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It's Time to Allow the Media Back at Government House

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Government House, St. Croix

On Monday, as a VI Consortium reporter was asking Governor Albert Bryan some important questions during Mr. Bryan's coronavirus press briefing, the phone cut off. It was not the first time this happened. During a previous press briefing, this same reporter, Ernice Gilbert, was muted as he was asking a question.

Mr. Gilbert has not been the only reporter who has experienced issues with the call-in system at Government House.

On Monday, Mr. Bryan jokingly said the occurrences may lead the community to believe that the cut offs are a conspiracy against Mr. Gilbert.

We don't think so. Instead, we believe the administration has been experiencing sincere technical issues with its system.

What we do know is that it's time for the administration to start allowing media back to Government House during the briefings, so that the press could start asking questions again in the presence of the governor and other officials, where followups are much more conducive, and where phone faux pas are a non-issue.

This is critical because now more than ever, Virgin Islanders need their media representatives to ask the territory's leaders probing questions with no hindrances caused of supposed technical issues.

Government House usually uses the following line in its releases about the press briefings: "In keeping with CDC and Virgin Islands Health Department guidelines to adhere to social distancing, no media will be allowed into Government House and the press briefing will be conducted via conference call."

But that's just a cop out that is increasingly appearing to be the administration's effort to control the narrative and shield from not only probing questions, but the followups that make any probing question relevant. What's a proper question without essential followup? And beyond that, the administration should not be allowed to make its current setup the norm. Freedom of the Press has been a bedrock of the American way of life for a reason: like The Washington Post says, democracy dies in darkness. This idea of call-in as the norm has not proven to be adequate, especially when Government House's own system — on numerous occasions — has proven to have glitches.

Relative to the social distancing argument, it was understandable in the early stages of the pandemic, when things were developing fast and action had to be taken. But now that information on the disease's spread is widely available, protocols to help minimize infection are also well known.

Looking at leaders on the U.S. mainland — more pointedly in the two most visible instances of President Donald Trump and Governor Andrew Cuomo — the media has been present, with strict social distancing protocols being adhered to. Media reps sit in chairs, each six feet apart and asks questions. Some setups even see media reps being tested for high fever.

There are only a few reporters in the U.S. Virgin Islands who attend these events, and the Government House ballroom on St. Croix, where the current call-in setup is being staged, is wide enough to facilitate adequate social distancing.

This administration, when it was just a campaign, had lauded openness as a principle that would be at the foundation of its tenure. Mr. Bryan even said his administration would be so open that residents would get sick of it.

In good faith, then, Mr. Bryan, go the extra mile and consider the press — who represent the people — and make accommodation for social distancing. You can even keep your call-in line active, but this open-ended lockout of media from the house of the people of the Virgin Islands is unacceptable.

