

Challenges Facing Public Service Leadership in a World of *Opportunities*

For the PUBA Core Year Certificate Seminar and Advisory Board Meeting

Jim Dator

May 9, 2009

Queen Liliuokalani Center for Student Services 4th Floor Conference Room

I have slightly altered the title of my talk from what is given in the program as "Challenges Facing Public Service Leadership in a World of Crises," because I will be discussing a world opportunities that lie ahead of you. Old systems that have been in place for a long time--some several hundred years, others only 30 years--have crumbled and more are crumbling. We are in many ways like the old communists were in the early 1990s when their Empire of Evil fell. I said at the time that it was not that capitalism succeeded while communism failed. Rather, it was that communism collapsed before capitalism did. Both were unsustainable and now it is our turn, though our options are much different from what they were for them two decades ago. In any event, you have an exceptional opportunity for leadership and novelty that few people have had for a very long time. Please embrace it.

Now is a great time to be in public service! After thirty years of insults, down-sizing, outsourcing, and budget-cutting, the public--and especially businesses that have been putting their boots to your face for so long--are now groveling in front of you, begging you to save them once again from the consequences of their stupidity and our stupid complicity in their fantasies.

As you very well know, until very recently it has been tough to be a public servant in the US. I have dreaded giving my annual lecture in the PUBA class because I knew I was facing a bevy of disheartened people who Dick and his crew were vainly trying to pump up into a frenzy of baseless enthusiasm.

But now, now that it is possible for a public servant to look at herself proudly in the mirror each morning, and as proudly tell her children that she *works for the government*, this year, for the first time in twenty plus years, I DIDN'T give the futures modules in the PUBA Core, but am instead elevated, as guess you might say, to speak to this--what is it? retreat? I hope

not because I hate that word to describe what I expect to be an advance, a foot--many feet--proudly put forward with confidence and pride.

Here I am wearing my blue *ha'aheo*, "pride in public service" T-shirt, with the words so faded and the shirt so tattered and torn as to be totally unreadable. But the sentiment is indelibly there. I am a public servant just like many of you, and I am proud of it. My meager salary is paid for by the taxpayers of the State of Hawaii and I let as many of them know how thankful I am for their charity as I possibly can. Lord knows I would be a very different "Jim Dator" if I actually had to work for a living instead of merely professing for one. For one thing, I literally think I would die if I had to wear a coat and tie. The blood to my brain would have long ago been chocked off by the flashy cravats, as are the brains of so many tie-wearers, I notice.

But pride is not always a positive virtue. I have found it almost always the case that "haughty pride goeth before a fall."

In my misspent youth, I was very active in the Episcopal Church and greatly influenced by it. It is a sect that puts a lot of emphasis on humility and unworthiness, which is why it attracts so many bankers and politicians.

The second Collect, "for Peace", in the *Book of Common Prayer* says: "God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom; Defend us thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in thy defence, may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*"

Of course, the Episcopal Church doesn't let you get morbid or all penitential about life. Sure, we're sinners, but get over it. Episcopalians are fun lovers too. As it is also written, "wherever three or four of us are gathered together, yeah, verily, you can be pretty sure that at least one of us will bring a fifth."

Anyway, the Church contributed to shaping me into what I am today--a humble, inept, fun-loving clown. In fact, I worked my way through undergraduate college as a clown in a circus in central Florida.

But that is another story, and I am not here to talk about me and my wicked past but about you and your challenging futures.

However, I do want to take as my text for today's sermon, the phrase in the Collect for Peace, "whose service is perfect freedom." Think about it for a minute.

I would have you take that view of your life and work as a public servant. Public service IS perfect freedom. The phrase, *Vox Populi, Vox Dei*, (meaning that the voice of the people is the voice of God) is very ancient and to the extent that it is true, especially in a so-called democracy, living your life in the service of the people is living a life of perfect freedom. There can be no higher calling, no better calling, no more fulfilling calling than serving your fellow citizens. Through caring service, you are set free.

Public service is not only fulfilling and freeing, it also has higher moral status than, for example, living a life of money-making or a life of shopping till you drop, which is what we were led to believe was a life of perfect freedom for the past 30 years when greed was suddenly declared to be good and conspicuous consumption glorified as every American's duty, while being poor was the surety and bond of an unAmerican sinner.

I believe we are experiencing the early stages of a transition from a fundamentally selfish and clearly unsustainable period of world history toward a world where we all will be humble servants in the interest of each other in healthy and sustainable communities.

