

The Florida Senate  
Opening Day Remarks by Senate President Jeff Atwater  
March 2, 2010  
*As Prepared*

Senators, Families, and Guests. Welcome to the opening of the 112<sup>th</sup> session of the Florida Senate. I want to thank you all for your diligence and service during the past six months of Committee meetings. The people of Florida should be proud of the way the Members of this body conducted themselves during these Committee meetings, with dignity, mutual respect and a solemnity commensurate with the tasks at hand.

I would also like to take this moment to thank all those who have traveled here to share with us in the traditions of opening day. I want to thank especially the spouses and families of our members who sacrifice daily so that their loved ones can participate in, and contribute to, the great deliberations of this body. Your willingness to share and support those of us on the floor means much more than we can adequately express.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank our special guests who have joined us in the gallery this morning.

Lastly, there are some Members for whom this is their final session. These are our colleagues who have reached the ends of their terms. I now ask the following Senators to please stand and remain standing: Senator Constantine, Senator Crist, Senator Diaz de la Portilla, our Majority Leader, Senator Garcia, Senator Lawson, our Minority Leader, Senator Peadon, and Senator Villalobos.

Senator Constantine (8 yrs House; 10 yrs Senate), you have demonstrated a sincere, deep seated and unwavering commitment to Florida's environment.

Senator Crist (8 yrs House; 10 yrs Senate), you have consistently championed a fair and equitable judicial system.

Senator Diaz de la Portilla (5 yrs House; 11 yrs Senate), you will be most remembered for your passion for service, skillful intellect, and your tireless work to make your colleagues successful public servants.

Senator Garcia (16 yrs House; 10 yrs Senate), you have been a relentless fighter for community development and a consistent champion for the entrepreneur.

Senator Lawson (18 yrs House; 10 yrs Senate), you are a giant of a man in every way, with a huge heart and a sincere respect for the dignity of all Floridians.

Senator Peadon (6 yrs House; 10 yrs Senate), you have been uncompromising in your drive to ensure that the health of Floridians will never be compromised.

Senator Villalobos (8 yrs House; 10 yrs Senate), you have blessed us with a keen intellect, been a guardian of justice and a mentor to scores of new legislators.

Senators, you have shown over your careers a wisdom, a dedication, a unique humility as you have ceaselessly put the interests of the citizens of Florida before your own.

We know the depth of your sacrifices on behalf of the Senate. We've seen your passion and compassion, your commitment to ideals we all hold dear, and your civility and good humor as you have worked your way through some seemingly intractable issues. You have served your constituents with honor and integrity, reflecting their hopes and wishes not your personal desires.

Those are the trademarks of statesmanship. Your contributions will be sorely missed, and the State of Florida is better for your willingness to serve.

Senators, we are gathering in noteworthy times, times of great civic, political and economic flux; when people throughout this great country are re-examining their own behaviors, revisiting the expectations of trusted institutions and questioning the actions of government at all levels. I have a sense that future historians will look back on this moment in time and identify a fundamental shift in the attitudes and assumptions of the American people, a time when we came to realize that we had strayed from the virtues that formed us, a time when we chose to abandon the banquet table and return to the kitchen table, when the shallow allure of the high life gave way to the heartfelt connections of family life.

Do not misunderstand. Americans are not lowering their expectations, they are re-energizing their values. They are refocusing their sights and proudly rediscovering those virtues Americans have traditionally held most dear.

We should not be dismayed by these developments. Indeed we should celebrate these dynamic tensions, for they are the very set of circumstances our democracy was designed to absorb, a dialectic which has carved out a great nation, the most energetic, imaginative, productive and compassionate the world has ever seen.

But for this equation to balance, the voices of the people must be heard, they must be trusted, they must be accorded the dignity they deserve, and they must be heeded. The sense of the

people of this Nation and this State is pretty clear, there is little room for confusion on the message they have articulated. Our fellow Floridians will not tolerate clever sophistry, or arcane argument. They want clear and unambiguous responses from their elected officials; responses upon which confidence, faith and trust can be rebuilt and restored.

Our constituents are looking to us for honesty and courage. They are asking us to behave just as they have been compelled to behave: to spend within our means, to shun the luxuries and embrace the core essentials, to question the purpose and value of every dollar spent. Floridians are letting go of what was once truly desired – because they only have enough money to pay for what is now truly required.

The issue is value creation for the citizens of Florida. That is the litmus test that must be applied at every level of government.

Just yesterday the Speaker and I announced a Constitutional initiative aimed at forcing more responsible fiscal behavior by Members of Congress. The burdens of Federal spending directly and immediately impact our residents and our State.

This is not a partisan issue. We find ourselves in this spot because of the behavior of both parties over many years.

This State we hold so dear, this beautiful, entrancing spot on the map that has beckoned explorers throughout the ages, and the place we have all chosen to call home, is destined to

become in short order the third largest State in the Union, and the tenth largest GDP in the world. But if people cannot buy homes, cannot start small businesses, cannot invest in their communities, cannot expand their enterprises and create employment opportunities because of the crushing weight of Federal debt, then we will be foreclosed from claiming our rightful place on the world stage.

I have asked each member of Florida's Congressional delegation, to commit to send a balanced budget amendment to the States for ratification. The Florida Legislature is constitutionally bound to balance its budget; the United States Congress should be no less bound to those same principles of fiscal discipline.

