

ISLAND VOICES

Senators' UH bullying bad for aloha, state

By Christian Fern and Randy Perreira

The life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness.

Those words first proclaimed by King Kamehameha III represented a stake in the ground, a celebration of restored justice, a visionary rallying cry of how the kingdom of Hawaii could move forward. It is as relevant today as our state motto as it was when Kamehameha first uttered those words in 1843.

Unfortunately, the Hawaii Senate chose to ignore their obligation to govern objectively and with minimal bias. The commitment to aloha and principles of pono inherent in our state motto were not a priority for the 13 senators who voted to reject Alapaki Nahale-a for a second term on the University of Hawaii Board of Regents.

Rejecting Nahale-a, who has a genuine commitment to the university, is a setback for the UH system, faculty, staff, students and our state. This is not just an assault on our university, but runs contrary to the Hawaii State Constitution, which gives the Board of Regents exclusive jurisdiction over the internal structure, management and operation of the university — not the 13 senators who targeted Nahale-a for not being their lap dog or watchdog.

But the Senate vote has other serious implications. It is shameful that a handful of senators held sway over the Senate and the majority of senators succumbed to playing politics and go along to get along, hoping for a payoff when their pet project needs support.

We have renewed respect and admiration for the 12 senators who stood their ground and voted their conscience, demonstrating they can think independently and are not afraid to stand up against their colleagues and do what is right for Hawaii.

Everyone is affected by this vote. We are angered when we repeatedly witness qualified and committed community members who sincerely care about the roles and responsibilities they have been asked to assume being publicly berated, made into a laughingstock, and demoralized by a handful of senators in abeyance to the committee chair.

Too many very qualified people willing to be public servants are turned down for refusing to surrender to those senators. How many others are being chased away for fear of receiving similar treatment? Our institutions and communities, including those ostensibly represented by these same senators, are further diminished when good people refuse to subject themselves to humiliation and decline to accept roles intended for the public good.

We have been conditioned to believe we are powerless spectators on the sidelines against these senators who believe they are invincible. Their behavior is a threat to our democracy.

Their tactics to intimidate and berate are intended to scare us into submission. The majority vote of the Senate against Nahale-a was a vote to condone and maintain the intimidation and bullying behavior by elected officials.

Ironically, instead of questioning the recommendations of their colleagues, we witnessed a rubber-stamping of the Senate Higher Education Committee's decisions — the very thing that the committee accused Nahale-a of doing in reviewing the UH budget.

What does this mean for UH, faculty and students? It means there must be even more scrutiny of every decision made by the Board of Regents to ensure they are acting in the best interests of UH and not kowtowing to the Senate. There must be a demand for greater transparency.

And if all else fails, to ensure UH operates autonomously and the Board of Regents functions independently, as the Hawaii State Constitution intended, then our recourse can be addressed in our ballots this election year.

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