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2011 Independence Day Address By Prime Minister – Hon. Dean Barrow

Your Excellency, the Governor-General, Sir Colville Young, and Lady Young
My Lord Chief Justice, Kenneth Benjamin, and other Justices of the Supreme Court

Hon. Leader of the Opposition, John Briceño, and Mrs. Briceño

Hon. Ministers of government and Members of the National Assembly

Your Worship the Mayor of Belmopan, Mr. Simeon Lopez, and Mrs. Lopez

My Lords the Bishops of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches of Belize
Superintendent of the Methodist Belize/Honduras District

President of the Evangelical Association of Churches

Other members of the Clergy

Excellencies of the Diplomatic Corps

Members of the Consular Corps

Special guests, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow Belizeans

I begin by acknowledging the pall cast by the death of Belize's first National Hero, the Rt. Hon. George Price. And I want to announce right away that, in his honour, next Monday, the day of the state funeral, is being declared a National holiday. But our mourning has to be interrupted today, even if only to be resumed tomorrow. And it has to be interrupted because today is the day of our Independence. Our Independence that was the dream of George Price; that was the struggle of George Price; that is now the legacy of George Price.

So full-bore, flat-out celebration is what is required now. We celebrate sovereignty; we celebrate George Price's vision; we celebrate George Price's life.

After all, today Belize is a confident thirty year old nation, and proudly marking that fact. The annual September programme of activity has thus been an expanded one. It has been packed with all sorts of additional and unusual events, designed to support and reflect the sustained merry-making that befits our 30th anniversary. Also, those responsible for decorations - and

I am happy to note my wife Kim as one such - have outdone themselves. I was especially impressed by the salute from on high of majestic Belizean flags all in a row and lining the Philip Goldson International Airport's access road. Coming into Belize City the sight of the Haulover Bridge freshly painted and festooned with coloured lights, is succeeded by the welcoming palms newly planted along the Northern Highway medians. The stunning arches anchored on Marine Parade and Central American Boulevard are another outstanding feature. And generally the streets and parks and lampposts of the Old Capital have been bedecked with a most plentiful array of bunting and posters and streamers. It is a riot of the red, white and blue, a gorgeous treat for the eyes and the senses. It is also a migratory feast, replicated here in the nation's capital of Belmopan and in all our District towns and villages. Indeed the spectacle is everywhere. And, together with the nationwide farrago of fireworks last night, it proclaims our triumphant milestone: the fact that at 30 we have grown wonderfully; that we have developed and matured and progressed; and that we are becoming now a country for the ages, strong and brave and free, always free.

We give praise to Almighty God, then, because there is much to be thankful for. This is a time when European nations that are as ancient as democracy itself, are being buffeted by economic storm winds and riven by social strife and violent protests. It is also a time when in North Africa and the Middle East, another cradle of civilization, the old authoritarian order is being set on its ear, but at a price of much shedding of blood, and even outright civil war.

It is against that sort of global backdrop that any troubles in our land are shown to be small ones. We can, in fact, chorus governance achievements and social, political and cultural advances which, as we begin our 31st year, are testament to a Belize that is without a doubt punching above its weight.

For starters, there is muscularity to our democracy that has to be the envy of many countries around us. The wise folk in our midst always ask for reason in our national discourse; the kind of civilized engagement that will produce compromise and consensus. And ultimately they are right. But I, for one, would not give up the clanging, clamorous, sometimes overflow, advocacy that is invariably heard along the road to synthesis. It is true that fierceness and contention in debate can be given a bad name by those with an anti-nationalist agenda to serve. But we must never miss the forest for the trees so that in the end, even if there is occasional tumult and disorder in the national conversation, it is good for democracy. After all, there is no dystopia here. There is not even the gridlock that was in attendance in the great United States, for example, during their recent debt ceiling confrontations. Excessive argumentation and unruly passion in Belize are at the last held in check by two things. Our system, our very Constitution, guarantees that after all is said and done those elected to govern, those in whom the people have placed their trust, can legislatively and structurally implement their mandate. And there is a political culture in which decision-making is never heedless. It

is recognized that the entitlement of the governed to speak their mind, must always be fertilized by the willingness of the leaders to listen and attend. I make no apologies for saying that this culture of democratic call and response is currently at its high point in Belize. For this is an administration that is never tone deaf or adamant. And that is why I reiterate that we can be grateful on this thirtieth anniversary for a country in which governance works; in which the springs of democracy are well-oiled, and not least by the mutual respect existing between the governors and the governed.

