



# The Senate Ka 'Aha Kenekoa

STATE CAPITOL  
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96813

Senate President Ronald D. Kouchi  
Opening Day Remarks  
32nd Legislature  
January 18, 2023

Aloha, and wow. This is a tough morning when I'm going to have to start with an apology. As COVID has dominated all of our lives for the last several years, and we faced the task of deciding how do we open, I chose to take a path down the middle and be somewhat cautious and limit us to 60 percent capacity on the floor. As I look out at the full gallery and everyone who has come here, I apologize to all of those who could have been added if we had had 100 percent and couldn't make it. I hope that we continue the progress that we are making in a safer, healthy community to be fully reopened again. Not everyone gets to speak today, so every Opening Day since I've been president, I have been sure to say on behalf of each member of the Senate to our families, who have been so patient in supporting us as we pursue public office and serving, for the sacrifices that you have made; to all of the wonderful friends and family who have come forward to help us get to this day: There aren't enough words to say how grateful we are for the sacrifice and commitment that you have made to help us all try to make Hawai'i a better place. So, to all of the families and friends, how about a big hand?

So how does a Waimea High School alum from the beautiful island of Kaua'i wind up with such an amazing protocol from the Kamehameha School students? Well, the program planner in my office happens to be an alumna of Kamehameha Schools. But as we talked about the theme, "Mālama Hawai'i" was an important aspect of where we see ourselves going forward and being guided by those principles in the decisions that we make. Most of the politicians, when we're out there promising the world on the campaign trail, talk about creating a better, brighter future for the young people of Hawai'i and to empower them to be the next generation of leaders. But if we leave them on the sidelines and we never put them in the game, then how do they get the opportunity? How do they acquire the skills to take over? And so this was a great opportunity for them to participate in their government, to have a voice, and to get comfortable appearing here. Now, as I sat and listened to Ms. Wong's contemplation, I could not imagine 15-year-old Ron Kouchi standing here like she did and delivering the message that she did today, and it certainly gives me great hope for the future of Hawai'i.

We all talked immediately when we shut the airport down—how we needed to diversify off of tourism and how we couldn't be so dependent on tourism, but the stark realities of our distance from market, cost of shipping, and then with the war in Ukraine and events worldwide and fuel costs rising dramatically overnight, we are at the mercy of so many external forces that the main

product we have is the beauty of our islands, the beauty of our people, and tourism. But when we've surveyed, our residents have been clear: Visitors should be paying for their impact on our natural resources; and visitors should take the time to learn about the Hawaiian culture, the Hawaiian people; and when they are a guest in our house, they should treat our home like they would hope we would treat their home when we visit; and, last, all of the profits being made by visitors coming to our islands should not be shipped off to other shores. And so to the Mālama Hawai'i program—I don't want to sell newspapers, and I'll begin with that.

So Governor Green talks about the green fee (pun intended) and how to tax tourists to get them to pay for these impacts, but other areas who are doing this are nations and it's a national program going into national coffers. We are a state and, under federal law, any money collected at our airport—where most of the green fees are collected in other areas—needs to be spent on the airport, and it's not getting to the natural resources that we want to help. I suggested that we expand on the current park reservation fee system that we have. Ke'e Beach at the end of the road on the North Shore of Kaua'i generates about a million dollars a year in entrance fees and parking fees. Wai'anapanapa on Maui generates about \$3.5 million in reservation and parking fees. And Diamond Head, which I believe went live in May of last year, in the month of October, collected \$900,000. In those three parks alone, we can generate almost \$15 million. There are other parks that would be appropriate—not all lend themselves to this reservation fee—but I believe we could be generating between 20 and 40 million dollars a year from the visitor. And I've shared these ideas with Governor Green, and we're trying to tax the same person, so I don't get why I'm supposed to be fighting with him because I didn't agree, like, let's maybe charge them at the airport, so I'm committed to work with him to get the resources we need from the people we agree should be paying it to take care of our natural resources and, in some of these parks, to have the lifeguards necessary to be sure that residents and visitors alike can go there safely.

