The Virgin Islands Consortium

First Woman Lieutenant Governor In USVI? Angel Dawson Makes Splash With LT Pick Marise James

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ST. CROIX -- Up until Saturday afternoon, the Petrus/Sanes gubernatorial ticket made all the headlines. The aforementioned two have had successful events, stole the show during the St. Patrick's Day Parade in downtown Christiansted, and seemingly had all the momentum.

Then, on Saturday afternoon, during a Democratic Party meeting at the 2 Plus 2 restaurant here, Angel Dawson, whose candidacy had appeared to be fading as Mr. Dawson struggled to find a lieutenant governor pick, breathed excitement into his base -- and the Democratic gubernatorial race -- by announcing an accomplished woman with deep roots in the U.S. Virgin Islands, as his choice for lieutenant governor.

Her name is Marise James, and her lineage is well known. Her father is the ubiquitous Randall 'Doc' James, whose mark on the Virgin Islands recalls dedicated service to the people. It is Mr. James that the horse-racing track near the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport is named after. And her brother is Neville James, the well-known senator who has served in multiple legislators in a variety of capacities, most recent being Senate president in the 31st Legislature, and majority leader in the current body (Mr. James was not present at the Saturday Democratic Party meeting).

But Ms. James did not rely on the successes of her family to carry her destiny; she is one of the most accomplished women in the USVI, with her last position being Staff Judge Advocate of the Virgin Islands National Guard -- one of the most revered positions in the National Guard.

"Today, I believe that Doc James would be proud to know that his daughter, Marise C. James, is poised to become the first woman lieutenant governor in the U.S. Virgin Islands," Mr. Dawson proclaimed as the crowd erupted with cheers. He announced Ms. James as his running mate at the end of a long speech he gave, presenting to party members why he believes he's best suited to lead Democrats against Governor Kenneth Mapp in November.

Mr. Dawson reminisced about a 1964 New York Times article that he said lauded the territory for its solid economic position, and said it was not too late for the USVI to regain such a strong footing. And he spoke of his years at the Public Finance Authority as executive director, and the achievements he claimed were accomplished during those years. Mr. Dawson also measured the steep economic decline the territory has seen since 2007.

"In 2007 the Virgin Islands Gross Domestic Product was four billion, four hundred and sixty million dollars ($4,460,000,000). Ten years later in 2016, it was $3,124,000,000 -- a reduction of 30 percent," Mr. Dawson lamented. He said in 2007 private fixed investments in the USVI was $540 million, ten years later in 2016, it was $271 million -- a reduction of 50 percent. And the territory's net exports in 2007 was $920 million, however in 2016, the USVI had net exports -- or a trade deficit -- of a negative $470 million.

"That represented a precipitous decrease of 151 percent over ten years," Mr. Dawson said. He later added, "Ladies and gentlemen, fellow Democrats, from the statistical measures that I just shared with you, it must be concluded that the patient is gravely ill. The Virgin Islands that I was born into in 1965 was a Virgin Islands that was on the rise. Clearly, a child born in the Virgin Islands today enters a Virgin Islands that by many measures is in decline, and that is a very sad statement to make."

Mr. Dawson then moved on to the local government's structural deficit and "the looming failure of the Government Employees' Retirement System." He explained that the decline of the territory's economy was not only tied to the government, but rather is the primary cause of the Virgin Islands government's fiscal decline.

While he rarely mentioned Mr. Mapp, Mr. Dawson painted a clear picture that the current governor had failed in lifting the territory economically. He chided Mr. Mapp for the multiple projects with funding sitting in the VI treasury waiting to be spent -- among them $100 million for major road projects. Of the Paul E. Joseph Stadium development, funds for which Mr. Dawson said he worked hard to secure, the candidate said no more ribbon cutting was needed -- just determination to do the work and see the project through. And he criticized the Mapp administration's decision to cut ties with the three major U.S. ratings agencies, and vowed to rebuild those relationships, as, he said, such connections are critical to the U.S.V.I.'s economic success.

Yet while he sought to sculpt the Mapp administration as a failed effort, throwing out depressing economic numbers that highlighted the territory's decline -- and how a Dawson/James ticket would do a much better job -- Mr. Dawson neglected to mention that much of the economic decline of the USVI happened during the years of 2007 through 2015, when John P. de Jongh served as governor, and continues to this day. During the de Jongh years, when Mr. Dawson served in the capacities of Finance commissioner and Public Finance Authority executive director, the USVI had experienced two major economic depressors: The December 2007 - June 2009 Great U.S. Recession, which began with the bursting of an 8 trillion dollar housing bubble, and the 2012 closure of the HOVENSA refinery. Those events ushered in a new day in the USVI, albeit one of mass migration to the mainland U.S. and the closure of multiple businesses -- including multiple private schools -- that relied heavily on the success of the middle class.

In fact, when the Mapp administration sought funding from the bond market in January 2017 to satisfy a structural deficit of $100 million that the administration met when it took office (the Mapp administration had used funds from the $220 million windfall the government received as part of the HOVENSA refinery sale to ArcLight Partners LLC, to bridge the budget gap in 2016), the bond market, for the first time, refused to lend money to the V.I. Government. By that time, the deterioration was severe, and the problem was exacerbated by neighboring Puerto Rico's own financial collapse, which chilled bondholders' willingness to lend money to the USVI.

Nonetheless the Democrats view the territory's failed economic state as a direct result of the Mapp administration's economic policies. Whether they will be able to effectively sell this strategy to voters, remains to be seen.

Feature Image: Angel Dawson and running mate Marise James during a Democratic Party meeting at the 2 Plus 2 restaurant on Saturday. (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

Watch the original video