

# **Independence Day Address 2017**

**Delivered by Prime Minister Rt. Hon. Dean Barrow**

**Belmopan, Belize, 21 September 2017**

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 Deputy Prime Minister, 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

Before I begin my address proper, I wish to offer condolences to our sister countries in the Caribbean on the destruction and loss of life suffered in consequence of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Belize will join the rest of Caricom in doing whatever we can to help.

I also extend solidarity to our northern neighbor Mexico, as that great country seeks to recover from the double blow of two earthquakes in as many weeks.

Last year at this time I lamented what appeared to be the fractious state of political and social relations in our Belizean democracy: the two major political parties were going at it hammer and tongs; the religious community was split; and the labour movement polarized.

I had hoped to have been able to report differently this Independence Day. But in once more surveying our Belizean scene, that phrase about the more things change is what comes to mind. That is because I am driven to concede that factionalism, though differentiated now as to subject area concentration, is still unabated. The divide between the traditional churches and at least one iteration of the evangelicals, seems to have become a chasm. A particular Union wrangle, with ethnic overtones, no less, in what we had long since come to regard as our post-racial society, was unedifying. And with the approach of municipal elections partisan rhetoric, virulence of language and attack, has become even more unhinged.

It is salutary, therefore, to have been called to unity, uplift and patriotic fortitude by this year's September Celebrations theme. Belize: Confronting Challenges! Celebrating Triumphs! Renewing our Resolve!

One challenge we are successfully confronting, is the challenge posed by last year's cyclical economic downturn. I therefore record with great satisfaction its reversal. And I am happy to say that national output is once again burgeoning towards the 4 billion dollar mark, providing employment for some 110 thousand Belizeans. Foreign Direct Investment, which has averaged over BZ\$ 400 million since 2008, is set to increase even more. And there are 25 major private sector projects, in different areas, poised for implementation.

Thus it is that the Statistical Institute of Belize was able to certify 1.1% GDP growth for the first six months of this year. And this headline exit from recession was fleshed out by some really quite remarkable figures in particular sub sectors: an 18% jump in sugar production; 30% for citrus concentrate; 20% in livestock; and a 7.8% increase in tourism overnight arrivals.

That 7.8% expansion between January and July of 2017, marked the continuation of a remarkable run in the industry that is the greatest driver of our economy. For it came on top of 2016's 13% spike over 2015, which spike distinguished 2016 as Belize's best year for tourism in over a generation. With this kind of annual growth we have now become one of the top destinations in the region.

2016 also saw the breaking of our cruise tourism records; and it is now confirmed that for the first time ever Belize hosted over 1 million cruise passengers.

Of course, there will be repercussions for us from Harvey and Irma. We naturally sympathize with all Americans affected by these storms. And since the US remains the single largest source of our visitor flows, with Houston and Miami two of our most important gateways, Harvey and Irma also constitute setbacks for us. However, new dedicated marketing in Europe and the start of direct flights from Canada, make us confident of the quick resumption of our phenomenal tourism success. And one more important ingredient in this job-multiplying, benefit-creating formula is the fact that we are working on the establishment of two new international airports. The one at

Basil Jones in North Ambergris Caye, is a while away from becoming construction-ready. But the long interrupted work on the Riversdale airport near to the fabled Placencia Peninsula will, according to the developer, restart momentarily.

On the cruise side, our cup runneth over. The definitive agreement has been signed with the Michael Feinstein group for the 125 million dollar Stake Bank docking facility; and so has an MOU with Port of Magical Belize. This latter is for alongside berthing on a parcel of coastline land just south of the Sibun River and not too far from Belize City. It is a 150 million dollar project; and together the two initiatives should create 1200 full-time jobs.

Agriculture is, of course, our other economic mainstay. But thirteen months ago we were assessing the damage from Hurricane Earl and lamenting the fact that this so important sector was hardest hit. Indeed, there were direct income losses of 75 million Belize dollars. Today, though, we see that the recovery has been steady and confidence in the sector high. Our officials have been busy securing market access to CARICOM for poultry, beef and direct consumption sugars. Arrangements for duty free export of live cattle to Guatemala have been completed and the first transfer under the program took place in February of this year.

Last month Western Dairies marked its 50th anniversary, celebrating impressive growth in a non-traditional industry and having recorded two export cycles of ice cream to Grenada.

