

Senate President Colleen Hanabusa
Opening Day Speech
2009 Legislative Session
January 21, 2009

Yesterday we witnessed a shining moment in American history, and a historic day for Hawaii as well. Barack Obama, our nation's first African American President, is also the first President born, raised, and educated here in Hawaii.

Throughout his long campaign, he challenged us to ask who we are, what we stand for, and what our nation can truly be.

And as he ascended to lead the greatest nation on Earth—as one chapter ended and another chapter began—our nation and the world saw that this son of Hawaii has succeeded in drawing our people around him by giving them hope through the rallying cry: “Yes, We Can.” That belief has defined the American spirit from the beginning, and kept our people steadfast through challenges of every kind. “Yes, we can.”

He assumes the leadership of our nation facing one of the greatest challenges any new President has had to address. Still, America expresses confidence in his ability to see us through these difficult times not because of decades of experience or a celebrated lineage, but because he embodies hope, courage, and the opportunity for change.

Here at home, where we felt the pride of accomplishment in the example of a young President whose life foundation was laid just a few miles from this building, we face our own challenges.

Hawaii has not been spared the crisis facing the rest of this nation. We cringed when the Council on Revenues said the deficit for the upcoming biennium will be \$1.8 billion. A twenty-five percent reduction in general fund revenues.

The State's revenue crisis is just another indicator of what our people are enduring. Unemployment is up two points since a year ago, when our rate was the lowest in the nation. Homelessness is growing and the safety net, which people rely upon the government to provide, is full of pukas.

Governor, members of the executive branch and my colleagues, these are the times when we show the people what we are made of.

These are the times when we ask the hard question of what the role of government is.

These are the times when we must say what we can do and what we will do.

These are the times when we can no longer afford partisanship or politics as usual. Times when our obligation is to bring the service, vision, and leadership we were elected to provide. Times when we stop looking for political points and start looking for solutions.

As President of the Senate, I am here to pledge this body's unflinching commitment to putting the needs of Hawaii's people before all other considerations. During my ten years in office, I do not recall my colleagues working as diligently as they have in the past weeks, assembling a majority package to place before all of you for public discussion.

Let there be no mistake: Yes, the projections with which we must frame our budget are down. But there is a budget and we must not lose sight of the fact that how we appropriate these resources must be guided by what matters most to the people we represent: their jobs, their economic security, their future. Senator Donna Mercado Kim will tackle this formidable challenge.

The federal government can help stimulate our national economy through the extremely helpful ability to print more money. We can't. Like every family in Hawai'i, we can only rely on

the money we bring home. That means that to get our economy moving again, we must be creative with what we have.

We in the Senate propose that a special oversight committee be formed to meet on a weekly basis to oversee and have input into the capital improvement projects that need to be released. Our representative on that committee will be Senator Shan Tsutsui. I am confident that the Governor will welcome the participation of the Legislature to ensure public confidence that we are doing all we can to keep our construction industry on the job.

For all businesses, we propose that the Unemployment Insurance Fund be used in the short term to keep your employees as part of your work force. We are asking that Senator Dwight Takamine, our Labor chair, look creatively at the UI Fund and redefine eligibility so that we can truly partner with those employers who have made contributions to this fund for situations like this. If necessary, we stand ready to extend benefits.

We are committed to examining tax credits to ensure that they are performing and enhancing the economy as they should. We also know that the time has come for us to follow the national trend in adopting the streamlined sales tax, ensuring that out-of-state sales are accounted for in the State's treasury. We must thank Senator Carol Fukunaga for her tenacity in calling upon this Legislature to recognize the lost revenues associated with Internet sales. She was truly a pioneer in this regard.

At the same time, there are vital issues on which there is as yet no consensus, but where serious discussions must continue. Questions including executive, judicial and legislative pay; legalized gaming; and deferring the transit tax for a year or more to provide relief to Hawaii tax payers. Everything is on the table for debate and discussion.

As well, we know we must address the sense of betrayal that many in our Native Hawaiian community feel on the issue of ceded lands, and in particular the case now pending before the United States Supreme Court. We will not turn a deaf ear to these questions, as difficult as they may be. We have heard the call of the people and we must respond.

