

The Virgin Islands Consortium

On Radio, Gittens Says 'Dictatorship' Behavior Led To Disharmony Between St. Croix Democrats; Francis Responds With Scathing Rebuke

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ST. CROIX - St. Croix made history when it elected seven Democrats to the 33rd Legislature, a feat that had never been accomplished in the past, and one that placed the island in the strongest position to move its agenda forward for the next two years. But that was on election night. Now, just one month following the November 6, General Election, the once-promising unified team is history, and an open verbal battle between five of the newly-elected Democrats and the two incumbents is now being waged in the public, while St. Croix residents look on in amazement.

The crux of the matter? Senators Kurt Violet and Novelle Francis believe that with St. Croix having seven Democrats, the island should hold the most powerful committee in the Senate: Finance. In the 32nd Legislature, it was held by Mr. Violet. Eight years prior, it was held by St. Thomas senators. In the 33rd, it was given to Senator-elect Donna Frett-Gregory, an incoming senator in the St. Thomas-St. John District. Mr. Violet wanted the seat -- or if he could not have it, at least a St. Croix lawmaker. But the Finance chairmanship reverted back to the district that held it for eight years prior to the 32nd Legislature, a move Mr. Violet and Mr. Francis determined to be ill-advised.

Senator Violet last week made the rounds on radio stations, painting the five St. Croix Democrats who supported the Finance chair being given to Mrs. Frett-Gregory -- Alicia Barnes, Allison DeGazon, Javan James, Kenneth Gittens and Oakland Benta -- as weak. On Friday, the senators-elect took to the airwaves themselves to respond.

They contended that holding the chairmanship of a particular committee does not give a senator unilateral power. And they vowed to never turn their backs on St. Croix, reminding the listening audience that St. Croix citizens were the Virgin Islanders who voted them in.

Mr. Gittens's words were fighting and pointed, stating on the Mario Moorhead radio talk show that either Mr. Violet or Mr. Francis, or both of the incumbent lawmakers, started exhibiting behavior reminiscent of a dictator.

"We started to see some dictatorship going on, and 'I want this, I want that, and if I don't get this, then I would not be a part of this,'" the senator-elect said. "And it started raising eyebrows because these are the individuals that we're looking at for that leadership. Sadly, it didn't manifest where we held seven... But the five that is here sitting in front of you are committed to a St. Croix agenda, and not turning our backs on the people of St. Croix as was painted earlier in the week. That will not happen. Not from me, and the other four are here and they will say for themselves too, that it won't happen. After all, it was St. Croix who elected me and I would be damned if I were to turn my back on the island district that elected me to office."

Ms. Barnes attempted to diminish the idea that a person leading the finance committee held outsize power. And she spoke of a process where committee chairs and vice chairs are elected, as compared to demanding chairmanship of certain committees. "It's important to, as we speak of process, that we just provide some information on the committee process and even the manner in which a majority is formed," the former D.P.N.R. commissioner began. "You do not simply come in and make a determination as to this is what you want. We discuss, we vote based on skillsets, and based on division, agenda that we collectively have to move, you know, this territory forward. For those of us from St. Croix, a specific St. Croix agenda. We want to ensure that the right persons are in the right areas that would be able to maximize the two years that we have with all that we have to do. So it's important that it is clear that the formation process is done by vote, and you make a determination based on the majority of the votes. So that's the first thing."

Ms. Barnes continued, "The second thing that's important to note is that no one committee chairperson is in control and can determine the fate of one island versus the next. If the Finance chair is on St. Thomas, that does not mean that they have control

solely and can dictate what can happen on St. Croix. It is one man, one vote. The committee process, as Senator Gittens outlined earlier, goes through many layers... So again, this idea that if a chairmanship is not seated on a specific island, that it places the island at a disadvantage is just misleading information, and it is endeavoring to lead, as Allison [DeGazon] said, by misleading. That is something that we do not want to do. We are here today because we realize that there is a lot of anxiety in the St. Croix community. We feel the anxiety; St. Croix elected us as their representatives, and we are endeavoring to stay in touch with our community."

Ms. DeGazon said it was important to restore the people's confidence in the newly elected lawmakers. "We are not going to fall into a trap where every single situation we run to a radio station and we address. The reason why we felt as though we wanted to take the time out and allow our constituents to hear from us individually, is because it is really important to restore trust and confidence," she said. "The fact that we were elected is one thing, but [when] you're not even sworn in, for your posture to be questioned is what's disheartening. It's as though on Monday we're all for St. Croix, we believe that you are all for St. Croix, but Wednesday, after one person's tantrum, now you're not for St. Croix, and we are asking the electorate to be aware and conscious of what's going on." Ms. DeGazon appeared to be referring to Mr. Francis, who sided with Mr. Violet on the stance that the Finance chairmanship should be on St. Croix.

Mr. James spoke of compromising even when one's desire is not attainable. "I just want to say that it's a little bit premature to say that anyone was kicked out of the Majority. Until January 14 when we get sworn in and we have the resolution on the floor, anything could change -- even down to what I'm assigned to right now, so as Senator-elect DeGazon said, if they want to come back, feel free to come back. This is not a war. It's a give and take. This thing is not checkers, this thing is chess, and sometimes you have to make a sacrifice to reach a bigger picture and goal. And one thing I realize with this whole process, it doesn't matter what committee you have, but it's good to at least have a seat at the table being part of the majority," Mr. James said.

Mr. Benta spoke of the many ills of the community, and the work ahead to move the territory into prosperity, a context that sought to show the current rift between the St. Croix senators as the wrong focus.

Mr. Francis did not take kindly the senators-elect radio marathon. On Friday, he issued [a widely-read statement](#) on Facebook accusing them of sowing discord.

"So five of the St. Croix Democratic senators took to the airwaves this week in an attempt to justify the formation of a Senate majority devoid of the Crucian incumbent senators," Mr. Francis wrote. "Were they successful in explaining their rationale of going against the St. Croix community's wish to elect 7 Democrats to the Senate? Were they successful in explaining why they conceded the Senate's most powerful committee (Finance) to St. Thomas? Why spend so much time and energy to throw incumbents under the bus -- deliberately attacking character and reputations -- to justify relinquishing a position of strength in 7 Crucian Democrats? Finally, were they successful in showing what leadership looks like? I submit there is no justifiable explanation for the madness. It is a shame that our community is being subjected to this travesty of leadership."

[View the original embedded media](#)

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. Violet and Mr. Francis, the incoming lawmakers' decision to give Mrs. Frett-Gregory the Finance chair after it was held by Mr. Violet 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. Violet's control, shows early weakness from St. Croix District incoming lawmakers.

In late November, Mr. Violet 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."

The incoming Majority Caucus [will hold its first press conference](#) to discuss the 33rd Legislature's committee assignments and officers on Wednesday at WTJX on St. Croix. The Consortium will carry the event live.