

# Idaho Democrats don't need another cheerleader

**Marty Trillhaase, Lewiston Tribune**

Bert Marley, the affable former state senator from Pocatello who took over the reins of Idaho's Democratic Party, sounded too much like too many of his predecessors when the Tribune's

William L. Spence caught up with him this month.

"I really think we're trending in the right direction," the newly elected Democratic Party chairman told Spence. "A lot of Idahoans identify as independents, rather than Republicans, and I think we're going to start seeing more of them lean toward Democrats."

Here's the problem: Every one of Marley's predecessors has promised much the same thing.

It never happens.

It's been seven years since Idahoans elected a Democrat to Congress.

It's been 13 years since any Democrat won a statewide office.

It's been 25 years since an Idaho Democrat was elected governor.

It's been 41 years since Idahoans chose a Democrat for the U.S. Senate.

Democrats now hold 21 seats in the 105-member Legislature. Marley's tickled that his party picked up one seat last year, but Spence noted GOP candidates ran unopposed in 46 races. And in another 38 contests, the GOP candidate carried an average 66 percent of the vote against the Democrat.

Nothing seems to change it.

Not a GOP civil war between the hard right and the hard-core right.

Not a GOP primary election that's closed to anyone who doesn't declare his allegiance to the Republican Party.

Not a Republican Party that frequently nominates the extremist over the moderate - and still wins in November.

Not a Republican Party that keeps making the same mistakes - whether it's supporting invasive ultrasound procedures for women or sabotaging child support collections for nearly 200,000 Idaho kids.

Not a political organization tied to the scandal-plagued administration of Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter.

Whether you're a Republican, independent or Democrat, having one party so firmly in control - and one faction of that party so firmly in charge of it - hardly serves your interests.

But another round of cheerleading from the latest Democratic chairman isn't going to help.

What's needed here is a startling dose of reality.

Imagine if Marley spoke the truth:

Today, our party is moribund. To the vast majority of Idahoans, our brand is toxic. To the insiders, we're seen as politically incompetent. We waste time and enormous sums of money running political neophytes - some of them self-financed - for marquee offices when they stand no chance of getting elected. When they drop from the scene, we repeat the process.

We're in this spot because we have virtually no bench of city, county and legislative officials who have built credibility with the voters and are in a position to wage a successful campaign for higher office.

There are reasons for optimism.

The Idaho GOP is talking nonsense.

It offers fear, not hope.

Its economic model isn't working. Idaho remains mired in the bottom tier of states.

Its education plan barely nudged school funding off the basement floor.

Republicans have put out the not-welcome mat to diversity, telling many of the nation's best and brightest to consider living somewhere else.

Demographics are on our side. Cities across the state have filled a void left by rigid state lawmakers and passed anti-discrimination ordinances.

But we can't capitalize on them using the old ways.

So here's what we're going to do. We're going to build from the ground up. Seriously.

That means recruiting quality candidates for local and legislative offices.

We're going to focus on races - perhaps as few as a half-dozen - where we're competitive.

We're going to raise money.

This means opposition research, message discipline and taking the battle to the GOP. We're going to define them, not the other way around.

We'll concede some races at the top of the ticket. This won't be easy. I can offer you nothing but heartache and frustration. But if we're going to learn how to win again, it has to step by step - until we get to the point where we regain the trust of Idaho voters.

Judging from his comments to

Spence, Marley may be headed in that direction: "Just filing for races isn't going to help us move the ball forward."

But he can't be both realist and cheerleader. If he's selling optimism, it's a long way off in the distance. - M.T.