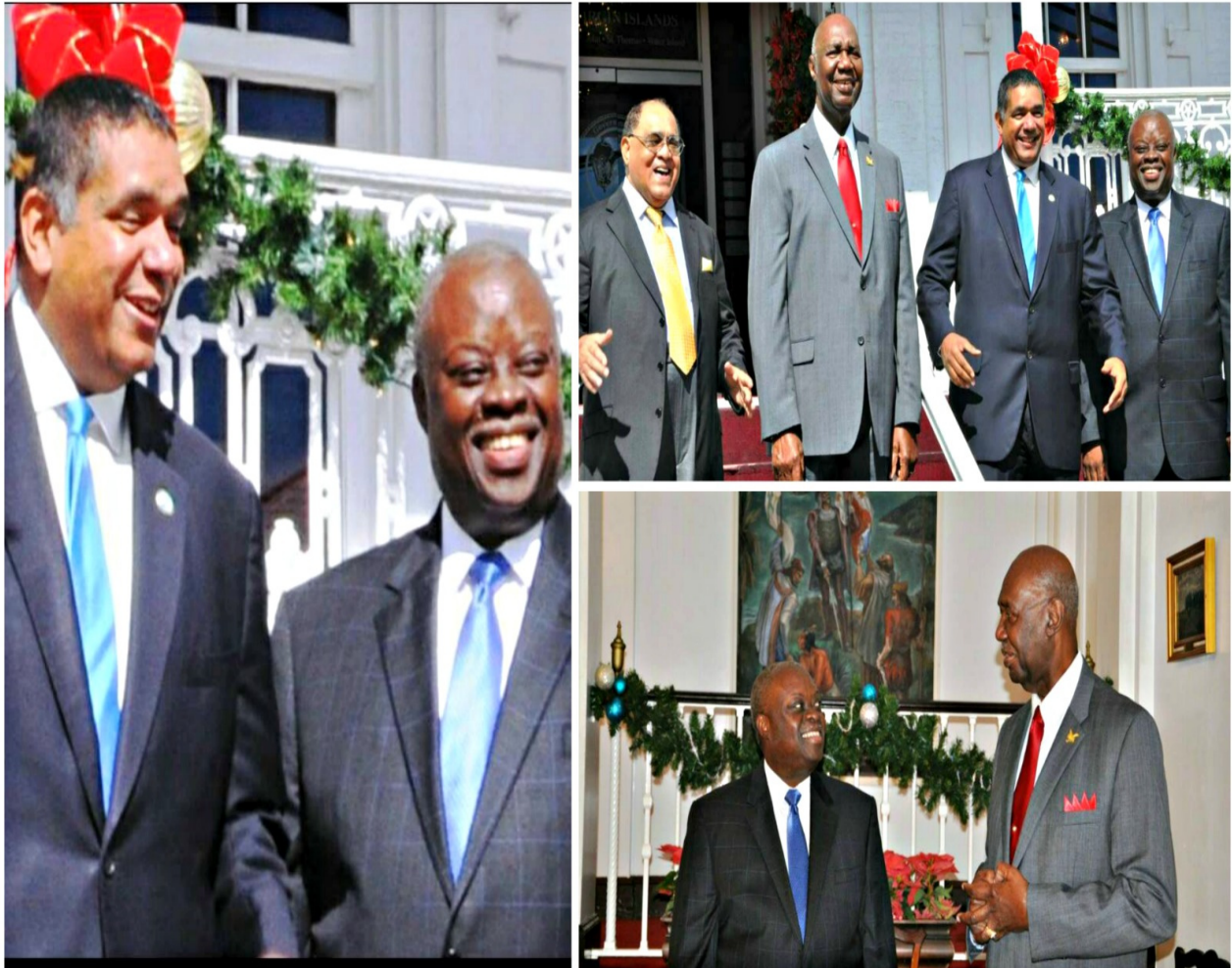


The Virgin Islands Consortium

On The Politics Of Words

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While the failures of government are seemingly obvious, their underlying causes are far more obscure. To simply list our problems today would serve no great purpose. Reiterating brings us no closer to resolution.