So as a people we are awake and conscious and vigilant. We are utterly emancipated and self-assured, and our political independence is secure.

But what about our economic well-being, how are we doing in regard to bread, the staff of life?

Well, when we look at the numbers we can certainly take satisfaction in the fact that for the first quarter of this year our GDP growth exceeded 6%. It is around a decade since we last saw that figure and local analysts declare that, in current world circumstances, it is an extraordinary statistic. Now it is already clear that the second quarter, for which the official figures are not yet in, was more subdued. But we are still on track for year-on-year growth of not less than 3%. And even those costive Scrooges at the International Monetary Fund have been obliged to concede that "Belize is weathering the financial crisis relatively well, when compared with CARICOM peers".

There is a mix of factors responsible for our economic growth, and high export earnings from our production of crude oil is one. But, what is far more sustainable, our job-creating tourism star is firmly in the ascendant. Thus, there was a 6.7% increase in second quarter overnight visitors to Belize, anchored by a 16% jump in the month of April.

And for the first half of this year, hotel revenues rose by 17.8%.

Now the legitimate query in the face of impressive growth numbers is always how does higher output benefit the regular citizen and improve the quality of life. It is in that context that we were pleased to have both the Fund and the Central Bank of Belize confirm that inflation was nil in 2010. In other words, there was no cost of living increase over the last calendar year. And this was as a direct result of Government's cancellation of both import duty and GST on a wide range of food items.

But however much we have been able to rein in the price of basic goods; our citizens still need money with which to buy. They therefore need the jobs to provide them with purchasing power.

Now the United States is the world's largest economy. But even in America joblessness is stubbornly high, and their underemployment rate is about the same as Belize's unemployment rate. Accordingly, President Obama has decided to focus great effort now on infrastructure development as a driver of jobs. Well, you will forgive me for underlining the fact that in this regard Belize is ahead of the curve. Ever since the onset of the global recession we have declared our concentration on infrastructure spending to be the centerpiece of our public sector investment programme. Most of our engagement with the multilateral development agencies has therefore been by way of infrastructure projects, and our agenda in that regard is now well advanced. Thus, the improvement of the Northern road network to paving standards proceeds apace with the recent award of the contract for the resurfacing that is taking place between Orange Walk Town and Progresso. And the second phase of the project going in the other direction to Blue Creek, and between the villages of San Lazaro and August PineRidge, is to start shortly.

In the South the work on the Punta Gorda to Jalacte road is well in hand. And in the West the contract is out to tender now for 10 million dollars worth of approach roads that will be built. This is in connection with the new Macal River crossing to replace the Hawkesworth Bridge. And it is only the first component in what is, altogether, a 50 million dollar project.

The work has begun in Belize City on the last phase of the Marion Jones stadium, and our friend President Calderón and the Mexican Government have confirmed that it is 15 million dollars that will be spent on their gift to us, the reconstruction of the Belize City Center. The 10 million dollar IDB loan for drainage works and street repairs on the Northside of Belize City has already been signed, and the actual commencement will be by year's end.

Ground has been broken in San Ignacio for the new welcome center under Government's IDB-funded Sustainable Tourism Project. And all District Towns are readying for the November start of the Municipal Infrastructure Project. Capital City Belmopan will receive a double dose of bounty, as EU funding for a new market is in addition to the World Bank money for streets and drains.

Ladies and Gentlemen: this is a panorama of projects that are all labour-intensive, and that have brought and will bring jobs to all the compass points of our country.

One project that is an ideal mix of physical improvement and social and community development is the Belize City Southside Poverty Alleviation programme. The loan agreement for Phase 2 has already been signed, and construction of dwellings under the 4.2 million dollars housing component of the project, starts in the next three weeks. Individual contractors are expected to do a lot of their hiring in the neighborhoods; and once in full swing, Phase 2 will also result in direct Government employment of around 300 persons.

