

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Liburd, O'Reilly Chastise James For Leaving Them Out Of Interior Dept. Meetings

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Senators Nereida "Nellie" Rivera-O'Reilly and Almando "Rocky" Liburd have jointly voiced their objections to Senate President Neville James' decision to exclude them from recent meetings held with officials from the U.S. Interior Department.

James and what he called "the St. Croix Senate Majority," which is comprised of Democratic members, met with Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Insular Affairs, Esther Kia'a'aina, along with Insular Affairs Director Nikolao Pula on Feb. 4. Neither St. Croix District Sen. O'Reilly, an independent, nor Senator-at-Large Liburd, who also represents the St. Croix District, were invited to participate.

Both subsequently wrote strongly worded letters to James criticizing his decision.

"These officials play an extremely important role in managing our resources and directing policy here in the Virgin Islands and we each had a great deal we would have liked to convey to them," Sen. Liburd wrote. "To only afford members of the Democratic Majority a voice is disrespectful and, frankly, unbecoming of a Senate President."

Sen. Liburd, who was president of the 21st and 24th Legislatures, said it is acceptable for the Senate president to represent the body on his own, but that once an invitation is extended to other members, it must be extended to all.

"As Senate president, you are first among a body of equals and you play a pivotal role in ensuring that the Legislature is managed fairly with all members being afforded an equal measure of consideration," Liburd said. "At all times you must keep in mind that you serve as president of a public institution and not of a political majority."

Three-term Sen. O'Reilly said, in her experience, all Senate members had been included in previous meetings with the Interior Department, and that there were a great number of issues she would have raised, given the opportunity.

"The St. Croix non-majority senators and our senator-at-large are the senior members of the body," O'Reilly wrote. "We bring a wealth of institutional knowledge that can only strengthen our position as we make the case for federal assistance and intervention in the affairs of the territory."

Sen. O'Reilly said she was deeply disappointed by the level of partisanship demonstrated by only inviting Majority members to the meeting with Washington officials.

"The message that rang the loudest leading to and following the election was one of unity and collaboration," O'Reilly said. "In particular, the people of St. Croix heard their elected officials say unequivocally that they would work together to move our island away from economic despair. The vexing issues affecting the district of St. Croix are not limited to party affiliation."

Liburd pointed out that as senator-at-large, he represented the entire territory and that the daily lives of St. Johnians were greatly impacted by the policies of the Interior Department, given the department's oversight of the V.I. National Park.

"Rebuilding St. Croix's economy must be our priority," Sen. Liburd said. "However, I told the Senate president that leaving St. John out of [the] discussion was a tremendous oversight given that the Interior Department controls the majority of land on St. John."

The senators said they chose to stand together with the hope that there would be greater fairness in the future.