

Calling Gov. Otter: Where have you been?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

For years, a rumor circulated that Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter intended to step down in the middle of his term, handing the office to his loyal second-in-command, Lt. Gov. Brad Little.

Turns out Otter may have abdicated - but only a piece at a time.

Through a quirk in Idaho's 127-year-old constitution, the state's chief executive relinquishes his authority whenever he crosses the state border or becomes incapacitated.

Because the acting governor gets a bump in compensation, Kimberlee Kruesi of The Associated Press used payroll records to determine that Little sat behind the big desk 373 times during the eight years he's been in office.

That's up substantially from December 2014, when the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell documented Little had served 247 days as acting governor.

By contrast, Jim Risch spent a mere 220 days as interim governor. Risch was lieutenant governor when Gov. Dirk Kempthorne resigned on May 26, 2006, to become President George W. Bush's Interior secretary. Risch remained at that post until Jan. 1, 2007, when Otter took over.

Put another way, Little has had the opportunity to preside as governor on average almost one day a week.

The focus now is on Little as he competes in a four-way GOP contest to succeed Otter. None of his rivals - Boise developer Tommy Ahlquist, former GOP Senate Caucus Chairman Russ Fulcher of Meridian or Congressman Raul Labrador - has Little's scope of experience.

Of course, there's less to Little's tenure than meets the eye. Sitting in for the governor is a matter of keeping the lights on and serving a ceremonial function. As Little himself noted, he would not act without clearing the move with Otter.

"I'm pushing Idaho's agenda," he told Kruesi.

That applies even to the most substantive thing Little may have done while serving as acting governor - issuing an executive order to launch a review of how Idaho issues occupational licenses. Otter was out of state attending a grandson's graduation.

Besides, this hardly helps Little distance himself from the perception that his candidacy is a fourth Otter term. By filling in for his boss that much, Little ties himself even closer to Otter.

But the real question isn't what Idaho's second banana has been doing or even how it affects his prospects at the polls.

Idaho has one governor at a time - and the current one seems to be gone a lot.

Back in 2011, Dan Popkey, then a reporter with the Idaho Statesman, found that Otter was taking Mondays off, that the number of personal days he declared had risen 28 percent while his official appointments had dropped 21 percent.

Within recent memory, no governor has traveled this much since the 1960s, when then-Gov. Robert E. Smylie not only was engaged with national organizations but was considered a possible vice presidential candidate on the GOP ticket.

What's Otter's excuse?

That he's been on trade delegations overseas?

Tending to political issues?

On personal business?

Certainly delegating his office that often to Little feeds the impression that Otter has become Idaho's absentee governor.

It comes closer to explaining how so many things have gone haywire on Otter's watch - from blowing deadlines on vetoes to overseeing costly, fouled-up private prison and high school broadband contracts or even taking a back seat to the Legislature.

But the GOP primary election is just under a year away and the general election won't come along until November 2018. Between then and now, Otter faces another legislative session and 19 more months in office.

Isn't it time to ask him where he's been and if this is the level of commitment his constituents can expect from now on?

To get a response, however, you may have to place a long-distance

call. - M.T.