund raid or he vetoes it and takes the blame for not addressing transportation.

There are no power struggles here in the Ministry - but that's not to say officials don't occasionally poke each other in the eye.

Taking care of business

Medicaid expansion has been the elephant in the room for several years now. Given the state's strict eligibility rules, tens of thousands of low-income Idahoans don't qualify for Medicaid, yet earn too little to qualify for subsidized health insurance through the state health insurance exchange. What to do?

A gubernatorial task force offered a path forward last fall, recommending a private-public compromise that doesn't expand Medicaid, provides health care access for 103,000 people, includes incentives for personal responsibility, and saves taxpayers an estimated \$173 million over 10 years.

And how has the Legislature responded to this comprehensive proposal? By approving "National Diaper Need Awareness Week."

The resolution was sponsored by Sen. Janie Ward-Engelking, D-Boise. It "reflects the Idaho Legislature's support for diaper banks, diaper drives and organizations that distribute diapers to families in need (A)ddressing diaper need can lead to economic opportunities and improved health for the state's low-income families and communities."

Certainly one could look at this through cynical eyes, but Smith might read it differently.

He might see it as the greatest inside joke ever: Getting the Idaho Legislature to approve a resolution that essentially says "all you poor people need to take care of your own s---, because we're not doing a thing for you."

Many people concluded that long ago, but never expected lawmakers to actually acknowledge it.

Well played, Sen. Ward-Engelking. It's much wittier, and in many ways more appropriate, than simply writing, "Down with Big Brother."

Spence covers politics for the Tribune. He may be contacted at bspence@lmtribune.com or (208) 791-9168.