



Full Story

## **Constitutional Convention marred by loud shouting, personal insults and delegates storming in and out**

**By MEGAN POINSKI**

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Daily News Photo by MEGAN POINSKI Constitutional Convention delegates Adelbert Bryan, left, and Eugene Petersen argue about a new constitutional proposal that Petersen presented to the convention on Saturday.

ST. THOMAS - As Saturday's session of the Constitutional Convention began, delegate Wilma Marsh Monsanto offered a prayer to rebuke the powers of evil from disrupting the convention's business.

As the session unfolded, however, consternation, confusion, chaos and quarrels filled the Small Business Development Center conference room in Nisky Center. The air was filled with shouting and arguments. Delegates stormed out of the room in disgust and annoyance. The gavel, wielded by Convention Vice President Lawrence Sewer, was pounded on the table with such force it might have broken.

Saturday's session disintegrated just before lunch with delegates arguing with each other and staying in the shopping center's hallways and outdoor terraces to prevent the body from having a quorum. Efforts to bring delegates to order were unfruitful, and no formal adjournment was ever called to Saturday's meeting. As delegates filtered out of the conference room, Sewer gathered his things and put away the gavel.

"We need to take a mental stand-down," Sewer told The Daily News.

Convention President Gerard Luz James II was not at Saturday's session.



Daily News Photo by MEGAN POINSKI  
Delegate Michael Thurland, standing, engages  
in the debate Saturday during the convention  
session.

The arguments between delegates started moments after the session began, as delegates questioned suggestions in Convention Secretary Mary Moorhead's report.

However, the spark that caused Saturday's explosion came in the form of a 23-page document circulated to the body by delegate Eugene Petersen, who rose to make a motion pertaining to his document.

"I move that this primary draft for the Fifth Virgin Islands Constitutional Convention be adopted in its entirety as our proposed first draft. So moved," Petersen said.

Petersen had taken the lead on cobbling together some of the provisions that the convention had discussed into a replacement document. Petersen's proposal leaves out the more controversial provisions in the constitution worked on by delegates so far. It has no definitions of native Virgin Islanders. It has no requirements that governors and lieutenant governors must be born in the Virgin Islands, and it decrees that both be

elected on the same ballot. It does not set class sizes for different grade levels. It has no definition of marriage.

Petersen started his work on the alternate document about a month ago, after he found that many of his fellow delegates were not happy with the document that was being produced. Before Saturday's session, he had wide support for his proposal among the 30 delegates. Before leaving on Saturday, 13 delegates had signed their support on his draft.

But many other delegates had not seen Petersen's draft before Saturday morning. Many of those were the delegates who find the portions Petersen deleted to be the most important parts of the constitution.

After Petersen's motion, the meeting room filled with impassioned shouts of "Second!" and "Objection!"

Moorhead challenged the basis of the motion. Petersen responded that he followed the convention's rules exactly. According to the rules, any delegate can present any document for consideration if it has been given to the legal counsel and has written on its front page the name of the delegate proposing it. Petersen's name is written across the top of his proposal, and convention legal counsel Lloyd Jordan said that he received his copy of the document on Friday night.

Before the business of the meeting got under way, Sewer said that delegates would have three-minute intervals to discuss any issue that was brought up. Because of the magnitude of the effect of Petersen's proposal, delegate Arturo Watlington Jr. got to his feet and made a motion that the time limit be extended to 10 minutes.

Delegate Adelbert Bryan objected to the motion. When he was recognized to speak about why he objected to extending debate time, Bryan instead decried the document. Shouting, clutching the proposal and waving his arms, Bryan cursed the proposal - especially because it was missing the article that defines native Virgin Islanders.

"Which lie are they telling us to present this?" Bryan shouted. He kept yelling as he stormed to the door of the conference room. "I am not going to vote for this!"

Shouting among delegates and protests that Bryan be called out of order echoed throughout the room. Sewer ordered that the vote be taken. The motion failed, keeping the discussion time on the document at three minutes.

But that discussion never took place. Petersen again explained his reasons for the document, and Bryan stood up to object. Bryan began speaking before he was recognized, sparking outrage from delegate Arnold Golden.

"He is disrupting the entire meeting!" Golden said. "He cannot have the floor all

morning!"

"Then come take the floor from me," Bryan responded.

Again, arguments and outrage erupted among delegates. Sewer watched the arguments, then abruptly called a two-minute recess.

As Sewer rapped the gavel, several delegates spoke up at the same time.

"I challenge the chair!" Petersen said.

Monsanto yelled, "This shows no respect for us and the work we have been doing!"

Delegate Charles Turnbull shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "This is what you call a coup," he said.

Petersen used the break to solicit support for his document among his fellow delegates. He turned his copy of the proposal to the last page, where there is a signature line for each delegate and set it down on one of the tables in the conference room. Several delegates signed next to their names.

"We are rescuing this constitution so it can be something the people can accept," said delegate Clement Magras.

Other delegates used the break to continue their arguments.

"I'm as native as anyone here," Watlington said to Bryan.

"And are you signing it?" Bryan asked.

"Yes," Watlington said. "Because I care about my people and I know how to treat my people with my own money. I don't need the government to do that. And I could be prejudiced against other people on my own."

Sewer called the convention back to order and said that discussion on Petersen's proposal must halt immediately. The reading of Moorhead's secretary report had not been completed, and Sewer said delegates needed to approve the minutes of the previous meeting before they could do anything else.