For the foreseeable future we, especially in these islands of Hawaii, are going to need selfless public servants who will help the rest of us learn to live meaningful and peaceful lives of self-sufficiency.

And THAT is the message of hope and opportunity I want to bring to you today. Greed is out; good is in. Selfishness is out; selflessness is in. Wasting is out; conserving is in. Being flattered is out; serving others is in.

Why am I saying that? Do I expect everyone suddenly to switch from being high-living born agains, demonstrating that they are saved because God made them wealthy, and instead become modest and frugal Episcopalians--or more likely, modest and frugal Evangelicals, because it turns out it is the Evangelicals who are actually leading the transformation among Christians from godly greed and the domination of nature to tender stewardship of the Earth and all of God's creatures?

No. That is not my argument,

It is because a future that I and many others talked about for many years has now arrived, with plenty more arriving yet to come, and we all need to recognize and embrace what is unfolding.

For many years, in the olden days, Ira Rohter, Jan Newhouse, Tony Hodges and folks like that were preaching energy and environmental doom and gloom for these islands, while I, to the contrary, was preaching high tech salvation. It was completely clear to me that if intelligent people (and our economic theory told us that people are rational and self-interested) came to understand the urgent necessity of creating new energy systems to replace oil, and of addressing our looming environmental problems, that we intelligent people would begin doing so with all deliberate speed. There were plenty of technological options then, if we would invest in developing them and bringing them online. We had time, but not too much time, and we had plenty of money and talent to do that because neoliberalism was still considered to be wacky voodoo economics while the policies and practices of a somewhat progressive welfare state still ruled. And so I thought we would do in time what was rational and in our long-run self-interest.

But I was wrong. While there were a few good steps taken in the correct direction during the 1970s here in Hawaii, and plenty of excellent technological and social options available, they were all purposely killed by media-blitzes, think-tank pronouncements, and governmental policies from 1980 onward. For three decades we allowed a bizarre economic ideology to overrule serious science, traditional religious teachings, and sensible human foresight.

So, after many years of doubt and resistance, about four years ago, I finally joined Ira Rohter and Lynette Cruz on a symposium in the political science department where I publicly confessed that I had been wrong, and that Ira and his friends had been correct, and I have been confessing my error all over town ever since, trying to get local folks in organizations who care about the future of Hawaii to see that they might be able to achieve a vision of the future I have heard many of tell me over the years they want for Hawaii.

For years, I used to ask people in Hawaii to contemplate one of four "alternative futures" that I constructed for them out of the options I saw lying before us. One future expected business as usual to continue; another alternative was my high tech fantasy complete with artificial intelligence, cyborgs, and space travel; a third alternative as about social and environmental collapse. Interestingly, the alternative future that many people told me over the years that they preferred was the one that Bud Smyser, former editor of the *Star-Bulletin*, used to call derisively, "Hawaii as a Backwater"--Hawaii as a community frozen in time when many people think things were about as good as they could be for most people living here--the 1950s and early '60s, perhaps.

But even though many people said they wanted a more "laidback" Hawaii, how could it be possible to achieve such a future, since all dominant forces internally and externally are pushing for endlessly more of everything--more tourists, more hotels, more big box stores, more McMansions on agricultural land, and more economic "growth" in every sphere?

The answer may lie in what I call "The unholy trinity, plus one." I use the phrase to capture the combined influence of three processes that are often considered separately. Someone focusing on one is unlikely to pay attention to the other two. Indeed, solutions to the one are often expected from the other two. But, all three are in crisis together and must be viewed together--along with something else: the "plus one" in my title.

The unholy three are:

--"Peak Oil"--that we may in essence "run out" of oil before equally abundant and cheap energy sources come on line. And Hawaii is almost totally dependent on cheap oil for everything it does now, or has done for the last 50 years;

--"Climate change" and all the other many environmental problems, including global pandemics, that we have been neglecting, and making worse, for so long;

--And "global economic collapse" of the debt-driven Ponzi scheme we were tricked into calling an "economy."

Since I began focusing on those three things some years ago, the price of oil has skyrocketed to unbelievable heights and then suddenly dropped like a stone. So concern about the futures of energy in Hawaii moved both rapidly in and now rapidly out of our consciousness. For a short while we were

panicked--but most of us were panicked only about the PRICE of gasoline, not its continued existence as a major energy source, which is what worries me. So now that the price is down (though still high compared to a few years ago), most of us aren't worrying about oil anymore. But for a while, people got the message and considered me to be a minor prophet.

