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Lawmakers Lay to Rest \$15,000 Salary Increase Controversy by Passing Veto-Proof Bill Untying Senators' Pay From Lowest Paid Commissioner's

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Senator Alicia Barnes appeared to suggest Tuesday that the \$85,000 senators are paid isn't a lot of money. **By. VI LEGISLATURE**

What started with an attempt by Senator Javan James to move an amendment that would decouple senators' salary from the lowest paid commissioner's, turned into a controversy that culminated with the 33rd Legislature holding a quickly organized session Tuesday, where they took decisive action to finally untie their compensation from the lowest paid commissioner's, namely Calvert White of the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation (D.S.P.R.) through the approval of [Bill No. 33-0423](#).

The vote was 15 yeas, giving lawmakers veto-proof strength if the governor were to attempt to fail the measure. And the legislation does not only seek to separate the salaries, it also invokes [Act 7878](#), "The Virgin Islands Public Officials Compensation Act", and directs the governor, the president of the Legislature, and the chief justice of the V.I. Supreme Court each to appoint three members to the commission.

But among the biggest developments of the day was that the amendment Mr. James attempted to move last Wednesday was, according to the Senate's legal counsel, illegal. Mr. James had given up authorship of the amendment, writing to legal counsel relinquishing control, which Mr. James confirmed to the Consortium Tuesday night. Yet he moved [during the Wednesday session](#) an amendment that he no longer had control of. For his part, Mr. James said legal counsel did not inform him that his relinquishment request was granted, although a letter from legal counsel dated June 10, 2020 shows the senator [had relinquished authorship](#) and legal counsel had disseminated the information.

Illegal or not, the senator's political move led to one of the biggest actions taken by the 33rd Legislature this year, one most of them agreed was long overdue.

Mr. James had seen the [Post Audit Report](#), page 21 of 28, that showed the Bryan administration appropriated \$100,000 for the Sports, Parks and Recreation commissioner in the 2021 budget. Such an action would immediately send the senators' salaries climbing to \$100,000 once the raise for the D.S.P.R. commissioner was activated. Lawmakers vehemently denied wanting a pay raise, and said even though the Post Audit Report included the salary increase, no Notice of Personnel Action (NOPA) was issued, and the Senate, they contended, had not allocated the funds. Even so, by law, once the D.S.P.R. commissioner's salary is increased, so too would senators'.

That will no longer be the case following the unanimous vote during the session.

Blows, Fighting Words and Snipes

Senators knew today's session — announced by the Consortium [in an article](#) published Monday — would have a lot of eyeballs. Yet [big viewership or not](#), some were unsettled that they had to be dealing with pay raise matters on the eve of an election. Others were disheartened that after working to bring forth what they said were meaningful legislation, that all the work was overshadowed by a situation senators contend they didn't ask for.

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory took aim at Governor Albert Bryan, stating that he was the cause of the entire controversy. "The chief executive of this territory has also acted irresponsibly by placing this body in this present situation in such a time like this, with no communication — well let me say, at least not with me — to afford us the ability to respond as leaders and in fact act appropriately," she said.

Ms. Frett-Gregory also lamented what she said was shattered efforts by lawmakers to build trust. "The last session lasted all of three days and meaningful legislation was passed. But you know what," she added, borrowing words from Senator Kurt Violet, "all the good measures were overshadowed, and just when we were making strides to get our community to trust our leadership, poof, up in smoke."

Ms. Sarauw focused her words on Mr. James and Senator Kenneth Gittens. Indeed, she was the one who revealed that Mr. James no longer had authorship of an amendment that he used to stir up the pay raise issue. And during the months Mr. James held authorship of the amendment, Ms. Sarauw — who wanted to work on similar legislation — said she sought to work with the senator.

"The response in a nutshell was, 'don't tell me what to do with my bill,'" Ms. Sarauw said, quoting what she said was Mr. Jame's response to her at the time.

On Mr. Gittens, Ms. Sarauw jabbed, "The people of Frederiksted should be disappointed that all you gave them is a land swap for a police station." Mr. Gittens had issued a press release stating that he was disappointed that his colleagues didn't allow Mr. James's amendment to go through last Wednesday. Some senators have contended that the move was purely political from a politician in need of a lifeline.

Mr. Vialet said no one should be receiving raises at a time when Virgin Islanders are struggling to make ends meet. And he called on Virgin Islanders to not only hold senators accountable, but also the commissioners, assistant commissioners and deputy commissioners — many of whom are paid higher salaries than senators. He also demanded that residents hold the governor and lieutenant governor to account as well.

Senator Alicia Barnes, who is not seeking reelection, and who was not present for the fateful session that led to the uproar, had a different take on the matter. She said as long as there is no reform that sees lawmakers being held accountable to constituents, things will remain the same. The senator said she would continue to support a constitution for the territory and has said reapportionment would bring forth true representation. The current system, Ms. Barnes contended, is broken. "Everyone represents everyone but no one represents anyone. Chaos. And that is why since 1954, these United States Virgin Islands, we have not progressed in earnest," she said.

But Ms. Barnes's most striking comment Tuesday was when she appeared to suggest that the \$85,000 senators are paid isn't a lot. "A salary is an employer's opinion of what an employee's work is worth. And so if we are employed by the people, by the electorate, I guess the electorate doesn't think we're worth much."

She added, "... I would dare say that everyone of us in this body, we represent the people. And if the people don't feel that we're worth much, then the people themselves do not hold themselves in high esteem, because we are a representation and reflection of the people.

"So United States Virgin Islands electorate, you sent us here, we look like you, we represent you, but yet you don't think that we're worth much. So then as a people, what do we think of our selves," Ms. Barnes said.