

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp Slams Coffelt: She Wanted To Run Justice Department 'As A Government Under Her Control'

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ST. THOMAS -- At a press conference organized and held at Government House here to announce Claude Walker as the new Attorney General, Governor Kenneth Mapp, while answering questions, lashed out at former Acting Attorney General Soraya Diase-Coffelt, his first pick for the position that has seen four acting attorney generals in eight months.

The governor said the Department of Justice is currently "in a mess," and that Walker and former Acting AG James Carroll, who will now serve as counsel to the Attorney General, "can turn that around."

Mapp also acknowledged Carroll for starting the turnaround process, and thanked him personally for serving in the AG capacity.

But in relation to the ongoing "mess" at the Justice Department, Mapp, in responding to a question that inserted some of Diase-Coffelt's assertions during a January press conference that the governor wanted to install a solicitor general with a direct line to Government House, and that Randy Knight, Mapp's chief of staff had yelled at her, the governor said it was Diase-Coffelt who had her own agenda; wanting little oversight in regards to how to run the department.

"The person I had intended to nominate first as attorney general did cite sufficient differences in the management style of the administration," Mapp began. "And it was clear and with no disrespect intended to her, it was clear that her perception was that she would be attorney general and then she would take that department and run off and manage it as if it was a government totally under her control."

He added: "The Revised Organic Act is clear in terms of the cabinet, the members of the cabinet and the governor's overall responsibility and authority as chief executive officer of the government to manage the affairs of the government.

"No commissioner, no member of a cabinet can expect -- whether in the Government of the Virgin Islands, in a state government, in the national government -- that they would be given a department as its head, and then they would do whatsoever they will in that department," the territory's leader went on.

Mapp also pointed to VI Code in relation to selecting a solicitor general, suggesting that Diase-Coffelt wanted to pick who would lead that office, contrary to what the law states.

"The law, for example, authorizes and directs the governor of the Virgin Islands to appoint the solicitor general; not the attorney general," he said. "And so in those differences, in those misunderstandings, the original appointee determined that she could not work or serve with the administration, and we respect her position in taking that position, and we wished her well in her future endeavors."

On [January 23](#), Diase-Coffelt lead a press conference that laid bare why she resigned her position as attorney general with the Mapp administration.

Diase-Coffelt said while she was recruited for the position with the understanding that she would be given the freedom to do her work effectively, she experienced everything but that.

"Throughout the campaign last year, the people of the Virgin Islands cried out for justice," Diase-Coffelt began. "They no longer wanted a weak Attorney General and Department of Justice that appeared to do only the Governor's bidding, and sweep corruption under the rug."

She continued, "They wanted someone to fight a war against corruption, a corruption that has plagued all of us. I was ready and willing to take on that challenge as the people's Attorney General."

Diase-Coffelt went on to speak of the importance of having the right people around her so she could have done her job effectively.

"In fighting the war against corruption and doing other important work in the Virgin Islands Department of Justice, I needed the right weapons and tools.

"The most important are the people who would work closely with me, as we must work together as a team, bringing experience and ensuring confidentiality and professionalism," she said.

Diase-Coffelt added that while it is the governor who appoints the Attorney General and the other attorneys at the Department of Justice, it was her job to advise and recommend those who would be appointed.

"Virgin Islands law provides that the Governor appoints the attorney general, as well as all the attorneys in the Department of Justice, but it is the Attorney General who prescribes the work," the former gubernatorial candidate said.

As a preface to the four points that Diase-Coffelt wanted to highlight as cause leading to her resignation, she laid bare the discussions she had with the then-Governor and Lieutenant Governor elect, detailing the basis on which she would accept the position.

"Before accepting the position of Attorney General, I met twice with the Governor and Lieutenant Governor," she said.

"The Governor specifically told me that I would be able to build my team and he would not 'micro-manage' me—those were his words, not mine.

"This was critical to me because of what I needed, and what the people demanded for an effective Attorney General. The Governor knew this, the Lieutenant Governor knew this, and I knew this.

"Based on what the Governor assured me, I trusted him and I accepted the position," Diase-Coffelt explained.

From there, Diase-Coffelt made known, in detail, the circumstances that led to her resignation.

"However, it quickly became obvious to me that what he had assured me would not happen. Here are the facts and nothing but the facts:

"One. I was forced to accept upper-level staffing changes that I did not agree with, and had not even been consulted on. I was treated as a messenger, as I was given letters by the Chief of Staff (Randy Knight) to deliver to two managing attorneys who were being fired the very afternoon that I was given the letters. Again, I was never consulted on these firings.

"After I was given the letters to deliver, I objected to firing these attorneys, especially since they had the experience I needed to move forward. [However], I was told that the decision had already been made, and they had to go. I was ordered to deliver the letters to them. One of these attorneys had been on staff for at least eight years, and had a

disabled child; now he has no job to support his child.

"Two. On Wednesday morning, January seventh, I was attending the inaugural activities on St. John, and I received a telephone call from the Department of Justice, informing me that an attorney (Terri Griffiths) had walked into the office, and had announced that this attorney was the new Solicitor General. Needless to say, I was very surprised, as no one had told me anything, and there was still a sitting Solicitor General.

"I was also informed that the attorney said that this would have to be kept quiet for a couple of weeks, because that attorney still had a pending case in the courts.

"Virgin Islands law prohibits an attorney from working in the Department of Justice and also having a private practice. I asked the contact person to tell the attorney that I knew nothing about what was happening, and to ask the attorney to please return the next day.

"I later telephoned and notified the Governor's council about this, as he was the person designated to vet applicants. I told him that I objected to this attorney being hired at the Department of Justice and my having not been previously notified.

