

- Good morning. Good morning. Welcome to Ability Radio and we've changed our name. We are now Ability Radio, You and Your Life. This program is hosted by the Disability Rights Center. My name is Amelia LaMont and I am joined this morning, as been many mornings, by Iris Bermudez. Good morning, Iris.

- Good morning.

- How are you?

- I'm fine. Glad to be back. I'm here.

- Yeah. It's been a while. It's been a while. First of all, we wanna thank all of you who had regularly listened to our previous show under the umbrella called Ability Radio, You and Your Health, all of the guests that we had on the show that were available to participate and bring us much needed help for related information, and we haven't stopped doing that but we're going to reinvent ourselves and make it more expansive. So the purpose of our show is, we're now calling it, Ability Radio, You and Your Life, and that's to help people live life to its fullest and promote awareness of what the US Virgin Islands offers from different perspectives certainly with the emphasis on the disability perspective. You will hear and learn from people, groups, programs that are working here in the Virgin Islands, and who are dedicated to maintaining and preserving an inclusive community while focusing on Virgin Islands' history and culture. But before we begin, I have to go through our usual rules of engagement. We request that there be no use of names, no personal attacks, no unfounded allegations, and no profanity. The opinions expressed are those of the host and those of the guest. And this is a live in, call-in show. We encourage you to call at 779-1079 or 713-1079. I'm excited. We have a very exciting guest this morning and we're going to talk about, probably the elephant in the room, some might say, but it's about the election process. So we're beginning our new program, we bring none other than John Abramson, Jr., former supervisor of the VI Election System who will render his expertise on what happened November 8th, 2016. Good morning.

- Good morning to you and the listening audience, and I'm glad to really be here. There's a lot to talk about. You know, the election was, I guess, mind-boggling for a lot of people.

- Yeah.

- Right.

- I don't think a lot people, I was out last evening and I, people are still reeling from the results of the national election and also from our local election. We had some, we had some issues on the local election as well. So, great to be here, I look forward to a great opportunity and great program this morning.

- Thank you. Thank you. Well, as you know John, honesty and integrity seem to be very serious issues confronting candidates running for office. What tips can you provide that can help a voter determine the credibility of a candidate?

- You know, the issue of honesty, integrity is really, is really personal and I use myself always as a barometer. The value system that you have come up with as a person is supposed to guide you between knowing the difference between right and wrong. I may use the example my parents always gave me, it's a very simple example, but I think it says the message. If you walk into somebody's house and there's a dollar or two dollars on a table and you're not really a thief, but it's, it looks inviting, will you leave it alone or don't you? Would you say to yourself, "It isn't mine"?

- Uh-hmm.

- And simply say, "It ain't mine," and go about your business. Honesty and integrity is something we need in all of our legislators and for the most part, I have to be totally honest as we were speaking of air, I've worked for the legislation for 10 years and for the most part we, I hear a lot of people come on talk shows, and that's in quotations...

- Right.

- ...and talk about corruption. Well for the most part, most of our legislators, locally, are extremely honest and have great integrity within themselves. To some of the decision making, that's another subject, but in terms of individual character and value system I think most of them are solid. However, if I have to give voters tips on what to look for for issues of integrity is, how many times have they been in certain issues related to certain subjects. Subjects like money.

- Uh-hmm.

- Money's always a...

- Oh, yeah. That's their primary function.

- As an attorney, you understand, they always say, "Follow the money."

- Right.

- If you see somebody they have money-related issues all the time, I think that's a little red flag. I'm gonna go, I'm gonna go to the place where most people won't think that I will ever go, but fidelity issues are a red flag.

- Right.

- Again, and again, as a, as an elected official, you're supposed to be at a certain standard in our community.

- Right.

- That's right.

- And that, when you see these little quirk start to happen, and I'm setting this up for something because when we get to Donald Trump, I'm sent for the red flag issues. When you see these little red flags, you need to pay attention to them...

- Pay attention.

- ...because if you don't pay attention to the red flags then you'll probably get a product that you don't want.

- Uh-hmm.

- See, I just said the elephant in the room. You called it as you saw it. Very valid points. Very valid points. You said that you've worked as a chief of staff from a number of senators, so you've certainly...

- Five of them.

- Five?

- Five.

- Wow.

- So, you've certainly bring in a wealth of experience in this regard.

- I think I've, I think I've paid some dues, to say the least.

