

The Virgin Islands Consortium

U.S.V.I. Could Remain With U.S. Or Seek Independence; U.S. Gov't Says

VIC News / **Published On April 03, 2016 11:03 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **April 03, 2016**



ST. CROIX -- The U.S. Virgin Islands could choose to remain a territory of the United States Government, or it could choose to be an independent nation, U.S. Department of Interior Secretary Sally Jewell told a capacity audience on Thursday during the 99th Transfer Day Commemoration. The comments were received with silence, and Senate President Neville James later said, "I just want to be an American," signaling his lack of interest in even considering the option.

"As you look to your centennial, as you look to the next hundred years, what would you like to be? What would you like for the Virgin Islands? Do you want to continue to be a U.S. territory as you are today with the opportunities and yes, the challenges, that comes

with that? Or do you want to move towards statehood with the challenges and opportunities that come there? Do you as a people want to become an entirely new country represented in the United Nations with the opportunities and certainly the challenges that come there?

"We encourage you to have these conversations in your homes, in your schools, in your communities, in your places of worship, and of course in your Legislature — to say what do we want as Virgin Islanders for our future. That is self determination, and we welcome that relationship and that partnership in the U.S. Government," Ms. Jewell said during her keynote at Thursday's commemoration.

Asked whether her comments were tied to discussions being had in the Obama Administration about the current relationship the U.S. has with the Virgin Islands, Ms. Jewell said her remarks were based on a broader initiative being helmed by Assistant Secretary for Insular Affairs Esther Kia'ainana, that sought to remind U.S. territories of their rights to forge their own paths forward -- with or without the U.S.

"Esther Kia'aina as Assistant Secretary for Insular Areas started a discussion with all of the territories just to make sure that everyone that is a U.S. territory understands their rights to self-determination," Ms. Jewell said. "And so this is really part of making sure that citizens of the United States who live in the territories recognize that they have a hand in shaping their future.

"And it will be up to the Virgin Islanders to say we like it the way it is or we'd like to change it. [Or] we'd like to remain a territory but we'd like a different set of rights. We'd like to march towards statehood, or we'd like to march towards independence -- those are all things that are within your rights as Virgin Islanders to determine. It's within the rights of the other territories of the United States in the pacific, as well as here in the Caribbean. So that's really what this is about: self-determination and making sure everybody knows that those rights are theirs."

On March 31, 1917, the U.S. purchased the Virgin Islands from then-owner Denmark, for \$25 million. The territory has been part of the U.S. ever since, but residents have been withheld some of the rights that mainland citizens enjoy. For example, U.S. citizens born in the territory and live here cannot vote for president; an issue raised by both Governor Kenneth Mapp and Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett during their remarks on Thursday. And there have been discussions in some local circles about the territory truly considering independence from the U.S., but residents that The Consortium has spoken with overwhelmingly expressed concern about parting ways with one of the greatest countries in the world.