

# That's some hole Labrador just dug himself into

## Marty Trilhaase/Lewiston Tribune

One of the worst kept secrets in Idaho politics is Congressman Raul Labrador's apparent interest in filling C.L. "Butch" Otter's shoes when the Republican governor's tenure ends in a couple of years.

At the moment, however, Labrador is occupied securing his fourth term in the House against Democratic challenger Jim Piotrowski.

In last week's televised debate between Labrador and Piotrowski, co-moderator Jim Weatherby asked a pertinent question: Is Labrador going to run for governor in 2018? And if so, would Labrador be phoning in his work to Washington, D.C., for the next two years while he campaigns for the job in Boise?

Labrador would be at least the third Republican to jump into the contest, following Lt. Gov. Brad Little and former state Senate Majority Caucus Chairman Russ Fulcher.

Labrador's response was about what you'd expect: He's waging one campaign at a time.

"I have not made a decision about running for governor," he said. "I'm going to decide after this election."

So far, so good.

But without any prodding or follow-up questioning, Labrador volunteered: "I will do the work that we need to do. I still want to work on criminal justice reform. I still want to work on immigration reform. And those are issues that I will finish before I leave Washington, D.C."

As a general rule, to finish something means to complete it.

Completing criminal justice reform may be within reach because there is common political ground. Liberals argue the federal criminal code unfairly targets minorities; conservatives believe having the world's largest population of prison inmates costs more than it's worth.

But immigration reform?

Where does Labrador see any daylight there?

Ever since the Senate passed a comprehensive immigration reform package several years ago - only to have the House refuse to consider it - the idea has been a congressional football. From the tone of the debate, you'd never know that thousands of border patrol agents, hundreds of miles of fencing, more lighting, underground sensors, aircraft, drones and surveillance systems have been put on line.

For his part, Labrador withdrew from the bipartisan "Gang of Eight" that was trying to forge an immigration reform compromise. Three years ago, he told his colleagues not to cut an immigration reform deal of any kind.

"Anything that you pass to the Senate piecemeal, they're going to try to conference it with their Senate bill," Labrador told the Huffington Post. "It's not worth doing."

Assuming the polls are right, Democrat Hillary Clinton will become president, Democrats may win a majority in the Senate, but Republicans probably will retain the House. Sounds like more congressional gridlock, doesn't it?

So what is Labrador saying here?

Is he prepared to vote for Clinton's immigration package?

Will Labrador define success by passing the low-hanging fruit of admitting more immigrants who have Ph.Ds or high-tech skills while leaving Idaho agriculture's need for a guest worker program unmet?

Even if a deal - piecemeal or comprehensive - is struck, it might not emerge until well into the second year of Clinton's presidency. If Labrador waits until then to run for governor, he will have provided Little and Fulcher an even larger head start.

Perhaps the Idaho congressman can concoct some maneuver enabling him to declare victory on immigration reform and go home to Idaho. Still, where's the wiggle room in what he said about finishing the job?

Is it just possible Labrador committed what pundit Michael Kinsley defined as a gaffe: speaking the truth inadvertently?

Did Labrador just take himself out of the governor's contest?

Perhaps. If not, he sure dug himself into a deep hole. - M.T.