

Idaho's 2018 Governor's Race Underway

Chris Carlson/Carlson Chronicle

By all the traditional political metrics Lt. Governor Brad Little should be the prohibitive favorite to be Idaho's next governor. For years he has traveled Idaho showing up at county fairs, board of education meetings, and always at Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter's side during the governor's numerous "Capitol for a Day" sessions.

As governor when Otter is out of state he has been the "real" governor well over a year. Reportedly, he has already accumulated \$250,000 for what could be a \$4 million dollar campaign just to obtain the Republican nomination.

He meets people well, is thoughtful, intelligent, personable and a solid conservative befitting the successful rancher he is. He is not an ideologue and therein may be his challenge.

Idaho's Republican Party is veering to the "Tea Party" extreme right which expects rigid adherence to a party platform that contains items such as repeal of the 17th amendment which created the popular vote for U.S. senators, who originally were elected by state legislatures. To Little's credit he does not agree with every item in that agenda.

In the mind of others that has created an opening to challenge him and some dare to accuse him of being a RINO (Republican in Name Only).

Former Meridian State Senator Russ Fulcher, who came close to upsetting Governor Otter in the 2014 GOP primary, quickly stepped into the breach, wasting no time in announcing his candidacy shortly after Little made his declaration.

If Fulcher hoped to pre-empt the Tea Party support and keep First District Congressman Raul Labrador in the nation's capital, he failed. Numerous reports are circulating through Republican circles with some prominent behind-the-scenes players flat stating Labrador will declare for governor one day after he takes

the oath of office sometime in the first week of January, 2017, as a member of the new Congress.

Further confirmation of the congressman's intentions come from reports that former Idaho Lt. Governor and Attorney General David Leroy is forming an exploratory committee to gauge support for a bid to replace Labrador in Congress in 2018.

The Lewiston native is one of the most astute political animals around. It is unfathomable to think he would let word start to spread unless he was sure the seat will be open.

Other possible aspirants to succeed Labrador include Third District State Senator Bob Nonini from Coeur d'Alene; Fourth District State Representative Luke Malek, from Coeur d'Alene; and, Coeur d'Alene Mayor Steve Widmeyer. A dark horse possibility would be Sandy Patano, the former State chief of staff for Senator Larry Craig.

Little recognizes that Labrador could be a serious roadblock to his gubernatorial ambitions. That alone may be the answer to why Little chose to split with Governor Otter on passage of HJR 5, which some major members of Idaho business wanted badly. It should have been entitled the "Expand the influence of Lobbyists Act." Little kow-towed to the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry (IACI) in part because he did not want to create an opening for Labrador.

While there are mixed views about Labrador there is no one in Idaho's political *cognoscenti* who does not recognize his considerable skills. He has demonstrated both when in the Idaho Legislature and the Congress that he is not afraid to take on his party's leadership. And like legislative leadership, during the last election cycle Labrador reportedly donated almost \$20,000 from his own campaign PAC to Republican state legislators in contested races.

In doing so he may have hurt himself with some of his Tea Party base. For example, his PAC contributed \$500 to Rep. Caroline Nilsson-Troy's re-election even though Tea Party favorite Ken

DeVries, from St. Maries, was running as an independent in the 5th district house seat.

Nothing prevents him, either, from converting his congressional PAC to his campaign for governor.

Labrador is on record saying his decision to leave D.C. will be based in part on whether he feels he has accomplished or put in motion to accomplish immigration reform and criminal justice reform. Beauty though is in the eye of the beholder and he can define progress and success.

On criminal justice reform Labrador deserves credit for his ability to work constructively with Democrats, such as the recently retired Virginia Senator James Webb.

There is a fourth possible gubernatorial aspirant that neither Little nor Fulcher nor Labrador can ignore----Idaho Attorney General Lawrence Wasden. Now in his fourth term, he is a proven vote-getter and has a reputation for thoughtful, solid work. Given his canny handling of the Department of Energy's inept handling of the Batt Nuclear Waste Clean Up agreement, Wasden owns that issue.

Most political observers know that any primary with more than three contenders gets hard to predict. From Little's standpoint it should be the more the merrier.

The fun is just starting.