



The Senate

Ka 'Aha Kenekoa

STATE CAPITOL
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Senate Minority Leader Brenton Awa
Opening Day Remarks
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I don't want to do this: In the most prestigious room in Hawai'i's Legislature in front of all of the most prominent leaders who run this state, I don't want to be the one to have to point out what's going wrong. I'm one of the youngest people in here—I don't know why I gotta be that guy.

Aloha! Three years ago, they pulled me off of television news and ended my career for standing up for truth and integrity, and then the people put me here. So, over the past two years, this journalist in me has been collecting stories from behind government's curtain, and today, once again, because of the people, we are back being streamed live, and we welcome you into the Senate Chamber 2025 on this Opening Day. I hope you're all having a pleasant morning. We begin with a new series looking into Hawai'i's model, questioning whether the life of the land is really being perpetuated in righteousness, or has our state become the land of the fee and the home of the ones who can pay it? I'll stop there because the last time I went anchorman in the Senate, everybody voted against us, so I'm going to leave it up to Keahi Tucker and Joe Moore to continue that. Daryl Huff, you can take the message back with you.

You know, this was supposed to be a roast, but the governor has a State of the State in a week, and I didn't want him to get the final say—we know he can doctor it up really well. Plus, the mayor owns the media, figuratively, much like Donovan Dela Cruz owns the Senate. Scott Saiki used to own the House, but the mahus changed his pronouns to “has-been.” I don't want to be the one to do this, but Tumua wasn't available. Our mayor is 78 years old, well old enough to be my dad, and when I try to introduce new ideas there, it rarely goes well. I can only imagine how the rest of this is going to go.

Joking aside, we're all more similar than we are different. Take the governor and I. He was raised in Pennsylvania; I went there to college to wrestle. He loves the Steelers; I'm also a fan. In fact, during the pandemic, when the lieutenant governor at the time was trying to be the governor and he was hogging all the TV time, he was coming on our newscast; I was behind the desk with my coat and tie but shorts on the bottom. The governor must have liked it so much that he started showing up that way, too. You know, the governor and all those who came before, they're not bad people; it's just their decisions is why Hawai'i is where it is. Many of us have that voice on our shoulder that says, “What if?” The difference is, when ours says, “What if we stop foreigners from buying our lands?” theirs says, “What if we get sued?” I don't want to be the one to keep Governor

Green from helping California fire victims, but if he wants to fly them in and offer hotel rooms for free, what if we offer that to all the Hawaiians who've been displaced up there? To all the people who used to live here who are now displaced, what if we be the bridge to bring them back? What if we took care of our own? What if we helped Lāhainā victims still recovering or the Hawaiians in tent after tent on the side of Waimānalo Beach, Kaka'ako, right outside this capitol? What if we helped local residents who are a paycheck away from losing their place?

Our government keeps unveiling one affordable housing project after the next on the news, but on the street, in our communities, we know for a fact our government solution to housing has been for us to move out of state. There is no more hiding it: We know one in three families consider it; 370,000-plus Native Hawaiians are living it. We are the minority in our own land. I don't want to be the one to point out how many of our leaders, whether they realize it or not, have been pricing us out while they build their own paradise.

In 2014, we were paying \$150,000 for the superintendent's salary of our public schools. Today, we're paying \$240,000 for that same position. In September, KHON's headline read, "Hawai'i has allowed education to plummet to new lows." Governor Ige signed off on—Governor Abercrombie (excuse me, Governor Ige, we have a pretty good relationship) signed off on that. Even though we still have a teacher shortage, lunch is arguably no better, and a lack of buses comes up every year. Still, last year, Governor Green gave his approval to raise the superintendent's salary up to \$300,000 per year if needed.

And I don't want to be the one to judge, but it doesn't seem like they're spending our tax money up in Mānoa any better. We just went from paying \$410,000 per year for the University of Hawai'i's former president to now \$675,000 per year, plus \$7,000 a month for housing and \$60,000 to relocate UH's new president from New York. If you're doing the calculations, that's a \$28,000 check before taxes every two weeks. Who needs a lottery when you have the Board of Regents? Over the next three years, they're set to give out \$2.3 million in a payout to an individual the board spent \$150,000 just to find—that is our taxpayer money. I don't want to admit, but, you know, our fellow senator from Kalihi is sitting right in the crowd over here somewhere, making \$72,000. She's a former Senate president. She knows the ins and outs of UH. We could've got away at a third of the cost if we tripled her salary.

It's no wonder why the City Council members felt justified giving themselves a pay raise from \$69,000 to \$113,000 without giving us a say. It's okay, though: I'm sure Tommy Waters, Esther Kia'aina, and company are giving 64 percent more effort every day they show up to work. Maybe they can help us stop the luxury development at Turtle Bay, where—like many other places across the state—outside developers are being allowed to squeeze both profits and people off of our land.

I don't want to be the one to make enemies, but for as long as we've been alive, there's been barely no resistance in this building—none for the past 10 years, so we will be the ones. We will be the ones to resist all decisions that force locals to leave. When lawmakers want to bring in out-of-state nurses to replace our own, we will resist. When they try to take our rights as parents, we will resist. When they force local businesses to shut down, we will resist. When the life of the land is not being perpetuated in righteousness, we will resist. Where there is greed, we will resist, and we will

represent. Everyone who has had to move out of state, we represent. The hundreds of thousands who don't believe in government, we represent. All of the people who are covered by health insurance but still can't afford to go to the doctor, we represent. All of the locals who turned down the job and lost their job, we represent.

I realize this is getting long—I could go on and on about the policies we're pushing, but historically, because of the lack of balance in this state, the Legislature does not pass bills from our side. If we're lucky, they'll take our ideas and run with it. I want to mahalo Senator Mike Gabbard for introducing a copy of our "About Time" bill to stop foreigners from owning agricultural lands. (Gotta be Tulsi's dad, after all.) We hope one day another one of our colleagues will adopt our "Hele On" bill to stop states from sending their homeless here. We have a project that could be a breakthrough solution to solving our cesspool crisis that won't cost you your house. But most importantly, this year, we'll bring transparency into the Capitol like never before. For all the braddahs who are saying "trans-what?" that means we hired Mr. Mean over here to broadcast to 400,000 people every day what's going on.

You know, on a sidenote, last year, we shined a light without all of that. We shined a light on one of our bills, and we just took it through the process, and we were blessed that the Senate passed our bill to ban foreigners as a study. We passed it over to the House. We showed people the process. When it got to the House, for political reasons, they decided to not let the people speak on it, and when we showed that to the people, their reaction—many people were triggered, and I'm sidenoting off this speech just because it's so important. There were threats on Representative Linda Ichiyama's life, and it doesn't have to come to that; it shouldn't come to that. And, while many locals have been forced to take flight and leave the state, the ones who've stayed, they'll fight to stay. And so, the more they sell out our land, the more they sell out our people, the less aloha there will be in this state. We have a governor who is leading it. Maybe we can save the aloha.

Before we go, just want to clear up a few misconceptions about our party—get ahead of it. They'll tell you we represent the rich. I had to move back with my parents just to afford to do this job, and I didn't take a single dollar to get reelected. They'll tell you we don't care about the environment and convince you with terms like "climate change," but they resist when we plant food trees to feed our people. And they tell you that we'll hate mahus, but just ask Kumu Hina up in the gallery who one of her favorite politicians is. I'm Brenton Awa, leader of the Minority. Good luck, God bless. Mahalo.