

Newcomb put friendship before party loyalty

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Ask people on both sides of the ideological divide if they think politics is too partisan today and you'll get a big show of hands.

Ask them if they want politicians to forget party labels and work together and you'll get the same reaction.

Ask them what they think of someone putting personal friendship ahead of party loyalty - and you'd probably get a round of applause.

But it's practically non-existent.

Not just in this era of polarized infighting, either.

Of course back in the 1970s, former Idaho Gov. Cecil D. Andrus may have openly supported Republican Govs. Tom McCall in Oregon and Dan Evans in Washington - and vice versa. But why would anyone in Boise - or Salem or Olympia - care all that much?

On the other hand, when a prominent Idaho Republican - former state Rep. Larry Jackson, R-Boise, backed Andrus in 1986, the GOP did not forget or forgive. Two years later, when Andrus appointed Jackson to the State Tax Commission, the GOP-controlled state Senate refused to confirm him.

So it was worth noting this week when former House Speaker Bruce Newcomb, R-Burley, endorsed Senate Democratic Leader Michelle Stennett of Ketchum, who is being challenged by Republican Dale Ewersen of Bellvue.

Not by privately spreading the word.

Not by quietly making a campaign contribution that may have gone unnoticed.

Not by taking shelter among a group of other Republicans supporting Stennett.

Newcomb acted publicly and alone, by submitting a letter of endorsement to the local newspaper:

"I am sure that some might wonder why a Republican is endorsing a Democrat. In our family we live by three Fs - faith, family and friends," Newcomb said.

Newcomb wrote Stennett - and her late husband, Clint, who preceded her in office - were "such close friends of ours that we consider them family."

"Everyone I know that has observed her service, including me, thinks she has done so with distinction and class. Michelle has a very strong work ethic. She is very intelligent and personable. Michelle is a very good listener. She always gathers all the information she can and makes decisions based on that information in the best interest of District 26 and the state of Idaho."

Even for Newcomb, this is unusual. As the top Republican in the House, he was the good partisan soldier. For example, he was friendly with his Democratic counterpart, Rep. Jim

Stoicheff of Sandpoint. But that didn't stop Newcomb from helping Republican George Eskridge against Stoicheff's widow, Jerry, in 2000.

In conceding defeat, Jerry Stoicheff expressed regret that her friend Newcomb had campaigned for her opponent.

How much good Newcomb's endorsement does Stennett is anyone's guess. She won her last re-election by nearly 59 percent. But it's a presidential year, when swelling Republican voter turnout puts every Idaho Democrat on edge.

Newcomb is inviting at least some heartburn among the less broad-minded members of his own party. While he is no longer in elective politics, Newcomb serves as government relations director for Boise State University. His wife, Celia Gould, serves as Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's agriculture director. He still has to work with Republican lawmakers.

So savor this display of someone putting the personal ahead of the political. Odds are you won't see anything like it again for a long time. - M.T.