



CURTIS ROBINHOLD

A Q&A with Kitzhaber's new chief of staff
by Camilla Mortensen

Gov. John Kitzhaber is back for a third term and his new chief of staff, former Eugenean Curtis Robinhold, is back as well. Previously a natural resources adviser to Kitzhaber, Robinhold worked for BP before returning to Oregon politics this month. Charming, funny and Oregonian to the core, Robinhold also brings a little Big Oil slickness to the governor's office. Robinhold says the governor is currently interviewing people for his old job in natural resources. The goal is to have agency and staff appointments completed by Feb. 10, he says.

Of his own position, Robinhold says, "It's really exciting. The first three or four days after accepting the job and before starting, I was working with my existing company to get myself extracted and find a replacement and just thought 'Oh my god, what have I done?' But after the first day on the job I just thought, 'this is fantastic, he's terrific.'" He adds, "I'm feeling great about it right now."

I understand that you are from Eugene. Can you talk a little about your Oregon background?

I'm a lifelong Oregonian. My parents moved here when I was 2 so I grew up in Eugene; I went to Edgewood Elementary School and Spencer Butte Junior High and South Eugene High School. My dad was a physician at Sacred Heart, a cardiologist, and my mom worked for the Teen Parent Project out in Springfield. So indeed I grew up fishing the McKenzie and grew up an Axman. I went to California for college and came back to work for Peter DeFazio for about three years.

I know Peter well and actually just saw him last week. I'm a big fan, always did the parade; Peter loves to pick up the slime. He always has the thing where he pushes the wheelbarrow around. Until recently he was still using my parents' wheelbarrow after all these years, but I think he's probably found a new, lighter wheelbarrow in his dotage.

So I joined Kitzhaber's campaign in 1993 and essentially worked for him from 1993 through 1999. Primarily, other than that small window where I left to run the campaign, I was the natural resources advisor working in the governor's office on issues like community right-to-know, Willamette water quality, and Steens Mountain preservation — a lot of land and water stuff — and just had a great time.

What moved you from politics to the business world and a job at BP?

I went to school for three years (at Yale) and did a joint degree in environmental management and an MBA and was hired out of that program essentially by BP.

In the governor's office I had really been frustrated with our inability to get very much done. We were really trying to be revolutionary. In one program in particular working on green permits, there are companies that have requirements about reporting effluents into our waterways. Companies that always

performed above the standard, and could do more, essentially always complained: "You have me reporting every day. I've had 14,000 consecutive days of compliance. Why don't you tell me to report once a month and ask for a higher standard?"

And so we did some legislation in the 1997 and 1999 sessions to try to do that and it was just really frustrating. Through that experience I met a bunch of people in the private sector who were doing really interesting things at Intel, at Weyerhaeuser of all things, and at GE. I felt like I wanted to see what was happening on the private sector side and see if I could do some of the things I was hoping to do on the public side, and I essentially shifted gears after school and joined BP for seven years.

In 2005 our then-CEO John Brown wanted to create a new renewable energy business within BP and I joined the team that was setting that up in June 2005.

We set up a business that became what was called BP Alternative Energy, and still is. It's morphed a little in the meantime but we had five core businesses — wind, solar, hydrogen — and I worked through the set-up and launch of that business in 2005 and joined one of the businesses as a commercial manager in 2006. It was the wind business in Europe and Asia and I stayed with that for the ensuing four years. It was both wind and natural gas-fired generation, and in the end I was running that business and became the CEO.

What got you to step away from the business world and come back to politics?

I started talking with folks here in Portland about energy efficiency and treating energy efficiency like power generation. In fact, when you think of efficiency at scale — when it's a large building or even your own home — if you're able to save say 100 kilowatts at your home, it's the same as creating, if you could imagine, a little 100 kilowatt wind generator or thermonuclear power plant on your front porch; it looks the same to your utility.

These guys at Equilibrium Capital were trying to come up with the business model where you could make that work — selling savings back to a utility and creating a financial structure to make energy efficiency work at scale.

I joined what is now Energy Resource Management in July of last year and had been doing that for six months when the governor called.

I'd kept in touch with the governor over the years, and had been talking with some of the folks in the transition about people who I thought would be good and some ideas I thought might be helpful in the new office. At some stage, right around Christmastime, some folks in the transition said, "You should probably talk to John about these ideas."

So I did and it turned out they were the same sorts of things he's been talking about — transformation, and how can you be more efficient in your day-to-day business of government and how can you take — without getting too arcane here — some of the delivery mechanisms for health care and education and restructure them to make them essentially deliver better service for less money.

It just seemed like a great opportunity, and given our long personal relationship, it seemed like a good fit and a good, exciting place to be for the next couple years, at least.

What does this background in energy and business bring to the table?

I have always heard you need to treat government like a business, and it just doesn't work that way. Government is not a business. You can't sell off the non-producing schools. It's not the same structure.

That being said, the way you address problems can be very similar. The governor has talked a lot about moving from addressing problems after they've developed to preventing them in the first place, and that's very much a "six sigma" kind of business approach. Why wait to fix the problems after, when