

COLUMN

Chad Blair: Gov. Neil Abercrombie and the Power of Incumbency

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JULY 1, 2014 • By Chad Blair   Share { 37 }

Hawaii's governor held no fewer than five separate bill-signing ceremonies Monday, and I sat through every one of them, from 10 a.m. until well after 1 p.m.

You can probably still make out the indent my butt made on the leather sofa in the executive office at the Hawaii State Capitol, right below the official portraits of Ben Cayetano and Linda Lingle.

I sat through Monday's marathon bill signings because the cynic in me went in thinking, "Holy cow! Five separate ceremonies in one day? Is this guy running for re-election or something?"

Of course, Neil Abercrombie is indeed running for a second term, a final four years in office.

He also might be in trouble, as evidenced by [a recent Civil Beat Poll](#) that showed him 11 points behind state Sen. David Ige.

On Monday, [a New York Times article](#) suggested lingering bad feelings over his appointment of Brian Schatz to become U.S. senator, rather than Colleen Hanabusa,

might cost Abercrombie his job.



Chad Blair/Civil Beat

Gov. Neil Abercrombie poses for photos with Rep. Scott Nishimoto and Sen. Glenn Wakai, executive chambers, Hawaii State Capitol, June 30, 2014.

Publicly signing bills is a great way to show the governor at his best — honoring lawmakers who author important bills, singing the praises of legislation that might otherwise go unnoticed and recognizing advocates who fight for change in our laws.

It also makes for great photo ops, with the governor posing for numerous photos behind a shiny desk and in front of flags and a giant state seal. Because the governor signed 16 bills Monday, he posed for several dozen photos — once with key lawmakers who shepherded the legislation, then with the lawmakers and various advocates of the bills.

The photo ops — er, I mean *bill signings* — often attract the media, though I was the only reporter to sit through all five ceremonies.

Wayne Yoshioka from Hawaii Public Radio was there for the first couple signings while the Honolulu Star-Advertiser and Hawaii News Now showed up for the last one: [House Bill 2590](#), which paves the way for voter registration on election day by 2018.

You can read about [the 16 bills here](#), which include measures related to aging, health, housing, building codes and fire protection.