Grunts of annoyance swept through the meeting room. As delegates objected and protested Sewer's ruling, delegate Douglas Capdeville arrived and more melee erupted.

Capdeville, a youth soccer coach, had come to the meeting straight from a game. He wore a T-shirt, athletic shorts and a baseball cap. He removed the cap as he walked in.

Noticing Capdeville's appearance, Bryan stood up and started shouting again. He

complained that Capdeville had not conformed to the convention's dress code and could not participate.

Capdeville shook his head and quietly asked Bryan to leave him alone. Other delegates started shouting in response. Several pointed out that the convention's rules state that delegates need to be dressed neatly and must be well-groomed.

There is no strict dress code, Petersen said.

Amid the melee, Watlington made a motion to accept the minutes from the previous meeting. Moorhead started taking a roll call vote, and delegates calmed down.

When she got to Capdeville's name, however, the dam burst again.

"Don't accept the vote from delegate Capdeville! He is wearing short pants!" Bryan yelled.

Other delegates asked Sewer to call the body to order and exclaimed that Bryan's outburst was not appropriate. The din rose once again.

"Stop shouting!" Arnold Golden said, breaking through the clamor. "This is bothering me!"

After the vote was finished, Sewer ruled that he was not going to accept Capdeville's vote because he felt that he was not dressed properly.

No sooner had he spoken than a chorus of delegates asked to challenge Sewer's ruling. A vote was taken and delegates elected to overrule Sewer, allowing Capdeville to participate fully in the session.

After the vote, Moorhead angrily started picking up her things.

"I must be excused, Mr. Chairman," Moorhead said. "I will be gone for the rest of the day. If I have to get properly dressed, I will not tolerate others coming here and not doing so." She briskly left the room.

Watlington then made a motion to amend the meeting's agenda, bringing consideration of new language and amendments to the forefront so Petersen's document could be discussed and voted on.

Sewer used the privilege of the chair to expound on his disapproval of Petersen's document. Not only is it completely different from what delegates have been working on, Sewer said, but the deadline to finish the document - May 31 - is coming quickly. With Holy Week coming up and V.I. Carnival dominating most of April, Sewer said, there is not much time to do something completely new and to educate the public about

the new document.

"If you attempt to stage a coup, we only have 15 days to effectively get our documents to the people," Sewer said. "We only have 15 days to get our document to be approved by our people - 15 days."

Bryan argued that he felt his point of view had been usurped by Petersen's proposal.

"What happened to the delegates? What happened to things they voted on?" Bryan said. "He can come here with collusion of people who can rewrite, and they struck down what we have already supported."

At this point, several delegates called for Sewer to take the vote on reordering the agenda. As delegate Elsie Thomas-Trotman, who was taking over since Moorhead stormed out, prepared the paperwork to record a roll call vote, Bryan got up, walked to the doorway, opened it, and called for a quorum call as he left the room. According to the convention's rules, business can be conducted only if a quorum of 21 delegates is in the room where the meeting is taking place.

Sewer ruled that the quorum call vote be done before the vote on reordering the agenda.

Delegates Brady, Capdeville, Magras, Monsanto, Petersen, Sewer, Trotman, Watlington, Gerard Emanuel, Arnold Golden, Violet Anne Golden, Lois Hassell-Habtes, Stedmann Hodge Jr., Francis Jackson, Thomas Moore, Claire Roker, Richard Schrader Jr., Robert Schuster, Alecia Wells and Lisa Williams all were present for the quorum call.

Delegates Bryan, Moorhead, Turnbull, Kendall Petersen and Michael Thurland all had been present at the session earlier on Saturday, but were not in the room for the quorum call.

Delegates James, Rena Brodhurst, Mario Francis and Myron Jackson were not present for any portion of Saturday's session.

As Sewer was about to declare that there was no quorum since only 20 delegates answered the roll call, Eugene Petersen pulled out his cell phone. The convention's rules allow delegates to attend meetings and vote by telephone, Eugene Petersen said. He switched his phone onto the speaker function.

A faint voice crackled out of the phone.

"I am delegate Barshinger, and I am present and accounted for," said delegate Craig Barshinger from the other end of the telephone call.

Some delegates expressed outrage that Barshinger could be counted as present over the

telephone. Others walked out of the room, shaking their heads.

Bryan stuck his head into the meeting room a second time. He asked for another quorum call and stepped out of the room as delegates groaned. Since a quorum had just been established, Jordan told Sewer that he could rule the quorum call out of order if he thought it was a nuisance.

That brought Bryan charging back into the meeting room and walking toward Jordan.

"I said quorum call. I am the delegate! Not you!" Bryan said. Using crude language, Bryan told Jordan to sit down and be quiet.

Sewer chose to take the vote for a quorum call. There were not 21 delegates in the meeting room, so the meeting devolved into private conversations between delegates.

Several delegates who had left the room to avoid making a quorum filtered back in.

Hoping to get something accomplished on Saturday, Hodge grabbed a roll call sheet and walked to the front of the conference room. He started taking attendance. Nobody responded.

"I give up," Hodge said. "We're getting nothing done because we big children. We're just big children."

The session was scheduled to continue on Sunday, but a quorum was never reached. Brady, Bryan, Emanuel, Hassell-Habtes, Francis Jackson, Monsanto, Moore, Moorhead, Kendall Petersen, Roker, Sewer, Thurland, Turnbull and Wells reported for the second day of the session. Delegates spent the day having informal discussions about language dealing with technology, nuclear power and waste, and taxation.