These new jobs will be an addition to the 486 that have already been given through CYDP and Government's Urban Rejuvenation project. For us in this Administration the language of the poor is never unheard.

Of course, we won't any time soon have full employment in our country. But it is an aspiration of which we shall not let go. And we don't forget either that many of those that do have jobs, are very often paid minimum wage. We have a duty to them also, as they struggle to make ends meet. It is in this overall context that it is important on this 30th anniversary to reiterate the uncompromising mission of this Government: to create a more just society, one in which the poor are always protected. It is all well and good for those that control the Bretton Woods institutions to tell us about macro-economic orthodoxy and fiscal consolidation. But generous and expansive social policies must be an article of faith in the new Belize if that first Independence Day promise of better is to be vindicated. So fiscal balance can only be a work in progress, a long-haul process. And if deficits in the short run are the price to pay for social stability and Government's pro-poor programmes, then deficits there will be.

Accordingly, we are not stopping to count the cost but are proceeding full speed ahead with our food pantry assistance and our Operation Boost. In Belize City 5,000 persons are now benefitting from weekly, half price food baskets; and that programme is enrolling another seven thousand in San Ignacio/Santa Elena and Benque Viejo. Operation Boost, for its part, gives monthly cash transfers to 4,300 individuals countrywide.

As well, our apprenticeship and second chance programmes are now a permanent feature of Government's social and educational outreach. Thus, we have over 1500 students enrolled in special classes in institutions that range from St Peter Claver in Toledo to CCC in Corozal. These programmes run the gamut from high school equivalency, to skills training, to literacy and life counseling. Next on our agenda will be the child care subsidy for working and single mothers.

In the effort to build Belize and to better Belize, Government conceives of land and housing as two of the most important cornerstones. We are working with Mexico on funding for a new low-cost housing construction programme that will be similar to the one we did with Venezuela, and which will be countrywide. In the meantime we are spending almost 5 million dollars this year on home repairs and for home improvement all across the nation. This is on top of the OPEC 4.2 million for Southside Belize. Of course, everything that we do in housing is free. We provide grants, not loans. This is because poor people-with the best will in the world-cannot repay loans except at an intolerable cost to themselves. We are witness to this even now as there are more than 9,200 loans currently on the books at the Ministry of Housing. The weight of these is taxing the loan recipients to perdition; but no more. Government has decided that it will write off each and every single one of

those loans at a total cost of around 62.6 million dollars. I will therefore be going to the National Assembly shortly for the formalization of this process. And it will be the consummation of massive relief for all those struggling with government mortgages that they simply cannot pay.

Then, on the question of land, the slow delivery especially of building lots has been a much-vexed issue that Government is determined to address. Thus, 5 million dollars is being spent on a new land management system that should eliminate a lot of the current chokeholds. And land is being identified in every District for survey and subdivision into house lots. Government will award these to first time owners by way of immediate freehold title, and at a price not to exceed a thousand dollars payable in installments. One thousand acres have already been acquired along the Western Highway for allocation to people in the Belize and Cayo Districts and so around four thousand building lots will be distributed as soon as surveyors can complete the subdivision work. We have also secured, by way of an amicable arrangement with a company called Belize Distills, another parcel of land enough to give one thousand house lots to Belizeans in the Orange Walk district. We will now turn to each of the other Districts and will acquire whatever is needed to continue addressing, in a sharply accelerated way, the cry of our people for land.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow Belizeans: I repeat that we want to construct a Belize that is based on distributive social justice. Those of our citizens that are disadvantaged, whether by poverty, illness or some disability, are entitled to have that disadvantage remedied by the state. And the state must find the will and the resources to pay for the redress that is required.