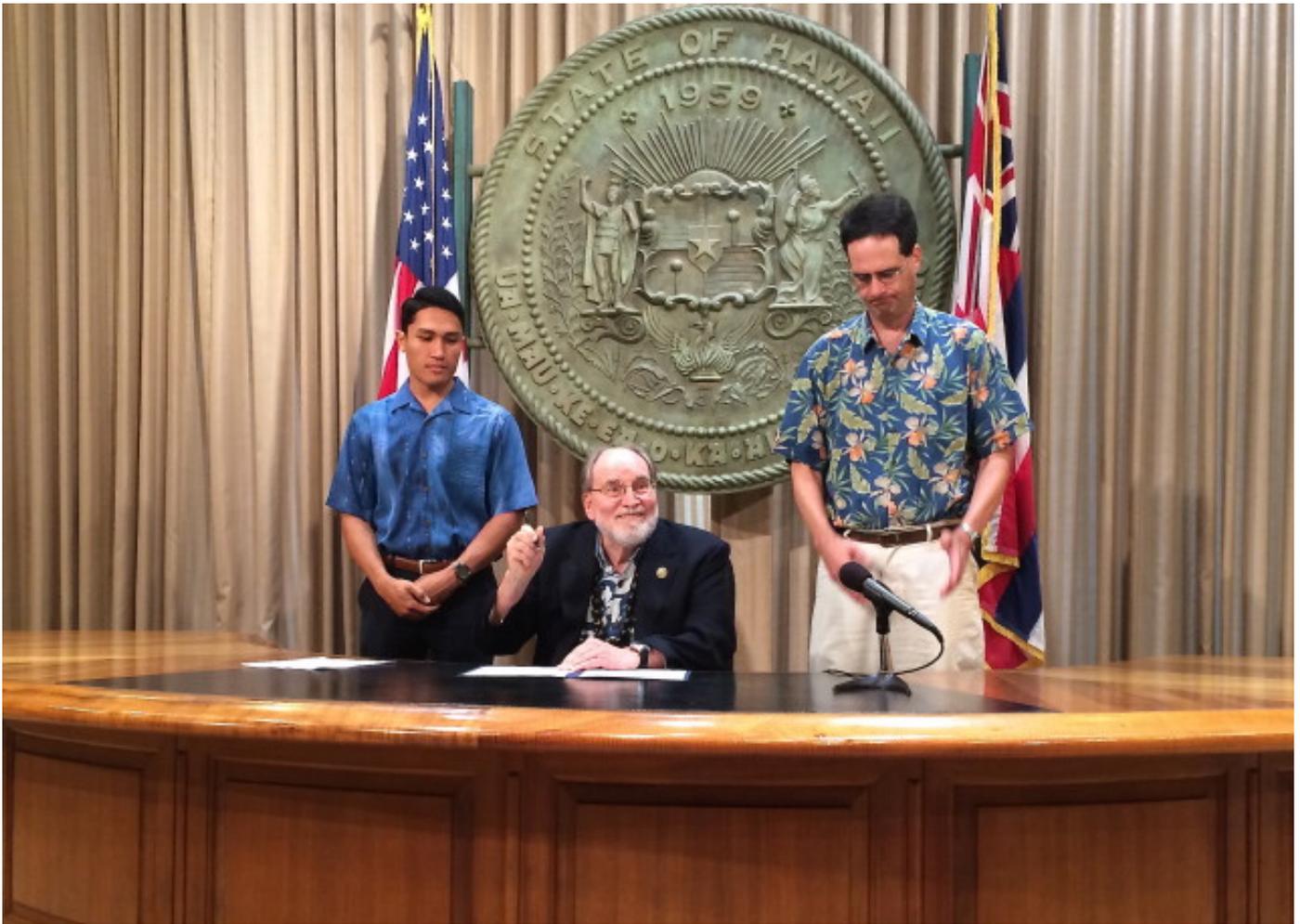
Bill-signing ceremonies are part of being governor. Abercrombie is no different than his predecessors in that regard.

But having five ceremonies in one day struck me as part of a possible new trend. On June 20, the governor signed 10 bills in 3 back-to-back ceremonies on the same day.

I asked the administration whether the bills are being signed in bigger clusters this year. Spokesman Justin Fujioka said they are not.

“I understand that this is no different than previous years and the number of bill signing ceremonies is on par with previous years,” he said. “It may even be less than last year. Most of these public bill signings are being held to fulfill the requests of legislators and departments or agencies and are being made available to the media if they choose to come.”

Fujioka is correct that there have been fewer signings overall this year. By my count, there have been 43 so far (though the governor still has until July 8 to sign more bills).



State Reps. Kaneila Ing and Karl Rhoads flank the governor as he signs a voter-registration bill.

Following the 2013 session, Abercrombie had 52 bill ceremonies. But then, there were more bills passed last year (293) than this year (245). And none of last year's ceremonies featured five in a day.

Oh, well. Maybe it's just a more efficient way to get things done.

Bill signings can draw strange bedfellows, though.

State Sen. Will Espero was on hand Monday for bills relating to the [building code](#) and [fire protection](#), which he introduced. But Espero is also the author of another measure that is on the governor's [intent-to-veto list](#).

[Senate Bill 2589](#) transfers law enforcement functions of the Harbors Division of the Department of Transportation to the Department of Public Safety. No legislator opposed SB 2589, but it's looking like it's dead.

The same goes for [Senate Bill 2682](#), the financial disclosure bill for state boards and commissions that has drawn a lot of attention. The governor indicated that he would kill SB 2682, too, but that didn't stop representatives from Common Cause Hawaii and the League of Women Voters from posing for photos with Abercrombie after the voting registration bill was signed.

