

It's a living

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to U.S. Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho. In the four years since Idahoans sent Risch to Washington, D.C., Idaho Republican Sen. Mike Crapo passed the Owyhee Canyonlands wilderness and joined in the Gang of Six to resolve the fiscal impasse.

Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, pulled wolves off the endangered species list and has pursued his signature Boulder-White Clouds wilderness initiative.

And Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, has been in the thick of hammering out an immigration reform package.

What kind of a name has Risch made for himself?

When the wonkish National Journal found his voting record was the most conservative in the Senate, it was compelled to ask: Jim who?

In a dysfunctional Congress, Risch seems to revel in the fact that he's not doing much. Here's what he told the Idaho Statesman's Dan Popkey earlier this week:

"Governor will wear you down." (Risch finished out the final seven months of Dirk Kempthorne's term in 2006). "You can't do that job permanently. This you can do ad infinitum."

- Perched on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Risch has become something of a jet-setter, focusing upon North Africa and the Middle East.
- He's part of the social set. His wife, Vicki, belongs to the Ford's Theater board, where the pair "relatively frequently" entertain.
- So the Senate takes too much time off? So what? "There's nothing happening when we're back there and there's nothing happening when we're not back there. What's the difference?"

Showing up to vote no.

Seeing the world on the taxpayer's dime.

Joining the D.C. social set.

"You know, I really enjoy this job. I really like this job," Risch said.

Who wouldn't?

JEERS ... to Risch and Crapo. First they were for enabling states to collect sales taxes due on remote sales. Now they're against.

The reason?

Passed by a 69 to 27 Senate vote, the measure excludes firms doing \$1 million or less a year in sales from collecting the tax. The National Conference of State Legislatures say that spares 99 percent of companies engaged in remote sales from charging and remitting sales taxes. It also will cost the states about 40 percent of the revenue owed them. So Idaho's share shrinks to about \$60 million.

Too low, Risch says. He wants the first \$3 million in sales exempted.

That would gut the bill. Besides, nobody gives that kind of a break to a small Idaho-based retailer. Even if he grosses only \$150,000, he's obligated to collect every penny of sales tax owed.

CHEERS ... to state Rep. Shirley Ringo, D-Moscow. With a negative 96, she got the lowest score on the Idaho Freedom Foundation's Freedom Index.

Good for her.

IFF presents itself as an monitor of conservative voting in Idaho. But if you dig through its survey of legislative votes, you find how arbitrary the Freedom Index has become.

Throughout a range of issues, only one really mattered - creation of a state-based health insurance exchange. Idaho Freedom Foundation Executive Director Wayne Hoffman vehemently opposed those exchanges and his legislative scorecard reflects it. Any House member who voted for it lost 31 points; any senator who did so lost 52 points.

The index took special aim at moderate GOP senators who ventured beyond the radical fringe. Some of them - including Majority Leader Bart Davis, R-Idaho Falls, Sen. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint, and Senate President Pro Tem Brent Hill, R-Rexburg - ended up being rated more "liberal" than House Democrats.

In other words, lawmakers who followed the Freedom Foundation's narrow world view got rewarded.

Among them was Sen. Sheryl Nuxoll, R-Cottonwood.

Those who thought for themselves got dinged.

None more so than Ringo

Wear that score with pride, Rep. Ringo.

CHEERS ... to Washington Sen. Mark Schoesler, R-Ritzville, and Reps. Susan Fagan, R-Pullman, and Joe Schmick, R-Colfax.

They joined the Legislature's unanimous approval of House Bill 1341.

Signed into law Wednesday by Gov. Jay Inslee, the measure extends a decent hand to the wrongly convicted.

Until now, someone who had been exonerated was left to his own devices unless he could show police or prosecutors were guilty of misconduct - an almost impossibly high bar to reach.

Now when the courts make a grievous error, the state will attempt to right the wrong by paying \$50,000 for each year of imprisonment, \$25,000 for each year on parole and another \$50,000 for each year on death row.

That follows the lead of 27 states, the federal government and the District of Columbia.

JEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter. In Idaho, 7.7 percent of the jobs pay minimum wage - that's the highest percentage in the country. Per capita income is ranked 49th and could hit bottom.

In many occupations, Idahoans could make more money simply by moving to any other state.

And what does the governor say about this?

Low wages are not a problem. Low wages are an asset for businesses to exploit.

"Idaho's average cost for our highly skilled, often customer-trained workforce is 21 percent less than Connecticut," Otter wrote in a business recruitment letter to 79 gun and ammunition manufacturers in 28 states. - M.T.