

A Very Mean Year

Editorial
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As 1961 drew to a close U.S. Attorney General Bobby Kennedy described it as being “a very mean year” for the Kennedy presidency. Almost everything in the field of foreign policy had gone wrong, and as usual when things go wrong, they had done so in threes. In April of '61—Kennedy's presidency opened with the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba. In June—in Vienna, Khrushchev verbally beat the young president to submission, stunning both the President and the allies. And in September—the Soviets made the division in Berlin permanent by building the Berlin Wall. It was a year where almost everything had gone wrong, “a very mean year.”

Four decades later and closer to home, there's another politician who has had “a very mean year.” That's Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski. Twice on the major issue on our current agenda, “whether to increase taxes in a bad economy or limit the growth of public spending,” the governor has been on the wrong side and soundly defeated by the Oregon people, or will be on February 3. If ours was a parliamentary system instead of a presidential/executive system, these two votes would be considered “no confidence” votes for the new administration and the queen would be summoning the governor to tell him it was time to go. But in our system Kulongoski still has three full years to govern.

In October of '02 we chose not to endorse Kulongoski for governor because we worried about his ideas about leadership. We wrote: “Kulongoski believes, and he does so passionately, that he can make the state work better by being a better facilitator, a better conciliator than Kitzhaber. Kulongoski believes that he can bring the conflicting parties together to the negotiating table and that he will charm them into the kinds of acceptable compromises that will get Oregon moving/working again. Just what's wrong with this strategy? Consider that professional unions, whether it's teachers or government workers, are the biggest stumbling block to change... Kulongoski says he can negotiate away the differences... The problem: unions have proven time and time again that their opening position is to give away nothing... nothing.”

In this “very mean year” for the governor his compromise approach has led him to supporting two statewide tax increases that, once again, have or will be decisively defeated by Oregon voters. For Gov. Kulongoski to be successful in his next three years he will have to throw away his compromise style and start to lead. And he will have to do the leading by being an authentic and effective fiscal conservative. State capitols in America, in difficult economic periods, are run by strong chief executives. They are not run by legislative committees.

So the question hangs out there. Can people change? Can the governor become a leader? Can he become a fiscal conservative? We hope so, because we wish him well in the next three years, and we wish the state well. Enough with the “very mean years.”