

## With no time to lose, Little makes his leap

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Any politician with a brain in his head runs a campaign like he's behind.

But Idaho Lt. Gov. Brad Little truly believes it.

"I fully expect to be the underdog," Little told the Idaho Statesman's Bill Dentzer last week as he announced his bid to succeed C.L. "Butch" Otter as governor in the 2018 election.

You wouldn't necessarily think so.

Being second banana in Idaho tends to be a springboard. Among those who rose from being governor-in-waiting to the top job - although not always in a linear fashion - were Govs. John Evans, Phil Batt, Jim Risch and, of course, Otter.

Nor is it all that difficult to imagine Little - who has held his current post since 2009 - sitting behind the big desk. Little's gubernatorial aura is sufficiently strong that he was able to fake out the Treasure Valley's political media. He lured them to tiny Emmett back in 2013 with nothing more than the suspicion that he was announcing for governor then. They had to settle for the non-startling disclosure that Little was running for re-election.

Little's numbers looked good in 2014. In contrast to Otter, who barely held back a surging GOP primary challenge from former Senate Majority Caucus Chairman Russ Fulcher, Little easily dispatched Idaho County Commissioner Jim Chmelik. In fact, about 17,000 of Fulcher's supporters split their ticket and voted for Little.

But Little is not being coy here.

With Otter retiring, the GOP primary is likely to be a free-for-all. In addition to Fulcher, you may see Congressman Raul Labrador and Attorney General Lawrence Wasden making a run. Others may follow.

Such a political cocktail would have unpredictable consequences. You saw it in the 2006 1st Congressional District primary when Bill Sali won the GOP primary with 26 percent of the vote. Much the same thing happened in 1978, when House Speaker Allan Larsen won the GOP nomination for governor with 29 percent over Otter and state Rep. Vern Ravenscroft.

Being lieutenant governor is a second-tier office. There's not much exposure that comes with it. Ask people who they recognize and it's more likely to be Labrador or even Fulcher.

At a time when the Idaho GOP base is moving both right and populist, Little represents the party's establishment wing - and is part of Idaho's economic elite. Both his own family and that of his wife, Teresa Soulen Little, own large ranching operations.

And he's tied to Otter.

It was Otter who plucked Little from the state Senate and appointed him to fill the vacancy created when Risch was elected to the U.S. Senate.

It looks like Little may be a continuity candidate, a fourth Otter term if you will.

That won't sit well with the right-wing fringe of the party that wrested control of the GOP away from Otter early in his first term - and openly sought his ouster two years ago.

Nor will it help Little to be tied to a governor whose tenure has been stained by ethical lapses, favoritism and scandals at the State Tax Commission, the Department of Transportation, the Department of Administration, the Department of Correction and, now, the Idaho Fish and Game Department.

Little told Dentzer it was obvious he would run in 2018 and "I should quit being cute about it."

But he's also being brutally candid about where he stands. Jumping into a campaign almost two years before the first ballot will be cast - and while Labrador is tied down running for a fourth congressional term - is driven by necessity.

Little knows he's behind and he needs the extra time to catch up. - M.T.