

Speaker Simpson? Who says it can't happen?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

To become House Speaker John Boehner's successor, Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy will make the kind of deal with Idaho Congressman Raul Labrador and the House Freedom Caucus no speaker should.

He'll grant concessions to a minority group of Republicans disproportionate to its numbers. It could mean endless rounds of government shutdowns to force the Senate and the White House to defund Planned Parenthood.

Or Obamacare.

Or President Obama's immigration executive orders.

Or even continued funding of the Patriot Act.

If nothing else, expect to see more gridlock from an institution that deserves the single-digit job approval rating it now has.

It comes down to math.

Although Republicans control 247 of the 435 House seats, the House Freedom Caucus has enough members - estimated at about 35 - to deny McCarthy the 218 votes he needs to become speaker.

For the sake of argument, suppose the Freedom Caucus overplays its hand - something it's certainly capable of doing - and the House engages in ballot after ballot after ballot without reaching the magic 218.

As the spectacle of congressional infirmity drags on, the grown-ups in the House - the slightly more than half of all Republicans and Democrats who arrived before the Tea Party insurgents made the place so dysfunctional in 2011 - descend on a senior member's office with bumper stickers.

The name of the office door?

Idaho Congressman Mike Simpson.

The rest of the country might say: "Mike who?"

But Simpson has the attributes of a speaker. He held the job in the Idaho House before his election to Congress.

Simpson is popular on both sides of the aisle.

He's a lawmaker of genuine accomplishment. Most recently, he steered the Boulder-White Clouds Wilderness bill to passage through a polarized Congress.

Moreover, Simpson has done something few of his fellow Republicans have been willing to try - stare down the barrel of the Tea Party's guns.

Last year, he defended his seat against a Club for Growth-funded challenger in the closed Idaho GOP primary election. It was a liberating moment.

Simpson would never become speaker through conventional means. He is anathema to Labrador's crowd. What's more, the nine-term Idahoan has little interest in the odious, political tasks of the job - raising campaign cash and traveling across the country on behalf of other GOP candidates.

What it would take is a recognition on the part of Simpson - and about 300 of his Republican and Democratic colleagues - that the conventional means of doing business aren't working.

Under this scenario, a coalition broad enough to include Democrat Steny Hoyer of Maryland and Republican Cathy McMorris Rodgers of Washington, would elect Simpson.

Simpson, in turn, would make it clear he's on board only for the rest of the current Congress, which ends in 2016.

With the fever of the Tea Party finally broken, a minority caucus of rigid ideologues would no longer hold Congress - and the nation - hostage.

The governing coalition of pragmatic Democrats and Republicans would take charge. Problems that have festered too long could be tackled:

- Closing the deficits by cutting spending and raising taxes.
- Fixing the looming financial meltdown of Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security.
- Modernizing the federal tax code and eliminating its inequities.
- Resolving the fate of 11 million undocumented workers while fixing the bottlenecks in the nation's immigration laws.
- Addressing damage budget sequestration has done to defense.

Do that and you've restored America's faith in its representative system of government on the eve of the next election. Who - Republican and Democrat - would not want to run for re-election on that record?

Unlikely?

Of course.

Impossible?

Not if reasonable people in both parties ask themselves this question: "Had enough?"