

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Early Rift Forms Among St. Croix Democrats As Violet And Francis Walk Out Of Meetings, Leave Majority Caucus

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St. Croix Senators Kurt Violet and Novelle Francis, two of the most powerful lawmakers in the 32nd Legislature, are not part of the Majority Caucus of Democrats, both Mr. Violet and Mr. Francis have confirmed to The Consortium. While the men did not delve into details, they said the issue that led to the current impasse with their Democratic colleagues was the incoming senators' decision to takeaway the Finance chairmanship from Mr. Violet and give it to Senator-Elect Donna Frett-Gregory. That move led to Mr. Violet and Mr. Francis walking out of two recent meetings, and has ruptured a Democratic team eager to project unity ahead of their January inauguration.

The district holding the Committee on Finance controls the government's purse strings, and works closely with the executive branch of government to determine the territory's agenda. For Mr. Vialet and Mr. Francis, the incoming lawmakers' decision to give Mrs. Frett-Gregory the Finance chair after it was held by Mr. Vialet for only two years, even as it was in the possession of the St. Thomas-St. John District lawmakers for 8 years straight prior to Mr. Vialet's control, shows early weakness from St. Croix District incoming lawmakers.

"My basic stance is that we won the jackpot on November 6 with seven elected Democrats for the district of St. Croix. With that positioning, I believe that it is important that we're able to determine and gain a level of satisfaction among ourselves on how we move forward, and that is the position I continue to maintain," Mr. Francis told The Consortium Monday. "We have seven Democrats on St. Croix, that's unheard of; that's never happened before. It's historical, and I believe that we have the political capital to make a determination on how we move forward from a position of strength."

Mr. Francis added, "When you look at the numbers, the St. Thomas-St. John District held the Finance chair for 8 years consecutively. The St. Croix District held the position for two years, one of which was interrupted as a result of the two Category 5 Hurricanes. So in all reality, St. Croix really only had the ability to move the agenda as well as the budget for 1 year and half of the term. So I'm in favor of us maintaining the Finance Committee on St. Croix."

According to information provided to The Consortium by two veritable Senate sources, the incoming 33rd Legislature's makeup is as follows: Mrs. Frett-Gregory is Finance chair, Senator-Elect Allison DeGazon is vice chair of Finance; Senator-Elect Alicia Barnes is chair of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary; Ms. DeGazon is chair of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture; Senator-Elect Javan James is chairman of the Committee on Youth, Parks and Recreation; Senator-Elect Stedman Hodge, Jr. is chair of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development; Senator-Elect Kenneth Gittens is Senate president; Mrs. Frett-Gregory is vice president; Ms. Barnes is Senate secretary; and Senator Marvin Blyden is majority leader.

The Consortium could not confirm the chairmanship of the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services. However, the publication has learned from two sources that it was offered to Mr. Vialet in place of the Finance Committee, but the veteran St. Croix lawmaker refused it.

Currently, the lawmakers who are not part of the Majority Caucus are Mr. Vialet, Mr. Francis, Senator Janelle Sarauw and Dwayne DeGraff. Five members are needed to form a minority caucus, however Mr. Vialet told The Consortium Monday that whatever senators who are not members of the Majority Caucus are called, be it a coalition or some other name, he will be part of it. "We will band together no matter what," he told The Consortium. "The gist of the story is that you have seven Democrats on St. Croix, yet they found it necessary to return the Finance Committee to St. Thomas after St. Thomas had it in the 28th, 29th, 30th and 31st Legislatures."

A Senator who requested anonymity to speak freely on private discussions, told The Consortium that Mr. Vialet and Mr. Francis did not want to go through a voting process relative to choosing committee chairs. Instead, this person said, the two lawmakers

simply wanted to "call the shots."

"They think that there's a move to put the power in St. Thomas; we can't wait for the press conference to dispel those perceptions," this person said. A press conference is being planned and the Democratic Majority Caucus will meet on St. Croix Thursday to determine when and where it will be held.

Mr. Vialet was also offered the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, this person said. However, he refused it as well, holding to his stance that the Finance chairmanship should be retained by a St. Croix senator. (In a followup call, Mr. Vialet told The Consortium that he was never offered the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, contrary to the source's claim.)

According to the source, Mr. Francis appeared to be recalculating his alliance with Mr. Vialet, thinking it to be politically risky. When asked by The Consortium Monday whether he would stay with the minority group, Mr. Francis said, "I'm in a state of flux, pretty much. I don't know where I stand, but certainly again I understand the process and I'm trying to be politically correct and waiting for a finalization of it."

Women leading the Senate

According to this person, the three women elected this year with overwhelming percentages -- Mrs. Frett-Gregory, Ms. Barnes and Ms. DeGazon -- are setting the agenda for the 33rd Legislature. And while Mrs. Frett-Gregory is the chair of the Finance Committee, with Ms. DeGazon as vice chair, St. Croix will continue to be fully represented, this person said.

Asked why the Finance Committee was not given to Mr. Vialet, who had held it only for two years while the chairmanship had been held by St. Thomas District senators for 8 consecutive years, this person said the incoming lawmakers believe they were given a mandate by the people to set the agenda, with women at the helm, and Mrs. Frett-Gregory fits the position well with her background in Finance.