"I also said that no attorney should be brought on in violation of Virgin Islands law. This attorney did not return again to the office while I was there. Later, at a meeting with the Governor and his other staff, I adamantly objected to this attorney being hired and given the high-level position of Solicitor General.

"I stated my reasons why. The Governor agreed with me and said that he would not make the appointment. The Lieutenant Governor was at the meeting, and also fully supported me.

"Unbeknownst to me, however, things began to transpire behind my back. Within less than a week later, I was told that the Governor had changed his mind, and now insisted on this being given the high-level position of Solicitor General, after all.

"Government House's response to my objection was that I was not to communicate with that attorney while that attorney was working at the Department of Justice. In other words, I was told that this attorney was untouchable.

"The Solicitor General oversees a group of attorneys at the Department of Justice, and handles all leases, contracts and appeals for the government. The Solicitor General makes policy decision on all these matters. Virgin Islands law provides that the Attorney General is the head of the Department of Justice, over the Solicitor General.

"But now, this attorney was now going to serve as Solicitor General and would be untouchable by me. As I saw it, that attorney would be able to do whatever that attorney wanted to do, and have a direct line of communication to Government House, but I would not be able to communicate with that attorney. I was shocked and found this totally unacceptable.

"Three. I would like to next state what happened in regards to my bringing on Mr. Kevin Rodriguez to assist me. I went through the appropriate and proper channels to obtain authorization to bring Rodriguez on board to help me with the transition.

"These channels were the Governor's Chief of Staff; the Lieutenant Governor, who is the chairman of the transition team; and the new Director of Personnel, with whom Mr. Rodriguez had worked during the Turnbull administration.

"Mr. Rodriguez's expertise is in Human Resources and Personnel Management, having served eight years as a Personnel Director for Governor Turnbull. He was assisting me with the transition, which involved making an assessment of the staffing situation in the department, including lawyers and non-lawyers.

"Mr. Rodriguez was at the Department of Justice for one-and-a-half days, from Wednesday, January seventh, to Thursday, January eighth, at approximately noon.

"At around noon, I received a telephone call from the Governor's Chief of Staff, who ordered me to get rid of him and to have him leave the building immediately.

"I reminded [the Chief of Staff] that he had given me permission to bring Mr. Rodriguez on, and that I had also spoken with the Lieutenant Governor and the Director of Personnel.

"The Chief of Staff continued to yell orders at me to get rid of him. At no time did Mr. Rodriguez interview or hire anyone, as that was not his role. He also did not takeover anyone's office, as there were plenty of vacant offices at the Attorney General's office.

"It is very important for me to say that it was my understanding that other acting commissioners and division heads were meeting with their personnel managers, and assessing their own areas. So what I was doing was not only permitted, but also customary. Unfortunately, there was no personnel manager at the Department of Justice, so it was one of the reasons why I asked Mr. Rodriguez to assist me.

"For the very short time that Mr. Rodriguez was there, all I heard were compliments from the staff. After he left, employees expressed to me their disappointment that he didn't stay on. He found many deficiencies and discussed with me corrective actions to be taken, including ways to obtain federal grant monies to hire more staff.

"Four. The Special Investigations Division at the Department of Justice is a highly specialized division, which handles confidential investigations and other work separate and apart from the police department. It used to have ten highly trained investigators; however, the previous administration fired the director and whittled it down to four investigators.

"I wanted to build it back up with experienced investigators to do the necessary white collar crime, corruption investigations. I submitted two resumes of very experienced, qualified individuals to head that division. At no time did I receive a response back from anyone at Government House. When I spoke to the Governor about filling that position, he told me that they were still looking into it. Then, I was presented with a resume, submitted by the Governor, for his family member to head that division.

"In my opinion, that individual did not have the experience or qualifications to serve in a Special Investigations Unit. To have such a person involved in critical investigations at the Department of Justice was also totally unacceptable to me.

“The Governor made a statement on a radio show this past Saturday, January seventeenth, that I resigned because of what he termed, ‘a cat fight,’ and ‘personality issues,’ with the attorney that he wanted to bring on staff as Solicitor General.

“Those were not the true problems, which were much more egregious and profound. I must also state that there were also additional serious problems that I faced and I endured, but I will not get into them now.

“It is my firm conviction that the Department of Justice cannot be treated as a Governor’s private law firm. It does very important work on behalf of the people of the Virgin Islands, including investigating and prosecuting crimes. My desire was to build a Department of Justice that the people of the Virgin Islands would be proud of. Moreover, I wanted to build a Department of Justice that the employees would be proud of, and that would rival the U.S. Attorney’s Office in experience, professionalism, and confidentiality.

“When I met with the staff of the Department of Justice in St. Thomas, I gave them this vision statement: ‘The VI Department of Justice will provide excellent, independent and ethical legal services for the U.S. Virgin Islands, in order to achieve justice, and to assert, protect and defend the rights of the people.’

“I decided by the fact I was not allowed to do that, and to do what I wanted to do, and I knew what the people wanted me to do. I saw the handwriting on the wall, and in just two short days, I knew that I was not going to be a figurehead Attorney General. I had no other alternative than to resign.”

Diase-Coffelt went on to say that her statement should not be seen as a personal attack on the governor, but instead, “It is to let the people know some of what I endured, and what I believe an effective Attorney General should not have to put up with.”

Diase-Coffelt then made a call to the people of the territory.

“Put pressure on our Legislature to change the law so that we could have an independent Attorney General and Department of Justice,” she said, adding that while there are many ways the law can be changed, it would take “boldness and an overwhelming support from the people.”

The attorney concluded by stating, “Rampant corruption will continue unabated and justice will never be achieved if we allow the status quo to remain and politics as usual to remain. I call for justice for the people of the Virgin Islands, and I call for an independent Attorney General.”