

# Keough's departure hardly bodes well for Idaho

---

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

On paper, at least, you'd have to say no one had more political assets than Idaho state Sen. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint.

After more than two decades in the Senate, Keough had achieved her goal to serve as co-chairwoman of the powerful Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee. In fact, she had deferred previous offers to serve as chairwoman of other committees in order to help guide Idaho's \$3 billion fiscal blueprint.

That makes her one of only two northern Idaho lawmakers - the other being Lewiston's Dan Johnson at Local Government and Taxation - to run a Senate committee.

Closing in on her 22nd year in office, Keough is the longest-serving woman in the Senate that has seen some greats - among them Sens. Edith Miller Klein, R-Boise, Marguerite McLaughlin, D-Orofino, and Mary Lou Reed, D-Coeur d'Alene.

Keough was at the top of her game at a time when turnover within the Senate - as well as at the state and federal level - offered someone with her pedigree opportunities to move up the political chain of command.

Instead, she's walking away.

Keough will complete her 11th term next year and retire.

In an earlier era, that would have been shocking.

In the times we're enduring, however, you can understand why.

The very qualities that make Keough a standout lawmaker - courage, knowledge, flexibility, experience and a willingness to solve problems - are out of vogue in Idaho's Panhandle if not the state as a whole.

For her efforts, Keough earned an "F" from the Idaho Freedom Foundation's Freedom Index - a lonely place to be in a legislative district where Republicans gave moderate Rep. George Eskridge, R-Dover, the boot two years ago. Since then, GOP voters installed two hard-liners - Heather Scott of Blanchard and Sage Dixon of Ponderay - in the House.

Keough was already swimming upstream when her party opted for a closed primary.

People who are put off by formally declaring themselves members of the Republican Party are a significant part of Keough's political base. When she failed to persuade enough of them to set

aside their aversion to affiliating with a political party just to vote in the 2014 primary, Keough had a close call.

Two years later, an effective get-out-the-vote effort yielded a comfortable 55.7 percent margin. But any error in the future - not spending enough time on elongated campaigns, failure to motivate her base or getting on the wrong side of a wedge issue - could reverse that.

Even if she succeeded at winning another term, what could Keough look forward to?

The contagion of hard-edge, take-no-prisoners zealotry personified in the House by Scott, Ron Nate, R-Rexburg, and Priscilla Giddings, R-White Bird, hasn't spread to the Senate.

Yet.

But upheaval is coming. Through his powers of persuasion and knowledge of the rules, Senate Majority Leader Bart Davis, R-Idaho Falls, served as a check against a chamber that was moving incrementally toward right-wing insurrection.

Now Davis is moving on. He's about to become the state's U.S. Attorney.

Meanwhile, two of the leading GOP candidates for governor - Congressman Raul Labrador and Boise developer Tommy Ahlquist - have promised to cut state spending.

That sounds like a formula for endless frustration for a budget writer who has spent the past few years repairing the Great Recession-era ravaged public schools.

Of course, Keough isn't saying much more about this than what she told the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell: "The last three primaries have been particularly brutal and bruising, and while it is not in my nature to run from bullies, the increasing lack of civility on the part of some and focus on issues unrelated to the duties of serving in the state Senate have taken a toll, particularly on my husband."

No one is indispensable. Still, if someone such as Sen. Keough is quitting under these circumstances, you need to consider what it says about Idaho politics at the moment. - M.T.