

Would Gov. Labrador act like Congressman Labrador?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Earlier this month, Idaho Congressman Raul Labrador gave us - perhaps inadvertently - a glimpse into what it could mean to have him serving as Idaho's next governor.

The occasion was the July 12 House Oversight and Government Reform Committee hearing on Labrador's "First Amendment Defense Act."

Labrador says his measure protects people who exercise a "religious belief or moral conviction that marriage is the union of one man and one woman" from federal reprisals such as the withdrawal of grants, contracts or tax breaks.

Now you could choose to dismiss arguments advanced by the American Civil Liberties Union that Labrador's bill would empower federal officials to deny people grants, loans or even jobs on the basis of a sincerely held religious objection to their same-sex union.

As well, you can discount the

ACLU's idea that Labrador's bill could allow federal contractors to engage in discrimination on the basis of their own moral views.

And you may see as wildly overblown the idea that this bill not only targets same-sex couples for discrimination but single parents and cohabitating couples.

Certainly Labrador would agree with your skepticism. He has said those objections are exaggerated. The Pulitzer Prize-winning fact-checking service PolitiFact buttresses his interpretation. And just to be fair, his recent amendments protect the religious or moral views of same-sex couples in the same way.

But you can't ignore the callous timing.

House Oversight Committee Chairman Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, brushed aside appeals to reschedule the hearing on Labrador's bill - coming one month to the day to the killing of 49 people and the wounding of 53 others at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Fla.

The hearing itself was divisive. For every James Obergefell, the successful plaintiff in the U.S. Supreme Court case establishing a same-sex couple's constitutional right to marry, there was a Kristen Waggoner, senior counsel and vice president of the Alliance Defending Freedom.

Obergefell accused Labrador's bill of "permitting discrimination and harm under the guise of religious liberty."

Waggoner countered the government was hostile "to those who believe that marriage is between one man and one woman."

This is political theater. Legislators have that luxury. Labrador is among 435 voices in the House and another 100 in the Senate.

But governors are executives. As the saying goes, the buck stops with them.

There's no better example than Indiana Gov. - and GOP vice presidential nominee - Mike Pence.

Last year, Pence signed a religious freedom bill that promptly blew up in his face. Before he reversed himself, Pence was fending off pointed questions from "This Week" host George Stephanopoulos, facing the loss of 10 national conventions, contending with dismayed home-grown firms such as Eli Lilly and Cummings, and watching his own political support crumble.

Even Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter - who went too far defending Idaho's unconstitutional ban on same-sex marriage - avoided Pence's misstep. The closest Idaho came to passing a religious freedom bill was the measure Rep. Lynn Luker, R-Boise, promoted in 2014. It ran into a buzz saw of opposition, never to be seen again.

Virtually from the time he emerged on the scene, Labrador has been discussed as a potential governor. The charismatic conservative could have considerable advantages in the GOP primary, which for all intents and purposes is akin to winning election.

But even in conservative Idaho, society is rapidly transforming the way gays and straights interact.

Idaho's 33rd governor will take office four years after the Supreme Court's Obergefell decision - and seven years after Sandpoint became the first of almost a dozen cities - including Lewiston, Moscow and Boise - to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Congressman Labrador has wedded himself to a dated us-vs-them narrative.

Is that what we should expect from Gov. Labrador? - M.T.