The second thing is, DLNR runs parks, so I think they're focused on their mission in that way. But if they're online, doing the reservation system, then I believe we should have links so that people making those reservations can buy Hawai'i-made products, and we can have small mom-and-pops be exposed to the millions of people who are making these reservations. During COVID, almost all of these businesses have created websites and online sales techniques to get their products out because you didn't have brick and mortar and people coming in. This way, we can ensure that as the visitors come and enjoy Hawai'i, that we can share in the visitor dollar with all of the residents of Hawai'i, and we can see small businesses flourish and succeed. I know when I've talked to the governor, he agrees 100 percent with that as well. And so maybe we need to get DBEDT involved with this system to get the links because that's not a DLNR thing; maybe we need to get IT involved in this to make it work. Or maybe we need to call the Kamehameha Schools Kapālama Middle School computer class and have them come here and help create the links. I don't know how we're going to do it, but I know we are going to do it and it can be done.

I was with the lieutenant governor yesterday with a host of legislators, and it reminded me, before we started the 2020 session, the Legislature and Governor Ige held a big press conference to talk about four major pillars that we hoped to address during the 2020 session: universal

pre-K, creation of a new school facilities department to get school facilities constructed better, affordable housing, and to increase the minimum wage and pass an earned income tax credit that was refundable. And then COVID hit and a lot of that got put on the backburner because of the economic uncertainty. But we continued to meet, we continued to work, and even as we dealt with COVID, these four issues remained at the forefront. I am pleased to report that, last session, we spent over a billion dollars in an investment for affordable housing, including the \$600 million for those on the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands list. And we passed a minimum wage that will get to \$18 and an earned income tax credit. As we started to see more financial success but greater burden in our community, we also wound up giving a \$300 credit per individual in families that earn under a hundred thousand dollars. You can look for more of those kinds of solutions in the upcoming session as we continue to try to help those in our community who are in great need, living paycheck to paycheck, identified in the ALICE report.

What the lieutenant governor is spearheading and talked about yesterday is great educational outcomes for children who attend pre-K. And we know that there are those who may not want their children there yet, and we respect that, but for those who want to go, the price should not be an obstacle to giving your child a fair start, an ability to compete on equal ground. And while we're most focused on giving the children of Hawai'i that education, the added benefit is relieving those families of the cost of child care and, with that, we want to make sure that we can put more money into the pockets of our working men and women of Hawai'i. And I publicly said at the press conference yesterday that I'm fully supportive of the lieutenant governor's plan and she can count on my support, and by the amount of legislators that were there, this is going to be great for the kids of Hawai'i. So how about a big hand for the lieutenant governor?

Before I get to the end of the report and the governor thinks that I'm only kissing up to the lieutenant governor because I don't want her to make fun of me, we've seen too often where there's been tension just within the executive branch and, as a newly elected governor and lieutenant governor, the concern that she may be running against him. And I want to publicly say to Governor Green: I admire your confidence. I admire the self-esteem you have to be confident enough to empower the lieutenant governor to undertake such an important task—to give her your full support because you want every member of your team working at an optimum level, and it's going to take that kind of commitment if we're going to succeed in solving the problems we face, so thank you, Governor Green.

We've had two issues that the press is asking a lot of questions about. First, with the recent Supreme Court decision on reproductive rights: Who would be leading the Senate in dealing with these issues? And I'm pleased to report that Senator San Buenaventura is now doing not just human services, but the health committee, and so you will have a strong advocate in Senator San Buenaventura. Thank you for stepping up, Senator San Buenaventura.

The second thing that they've been asking is, with the recent court rulings, what are we going to do with gun legislation? Here in Hawai'i, we have some of the strictest gun laws in the nation today. The one thing that is an undeniable fact: Bad people do bad things, and you can't just legislate out bad behavior because people routinely break the law. As I was coming here to appear on TV before 5:00, I may have gone 38 miles an hour in the 35-mile-an-hour zone. But

what nobody's talking about is, when the bad thing happens, what do we do to try and make sure that we can stop it as quickly as possible with as little damage as possible? And I believe Vice President Kidani and Ways and Means Chair Dela Cruz have come up with an amazing idea of how to protect our children and the residents of Hawai'i. They have been pushing for a first responders park in the Mililani area where we are not looking at housing state law enforcement—we are looking at county and federal law enforcement as well. We want them training together; we want them working together. And when they did a recap in Uvalde, Texas, one of the findings about the delayed response is the multi-layer jurisdictional authority that was onsite and nobody knowing who or what should be taking command and giving what order and who was in charge. And I believe in what Senator Kidani and Senator Dela Cruz are trying to do is make sure that doesn't happen to us here in Hawai'i—that we keep our children safe and our people safe.

