



Senator Les Ihara Jr. • Senate District 10

Palolo, St. Louis Hgts, parts of Maunalani Hgts,
Ala Wai, Kaimuki, Kapahulu, Mo'ili'ili, McCully

e-Newsletter Issue #1

What Forty Years At The Legislature Has Taught Me

Aloha, and thank you for reading this first e-newsletter issue and, perhaps, joining the e-newsletter pilot series. This e-newsletter series will serve as a community report on what I have learned about civic culture, public service, and politics in four decades at the Legislature.

In 1986 while leading a community empowerment program, I declined an appointment to the State House. I wanted people to be inspired by politics, not frustrated, and saw little possibility at that time. My father suggested that I join the Legislature to learn “inside politics” and how political empowerment might be possible. I developed a forty-year plan, accepted the appointment, and completed the plan this year.

I have learned that civic values can complement legislative decision-making, especially where competitive systems produce unwelcome outcomes. Our islands hold memories of the Hawaiian Kingdom and civic experiences of caring, belonging, collective stewardship, and responsible action. Remembering Kingdom-era values can guide us today when they are renewed and expressed in modern form.

I have seen legislators under pressure while making decisions, meeting deadlines, and maintaining relationships with lobbyists, advocates, constituents, and colleagues. I've seen the pressures that wear people down, how systems built to help can become rigid, and how good people forget the original caring that brought them into elected office.

I have also seen moments of grace – when people listened across differences, adversaries became collaborators, and the Legislature became a place of healing, not only conflict. I've seen legislators change their minds and community members speak with courage. These moments teach me that civic culture is not gone. It may be hidden, weakened, and waiting to be remembered.

I believe a civic culture with integrity, historical awareness, and practical service could reside inside the Legislature. By civic culture, I mean the habits, values, relationships, remembrances, and practices that shape how we treat one another while making public decisions. A civic culture allows people to care for one another, belong to one another, disagree with respect, and act responsibly for the whole community.

To help build a legislative civic culture, a small group of civic leaders and I have initiated what we call the Civic Culture Project (CCP). It's a shared project to listen for the recoverable civic memory of our islands and explore how that memory empower us in today's circumstances. CCP's core value is respect for human beings and the coexistence of human cultures, even

when we must confront cultural practices that cause harm to humanity and the world. We accept the presence of harmful actions in order to see them clearly and accurately so we may formulate effective responses.

In the global crisis we experience today, there is an opportunity to bring the guidance of caring and the Aloha Spirit (HRS §5-7.5) into our legislative process and actions. I reflected on this in a recent [Senate Moment of Contemplation](#).

For e-Newsletter #2, I plan to begin responding to feedback received on this issue and continue reporting what I've learned about civic culture, public service, and politics.