

Divisions Mark Opening of Sixth Constitutional Convention as Leadership Vote Sparks Controversy

Critics claim the selection process maintains the status quo, while newly elected president Richards emphasizes experience and the need for unity in drafting the territory's constitution.

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Nelcia Charlemagne **January 29, 2025**

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6th Constitutional Convention President Usie R. Richards, a 5-term lawmaker, former Senate President and respected statesman. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

The tenure of the Sixth Constitutional Convention began on a tense note, with the behavior demonstrated in the Legislative chamber casting a shadow over the purpose of this important body — the territory's sixth attempt at establishing the territory's constitution.

On Tuesday, the 15 delegates of the Convention – elected during last November's general election – took the oath of office as they prepare to take on a task that those before have been unsuccessful in drafting.

John J. Abramson Jr, Lilliana Belardo de ONeal, John M. Canegata, Devin F. Carrington, Imani Daniel, Lydia Hendricks, Rudel A. Hodge Jr, Stedmann Hodge Jr, Usie Raymond Richards, Akima Richardson, Rupert W. Ross Jr, Ronald Russell, David Silverman, Arturo Watlington Jr, and Alecia Wells promised to faithfully and impartially discharge the duties assigned to them.

The next order of business was adopting Resolution 001, establishing the officers of the Sixth Constitutional Convention as follows: Usie Raymond Richards as President, Stedmann Hodge as Vice President, Imani Daniel as Secretary, and John J Ambramson Jr as Treasurer. The motion passed with a slim 8-7 majority.

When delegates were afforded a point of personal privilege to thank their supporters and loved ones, the minority voters instead took the opportunity to voice their displeasure with the composition of the Convention's executive team, led by Mr. Richards, a 5-term lawmaker, former Senate President and respected statesman.



Imani Daniel (Credit: V.I. Legislature)

Imani Daniel, a write-in candidate for the St. Thomas district – where only [four names were listed](#) on the ballot – was the first to express displeasure with the Convention's leadership. "I'm already incredibly disappointed in this Convention and the way that we organize and the way that we chose leadership and in the way that promises and intentions were broken," said Ms. Daniel, [who received 80 votes](#) to Mr. Richards's 3,102 — the top vote getter. "I think we are upholding the status quo in the Virgin Islands, and we are not pushing forward millennials and youth and women who deserve to lead, who are capable of leading," she added. "Who don't hear will feel," was Ms. Daniel's cryptic warning. "You had an opportunity here to do something different, and you chose not to. We'll see how it goes."

Ms. Daniel is one of the two younger female members of the group of 15. The other, Akima Richardson, considered the Constitutional Convention "history in the making."

Meanwhile Arturo Watlington, who had also objected to Resolution 001, shared a concern that the Sixth Constitutional Convention could replicate the "bullying experience" of the previous. "We had a concept wherein a majority was formed, and a minority was created. Today resembles the

same process,” he lamented.

Others shared their displeasure with the leadership in less impassioned words. “I had hoped for a different leadership, but I stand fully behind the leadership which was duly elected. I am a collaborator by nature,” said David Silverman.

“I too, had hoped for a different outcome this morning because I believe that the older heads should be holding up and giving information to the younger heads,” noted Alecia Wells, the Convention’s at-large representative.

Conversely, delegates like Ronald Russell urged collaboration. “I hear that you don't like how it was formed, but we formed, and it's now time to get on to business.”

“I have no issues with having a woman in leadership roles,” clarified John Canegata. He, however, urged for the commencement of work despite the composition of the leadership. “I can honestly say I've never worked at something that failed, and I don't expect this to be the first.”

Tuesday’s session concluded with remarks from Mr. Richards. He reminded the delegates of his extensive background and experience. “I've presided over a 24-member body in the Caribbean, a 45-member body in the Americas, and have served in the capacity of creating a governance document for over 212 national federations.”

“It is that experience I intend to bring to bear to ensure the concerns, the ideas, the issues of everyone is equally heard,” declared Mr. Richards. “I'm pleased to be the Traffic Director, for the lack of a better term.”

He referenced an African proverb which goes, “the father places his son on his shoulder so that the son could see further down the road...” “This is what we intend to do today for our youthful members,” he assured.