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M.D. HARMON: LePage one of just four governors to get 'A' from Cato Institute study

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It's certainly true that Gov. Paul LePage has made lots of enemies among the state's left-of-center community, whose members continually object to his rough manner and occasional harsh language.

Of course, those whom he criticizes have no difficulty in using equally harsh language themselves, but that may just be a way to help them feel better about losing the Blaine House and the Legislature in the last election.

That tit-for-tat indulgence, as much fun as it appears to be for liberals, also offers the strong impression that as much as they dislike the governor's style, what they really hate is that he and his party brought the decades-long liberal domination of this state's politics to a halt (for however long it lasts).

Thus, much of what they say appears to be nothing more than sour grapes.

Once they get past LePage's removal of a partisan mural from what was supposed to be a nonpartisan state office and their objections to his absolute refusal to bow to the usual liberal pieties of political correctness and trendy causes, they finish up their bellyaching by complaining that he has held the state up to disrepute across the nation.

If you only look at the grand echo chamber of liberal media outlets, pundits and professional alarm-sounders, that may be true.

But there are other public policy circles in America besides left-wing ones, and one of them turned up this week in the Wall Street Journal.

There, an op-ed column by Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, had some very good words indeed to say about our much-maligned chief executive.

Edwards, the chief author of the 11th edition of a Cato study titled "Fiscal Policy Report Card on America's Governors," says that his group's analysis of the tax and spending policies of the nation's 50 state chief executives since the 2010 election cycle gave them letter grades from "A" to "F."

Only four governors did well enough by their states' taxpayers to get an "A" rating, and one of them was -- wait for it -- liberal bete noire Paul LePage.

The others -- Sam Brownback of Kansas, Tom Corbett of Pennsylvania and Rick Scott of Florida -- joined LePage because of their similar records of tax rate reductions and spending control, putting their states, in Cato's view, on a much more solid footing in a time of serious economic pressure.

Though it hasn't been the case in previous years, the "A" ratings this time all went to Republicans and the five "F" rankings went to Democrats. Since analysts are saying the ideological boundaries between the major parties are becoming more firm, this may reflect that trend.

Cato gave LePage top marks for some "solid achievements" (in concert with Republican legislators), including a "major tax cut in 2011" that "reduced the top personal income tax rate from 8.5 percent of 7.95 percent, simplified the tax brackets, and eliminated taxes for 70,000 low-income households. The package also included some business tax cuts," which help with job creation.

The income tax cuts, which will show up in withholding tables on Jan. 1, could reduce the top tax rate to 4 percent over time if revenues permit.

The study also notes, however, that for LePage, that's just a down payment: "His ultimate goal is to phase out the Maine income tax completely," to help us compete for business with New Hampshire, and "to eliminate taxes on pension income to discourage retirees from leaving Maine for warmer and tax-friendlier states (Maine already exempts Social Security payments from the income tax)."

Still, the think tank says, Maine could have done more to cut spending. General fund outlays went up about 8 percent in fiscal 2012, though they are "expected to drop a bit in fiscal 2013. The governor has signed cost-cutting reforms to welfare and health care programs ... wants to eliminate funding for Maine Public Broadcasting, which he calls 'corporate welfare' ... (and) has also signed reforms to reduce pension obligations for state workers and ... modestly trimmed state government employment."

On Tuesday, the governor turned up at the annual policy luncheon of the Maine Heritage Policy Center (for which I also write a weekly column) to receive a standing ovation. (It turns out he's not all that unpopular with Mainers who value fiscal responsibility.)

LePage told the group that fiscal policies that increase government debt and encourage dependence have "taken away the American dream" of prosperity and self-sufficiency.

And he pledged that for the rest of his term in office ("four years -- or eight," he told the cheering crowd) he will fight to help the state grow, using fiscally solid policies that also will let Maine's productive workers keep more of the money they've earned.

His critics probably won't like that, either.