

# Cheers and Jeers: The year-end edition

By Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho. What a year this Idaho politician has had.

He started by voting against a must-pass bill to back away from the fiscal cliff.

At about the same time, Labrador got involved in a botched coup against House Speaker John Boehner. Roll Call listed Labrador, along with Rep. Justin Amash, R-Mich., and Mick Mulvaney, R-S.C., as the ringleaders.

When seatmate Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, told the Idaho Statesman's Dan Popkey that Labrador had torpedoed his credibility, the would-be insurgent blasted Simpson as a "bully" and "an old-school legislator that went to Washington, D.C., to compromise. ... That's how you get to a \$1 trillion deficit, by just tinkering around the edges."

As the fall government shutdown loomed, Labrador's fingerprints were all over it. Earlier in the summer, Labrador joined 78 other House Republicans who endorsed North Carolina Congressman Mark Meadows' plan to block any spending bill that included funding for Obamacare.

By September, he had joined another 80 House Republicans in co-sponsoring Georgia Rep. Tom Graves' threat to essentially shut down the government unless Obamacare was blocked.

By mid-October, the adults took over and found a way out of the shutdown impasse. Had Labrador's side prevailed, not only would the government have remained closed but the country would have defaulted on its national debt.

Then this month, when a coalition of conservative House members, led by Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., brokered a modest budget deal with Democratic Senate members, led by Patty Murray of Washington, to avoid the next round or two of shutdowns, Labrador found another reason to vote no.

Elsewhere, Dr. No from Idaho bailed out from immigration reform, his ticket to national prestige. In June, he bolted from the House "gang of eight," a bipartisan panel that had been hammering out immigration reform. Labrador objected to giving newly legalized residents access to public health care.

Labrador stretched the limits of decorum by openly lobbying Idaho lawmakers against enacting Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's state-based health insurance exchange. Members of Congress generally avoid getting involved in state issues - and if Labrador is so passionate about Idaho's legislative priorities, he should not have retreated from running for governor.

Meanwhile, he continued to pay his wife, Becca Labrador, \$2,500 a month plus taxes to work on his campaign - a move that would be illegal had the House-passed 2007 ethics reform package been enacted into law.

That's quite a record.

CHEERS ... to Idaho Senate Majority Leader Bart Davis, R-Idaho Falls. You'd be hard-pressed to find a more compelling portrait of magnanimity than that of Davis and his wife, Marion.

About a decade ago, their 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.

But when it came time for Olsen's parole hearing, the Davis family chose mercy over vengeance. Testifying at an April 9 Idaho parole commission meeting, Cameron Davis' parents said they would not oppose release for their son's killer.

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 Associated Press. "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."

CHEERS ... to former Idaho Gov. Phil Batt. Upon receiving the Idaho human rights lifetime achievement award in October, the godfather of Idaho's human rights law chided members of his own Republican Party for their failure to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

"The Idaho Legislature showed up with the biggest stupidity, last time, regarding to add the words 'sexual orientation' to the human rights statute," Batt said. "They accomplished absolutely nothing by it, except to be made to look like fools.

"A person, a homosexual, who can't rent a room or get a job because of his orientation - (that) doesn't make any sense to anybody," Batt said. "Why some of the politicians are not more sensitive to that - more sensible, I should say than that - beats me."

No one speaks with greater moral authority on these issues. As a state senator, Batt fought racism in the 1960s. As governor, he secured worker compensation insurance coverage for Idaho's farm workers.

CHEERS ... to Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash. As noted above, Murray and Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., hashed out the first working budget compromise in several years. For that, Roll Call correctly lists her among the few winners in an otherwise dysfunctional congressional year.

"She continued to increase her national profile, having negotiated the budget agreement with (Ryan) that partially stops the sequester," the Capitol Hill newspaper wrote. "What was

suspected more than a year ago when Murray announced she would take the Budget Committee gavel came true, and Murray could factor into any potential future contest for leader of Senate Democrats if (Majority Leader Harry) Reid ever leaves, that is."

JEERS ... to Idaho schools Superintendent Tom Luna. The man responsible for 2012's biggest political debacle - the repeal of his heavy-handed, school overhaul bills aimed at steering tax dollars into the coffers of Luna's cronies - was up to his old tricks.

Luna took \$2.25 million in money state lawmakers assigned for one-time school technology projects and parlayed it into a five-year plan to install Wi-Fi in Idaho high schools - an obligation that could extend into 15 years and \$33.75 million.

Not only did this catch lawmakers flatfooted, but Luna's shop steered the contract toward Nashville, Tenn.-based Education Networks of America - over two Idaho firms, Ednetics of Post Falls and Tek-Hut Inc., of Twin Falls.

ENA contributed \$6,000 to Luna's campaign. Garry Lough, Idaho director of customer services for ENA, was the Idaho GOP executive director for two years and then worked as Luna's deputy of legislative affairs.

JEERS ... to Tim Eyman. Credit him for cluttering up the recent Washington election ballot with misleading and meaningless advisory votes. Eyman's 2007 measure, Initiative 960, straitjacketed state government by requiring lawmakers to round up a two-thirds majority to pass tax bills until the Washington Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional. Measures on this year's ballot asked your opinion on five revenue bills lawmakers passed earlier in the year.

But they weren't binding. All Eyman accomplished was to drive up election costs and create unfulfilled expectations.

Lawmakers such as House Government Operations and Elections Committee Chairman Sam Hunt, D-Olympia, and House budget panel Chairman Ross Hunter, D-Medina, say they may fight to repeal this nonsense.

CHEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter. Whatever else Otter accomplished - or failed to pull off - during his seven years in office, he holds this distinction: He is the only Republican governor presiding over a Republican legislative majority to pass a state-based health insurance exchange.

Otter detests Obamacare, but his approach was sound: Having Idahoans run the exchange meant better service, lower costs and less interruption than relying on the federal government.

For Otter, the effort involved taking on elements of his own party - and it generated a primary election challenge from Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian.

Whenever a politician puts himself at risk by doing the right thing, it's worth a salute.

JEERS ... to Idaho Transportation Director Brian Ness. Along with his boss, Gov. Otter, Ness opted to side with megaload shipper Omega Morgan's plans to send equipment bound for the Alberta tar sands along U.S. Highway 12 - against the objections of the Nez Perce Indian Tribe and the U.S. Forest Service as well as the implications of a federal court ruling that validated the 100-mile route's protection under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1964.

It worked once.

But not a second time.

U.S. District Court Judge B. Lynn Winmill stripped Idaho of its control over that and future megaload shipments along U.S. Highway 12 - and handed it over to the tribe and the Forest Service.

CHEERS ... to Asotin County Commission Chairman Brian Shinn. He deserves credit for the plan that ultimately rescued the Asotin County Family Aquatic Center from its financial problems.

First, the facility was placed under a newly created public facilities district.

Second, voters agreed to add a 0.2 percent sales tax surcharge - taking the sales tax from 7.5 percent to 7.7 percent - to generate about \$475,000 for the pool and water recreation park.

The combination meant the entire amount would go toward the aquatic center, rather than get siphoned off to the city of Clarkston - which has been the fate of an earlier sales tax surcharge meant to support the center.

This new money means the aquatic center will expand its operating schedule plus have the resources required to keep up with maintenance and equipment replacement.

JEERS ... to Taxpayers Against Unfair Taxation Chairman David Estes. More than two years ago, he promised Lewiston what sounded like a good deal: Reject the school district's \$52 million bond to replace its 85-year-old, obsolete and cramped high school - and he'd deliver a cheaper alternative.

Here's what Estes produced: A blueprint to spend \$66.6 million renovating and expanding the current facility during the next 20 years.

Even if Lewiston voters eventually return to Plan A, it won't be as cheap. You have to factor in three years of inflation and the lost opportunity to use federal stimulus dollars to finance at least a third of the project.

JEERS ... to U.S. Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho. By voting against everything - including the Violence Against Women Act, funding for the Idaho National Laboratory, aid to Pakistan and help for Idaho's rural schools - Risch wound up to the right of everybody. The wonkish national Journal proclaimed Risch far and away the Senate's most conservative member.

Other than that, it's been a life of relative ease for the state's junior senator. He more or less admitted not breaking much of a sweat in Washington. In an interview with the Idaho Statesman's Dan Popkey, Risch said: "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."

JEERS ... to state Rep. Thyra Stevenson, R-Lewiston. For the past year, the freshman lawmaker who was elected in 2012 has stubbornly refused to relinquish her seat on the Lewiston City Council - even breaking a pledge to step down after voters elected her successor in the Nov. 5 elections.

Meanwhile at the Statehouse, she is building a reputation for acting thoughtlessly. Consider how she treated fellow Rep. John Rusche, D-Lewiston, during a March floor debate on the health insurance exchange.

She all but accused Rusche of having a conflict of interest because Rusche once worked in the health insurance industry.

Rusche left Regence Blue Shield nine years ago, hence no conflict.

It was no way to treat a seatmate. When she was asked about it, Stevenson responded: "It was an innocent question. Don't blow it up."

CHEERS ... to the Moscow Mayor Nancy Chaney and the city council. They joined Coeur d'Alene, Boise, Pocatello, Sandpoint, Idaho Falls and Ketchum in safeguarding the civil rights of all citizens.

Moscow's ordinance bans discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodations on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Idaho cities are taking this step because state lawmakers refuse.

And until Idaho's human rights act is amended, it remains legal in most of Idaho to openly discriminate against gays, lesbians and transgender people.

JEERS... to Idaho Board of Correction Chairwoman Robin Sandy. Look at the evidence she has ignored: Under its \$29 million contract to manage the Idaho Correctional Center outside Boise, Corrections Corporation of America scrimped on staffing to maximize its profits. Inmate violence escalated to the point where the place became known as the "gladiator school." CCA falsified time slips. A federal judge issued a contempt of court citation. The Associated Press determined Idaho taxpayers probably lost money on the deal.

After Sandy and the board opted not to renew CCA's contract and seek new bids, the corporation opted to pull out of Idaho. The nation's second largest prison manager, the GEO Group, also won't bid on ICC.

Yet Sandy stands by her view that only for-profit prison managers should submit proposals to operate ICC - even though it's possible the Idaho Department of Correction can do the job cheaper and more effectively.

CHEERS ... to Idaho State Rep. Tom Loertscher, R-Iona. Good luck finding anyone in the Idaho Capitol who is more conservative. But Loertscher has accepted the facts, which show that Idaho taxpayers would be far better off if the state accepted the federal government's offer to expand Medicaid coverage to low-income adults.

Under Obamacare, the feds will pick up 100 percent of the costs for the first three years and never less than 90 percent thereafter.

As Loertscher knows well, many of the people who would get this coverage are now served by Idaho's county medically indigent and state Catastrophic Health Care programs. So Medicaid expansion would save taxpayers about \$80 million a year.

Unfortunately, Loertscher has been a lonely voice. Idaho Republicans loathe Obamacare - and fear a GOP primary challenge. - M.T.