- And I'm encouraged by your comment about honesty and integrity, and certain ways in which one conducts themselves. And I'm also encouraged by you mentioning that one of the strengths, I think of, the Virgin Islands is that people can spot you and recognize you as an elected official, and will call you to task and are very, I think, smart when they figure out that somebody isn't really working for them in whatever way they can or can't.

- Uh-huh.

- I have to agree, again, none of our legislators can escape the wrath of the voter, and the wrath of the voter means whether they catch you in the supermarket, the bakery, to the fair, and very few times that they catch you in your office...

- At the beach.

- At the beach, yeah.

- [ inaudible ] by the beach.

- By the way, at dinner, by the way, there's no private time for any of our legislators because we live in such a small community, so isolated, and again, as I mentioned, I, we used to work for the New Hampshire Legislature when I was in graduate school. We have, like, assembly people, like, 400 and odd, and they only meet from July to August, to July to September. And again, I'm, one of the things I think we need to consider is restructure of our legislature.

- Yes.

- I'm gonna go out on a limb here. If we had a part-time legislature, I may consider running myself.

- Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.

- I think we need to go to a part-time legislature, we need to go to districting, we need to change some of the issues because the product we have now, we're not getting our best outcome from the product we're delivering now.

- Absolutely.

- And I think we would get a higher quality, and I'm not dissing anybody by this statement, I think we'll get a higher quality of individuals that would be willing to serve. I'm certain that I could convince you to serve [ inaudible ] I'm sure I can, if we were part-time, I'm sure I can convince you to serve. The issue is this, we would get a higher quality, and in doing that we would change the paradigm of how people think about us as a country because right now as I said, the average person thinks being a senator is a glamorous job, and I'm going to sit here and tell you, not...

- It's not.

- ...in very certain terms, it is not a glamorous job, you have to make hard decisions, you can't do very much planning in your life. Remember now, you can't get a loan. If you wanna go to the bank and get a new car...

- Uh-hmm.

- ...it's gonna be a five-year loan and you only got a two-year term, so...

- Right. Wow. I haven't thought of that.

- So the issues, the issues are that, it's a very taxing job and people don't understand the idiosyncrasies that go with trying to, and more importantly, as I said, that you work 24/7 and people don't believe that that's the truth, but it is, and I stand as witness to most of them that, it's a grueling job, but at the same time you have to make decisions, and when you make decisions for our community, that may be hard and impacting.

- Right.

- There's nowhere to run to. You can't [ inaudible ]

- They know where you live. They know where you live.

- But that, that's a good point you're just making because I'm sitting here listening to you and I'm thinking, "Decision making, you have to make so many different decisions." When do you feel that you're making the right decision or, like a lot of people in the community think, that it's all political, it's all politics, we're only being governed by politics, so whatever decision they've made is because they wanted to get re-elected again?

- Yeah. But we're gonna have you think about that while we take a little break and we'll be right back. Exciting morning. Thank you. And we're back. You're listening to Ability Radio, You and Your Life and we have a very special guest with us here this morning, John Abramson, Jr., former supervisor of the Virgin Islands Election System. Iris, you had a question before we went to break and...

- I do. I do. It was about decision making with respect to, you know, how some, the population feels that when decisions are made by senators that it's only because it's politically expedient for them to make that decision even if it's not gonna help the constituents, and I was wondering, how do they come up with the decisions they make? I mean, is it really political or is it that they're trying to think in terms of what's best for the community?

- In, and, you know, for the most part, and again, I have to support the legislature, and again, we talk, I'm talking about our most recent one and a few others, but, you know, I think the legislature is in a very tough position. They're between a rock and a hard place all the time.

- Right.

- Do you make decision that are going to impact people and, I mean, they have drastic impact, it depends on the subject topic of whether we talk about GERS, WAPA, some of the real hard issues, and they have to make decisions, and sometimes, and for example, I'm going to, again, I'm going to, I always go out on a limb anyway. For example ArcLight. I think most of ArcLight was political decisions because they [ inaudible ] needed something so they had to make some political decisions. Do we support the governor on this, do we do that, do we work with the other branch? Those were political decisions.

- Now, to refresh our recollection as to what ArcLight is, I think I know what...

- ArcLight was the...

- [ inaudible ]

-...Limetree, the, no, Limetree, the new Hovensa [ inaudible ] Hovensa and Limetree [ inaudible ] whether they're gonna do tanking storage, bam, bam, bam, all of that kind of information. So that issue when he brought them a proposal which they only could ratify, and again, one of the issues that I, and I'm gonna answer your question Iris.

- That's okay.

- One of the issues I always have with this is a lot of people still don't understand about civics.

- Uh-hmm.

