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Bryan, Vialet Trade Jobs, Share Vision For USVI in Last Gubernatorial Debate Ahead of Nov. 8 Election

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Governor Bryan, left, and Senator Kurt Vialet participated in the final debate before the 2022 General Election on Oct. 13, 2022. The debate was a partnership between the V.I. Consortium and WTJX. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The long-awaited gubernatorial debate between incumbent Governor Albert Bryan Jr. and Senator Kurt A. Vialet lasted an hour-and-a-half and was laced with policy questions about the future trajectory of the U.S. Virgin Islands. **NOTE:** WTJX suffered a technical failure with a portion of their on-air broadcast of last night's debate. They will re-air it in its entirety tonight at 8:30 pm.

It was a battle against a man who, along with Lieutenant hopeful Janelle K. Sarauw, says he wants to lead a team that plans to improve the quality of life for residents of the territory, and an

incumbent governor who says he wants to continue the work that he and Lieutenant Tregenza Roach started almost four years ago.

On Thursday night, the two men tussled over questions of healthcare and the delay of the JFL North, the temporary modular hospital north of the main facility; the future of education; the diversification of the economy; mental illness; the development of rum distilleries; and crime, in what was to be the final debate until the November 8, General Elections.

Thousands of online viewers tuned in to the 2022 Gubernatorial Debate on Thursday night which was hosted by The V.I. Consortium and WTJX at the Good Hope Country Day School Pavilion on St. Croix, and moderated by VIC Publisher Ernice Gilbert.

Both Mr. Bryan and Mr. Violet lashed out at each other with accusations of corruption during the debate, with the senator accusing the governor of providing contracts to his friends and close allies, while the governor gave similar pressure, and at one point said Mr. Violet took \$2.5 million from the JFL Hospital to “put in his palace of a Legislature.”

What about our health?

The first round of debate focused on the issue of healthcare and zeroed-in on the opening of the temporary JFL North hospital, which received the notice to proceed in July 2018 and was supposed to be completed no later than the end of 2019.

Mr. Bryan admitted that the executive team had “run into a lot of problems” with JFL North over the past four years. He insisted however that his team had “fast tracked” the planning of the new hospital all while battling with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to secure funds to build it.

“And just when we’re about to hook it up, we learned that if we did, the whole hospital would fail,” he said, stating that instead they decided to “err on the side of caution” to ensure that everything was ready before it is made operational.

Mr. Violet argued that JFL North's protracted delay was a result of the administration's poor management. “The FFEs (furniture, fixtures, equipment) languished in the territorial board for over a year before they made a decision as to be able to execute that contract to purchase FFEs for JFL North,” he said.

“One year, 10 months ago we [Legislature] had a meeting with the governor in which we asked as to whether or not there was a need for monies from the Legislature to expedite the opening of JFL North, and the answer was 'I got it under control'. One year, 10 months later, we still hearing excuses as to when it’s going to open,” he said.

It was in response to Mr. Violet’s rebuttal that Mr. Bryan accused him of taking \$2.5 million from the hospital and appropriating it towards expanding the Legislature. Mr. Violet did not respond to the accusation, instead he focused on pressuring the governor on JFL North.

The administration says JFL North [will open in November](#).

What’s in it for educators?

Another hot-button topic was the state of education for which Mr. Bryan was asked how he planned to retain teachers who had been [leaving the territory by the hundreds to work abroad](#).

Mr. Bryan spoke of the Covid-19 pandemic and how it had impacted learning, and how his team sprung into action to prepare virtual instruction in record time. He also referenced former Mapp administration for what Mr. Bryan said were failures of the past that his administration had to correct. Mr. Bryan said his government inherited education modular units that were [“poisoning the students.”](#)

“Our people had to go in now and retrofit all of those modular [units] that were built under the Mapp administration,” he said. The governor also said his administration has secured millions from FEMA to rebuild hurricane-damaged schools, [one of which was already underway.](#)

Mr. Bryan did not offer a direct solution to the migrating teacher problem. Instead, he said that there were less students to teach, saying that the territory has had the lowest student enrollment numbers “in history.”

