

As Maine goes, so should Idaho go

By Wayne Hoffman

A few weeks ago, I had the good fortune of listening to a speech by a governor who really wants to make a difference by embracing, fighting for and implementing conservative, free-market principles.

This governor said his state's tax policy is a failure; he wants to get rid of the income tax. This governor said he's fighting the federal government; he's revamping the Food Stamp and welfare programs, even though the Obama administration has said he can't. This governor has steadfastly refused to implement any portion of Obamacare—whether it is the insurance exchange or Medicaid expansion.

Who is this governor? It's Paul LePage, a second-term Republican state chief executive from which state? Maine. Maine, you'll perhaps realize, is a state that has supported Democrat presidential candidates since Bill Clinton. Maine, of course, is also a state well known for electing liberals and moderates to office.

LePage told a crowd at a Heritage Foundation event near Seattle that his state is being held back by its income tax. Like Idaho, Maine has relied on a "three-legged stool" that raises revenue via an income tax, sales tax and property tax. LePage said stools are fine for sitting, but Maine needs to move. He wants to convert the stool into a bicycle.

LePage also told how he's been battling the federal government over modest reforms to the state's administration of Food Stamps. He said the federal government has threatened and cajoled, but he's not deterred. Over objections of the Obama administration, he had photos added to the EBT cards that people on Food Stamps use to buy food. He's been working to further restrict the use of those cards and other cash welfare assistance programs for junk food and non-essentials.

And then there's the governor's position on Obamacare. LePage has said no to both a state insurance exchange and the expansion of Medicaid, even vetoing pro-Obamacare legislation that reached his desk.

LePage is a horrible speaker. He's stodgy and unfocused. But by golly, the crowd was glued to every word. He told his story, which is fascinating all on its own. He grew up in a French-speaking home with 17 kids. They lived in utter poverty and endured an abusive, alcoholic father.

According to the Portland Press Herald, "their only hot water came from a pot on the wood stove in the kitchen. Their toilet was an outhouse for much of their childhood." The man who would become governor of Maine was the only one of his siblings to finish college. He's a self-made, successful person, a study in the American Dream.

Here's a Republican governor in a fairly "blue" state who is trying to fix what's wrong in Maine by embracing—thoroughly embracing—conservative ideas. That's not to say LePage's record is perfect. Nobody is. Rather that he's doing more and fighting harder than the people at the helm of a lot of states that have conservative electorates and Republican supermajorities.

When I travel the country visiting with legislators and governors from other states, they're generally not talking about the things Idaho is doing to promote low taxes, limited government and economic opportunity.

Apart from a bill last session requiring labor union negotiations to take place in the open and another to require agencies to monitor and report on all the federal funds they're getting and spending, Idaho is disappointingly not considered a trendsetter.

The question that needs to be asked is, if a governor like Paul LePage has the political wherewithal to fight for conservative principles in a state like Maine, why's it so hard to see similar initiatives from elected officials in Idaho?