Government has always played a vital role in ensuring that those who are less fortunate and in need of temporary assistance are provided for. This is our social safety net. Senators David Ige and Suzanne Chun Oakland will take on the challenge of looking at how we will prioritize the issues of health, food and social service programs with limited funds and growing needs. They are also ready to address changes in the structure of health care, and help ensure that families and children who rely on us do not face locked doors.

We have a unique opportunity to ask for assistance from Congress and the Obama administration in the form of increased Medicaid assistance through the Federal Medical Assistance Percentage Program. We are prepared to act within days on a Senate Concurrent Resolution asking President Obama and our congressional delegation—particularly Senator Inouye—to appropriate these funds. This will assist us in closing one of those pukas in the safety net.

We face challenges, but we will overcome them. We have reason to be confident in our future, because we have seen that confidence reflected in others.

Our visitor industry is still the main driver of our local economy, and that has been one of the factors leading the current downturn. We know that tourism is an industry that responds to outside factors. When rising oil costs drove up air fares, our visitor numbers dropped. Now, with oil prices and fares down, we find that individual uncertainty about the global economic picture

prevents some from spending their money on trips to our state. And so the question becomes, how do we boost that confidence and rekindle interest in Hawai'i vacations?

Our answer lies in the fact that when industry leaders express their support for Hawaii as a visitor destination, others will follow. And a name that resonates around the world when it comes to travel is Disney.

Less than a week ago, Disney Parks and Resorts awarded the first phase of the construction contract for their project at Ko Olina. That is an expression of their confidence in the long-term viability of Hawai'i as a visitor destination. By reiterating their commitment to building and operating a landmark resort on our Leeward Coast, a world leader in the hospitality and visitor market has said, "We will put our money where our mouth is. Hawai'i is the future." We can share that confidence. We can reclaim and keep our share of the global visitor market through the cooperation of industry leaders, through effective marketing of what is uniquely ours, and by building on our strengths and preserving our identity.

In addition, many have looked upon the Disney project as an anchor to ensure the completion of the Second City of Kapolei. This project will help stimulate construction in the Kapolei region which, along with the release of pending state projects, will assist us in keeping our people employed.

We must also continue investing in our future, despite the challenges we face today. We must take this opportunity to cut our dependence on fossil fuels, one of the root causes of the current economic crisis. It doesn't matter what the initiative is called. What matters is that we all join hands in the construction of energy-efficient buildings, the production of renewable energy, and the move toward motor vehicles that do not run on petroleum products.

In this light we need to recognize the military, which has led the way in energy-efficient construction and in the provision of jobs and opportunities for our community. They are and have long been one of the most stable forces in our economy. We must applaud the Department of Defense for projects such as the production of jet-grade fuel from algae which, when it becomes reality, will address many of our concerns into the future.

We in the Senate have dedicated so many years to our efforts at Sustainability 2050, and we are now beginning to see the fruits of that commitment. Senator Russell Kokubun is pleased with how far along these efforts have come. He sees the challenges that remain, preeminent among them the task of preserving lands for agriculture for future generations and how to balance our need for food with our need for energy. We are confident that we will be able to achieve both.

I am confident that we will rise above these difficult times. Hawaii has always been a place of hope. Whether your family arrived by canoe fifteen hundred years ago or by plane just last week, they set out on their journey with visions of a new beginning. Laborers and businessmen. Asian and European. People of every color and from every social stratum. A family from Kansas by way of Seattle. A young man from Kenya planning to study at the University of Hawai'i. All came because Hawai'i offers hope.

My hope continues today. Not just because of my faith in my colleagues and their individual and unique abilities, but because of my faith in the people of this state. We have come to learn to share and live together in a very special place, and we carry that with us everywhere. Many of us believe that President Obama was able to achieve greatness and carry his message of hope because he was shaped by this special place. General Eric Shinseki, who will be President Obama's Secretary of Veterans' Affairs, comes from this special place. Senator Daniel Inouye,

chair of the most powerful committee in the United States Senate, comes from this special place. True sons of Hawai'i, aligned like stars to aid us in meeting our challenge.

The people of Hawai'i: working a lo'i in Hanalei, on a farm in Ka'u, in a Bishop Street board room or a Kaanapali hotel. They are the foundation upon which we will build our efforts, and the reason we will not shy away from the task before us.

Mahalo.

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