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Legislative limelights

Idaho 105 legislators praised on decorum

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Two emotional incidents the past Idaho Legislature prompts the observation that the 105 lawmakers for the most part maintain a high level of dignity, courtesy and honesty, regardless of their frequent deep political differences.

After viewing the political scene for close to 40 years, it's rather remarkable that as far as can be remembered there have been no Idaho lawmakers every accused of such serious charges as bribery, kickbacks or other crooked tricks that would make him or her unfit for office. These types of criminal violations appear all too frequent in Congress and in many other state Legislatures.

True, there have been frequent cases of conflict of interest and strong favoritism but they now appear a part of the political process and not so blatant as to indicate there are serious criminal violations.

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Two incidents which caused some eyebrow lifting were the fisticuffs actions involving Sens. J. Wilson Steen, R-Glenns Ferry, and Vernon Brassey, R-Boise; and a public acknowledgement by Sen. William L. Floyd, R-Idaho Falls, that he had broken his word on a bill vote.

Actually, the Steen-Brassey melee was a case where Brassey called Steen a profane name over the way Steen handled a comparatively minor health and welfare bill and Steen struck him twice, once to the jaw and again on the mouth, drawing blood. It's the only time this writer can recall that actual blows have been struck, although there has been many violent verbal altercations on the floor, committees sessions and outside of legislative deliberations but not actual physical combat.

Floyd admitted he promised the Senate Democratic leadership to vote for a motion to place the reapportionment bill on the floor for amendment but caved in to Republican pressure and cast an opposition ballot. This resulted in failure of the motion by a single vote. It distressed him so much that he did not attend the last day of session, drawing further attention to the incident.

Actually, many legislators complain their fellow lawmakers have failed to keep their word on how they would vote, but the question arises on how clear was the understanding.

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Overall, the Idaho Legislature may not be viewed as the brightest in nation but in decorum it doesn't take a back seat to any other and probably is in the van, as many impartial observers will verify.

Larry Grupp, lobbyist for the J. R. Simplot Co., in Idaho, Oregon, Washington and Montana, said for integrity and honesty he would rank the Idaho Legislature superior to those in the other three neighboring states.

Attaches who have served in other state Legislatures before moving to Idaho all say they find the Idaho lawmakers far superior in the dignified way they go about their business. Lawmakers in other states often appear with unkept beard and long hair, unshaven, slovenly dress, drunkenness, and rudeness, they report. These are traits very seldom seen at the Idaho Capitol. Idaho legislators have a dress code which requires coats and ties.

There were two or three legislators who did have well kept beards for a time last year but these had disappeared in the past session. This is not to disparage beards but to point up the conservative image the legislators extol.

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The Idaho Legislature has reformed itself over the years so that now it operates on a set of rules, rather than from the leadership. Profanity and name calling in debate is against the rules and often calls for an apology by the perpetuator.

Because this is an election year, sharp political differences were expected but this did not occur extensively. On the contrary, both the Republicans and Democrats exchanged compliments on fair treatment.

Much of this situation is attributed to the high calibre of leadership, such as Senate Majority Leader Jim Risch and Senate Minority Leader Ron Twiligar, both Boise attorneys, in the Senate; and House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, Twin Falls, and Majority Leader Walter E.Little, New Plymouth; and House Minority Leader Melvin Hammond, Rexburg, in the House. Added to these are the two titular heads of their party, Gov. John V. Evans for the Democrats and Lt.Gov. Philip E.Batt the Republcans.