

The Virgin Islands Consortium

U.S. Should Apologize To Virgin Islands At 2017 Centennial For Past Sin; Senator Nelson Says

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ST. CROIX -- During a Committee on Government Services, Consumer and Veterans Affairs hearing held on Thursday, Positive Nelson, the veteran Independent Citizens Movement (I.C.M.) senator, said the United States should apologize for its sin of purchasing the territory from Denmark without giving Virgin Islanders input in determining their destiny, a wrongdoing he said Denmark is guilty of as well.

It's a stance that became more mature on Thursday, but Mr. Nelson has harbored that idea for sometime.

"I feel there's been no transfer of power," Mr. Nelson said [earlier in April](#) during a debate on the issuance of Centennial license plates. "There was a transfer of ownership; and until Virgin Islanders rise up and empower themselves into what really should have happened in 1917 when a free people were sold without any input, that's the discussion we really need to be having if we're really serious and conscious about what happened."

On Thursday, Mr. Nelson revealed that he's sponsoring legislation that would call on Governor Kenneth Mapp to require an apology from the U.S. and Denmark during 2017 Centennial events.

"The real discussion that we should be having is should we require the governor to request an apology from Denmark and the U.S. at the Centennial. That would be appropriate. That would show that we understand that we were wronged at least. And even if they never give it, just asking for it on a public stage says a lot about where we ought to be consciously. We can't lead our people with the same level of misguided antics of the past," Mr. Nelson said.

Mr. Nelson, making mention of a [heated debate](#) that occurred on Wednesday between himself, Senator Sammuel Sanes and historian and radio personality Mario Moorhead during a protest against youth violence at the Legislature building in Frederiksted, said the territory should rise out of self-pity, which he says breeds oppression.

"So when we're going to talk about the Centennial, talk about where we need to be going, where we want to go, where is our vision for the future and not rely on America or Denmark to determine for us. Our future must be intentional. And we as the people sitting in these seats to make certain determinations, should be focused and geared towards doing that," Mr. Nelson said.

He added: "So I want to see who's going to be supportive with me in supporting the legislation to ask our dear governor to request an apology from Denmark and the United States during our 100-year celebration. Who's going to stand with me to show that we are a people who understand that we have been wronged and we're not going to be wallowing in self-pity, but we have a clear direction, and are going to have a relationship with our Caribbean neighbors to empower us economically and culturally.

"Who's going to stand with me when they're going to say about what they do with us -- [whether they want to tie us to Puerto Rico because of Puerto Rico's situation](#). I'm tired of the Virgin Islands being considered the poor house of America. We are a rich people with a flamboyantly rich history, and our history is greater than the Virgin Islands; greater than the Caribbean. Our history is world history and too many times we limit ourselves and we segregate ourselves."

But if the senator who spoke after Mr. Nelson on Thursday is any indication, support for Mr. Nelson's apology-requesting legislation may be dead on arrival.

Mr. Nelson, the sole I.C.M. public official was assailed by Senate President Neville James, who suggested that there was hypocrisy in Mr. Nelson's impassioned stance.

"Some of the things that were said by the previous speaker I'm opposed to, notwithstanding our friendship," Mr. James began, referring to Mr. Nelson. "Apology from America for what?" he asked, his voice slightly raised. "We have a bad habit here. When

we graduate from high school we can't wait to go to America to go to college; our hospitals crumbling because we're running going to Cleveland Clinic. Let us be careful with what we're saying."

Mr. James, reminding senators that he's a history major, said the discussion "could get real good," but refrained from continuing down that path as the hearing was held to determine the territory's status in regards to [Bureau of Motor Vehicles progress](#) on the mandatory Real ID Act.

On Transfer Day 2016, U.S. Department of Interior Secretary Sally Jewel, said the territory could [choose to remain with the U.S. or seek independence](#). Her remarks set off an [impassioned debate](#) among residents, most stating that the territory was ill-prepared to stand on its own.

"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.

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'aniana, 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 at the this year's Centennial commemoration in Christiansted. 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.

Feature Image: Sen. Nelson blowing a conch shell on October 1, 2015, at a [Senate session in St. Thomas](#) in honor of Fireburn Day, or Contract day.

Image Credit: 31st Legislature.

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