- Uh-hmm.

- How the government works.

- Right.

- Yes.

- And how the government works is critical for you to understand whether people, how people make decisions.

- Yes.

- And part of decision making is when they made that political decision, I consider ArcLight to be a political decision and it was a political decision which would my, in my estimation was vested in wanting to have the best interest of St. Croix. The, St. Croix was at such a low economic position that they said, "A little of something is better than a lot of nothing."

- Than a lot of nothing.

- And with that said there are other political decisions that they must make that can be very unpopular and for me, and I keep going to issues of structure and I won't ever get off of that because I think structure makes how things work.

- It's the foundation.

- Right.

- The basics.

- If we, if we, if we consider, if we were to have a bill in front of legislators who say that you'd be a part-time legislature, that we would go to sub-districting, that you would get \$75, you'd only meet three months a year, twenty-four cents a mile, that would change our governmental structure. Any of you guys have any idea how much the legislature spends on their annual budget?

- I'm sure it's millions.

- I know it's millions.

- Take a guess on millions. Take a guess.

- Let's say 17 million.

- Eighteen. You're pretty close.

- Oh.

- All right.

- Okay.

- You are pretty much on the bar [ inaudible ] 15, 18, they spend on legislation.

- That's a lot of money.

- And the problem is is that, and again, I go back to the civics issues that a lot of people feel that they have, that senators are omnipotent, that they can do anything.

- Yeah.

-But they can't. That's not their job description. When I worked for a few senators, I used to have to put up in the office, "This is not an employment nor a housing agency," because most people feel senators do all of the above.

- Right.

- Their role is to appropriate funds.

- Right.

- Have purse strings of the government, to have oversight over the executive branch and certain issues that they can do. But again, I understand old-time politics, by the way, I, my first time in the legislature, I was in the Legislature. My first birth there was in the 17th Legislature. Well, what's [ inaudible ] we in now, 32nd.

- Right. Okay.

- [ inaudible ]

- I was in the 17th. I was the chief, my first chief of staff post was with Alicia Torres-James and I would meet with people like the honorable John Bell, who I consider to be a personal friend, and he would say to me, "John, I, after [ inaudible ] in the house and to fix some people thing." I'd be like, "But, senator, that ain't your job." He's like, "You stand there." And I understand old-time politics and new-time politics, and the difference is we're in the new era. We're in a very different time. We are, we are digital. We are in the whole different conceptual idea.

- Right.

- And I think we need to start to educate our public to rethink some of our positions because as much as we think senators can accomplish the world, they can't. And more importantly, it takes the majority to do everything. And as a parliamentarian, I guess, the only certified parliamentarian in the Caribbean, I'm saying, they don't understand that it is so difficult, can you imagine to give 15 people a task to come to a single issue? It's really hard and whether people want to understand that or not, it is very, very, very hard.

- It is a challenge. I mean, there have been instances where, you know, we're, for example, we do a lot of work with individuals with mental illness and one of the proposals had been, through our advisory council that focuses on mental illness, just an amendment to what was presently in place. And to get an amended, an amendment which is really not a controversial issue...

- Issue.

- ...is really staggering that that had not been able to get accomplished. Tell me a little bit more, tell us a little bit more about how districting would have better impact on governance.

- Well, you know, right now, we have a system of plurality. The first seven to cross the poll wins. First of all, we have individuals that, and I would say from, running from the same party, they have to compete against each other.

- Yeah.

- And then at the end of that tussle, they have to go into the legislative. They win and be colleagues.

- Difficult.

- That's kind of hard.

- Okay.

- It's like cursing your assistant and then say you love her [ inaudible ] can you fix this?"

- Okay. Something like that

- So that, in and of itself, is hard. The other issue is an, in any system of, what we call a system of representation in the election process, it is, what's your goal? What do you want to achieve by the system you have? I do a lot of work in the Eastern Caribbean observing and I've been the supervisor for 20 years. I do, I, and I've done a lot of places. The issue is, what is the goal you want to achieve? Districting, sub-districting would give us the opportunity of being able to identify who's the responsible party.

- Right.

- It gives you the issue of accountability and I hear a lot of people getting on the talk shows, and by the way, I keep, every time I say, "talk shows," it's in parenthesis, yeah, in quotations. The issue is, it would be able to identify who's not doing their job.

- Right.

- In other words, you instead of now, if I tell you I live up, Mahogany Road is in a state of district [ inaudible ] who do I hold responsible?

- Right.

