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PRESS RELEASE

Independence Day Address by the Honorable Dean Barrow, Prime Minister September 21, 2016 Belmopan

Your Excellency, the Governor-General, Sir Colville Young, and Lady Young
My Lord Chief Justice, Kenneth Benjamin and Mrs 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 Khalid Belisle

My Lords the Bishops of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches of Belize

Bishop 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

This year's September Celebrations came at a time of great division in our country. Notwithstanding that it was not even 12 months since the people spoke in the last general elections, at which the results were decisive, the tug of war between the Ruling and Opposition parties has become more contentious. The Labour movement has also been beset by a degree of factionalism. And even within our Church community fundamental philosophical and doctrinal differences have beaten back the spirit of Ecumenism and highlighted some seemingly irreconcilable points of view. The principal source of the conflict here is what has been described elsewhere as the culture wars: starkly contrasting positions on how to treat with the recasting of the categories of sexual and gender identity, and the claims that human rights include LGBT rights. Not surprisingly, the Chief Justice's Section 53 ruling detonated a societal pitched battle in which traditional values and religious mores are in a fierce offensive against liberalism, secularism and the arguments for evolved Constitutional protections.

Things, then, have gone way beyond the natural ferment, the expected clang and clamor of a young, developing Democracy.

And the economic backdrop to it all is, at this time, a complicating factor since we are experiencing a recession caused by the vagaries of the commodities cycle: agricultural sector disease, the drying up of our petroleum resources, and the crash in global prices. It is, of course, a recession made worse by Hurricane Earl. But it is also a recession from which, I must say at once, we will absolutely recover.

In this overall context which I have just sketched, the theme of this year's celebrations is timely both as reminder and exhortation. Sovereign and Strong: Together as One. Starting first with sovereignty, its preservation remains our foremost preoccupation. And in seeking to safeguard it, we know to deal with internal as well as external risks. That is why we have never allowed social or political differences to weaken ultimate allegiance to our Belizean state. And that is why support for party, organization, group or clan, is always subordinate to loyalty to our Belizean nation. And so we beat back any possibility of erosion or crackup from within.

But it is also true that our sovereignty is variously tested from without. And in this sense not the least of our trials is the constant element of peril which attends the unfounded Guatemalan claim. There is in fact a built-in precariousness to territorial integrity when our country is bordered by a much larger neighbor with revanchist aspirations; a neighbor whose size and power, even if not expressly deployed militarily against us, by their very fact are continuing, intrinsic threats to our reality. In the circumstances, our diplomatic and physical survival and progress, the phenomenal job of work done by our Foreign Service Officers, our BDF and our Coastguard, are matters of solace and pride. Our security forces in particular are small in number but outsize in determination and ability; and Government will continue to resource them in that same fashion which has already seen us provide helicopters and super modern cutters.

So we have, since Independence, remained successfully sovereign, sovereign in both of the two fundamental regards. And especially from the external point of view we have prevailed against powerful odds in a manner and to a degree which is tribute to that Baymen's blood coursing through our Belizean veins.

And we are also strong. Strong and resilient and anchored by certain enduring fundamentals with which the bounty of this land, the native brightness of our people and the richness of our culture have blessed us.

Take the question of the economy. Even though there has been a slackening of the GDP numbers, there is still an abundance of good things happening. In particular public works, that driver of jobs and growth, continues to remake our country. The Belize Infrastructure Limited is still proceeding with the construction of sports and community facilities in the District Towns. And in the Old Capital the Belize City Center is beginning to commune with the heavens, the frame of its roof already dominating the skyline. The Chetumal Street Bridge and the new Lake I Boulevard function as a critical transportation by-pass, much appreciated by commuters. And the adjoining Resource Center Building starting to take shape, signals the

implementation commencement of the Master Plan for the 45 acres owned by Government, designated now as a Special Development Area. It is a mixed use project that will house the National Bus Terminal and a GOB office complex, but as well private sector recreational, entertainment and retail spaces.

The larger, countrywide infrastructure canvas also displays a medley of good things. Those of you coming to Belmopan this morning from Belize City or from the San Ignacio, would have been impressed by the new Guanacaste Roundabout at the junction of the Hummingbird and the George Price Highway; and you should see it at night when it is splendidly lit up, gorgeously displaying its first world quality and serving as emblem and beacon for our non-stop transformation.

Then, approval has already been secured for the paving and aligning of the Coastal Road together with new bridges. This comes out of a 40 million dollar UK grant, the balance of which will go for improvements in the North to the Philip Goldson Highway between Orange Walk and Corozal.

In the West the IDB is funding the rehabilitation of the entire George Price Highway from the Belmopan junction to Benque Viejo. And OPEC/OFID will do a new Baking Pot Bridge and access roads as well as the Caracol Road. Also, the new Macal River Bypass and Bridge will be completed by March of 2017.

In Toledo we will finish the last portion to Jalacte of the Southern Highway. And in Stann Creek the complete re-do of the Hummingbird which is underway will, together with the Coastal, enhance the viability of the planned Commerce Bight Port.

