



COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS

VICE RANKING MEMBER

SUBCOMMITTEE ON

ECONOMIC GROWTH, TAX, AND CAPITAL ACCESS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON

RURAL DEVELOPMENT, AGRICULTURE, TRADE, AND
ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515-5200

COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE UNITED STATES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON

WATER, OCEANS, AND WILDLIFE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

VICE RANKING MEMBER

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH

SUBCOMMITTEE ON

OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

12th Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders

East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii

Remarks by Congresswoman Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen

Member for American Samoa

Co-chair, Congressional Pacific Islands Caucus

Opening Session, Tuesday, September 13, 2022

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Talofa, Aloha, and good morning... Thank you for offering me the time to speak and I understand that my governor, Lemanu Mauga, spoke to you by Zoom. In addition to being head of government, he is a high chief in our culture, just as I am. Whenever there are Samoans in the audience, it's a custom in my culture that we say one or two words of greeting in our native language. So, if you will permit me, (Samoan customary greeting).

I'm honored to be sitting here but I find it a bit surreal. It seems as though of late I have been chasing around the region the memory of Peter Tali Coleman. Two weeks ago, I was a delegate to the sixth American Samoa constitutional convention, the first of which my father organized and chaired in 1960 and now I'm here at PICL, of which he was a founding standing committee member and participant 20 years later in 1980.

My father was a regionalist and, like all of the other leaders of the post-war founding generation of the modern insular Pacific, I think he and they would be troubled by the fractionalization of our region that we have witnessed in recent years. Growing up in Government House in American Samoa, I watched as leaders came and went but came to a realization of their closeness only in 1982 when my father hosted a South Pacific Conference in Pago Pago and personally invited his old friends to come for the opening ceremonies. Eight of them came.

I helped organize that conference and the night before the opening ceremonies when dad invited the heads of government and heads of state to Government House for relaxation and refreshments, I peered between the palm fronds separating the main living room from the hallway and watched as the King of Tonga strummed his balalaika and the others joined together in songs familiar to their generation while sipping their beverages. It was at that moment that I realized that although they carried different titles like king, president, prime minister, premier and governor, these titles were imported from the Western World. In that room, they were peers and friends who carried the same title in all our Pacific cultures: leader of the people. I think I

like best the simple title used in Tokelau: ulu, which among other things in the sister Samoan language means head. That says it all.

My father would have liked to have joined his friends at the PIF (Pacific Islands Forum) when it was founded in 1971 but was barred by our political status. Under our constitutional arrangements with the United States, we cannot have our own foreign policy. But that is fine with us, as we reaffirmed our status in our recent constitutional convention. The subject of our fundamental ties to the U.S. was not even questioned at that gathering and the day the American Flag was first raised over our islands in 1900 remains to this day our most important secular holiday.

That's why my father so eagerly embraced this organization when it was founded nine years after the Forum. He and his friends on that first standing committee – which included Ratu Mara, Michael Somare, Tom Davis and other leaders of that era – recognized there needed to be a forum where leaders of all the Pacific Islands could speak freely and equally without concern that its deliberations would be dismissed by outsiders as reflecting the policies of the so-called metropolitan powers who largely funded what was then called the South Pacific Conference. With the advent of PICL, at which none of the outside countries has a seat at the table but at which all the Pacific peoples are represented by their leaders, the SPC could more fully concentrate on technical cooperation and the Forum on regional foreign policy while this organization provides a voice for all at the leadership level.

As for me, I offer myself as your voice in Washington, D.C. Yes, many of you have embassies, Washington offices or lobbyists to look after your specific needs, and they all do a wonderful job, but when Congressman Kaiali'i Kahele departs Washington in January, I will be the only Polynesian in Congress and as such I consider it my responsibility, along with my two Micronesian colleagues, to carry to my fellow members your views on regional issues. Whenever you are in Washington and whenever your government representatives have the need, you and they should look at my office as their office on Capitol Hill.

As most of you know, under our system of government the Congress is an entirely separate and independent branch of government, unlike that of those countries that have a parliamentary system. As such, I can freely express my views without concern that they represent the policy of the United States government. Those views are left to be expressed by such senior luminaries as Secretary Wendy Sherman, Kurt Campbell, Dan Kritenbrink, who are joining us at this conference and who will be hosting the Forum leaders who will be meeting with President Biden in Washington in two weeks' time.

