

Wising up

Marty Trilhaase/Lewiston Tribune

CHEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter. His prison privatization policy was running on ideological fumes by the time he got around to giving it a skeptical look, but the governor finally yielded to the evidence - or at least the imperative to get some.

For the first time, Idaho may consider whether its own Department of Correction can manage the violence-plagued Idaho Correctional Center as efficiently as a private company.

"I'm going to listen to other people," Otter told the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell Wednesday. "I'm not foreclosing that discussion."

After canceling its \$29 million contract with Corrections Corporation of America, the Idaho Board of Correction - and by extension, Otter - had refused to take bids from the state agency.

CCA's history of scrimping on staffing - thereby enabling inmates to beat up each other - culminated in U.S. District Judge David O. Carter holding the contractor in contempt of court. He put an impartial monitor in charge of watching personnel levels and threatened escalating fines if CCA didn't comply.

Could all of this mean CCA's original ICC bid was too low in the first place and that it couldn't make a profit without leaving slots vacant?

We'll never know. Last week, CCA opted to not reapply for the ICC contract when it expires next year - leaving two smaller competitors, the GEO Group and Management and Training Corp., to submit bids.

Unless the state agency shows what it would spend managing ICC, Idaho taxpayers couldn't be certain whether they were getting fleeced by privatization. Several studies - including one by The Associated Press - showed private contractors cherry pick the healthiest, least troublesome inmates, driving down their costs while shifting more burdens onto the publicly run operations.

Otter's become weary of flying blind. Good for him.

JEERS ... to Gov. Otter. When September's tax revenues came in nearly \$16 million ahead, he claimed the numbers "validates our belief ... that lowering taxes encourages more economic activity."

Hold on there, Tex.

It's easy to be validated when you rig the game. Last month, Otter's budget shop lowered the bar, projecting state revenue growth would fall to 2.1 percent from what it had earlier forecast at 4.6 percent.

Besides, if Otter's tax-cutting fetish has worked so well, why are so many Idahoans losing ground? State per capita income is next to last. No state has a greater share of its people earning minimum wage. And if you look at average weekly wages, only Puerto Rico does worse than the Gem State.

CHEERS ... to Idaho Senate Majority Leader Bart Davis, R-Idaho Falls. Quite possibly the most painful moment in his life came a decade ago, when Davis' 23-year-old son Cameron Wade Davis was shot and killed during a brawl at a Boise keg party. The assailant, Vincent Craig Olsen, was convicted of manslaughter and drew a 25-year sentence.

At an April 9 Idaho parole commission meeting, Davis and his wife, Marion, said they would not oppose Olsen's release.

They saw in Olsen's parents, Craig and Lenna Olsen, some of their own pain.

"We saw their hearts ache," Davis wrote in a statement to the AP. "With time, we prayed with them. With a little more time, we prayed for their son. Our loss is real, but now there is comfort."

Such magnanimity in the face of grief compelled the commission to overrule a hearing officer's recommendation and place Olsen on the path toward redemption.

JEERS ... to Idaho Lt. Gov. Brad Little. As a state senator in 2005, Little showed good sense by opposing a proposed constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage in the Gem State. Enough senators joined him to stop the anti-gay amendment cold.

Until the next year, when Little - joined by four others including Sen. John Goedde, R-Coeur d'Alene - flipped and put the measure on the 2006 ballot.

To Idaho's everlasting shame, voters stamped this bigotry upon their charter by a 63.5-percent margin.

Seven years later, the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated portions of the Defense of Marriage Act. Since then, the Internal Revenue Service ruled same-sex couples married in one of 14 states that recognize such unions can file a joint tax return.

In other words, a Lewiston couple that crossed the Snake River to be wed in Clarkston is married in the eyes of the IRS.

But not in the eyes of the Idaho State Tax Commission. After filing a joint federal return, Idaho's same-sex couples would file separate returns to the state.

It's insulting. It means more tax-filing expense for same-sex couples. It could cost the state money. Remember the marriage penalty? Some couples wind up paying more tax than they would filing separately.

Don't blame the tax commission for following the constitution.

Look, instead, to Little and the others who followed their conscience in 2005 and then yielded to expediency in an election year.

CHEERS ... to Mike Ferguson. Idaho's chief economist for a quarter-century under six governors, Ferguson knows the fallacy of budgeting a \$2.75 billion enterprise on an annual basis.

Nothing illuminates that more than Otter's contradictory pledges to boost school funding more than \$350 million in the next four to five years while cutting taxes and holding the line on government growth.

Ferguson, now director of the Idaho Center for Fiscal Policy, has called on the governor to "produce a clear road map showing how he intends to achieve that outcome."

That means forecasting state revenues several years ahead. At the same time, the state could anticipate its own long-range costs to meet school enrollment increases, prison population growth and health care costs.

"Only by presenting a credible, complete budget scenario covering the full period of the phase-in will the public be in a position to assess the veracity of the governor's commitment to public schools," Ferguson wrote in a recent op-ed. - M.T.