



# **Independence Day Address 2009**

**Delivered by Prime Minister Hon. Dean Barrow  
on 21 September 2009**

Together with His Worship the Mayor, I say welcome to Belmopan. And I congratulate the September Celebrations Committee for giving back the Garden City its pride of place; for recognizing that the proper seat for the official Independence Day program is the nation's capital.

In preparing for today's address, I have been reflecting on the years since September 21st, 1981. In particular, I wondered whether any of the anniversaries since that first glorious day, found us in circumstances as difficult as the ones we face now. And it has been hard not to conclude that, certainly in terms of the economy, our present challenges loom at least as large as at any other time during our post-independence existence. A peculiar combination of world circumstances, natural disasters and the legacy from insane commercial borrowing and corrupt political spending has resulted now in national problems of unprecedented scale and circumference.

The effects of the global financial and economic crisis on our country - on government revenues, on tourism, on construction, on commerce, on agriculture - are too well known to rehearse here. What does bear repeating is the story of the way the developed world, the creators of the crisis, has pretty much cut and run. We heard encouraging rhetoric from the G20 earlier this year. But their promised assistance to small countries has turned out to be somewhat of a Barmecide feast. The new money that was to help us overcome the crisis, that was to come our way via the regional development banks, has not materialized. And without it our ability to take necessary measures in the face of the global recession has been greatly constrained.

When an economy goes into a tailspin, it is a truism that government should step into the breach. As business shrinks, consumer spending drops and the private sector is unable to invest; it falls to government to pick up the slack. Taxes should be lowered, interest rates go down, and public sector

spending increased. And that is exactly what has happened in the developed world. There, huge surpluses and the ability simply to print paper have financed unprecedented government interventions. But small countries such as ours have no money to properly fund stimulus packages and ramp up public spending. Heaven knows that in Belize we have tried, and we have made some progress. Much more, however, needs to be done. The promised external flows must arrive, the green shoots of recovery transplanted to our soil. Especially on Independence Day though, we make clear that we call for developed world action not as a charity case but as their partner in the global enterprise. We are a people, after all, that have always paid our fair share to the international financial institutions.

Now it is clear that the straitened economic circumstances in which this country finds itself, is owed in part to the transgressions of rich club nations. But it is equally true that our problems have been terribly exacerbated by local sins, by the rot and corruption of the pre-2008 era. Exhibit 1 is, of course, the poisoned chalice of that 1.1 billion dollar super bond. That is what is raiding our recurrent revenues; crippling our cash flow; stifling our fiscal space; and ripping from our hands the tools to deliver the goods and services to the people of this country.

But today is Independence Day and I shall not rant. We have to be real but we do not have to be raucous - For this is the day when we give thanks for our wonderful country, our wonderful democracy. And it is a democracy so limitless in its tolerance that it extends forbearance, if not forgiveness, even to those that have left us this terrible bequest of the super bond.

So that is the theme I now wish to sound: how good and how great, despite present tribulations, our country is; how storied our past, how glorious our history from the time of the Maya through the battle of St. George's Caye; how we continue to be inspired now by this trajectory; and how we are determined therefore that our independence celebrations will always be festivals of hope, confidence and joy.

In this vein there are some important particulars to which I now point. I highlight, for example, the great strides that we have begun to make again in education: the new investments in teacher training, the certificate course in primary education to upgrade classroom pedagogical skills. There is also the subsidy program to first and second form students, and the quantum increase in school places all over the country but especially in the impoverished south. And it has surely pleased all of us to learn that the results of the Caribbean Education Certificate exams this year show a huge improvement over 2008. Let no one doubt it, we are back on the road to excellence in Education.

Agriculture is also on the rebound. Bumper crops in basic grains have been so much a feature of this last cycle that we have been able to sell 2.5 million pounds of yellow corn to a neighboring country. Beans and rice production is also on the increase, and Central American export markets for these two are even now being secured. To top it all off, the Minister of Agriculture is to sign this month a trail blazing agreement for the export to Mexico, our friend and brother, of Belizean cattle and processed beef products.