Some two hours later, the administration [issued a press release](#) saying that the governor will let the financial disclosure bill become law without his signature — a way for Abercrombie to hold his nose for an unpleasant task. Maybe he was feeling the pressure because people like Carmille Lim of Common Cause said the governor's view that the bill would harm women [was sexist](#).

No one gets everything they want during a legislative session, and one has to celebrate the victories as they come.

No elected official knows that better than Neil Abercrombie, who may have had cynical reporters like me in mind when he made a statement Monday to lawmakers after the signing of several kupuna care bills.

The governor's comments came after he signed an elderly care bill that attracted Senate Majority Leader Brickwood Galuteria, who brought his mother and aunt for the occasion:

"I want to congratulate you, because in an age when there is a lot of cynicism about government and people, the idea that no one pays attention or it is difficult to have attention paid, the fact that we can have Sen. Galuteria's aunt inspiring a bill, and you folks step forward, and the Legislature recognized that the experience that you had, the conclusions you've reached, could be translated into a bill and then translated into legislative action shows that we still have that opportunity."



Neil Abercrombie supporter Daniel Dae Kim.

Abercrombie continued: “And that if people speak up and speak out and contact legislators who are sensitive to their issues — and there are many, many such in the Legislature — and have very, very positive results. And I wanted to congratulate you in particular.”

The audience in executive chambers applauded.

OK, back to my role as cynical reporter:

Earlier Monday Abercrombie received the endorsement of actor Daniel Dae Kim of “Lost” and “Hawaii Five-0” fame.

“Governor Abercrombie has been a longtime supporter of the arts,” Kim, who is away on location shooting the film, “Insurgent,” said in a press release.

“I’m honored to have the support of Daniel Dae Kim,” Abercrombie said in the same statement. “Showcasing the beauty of our Aloha State in top-rated television shows and award-winning films speaks volumes about Hawaii as a world-class film location.”

By late afternoon the Abercrombie campaign released [yet another television](#)

[commercial](#), showing how he’s a “fighter” and cares for keiki.

But the day wasn’t over yet.

Just before five, the campaign — er, I mean *the administration* — issued a press release titled, “Governor to Hold Historic Bill Signing Ceremony on the Island of Hawaii.” The governor is slated to sign five bills in Hilo.

What a busy time for Neil Abercrombie, governor and candidate for governor.

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John Bond

What's to be cynical about? We have never had it so good under New Day I'm not your friend I'm the Governor...

Like · Reply · [1](#) · Jul 1, 2014 4:15am



Tony Alahaki · Honolulu, Hawaii

What's ironic is that most people have forgotten -- if they were ever even aware in the first place -- that the governor was talking about special interests in the "I'm not your friend" statement. How that was reported was the epitome of cynicism.

Like · Reply · [1](#) · Jul 1, 2014 9:42am



Tony Alahaki · Honolulu, Hawaii



If it's true as you reported that there have actually been fewer bill ceremonies than last year, then yes. Chad, you're too cynical. Lol. But you're a champion for sitting through it all.

Like · Reply ·  3 · Jul 1, 2014 9:37am



Aaron Landry · General Manager at Car2go

Yeah, it is a little cynical. The Abercrombie administration and the Abercrombie campaign are operating too well! There must be something wrong!

Like · Reply ·  1 · Jul 1, 2014 11:16am



Jonne Comlatelee

This is a good one Chad. Almost makes up for the other article you wrote.

Like · Reply · Jul 1, 2014 12:22pm



SE Shiroma · University of Hawaii

Hawaii primary election on August 9th maybe the repeat of Mayor Dante Carpenter vs Bernard Akana on the Big Island which resulted in Mayor Bernard Akana (newbie).

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Frank De Giacomo

Two days ago the Gov was taken to task by Common Cause and the League of Women voters for being sexist and promoting corruption. The day after that everyone is smiling and posing as one big happy family. Right after that the Gov lets the the disclosure bill become law.

So in just 3 short days he managed to take a beating and fully recover from it throwing the whole incident into the dust bin of history.

The Gov has more skill in getting elected than he does in governing, but he does have skills.

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