

Commentary Marty Peterson In Idaho, we don't call it socialism

~~Marty Peterson/for the Lewiston Tribune~~

Presidential elections years are always great times to enter into name calling and finger pointing. It's one of the things we do best in our political system. Why solve problems when you can pass the blame?

One of the accusations made by some opponents of President Barack Obama is that he is a socialist who espouses socialistic causes. The Pew Research Center has found that 60 percent of Americans respond negatively to "socialism." So this could be a pretty effective piece of mud to throw at the president if it could be made to stick. But this also made me curious about socialism in Idaho.

The website usconservatives.about.com defines socialism as a political term applied to an economic system in which property is held in common and not individually, and relationships are governed by a political hierarchy. Common ownership doesn't mean decisions are made collectively, however. Instead, individuals in positions of authority make decisions in the name of the collective group.

Using this definition, Idaho has been steadily creeping toward socialism since its earliest territorial days in the 1860s. But in Idaho we don't generally call it socialism. Although sometimes we do.

In 1911, John T. Wood was elected mayor of Coeur d'Alene on the Socialist ticket. And in 1915, Earl Bowman of Valley County was elected to the Idaho Senate as a Socialist. But usually things are a bit more subtle.

Probably the best example is our system of public roads and highways. During the first few decades of Idaho's existence, the Legislature granted numerous permits for the construction of privately owned toll roads and the operation of private ferries in Idaho and then, with the advent of the motor vehicles, edged out those private owners with publicly owned and maintained roads and bridges.

The first school in Idaho was a private affair operated by missionary Henry Spalding, but it didn't take long for government to take over that service as well.

The oldest colleges and universities in the United States are Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, Princeton and Columbia, all privately owned. But in Idaho, we decided to build a public system of colleges and universities, even though we have several that are privately owned.

In the Lewiston area, irrigation first came from private sources. Henry Spalding constructed Idaho's first irrigation system and Charles Frances Adams of Boston brought water to Jawbone

Flat from the upper reaches of Asotin Creek, making possible the development of Clarkston. But in southern Idaho, the federal government's Bureau of Reclamation, over the past 100 years, has brought water to thousands of acres of land, mostly worked by firmly anti-socialistic farmers.

In early Idaho, you could go to your favorite drug store or saloon and buy a bottle of your favorite spirits. ~~But today the Idaho State Liquor Dispensary has a complete monopoly on the~~ sale of spirits. The same is true for gambling, other than on Indian reservations. In early Idaho you could go to your favorite saloon and bet, play cards, slot machines and other types of gambling. Today in Idaho, you can play the government's lottery or go to a county-owned horse racing track to bet.

In Idaho we have a state government mandate that employers have to have workers compensation insurance. This predates the Affordable Care Act, better known as Obamacare, by decades. It was first established by the Idaho Legislature in 1917 and expanded to cover farm workers by Gov. - and former state Republican Party Chairman - Phil Batt in 1996. And, even though you can get privately issued workers compensation insurance, by far the best buy is generally through the state-owned and operated Idaho State Insurance Fund.

These examples are just the tip of the iceberg outlining the way that socialism has crept into our lives in Idaho. And by and large it has done pretty well to meet the needs and desires of Idaho citizens. But we Idahoans are generally a polite and civilized lot. So don't call it socialism. That's a dirty word. And polite people don't say dirty words in public.

Peterson grew up in the Lewiston-Clarkston Valley. He is retired and lives in Boise.