



Independence Day Address 2013

**Delivered by Prime Minister Hon. Dean Barrow
on 21 September 2013**

Your Excellency, the Governor-General, Sir Colville Young, and Lady Young

Hon Roosevelt Skerrit, Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Dominica and our Independence Day Guest of Honour

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

Independence, which this year we celebrate under the theme "Belize in you, Belize in me -Land of the free", is the cardinal fact of a nation's existence. It is political and geopolitical. It is cultural and ethnic and spiritual and material. It is the very fount of a country's being, the source of things practical and philosophical, of things quotidian and things transformational. In reflecting on our Independence, then, we must of course be preoccupied with the here and now, with our current well being and state of affairs. But we must also be forward looking, concerned with the future, with where we want to go and how we get there. 2

Independence Day speeches, in that sort of a matrix, always constitute something of a dilemma: how to paint a broad but balanced canvas; how to combine an impasto approach with delicate, detailed brushstrokes; how to align the national picture without over-emphasizing certain aspects to the neglect of others.

This year there is such an overflow of good things that I serve immediate notice: it will be hard to employ restraint in talking about all that is positive on this thirty second anniversary of the birth of modern Belize.

Let me begin with the economy.

Here the headline news is that unemployment is down. While GDP growth, no doubt in view of the incredibly high bar set in 2012, is flat year over year for the first half of 2013, the jobless figure fell from 14% to 12%.

The drags on growth between January and June, came as a result of a sharper than expected deceleration in oil extraction, lower citrus production, and a decline in energy generation. With respect to petroleum exploration, though, it is worth mentioning that a second well dug in Hillbank by Maranco, just like the first, showed the presence of oil in

relative abundance. The difficulty is to viably bring the oil to the surface in circumstances where the rock formation, in terms of permeability, is challenging. But the experts feel it can be done, so there is still optimism that the find will prove commercial. And with respect to electricity generation the rains have come right on schedule in the second half of the year. Thus the dam catchment areas are now full, and there is no longer any hydro power constraint.

So even in these two areas the prospects going forward through December are encouraging. But let me tell you why there is so much more to justify every confidence that there 3 will be dramatic second half growth, and that it will surpass the 2% that the National Budget forecasts.

In a word, it is infrastructure.

Now the role of infrastructure in increasing output, productivity and growth, has long since been recognized. As well, it creates jobs and improves the quality of life. It has therefore always been a critical investment area for Government. But as a driver of economic development it has now become the principal implement in this Administration's toolbox. One reason is that unprecedented spending on infrastructure has now been made possible by Government's restart of the PetroCaribe arrangement.

Under this we are able to secure plentiful, long term, 1% financing from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, long may she live. Accordingly, the infrastructure splurge that will lift the economy and give it wings in this second half of the year, has already begun.

Thus, work started two weeks ago on the Lake Independence Boulevard connecting the George Price Highway on the Southside of Belize City with Chetumal Street on the Northside. This will open up the area where both the CDB-funded sporting and community development

facility, and the new National and International Bus Terminal, will be built. Government will at the same time construct the new bridge over the Belize River, and the total cost of this signature project will be in the region of 25 million dollars.

The dismantling of the old Civic Center has also commenced, in preparation for the building of the new multi purpose complex on the same site. The cost is expected to be 30 million dollars for a state-of-the-art structure, and this money will be provided solely by the Government of Belize. Mexico, which had originally committed to assisting us with 4 the project, will instead now look at funding an Olympic size swimming pool and a volleyball facility at the Marion Jones Stadium.

The new Civic Center construction will be handled by the Belize Infrastructure Limited, the special purpose vehicle chartered and owned by Government but with seats on the Board given to the NTUCB and the BCCI. BIL will also oversee the spending of another 40 million dollars on community development and sporting facilities, one in each District Town countrywide. In this regard the PetroCaribe funds will be supplemented by GOB's Treasury Notes domestic borrowing, as we seek to take advantage of excess liquidity and historically low interest rates. The first of the Municipal projects will be in San Ignacio/Santa Elena, to be followed by Benque Viejo Del Carmen. And depending on whether BIL can handle it, we would like to do two or three of the District Towns simultaneously. In other words, if BIL has the capacity, GOB has the money.