This meeting is perfectly timed so that when they go to Washington the Forum leaders will be armed with the views of the entire region, without regard to political status. I think we all owe a great debt of gratitude to you, Chairman Panuelo, for your courageous letter to your colleagues warning of the dangers of running into agreements with the PRC (People's Republic of China) that could destabilize our region and disrupt the peace and tranquility we have enjoyed since the last shots were fired in 1945 to end the Great Pacific War. That act drew the attention of Western capitals and is a major reason the alarm bells went off in Washington in a way not seen since the mid-1980s, when the late Mikhail Gorbachev declared the Soviet Union to be a Pacific nation in his historic speech in Vladivostok and concluded a major fishing deal with Kiribati in the middle of the region. Shortly thereafter, the Soviet Union crumbled, and Washington went back to sleep.

Now we have China.

I was in Taiwan just last month to meet with President Tsai as part of a congressional delegation led by Sen. Ed Markey of Massachusetts, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific. Following closely on the heels of Speaker Nancy Pelosi, whose own visit angered Beijing, China was none too happy with us either and I imagine I would not be welcome in China any time soon.

I can tell you that the Pacific Island countries never have had the international leverage that they enjoy today, and I hope you will exercise it with Beijing as much as I expect you will in Washington. Yes, we all know that the major existential issue facing our region is climate change and nowhere else in the world is it a greater threat than in small Pacific Islands, especially atolls. I can see it at my own home as the seashore each year creeps closer to my front doorsteps. And having lived in the Marshall Islands while my father administered there functioning as head of government for four years, I am painfully aware that that great country could disappear from the face of the earth if something is not done to bring the greenhouse gases under control.

Just before I left Washington for my trip to Asia, Congress passed a bill that makes available \$369 billion dollars for energy security and climate change. That includes \$110 million to the territories through the Environmental Protection Agency and \$15 million technical assistance for climate change, for mitigation, adaptation, and resilience in the form of competitive grants through Interior's Office of Insular Affairs.

Even though the U.S. has led the world in reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in recent decades far ahead of all other nations by as much as five times and is greater than the reductions of greenhouse gases of the U.K., Spain, Japan, Russia, France, Germany, Canada and Greece combined, I know you will be asking President Biden to do more for the rest of the Pacific—and you should.

But at the same time, you must exercise your leverage to be certain China is playing its part. The real measure of contribution to global warming by greenhouse gases is the volume of emissions, and by far above all nations in the world the greatest contributor of the highest volume of greenhouse emissions is the PRC.

China leads those heavily populated and industrialized nations that have not met international goals for reducing CO₂. While China says the right things it does not do the right things – China is heavily reliant on coal power and the country is currently running 1,058 coal plants – more than half the world's capacity. I realize Beijing has made ample climate related funds available to Pacific countries with whom China has diplomatic relations but before you even think about negotiating any agreements with Beijing, you should be asking China to live up to international standards. They are not signatories to the Paris Climate Accord and although they say they are meeting international goals, their statistics are suspect. Our Pacific peoples and our governments need to deal with PRC at arm's length with our eyes wide open.

And while you are at it, use your international leverage and prestige to tell China not to support Russia in any way in its unjust war in Ukraine. Climate change standards and Ukraine War support are the two areas at a minimum that China must address with the Pacific before you even

begin to talk with them about increasing their involvement in our islands. We owe it to the people we lead. I guess I've already have joined Nancy Pelosi on Xi's list of least favorite people, so I might as well join Putin's list while I am at it.

Finally, I am indebted to Congressman Ed Case of Hawaii for taking the leadership to form the bipartisan Congressional Pacific Islands Caucus, on which I am honored to serve as a co-chairman. Ed and I recently traveled together on two delegations: one to Palau for the Our Ocean Conference and one to Poland to look into the refugee crisis spawned by Russia's war on Ukraine. Later this week the Caucus will have a roundtable discussion with the presidential envoy leading U.S. negotiations on Compacts with the Freely Associated States in Micronesia. Inasmuch as last week I learned that I will not be opposed for reelection to Congress in November, when I return to the House of Representatives in January, I intend to encourage both the Pacific Islands Caucus and Sen. Markey's subcommittee to make visits to our region over the course of the next term of Congress. In addition to my office, I would invite you to look at our Caucus as your best friends on Capitol Hill. Whatever new initiatives the Biden administration will undertake in the Pacific will need to be funded by American taxpayers and those funds must be approved by Congress, where I have a voice. The relevant committees of Congress will be looking to our caucus for advice and your united support would have an impact. Their visits to our region are essential for them to truly understand the problems we face.

Again, Mr. Chairman and the leaders, I appreciate the invitation to be here with you, acknowledge with appreciation the participation of my governor, Lemanu Mauga, thank you all very much. I want to convey to you my very best wishes in your deliberations here and good luck to those traveling on to Washington, DC. Soifua, ma ia manuia.