Earlier, in January, Quality Poultry Products from Spanish Lookout obtained HACCP certification for their production facility. This was followed by a similar accomplishment in May for Caribbean Chicken of Blue Creek. And these certifications now clear the way for both facilities to export to CARICOM.

In Aquaculture there is still a problem with the Early Mortality Syndrome that has been plaguing our shrimp industry since 2015. Efforts therefore continue at genetic improvement, biological control and enhanced management practices to combat the scourge. Balancing the Aquaculture picture somewhat, though, has been the success in Tilapia production and export. Fein Catch, the successor entity to Fresh Catch, has turned things around in just three short years. They are now selling to Walmart in both Mexico and Guatemala; are increasing the number of their ponds by 31 to make for a grand total of 122; and will produce around 6 million pounds of live fish over the next 12 months.

The Banana Industry recovery from last year's hurricane is also on track. There are, though, certification problems with a few farms, and the non-implementation of the required dredging to improve access at the Big Creek Port is also an issue. Both difficulties are soluble, however, and the longer term prospects remain good.

One final note in this area concerns the processed meats sub-sector, and the great strides the Running W enterprise has been making. Their plan is to build on the limited market penetration into El Salvador and Guatemala, which their efforts and investments have already secured. A potential joint venture with the new owners of Valley of Peace Farms would see the expansion of Running W exports to Central America as only a first step. This is because the parent company of VOP Farms is the fourteenth largest producer of pork in the US and controls 10% of the meat packing sector there.

And coming back for a minute to the surfeit of new private sector projects that are on tap, I must single out with pride the 96 million dollar BTL investment in its National Broadband Plan. This is BTL's fiber-to-the-home project and will connect around 90 thousand Belizean households over the next three years. It will mean a wholesale change-out of the current copper wire network and its replacement by state-of-the-art fiber optics. In turn this will permit Belize a level of broadband connectivity to rival any jurisdiction anywhere in the world. In other words, our core data infrastructure will be on a par with London, New York, Singapore and Seoul. To put into further perspective just how huge a deal this is, the World Bank has concluded that for every 10% increase in broadband penetration, some 1.38% growth is added to a nation's GDP. A check with residents and businesses in San Pedro can give anyone a peek into what this brave new world is looking like. Because of BTL's implementation of its undersea fiber optic cable technology to San Pedro, people there enjoy internet speeds of up to 130 Mbps. This is a tenfold increase over previous offerings and the fastest internet service anywhere in Belize. And since pilot rollouts for the new fiber technology have already been taking place in Los Lagos, Joseito Layout in Corozal and a part of Lords Bank, BTL has taken on new workers and this additional employment will only grow as the program intensifies. It strikes me that what we have seen with road infrastructure we are now seeing with telecoms technology, and Belize in these areas is catapulting itself into first world territory.

This, then, is the backdrop to the economic steadying of 2017's first two quarters. And it presages a forward momentum that should result in full year growth in excess of the 2% we have averaged over the last decade. We can check off, therefore, the 'confronting challenges' box of this year's September theme.

And when it comes to 'celebrating triumphs', there is a lot about which to be pleased. Inflation, for example, remains tame at 1.4% year to date. Altogether exports are up 16% and imports down 5%, leading to an improved current account position. Private sector credit from the commercial banks continues to stretch, gross foreign reserves of the CBB stand strong at \$811m, while non-performing loan levels have shrunk to below 3%. The private sector's borrowing costs maintain their downward fall with a weighted average lending rate of under 9.5%, the lowest on record.

Also, April saw the culmination of our initiative to financially empower, rather than fiscally straitjacket, our public officers, teachers, soldiers and police officers. Our refusal to become prisoners of the prevailing orthodoxy, our determination to place people above dogma, man over metric, resulted finally in 30% higher wages for Government employees. This increase, disbursed over just three short years, is without parallel in our region.

