



Independence Day Address 2012

**Delivered by Prime Minister Hon. Dean Barrow
on 21 September 2012**

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, Francis Fonseca, and Mrs. Fonseca; 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; and, of course, I salute my wife Kim, just back from Houston and another stage on the return journey to health.

As I contemplated, in preparing my address, this 31st Anniversary of Independence, I was struck by the 2012 theme under which we celebrate Belize. "Many faces, many dreams, one goal" is powerful in a simple, economical, yet lyrical way. Much like our country itself, this September's motto is elegant and strong without being too showy or self-regarding. And it captures the essential core, the quiddity of Belizean oneness: that unity in diversity that so many nations strive for but so few achieve.

Of course, if it had been in our nature to be boastful, there is much to boast about. In the twelve months since we were last here, we have marked a number of milestones that are testament to our continued progress as a nation. We have shown that we grow and mature and shape and stamp our destiny; that we construct a wonderful, ever expanding democracy; a vital, vibrant society of both integrity and elasticity. Thus, the Belize brand is daily more distinguished, and makes its mark increasingly on our region and the world.

Another reason why I've been so enamored of this year's theme is because it clearly encapsulates the vision of Father of the Nation George Price. To some extent, it is also what the current administration has been trying to capture with the message emblazoned on the billboards erected soon after March 7: "One people, One government, One Belize".

Now we just a few days ago observed the one year anniversary of Mr. Price's death. And obviously the divine providence, in which he so wholly believed, arranged things so that, even in terms of dates, our Independence Day reflections will ever hereafter be centrally linked to the remembrances of the life and work of George Cadle Price. Today, then, we celebrate him even as we celebrate Belize. And we know that from that special place in the pantheon, which he occupies together with Philip Goldson, his benediction continues to envelop us. This is thus the time to make an Independence Day announcement regarding these two, who shall always remain the brightest stars in our modern historical firmament: The Government of Belize, in conjunction with the National September Celebrations Committee, is officially renaming the Western Highway the George Price Highway; and the Northern Highway the Philip S.W. Goldson Highway.

But George Orwell said: "He who controls the present, controls the past. He who controls the past, controls the future".

So since the present is such an absolute key, let me turn to the here and now, to some of those current, sometimes unsung, everyday Belizean heroes.

I speak, therefore, of the young Rowan Garell, physically without sight, whose daily existence must in, so many ways, be a challenge; but who brought this nation to its feet, applauding his exploits in scaling literally and metaphorically our highest peak: a boy walking across our land and casting the shadow of a giant.

I speak of the firefighters in Belize City, who were fearless in the face of the potential annihilation that threatened them moment by moment as they doused the flames from the butane tanks on fire at Mile 2 on the Western Highway.

I speak of the citizens of San Ignacio and Santa Elena and Benque Viejo, banding together to help solve the despicable murder of the youthful and oh-so-promising Jasmine Lowe, her parents' beautiful and bright eyed daughter. I speak of how the residents signaled by action their refusal to allow their community to slide into the abyss that the predator presaged. I speak of their continuing anti-crime solidarity, which has resulted now in the Cayo District having countrywide the lowest incidence of murder and violence.

I speak of the tremendous coming together of large numbers of Belizeans from all walks of life in The Inspiration Telethon that raised over a million dollars in one day. It was a cause for the differently abled among us. It was a cause that shows we can take care of our own. And it was a cause that immeasurably ennobled the nation.

I speak of Police Corporal Victor Lima who-in order to protect and serve-gave his life for Belize.

I speak of Dr. Adrian Coye, and Dr. Joel Cervantes, (and their colleagues at the KMH) who successfully and respectively performed the first open heart and spinal scoliosis surgeries in this country.

And, finally, I speak of the members of our national Debt Restructuring Team, engaged in the high enterprise of helping us recover fiscal sustainability and survivability; fighting thereby another post-Independence battle for Belize; conducting a second internationalization campaign; making Belize's case to bondholders, but also to the Directors of the IMF and the representatives of the various countries on the IDB board; pressing forward in the unrelenting manner that this existential issue demands; and operating with such force and forensic passion as to make us absolutely confident of the success we deserve.

Your Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen: these are the sorts of personalities and events that etched themselves upon the national consciousness in the thirty first year of our Independence; that burnished the proud legacy that this young country is already heir to; that serviced the ever renewing wellsprings of our patriotism and sovereignty.

Sovereignty and autonomy must, of course, always be among the most dominant notes we strike on Independence Day. And in that context we point with satisfaction to the fact that our nationalized essential utilities companies continue to move from strength to strength. Telemedia continues to give lower call rates generally, and free Internet to over 40 NGOs and 200 schools at all levels; and its 30 million dollar 4G rollout begins next month. And BEL, after reducing our people's electricity bills by 12 million dollars, is still operationally strong, servicing its debts and making its financial way forward. I point again to the capital expenditure programs of both companies as huge drivers of economic activity, growth and employment in the Belizean economy. And I repeat that there is simply no way we will ever allow any retreat from this high point in the catalogue of Belizean nationalist accomplishments.

