

Where's Otter and what did they do with him?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The man who delivered the State of the State address Monday was, of course, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter. But you could have mistaken his message for the kind of thing former Gov. Cecil D. Andrus used to say.

The Otter Idahoans have come to know would have been expected to comfort the comfortable by urging his fellow Republicans to lower the top income tax rate on corporations and wealthy families - or at least make another attempt to eliminate the personal property tax corporations pay on equipment. You can almost hear Otter crediting these folks with turning Idaho's economy around - thanks to the \$300 million in tax cuts approved during the past nine years while he's been governor. As Otter likes to say, the proper role of government is to return budget surplus to taxpayers and hold the line on spending.

Andrus took a grass roots approach and on Friday, Otter gave-this Andrus-esque observation: "Our greatest resource," Otter told reporters, "is the people of the state of Idaho, and our greatest effort on their behalf should be to get them educated and trained and schooled in order to participate fully and completely in our economic activity in the state of Idaho."

Trickle-down economics, it was not. Instead, Otter provided a disciplined, focused and restrained 37-minute speech that called for:

- A substantial \$116 million boost in public school spending that promises to help recruit and retain quality teachers while trying to lower public education's addiction to local property tax supplemental levies.
- A \$44 million increase in funding for higher education that is focused on access. The governor's not talking about lowering tuition, but the state would lock a student's tuition at the rate he paid upon entering school. Otter also wants to double the \$5 million Opportunity Scholarships and allocate \$5 million to help people who dropped out of college resume their education.

What could account for such a dramatic reversal?

It could be something as simple as the obvious: Idaho is trapped in a vicious cycle of low-skilled workers earning low wages. Per capita incomes are near the national basement. The percentage of high school graduates continuing their education is last in the country. High school graduation rates are tied for 41st in the country. Business owners and economic development specialists are saying privately what former Commerce Director Jeff Sayer said publicly last fall: Without more trained workers, the economy is in trouble.

Certainly, it's legacy-building time. Only three Idahoans have served longer as governor - Andrus put in 14 years, Bob Smylie held office for 12 years and John Evans was governor for 10

years. The fact that Otter has more legislative sessions behind him and fewer opportunities ahead must be a sobering thought.

Sobering, as well, must be the abyss his political party is looking into - whether it's Donald Trump's demagoguery at the national level or the radical libertarianism at home. Year after year, Idahoans tell anyone willing to listen that education is their chief priority. Appealing to those aspirations may be Otter's way of restoring equilibrium within the GOP.

Or is it simply that this is the governor that Otter always wanted to be? He sought the third term to outlast a deep, budget-busting recession. With surplus tax revenues in the bank and freed of restraints imposed by the imperative of running for re-election, Otter finally can pursue his education agenda.

Of course, it took more than one year or even one governor to get Idaho into this fix. Since Andrus left office in 1995, Republican governors and lawmakers have stripped education of about 25 percent of its traditional share of the state's personal income - a loss of more than \$500 million every year.

Otter has given a good speech. But it's only one speech from a chief executive who's been notoriously passive ever since members of his own party overwhelmingly rejected his transportation package nearly seven years ago. Those same lawmakers face re-election in a closed GOP primary less than five months away. They'll be under pressure to cut taxes and "starve" the beast of government, not expand it.

The question for Otter - as it is with any governor who has just jolted the legislative creature from its slumber - is this: How hard will he work to enact his agenda?

Does Otter want to be remembered for meaning well - or for actually accomplishing something?
- M.T.