

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Rivera-O'Reilly Assails Local Paper For Allegedly Engaging In 'Media Terrorism,' Challenges Overall Media To Examine Role In Society

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ST. CROIX -- In a press release issued late Saturday, veteran lawmaker and vice president of the 32nd Legislature, Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, slammed a local newspaper for what she described as reporting that seeks to divide the territory, and called on the Virgin Islands media as a whole to examine its role in society.

Responding to a recent Virgin Islands Daily News article, Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly indicated that the newspaper, one of the oldest in the territory, has engaged in "media terrorism" for far too long.

"It's recent claim that the members of the 32nd Legislature "broke the law" by meeting with the territory's chief executive officer, cabinet members and representatives of the business community, flies in the face of what we have come to expect from responsible journalism," she said. Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly added that instead of focusing on the fact that elected officials, particularly the 32nd Legislature, hit the ground running announcing committee hearings in the same week it was sworn in, as well meeting with stakeholders to discuss concerns and explore ideas as they continue to address the fiscal challenges of the territory, the paper used the power of the ink to spread misinformation and to plant seeds of doubt in the minds of its readers, seeking only to further divide the community and disparage its representatives.

The Daily News article referenced in the senator's strongly worded response, came with a title that suggested that the 32nd Legislature's first order of business was to break the law when it met with Governor Kenneth Mapp, members of his administration and privater sector officials to discuss the governor's five-year economic recovery plan in meetings held at both St. Thomas and St. Croix government houses. The paper cited a Senate law that it says bars a group of eight or more senators from meeting to discuss pending legislation -- in this case Mr. Mapp's five-year economic growth plan legislation -- without notifying the public.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly chastised the paper for what she described as a style of reporting that is titled towards "bias and rancor," and added that that style was at the root of the paper's reporting.

"It is unfortunate that a paper once awarded the Pulitzer Prize and praised for its fair and cutting-edge reporting, has devolved becoming more like the Virgin Islands Enquirer," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said. "We all recognize that papers must sell and that headlines, particularly sensationalized titles and subtitles, sell papers."

The senator stated that the birth of online newspapers places added financial burden on print media. Nonetheless, she contended, profit margins should never get in the way of fair and balanced journalism.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly's challenge to the paper's interpretation of the law appears to hinge on who organized the meetings and where they were held, as well as the nature of what was discussed and the players involved. While the law states that the Senate is barred from meeting to discuss pending legislation without notifying the public once eight or more lawmakers are involved, her argument seems to suggest that the meetings were not organized by the Senate, were not held in the Legislature, and involved the executive branch as well as members of the business community. The legislation at hand was the governor's five-year economic recovery plan, a measure that has been known to the public since at least October, 2016.

"The Daily News is not entitled to its "loosey-goosey" interpretation of quorum or roll call. The truth is that the meetings were held in government house and were organized by the office of the governor. The members of the legislature were invited by the commissioner of finance, as were members of the private sector and the governor's cabinet. The topic of discussion was Govenor Mapp's five-year plan which has been in the public domain since October of last year," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said.

Saying that she will not be bullied by the media and will not remain silent when she observes divisive and separatist form of journalism expressed by any newspaper sold in the territory, she challenged the Daily News and other news reporting entities to engage in serious introspection and examine both what their role is in society as well as their responsibility as news reporting mediums.

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