

# Idaho's rejectionist may find himself rejected

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, will never fit into Pennsylvania Republican Congressman Charlie Dent's definition of a "governing conservative."

Those are the 70 to 100 House Republicans Dent says can be counted on to swallow hard and accept the need to keep the government's lights on, even at the price of voting for a flawed but vital bill. Here you'll find Labrador's seat mate, Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho.

Rather, the question was whether Labrador was part of what Dent called the "hope yes, vote no" crowd. These are the 70 to 80 members who vote no because it's popular with the partisan fringe of the GOP. Privately, however, they recognize the importance of clearing budget deals, highway funding or, in Idaho's case, Payment in Lieu of Taxes, Secure Rural Schools and funding for Idaho National Laboratory.

In a close vote, some of these "hope yes, vote no" members peel off and vote affirmatively. Even Labrador has drifted in this direction on rare occasions.

But if you read the New Yorker magazine Washington correspondent Ryan Lizza's profile of the House Freedom Caucus, you'll conclude Labrador's feet are planted firmly among the 40 to 60 House Republicans Dent labels the rejectionist wing.

Political expedience does not drive their votes to shut down government programs.

They're acting out of pure conviction.

Labrador is unrepentant about the 2013 government shutdown he helped engineer. He cites polls showing the GOP's numbers improving after it took that stand - culminating with the Republican victory in the following year's congressional campaigns - and faltered after the House forged a deal to avoid another round of gridlock and dysfunction.

"This is what happens when we do nothing," he told Lizza. "This is the new GOP majority in 2015, when we stand for nothing."

In other words, Lizza wrote, Labrador was unhappy with his party for engaging in "governing."

"If people just want to 'govern,' which means bringing more government, they're always going to choose the Democrat," he said. "You have somebody in the White House who plays hardball. He wants to fundamentally change America. And when you have a guy whose only job is to 'govern,' and doesn't realize the other guy is trying to fundamentally change America, you just don't have an even match."

If Labrador does not believe in "governing," then what does he believe in?

Perhaps it's seeking a clear clash of ideas. But if the welfare of a political party - or even a fragment of that party - rather than the well-being of the country as a whole is his litmus test, where does that leave the rest of us?

Government shutdowns and brinkmanship over the national debt may have energized the partisan base and delivered votes for the Tea Party wing of the GOP, but it stalled a still fragile economic recovery - if not emboldened the nation's enemies abroad.

For the rejectionist wing, the high water mark came in October when it claimed credit for Speaker John Boehner's resignation. Labrador's boasts of handing the speaker an ultimatum is premised on this math: Any speaker needs 218 votes to prevail. With 247 GOP members, Boehner had a margin of 29. The Freedom Caucus had at least 35.

Labrador's colleagues claim to have fundamentally changed the House. That's true.

As much as anything, it now resembles a parliament of competing coalitions. So the action is not on the fringe, but with the center. If Dent's "governing conservatives" forge majorities with like-minded Democrats, where does that leave Labrador and the Freedom Caucus?

Had a reluctant Paul Ryan not agreed to ascend to the speaker's chair, that centrist coalition might already have asserted itself by settling on someone such as Simpson or Tom Cole, R-Okla.

"Those are just a few of the conservative nightmares that could now escape from this Pandora's box that the Freedom Caucus has opened," Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Calif., told Lizza. McClintock bolted from the Freedom Caucus because he believed its tactics were empowering the minority House Democrats. "Good intentions are paving the road that the Freedom Caucus is taking us down, but I don't think conservatives are going to like where it leads."

With a political cycle swinging into a presidential election in a country where the anxiety level over terrorism is steadily rising, governing may not be a dirty word. Unwilling to engage in it, Labrador might be left out in the cold by those who are. - M.T.