- Like, do I hold all seven people? I know Neville James doesn't live in Frederiksted so he might never, he might not even, ever been on Mahogany Road. So the issue, districting would give us the issue of accountability, and I believe that most Virgin Island is and, specifically, most St. Croix residents are concerned about getting government close to them. I'm a strong advocate of municipal government and districting at the same time. The question I'm grappling with is, are we at a point in our political development where we need a two-tier government? I have a problem with senators making, from St. Thomas, decisions from here in St. Croix.

- Uh-hmm.

- Uh-hmm.

- I have a problem with that because I don't vote for you.

- Right.

- Uh-hmm.

- Yeah.

- So, are we at a point in our political development where we need a two-tier government? I believe we are. I have some other issues that I want to concern, to, have people to think about is, for example, our present situation, we just elected somebody at-large who ran unopposed, but he had to be from the island of St. John.

- St. John.

- Are we getting the best product out of that office? Again, should the at-large position truly be an at-large position that you could run from any of the three islands?

- Sure.

- I think it should. So we're simply electing our governor, lieutenant governor as a team. Twenty-eight states have gotten away from that and I think that we may consider because, again, we have this concept that if I'm a Crucian governor, I need to get a St. Thomian partner.

- Right.

- Two Crucian might do a better job. Again, concept is should we look, and all of this is in the Organic Act '54. Should we start looking at some of these reforms and I don't wanna call them election reform because people get caught up in that term.

- Uh-hmm.

- Uh-hmm.

- Should we look at some of these reforms that we should be doing to change our structure of how the government works to give us a much better product that would be making the people, I know, I can walk into your office and say, "Ms. Bermudez, my Frederiksted representative, you're not fixing a road."

- Right.

- "And I am not going to vote for you until I see you do something and I can hold you responsible because you're the representative from the District of Frederiksted [ inaudible ]

- Uh-hmm.

- Right.

- Uh-hmm.

- That would make a big difference. At least, that's my opinion. And then I strongly feel that because in all of the Caribbean Islands that I've ever traveled to, they have districting and I'll give you one example. I was doing some work in St. Kitts and after the election, I was there doing some work as an observer. After the election, we went, they were taking me around for a little tour and we drove over a road, and I said, "Man, iron out that pavement." They said, "No. This district didn't vote for the government, so they get nothing."

- Oh, my goodness.

- Hmm.

- Hold that thought.

- Hmm. Hmm.

- We're gonna take a little break and we'll be right back. You're listening to Ability Radio.

- Oh, my good...

- We're back. You're listening to Ability Radio, You and Your Life. My name is Amelia Headley LaMont, cohosted this morning by Iris Bermudez, and our special guest this morning is John Abramson, Jr., former supervisor of the VI Election System. Districting, municipal government.

- Counties.

- Counties and such, I mean, I understand the vision and maybe you might want to elaborate more, but let me ask you the how. How can that be even approached here?

- Well, the first thing is first, we are presently governed by the Revised Organic Act of 1954 which is Virgin Islands' Constitution where the people are believed dah, dah, dah, first thing's first, we need the constitutional issue to be addressed. We...

- Didn't we just have a convention that didn't seem to function?

- No, we had a constitutional convention that I, in all truth, and I must say this to you Atty. LaMont, they did a wonderful great job. We had a few delegates that had personal agendas...

- How about...

- ...that they wanted to include in the document and subsequent, like anything else if you, if you overload any circuit, it going to, it's gonna fry. It's gonna go. And so we lost that but, by the way, the Fifth Constitutional Convention is still convened. They have never convene sine die, they've never got away.

- Uh-hmm.

- We need to deal with the constitutional issue. Most of the changes are things like I'm talking about and structural changes in the government needs to be done through a constitution. However, we always have the chicken and egg situation here in the Virgin Islands and again, it's about the civics and education, of people not knowing. People keep talking about we have to determine our status. It's not a question.

- Uh-hmm.

- The United States government granted the right to write a constitution to the Congress of the United States under the status that we presently exist. They didn't, what, the question wasn't what you are going to be.

- Uh-hmm.

- The question is, if you wanna write a constitution, we're giving you the authority to do this as you exist.

- Uh-hmm.

- By the way, we've already had a plebiscite here in the territory on seven different status issues and the majority of people voted that they wanted the status quo.

- Status quo.

- Okay.

- Right. That's right.

