

Running scared

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston TribuneJEERS ... to Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash. The House Republican Conference chairwoman is portraying herself as a woman of the people without actually having to interact with anybody outside a canned meeting.

As the Tribune's William L. Spence noted, McMorris Rodgers kept to a series of scripted sessions behind closed doors - including one Tuesday in Colfax with a dozen local officials of her choosing.

But in a news release, McMorris Rodgers patted herself on the back for parachuting into "Walla Walla, Colfax and Pullman hosting more meetings to hear the thoughts and concerns of people all across eastern Washington."

You can trace this reticence to McMorris Rodgers' Jan. 16 Martin Luther King Day appearance at the Spokane Convention Center. Protesters disrupted the proceedings. Although a McMorris Rodgers staffer raised the specter of violence, that's not how the Spokesman-Review's Shawn Vestal saw it. He described it as "all-around, a humdrum and exaggerated bit of 'controversy.' Some of McMorris Rodgers' supporters seemed to think it was an egregious offense that she was a wee bit interrupted."

By no means is McMorris Rodgers the sole Republican member of Congress to seek refuge from the thunder on the left that emerged with President Donald Trump's election.

But there are a few brave souls who charged right into it.

Take Idaho 1st District Congressman Raul Labrador. For three hours Wednesday, he took question after jibe after complaint in a heavily attended town hall meeting at Meridian - all with good humor: "I'm used to getting booed. I get it at home all the time."

Other Republicans who have waded into hostile town hall forums include Sens. Tom Cotton of Arkansas, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Jeff Flake of Arizona as well as Reps. Greg Walden of Oregon, Mark Sanford of South Carolina and Jason Chaffetz of Utah.

They've been willing to escape the cocoon of Washington, D.C., where members of the House and Senate are immersed in the adoration of their staffs, the sycophancy of lobbyists and the perks of being one of 535.

What is McMorris Rodgers scared of?

Answering needling question about Trump's tax returns? Russian involvement in the election? Whether the president's trade and immigration policies will undermine eastern Washington's agricultural economy?

How repealing Obamacare will hurt her own constituents?

Or is she anxious about defending the relative dearth of accomplishment in the current GOP-led Congress?

McMorris Rodgers isn't going to win over many of the protesters at an open town hall forum - even though she's been elected to represent them as well. But placing a politician in an unfriendly - even hostile - setting tells you a great deal about her:

How well does she relate to regular folks?

What's her body language?

Does she display respect and even humility?

Is she capable of acknowledging mistakes?

Can she think on her feet?

Mixing it up with unruly constituents divides the politicians who handle themselves as the people's voice in Congress from those who see themselves as Washington, D.C.'s ambassadors to the masses.

When a congresswoman retreats behind stage-management, nobody's fooled.

JEERS ... to Idaho State Board of Education President Emma Atchley. Wednesday, she stood alone and voted against increasing tuition at the University of Idaho by 3.5 percent.

Said Atchley: It wasn't enough.

The UI sought a 6 percent boost and Atchley opposed her colleagues' decision to take it easy on the poor students.

"I think the board has a role in advocating for the institutions," Atchley said. "We had an opportunity to do so today, but we didn't fulfill our duty to them (or) enable them to have programs that are up to their aspirations and at a level to benefit students."

Huh?

Is this the same state board president who just three months ago warned the Legislature that "many students are being priced out of a post-secondary education"?

Her own office released reams of documents showing tuition at state institutions of higher learning rose 72 percent in the past decade - three times faster than per capita income in the Gem State.

What happened to her?

JEERS ... to Idaho state schools Superintendent Sherri Ybarra. To hear her talk, Ybarra is the victim of a hostile Idaho media.

That's what she told columnist Chuck Malloy. Last week, Malloy noted Ybarra's affinity for embattled U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos.

"I went through exactly what she's going through," Ybarra said. "I've told my team: 'Look at her, she's telling my story almost verbatim.' "

What a crock.

Ybarra is a victim of self-inflicted wounds.

Remember her 2014 campaign flubs - plagiarizing whole passages of her Democratic opponent Jana Jones' website, claiming endorsements she did not have or inflating her resume?

How about her underwhelming first appearance before the Legislature's budget committee in 2015? It lasted all of 17 minutes?

Has she forgotten how last year Idaho's education stakeholders complained that Ybarra somehow neglected to involve them in the drafting of the state's blueprint for meeting federal Every Student Succeeds Act standards?

Surely she remembers the ugly audit of Idaho's teacher evaluation program. Rather than release it on time, Ybarra sat on it for nearly six months - until Idaho Education News obtained it through a public records request.

Ybarra did all of this on her own. She needed no help from the media.

JEERS ... to Washington Rep. Matt Shea, R-Spokane Valley. As the Tacoma News Tribune reported last week, he's among a handful of eastern Washington lawmakers who flirted with transferring federal lands to state ownership.

Thankfully, this federal land grab is going nowhere.

About 27 percent of the Evergreen State is owned by the federal government. As is the case throughout the West, the cost of managing those holdings - including fighting fires - could break the state budget.

Washington would be forced to slash spending or raise taxes before ultimately liquidating the properties, selling off the choicest areas to the highest bidders and fencing them off from the public.

No wonder the coalition against it is as broad as it gets - the National Rifle Association on the right and environmental organizations on the left. - M.T.