What the increasingly amplified daily rancor of complaints reveals is that something is fundamentally wrong in how our government functions, or, if you are in this growing consensus, malfunctions. The simple, and I believe far from thorough approach, is to blame current office holders, seek their recall and at some point, proceed through the judicial system in search of restitution.

If the effort is made to review the passage of the past several decades, we see that the issues that now inflame our passion for a more just and responsible government is not new. There is a recurring theme that characterizes the machinations of one administration after another. The only notable significance is that each succeeding gubernatorial office holder seems justified by previous infractions to extend the limits of their own breaches. When misdeeds of the past go unchallenged they become a basis on which to gauge the potential for more egregious and profitable ventures in the future.

We are all familiar here with the expression: “the politics of personalities.” If we are honest enough to look beyond our own self-interest, it does not seem too difficult to see that there is a striking similarity among many of those drawn to the profession of elected office. Then let us consider the electoral system by which such offices are attained. Thanks to the legal profession and the judicial forum in which it operates, we are increasingly made aware that money and influence is a mainstay that necessarily assures the wealthy and powerful a level of free speech that is commensurate with their elevated social status. Equality in such a system equates to only an equal opportunity to participate at whatever financial level one can afford. The playing field is not designed to be level, but rather open to whatever one can afford; the consequences do not mirror our Constitution or that earlier, most noble and principled document, the Declaration of Independence.

A closer reading of the ‘Declaration’ reveals how crucial the effect of an ill-chosen word can be. There is much evidence to suggest that the consequences which follow can eviscerate original intent while magnifying the widening gulf that a distorted interpretation can render. The central, and I believe only flaw that the ‘Declaration’ contains is the word “happiness”. The context in which we find this otherwise innocuous word is in the stated “pursuit of...” which is thereby elevated in stature to a fundamental right along with “life” and “liberty.” Thereby rendered as an essential component of freedom, it has now become some opportunistic gesture. Once seen as a common goal, it served to articulate a public right. Its interpretation has become accepted to mean a private achievement of individually determined magnitude.

In the passage of time, we not only “wandered off the reservation” of that initial, and most viable democracy, we took the meaning of that word to a context so ill-defined that it no longer serves the authors’ intent. What began as the basis for a widespread social harmony became the unfettered pursuit of self-aggrandizement. In its evolved interpretation it is now possible for one person’s happiness to be another’s horror. We each need to reflect on how such a distortion now affects the drama of the unfolding political process today, both here and on the mainland.

To correct the flaws in such a system requires more than just identifying some of the miscreants. We need to acknowledge the importance of constitutions, and recognize that significant corrections are warranted in our “Revised Organic Act.” Compared to the original, in which municipal government was part of the structure, there is a progressive distortion that devolves into a highly centralized structure that assures far fewer balances of power and a greater ambiguity that leaves the electorate without the necessary financial transparency to evaluate the true costs and benefits, if any, of actions taken by either the legislature or the executive branch.

Past experience informs us that far greater efforts are necessary to educate the electorate as well as potential delegates among them, on how to proceed without the mis-steps of earlier attempts. There is a need for greater involvement not only on the part of the federal government, but the United Nations as well. What is critically needed is outside expertise and not parochial emotions to guide such an undertaking. Absent such support and assistance, we assuredly will fare no better in the next convention than in past efforts.

Unquestionably, it is necessary to put an end to all attempts at the further squandering of critical public resources. But to consider the possibility of good governance in the future requires a complete overhaul of the "Revised Organic Act" which in its current form is as much a part of our current problems as the office holders who use its distortions and weaknesses to their advantage.

That said, my ardent hope is that I have chosen my own words with a careful enough regard to have some positive effect.

Submitted by:

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