Okay, I've looked at my notes and I've talked about how I love the governor and the lieutenant governor. (Joy, he didn't really mean it—don't hit him.) In working toward the end, and I open with about young people's voices being heard, I met an incredible woman last year, and she's known as Ms. Sarah "Mili." She is a middle school teacher at 'Ilima Intermediate School, and she has led or been part of the leadership of the Ma'i Movement here in Hawai'i. For those of you who don't know what that is, it's ending period poverty. Former senator Acasio had identified that in her priorities last year as we talked about the Senate's priorities. I started seeing Facebook posts from my daughter-in-law Sarah Kern, who's a middle school teacher at Chiefess Kamakahelei Middle School on Kaua'i, and found out that Sarah "Mili" and her students had submitted legislation two years prior and, with COVID and no money, never got a hearing on their bill. Reintroduced it again the next year and, with the financial uncertainty of COVID, never got a hearing on their bill. So, they decided in the third year to introduce their bill again, but this time, with the money, and they got smarter in how they were doing their work. They were featured in *Civil Beat* and they got picked up in all of the news stories, and as the hearings were held, they came out with students to the Capitol and testified, and at the end of the day: \$2 million dollars so that we would have period products available in all of the schools in the State of Hawai'i. But the more important thing was that they were having the young boys and girls having the conversation in school about biology and normal human functions of both males and females. You had several of the young guys who were actively involved, and they have dispensers that are out in the open so that there's no shame in coming to get any period products if you need them, and a key mission was to normalize the conversation. And it was amazing to me how they hit the tipping point and became the buzz of the last legislature, so join me in giving a big hand to Sarah "Mili." So, as a typical guy, I immediately pigeonhole her as the Ma'i Movement champion and left it at that, and as I followed her on social media, she is a nationally recognized teacher and leader for so many other things besides the Ma'i Movement. But when we talk about the public school education that our children are getting here in Hawai'i, I just want to say it's people like Sarah who are making the difference in the lives of our children, so one more time.

And, in closing, I started in the 1982 election; I was 25, I was single. I had a lot of my friends not coming home—staying where they went to school or reupping in the military because the mid-'80s was a difficult economic time in Hawai'i, and West Kaua'i, where I grew up, had a

negative population growth, so I wanted to create jobs and, in the process, I eventually met my wife, Joy, who I married, and then I had to change my priorities. Then in 1990, our son Dan was born, and in 1991 our son Egan was born and, again, my priorities changed. So by the time I get to the Hawai'i State Legislature in 2010, I'm focused on trying to create a Hawai'i where our children would choose to come back to because they have choices, and I'm so pleased to be here this morning, at least having accomplished the goal for me, as both sons are now back here in Hawai'i and working. They have met wonderful women and they are now married. We're looking forward to the families someday that they will have, and I am committed to each and every one of you to continue to work toward that goal because I know how good it feels to have our children home. I would like to thank Senators Akaka and Inouye, who gave our eldest son, Dan, an opportunity to work in Washington, D.C.; to Senator Hirono, who hired not only our son Dan but his wife, Katie, and they both work for her. And then in having a more appropriate workplace, Dan was able to work for Congresswoman Hanabusa and be in a different office from his wife. And so for the mentoring and everything you've poured into helping make our son Dan the person he is today with his wife, Katie: Thank you very much. To my brother Scott, who doesn't like these crowds and is sitting in my office watching—he is my younger son's, Egan's, boss. When I'm here and doing this work and not on Kaua'i, he has provided so much mentorship and guidance for Egan. I appreciate everything he's done to help us in raising Egan. His wife, Sarah needs, well, all the congratulations to the people in the world for her. She did Teach for America in Wai'anae, and after she finished, she stayed there for a total of five years, and what's significant about that is, she lives in Hawai'i Kai. And so she drove over an hour each way because she loved the students in Wai'anae—she loved the people of Wai'anae—and it took a great guy like Egan to entice her to Kaua'i to come and teach the students on Kaua'i, so we've been blessed to have great mentors and help. I know each of you would like to stand up and thank the people who have done that, but I hope, in sharing a little bit of our family's personal story, I'm saying thank you on behalf of all of the Senate members for all of you who have contributed so much in making us who we are today. It's been a real pleasure to resume in front of people; it's been lonely with the gallery and the floor empty or the impersonal meetings of Zoom. And so thank you very much—aloha.