As we strive to realize this vision of our Belize, one of the greatest impediments is the spiraling cycle of urban violence that is afflicting especially Belize City. Lord knows that we have tried to address this. I looked recently at the figures and saw that around a million and a half dollars more than was budgeted has already been disbursed on security operations. And the fiscal year is not even half gone. Government's determination to spend whatever and do whatever has been matched by the personal time and thought and worry that I have invested in this problem. That is why I conceived it my duty to meet with gang leaders as part of the effort to stanch the flow, stop the hemorrhaging of Belizean blood. A truce was agreed and there has been no gang-related murder since. But as events on Monday demonstrated, the state of play remains fragile; and the work that has to be done to ensure that things don't again fall apart, is enormous. We move ahead resolutely, though, conscious that the need to overcome once and for all this phenomenon of crime and violence is perhaps our greatest immediate challenge.

But no matter what, the requirements of modern day policing in Belize will continue to be overwhelming. Government is therefore ceaselessly engaged

in a process of better equipping our security forces. And in this connection I am pleased to announce that the funding to set up our long-awaited DNA lab has now been secured. This is thanks to the US and CARSI, the regional security program. Through our local resources, Government is financing the refurbishment of the physical space at the present National Forensic Science Service Building, as this is where the new DNA equipment will be operationalized. GOB is also paying for the foreign expert that will train our local personnel in the new science. And draft legislation has already been prepared to provide for the acceptance of DNA evidence by our courts of law. To complete this forensic picture, a new, fully outfitted, top-of-the line Scenes of Crime vehicle will be in country next month. It will have the refrigeration capacity, the kits and all the other tools to do onsite preliminary specimen analysis. Welcome to CSI Belize!

Three new mobile interdiction units will also be made operational, two in the North and one in the South. These will deploy for the interception of illicit drug-and other serious crime-activities.

Additionally, the Police are upgrading their communication equipment in a major way. A new 911 call center will be capable of handling seventy calls simultaneously; and a new Crime Information Management System will allow for the electronic documentation of crime data from the time a complaint is made straight through the investigation and prosecution processes. No longer will there be any possibility of files going missing, simply disappearing.

Finally, electronic fingerprinting machines are even now being installed in each of six District stations. The system will store and match fingerprints and identify suspects through a countrywide data base of samples.

Ladies and Gentlemen: We are working hard socially and economically to get at the root causes of crime, to try to eliminate some of the triggers of anti-social behaviour. But there is an ancient Arab proverb which tells us to trust in God but tie your camel. Increased prevention efforts will thus be thoroughly complemented by increased interdiction and enforcement efforts.

I cannot depart this podium without a word concerning one very important manifestation of reiterated sovereignty. I speak, of course, about the acquisition of the essential utility services, and the proposed enshrinement in our Constitution of that acquisition. I need to make clear that Government considers this a foremost expression of Belizean will and a foremost affirmation of Belizean nationalism. We have addressed the concerns of those that feared certain aspects of the Belize Constitution (Ninth Amendment) Bill. And we expect that the continuing public consultations may well spotlight other required changes. But the principal objective of safeguarding in a constitutionally unassailable manner our ownership of light, water and telephone, is non-negotiable. What is now widely acknowledged to

be part of the Belizean patrimony, cannot and will not be bargained away. For us sovereign integrity covers our land, sea and all other Belizean assets.

In any case, in celebration of unalterable Belizean ownership on this Independence anniversary, I make the following announcements: Telemedia will, on October 1st, give both greater Internet access and a lower price to Belizeans. Currently the minimum amount of bandwidth that can be purchased is 256 kilobits per second for 100 dollars per month, plus GST. Now the company will offer 128 kilobits per second at the rock bottom cost of just 49.00 per month. But there is more. As a special 30th anniversary gift, government will remove the GST on internet services. We will thus forgo 2 million dollars in annual revenue. But it will be worth it. Currently, the 14 or 15% rate of internet penetration in Belize is among the lowest within our country peer group. This is unacceptable, given the fundamental importance of the Internet to development and modern day life. And for Government and Telemedia, the removal of all obstacles along Belize's super information highway is therefore a must. So we are proud to jointly usher in this new era of forty nine dollars per month internet, and no GST. Also on October 1st, the international dialing rates using the 10-10-199 service will be reduced by an average of 25% to the 15 countries that Belizeans most frequently call. The list includes the United States of America, Central America, the Caribbean, and China. And the 10-10-199 service is available via both fixed lines and mobile phones. Naysayers should note as well that over the past two years under local control, Telemedia has spent more than 60 million dollars on capital expenditure. This has meant, as only one example, providing 95 additional schools with free internet access. The concentration has been on enabling service to remote, far-flung areas. So that, as examples, the deep south St Joseph RC school in Barranco is empowered, as are the Mennonite school up north in Blue Creek and the Primary School in the western border village of Arenal. That is essential service to the people, from an essential utility provider owned by the people.

