

# Shawn Vestal: Far-right fake charities target true conservatives

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Maxine Bell is almost certainly headed toward the happy conclusion of a 30-year career as a rock-solid, budget-minded Idaho conservative legislator. She just won her primary and there is no Democrat on the general election ballot.

Bell, an 84-year-old from the south-central Idaho town of Jerome, has been a member of the budget committee since her second year in office. She's a retired librarian, farmer, and member of the LDS Church. She is a dues-paying member of the NRA who opposes background checks on private gun sales. She opposes abortion, even in cases of incest or rape, according to Project Vote Smart.

She is also – by the lights of the self-appointed right-wing police – not conservative enough.

The Idaho Freedom Foundation, a secretive lobbying group that hides its donors by identifying itself as a charitable organization, has given her a score of 4 on its Freedom Index. Out of 100. It's a ridiculous list, made by an organization that believes Idaho's Legislature is "not even close" to conservative enough, but still. And an absolutist gun-rights group with growing influence in Idaho politics has labeled Bell "anti-Second Amendment" and worked against her in the recent primary, which she won anyway.

Welcome to Idaho politics, circa 2016 – where the question is: Conservative enough?

Gun extremism has become one new litmus test, and it's being administered by the Idaho Second Amendment Alliance. The founder and leader of the group, Greg Pruett, has a simple and absolute view of the Second Amendment – "shall not infringe" being an absolute term to him, one that precludes such tyrannical excesses as gun permits, training requirements, or limits on where guns are allowed. "Shall not infringe," to Pruett, means any adult should be able to walk into a courthouse or city park or a school with a gun hidden under their coat.

"Until I've done something wrong – until then, it's not really anybody else's business" if or how or where he carries a gun, he said.

Bell sees potential areas where it might be other people's business. Last year, she opposed "campus carry" legislation – the proposal that opened up classrooms for gun-toting. She did so because she heard a lot of opposition from her constituency, which includes the College of Southern Idaho in Twin Falls.

“They said, ‘Don’t give us guns on campus,’” she said. “We don’t know how testosterone and beer and firearms might go together on a college campus.”

This year, she opposed “permitless carry,” the bill that eliminated the requirement for a permit to carry a concealed weapon. It passed, too.

For this, the ISAA went after Bell in her primary, saying she had joined the “gun control crowd.”

“Instead of voting to protect gun rights,” the ISSA said, “she has chosen to vote against them by siding with Michael Bloomberg and Moms Demand Action.”

The ISAA made similar evaluations in several other legislative races. Pruettt made videos himself, and the group’s website includes the information as well.

In the case of one eastern Idaho lawmaker, Rep. Paul Romrell of St. Anthony, the ISAA withdrew its support after Romrell said on a survey that he would support limits on magazine sizes and/or semi-automatic weapons. He later told the IFF that he wouldn’t support a semi-auto ban, but might consider limits on magazine size. The tyrant. The NRA briefly withdrew its endorsement of Romrell, but reinstated it after a couple of days, saying it was satisfied he was not a gun-grabber. Romrell lost a close race in the primary to an opponent with a purer position.

Pruett said all of these activities fall short of endorsing candidates. If this strikes you as funny there is a very good reason for the verbal flippity-flop: It’s a tax-status dodge. Similar to the Idaho Freedom Foundation or the Washington Policy Center, the defines itself for tax purposes as not primarily political: It is a 501(c)4 “social welfare organization.”

“Part of what we have to do to follow the law is not tell people who to vote for or how to vote on an issue,” Pruettt said.

Pruett’s videos and his blog posts make it clear which candidates the group prefers and why. He acknowledged, “it’s hard to do this without making it seem like we are in favor of” one candidate or another.

I said they certainly seem like endorsements to me.

“It comes across that way to a lot of people,” he said.

Pruett says about five volunteers, including him, do the organization’s work for now.

The group’s Facebook page is a steady stream of invective and paranoia and conspiracy-minded attitude – pretty standard stuff on pro-gun web sites, where the coming gun-confiscation apocalypse is always nigh. A post about Obama last year includes more than one reference to the president as an ape, such as this one: “Lying Liberal Yard Ape.” Posts about Hillary Clinton inevitably include the term “bitch.” Katie

Couric, a recent target over her editing of a gun-rights interview, was deemed by one commenter: “just another kosher mafia liberal whore.”

Reading it does not fill you with respect for these people and their understanding of the Constitution. Nor does it make you all that happy to know that these are the true believers most eager to go walking around with their weapons concealed.

Bell said she has heard from some angry voters, but also from those who supported her gun votes. Most people in her district – and around the state, I’d wager – are not represented by these far-right fake charities and their efforts to force people to toe their line.

She will move on uncontested to the general election, and what she says will be her final two-year stretch as a state representative – on her terms, not run out of town as not-conservative-enough.

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