Infrastructure is, of course, not just physical but social and financial as well. In that last context, PetroCaribe funds also provided the capital for the launch of the National Bank of Belize. The Bank is off to a fast start. And while initially it is concentrating on home construction loans, it is worth

reminding that we intend to move as quickly as possible, and perhaps as early as the end of the first quarter of next year, to becoming a full-service, deposit-taking institution. This is part of Government's overall resolve to push access to affordable credit for individuals and businesses as a key way of stimulating even more growth and productivity. There is a central role in all this for the DFC as well. The DFC was, of course, revived by this Government against all odds and after last rites had been administered by, among others, the IFIs. It is, thus, another success story of renewal and reform 5 to which this Administration can point. It has regained operational profitability while directing the bulk of its lending-83%-to the productive sector. Now, guaranteed by Government, it will expand its portfolio by 80 million dollars over the next few years.

Perhaps, then, this is the time to announce what I hope will be an annual feature: an Independence Day gift. As part of its debt relief to Belizeans, Government is arranging to forgive some 6.22 million dollars

worth of DFC loans. These are principally mortgage loans, but also include some in the education and productive sectors. For the most part, the loans have already been foreclosed on by the DFC and the borrowers' collateral seized. But the sale of the collateral was not sufficient to liquidate the debt, and the borrowers were still on the hook for the balance. Government will now step in so that the 361 persons that qualify under the program will no longer be hounded by lawyers and bill collectors for the remainder of what they owe.

But back to physical infrastructure. With the mix of Treasury notes and PetroCaribe funds, a new headquarters will be built for the National Bank in the area opened up by the Lake Independence Boulevard; another new bridge will link the mile eight surrounds of suburban Belize City to Lords Bank behind Gentrac, close to the International airport; and starting around the middle of next year central Government

will be pumping money into District Towns for work on streets and drains so that the Belize City miracle of Mayor Darrell Bradley might to some extent be replicated across the nation. 6

Truly then, My Fellow Belizeans, as we start this thirty third year of our Independence our material prospects are exciting to behold. We are embarked on nothing less than the creation of a post-Independence golden age. And we will not stop until we reach a point where people will in years to come be able to look back on this time and say, with the Poet, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive"

And so it is also that Foreign Direct Investment continues to pour into our country.

ASR is expanding the capacity of the BSI mill to grind 10 thousand tons of cane per day as early as the next crop year, which starts in two months. Farmers are busy planting additional acreage to take advantage of this historic increase, and these are indeed times of plenty and prosperity for the North.

Meanwhile the new GreenTropics sugar mill is beginning to be assembled, and Brazilians want to do ethanol at Libertad. Generally, agriculture is making a Great Leap Forward. Four thousand additional acres of rice are being planted for export by the Mennonites in the area behind Roaring Creek; we are sending corn to Mexico as well as Guatemala and Jamaica; and the second cattle sweep is being completed, which will allow us to sell livestock anywhere in the world.

Tourism is growing at 8% over last year, which itself grew 10% over the year before; and the 100 million dollar NCL investment presages more good things to come. There are, of course, the naysayers that propound far and wide the notion that cruise tourism is a deterrent to overnight tourism.

But as though especially to confound them, a sales agreement has now been signed for the purchase of Caye Chapel by the same investor that sold Harvest Caye to NCL. 7

And he is partnering with the Six Senses Group to build the first internationally branded Belizean five star resort on Caye Chapel, and so provide further impetus to the already robust stay-over sector.

My Fellow Belizeans, distinguished guests: Independence, the fundament of our existence as a sovereign Central American and Caribbean state, is distinctly about the kind of economic progress I have just

rehearsed. But it is, as I said at the start, about so much more. It is, for example, about security and territorial integrity. And in the context certainly of citizen security, the news on this 21st September is also good. Thus I am happy to report that as of this writing murders countrywide stood at 74 for the period January to September 2013. This is 29 less than the 103 for the first nine months of last year, and in fact the lowest it has been in five years for the January to September period. Even more encouraging, the Belize City gang-related murders have dropped still more dramatically. Through September 19th, 2013, gangland-driven murders are down by 34% as compared to last year: that is, from 41 to 27. I hope I don't speak too soon when I say that it appears that finally the long nightfall is lifting, the Stygian darkness is ending.