- So the question of status should not be a question we are debating. I hear a lot of people on the talk shows talk about the UN Resolution 1514 about self-determination and listen, all that's a bunch of crap. The congress said write a constitution as how you exist, where you are now, and that's what we need to do. There has been some discussion. I think the honorable, former Senator Usie Richards had came up with the idea that we may consider taking our present document, the '54 Organic Act, adopt it as the constitution and then go through the amendment process. I think that's honorable and it, and it's smart. However, I do think the Fifth Constitutional Convention did a lot of work, good work, and that they came up with some very unique ideas and that we should consider that. However, there are sections of it that I have problems with which is, again, the structure of the legislature and things of that nature. But that's our first step. So you said how do we start? The first step is we need constitutional change, first step is we need to have our own constitution, first step.

- Right.

- Then from that point on, we can start to make amendments to the document that will give us the kind of government we need. Again, I lived in, I lived in New Hampshire and, you know, I got to be honest, I'm not a republican, I'm not a democrat, but I am a no-party affiliate. But I live in New Hampshire and they, their state motto is, "Live free or die."

- Or die.

- Okay. Right?

- Yes. Yup, yup.

- Complete volunteer fire service.

- Yeah.

- Nobody gets paid...

- Nobody.

- ...a dime.

- Uh-hmm. Yup.

- Uh-hmm.

- EMS.

- Teach, EMS, complete volunteer.

- Yup.

- Teachers make, like, 60,000 or 80,000, \$60,000 or \$5,000 stat in salary.

- Uh-hmm.

- Why can they do that? Because some services that are essential to the, to the running of the country, of the state are free.

- Right.

- Uh-hmm.

- If you gotta pay for everything...

- Yeah.

- And I think if we had municipal government, places, by the way, I'm a, I'm a [ inaudible ] Frederiksted advocate. I think places like Frederiksted, that people would start to step up. I just believe in the human spirit that, my mother, God bless her soul, always told me the only thing in my life, she said, "John, the only thing in your life ever going to be constant is change."

- Yup.

- Uh-hmm.

- And I've never let that go for one minute because it is true.

- It's true.

- Everything that, everything is going to change. By the way, we had municipal government and districting in the Virgin Islands for a hundred years and in '54, we changed that process. In 1936 Organic Act, we still had districting and we still had municipal government, that, they call them municipal council.

- Right. Right.

- In '54, we changed that.

- This is so fascinating because I'm thinking, you know, education I think, kind of, got away from doing civics. I think we need to bring that back to the fore of what our children, it's important.

- Well, I would hope, and especially, in your position Atty. LaMont because you represent individuals that are physical challenged and, again, we used to do services through our churches...

- Uh-hmm.

- ...for individuals that were physically challenged. We had a social service system that existed born in response of the issue.

- Uh-hmm.

- Where did all of this volunteerism...

- Right.

- ...where did we lose all of this? And, I guess, my advocacy is to...

- [ inaudible ]

- ...for us to go back in that direction, look back in history. Those, I mean, that was wrong. I think that there were some good things happening. And I think blend it with our modern technologies and...

- Uh-hmm.

- ...we could have a, we could be a model community of what really good citizen participation, and I want to use that as a very broad phrase [ inaudible ] like, and I think this community, you see, I have on my Rotary pin, we have five Rotary Clubs in the Virgin Islands. We have hundreds of churches. I mean, I think the infrastructure for our, but I think, Iris' point, we really have to go. Without civics teaching you that volunteerism is good...

- Yeah.

- ...it's not a bad thing.

- Right.

- You don't always have to get paid. I think getting back to some of that would, I'm gonna make a sweeping statement. Paradigm change, we need to get in to grade schools to start this.

- Yes.

- Because we lost two generations already that's never going to consider it because if we have these two generations under check, we wouldn't be having a crime and killing and all those things we got running around.

- Uh-hmm.

- When I growing up, you and somebody get in a tiff, you punch him, he pouch you, you thrust a stone, he thrust a stone, and the next day, all is friends.

- Yup.

- That was the way it worked. And we just have to change people's thinking and that's why I'm concerned about the education system. I did, back in the day, I was, formerly at one time, served the board of education and again, at that time, it was, it was, that was in the early '80s and a little different, and I think we need to get back to reorienting our educational system to our community. I'm making a linkage there, too.

- Uh-hmm.

- That goes back to what you were saying about the legislature or senators doing work that belongs to other people. For example, what's the role then with the commissioner, any commissioner of any department versus a senator? That's their job to make sure that their department is functioning adequately and it's a senator, if I'm, if I'm right, it's a senator's role to just say, "How you doing? What do you need?" as for...

- To accomplish his task.

- To accomplish your goals.