“In the last, maybe 20 years, we’ve only had 8,000 students. We’re constantly complaining and I think it’s a message about having teachers but when you go to the schools and visit them like I do, there’s only 18 students in a class as compared to when I went to school and there were 30 students in a class,” he noted.

The governor also said that his administration is taking advantage of the unique opportunity the territory has been afforded as a result of the 2017 storms. “We have problems and we’re going to work through them, but this is an opportunity for the Virgin Islands to build new schools. An opportunity that is not afforded to anyone else in the United States but us and Puerto Rico. It took us a year to establish this new program with FEMA, but it’s already bearing fruit. We got \$240 million for our first school, and the bid came at \$160 million. You know what that means? That means there’s \$80 million to build another school that hasn’t even been damaged,” he said.

Personal Question Round

In his personal question to Mr. Vialet, Mr. Bryan chose to focus on education, asking the senator why, if he was so passionate about seeing a change in education, that he chose not to lead the Committee on Education and champion for change for students and educators.

“You haven’t really or championed any piece of policy that would change the quality of education for our children,” Mr. Bryan charged.

Mr. Vialet, who had been a teacher for over two decades, contended that he did not need to be the chair of the committee in order to move legislation that makes meaningful change.

When it was the senator’s turn to ask the governor a question, Mr. Vialet grilled Mr. Bryan over no-bid contracts that he accused the governor of providing to his colleagues and friends. Mr. Bryan pressed the senator to show proof of these accusations, and said the only justification for a no-bid contract is an emergency, “and that’s what we had in Covid,” he said.

“We issued no-bid contracts for emergency things in order to facilitate cleaning of offices, cleaning of facilities where people are going to, getting medical supplies, and getting help in here like Pafford [Medical Services] to help our nurses and supplement our very tired workforce,” Mr. Bryan said.

He added, “I don’t know what no bid contract you are talking about, senator, but if you were serious about no-bid contracts, as a senator what legislation that you’ve put forth to make sure that this type of stuff doesn’t happen? You’ve been there for eights years... your running mate has been

there for six [years] and you guys have not produced any legislation to stop any of this so-called corruption that you're always referring to. If you're so intent on stopping no-bid contracts, why haven't you passed legislation?"

Mr. response, Mr. Vialet said, "What you have done is to have an overall entity and then have some contracts under that entity to give to your friends; what you have done is determine just recently that TSG [The Strategy Group] could get a source contract for Department of Finance to perform duties that are already being performed by the department; what you have done is to try to give them a contract to manage the EnVision program under Witt O'Brien's and they were the subcontractor that was rejected twice by the board — that is what you have done."

What are we going to do about crime?

In his response about efforts to reduce crime, Mr. Bryan said that owing to his administration's efforts, criminal activity has been on a decline. "Contrary to belief, crime is actually on a downward trend," he said. "We have the lowest amount of murders in almost 20 years."

Mr. Vialet proposed approaching the problem of crime as a "two-pronged" issue where criminals can be arrested while authorities simultaneously work to prevent an environment that fosters more criminals.

"We have to look at those individuals who have the tendency to become criminals by being able to create wrap around services for those young individuals who have deep-rooted issues, who need some help in terms of conflict resolution, anger management, who are acting out in school on a regular basis, who are in the youth rehab center and not receiving any services – we've got to take care of them so, that they don't become the next generation of criminals," he explained.

Additionally, he suggested that law enforcement officers should be deployed during the hours that crimes are most likely to occur in an effort to dissuade criminals.

What I promised.

"I never promised everybody I was going to solve every problem in the Virgin Islands in three-and-a-half years," said Mr. Bryan, who at the time was asked about his administration's failure to repair more homes damaged by Hurricanes Irma and Maria as part of the EnVision Tomorrow program.

Mr. Bryan insisted that some of the problems that residents were concerned about four years ago have been addressed, including issues with the Government Employees' Retirement System, the paving of roads, and paying tax refunds.

In their closing statements, both men urged the electorate to vote for them as the better choice to lead the territory.

Mr. Vialet pushed the Vialet/Sarauw's team platform for improving the quality of life for Virgin Islanders in health, education well-lit highways, high electricity bill, while Mr. Bryan spoke of his Bryan/Roach team's achievements over the past three-and-a-half years in government.