

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Democratic Majority Formed, Neville James Is Senate President

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The Democratic Party has formed its Majority following a solid victory in the 2014 General Elections, after 11 of the 15 senators elected to be part of the 31st Legislature were Democrats.

Of the Majority, Neville James, who will be serving his fifth term as a senator, has been chosen as Senate President; Janette Million Young Vice President; and Samuel Sanes as Majority leader. Of the 11 Democratic senators making up the Majority, six are from St. Thomas while five are from St. Croix.

The St. Croix Democrats are as follows:

- Kurt Vialet
- Samuel Sanes
- Kenneth Gittens
- Novelle Francis
- Neville James

On accepting the position of Senate President, James said in a statement that his colleagues chose him to lead because of the experience he has as a senator. The incoming Sen. President also said he has given "much thought to the discipline that should be exercised by the members of this institution, and we have organized in a manner that lends to the strengths of each committee chairperson and members of the central staff."

James did not reveal the committees to which senators were delegated.

The St. Thomas Democrats are:

- Janette Millin Young
- Marvin Blyden
- Clifford Graham
- Jean Forde
- Myron Jackson
- Justin Harrigan

Excluded from the Majority are St. Croix senators Terrence "Positive" Nelson, who is a member of the Independent Citizens Movement (ICM), and Nereida "Nellie" Rivera-O'Reilly, an independent senator.

When asked for her thoughts on the newly formed Democratic Majority, Rivera-O'Reilly, a former Democrat, said it did not surprise her that the group was formed along party lines, pointing out that during the campaign season candidates vowed to come together as a cohesive St. Croix front, regardless of party affiliation.

"I expected it. I have never been in the majority and I wouldn't last a day in one," she said, adding, "I can't be controlled and no one will tell me how to vote. Those are nonnegotiable for me."

And, regarding promises some candidates made on the campaign trail, Rivera-O'Reilly said, "Candidates bank on voters having a short memory, but we'll see what happens. I hope it's different."

The four-term senator also pointed out that much of the work of legislative bodies in the past have been bogged down with hearings to provide status updates on previous hearings. She is hopeful things will be different with the 31st Legislature, stating that she wants to see lawmakers "actually get to legislate" in the best interest of Virgin Islands' residents.

As compared to the five women senators in the 30th Legislature--Sen. Diane Capehart, Sen. Judi Buckley, Sen. Alicia Hansen, Sen. Janette Millin Young, and Rivera-O'Reilly herself--Rivera-O'Reilly is only one of two women senators re-elected to the 31st Legislature; Sen. Janette Millin Young also retained her seat.

However, Rivera-O'Reilly said it does not bother her that she will be St. Croix's only female senator come January--Senators Capehart and Hansen were voted out, and Sen. Buckley did not seek a second term. In fact, Rivera-O'Reilly said she had already dealt with being the only female senator during her tenure in the 28th Legislature.

"I had a huge amount of respect from the other fourteen men senators and I did not feel lonely," Rivera-O'Reilly said.

However, she said she was disappointed that, despite her efforts, her other female colleagues in the 30th Legislature, except Buckley, did not do more to form alliances with each other to help push forward legislation that would benefit Virgin Islands' families.

"I think that's really sad," Rivera-O'Reilly said, adding that she tried to form a caucus among the female senators, and also conducted meetings in an effort to get more women involved in politics. "Senator Buckley was the only one that saw the need to work together."

As the 30th Legislature is in its final days, Rivera-O'Reilly said she has submitted more than 231 pieces of legislation over the two-year period, adding, "I don't need to be in the majority to get things done. I don't stop working. It is what the people have elected me to do and that is what I get paid to do."

The new Senate will take office on January 12, 2015.