- Or to give a call and say, "Listen, I have a constituent came in."
- Yeah.
- "I need, I need you to look into this for me."
- Right.
- But you don't do the work. In other words, you don't...
- Somebody else.
- Right. You don't become a super commissioner...
- Right.
- ...having both executive and legislative functions.
- Uh-hmm.
- Exactly.
- You would call the commissioner because if a senator calls a commissioner, chances of him picking up the phone is probably 99.9%.
- Uh-hmm.
- If John Abramson call a commissioner, chances of him picking up the phone is probably 60, maybe 50, and probably [ inaudible ] maybe 40. So, the issue is the senators with his oversight responsibility just, basically, doesn't get involved in the issue, but then he does transmit, "I have some concerns because my people, constituents"...
- Constituents.
- ...which, whether [ inaudible ] use that phrase, but I'm the, of the opinion there's no constituency in the Virgin, I think only one person in the Virgin Islands has constituency and that is Alicia "Chucky" Hansen. She's the only person in this territory that have, every other senator just, every other public official that runs for office are just running. She has a constituency, but, and again, districting would establish constituencies.
- Right.
- And I think in numbers lie strength and that is why districting, sub-districting would be the best and most effective way to have great accountability, and also it would give us a better handle on the financial management of where money is going, coming, and going to, and going from so that we can see what's happening.
- Absolutely.
- So this would have to happen within the confines of another convention, is that what I'm hearing?
- It could, exactly. It would have to either a convention or direct modifications to, if we adopt the Organic Act, they can convene a ad hoc committee, this can be done through the legislators, simply through legislation, and say that we can sit down and we want you to come up with

amendments that you would think, as an organization, I'm assuming any ad hoc committee would have business leaders, community personnel, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and be able to come up with amendments that we'd like to see drafted into the adopted '54 Organic Act. And then whatever changes need to be made, whether they be in the structure of how the legislature, the court, whatever, but those amendments would be made through that process.

- Remember a long time ago, we had a conversation about, when I was trying to still grapple with what was meant by a referendum. Remember the referendum issue?

- Yeah, I remember that. I remember, we had that discussion for quite a while.

- Okay. And I, we learned that, you know, after we had a referendum with respect to the content, the numbers of...

- We had an opinion poll. You're still going there?

- I know.

- We had an opinion poll.

- You remember? Right. Oh, it was an opinion poll?

- Yeah, because a referendum, a referendum is a binding act. That's the difference in definition. And by the way, only the Legislature of the Virgin Islands, in this particular island, on this territory, can execute a referendum. But it must be binding, some action must occur when it's completed.

- Hmm.

- We've had several opinion polls that the legislature has, entitled referendum.

- So therein lies the rub because you remember what the issue was, limiting the number of senators.

- And I told you that before, it was not the question on the table.

- Okay.

- The question on the table, what the legislature [ inaudible ] was to petition the Congress of the United States to reduce the number of senators.

- Okay.

- That was the question.

- Importance [ inaudible ]

- And when we come back, I want to finish this thought because this is...

- All right.

- ...critically important.

- Okay.

- It sure is.

- We'll be back in a little bit. Thank you. We're back. You're listening to Ability Radio, You and Your Life, our new iteration so to speak. My name is Amelia Headley LaMont, executive director of the Disability Rights Center. I am joined this morning as in many mornings, happily, by Iris Bermudez. And our special guest this morning is John Abramson, Jr., former supervisor of the VI Election System who has been sharing with us this morning a wealth of information on our Election System, and it also comes down to, as we discussed during the break, civics...

- Civics.

- ...and grappling with or having a better handle as to how government functions.

- Uh-hmm.

- And you were just...

- I wanna get back to referendum [ inaudible ]

- ...giving, okay.

- I don't wanna leave that alone.

- Yes, no, no, that's good. The...

- This is critically important for me.

- Very important, yes. I agree.

- Again, the referendum issues are always binding. Now, we've had a number of opinion polls. We did have an opinion poll to petition the Congress of the United States, and I want you to understand the words I'm using, "Petition the congress"...

- Asking...

- ...so we were asking congress for the right to do that. I have, every time you have an election, I am, as a former supervisor, is required to send a copy of the ballot to the Congress of the United States, to show that the office of the Delegate is a actual office and the Federal portion of our ballot. I send that up and the Clerk of, the Clerk of the House sent me a notice saying, "Oh, by the way, you're having an issue on your ballot that we've already, we've grappled with already on October 28th," this is 1998, October 28, "We already took care of that. We already wrote to the Legislature and said that they have the authority, that the congress already threw an amendment, granted them the right to reduce their size on their own," so it's a legislative act at this point. At the time, Vargrave Richards was the Senate President. I jumped on the horn, I called Vargrave, I said, "Sir, I take it off the ballot. We need to do something here [ inaudible ] he's like, "No, it's too late." This is 31st October, the election was November 2nd.