In the Belize District the work has already started on the portion of highway between the PSWG Airport and the City's outskirts; and funding has now been secured for the new link road to span the Belize River starting from behind Gentrac and coming out at Mile 8 on the George Price Highway. OPEC/OFID, who will provide the money, has also agreed, as a result of Hurricane Earl, an additional few million dollars, on top of the tranches that had already been slated for later in the year, to help with new home construction and landfill for Southside Belize. And talking about the Hurricane gives me a chance to say how well NEMO handled the coordination of the social recovery effort. Their operational model has been commended by the international team from ECLAC, which was in Belize to do the damage assessment that will underpin the loan quantum to be funded by the IDB and CDB to assist our national rebuilding program. In that same vein the Caribbean Development Bank has already given an initial grant to undertake the replacement of the Calla Creek Bridge and the low-lying Bridge connecting Santa Elena with San Ignacio.

On the productive sector side of things, the shrimp rebound from the virus that decimated our stocks is in full flow and we will begin to export again at the start of 2017. Citrus prices are robust and ticking up, and the only challenge now is financing for increased production. The banana industry was indeed badly hit by the hurricane, but those hardy farmers in the South are doing all they can to accelerate the recovery. The expectation is that we will therefore regain total pre-hurricane capacity by next March. Grain for export was also terribly affected but there is enough for local feed and food with a little left over to sell abroad.

On the other side of the ledger, some compensation is being experienced by the start of Santander sugar production with deliveries to Spain having already occurred. The next harvest will be bigger and better with greater export earnings. Belize's poultry will also commence going to CARICOM by November and this too, with its value added in terms of use of local inputs for quality chicken, is part of the equation that will help return us to full economic wellbeing.

Tourism remains, of course, the brightest star in our constellation with success following success and overnight arrival records constantly being shattered. NCL is on track for its Harvest Caye November start, and the exploratory probe into the feasibility of the new Belize City Port Loyola Cruise Terminal has yielded initial results that are encouraging. Our dollar continues strong and securely underpinned, though our correspondent banking woes are still a problem. Three out of the four local commercial banks now enjoy full correspondent relationships with US or UK banks. But the fourth is still searching and until it succeeds its inability to route external flows for its customers does create a foreign exchange choke point. But our Central Bank is working to solve that problem.

My confidence today, then, is for a full return, by the start of the next fiscal year, to GDP growth and financial system normalcy. But that confidence is marred by one thing: fear of that other hurricane called the SuperBond. So I will say just this. If it is the last thing I do before I leave office, I will solve once and for all that problem. And it will not take anything like the four plus years I have left on my Constitutional mandate.

I hope, Ladies and Gentlemen, that I have succeeded in showing that our sovereignty and strength are intact, resilient, perdurable.

But that 'together as one', that latter part of the formulation urged by this year's theme, is more problematic. It requires us to summon up all our energy, all our goodwill, all our patriotism to make it happen. Let us therefore be inspired by all things available, such as our Hurricane Earl experience, the scores of stories coming out of that fateful night and early morning. For these were stories of courage and extraordinary solidarity. These were stories that told of the heroism not just of the Police and the BDF, but of ordinary folk braving the raging wind and surging sea to rescue from collapsing houses occupants utterly and helplessly at the mercy of the elements. They were stories of the drawing forth of every vestige of national empathy, in some instances captured in real time such as when Love FM's Doctor Villanueva froze in on-air shock and fear, face turned ashen for the woman trapped by rising water whose desperate call to the station was cut off in the middle of her SOS.

It is that spirit of ultimate oneness which must now help with the binding up of our wounds, the pressing ahead of the reform agenda, the partnership with our Public Officers and Labour and Business and the Churches.

And never let us forget what it is that we are fighting for. Let us always be conscious of the essence of our Belize: its breathtaking physical beauty; its seas of blue and green and iridescent Aqua; its Caye sands of purest white; its majestic mountains with their lushly forested slopes; its rural retreats with their golden air and special light; its arboreal richness with the profusion of tropical fruit whose special bouquet and flavour is acknowledged to be the best in the Caribbean; its Mayan temples, visits to which can produce an out of body experience, a palpable sense of being cast back in time to the ceremony and rituals and work and achievement of that ancient civilization of which we are proud inheritors.

So, this is no time to cut and run, no time for discouragement. No time for what Nobel Laureate Saul Bellow called 'the cant and rant of pipsqueaks'. Let us rather channel National Hero George Price. For we are still, and ever must be, nation builders all. We must fix whatever has gone wrong and continue the forward march. We must bring healing on the basis of compassion and understanding and the infinitely sheltering capacity of Divine love. We must unceasingly strive to shine and polish this Central American Jewel set, to magnificent advantage, in the Caribbean basin. We must build and expand this country of progress and reform and social justice where, as was said on that first Independence Day, every man, woman and child has a stake, a real stake, in the life and work of the new Belize.

Happy Independence and may God bless our native land.