Ben Plastino

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Camaraderie better in capital

"Each morning," says the effervescent Republican Lt. Gov. Butch Otter, "I call Carol and ask 'how is Cece today?' "

Carol is the wife of Democratic Gov. Cecil D. Andrus. Andrus replies in kind, "I find that Carol is falling in love with Butch because he asks about my health every morning."

Perhaps this joshing best exemplifies the camaraderie flourishing between Republicans and Democrats at the Statehouse on all levels of state government.

It has seldom been that way in the recent past, even during Andrus' first six-year gubernatorial reign in 1971-76.

Otter is building a power base of his own never seen before. Not even the frankly ambitious former Lt. Gov. David H. Leroy, who opposed Andrus last year, achieved this.

State government in the early years was not taken nearly as seriously as it usually is today. For the most part, partisanship was at a low ebb, and politics was looked on more as a game.

It's not that way anymore. Campaigns are becoming more vicious. Relationships between Republicans and Democrats have steadily deteriorated. Dissension has not only been between the two major parties. In fact, the most bitter hassles have developed among the Republicans between what are generally called the radical right wingers, conservatives and moderates, especially in the last decade.

The defeat last year of such radical Republicans as State Rep. Gene Winchester of Kuna, Robert Forrey of Nampa, Donna Scott of Twin Falls, and to a lesser extent Reps. Walter Little of New Plymouth and Noy Brackett of Twin Falls and Sen. Walter Yarbrough of Grand View, has helped calm the political tempest.

Also the absences of Sens. Reed Budge of Soda Springs and Dane Watkins and Rep. J.C. Chadband, both Idaho Falls, none of whom sought re-election, have fostered a more peaceful atmosphere. They were leading figures embroiled in frequent emotional confrontations.

Heard frequently in Boise are remarks that Bonneville County has sent one of its best delegations in 20 years. Mentioned particularly are such experienced, public-spirited leaders as Sens. Mike Crapo and John Hansen, and Reps. Reed Hansen, John Sessions and Con Mahoney.

It has been since the defeat in 1966 of Gov. Robert E. Smylie, the last Republican moderate to hold the office in Idaho, that political mayhem has steadily escalated. This received impetus when the Legislature switched from biennial to annual sessions in 1969, and the sessions lengthened from 60 days or less to 70 days or more. It gave elected officials more time to engage in political infighting.

For example, the sessions totaled 82 days in 1986, 66 days in 1985, 83 in 1984; an all time record of 95, plus three days special session, in 1983; and 73 days in 1982.

Republicans have gradually gained numbers since 1958, the last time Democrats held control in both chambers, 25-19 in the Senate and 35-29 in the House. The Republicans' high point was reached two years ago with advantages of 28-14 in the Senate and 67-17 in the House. The Democrats gained three seats in the House and two in the Senate, enough to uphold a gubernatorial veto, for this biennium.

Andrus and Otter have forged a smooth-working relationship. Both say they would not undercut each other, but Otter says he did not promise he would not oppose Andrus at some future time. He is frank in saying he would like to become governor some day.

When Andrus was asked how long he intended to serve, he relied, "Just as long as it takes to get the job done, whether it be one or two terms."

This would indicate he likely will serve two terms and maybe more. As he pointed out, "There is no limit on how long a governor can serve."

Both Andrus amd Otter, for example, had agreed on the need for repeal of the investment tax, a move opposed by the Senate Republican leadership, killed in the House Revenue and Taxation Committee, and now an apparently dead issue.

They agreed Otter, a J. R. Simplot Co. executive, will be used widely for his expertise in the business sector.

Both Senate President Pro Tem James Risch, Boise, and House Speaker Tom Boyd, Genesee, have expressed cooperation, although they reserve the right to differ on some isses.

Otter said as the Senate presiding officer he is working closely with the Senate Republicans.

Boyd believes that for the first time in 20 years, the Legislature will finish in 60 days.

Boyd estimates the budget will settle near $656 million. This compares to the $662.6 million recommended by Andrus.

"I'm delighted at the good feeling in the Legislature so that all of us can work together for the best interest of the state," said Boyd.

Senate Majority Leader Mark G. Ricks, R-Rexburg, agrees relations among the legislators and the governor are vastly better, but that Republicans will still oppose Andrus when they deem it necessary.

There have been many proposals in the past to have the governor and lieutenant governor run as a team of the same party. None has passed, including a constitutional amendment to bring this about a quarter of a century ago.

Evans had Republicans Phillip E. Batt and David H. Leroy as his lieutenant governors while he held the governorship. Andrus also had Republican Jack Murphy as his lieutenant governor the first four years of his term and defeated him decisively in the 1976 election for the governorship. Evans was Andrus' lieutenant governor two years before Andrus resigned to become secretary of the Interior under President Jimmy Carter.

Since Idaho became a state in 1890, the governor and lieutenant governor have been of the same parties 34 times and of different parties only eight times. This includes six of the last nine elections.

(Ben Plastino is a columnist for The Post-Register.)