For this no doubt the Security Forces are to be commended. They are better equipped and better resourced by Government, and they have done a splendid job. But it is also a certainty that the strides we are making in job creation have played a major part. It is in that context that the welcome decline in the unemployment rate must be placed. 8

On the question of territorial integrity we are very much determined to contain, and even reverse, the illegal incursions into the Chiquibul Forest, its National Park, and other areas. These depredations have laid waste far too much of our biosphere, and cannot be allowed to continue. Thus Government is to start immediate construction of three new border monitoring outposts. The locations are to be identified by the BDF in consultation with Friends of Conservation and Development, and the latter will assist as well with implementation. Enough cannot be said in praise of FCD. Their awareness-raising as well as operational efforts, have been phenomenal; and are capped now by their international partnership with the Guatemalan NGO Asociacion Balam, and the FAO. This international agreement is designed at getting some prevention and preservation action from the Guatemalan side of the border, which of course is the origin of the problem.

Part of the plan on our side is to grow the BDF as much as possible. And so intake numbers will be increased to at least 80 persons with the next recruiting tranche; and this step-up will continue with every new complement in order to improve overall BDF troop strength by at least one quarter over the next few years.

Ladies and Gentlemen, My Fellow Belizeans:

Above all else or, better put, including all else, Independence is about patriotism. So no Independence Day speech can be complete without a reflection on patriotism. And on this score I believe we are also in good shape. Indeed, in ways both ordinary and extraordinary, Belizean patriotism is always on show. And there are times when there is a great onrush, a great outpouring of that patriotism. One such was our Gold Cup football appearance. Belizeans went wild over the Jaguars; and the platitude that it doesn't matter whether you win or lose, took on a whole new meaning. It was, without a doubt, our Invictus moment.

Belizean patriotism has, of course, always been bound up with Belizean diversity. When we speak of unity in diversity we speak of the oneness, the solidarity, the surpassing fellow feeling that love of this country has produced among disparate ethnicities, disparate social groups.

Recently, however, a most unsettling phenomenon has arisen. A version of the culture wars has come to our country and it is souring the harmony and disrupting the rhythm of Belizean life. The golden knot that ties us all together, is in danger of coming loose. Now I do not wish to give offense to anyone on Independence Day. So what I say next is spoken not in anger or even in sorrow, but merely by way of exhortation. The diversity that we have hymned for so long must not now prove to be an empty trope, so much PR fluff. It must pass this latest test. In particular, we cannot afford for Government and the Churches to be at odds. The filigreed chain that links the two is a proud part of the national ornamentation, and it cannot be allowed to break. Government will therefore fully respect the right of the churches to propagate their understanding of the morality, or immorality, of homosexuality. But what Government cannot do is to shirk its duty to ensure that all citizens, without exception, enjoy the full protection of the law.

After all, the Belize Constitution that affirms the supremacy of God also affirms fundamental rights and the dignity of the individual human being.

That same Constitution further declares that all persons are equal before the law and entitled to non-discrimination; to freedom from interference with their privacy; and to freedom from unlawful attacks on their honour and reputation. 10

There is, I submit, no logical inconsistency between these different tenets of our Constitution. And Government, the Churches and the Belizean polity must find a way to uphold all the principles of our foundation document.

Ladies and Gentlemen, My Fellow Belizeans: in closing I wish to salute our two National Heroes, George Price and Philip Goldson. As we engage in national debate and disagreement, let us recall that these two were lifelong political opponents. They walked different roads in their search to redeem our country's destiny. Yet, in the end both are recognized as patriots of Independent Belize the likes of which we shall never see again.

As we honour them, I announce that Government, on Tuesday of this week, completed the purchase and transfer of the house here in Belmopan last occupied by Philip Stanley Wilberforce Goldson before his death. We will now turn it into a memorial to his life and legacy, putting NICH in charge of that project. Government has also, at a cost of some one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, commenced the paving of the road leading to the George Price Center, and will install proper drainage so as to ensure longevity of the new asphalt surface.

Let, therefore, the life and legacy of both Philip Goldson and Father of the Nation George Price be what we most remember on this and every Independence Day. Let the example of these two titans be what always animates our continuing dedication of this rich, glorious and blessed land to that Almighty God who has given it to us for our everlasting heritage.

Happy Birthday Belize, y que viva nuestra Independencia!