It is also noteworthy in this regard that the Cassandras, who predicted the stalling and drying up of foreign investment as a consequence of the nationalizations, have been completely confounded by events.

Exhibit one in this context is the 200 million dollar investment of ASR in Belize's sugar industry, and the GreenTropic project to plant cane in Cayo.

Also, the Bowen shrimp farm is back up and running thanks to significant foreign equity partnership.

Our business outsourcing and near shoring initiative continues to pay dividends, and there are now upwards of two thousand persons employed by the ever increasing, FDI-sponsored number of call centers.

There is a magnificent tourism resurgence taking place, which has seen an 8% visitor increase between January and June of this year over last year; and 16 and 23% in July and August 2012 over 2011. This good news is to be topped off shortly by the Qatari Diar's purchase of Caye Chapel. This will then lead to a Four Seasons - branded, five-star hotel on the property.

Talks proceed apace with Turkish investors that plan to invest in both container and cruise ports in Belize.

Wall Street money wants to come in to plant thousands of acres of grain for export and for local feed.

The cattle sweep has been completed in Blue Creek, paving the way for legal livestock trade with Mexico.

New and more lucrative marketing arrangements have been concluded by our banana farmers.

And the first of several small business development centers has been chartered by Government in the continuing effort to assist young entrepreneurs and grow the middle class.

As we continue to build this country, nothing is more important to our democracy than the expansion of the political space inhabited by pressure groups and social partners. I believe the dialogue and cooperation in this regard has broadened. The public/private sector initiative of which the business forum is emblematic, continues with its work. And the conversation with Labour is intensifying as we seek to entrench and expand the gains of the working class.

So we celebrate today. And we are inspired by the progress made; uplifted by the examples all around us of advance, of a new Belizean race to the top.

But it is not as though no cloud darkens our sun, not as though we are without problems. And the stubbornest, most protracted of these is the continuing instability caused by the crime and violence in our urban areas, especially Belize City.

When we come to lament the seeming intractability of this citizen security issue, some may be forgiven for feeling discouraged. We have tried well-nigh everything. Yet far from permanently improving, the situation overall seems merely to get slightly better, then worse again. But if this challenge won't go away any time soon, neither can our determination to confront it. And we have had some successes. Indeed, in international forums, Belize's program of social interventions and initiatives to try to stem gang violence, has received rave reviews. Now, this might be cold comfort since the successes we have enjoyed have all turned out to be temporary. But virtue doesn't have to be its own reward. Attracted by the quality of our efforts, one of the largest social violence reduction organizations in the world is coming to Belize to assist with funding and capacity building. Similarly, the Government of India has offered technical and operational assistance to our Ministry of National Security. Thus, a well-credentialed, law and order expert from the sub-continent should be in post soon as advisor to the Belize Police Department.

Meantime, our sense of urgency and resolve has in no wise abated. Thus, the Police are forming a number of additional specialized intelligence and operational units in order to ramp up the continuing interdiction efforts. Likewise, a Cabinet subcommittee has been appointed to work with Restore Belize on a new, sustainable strategy for getting youths out of the hellhole of nihilism and violence that is gang life in Belize.

Even, then, as I acknowledge on this Independence Day the blots and blights that blemish our society, I make the obvious case that they are no reason for lack of courage, lack of effort. Indeed, the opposite is true. And Belize has received more than its fair share of that imperishable will to strive, which is part of the Divinity's gift to humankind.

So I close today, reflecting on how important it is to join the practical and the concrete to the spiritual and the aesthetic; how Belize is so abundantly blessed in both spheres; and how the imperfections and shortcomings that are also part of our lot in this earthly vale, can never slow us down.

Quite some time ago, Harriet Beecher Stowe put it best: "...discords only...enhance the perfection of harmony. A faultless style sends you to sleep. (But) Defects rouse and excite sensibility to seek and appreciate excellences."

And there are also other words of hers when she remonstrated with artists that only "painted with dry eyes and cool hearts", "thinking little of heroes, faith, love or immortality".

Well, long may Belize continue to make heroes, faith, love and immortality integral to our national sensibility. Long may our prospects continue to be radiant. And long may our quest for progress remain unquenched, the light that shines our way undimmed.

In other words, nation building is indeed a task for giants. Giants that, in relation to our problems, will be steeled by God's reassurance to Jeremiah: attack you they will, overcome you they can't.

As we forge ahead, then, there is no room for - to borrow a coinage - any Isaiahs of the void. Let all Belize, therefore, be always able, as the poet so memorably said, "To see a world in a grain of sand/And a heaven in a wild flower"

Thus, to all here present; to Belizeans throughout the length and breadth of the Jewel; to Belizeans at home and abroad; to Belizeans everywhere: Que viva nuestra independencia! Happy Independence! Long live Belize and may God bless our native land.