

Where's the gov?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter. His state just went through an episode of "Gov. Gov. Where's the Gov? "

Credit the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell for exposing this. Monday, she looked around and noticed:

- Otter was leading a trade delegation to the Paris Air Show. He'd been out of the state since June 15 and is not due back until late today.
- Under Idaho's Constitution, when the governor leaves the state, his powers and responsibilities fall to the second-in-command. But Lt. Gov. Brad Little left Idaho on Sunday to attend the SelectUSA Summit in Washington, D.C., which ran through Tuesday.
- So began a gubernatorial succession that runs next to Senate President Pro Tem Brent Hill, R-Rexburg, and then House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oakley.

Here's where the confusion began. When Russell checked in with Otter's office, she didn't get a response. So her next call was to Hill and Bedke.

Bedke told Russell it wasn't him; it must be Hill. But Otter Communications Director Mark Warbis told Russell that Bedke was indeed Idaho's acting governor because Hill also left the state.

"With Gov. Otter and Lt. Gov. Little out of state, the role of acting governor normally would fall to Senate President Pro Tem Hill. But he is also out of state, so House Speaker Bedke is acting governor."

Nobody told Bedke.

Not to worry, Warbis said. Staffs for both Otter and Little remain ready to "handle any immediate needs that might arise."

And there things stood for two hours - until Russell heard back from Hill.

As in Gov. Hill.

"I'm not out of state - no, I'm here," he said. It all had been worked out in advance. Hill even canceled plans to visit his grandchildren on Father's Day in Utah in order to serve.

"I said, 'Nope, we're on duty right now, so we're going to stay in the state.' "

What's going on here? Has this business of delegating his office to Little become so routine for Otter that he's getting sloppy?

In the eight years since Little was named Otter's No. 2, he has served as governor 373 days, according to Kimberlee Kruesi of the Associated Press. That works out to almost one day a week.

Who's sitting in the governor's chair is more than a formality. Can you imagine conversations such as these?

There's a massive forest fire in northern Idaho, Mr. Warbis. Tell the governor.

Warbis: "Have you seen him?"

Mark, the Snake River is flooding its banks in Blackfoot. What do we do?

Warbis: "Can I get back to you in an hour or two?"

We've got a dam down here that's about to breach. Where's the governor?

Warbis: You mean, who's the governor?

CHEERS ... to U.S. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho. While his seatmate, Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, has been getting headlines from the Intelligence Committee's testimony of former FBI Director James Comey and Attorney General Jeff Sessions, Crapo seems to have emerged as a national figure.

Newly installed as chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, Crapo steered to passage a substantial stiffening of U.S. resolve against Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Citing Putin's aggression against Ukraine, his support of Syrian President Bashar Assad and his hacking into the American 2016 elections, Crapo forged a bipartisan coalition to take the following steps:

- Toughen current economic sanctions to reach Russian oil and gas, shipping, railway, mining and financial institutions worldwide.
- Target Russian government officials, their families and close associates.
- Impose new sanctions, particularly against those seeking to undermine cybersecurity or supplying arms to Syria.

Crapo's measure also bars the Trump administration from lifting sanctions unilaterally.

"We require the president to notify Congress when imposing certain types of sanctions and we will have the opportunity to review any attempts to lift sanctions with regard to Russia," Crapo said.

It's one thing to have a Republican Congress impose such terms on a Democratic White House - but here you have Crapo holding firm against a president from his own party.

The measure cleared the Senate 97-2 -with only Sens. Mike Lee, R-Utah, and Rand Paul, R-Ky., voting no.

CHEERS ... to former Idaho Supreme Court Chief Justice and Attorney General Jim Jones. He's condemning the practice of imposing mandatory minimum sentences against criminal defendants, usually involved at the lower rungs of the drug trafficking networks.

Jones noted that policy has been discredited in Idaho and elsewhere, expanding the state's prison population and leading it toward a disastrous contract with Corrections Corporation of America (now CoreCivic). CCA's mismanagement of the Idaho Correctional Center near Boise resulted in so much inmate-on-inmate violence that the place became known as the "Gladiator School."

What's noteworthy here is that Jones accepts some of the responsibility.

"I have to admit that I supported mandatory minimum sentencing for drug kingpins during my tenure as Idaho attorney general in the 1980s," Jones wrote. "However, Idaho and other states have come to realize that long mandatory sentences are not appropriate for every offender.

"They tie the hands of judges who are best positioned to tailor the appropriate punishment for the crimes committed by a particular defendant. And, while they do not reduce recidivism, they do needlessly inflict damage on the families of low-risk offenders."

To say the least, Jones continues to impress.

CHEERS ... to state Reps. Luke Malek, R-Coeur d'Alene, and Mat Erpelding, D-Boise. At a time when the Trump administration is pandering to the anti-Castro enclave of Little Miami, Fla., these two Idahoans are offering a bipartisan, united voice toward opening up trade with Cuba.

That puts them in sync with Otter, who has led several trade delegations to Cuba and is chairman of the Idaho State Council of Engage Cuba.

Credit this group with having a clear-eyed view. The Kennedy-era trade embargo has not toppled the communist regime - far from it. Lifting it would enable Idaho farmers to tap into the country's \$2 billion market. Robust trade might even speed the day when Cubans enjoy more freedoms.

Write Malek and Erpelding: "We wholeheartedly believe that working with Cuba, rather than shutting it out, is the right thing to do."

Good for them. - M.T.