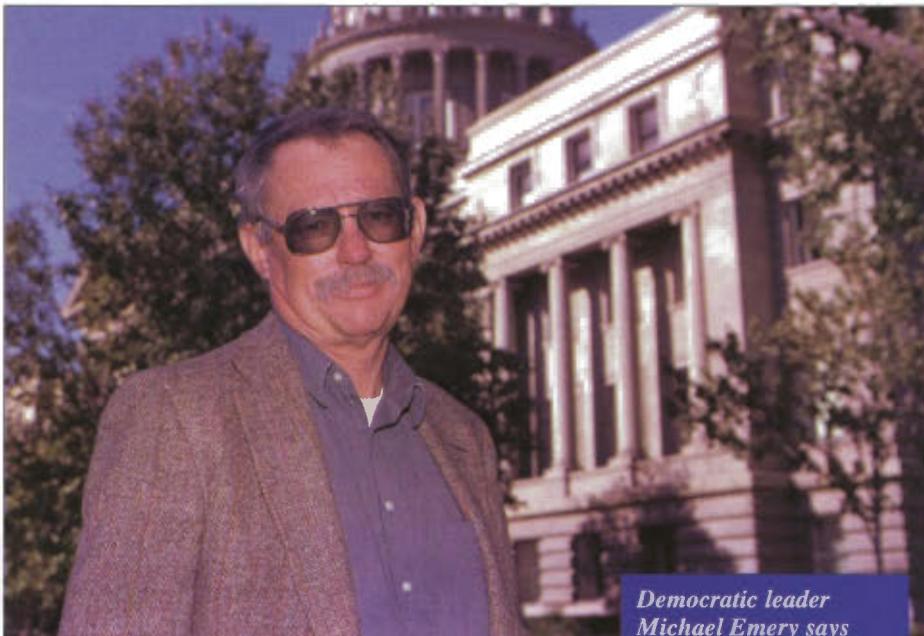


Can We Balance On One Foot?

Idaho suffers from unilateral governing.



OLIVER SCHREIBER PHOTO

Democratic leader Michael Emery says public accountability is snubbed in partisan solidarity.

By Michael Patrick Emery

Just as heresy is the lifeblood of religion, so dissent is the lifeblood of politics. But without diversity there is no dissent — not even dialogue. Orthodoxy reigns from above.

There is neither service nor recognition to the followers, and the interests that pay the fiddlers call the tunes. What better laboratory in which to observe this phenomenon than Idaho politics with an 85 percent Republican Legislature, 100 percent Republican congressional delegation, and all but two statewide office holders?

Polls show consistently that Idaho voters want support for education, conservation of resources, affordable, available health care, and living wage jobs. What do we get and why?

A party that knows it has the power can get careless with its constituents. Without enough lonesome Democrats in the Legislature to even force committee votes, decisions are made by calling or not call-

ing questions. They never come to a vote on the open floor. For all we know they are made in a smoke-filled room in the dark of the moon, and we get decisions without a public record like the rejection of farm worker minimum wage, the intent to further reduce already inadequate Medicaid funding and the continued increase in college tuition. Public accountability, economic justice and the state constitution are all snubbed in partisan solidarity.

Now, let's look at who calls the tune, starting with the economic conservatives. Forty-three of Idaho's top 50 campaign contributors are corporations, many from outside the state. What we get reflects that: the tax cut that nobody wanted, with a vast majority of the reduction going to our most well-to-do neighbors, or the tax

cut for timber companies that takes school funding away from some of our neediest districts. Or, more subtly, we see the continued posturing, show hearings and blame-casting by our congressional delegation over the gradual but historically inexorable decline of the extraction industries, courtesy of NAFTA, the WTO and technology that they themselves supported.

What they ought to be doing is trying to alleviate the distress of many more of our neighbors by fighting for mitigation, new job training, investment funds and education to replace the Idaho jobs that are being lost to the global economy.

And, now, with an 85 percent majority, can they resist throwing some largesse to the social conservatives, stalwart contributors all—in the form of public TV censorship in the service of bigotry? It's another solution that nobody wants, and has the rest of the country either appalled or snickering.

Here we have Idaho, hanging her head in shame. The melded power of opposing energies is nowhere to be seen.

So what is the challenge for Democrats? The answers are three: work to organize and speak out about who created this mess and what we can do about it for you; be humble, for absolute power corrupts the left and right alike; and finally, have hope.

Remember the old saying — Give them enough rope and they'll hang themselves. I have yet to hear of elephants dangling from the cottonwoods on the Greenbelt, but there are a lot of them tangled up in the Statehouse. □

Michael Patrick Emery is a clinical psychologist who resides in Lewiston. He serves as chair of the Idaho State Democratic Party Communications Task Force.