



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE CONTACT: David.Rolland@sen.ca.gov

March 21, 2018

Toni Atkins' remarks on being sworn in as 48th President pro Tempore of the California Senate

Remarks as prepared for delivery:

Colleagues, I'd like to begin with an expression of profound gratitude to you for this privilege.

Every day, I'm struck by your energy and intellect. I'm inspired by your passion for public service. I will never stop striving to earn the trust you've placed in me. Nor will I ever take for granted the gravity of this gavel.

And -- as my first official act -- it's my honor to welcome all our special guests to this Senate Chamber.

Governor Brown joined me at the Women's Caucus breakfast this morning. As Governor, he led us from insolvency to unstopability and will go down in history as one of America's most effective Chief Executives. And I should know -- I served as acting Governor for a whole 12 hours -- and historians say it was a time of unprecedented prosperity! It will be an honor to work with Governor Brown.

Now, I know there's a lot of important people with impressive sounding titles in this room -- and I'm humbled by your presence.

But -- to me -- the title most of us share is the most impressive of all -- Californian. And that's a title that means more today than ever before.

Diversity is our destiny. Inclusion -- a reflection of our character. But it's not just about who we are -- it's about what we can do -- together.

Of that, there might be no better example than my fearless friend and leader through these last four years of historic progress.

Kevin de Leon and I come from very different backgrounds, but we both know what it means to grow up so far below the poverty line we couldn't even see the line. And we are both committed now to giving every Californian the opportunity to build on their beginning -- no matter how humble -- and achieve their higher calling.

For every gesture of kindness he's extended to me -- and for every measure of devotion he's offered our state -- our climate, our children, our working families and our immigrant community -- from the bottom of my heart, I say thank you.

This house respects its history. And I want to honor the esteemed former Senators with us today who served in this role -- David Roberti, Bill Lockyer, John Burton, and, of course, Mayor Darrell Steinberg. Each in his own way left an indelible imprint on this Senate and this state.

As a point of personal privilege -- I have a few members of my own extended family to acknowledge.

My Capital and district staff. In fact, every Senate staff member and all those who made today and every day in this People's House possible. It's our names on the door but it's really your work on the floor. And we will always appreciate what you do.

One of my most important mentors is here -- Senator Christine Kehoe with her spouse Julie Warren. Chris -- thank you for every opportunity you ever gave me.

Also making the trip north, San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer and Sheriff Bill Gore. Today is an especially fine day for America's finest city. It's been nearly 40 years since Jim Mills, was the first and only Senator from San Diego County to serve as Pro Tem, until today. And I'm honored by every San Diegan who made the trip today.

I want to extend a special acknowledgement to those colleagues with whom I served on the San Diego City Council -- Jim Madaffer and Assemblymember Brian Maienschein, along with, of course, my current colleague Senator Ben Hueso. My good friend and former colleague Congressman Scott Peters is in Washington doing our nation's business but his remarkable wife Lynn Gorguze is here with us.

And I want to recognize one of my dearest friends from college Pam Kestner. She has served three different Virginia governors and still found time to join us here today.

Now that's my work family. Here's my family family. I'm pleased to introduce my mother and father in law -- Dr. Jack and Kate LeSar.

And most importantly -- my spouse, Jennifer LeSar. Every day, Jennifer proves you don't have to serve in elected office to serve the public good. And I wouldn't be the public servant I am today without her. So Jennifer, thank you.

To everyone present -- to every Californian -- and especially to my colleagues -- today might seem all about me -- but -- tomorrow -- I promise -- it's all about you. And I can't wait to get started.

By nurture or nature, I've always been a little uncomfortable talking when the subject of the sentence is me. I've always preferred to work behind the scenes, advancing good public policy and, hopefully, making life easier and better and more affordable for everyday Californians.

But too many generations of pioneers and trailblazers have sacrificed too much to the cause of equality for me not to highlight a few historic firsts.

One, this is the first time an open member of the LGBTQ community has been elected to lead the California State Senate.

And, two, this is the first time a woman has been elected to lead the Senate of America's largest state.

It's the first time. And it's about time.

Now -- to be honest with you -- I came to the Senate to make progress, not history.

But, if I'm touching any part of the sky today, it's because I'm standing on the shoulders of couriers of courage. Individuals who refused to accept closed doors, hidden closets or glass ceilings.

They weren't waiting – they were working. Marching in streets. Battling in courtrooms. Speaking out. Stepping up.

This ascension is their accomplishment, not mine.

All I can do to celebrate their legacies is to follow their examples and fight every single day to make moments like this the rule, instead of the rare exception.

I'm particularly honored to accept the gavel at the same time a woman is already leading the Senate Republicans. Pat Bates and I aren't always ideological soulmates but we are soul sisters who both love California. And I'm excited about what we can accomplish together.

As this moment shows, California has always been a place that proves history need not be destiny.

Californians are constantly rewriting our own narrative. We're dreamers, not dwellers. We've built the greatest engine of opportunity the Earth has ever known – but we never settle for the status quo. We aren't content to just stand our ground -- we reach for the stars.

