

# A remarkable passage from a remarkable speech

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of former Idaho Gov. Phil Batt's critique of the GOP came when he turned the focus on himself.

Speaking to the Canyon County Lincoln Day banquet last week on the 20th anniversary of his inauguration as Idaho's first Republican governor in 24 years, Batt observed how history had judged him.

Batt's legacy was not necessarily the agenda he'd scoped out - such as shrinking property taxes by \$40 million or his ongoing drive to be a fiscal "tightwad."

"I was tight. But do I reflect on that as my legacy? No, and the public doesn't either.

"They'd rather talk about my uphill, successful effort to cover farm laborers with workers compensation, my contract with the federal government to keep nuclear waste from being stored over the Snake River Aquifer or my help through monthly meetings in transforming Idaho's Indian tribes from being poverty-stricken to moderate recovery."

There's good reason for that.

Lowering taxes and shrinking government was going with the flow of his party and supporters.

By 1996, however, Batt took a different path. He pursued extending workers compensation insurance to agricultural workers.

It was a job that needed doing. As things stood, anyone grievously hurt while working on a farm had no access to the medical care and rehabilitation worker compensation insurance provided to others.

But the people Batt was trying to help lacked political clout. Meanwhile the forces gathering to stop Batt - the Idaho Farm Bureau, the state's agriculture industry and the core of his own party - weren't accustomed to losing.

Batt prevailed because he marshaled the state's conscience and twisted the arms of old friends and political allies so severely that he admitted some friendships were broken beyond repair.

Batt picked that fight. Another was forced on him. That same year, he brokered a truce in Idaho's battle to stop the shipment of spent nuclear fuel from the U.S. Navy and commercial reactors to the Idaho National Laboratory near Idaho Falls.

The settlement is popular today, but at the time Batt was caught in a political no man's land.

Anti-nuclear advocates accused him of appeasing the federal government; INL supporters argued he was offering only tepid support toward their interests.

And Batt met with Idaho's tribal governments at a time when members of the GOP were openly skeptical toward attempts to jump-start reservation economies through tax incentives and gaming operations.

The context for Batt's reminiscence was the former governor's rebuke of his party's failure to outlaw discrimination on the basis of an individual's "sexual orientation and gender identity."

But consider what the former governor has distilled from the passage of time and his own battle scars: Cutting taxes, holding the line on spending or even coming up with more money for schools and transportation are perennial and political struggles.

The test of any governor is what he does for people who turn to him when they have nowhere else to go.

Could that message be any clearer for Batt's current successor, Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter?

Without Otter, Idaho may wait years before it recognizes all of its citizens - including gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people - deserve respect and dignity.

Until Otter insists, Idaho will drag its feet and leave almost 80,000 working poor adults outside the health care umbrella Medicaid expansion would bring.

Twenty years from now, Idahoans won't remember Otter's platitudes about maintaining the "proper role of government" or his taunts at an unpopular White House.

They'll merely ask: How well did he look after people living on Idaho's margins? - M.T.