



# **Independence Day Address 2010**

**Delivered by Prime Minister Hon. Dean Barrow  
on 21 September 2010**

We are gathered once more to celebrate our most important annual ritual, the anniversary of our Independence as a free and sovereign Central American nation in the heart of the Caribbean Basin. And let me say straight off how pleased I am to see the notion of the "Three Capitals of Belize" now firmly enshrined in the September calendar. We opened our official festivities at the first Capital, St. George's Caye; commemorated the 10th at Memorial Park in Belize City, the second Capital; and culminate today, most appropriately, in Belmopan, the current Capital and the proper seat for the formal Independence Day programme. I congratulate the Celebrations Committee and salute Mayor Lopez.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a function of the times, the reality of globalization, that a contemplation of our sovereignty, of where we are on our anniversary, must also involve a consideration of where the world is. This is so most particularly with respect to trade, finance and investment and our placement geographically and economically so close to that most dominant of Powers, the United States of America. The recession there, it was first thought, would be Y shaped or U shaped. The fear now is that it may be W shaped: meaning, of course, that the economy having dipped once and come back up, may dip again into negative territory before finally coming back up to stay. The implications for us in terms of remittances, investment, exports and tourism, have been harmfully consequential. But the data shows that we have been remarkably resilient in the circumstances.

The Statistical Institute of Belize recently confirmed that for the first half of 2010 our economy grew by 2.4%. Tourism, in particular, is up, with hotel revenue for April to August 2010 increasing by 8.39% over the same period last year. Bananas and citrus are doing well, and construction, energy generation and petroleum production are all robust. Even aquaculture is on the rebound, and non-traditional exports are experiencing their own great leap forward: Black eyed peas were shipped, mostly to Caricom, in the amount of almost six million pounds during the first half of this year; Red kidney beans production is

estimated at 16 million pounds; papaya exports had already earned 13.6 million dollars from 35 million pounds in July; yellow corn to Guatemala will total around 50 million pounds for the year; and corn meal now represents a new export commodity for Belize with 500 thousand pounds having already been sent to Jamaica.

This begins a process that should see us reach 20 million pounds over the next twelve months. Perhaps most important of all, I am pleased to announce that Mexico has now cleared the way for the export of Belizean cattle to begin, with an initial three thousand head destined almost immediately to go overland to our neighbour and friend. The thesis I am trying to propound, ladies and gentlemen, is that these advances of ours despite the global crisis, came as a result not so much of luck as of pluck. Pluck involving a creative and resourceful productive sector; and a government determined to enable the economy by increased investment spending, plus concessions, incentives and access to credit for the national drivers of growth and development.

So it is true that our independence and sovereignty do not exist in a vacuum, isolated from international circumstances. And it is equally true that those circumstances can be constraining. But whatever limiting factors there are must never be seen as any overarching deterrent. They must never fetter our appreciation of the value of nationhood; of the preciousness of political autonomy; of the ultimate worth of freedom: freedom to seek our own way and make our own fight against whatever odds size and location and geography might throw up against us. Now I have seen where recently some in the commentariat have tried to hang our sovereignty out to dry; to question whether in a bad and dangerous world, it is not all a self-deluding charade. But to so deconstruct our independence is either self-flagellation or intellectualism on steroids. Our patriotism is, you see, one for the modern era, and too protean to be pinned down by some forensic shell game.

It is true that it can be grand and inspirational and scale the heights. After all it is informed by history and the Battle of St. George's Caye, which long ago taught us that great obstacles are no excuse for surrender. But our patriotism is also practical and functional and quotidian. It is as much represented by today's farmers and workers and nurses and policemen, as by the spirit of the Baymen. Thus, under-resourced and over-challenged though we may sometimes be, we fight and claw always to lift this nation up; to protect it from Xateros and illegal fishers, as well as from poverty and violence and underdevelopment. So we repeat to the world: our nationalism is both devotional and realistic, both soaring and scrappy, both triumphal and incremental. And we wear it with pride, the property of an indigenous ethos that will never be deterred from moving this country forward, even if it is sometimes inch by painful inch. Let me turn now, then, to some of what we are doing to advance our Belizean social, economic, and political agenda.

Even though our economy is back on a growth path, unemployment is still too high and government is more determined than ever to create jobs. We continue to see the key here as being, from a public sector point of view, our spending on infrastructure. The contracts for the new lot of road reconstruction works in the North of our country will be signed imminently. Thus, 25 million dollars will begin to be spent now on the Orange Walk to San Lazaro Road, and the Orange Walk to San Estevan to Progreso Road. Government has negotiated with the contractors so that villagers will be given piece

and sub contract work. And in each district town and capital city Belmopan, five million dollars per area will be spent on drainage and street works as part of the Municipal Development Project that the World Bank Board just last week approved.

In the South, the multi- million dollar Kendal Bridge winning tender has been chosen; and government is providing a quarter of a million dollars to the Ministry of Works for urgent remedial attention to the Toledo Roads damaged by the recent floods. Also, the bids for the construction of the 50 million dollar dump to Jalacte Highway were opened on September 15. In Belize City, the last portion of the urban rejuvenation funds is being disbursed; and by the time that has been spent, phase 2 of the Southside Poverty Alleviation Project will kick in. Apart from more money for home repairs, this will see the entire length of Central American Boulevard hot-mixed, Fabers Road refurbished, and Neal's Pen Road, Benbow Street and a number of others, paved. The value of this second tranche of OPEC funding is 22 million dollars; and the point of all this is, Ladies and Gentlemen, that infrastructure is on the move all across the land and there will be more jobs countrywide.

