



# The Senate

## Ka 'Aha Kenekoa

STATE CAPITOL  
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96813

Senate Minority Leader Brenton Awa  
Opening Day Remarks  
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I believe Hawai'i will one day reach a moment where most will no longer judge each other off the color of their party but by the character of the person they are and what they do for people. It is our intention today to take a first step towards that moment and hopefully educate along the way. Aloha! Last time I stood here, I asked, "Why me?" When I sat down to write this time, I said, "Why not?" It could be the last time I get to give an Opening Day speech on the Senate floor. Few get the honor; even less get to speak freely when they have it. These days, speaking truth automatically comes with being attacked. It can cost a person their job, their reputation, or, in politics, speaking of the ladder, where they stand on it. I started writing and then realized, well, if I say this, you know, this lawmaker might get offended. If I say it in a certain way, the State Ethics might throw me another fine. And if I say too much, lawyers might try to hit me with another lawsuit because of the information I'm about to give to you today.

Listen: After getting into the Senate, I took \$35k, but it wasn't in a brown paper bag. Imagine if I stopped the story right there, I can see some people texting already, "I knew it; he did it. Can you believe he took it?" I thought I saw one of the guards doing the Hawaiian haka looking for the cuffs. Thoughts jumping to conclusions—these days, that's automatic. That brings us to lesson one: Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Or, for those of you who grew up with a kupuna giving you the line when they're pulling your ear, "Eh, boy, why God gave you two ears and one mouth? To listen two times more than you talk."

The \$35k I took came from three checks. They're hanging on my office door from a settlement with my former employer, and now we're at the part where I told you earlier could cost me—could cost thousands, but I'd like to think the value of what I'm about to tell you guys and you hearing it for your own knowledge is worth the money. At the peak of my career as a news anchor, my teleprompter would often be filled with wrong information. The jammed-up part was, instead of addressing the problem, I was looked in the eyes and told a line I'll never forget. They said, "Brenton, if you see misinformation in your teleprompter, read it with extra confidence because 95 percent of people here will believe it." What's worse is, I went to the GM at the time—confirmed I had to read it because that's what corporate pays for. I ended up getting fired, like everybody knows, a few weeks later for refusing. The point is, when it comes to the information that we hear in the media, to play off a quote from *Anchorman*, "Sixty percent of the time, it's accurate every time." In other words, don't listen all the time. Just to add, I later

learned something few journalists are even aware of. (Daryl, get the notes out. We're back here again.) In the eyes of the courts here, journalists give up their First Amendment rights when they sign their contracts because the stations also have rights over what their employees can or cannot say. There's also a kicker: The same law firm that represented the station that cut my settlement checks are the same lawyers who trained every single lawmaker here on ethics. As you soak that in, a side note for the critics sure to ask where that \$35k went: I paid off most of my debt at the time.

Now, right now, if you're easily offended, might be the time to hit mute, unfollow, or go watch the House's speech. For everyone else, no, none of this is personal unless you're a REIT or one of the many outside developers who've flown in, bought our land, hired some of our friends and neighbors, pay them well to work on projects that drive up the prices in our communities that we don't want.

Before I go further, I want to point out everyone has that inner voice—I've said this before—that voice that narrates your thoughts. When I started writing this speech, my thoughts were coming from the heart—it was meant to uplift; it was meant to be funny. It sounded like a mix between Island Magic Mike and Tumua. But when it comes out, I realize it sounds more like Joe Moore.

Did you know the state is preparing to investigate one of its own in hopes of finding out what influential lawmaker took \$35,000 in a paper bag? For the record, wasn't me. I wouldn't put it past Senator DeCorte, but she wasn't elected yet. And it couldn't have been Senator Fevella 'cause if you read *Civil Beat*'s article, apparently, he's not influential enough. (Kurt, that was their words, not mine.) Look, we have a resolution asking for the Senate to investigate. Kurt was on the news saying that's kind of a waste of time. We kind of agree, so we brought in the polygraph test—that's what this is over here. And don't worry, all you senators: It's not about you guys because what I realized was, you know, the news yesterday, the attorney general said they're gonna investigate, so thank you for that. We don't have to put everybody on that. But after seeing the briefings, I don't know; Senator Kim, you might agree here: We might want to put the Department of Education on this thing. I might keep it around.