The truth is that we still do need to move very quickly towards substantial energy conservation measures, and towards effective alternatives to oil. To be sure, there have been some good discussions and tentative actions towards this locally--led by some people in this room, in fact--but much, much more is needed given the fact that almost everything we eat and otherwise consume is shipped in by oil-fueled transport, and that our major industry, tourism, requires that the tourists also arrive on oil-fueled carriers. We need to move towards total energy self-sufficiency very quickly.

But the thing that is on our minds now--and that has driven down the price of oil more than anything else--is that indeed the global Ponzi scheme has collapsed as Ira and I have been saying it would, and it is still in the process of total disintegration as I speak, in spite of many false sightings of light at the end of the tunnel.

I have been warning since the late 1970s of a global depression of considerable duration. But the tireless fiscal wizards were able to come up with one deceptive debt instrument after another which for a while successfully postponed the inevitable day of reckoning: first the invention of easily-obtainable credit cards with ever-increasing debt limits; then massive deficit spending on anything we labeled as a "war"; then no money-down one-year-to-pay loans and then more recently to subprime mortgages, interest-rate swaps, quant-funds, hedge-funds, derivatives, credit-derivatives, auction-rate securities, collateralized debt obligations, synthetic collateralized debt obligations, and credit-default swaps, all of which eventually brought down the incomprehensible and unsustainable system causing such deep and general misery that I am amazed that we are not all up in arms in anger and frustration demanding justice for those who are responsible for our pain.

Of course, it is possible that the fiscal wizards will come up with new debt instruments to keep the ponzi scheme going a bit longer, and I know they are working hard at it. We certainly will have more ups and downs of the stock market (as we see with the price of oil), with accompanying cries of

salvation and renewed calls for greed. But I think we are in for a long and deep depression.

In any event, we here in Hawaii should be preparing for a long and deep depression, and if I am wrong and the old economy bounces back, then there will have been no harm done and maybe some good. But if I am right, and we ignore that possibility, then we are in for some very challenging times ahead for which almost all of us here are entirely unprepared.

As for the Third Person of my Unholy Trinity--environmental and public health challenges--it may be that Hawaii is in the early stages of a pedagogical health and environmental crisis such as Hurricane Katrina was for the US Gulf region. One of the weird ironies about the uncertainties surrounding swine flu is that our futures center has been working for many months with the State Department of Health developing an interactive electronic game, called Coral Cross, that enables Hawaii's citizens to pre-experience in one week the first six months of a flu pandemic, in order to enable citizens to help the Department establish some priorities as to who receives vaccines first when they finally become available. We were about to roll out the game--we had posters printed and a team was ready to spread them around the Island--on the very Saturday that swine flu broke out in Mexico. We have spent the past weeks figuring out how to respond to the fast-breaking realities.

In the interest of full disclosure, must also point out that I happen to be a member of a congressionally-mandated committee of the National Research Council tasked with recommending to Congress what should be done to identify, track, and mitigate catastrophic impacts from asteroids and comets.

It has been very illuminating to me to be asked to consider how to warn people about and protect people from two very different things that absolutely will happen--a global flu pandemic of horrendous proportions WILL happen, and an asteroid (or more likely a comet) of civilization-destroying proportions WILL hit Earth, but no one knows when, and so far no one knows for sure what to do about either!

If my record over the last few years of warning about Peak Oil, Economic Collapse, and Swine Flu holds up, we should be hit by a good sized asteroid any day now.

Of course, the full brunt of the interrelated Unholy Trinity still lies ahead for us here: Oil continues to dwindle while we have no replacements at hand; the false economy is continuing to sink and must be transformed into a real economy; and global climate is changing, the seas rising, and a flu pandemic either unfolding or still waiting in the wings.

But what is the "Plus One" I mentioned earlier?

It is the fundamental inability of our governments, especially the federal government, to help us solve these problems. Our governments cannot help because of what I mentioned at the outset: 30 years of bad-mouthing, downsizing, privatizing, outsourcing, tax cuts, and debt, each of which were intended to drive nails into the coffin of effective government. Our massive and growing national debt is the final nail. Please understand that our huge debt national was incurred on purpose. It is not an unfortunate and unexpected consequence of good policies. It was the intent of those policies to destroy effective government by indebting it so as to leave everything up to private and not public forces--to what Naomi Klein calls the "Disaster Capitalism" of such profiteers as Blackwater, Battelle, Halliburton, et al.

