

Otter: D.C. Could Learn About Governing From Idaho

By Butch Otter
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How can a largely rural Western state of roughly 1.5 million people — a state whose Republican credentials are matched only by its almost contrarian sense of independence — possibly set an example of responsible governance for the rest of America?

In Idaho, we did it by reassessing the proper role of government in people's lives. We did it by identifying what our constitution and laws require government to do and eliminating much of what they don't. We did it by instituting zero-based budgeting and bringing business principles to government. We did it by making tough choices and difficult adjustments early in the economic downturn. And we did it by being cautious, prudent, and yes, conservative with taxpayer dollars in order to live within the people's means.

The result was meeting the Idaho constitution's requirement for a balanced budget each year, a nearly 20 percent reduction in the size of Idaho's general fund budget, and a leaner, more efficient and effective state government with an improved bond rating and a strong pension system for state employees.

We didn't raise taxes. We didn't spend down our reserve accounts at the first sign of trouble. We didn't spend one-time federal stimulus money on continuing fiscal obligations. We avoided one-size-fits-all solutions and instead built more and stronger partnerships with the private sector to address challenges such as making affordable, accessible health care available to more Idahoans and — most importantly of all — improving on an already business-friendly economic environment to bring more career opportunities to our citizens.

It wasn't easy, and it wasn't always popular. We took plenty of heat along the way from those for whom growing government — and the sense of entitlement it inevitably fosters — had become a way of life during the years of economic expansion. We listened to taxpayers, we worked to be more inclusive while overcoming hind-bound resistance to change, and we instituted sweeping reforms of our public schools to prepare our state and our students for an increasingly competitive global marketplace.

The people of Idaho honored me with a second term in 2010 on a theme of "limited government; unlimited opportunity." My commitment now is to ensure the changes we made during the Great Recession become a permanent part of how Idahoans view government's role in their lives. It no longer can be all things to all people and or even their primary social safety net, but it can and should be part of a continuum of private and public assistance that begins at home and extends to families, social organizations and communities.

My goal is for Idahoans to see their state government as more of a partner than a provider, more of a facilitator than a regulator, and more focused on educating and empowering citizens to find local solutions than on imposing its own from afar.

We all remain hamstrung by gridlock and uncertainty in federal policies and the frailties of the global economy. That makes it all the more important that we put our own houses in order, be aggressive in addressing the issues we can handle on our own, and work to help people understand that this is not a matter of crisis management; it's our new normal.

The sooner the federal government recognizes what we in Idaho know — that people are tired of rearranging deck chairs in Washington, D.C., tired of government that over-promises and under-delivers, and ready for fundamental changes in their relationship with government — the better off we all will be.

Idaho Gov. Butch Otter (R) served three terms in the House.