



The Florida Senate
Senator Ken Pruitt ,
President
District 28
Opening Day Remarks
March 4, 2008

Senators, families, our professional staff, and our invited guests: Welcome.

When I took the gavel for the first time as President, I spoke about the beginning of our "journey" together. Today, I welcome you to the halfway point. It's been an incredible ride so far.

There are parts of this moment in history that occur as a result of choices we have made. Yet there is one choice that a President does not get to make; that is, which Governor and Speaker he or she will serve with. You have heard me say time and time again how grateful during my term as President, and how blessed I am to have Governor Crist and Speaker Marco Rubio as my partners.

When it comes to Governor Crist, what can I say? He is Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan all wrapped up in one. I really love this man-his "can do," "It's always morning in America" attitude is an inspiration to every citizen in our great state. It's a sharp contrast to the "gloom and doom," "It's America's fault" attitude that pervades his critics and pundits and some in the media. I count my blessings every day for Charlie Crist.

Speaker Rubio, I love you too. Sometimes he's tough to love, but I do genuinely love him. He is a man who has the courage of his convictions- an inspiring leader who keeps us pushing the envelope of greatness at every turn. I am proud to be his partner.

As I look across this Chamber at the faces of our families and loved ones, I see a lot of genuine smiles-smiles not yet faded by the extra responsibilities and sacrifices that they bear because of the duties that take us away from home. *[To the families:]* You may not be elected, but you truly are public servants of the highest order, and we thank you.

To my bride, Aileen, it's been quite a year. You are the strongest person I have even known. You have lifted me when I was at my lowest points, you, your joy and laughter has brightened my darkest days, and, above all, you have been the perfect match to complete my soul. Aileen, I love you.

Opening days are among those unique jewels in the treasure chest of Senate tradition. They give us the chance to stop for a moment and reflect on what has been done, and what is left for us to do.

Tonight, our Governor will give the State of the State speech. This morning, I have the privilege of reporting to you on the "State of the Senate."

Senators, I am proud to say, the State of our Senate is very, very good.

One year ago, we rededicated ourselves to the goal of putting aside partisanship to rise above our individual interests in order to better represent those who we are called to serve.

We committed to working together with a united front to do the people's work.

And while many words will be spoken today, and many ceremonies will take place, if I could step away from policy and legislation for a moment to speak to you on a personal level, I would like to say to each of you with genuine gratefulness-"Thank you." Thank you for the honor and privilege of being your President. Thank you for your continuing efforts to be a united Senate.

By standing together we not only called upon, as Abraham Lincoln so eloquently described, "the better angels of our nature," but we have also been able to fulfill our very special role in American democracy as the thoughtful, deliberative, and inclusive Chamber. Because of you, our work product represented the best and brightest ideas of all Senators- without regard for party, seniority, or alliances. Our work product represented Florida. The results speak for themselves.

With a united voice, this Chamber passed comprehensive property insurance reform. The legislation has made significant progress in stabilizing a shell-shocked market. It's frightening to think of what this market would be without those reforms. Rates are finally going down for consumers. The patient is stable, yet we know that there is more to do in order to continue the process of healing and recovery.

We started the 2007 Session with a strong commitment to public safety by passing Florida's Anti-Murder Bill. Again, by unanimous vote, this Chamber passed legislation to keep dangerous criminals locked away from hurting our children, our seniors, and our neighbors. And it is working.

Senators, we took on property tax relief and reform; one of the most contentious and complex issues that I have seen while serving in the Legislature. I cannot tell you how proud I am of the way you conducted yourselves during the heat of the battle.

Last year, I called you the master architects of the process-and you were just that. Property taxes are lower today because of you. Despite the many, many, MANY critics and pundits, Floridians got the last word on the issue. They said yes to our reforms by an overwhelming 64 percent, in one of the largest primary turnouts of BOTH PARTIES in Florida's history. That's a pretty impressive seal of approval.

Though it is less written about, the statutory revenue cap on cities and counties that this Senate championed is working. We've all seen what has come to be known as the "Webster Chart"-the line graph that measures the revenue collections of local governments. We said we wanted to end the unaffordable, unsustainable spikes in property taxes. We said taxpayers should not be burdened with the crushing weight of massive increases. And thanks to your efforts, they won't have to.

Our number one priority for the 2007 Legislative Session was to invest in Building Florida's Future-or "BFF" as we affectionately called it. Senators, we invested over 5 billion dollars of non-recurring revenue into Florida's economy. We're building more roads, schools, community colleges, universities; heavily investing in our water quality systems; and most importantly, injecting significant "seed money" to grow a new "knowledge-based" sector for Florida's economy.

We are seeing great success in our efforts. Last year I listed the growing cluster of research-based industries locating to our state: Scripps, Burnham, Torrey Pines, SRI. These are the trailblazing pioneers of a new economic frontier for Florida. Because of the Senate's BFF initiative, we now can add the world-renowned research institutions Max Planck, VGTI, and

Genomics to the growing list. Senators, our efforts have caught the attention of the world like a sonic boom. We are growing a new economy in Florida. I believe that 10 or 20 years from now, Floridians will point to this Legislature as the leaders who had the vision and courage to make it happen.

These new initiatives occurred against the backdrop of our long-term and continuing commitment to our state's priorities: Health Care, our Seniors, our Environment, and Education.