And we are the envy of the world because of it.

Now, there will always be people in this line of work who cling to a gauzy version of a simpler past.

But – for California – to quote that great philosopher of my day -- Carly Simon: "These ARE the good old days."

Step outside and soak it in.

See the natural splendor matched with human capital, innovators and educators and caregivers and skilled workers, communities teeming with diversity and productivity.

In recent years, we've kicked open doors to fairer wages and fundamental human rights. We've invested in public schools, modern infrastructure and clean air and water. We've made it easier for people to access health care when they need it, to afford a roof over their head where they need it and to save for a secure retirement after a lifetime of service.

These ARE the good old days. On any given day, California is the world's breadbasket, the capitol of both the entertainment industry and the innovation economy and produces more domestic prosperity than 236 nations. The future is now – and it's within each of us to bring it forth.

Our challenge now is to ensure that those good old days are being enjoyed universally – not just the privilege of certain communities.

We must ensure that every person living in California – no matter how they look, who they love or where their parents were born – can climb life's ladder, live out loud and be whoever they want to be -- without being demeaned, downsized or discriminated against.

California's truest potential is to be a place where nothing stands in the way of its people fulfilling their truest potential.

And, as duly elected representatives of the people, we must always strive to lead by example.

For this Legislature these last few months, the learning curve's been a little steep.

We've been confronted with some hard truths about our duty to each other and to our employees in this hallowed workplace.

The work we do, the laws we pass, hold the power to positively change millions of lives. But great policymaking doesn't exempt policymakers from personal responsibility.

To some extent, we bear the burden of past sins too often swept under the rug. We can't change the past. But we can and should be judged on how we shape the future.

Recently, we've reformed some of our internal processes for the better.

But we know that true culture change cannot be legislated or decreed. It doesn't occur overnight. And it doesn't get solved simply by electing women to leadership.

True culture change – holding ourselves to a higher standard – requires the active, every day, enlightened participation of every person who works in and around this Capitol.

And I pledge to you: that will be our mission and our mandate.

And we will treat any person – of any gender identity, age or orientation – who walks into the people's building with respect.

Of course, culture change is about more than how we treat one another. It's also how collaboratively we work with one another.

Another lesson of the past few months is that our Legislature is at its best when we endeavor to be greater than the sum of our turf battles. We are a big tent. And we are bicameral. But some issues cry out for elevated consensus.

One thing I've noticed in ceremonial moments like today – when the cameras are rolling -- we paint in bold colors, promising aspiration above ambition, partnership over partisanship, unity over division – and everything seems possible.

It's a sweet-sounding sentiment -- but it always seems to have a day-long shelf-life. How fast those ideals fade. Today's applause lines become tomorrow's broken promises.

But I'm not interested in happy rhetoric. I'll be happy when we get results. And I'm willing to work with anyone willing to shake off the shackles of zero-sum thinking and put some big ideas on the table for the people of California.

Now – it's no secret that I have a deep and abiding affection for the Assembly and the Members who serve there. They were my colleagues. They are my friends. And I know my successor as Speaker, Anthony Rendon, to be a leader of integrity and creativity.

And if you think I might not care enough about the historical rivalry which separates the Senate from the Assembly----- you're right, I don't care AT ALL about the old fights and frictions.

The people we serve view us as one co-equal branch of government and hold us to the exact same measure. And I'm looking forward to collaborating with my friend Speaker Rendon and the entire Assembly to meet and exceed those public expectations.

I know our houses have some differences – red carpet versus green. Washington instead of Lincoln. But we have far more in common. The oath we took. The constituents we serve. Our quiet, understated Appropriations Chairs.

So I don't care whether you are a Senator or an Assemblymember, a Republican or a Democrat, rural or urban, north, south or central – we are all Californians, we all represent Californians, and, like California itself, we succeed or we fail together.

That's my deal. I want to build on the remarkable progress of the past -- but I want to approach it a little differently.

Because that's what transitions are for – to reflect, renew and evolve.

And I know old ways die hard.

But we owe it to our constituents, and everyone who works in and around this building, to turn the page and write our own narrative.

After all, isn't that the promise of California? Where people can dream big dreams and make them real. Where people can be whoever they want to be.

Where the daughter of a poor Virginia coalminer can succeed the son of a poor Mexican housekeeper as the leader of the State Senate.

That's the California I love. And that's a promise I intend to keep.

Thanks for listening. Now let's get to work.

* * *

Toni G. Atkins represents the 39th Senate District, which includes most of the city of San Diego, as well as the cities of Coronado, Del Mar, and Solana Beach. She becomes the second Senate President pro Tempore from San Diego County. The first was Jim Mills, who served as leader from 1970 to 1980. Prior to beginning her first term in the Senate, she served on the San Diego City Council from 2000 to 2008 and the state Assembly from 2010 to 2016. Atkins served as acting Mayor of San Diego in 2005 and Speaker of the Assembly from 2014 to 2016.

Website of Senator Toni G. Atkins: www.senate.ca.gov/Atkins

###