You know, I told myself I'd keep this positive. We passed a clean bill through the Senate last session. I'm not sure if the senators liked it or they just wanted to sic me on the House. A simple bill: We recognize the coconut tree as a food source. It's currently designated as a landscape item, and that matters because right now we're chemically injecting trees without knowing the environmental consequences. Now, because the Senate passed it untouched, the House had a rare opportunity to fast-track the bill into law. Instead, they chose to edit the bill just to keep it stuck in the system. It's par for the course with what we deal with as the Minority. Worse, the lawmaker who handcuffed the bill agreed it was good for Hawai'i—no changes were needed—but she had to amend it because, if not, she feared her leaders would catch wind that she passed a Republican bill and she'd get the boot from her committee. That's that ladder I was talking about. Lesson learned.

Lesson two here: In government, it's not who you know or even what you know in here; it's, you get ahead by what you have on the person telling you "no." Leverage equals action in

government. Here's a real example: Most know we've been trying to ban foreign ownership of property since we got into office. We want a Hawai'i where residents don't have to compete with the rest of the world when it comes to finding a home to live. Most people who followed the "About Time" bill know what the state told us in year one: unconstitutional. So we watered it down; we came back. Year two: still unconstitutional. By year three, we stopped playing mental gymnastics. We let a Democrat introduce the bill. I traded one of my votes with Senator Rhoads, and what do you know—a bill to ban foreigners passed the Senate. Nobody was talking about its constitutionality. Of course, the House, they held it up, trying to protect what little power they have. We see that everywhere—the Elections Commission or healthcare system or the wealth-care system. No offense if you guys are in the system. But it could turn into the next monopoly, where CEOs making millions, and families here, we can't afford to even pay the bills, all the bills that come in the mail after you take the visit.

New red light cameras—they're funded by projected fines from the current ones. Speed limits designed for safety, implemented for profit. Renewable energy was supposed to be cheaper. Instead, our bills keep going up. Home prices—like the President said—the highest they've ever been in Hawai'i's history. It doesn't need to be this way.

On the federal side, programs that helped Hawaiians are disappearing. The rub with this one is, the very leaders here complaining about it, some of them (not you guys in the Senate) are the same ones that call Hawaiians racist when we push for more Hawaiians in leadership positions in government. At this time, I want to ask my colleagues and anybody in the room who's Hawaiian to please stand up for an applause, nothing else, if you guys can. You guys can sit down, thank you. You know, I didn't know what was going to happen; I kind of tried to see and gauge what the other side was going to do. But three years in, I haven't even gotten these guys to applaud when we speak. You know how they, you know, up in Congress, what you guys see. So, by seeing you guys stand up, you know, as leaders, that means a lot because now, if we can have these moments where we can stand together against or above party lines, then, you know, maybe we can get somewhere. And as you guys saw, I think there was only about seven of us.

And I want to keep it positive, but real quick, the last, you know, passionate part that I have is, this is why I believe the waitlist is stuck at 29,000 people. There are not enough Hawaiians in here. No offense to everybody else who is not. This is why Hawaiian homes can cost up to \$750,000 just to lease. This is why every 10 years, 5 percent of Hawaiians leave Hawai'i. If that continues, the math says in less than a hundred years, there'll be none of us left. And for the homesteaders thinking you're safe, still no one fixed the blood quantum issue for passing it down.

Again, the goal here isn't to complain but educate. We've been divided by the American political system. We'll be conquered if we can't put our differences aside for simple dialogue. It shouldn't matter if you're red, white, blue, māhū. Recognize we are few, and unless your name is Max Holloway, choosing to fight each other will only keep you standing for so long.

The last lesson is the power of aloha. When the Thirty Meter Telescope project tried to break ground on Mauna Kea, not many people thought it could be stopped. But people united—all

kinds of people—and what we saw was kūpuna leaning on aloha even when the state sent their own relatives to arrest them. Today, there's still no TMT. We can accomplish impossible feats just by showing aloha. In other words, the next time you're feeling like throwing blows, throw aloha. Use that moment. Be in that moment.

And, lastly, for the House: We want to share some moments with you. But for good leverage, what goes around comes around. And if I'm in a different building next year and you need federal funding ... I'm just saying I'm looking forward to this legislative session. On behalf of the Senate Minority, I'm Brenton Awa. Mahalo, good luck, and God bless.