In 2008, we will press on. The first two quarters have been played, but there is still a second half to go.

In some ways, it feels like we have never really stopped. I realize the special sessions and additional meetings have taken their toll. It would be tempting to let up, but we cannot. We must not. We are going to keep aggressively moving forward.

There are new challenges. Revenues continue to drop. And while there is no unified opinion among the experts or pundits as to whether we are in a recession, near a recession, or will barely avoid a recession, one thing is certain—we are experiencing challenging economic times.

Senators, we will have less money to spend this year than we had last year. Less money means having to say no a whole lot more. It means fewer bills and no special projects.

It is times like these when our mettle is tested. It is a whole lot easier to lead when there is a lot of money. The pressure will be on as we reduce costs, find efficiencies, and say no to new initiatives. Now, more than ever, the traditional role of the Senate is going to be vital.

Any legislator who plans on focusing solely on the "here and now" is going to have a long, long session. Seasoned veterans of this process will tell you, you can't live solely for today—we must view our decisions based on the long-term results for Florida.

Senator Margolis, you served as Senate President in 1990, presiding over the last major economic downturn in Florida. Senator King, you led this Senate in the aftermath of 9-11. This body did not only get through those tough times, we came out better and stronger than before.

This isn't the time to shrink back or bunker in; it's the time to act. We are not only going to get through these challenging times, but we are going to move Florida forward.

It's why we are going to continue investing in Florida's infrastructure and economic innovations with Building Florida's Future 2. It is my hope that we can match or exceed the investment that we made last year. The fact remains that non-recurring dollars are best spent on one-time initiatives. It's why we are promoting Building Florida's Future 2—a plan to strategically invest our non-recurring dollars to stimulate Florida's economy.

We are going to continue to move aggressively forward on property insurance reform. The Select Committee on Property Insurance Accountability is meeting and already they have had an impact. Immediately after Senator Atwater and Senator Geller announced that they were bringing insurance executives in under oath—and by subpoenas if necessary, the Office of Insurance Regulation received calls from several companies who suddenly wanted to call off their challenges to the lower rates that OIR demanded. We are going to keep the pressure on. We will continue to get answers. We will change the law if needed to ensure that consumers in Florida get the rate reductions that we intended for them.

We will move forward on energy independence for our state. We are all aware of the scientific

and political debates on global warming. Let's not get caught up in that debate. Rather, we must realize that increasing Florida's energy independence can only benefit our state. Let us forge ahead on an alternative energy policy so that we can leave a healthy and vibrant Florida for our children and their children.

We have made tremendous investments in our precious environment, including the Northern Everglades Act passed just last year, and we plan to continue the efforts. Our focus this year will be creating a successor program to Florida Forever, extending our environmentally sensitive land purchase program to take us into the next generation.

We are going to move forward on education accountability with a constitutional amendment that will put the selection of an Education Commissioner back in the hands of the voters. By doing so, we not only give Floridians a meaningful role in the direction of our education system in Florida, but we also elevate education back into a cabinet level position, a place that it rightly deserves.

The amendment will also address the deficiencies in the constitutional amendment in 2003 authorizing the Board of Governors. The authors- for whatever reason-left out what was probably the most important question when the Board of Governors was created. Senators, we are going to allow the people to have a clear and transparent vote on the issue. Do they want an unelected board to set tuition, or do they want their Legislature-a body elected by the people-to set it?

And finally, we will move forward with an initiative to protect our most vulnerable population-our seniors-from financial and criminal predators. To all those, including companies, who confuse and deceive seniors out of their savings with financial schemes that scam thousands upon thousands of dollars from our seniors-we are putting you on notice. We will partner with our Chief Financial Officer and the Department of Financial Services to implement severe penalties to protect our Greatest Generation.

Senators, as I said in my opening, we have finished the first half, but there is still another half before us. When the final gavel falls in just 60 days, I believe we will be able to look back with pride and satisfaction that we did our job, and we did it well. It is also likely that we will finish this session with a little bit of sadness-for the end of session will also mark the last day of legislative service for six of our Senators.

With the departure of these beloved colleagues, we will lose 116 years of combined legislative service.

As I read their names, undoubtedly a wave of memories, emotions, and appreciation will flood each of our hearts:

Senator Gwen Margolis,
Senator Burt Saunders,
Senator Mandy Dawson,
Senator Steve Geller,
Senator Lisa Carlton, and
Senator Daniel Webster.

Each one has made significant contributions to our state and indelible marks in our lives.

[To the Senators:] Thank you for your incredible service to the Senate, and to our state. This is your last session, and we plan to make it your best one yet. Most of our "send-off" ceremonies

will happen during the last week of session, but I thought it would be fitting to begin your final session with a public tribute to each of you for your incredible service to our state.

Senators-I invite you to take this moment to watch a brief photo presentation honoring our six Senators.

[To the entire Senate:] Senators, let us take every opportunity to spend time with these special people in the last days of their noble service in the Senate. They have fought many battles and navigated through some very choppy waters. They have much to offer, and we should take every chance we can to tap into their storehouse of institutional wisdom.

And so it begins. The 2008 Legislative Session. Our second half. I am proud of the work that we have done, aware of the challenges that are ahead, and confident that together we will accomplish an agenda that will result in a stronger and better Florida for generations to come.

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