- Uh-hmm.

- He's like, "No, let's let it ride." It was a bill sponsored by former Senator Donastorg. He said, "Let it ride." It comes back, the people vote that they would like to petition the congress to reduce the size of legislature to nine, but in most people's mind, what they were voting on was reducing the legislature, it wasn't the case, it was to petition...

- The congress.

- ...congress, so all the time we were voting, the legislature already had the authority to do this and, by the way, they have that authority up to today. So...

- Wow.

- If they want to reduce in size, they could just go into session and say, deal, bam, reduce.

- Done.

- Done, don't need any more consideration. We have some other referendums...

- You want to repeat that?

- For real, when was that? What's the [ inaudible ] of that?

- I told you it's...

- 1998.

- 1998.

- 19, October 20, October 28, 1998 that they basically, the congress gave the Legislature of Virgin Islands the authority to reduce their size, so they can make it big or they can make it smaller.

- Uh-hmm.

- Recently, over the last few months, we've been having these discussions at some radio programs about reapportionment. Reapportionment has to do with population, it has to do with size.

- Uh-hmm.

- Those issues are, those are scientific subjects that needs to be well researched. It's not just about, it has to do with population issues. I know we've had some population decrease here, so should we be taking away centers because we have less people? Those, it's very technical. All in all, they, the whole issue and why I want to talk about this referendum is this one thing, in every of the opinion polls that they have sent when I was sitting as supervisor, they would put in a clause that has to meet, the threshold would be fifty percent plus one vote, meaning a majority of voters that cast votes in that particular issue. And I have always written to the legislature and said, the words that I'd like to use, I can't say on the radio. The issue is if I let you to represent my life in this territory by a simple majority, why cannot this opinion poll or referendum as you have entitled it, be by simple majority?

- Uh-hmm.

- Uh-hmm.

- If the majority of people vote and say that Senator Kurt Vialet wins, we respect that.

- Uh-hmm. Right.

- So why can't we respect if the majority of people vote and say, "We would like medical marijuana in the Virgin Islands, and just a majority of, a simple majority of people say yes, then it happens. And then that has to be binding upon someone. When you write a bill, you have to say when this is, if it pass that the Department of so and so will do so and so, and the agency of so

and so will do so and so, and the Legislature will do so and so, and so and so so that once the action occurs something shall take place, that's the difference. I worked for Bert Bryan and when he passed the Casino Control, the Casino Act, which established casinos in the Virgin Islands, which was a hotel development bill by the way.

- Hmm. Okay.

- It's just because he picked it up and after we had the opinion poll and people said in St. Croix that they did want casinos because St. Thomas has voted in the non-affirmative. He picked it up and developed the Casino Legislation, it was based on Atlantic City, New Jersey. I give Ms. Constance Krieger, a former, our former legal counsel, great props on doing a great, great, great job, and my deputy at the time when [ inaudible ] said, the issue was that we came up with a great document. We got the signatures, we got it passed, and now we have the Casino Control Act, the establishment of the Casino Control Commission and all that. If he didn't pick it up, again, it would've just fell by the wayside. What a referendum, and this is what I'm trying to get at, in my Civics class today.

- Oh, you're gonna have to come [ inaudible ]

- A referendum must be binding than an action, will improve the life of the public when it's done, and that's simply said, and that's what it is.

- All right. So my question now is do we even have the capacity to have a referendum?

- Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

- Okay.

- I think there are, I think the recent, most recent opinion poll we had was on medical marijuana.

- Uh-hmm.

- By the way, what did the majority of people say? Yes, they wanted medical marijuana to be approved in the Virgin, or, no, it wasn't, it was on hemp.

- Hemp, yeah.

- It was on hemp. I'm misrepresenting. It was on hemp. And majority of people said they were interested in development of the issue. Where are we? What's happening? Who's responsible? Should Agriculture pick it up? Should the Legislature pick it up? Who's supposed to do something? Because the legislation is so open-ended, although we all said yes to something, we get nothing. So the issue is if you're gonna do a referendum, to make it useful to us, after the act of voting somebody should be responsible for implementation, and that's really what a referendum is. Want to go on the other side of the house now, we also have initiative and initiative by the way is people driven. It is the only thing that cannot come from the legislature. Initiative is required and it has very stringent requirements to have initiatives on the ballot and I think, again, in our structural redevelopment, and when we look at the constitution, we should undo some of these layers of layers of layers of activity, it should be easy for the people to walk in and say, "I'd like a referendum." Look at California. I know California...