Turning to BEL I can say that on Thursday last the new, Government-controlled Board of Directors officially renounced the Fortis demand for our people to pay higher electricity rates. We were told prior to the sovereign acquisition, that Fortis required an immediate rate increase in order to avoid the certain collapse of BEL. But Belizeans have now taken over, and there is no way to sugarcoat what we found. Fortis was consistently inflating BEL's asset base and engaging in wasteful capital spending. This was in order to manufacture artificial pass-through costs and justify unwarranted rates of returns. A great deal of expensive equipment was never commissioned and never used. But it was nevertheless entered into inventory so as to massage BEL's regulated asset value. This kind of slickness was always suspected by the Public Utilities Commission, and that is why they refused to increase rates. And now those sharp practices have been proven by the new, Belizean-owned BEL. Of course, those sharp practices have also been stopped by the new, Belizean-owned BEL. And that is why there will be no

hike in your electricity bills. Not now, not ever - under this administration. In fact, barring any emergencies, we actually expect to lower rates at the time of the next full tariff review. That is correct: light bills are going to go down!

Ladies and Gentlemen:

In view of all this, those that have been insisting on the gospel according to the foreign multinationals really should fess up: nationalization is the best thing that could ever have happened. Exploitation is ended and Belizean pride and Belizean protection are resurgent. And the new BTL and the new BEL are, and will continue to be, case studies in Belizean ingenuity, Belizean efficiency, and Belizean resourcefulness.

Accordingly, I also want to announce that by way of a European Union grant and the provision of counterpart funds by the Government of Belize, BEL will begin to provide electrification to 44 rural and peri-urban communities countrywide. Around two thousand new households will now be serviced in the outlying areas of Belmopan; in Benque and Succotz and Cayo South; in the Belize District at Hattieville and Rockstone Pond; in Orange Walk and Corozal; in Dangriga Town at Rivas Estate and Wagirale; and in the villages of Stann Creek West and Toledo East and West.

This, Ladies and Gentlemen, is now the face of BEL. This is the advance being brought by Belizean suzerainty, Belizean ownership, and Belizean control.

Now I want to end this address by ensuring that I quarrel with no one. I will therefore not get into it with those that would try to scuttle one set of perfectly good partnership proposals that could rescue the sugar industry and the livelihood of six thousand independent Belizean cane farmers. But it is pretty obvious that there are some in our midst trying to produce the very outcome they claim to decry - the scaring away of foreign investment. I make this point only to repeat that fear-mongering notwithstanding, this government and this country will continue to welcome and, indeed, to court foreign investment. Of course, it can never be at the price of Belizean dignity. Whether, therefore, it is in the area of telecommunications, electricity or butane gas; and whether the investor is from Britain, Canada, or Central America, the requirements of fair play, equity and conscience must apply. Genuine investors know this. And they are prepared to come. They are willing to follow the rules. That is why, for example, a brand new palm oil industry is on tap; that is why the sugar factory at Libertad is reopening; that is why we are beginning to shine in Business Process Outsourcing; that is why four new call centers that will provide at least one thousand jobs, are lined up; and that is why medical tourism in Belize is about to become a reality.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow Belizeans: I conclude by returning to the lustrous fact of our wonderful democracy, the ever present promise of greater spiritual and material enlargement that is inherent in being Belizean. As a people we have the great good fortune to be the inheritors of this choice

piece of earth, this land of unmatched beauty. I know that we will always make the best of our special heritage, our unequalled legacy. And so with abiding faith in the God who does not fail us, and with enduring trust in the people of this nation, I say to one and all: Happy 30th Birthday and long live Belize.

Que viva nuestra independencia, y que Dios nos bendiga.