

# It's Labrador's race to lose - but lose it he could

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## Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

There are those who will read the interview Raul Labrador gave to the Tribune's Bill Spence and conclude the 1st District congressman already has decided whether to jump into Idaho's GOP gubernatorial primary - and merely is being coy about when he'll announce it.

After all, it's Labrador's race to lose.

The Idaho Freedom Foundaton's recent poll puts Labrador comfortably ahead at 39 percent, against 27 percent for Lt. Gov. Brad Little, 7 percent for former state Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, and 2 percent for Boise developer Tommy Alhquist.

Since his election in 2010, Labrador has built up a powerfully attractive political brand with the Idaho GOP base, not unlike that of former Sen. Steve Symms and the late Rep. Helen Chenoweth-Hage. That would seem to give him a decided advantage over Little, who has yet to catch fire and may not, given his proximity to incumbent C.L. "Butch" Otter; Ahlquist, who is an unknown; and Fulcher, who came close but not close enough to beating Otter in the 2014 primary. Since they'd be courting the same conservative voters, you have to wonder if Labrador's entrance would signal Fulcher's departure from the race.

But leaving Washington, D.C., would require Labrador to surrender his status as a member of the House Freedom Caucus, his chairmanship of the House Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations and his opportunity to work with a Republican Congress and White House.

Gone would be an off-ramp from Capitol Hill to a lucrative career as a lobbyist, a job with a conservative think tank or even to the punditry class.

And for what?

For starters, Idaho's top Statehouse job pays less.

Labrador collects \$174,000 from Congress. In addition, he pays his wife, Rebecca Labrador, roughly \$36,000 (before taxes) from his campaign to keep the books.

By contrast, Idaho pays its governor \$124,436 plus a \$45,000 housing stipend. For a man who admittedly is among the poorest members of Congress, that's not something that can be easily dismissed.

Nor, for that matter, are the limited career opportunities he might face eight years from now as an outgoing governor.

A continent away, he's beyond the scrutiny of Idaho's media and voters. As governor, he would be living in a fish bowl, responsible for everything that can go haywire in state government - including an economic slowdown that could force him to balance the budget with holdbacks on such things as public school funding.

Congressman Labrador can make protest votes against Obamacare; Gov. Labrador just might find himself implementing Medicaid expansion.

Transitioning to governor was difficult for two former Idaho members of Congress - Otter, who served three terms in the House, and Dirk Kempthorne, who served six years in the Senate. In fact, 2nd District Congressman Mike Simpson, who harbored gubernatorial ambitions as an Idaho House speaker, found he waited too long and had become too acclimated to the workings of Washington, D.C., to return to Boise.

Those are the headaches Labrador can expect if he wins - which is far from certain.

He'd be jumping into Idaho's first legitimate "jungle" gubernatorial primary in four decades. In the last one, the frontrunners got upset.

Labrador hasn't forfeited his prospects by waiting six months since the last election to decide his next move. But money and political talent have begun to gravitate toward his opponents who have taken those months to organize.

In fact, fundraising may prove more difficult for Labrador, who has never been particularly popular among Idaho's business and political elites.

And who knows what the political environment will look like a year from now? Associating with the national Republicans in the era of President Donald Trump may prove to be a liability in 2018, even in an Idaho GOP primary.

Labrador's penchant for brash statements notwithstanding, he remains a fairly cautious politician. With the exception of voting once for former House Speaker John Boehner, he hasn't gambled with his job.

Don't be surprised if this is one gamble he avoids. - M.T.