

Gov. Otter stopped by Monday just to chat

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

To understand how far short Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's State of the State speech fell Monday, let's look back a few years.

In 2003, Gov. Dirk Kempthorne drove lawmakers to see things his way by refusing to cut school spending and forcing them to enact a temporary sales tax increase.

It was Republican Gov. Phil Batt who in 1996 cajoled when possible and twisted arms when necessary to get members of his own party to extend worker's compensation insurance to people employed in agriculture.

And in 1988, Gov. Cecil D. Andrus fought a GOP legislative majority over public school funding.

That's called executive leadership - something that was visibly missing from Otter's delivery. Devoid of details and context, Otter made no attempt to inform or persuade his fellow Idahoans to follow his agenda.

Nor did he make any effort to challenge lawmakers on the weighty issues of the day - with one notable exception. He urged the 81-percent GOP majority to swallow hard and enact one feature of Obamacare - creation of a state-based health insurance exchange through which individuals and small businesses can shop for policies. It's either that or the feds will step in and create an exchange that will drive up Idaho costs, undermine Idaho health insurance carriers and disrupt Idaho health care providers.

"You all know how I feel about Obamacare. I will continue encouraging and supporting efforts by our Idaho congressional delegation and many others to repeal and replace the law. But the fact remains that for now and for the foreseeable future it is the law," Otter said. "And as responsible elected officials we're sworn to uphold the rule of law - not just those laws that we support."

Good for him. But with Otter, the perennial question is how hard is he prepared to fight for his views?

When it comes to education reform, the answer is murky. In response to the voters' massive rebuke of the Luna Laws, Otter wants people who actually know something about teaching to work with the State Board of Education to map out a consensus.

"Let me say it again: I am neither calling for nor expecting major school improvement measures this year," he said. "But I believe there are areas in which we can make progress, and I encourage you and all citizens to engage in that public discussion."

Which is it?

Otter was equally opaque about repealing the personal property tax businesses pay on equipment. Doing so would drain \$140 million - and it would inflict damage disproportionately to those counties, cities and school districts with more industry.

What's Otter's solution?

He offered \$20 million - "for easing counties' transition." Does that suggest the state will gradually take over the entire cost - or will local governments and schools cover the rest?

Then he suggested allowing a local option tax. What kind of tax - sales tax, property tax, income tax?

Your guess is as good as ours.

Legislators have declared local option taxes dead on arrival in the past. And a local option tax would not be much use for Plummer, which stands to lose 46 percent of its tax base.

With the state budget so tight it can't afford to pay its employees and teachers more, Otter has an estimated \$27 million to throw away on a clunky state medically indigent program that responds only to health care crises and provides no preventive care. But that's the price of Otter's refusal to expand Medicaid coverage to Idaho's uninsured working poor adults next year under the Obama health package. The feds would cover 100 percent of that program's costs for the first three years and never less than 90 percent.

He wants to study how to better run Medicaid. Fair enough. But who says Idaho can't do both - saving a huge pile of money by expanding Medicaid now while fine-tuning the program later?

Had Kempthorne, Batt and Andrus behaved this way, the state would have been perplexed and slightly embarrassed.

But with Otter, it's become the new normal. - M.T.