

Taking back Idaho from its fringe politics



Republican Idaho legislators meet to air grievances against Governor Little
On June 23, 2020, 15 Republican Idaho state legislators met out of session at the chambers of the Idaho House of Representatives to air their grievances with the way Gov. Brad Little has handled COVID-19 emergency orders and spending. BY ALYSSA HODENFIELD | SCOTT MCINTOSH

BY BOB KUSTRA
JULY 26, 2020 07:00 AM

When I first arrived in Boise in 2003, one of my responsibilities was to represent Boise State before the Idaho Legislature. I still remember those days fondly as I made new friends and established a rapport with legislators, many of whom did not themselves attend college or university but who respected the role that higher education played in building strong communities and a strong economy in the state.

The overwhelming majority of legislators I met in those days were conservative by anyone's political standards. They represented family legacies of ranching, farming and small business across Idaho, and a college degree was not necessarily required for those lines of work.

They believed in strong family values, limited government and low taxation. That presented a challenge to those of us who were responding to a changing state economy, in Boise in particular, as Micron and Hewlett-Packard brought a tech economy to the Valley and then spun off many tech upstarts that have since grown up as major employers in their own right.

As Boise and other Idaho towns grew up, the demands on state government to fund education and social services increased as the complexities of urban living required a stronger government role than that required when Idaho was a collection of sleepy ranching towns. It was not easy for legislators to see the changes overtaking Idaho, southwestern Idaho in particular. It required them to adjust their politics and their view of government to the new demands of a growing and expanding economy.

In my early years working with the Legislature, I found Idaho's conservative legislators operating in a political space to the right of center, but seldom straying to the far reaches of the far-right end of the political spectrum. They came to Boise from small communities across the state far more homogeneous socially and politically than Boise, yet they were open to new ideas, and they seemed to understand the value of a strong higher education sector in training and educating Idaho's citizens for a more diverse state economy.

Over the years, some of the most effective and thoughtful conservative or moderate Republican legislators were challenged by right-wing political activists who slowly but surely hijacked the Republican Party. This growing reactionary faction of acolytes in the Legislature who genuflect anytime the Idaho Freedom Foundation calls them to prayer is well-known among Republican legislative leaders.

Many times, I've heard them privately lament their party's move to the far right, but you will never hear them utter a word publicly about the takeover for fear that their leadership position will be next on the right-wing chopping block. The arrival of Donald Trump in 2016 on the Republican scene and their fear of his base silenced them for good.

Idaho state government is now under siege by the right-wing politics of a few who simply threaten, intimidate and outsmart what I called in a previous column, The Idaho Political Consensus, that moderately conservative majority that ruled Idaho for many years.

The latest version of right-wing interference in the political affairs of Idaho comes to us by way of COVID-19 and the peculiar way Idaho has chosen to deal with the coronavirus.

Ever since Gov. Brad Little washed his hands of the responsibility for directing a statewide effort to combat the coronavirus here in Idaho and handed it off to the seven local health districts, Idaho's right wing found an opening for their misguided claims, including criticism of a mask requirement as though it's a God-given right enshrined in our Constitution by the Founding Fathers.

With far too little scientific expertise on their decision-making boards and populated by elected officials with no background in public health, these local health districts are the perfect foils for the likes of Ammon Bundy and his right-wing crew as they proved

recently when Bundy and his ilk appeared in Canyon County to demand entry into a meeting of the local health district board to challenge a mask requirement.

There is a real danger of Idaho tilting so far to the right that it will be bypassed, as employers consider future job sites and call Idaho off-limits. Along those lines, the NCAA next month will consider banning Idaho schools from hosting its basketball playoffs as a result of the anti-transgender legislation Gov. Little signed this year.

Eventually, Idaho companies who operate globally will not stand still for an Ammon Bundy takeover of Idaho politics or any shift to the far right in the state's lawmaking assembly.

It was justice served last year when Micron announced a new vice president for diversity and inclusion just weeks after Boise State was attacked by right-wing legislators for its diversity and inclusion programming. It was a strong message to Idaho's public officials that Micron operates in a global economy far removed from the petty and provincial thinking of the Idaho Legislature, and Micron's new vice-presidency of diversity and inclusion better reflects the world Micron must navigate than the exclusionary universe a growing segment of Republican legislators seem to be requiring of Idaho.

Whether it is Idaho's growing reputation as a right-wing nirvana for conservatives fleeing California and other states they deem too liberal for their politics or whether it's Ammon Bundy's brand of confrontational politics, Idaho is gaining a reputation that will not serve its economy or its people well in the years to come.

Now is the time for a strategy to take back Idaho from the fringe elements of our politics and return to centrist normalcy where conservative and progressive factions can fashion public policy as they did for many years in this state.

Next week some thoughts on how that could happen.

Bob Kustra served as president of Boise State University from 2003 to 2018. He is host of Readers Corner on Boise State Public Radio and is a regular columnist for the Idaho Statesman and a member of the Statesman editorial board. He served two terms as Illinois lieutenant governor and 10 years as a state legislator.