Over the next sixty days you will each search your souls, come to your own personal decisions, but for my part, I will not participate in the evisceration of the American dream, I will not lower my vision, I will not choose the easy path, and I will not stand idly by while Congress smothers the next generation with its self indulgence and irresponsibility.

Our choices are limited and sharply contrasting. We can succumb to a sense of expanding gloom, accept a bleak vision of our future and substitute sound policy decisions for sound bites and demagoguery. Or we can have faith in our democracy, drink deeply from the well of American courage and stamina, and develop an imaginative response to new economic realities. We can bemoan the hand we have been dealt, or reach out to the hands of Floridians and together create a new economic foundation based on the expressed will of the people.

The animating spirit of this Nation and this State has never been defined by the degree to which government distributes goods and services, but the extent to which the people of this great country have been free to pursue dreams, to build communities, to extend a helping hand to neighbors, to create commercial and social enterprises, and yes, the chance to fail. Inherent in that freedom to risk failure is the empowering freedom to succeed beyond one's wildest expectations.

Florida was not built on government programs, it was carved out of a seemingly insurmountable wilderness; its potential was not confined by the barriers of state planners, it was expanded by the vision of dreamers across the ages, people who were bold enough to believe they could navigate impenetrable swamps, link far flung communities across the width and breadth of the State, tame an inhospitable climate, invent the personal computer and yes, even touch the stars.

This year, as we approach yet another difficult budget cycle, our goal must include once again unleashing the potential of Florida's citizens. That is not how great and enduring nations are built.

This session we will pursue reforms that return to the people of Florida the tools they need to move forward.

In the first instance, under the leadership of the Select Committee on the Economy, we will be recommending a series of measures that will encourage the creation and growth of jobs.

Our highest priority should be eliminating barriers to entrepreneurship. We can exponentially expand the potential of Floridians to redefine and reinvent this State by removing unnecessary regulatory restraints and uncapping their intuitive genius. The People of Florida are capable of achieving great things if their creativity is not artificially constrained.

Secondly, we will seek to advance reforms in education for the singular purpose of ensuring that Florida's youth have the best opportunity to pursue their dreams and become global leaders in their chosen fields of endeavor.

In 2002 Florida passed a class size amendment to the constitution in a well intentioned attempt to manage the relationship between class size and student achievement. Having now been afforded a window of time through which reasonable people have been able to carefully evaluate the impact of that amendment, it is now clear that this State can benefit from maintaining the basic intent of class size while slightly modifying its structure. Such an action would permit us to deploy scarce resources in much more meaningful ways and to produce much more lasting outcomes.

Two such opportunities will be advanced this session.

The first involves our participation in a national re-evaluation and commitment to strengthening graduation requirements. We can no longer suffer under the canard that we simply compete within the friendly confines of fifty States. We compete against a world community with a broad and expansive mission, whose target is nothing less than supplanting the enviable economic and

political status of the United States of America. We cannot defend our position with students who are denied exposure to an enriched and vibrant curriculum. This session we will increase the academic standards for graduation, particularly in the areas of advanced math and science, thereby preparing the sons and daughters of Florida to compete and succeed in the global arena.

Secondly, it is incumbent upon us to create an atmosphere where the most skilled in our communities look to the classroom as a place for personal growth as well as increased student achievement. Let us redirect funds towards rewarding excellence in the classroom with meaningful incentives, attracting the brightest graduates and exposing our students to the finest practitioners in their fields. We demand nothing less in other institutions, why would we settle for less in our schools. A world class educational system will produce the imaginative, curious, excited and well equipped workforce necessary for a vibrant and competitive Florida. This session we will begin the process of restructuring our educational system around teachers who are generously and professionally compensated, incited to produce students of the highest caliber.

Finally, it is important to remember that we are stewards of the taxpayers' money, and decisions on the distribution of State funds reside squarely with us. Unfortunately, there are unscrupulous individuals that fraudulently siphon valuable resources which could be deployed to assist struggling Floridians and our most vulnerable. Those Floridians struggling to make ends meet, to keep two jobs, hold on to their homes, are looking to us. They cannot rectify the situation, only we can.

You will see a series of bills dealing with all types of costly fraud, bills that protect seniors from financial theft and abuse, and that reign in the untoward manipulation of our most vulnerable citizens. Waste and fraud benefit no one but the criminal and the indolent. It is simply time to say that their day is done; we will return the resources of this State to the rightful owners, the men and women of Florida.

The tasks before us are doable, wanting only the same strength of character and fierce determination that generations of Floridians before us have shown, and that the current generation of Floridians demands. Those who have come before us did not turn from tough decisions; they welcomed them. They seized on the opportunity to mark themselves apart from other generations, to claim for themselves the hallowed ground of principle and determination, knowing that history lauds only those with the courage to face the difficult choices.

It falls clearly within our purview to be remembered as the heirs of the pioneering spirit that shaped our land, to demonstrate faith in our past and confidence in our future, to be that group of Senators who acted with conviction when the foundation of our economy was under duress. I have seen that will to perform in the past and I know the citizens of Florida have chosen the right leadership to restore fiscal common sense and rediscover the economic balance that served our greatest generations well.

I thank you all in advance for the honest debate, the keen intellectual involvement, and the civility which I know will be manifest in this Chamber for the next sixty days.

God bless the great State of Florida