- [ inaudible ]

- ...has a 28 page ballot...

- All the time.

- ...sometimes, but it gives the people a right of say.

-Right.

-And that's what true democracy of the Republic of America is. Our democrat way, we are republic.

-Right.

-Our republic say we're democratic and through that processes we're supposed to be able to have a say and our say is in our vote.

- Right.

- And that's why it should be easy to get issues on the ballot. I think as our present initiative process stands now, it is overly difficult and even a supervisor, I would always cringe when people would bring things forward.

- Oh, boy. Okay. Well...

- It's...

- ...I'm learning a lot, and I thought I knew something, this morning, but, we'll take a quick break and we'll be right back. We're back. This morning you're listening to Ability Radio, You and Your Life. And our special guest this morning is John Abramson, Jr., former supervisor of Elections. Let me also mention that if you missed anything this morning on the show, this show will be rebroadcasted on Sundays at noon and we also have it recorded on our website, drcvi.org. So, sir, I am, I'm characteristically speechless after this program.

- And that is true uncharacteristically.

- Which also means that we, I really think that you've given us some thought to perhaps engaging in a series of civics...

- Yes.

- ...lessons because I like to consider myself, I loved social studies when I was kid.

- Uh-hmm.

- But again the detail, the nuance, and I'm sitting up watching, you know, Late-night to, the election results because these are the kinds of things that intrigues me. That, you know, I like to consider myself as being an engaged citizen. But I think a lot of us shouldn't just wait till election years to know how the system works and I agree with what you said of having to do with a return to volunteering.

- Correct.

- I have a seen a real sharp decline and even parents when we do events or people coming out even, you know, everyone is, I don't know, I don't know what it is about, but one of the things that I will not abide by is that I refuse to think that we cannot do it. We are small community. We are supportive community. We can make change. It's possible.

- Quickly, I just wanna say that, and with our, with our recent development in the, on the national scene, I think we need, as a community, need to start to really take stock.

- That's right.

- How are we going to make our self better? I'm not a real, I don't want too much show my hand. I, well, I couldn't vote for any of the particular candidates but the bottom line is this, we need to really look at our community. How can I help it? You knew, everybody needs to step up and say, "What can I do to help?"

- Right.

- And I think there are some of the individuals that you represent Amelia that, we have so many needs.

- Yup.

- And we need to keep in my mind one thing, the government is not, cannot do it all and, by the way, the government is us.

- Us.

- Right.

- It is by the people, of the people...

- For the people.

- That's right.

- ...and for the people. And until we do our job, we are always going to be in the quagmire.

- And one thing that we kind of lose sight of is that whatever happens up there trickles down here.

- Always.

- Always. Always.

- And so we start, we should start to put on some armor now because I think we might be in a...

- For some hard one.

- ...tough position in the election months so...

- Yeah, that's right.

- And we should start to look at it.

- It's agree, it's agreed that it's, it is a time for serious reflection and action.

- Action.

- And action.

- And action. And I would like, and I think we should do that. We should make a call for action, especially on the volunteer front because I know you could use a couple of volunteers.

- Absolutely.

- And I know [ inaudible ] her work because I was, I used to work a lot in health related issues and in the health field, in the mental health field, I, personally, I got to be honest with you, you know I'm a, I'm a, I'm a full Frederiksted guy, and I cringe at how many people we have walking, and one in Frederiksted that, but the question is what can we do...

- What can...

- ...and I think, if by chance, I do have another opportunity to come and sit down with you young ladies, I would like to talk about what can we do as people to try and change some things that happen in our community. I really would like to get involved in the mental health issue somehow [ inaudible ]

-Oh, my God.

- I just don't know what...

- Oh, my...

- ...I don't know what to do, but...

- Oh, well, I'm so glad you said that and it's recorded.

- Oh, yeah, I'm putting his name down.

- Absolutely.

- I just don't know what to do. I don't know where to start and I don't know who to go to, but, you know...

-You're looking at them. Listen, this has been an absolute pleasure.

- Absolutely.

- And I thank you so much for taking time out to educate us, all of us on the importance of involvement and citizen engagement. This is Ability Radio, You and Your Life, and we will talk to you again next week. Thank you.

- Thank you.