Then while there has been a 9% hotel occupancy drop in our overnight tourism, preliminary bookings for

next year's high season are bouncing back. Meantime cruise arrivals have remained steady and are projected to increase with the plan for a southern Belize cruise itinerary. The 60 million dollar Sustainable Tourism Development Project is in place, and physical tourism improvement works in Belize City, San Ignacio, San Pedro, and Placencia will begin early 2010. Construction on our second international airport at Riversdale proceeds apace, and new high-end resorts for the peninsula also have 2010 startup dates. As well, development of the 3000 acres purchased by the Koreans in North Ambergris Caye is imminent.

Commencement of the five million dollar Belize City rejuvenation project has provided jobs to youth at risk, and the companion municipal streets and drains project will roll out in district towns around the end of the year. The Marion Jones Sporting Complex; the Kendal, Middlesex, and Mullins River bridges; the Southside Poverty Alleviation works, the road rehabilitation countrywide but especially in the North and South – all these are meat on the bone of our stimulus efforts, modest but effective.

Continuing, accelerated oil exploration also gives us hope of significant new black gold discoveries; and there may even be a way to avoid super bond Armageddon via the debt for nature swap we are presently discussing with the World Bank.

Finally, we are completing both an expanded Finance and Audit Reform Act, and revised Stores and Financial Orders. These will be accompanied by a new Fiscal Transparency Law; and all these pieces of legislation will have in common stiff penalties and jail time for politicians and public officers caught trying to make off with the people's money. As we have recently demonstrated, this government will go to all lengths to improve our corruption – fighting infrastructure and pursue official wrongdoers. It is a vital part of the democratic nourishment, it is a vital part of making fast the fabric of our social and political compact.

Materially, then, we make our way forward. And while the extant difficulties foreclose any possibility of complacency, I believe I have sufficiently sketched this morning proofs of justifiable confidence. But man does not live by bread alone. And perhaps even more important than the material is the incorporeal - the Belizean character, the Belizean culture, the Belizean spirit.

In that context I will never tire of holding up, to ourselves and the world, those shining moments that saw us, after tropical storm Arthur, TD 16 and all the other flood events, come together as a people, one indivisible Belizean nation, to bootstrap our recovery. It was each for all and all for each, government and citizenry working as one, doing the near impossible, producing all the resources necessary to rebuild damaged homes, broken businesses, shattered lives. And there is not much credit to be had for things that don't happen. But because that same spirit continues to animate us, only a few weeks ago NEMO, by dint of rapid pre-dawn action and citizen solidarity in the South, was able to say 'disaster avoided' in the teeth of yet another bout of unusually heavy rains.

It is this very Belizean spirit that is on display when we fly the flag, sing the anthem, honor our patriots. It is this spirit that produces year after year the fantastic creativity at the National Expo; that has now resulted in the design of our first green building; that is underpinning our great leap forward in

information and communications technology. And it is this spirit that saw us on August 24th, 2009 reject the native auxiliaries of neocolonialism to fully assert and vindicate our Belizean sovereignty.

These annual anniversaries of our independence, then, will always be celebrations of ritual and renewal. Each year we bring out, and add to, the collected jewels of nationhood: our continuously fertilized diversity; a culture made rich by antiquity and modernity; and a cross cutting solidarity anchored by a fierce loyalty to this land and its soul-uplifting properties. These are the gemstones of our Belizean identity; and it is meet and right that every independence day we showcase them, their luster and translucence reflecting our love and our great, shared, wondrous patriotic pride.

We are, I repeat, a special people, the sons and daughters of Africa and Amerindia, of Europe and Asia and the Middle East. Juntos y revueltos, we are vital, resilient, endlessly renewing, endlessly renewed. And so we confront the challenges of nation building with brim and brio, with a bravura that is uniquely Belizean, and that we wouldn't trade for anything in the world.

Always, then, we endure; always we prevail. Secure in this certainty, with the confidence to match, we greet each other this and every anniversary: Happy Independence Day, Que Viva Belize, and God bless us all!