

Overturing more vetoes? Who is kidding who?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

With the ending of another legislative session, the usual string of post-session vetoes is being met by the customary round of political bellyaching.

Triggering the latest episode was Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's decision to block bills aimed at curbing abuses of the state's civil asset forfeiture laws, easing up on the regulation of cosmetologists, protecting the state's waterways from Quagga mussel infestation, removing the sales tax from food purchases and establishing a special election to fill any vacancy that occurs in either of Idaho's two seats in the U.S. House of Representatives.

All were popular enough to win by more than the two-thirds margin required to override a governor's veto. In fact, the asset forfeiture bill got unanimous support.

With the exception of the special election measures, these bills were vetoed after lawmakers left town for the year. That's why Otter will get the final word.

"Only the governor has the power to call lawmakers back into session, and he won't do that to have his own vetoes second-guessed," notes Sen. Steve Vick, R-Dalton Gardens.

So Vick has a solution: He wants to amend Idaho's Constitution to enable lawmakers to summon themselves back to Boise.

"Idaho is one of only six states in the United States that does not have the ability to override a governor's veto after the legislative session has ended," Vick wrote in a recent op-ed.

Of course, that begs the question: How diligent are Idaho's lawmakers about protecting you from the governor's arbitrary use of a veto stamp? How many times have they stood up against it?

Look at your right hand. Count the fingers.

Idaho lawmakers blocked:

- Gov. John Evans' 1985 veto of a right-to-work law.
- Gov. Cecil Andrus' 1994 veto of a tax break for ethanol.
- Gov. Dirk Kempthorne's 2002 veto of the Legislature's term limits repeal.
- Otter's 2007 veto of a bill banning smoking in bowling alleys.

If you want to get technical, lawmakers didn't bother to override four budget bills Kempthorne vetoed in 2005 as leverage toward passing a highway bill; they simply passed newer versions.

The same thing happened in 2009 when Otter held almost three dozen appropriation bills hostage in his unsuccessful bid to boost transportation funding.

Otter also has the distinction of having his 2015 veto of a ban on quasi-slot machines at horse racing tracks invalidated by the courts. Otter blew his deadline to act under the state constitution.

The same accusation has been leveled at his food tax repeal veto.

Still, that's an awfully short list during the course of 46 years.

All of which tells you hollering about confronting "one-man government," as Sen. Mary Souza, R-Coeur d'Alene, recently put it, is one thing. Stomping on a governor's veto prerogative is quite another.

Governors tend to remember who stands with or against them - and dispense future favors or extract punishment accordingly.

Calling lawmakers back to Boise for a special session won't change that. So let's dispense with this talk of cluttering up Idaho's Constitution with yet another amendment aimed at empowering the Legislature.

Besides, if lawmakers truly want to avoid getting blindsided by post-adjournment vetoes, here's a novel idea: How about not putting off their work until the last minute? - M.T.