

Swimming upstream and against the current

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

If you want to understand what made House Speaker Tom Boyd, R- Genesee, so unique, consider the fate of the lowly steelhead.

Boyd, who died Monday at the age of 86, adopted the steelhead as the mascot for a political career that consisted, as he would put it, of swimming upstream, always against the current.

Even the night he first got elected to the Idaho House of Representatives, Boyd was the odd man out.

It was 1976.

Jimmy Carter and the Democrats were sweeping into office.

Latah County had elected Boyd, a Republican, to join an otherwise Democratic delegation that included Sen. Norma Dobler and Rep. Bob Hosack.

And so it continued.

Much to the chagrin of conservative House Speaker Tom Stivers, R-Twin Falls - who famously replied "goodbye" to a public school teacher who had composed an anguished letter about inadequate public school support - Boyd crossed the aisle.

As a member of the Legislature budget committee, Boyd found himself forming pro-education coalitions with fellow moderate Republicans, such as Boise Rep. Kathleen "Kitty" Gurnsey and Twin Falls Rep. Larry Knigge, and Democrats such Dobler and Sen. Marguerite McLaughlin of Orofino.

But nobody expected what came next. After becoming the poster boy for a hard-edged brand of conservatism, Stivers retired in 1986. His presumed successor was Rep. Robert Geddes, R-Preston.

Geddes had a leg up. He'd already been elected assistant majority leader. He came from the Republican-rich southern edge of the state. And his conservative credentials were impeccable.

Boyd was at a distinct disadvantage. He couldn't court his fellow northern Idahoans. Most of them were Democrats.

If they had coined the term Republican In Name Only, he'd been stuck with it.

But standing up to Stivers had earned him the respect of a wave of GOP moderates who had been elected across the state - people such as former State Board of Education President Janet Hay of Nampa, Doug Jones of Filer, Mary Hartung of Payette and Bruce Newcomb of Burley.

Boyd had one more thing Geddes lacked - a trio of lieutenants from the steelhead caucus, Reps. Dean Haagenson, R-Coeur d'Alene, Jerry Deckard, R-Eagle, and Chris Hooper, R-Boise - who scurried for support.

What followed was a startling upset. Nothing short of a Democratic takeover of the House could have been as dramatic as the transition from conservative Speaker Stivers to moderate Speaker Boyd.

And then the current shifted again. By 1990, Idaho voters had handed Boyd's Republican Party its worst defeat in modern times. In winning re-election, Democrat Gov. Cecil Andrus carried with him control of the State Land Board and half of the state Senate. Suddenly, the only chamber solidly in GOP hands was the House - and Boyd arguably became the Republican voice in the state Capitol.

By 1992, Boyd decided three terms as speaker was enough. But six years later, Republican Gov. Phil Batt asked him to serve three years on the State Board of Education. State board members were trending toward spending more time on K-12. One more time, Boyd found himself pushing against the conventional wisdom by insisting the University of Idaho and Lewis-Clark State College got their fair share of attention.

That's not to say Boyd's path was always smooth. His caucus frequently pushed him to the right of his own constituents. At home, Democrats saw him as vulnerable. Andrus campaigned against him. While he was re-elected, it was never by an absolute blow-out.

At the same time, conservatives were nipping at his heels. One upstart, then-state Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Blackfoot, challenged him for speaker in 1990. Not killing the king frequently proves fatal in politics, but Boyd held no grudge. Simpson retained his choice committee assignments, such as a prized seat on the House Revenue and Taxation Committee. And when Boyd retired, Simpson went on to the speakership and ultimately to Congress.

"Whether you agreed with him philosophically or not, he was the kind of politician we need today," Simpson says.

These days, Idaho's outnumbered Democrats are almost an afterthought, and too much moderation will get a Republican purged in a primary.

The era of Boyd's steelhead caucus giving conservatives fits is but a distant memory.

Idaho is all the poorer for its

passing. - M.T.