I want, at this juncture, though, to repeat my concern that not enough is being done for the private sector by way of affordable financing. The commercial banks have made some effort, but it far from enough. In this connection I am therefore pleased to announce that the President of the IDB, Luis Alberto Moreno, will himself be leading a team to Belize in November to help us, via the private sector arm of the Bank, address this problem. Meantime, though, government is not standing still. Thus, I also announce today that we will be making three million dollars available immediately for loans to the small business sector. The bulk of this money will go to the DFC, and will be on-lent for start up businesses at only 8%.

Turning to the social side of things, the nation has seen how we have tried mightily to expand assistance and opportunities in education. To complement the Restore Belize initiative, we are refurbishing the Magazine Road Bus Terminal to take in especially young people who never had a chance to attend or complete high school. We are also providing a facility, most probably in Stann Creek, for the 10 to15-year-olds that will be taken off the streets for their own welfare under the new jurisdiction being given to the Family Court. In terms of Restore Belize, I once again make an appeal for national commitment. Altogether government will be spending around two million dollars in the rest of this fiscal year on the various aspects of the initiative.

This is money not budgeted. But it must be found since everything has to be done to defeat this great scourge of gun violence and murder now overtaking the Belizean way of life. So we will find funding for, on the enforcement side, an additional police intake immediately after the October graduation of the current one; for a new gang suppression unit; for improved forensics; and for a more muscular BDF role in securing Belize City streets. On the social side, we are going to employ more and more young people in more and more projects of physical community rehabilitation and the creation of safe zones. This will be accompanied by a comprehensive and sustained programme of inter-personal and family outreach.

Now the experience of others in dealing with this kind of problem teaches us one thing. Everyone has to get involved and there is no time for business as usual or, worse, politics as usual. I therefore wish to

repeat in simple terms my invitation to the Leader of the Opposition: stop cursing the dark and help us light a candle. Also in the context of our social interventions on behalf of the poor and struggling, I make another announcement: the government's food subsidy pilot project for Southside Belize City starts in the next two weeks. We will be working in partnership with the Salvation Army, which we have contracted to administer the programme to ensure both efficiency and fair play.

People living at the margins will be able on a continuing basis to purchase from two distribution centres on Cemetery Road and Mahogany Street, a basket of basic food items at half price. And this Belize City project will very shortly be followed by the countrywide Conditional Cash Transfer programme that will especially target cost of living assistance to the rural poor. On the question of the political reform agenda, we go back to the House on Friday to pass the Recall of Elected Officials Bill. This is legislation that is being justly hailed, both at home and abroad, as perhaps the most far-reaching and progressive pro-democracy act to come out of the Independent Belize. And I, last week, signed a comprehensive set of Fiscal Transparency Regulations and will seek Parliament's support for it also at the House meeting this Friday.

I announce today as well, that the first draft of the new Finance and Audit Act is in hand. We are doing the final review and readying it for introduction to the National Assembly in either late October or early November. This new law will give legislative force to new Finance and Stores Orders; provide for increased and tighter safeguards in the handling of public monies; and, most important of all, mandate criminal sanctions for politicians and public officers that mishandle or abuse state funds and resources. Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow Belizeans: this is indeed moving forward with what I consider a most important national enterprise: making our Democracy ever safer and stronger, by making it ever more transparent and accountable.

Before I conclude, I want to return to this matter of our sovereignty and how good it is to vindicate and revalidate it. And, I suggest, there is no brighter example of such revivification in recent times, than the nationalization of Telemedia. And today, on this anniversary of our ever-glorious independence, the wheel is coming full circle. For in making my final announcement I wish to tell you that the Prospectus is ready, and the sale of shares to the Belizean public will commence on October 15, 2010. Now this is, in all respects, a triumph for our country. It has been a most salutary thing to demonstrate with utter clarity that we will not tolerate anyone to come here and disrespect us, abuse our hospitality, and violate the rules of comity and good corporate citizenship. But psychological uplift apart, there are great practical benefits that this nationalization has conferred. Thus, it is lovely to be able to say that under local ownership connectivity is being greatly increased, and at cheaper rates for all Belizeans. As an example, BTL will now reduce the price of their internet service by providing all customers with twice the bandwidth at the same cost.

In the case of schools, this expanded bandwidth will, of course, continue to be absolutely free. How sweet it is, then - this magnificent victory achieved with steadiness of nerve and fidelity of purpose. Ladies and Gentlemen, I close now with the hope that this year's theme, "United and Proud. Moving Forward. I Am Belize!" will prove to be much more than just a rhetorical flourish, a September effusion. When the celebrations are over, let the concentrated merry-making give way to an all-year-round

resolve to arduously sustain and improve the life of all in this land. For we are Belize: proud though not boastful, confident though not arrogant.

We are sure and steadfast in our citizenship of this nation; in our commitment to this country; in our certainty that we will succeed here in this place so many have dubbed a paradise on earth. We have every pride in our past and every faith in our future. So now, as we continue with the laying down of our patriotic paving stones, let us chorus lustily from the Hondo to the Sarstoon our thankful, joyful Independence Day greeting: Happy Birthday everyone and God bless Belize.