But how can I say that? Didn't the federal government give us all \$250 as a boost to the economy a while ago (with another check for \$250 in the mail), and, then when that first giveaway failed to work, didn't the Bush administration rush to the rescue of the collapsing financial giants of Wall Street with an obscene untethered handout--a handout that we were told (just as we had been told about the Iraq war) that we absolutely HAD to make NOW and could not stop to think about, or the banks would fail? And so we acquiesced to the massive giveaway, while more and more banks and corporations, and industries large and small--including our gas-guzzling automotive industry--continue to fail anyway, prompting still more failures down to our very jobs and lives.

And then when the great change artist, Obama, came to power, didn't he continue to dig deeper into America's pockets to save the economy from itself?

Doesn't that prove that government can and did come to the rescue when necessary?

Absolutely not at all. It substantiates my argument. Never mind who got the bailouts and who did not. In the most obscenely unethical way imaginable, all the government did was to steal more and more massively from future generations. It pretended to solve our problems by passing on even more crushing debt to our children and grandchildren, while also making the US weaker and weaker in the eyes of a generally weakening world. While preventing immediate collapse, the actions have solved nothing, and were not really intended to. They were simply more payments from the future to privileged interests in the present. It is thoroughly disgusting that we permit it.

We are told that it is the taxpayers who are paying for the bailouts. If that were so, there would be some bit of ethical fairness about it. But we are not taxing ourselves. We are not making any sacrifices at all. Instead we are further burdening future generations.

And then when we here in Hawaii do try to respond bravely and fairly through taxation, the act is vetoed: Better to punish, through layoffs, the people who are already suffering from the greedy acts of others than reluctantly but bravely to distribute the burden fairly to all through taxation, with those who already have the most, helping the most, as we should.

Clearly, all of this makes your jobs as public servants even more challenging and necessary. You--and I--will just have to work harder than ever with less pay and probably not a lot of aloha in spite of what I said at the outset. But many people will be relying on us as Hawaii transitions from a Consumer Society to a Conserver Society.

Of course, we are not alone. There are scores of groups in Hawaii focusing on local self-sufficiency. Some of you toil with them. I hesitate mentioning any because I might omit some.

In addition, some time ago, the *Advertiser* featured an op-ed piece by Robbie Alm about HECO's plan for electrical generation from renewable sources, distributed to most islands by underwater cables. Alm said it is HECO's hope to end electrical generation by imported oil or coal, and to see that all electricity here is generated entirely by local, renewable sources--though he did not name any of the possible sources in the article, when construction would start, or how long--and how much energy--it will take to bring them online.

There have also been some people in the Legislature who understand the need for new energy systems, Representatives Cynthia Thielen and Mina Morita among them.

Senator Fred Hemmings has spoken and written several times about the necessity of ending the continued economic growth mania in Hawaii and creating a steady-state economy here. Since the economy is not growing now, I hope he is doing everything he can to prevent the economy from growing again while helping create a viable steady-state economy.

The most important things we can do now concerning Hawaii's dangerous energy dependence are related to energy conservation--we must do everything possible and legal to reduce our demand for, and use of, energy of any kind. The current collapse of the economy is doing its bit in that regard. But unfortunately, lack of money also makes it both very difficult not only to fund the kind of energy conservation measures we should, but also to invest in small-scale, renewable energy production technologies. So once again we see how the three Persons of the Unholy Trinity are indeed one in three.

I probably shouldn't quote Robby Alm again since he will speak to us shortly, but I can't help it. He is one of my heroes, and he wrote at the end of his op ed:

"Hawaii can turn clean energy into an economic pillar for our community.

"Hawaii can transform a fragile dependent economy into a strong independent society.

"It will take time. It will take investment. It will require that we lay aside historical disagreements. It will require that we take on different roles and responsibilities. It will require that we do all of these without immediate reward.

"It is an act of faith. It is imperative that we act in faith of our future."

I must admit that my faith has just about run out. That is why I am putting so much of what remains of it on you. More than anyone I know, public servants have the tools and intelligence needed to help transform Hawaii peacefully but surely from a wasteful, dependent, and dangerous Consumer Society into a satisfying, self-reliant, and sustainable Conserver Society.

Proud public servants! Future generations and I are counting on you. Don't let us down.