

Toward 2018

Chuck Malloy/Idaho Politics Weekly

Brad Little, Idaho's lieutenant governor since January 2009, has filed paperwork toward a run for governor in 2018. In doing that, he has finally done what some observers expected he would in 2014 or even as far back as 2010.

No need now, he was quoted in one news report, to be coy about it any more, which makes definitive that the incumbent governor who appointed him, C.L. "Butch" Otter, will not try for a fourth term. Running for governor, or one of the top offices, has been more or less eventually expected of Little for many years. Even when he was in the state Senate, and before that when he rebuffed suggestions he run for this or that, there was the sense that he would one day be a contender for top-rank office in the state.

Brad Little comes from one of the major Idaho pioneer families, for three decades running his family's large ranching operations based at Emmett. He has been an actual cowboy – the real thing, not a rodeo enthusiast but a working cattleman. Years ago during a backcountry drive I paused for refreshment at one of the bars at Yellow Pine, and watched as a gaggle of dirty, tired, ragged cattle hands burst in through the door – Brad Little in the middle of them, one of the gang. You'd not easily have picked him out as the corporate and political figure in Boise he also was even then. Or guessed at the scope of self-education and contacts he's developed, the variety of perspectives he's absorbed.

He is a more complex figure than most Idahoans probably realize. His profile as lieutenant governor for the last six-plus years has been defined as a rigorous Otter loyalist. He will no doubt have Otter's support in the coming campaign, and – as the campaign treasurer appointment of Vicki Risch, wife of Senator Jim Risch, should make clear – that of most of the Republican establishment as well. To tag Little as simply providing another term of Otter would be wrong and unfair given his own capabilities, though that is likely how his opposition will describe him.

And there will be opposition. Two names at least have been circulating for quite a while: Representative Raul Labrador and former state Senator Russ Fulcher, who lost the Republican primary – after a hot and spirited contest – to Otter in 2014. Labrador has been mentioned as a prospect almost as long as he's been in the House, though he may be more likely to continue settling in there than to uproot for the statehouse. Fulcher appears to have kept in touch with his support base, and could be well positioned to renew his campaign if he decides to give it another go.

The governor's office doesn't come open all that often, and it almost certainly will be contested.

For the moment, however, Little has good positioning for it, for at least two reasons.

One, taking a tip from Otter's campaign approach, he effectively announced early. Otter did that in his first run for governor and hoovered up most of the money and support available. Jim

Risch, who was seriously considering a run for the job too, finally backed off. Little may be a formidable contender before 2018 even arrives.

Second, if he has to fill in the political role Otter has played, that may not be a liability. Otter, after all, decisively won in 2014 in the face of serious opposition. Little might well be able to appeal to many of those elements that gave Otter his third term.

In 2014, Little was challenged in the Republican primary directly from the Fulcher wing of the party, and defeated Idaho County Commissioner Jim Chmelik with just over two-thirds of the vote. He will not be easy to defeat.

But challenged he almost surely will be, and now the campaign is on.