As well, we continue to pour the concrete so as to keep working that miracle of countrywide infrastructural transformation which we have engineered. Nothing has been more central to that effort than Venezuelan's PetroCaribe initiative. This saw us source fuel from Venezuela and in turn enjoy handsome price rebates that served as long term, super concessionary loans. That funding paid for hundreds of miles of streets, drains, bridges and culverts, resulting in the remarkable transformation and beautification to which we bear witness everyday. It paid, as well, for a multitude of sporting facilities, of which there is none more impressive than the new Belize City Center. That 30 million dollar complex is one to treasure: not just as an arena for our volleyball and basketball exploits, but as physical and architectural testament to our enduring friendship for, and lasting gratitude to, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

At the end of last week, however, we announced the suspension of the PetroCaribe fuel and financing arrangement. This had to do with a number of issues which had led to unreliability of supply and forced us to engage in last minute, higher cost, alternative fuel purchases on the spot market. The resulting increases in prices to the consumer at the pump, was what obliged us to move.

As soon as we did this, though, Venezuela informed that it was sending a high level delegation to Belize, with a direct mandate from President Maduro to fix the problem. That mission came, met with me on Tuesday, and agreed to new arrangements that guarantee reliability of supply and filling by Venezuela of all our fuel orders. Shipments will thus restart next month, PetroCaribe will "roll it" once more, and we thank the Bolivarian Republic for their fidelity to this enterprise.

In any event, however, our own budget and the stability of our partnerships with friendly countries and the IFIs will always drive public works and job creation. Next month I sign the OFID loan for the Haulover Bridge replacement, and this will top off the ongoing Highway upgrading between Belize City's Buttonwood Boulevard and the PGIA junction. The total project cost is 107.2 million Belize. And going in the opposite direction, there is funding from the UK via CDB for rehabilitation of the Philip Goldson Highway right through to the Northern Border and including the Remate Road. The Crooked Tree Causeway is also to be raised and resurfaced, and CDB is to sign imminently the contract for that scope of works design.

Turning to the West, the procurement process to recruit the contractor for the new Roaring Creek Bridge has been completed. All that remains before work actually starts, is the finalization of the

acquisition of some necessary private land. The contractor has also been chosen for the rehabilitation of the George Price Highway from Roaring Creek to Spanish Lookout. And finally in the West, the first fifteen miles, between Georgeville and the San Antonio junction, of the new Caracol Road is to be finished by year's end.

In the South the Hummingbird Highway Rehabilitation project is 90% complete, and the consultants have now been hired to produce the drawings for the new Coastal Road.

Of course infrastructural triumphs, economic and fiscal advances, are only two facets of the overall sustainability and security equation which we constantly seek. The total paradigm also concentrates on social, and territorial and citizen safety, investment. That is why 50 cents of every dollar Government spends go on education, healthcare and border and civil protection. Thus, during the last few weeks as school has reopened, thousands of students have benefited from Government's tuition and materials support. New classrooms have been built especially in the South. And so have new health posts, most notably in Santa Elena and San Antonio in the Cayo District, and San Narciso, Chunox, Cristo Rey and San Pedro in the Corozal District.

The assets of the BDF continue to increase so that, among other things, there are now 3 helicopters and two fixed wing aircraft. Construction finished this year on a new OP at Caballo to assist in soldier and FCD patrols. And work on another one in Cebada starts shortly. Our army has also partnered with the Ministry of Human Development to charter a new Belize Youth Challenge Academy. This will be a school for youth at risk, in particular young men between the ages of 15 and 18. And the Institution will provide a two year program that will offer discipline, skills training, trade instruction and good citizenship classes.

The new BYCA efforts at weaning young people off undesirable lifestyles, will help the Police in their own struggles to combat crime and violence and the gang culture responsible for so many murders in our country. And insofar as the work of the Police is concerned, greater professionalism is being sought for the Department by their Ministry, which is also undertaking an exercise to improve morale and conditions of service.

On the social progress front, we celebrate now the imminent passage of the marijuana decriminalization Bill. This is a first step in ameliorating conditions that saw principally the already marginalized ending up in jail for weed possession. Weed possession in amounts that were so small as to be minuscule. We also welcome the victory for conservation and environmental protection which the Bill for a moratorium on offshore oil activities will secure.

Implementation of the UNCAC is moving full speed ahead, with multiple stakeholders participating in this National Process. The Integrity Commission has been reconstituted, is working, and has already published for public knowledge and further action the names of those

politicians who failed to comply with their obligations under the law. How so-called responsible people can claim to be unaware of these activities and strides, defeats me.

Government, I should say in this context, is still agreeable to the expansion of the PAC, though the logistics of its conversion from a House to a bi-cameral entity are proving challenging.

And with further regard to the anti-corruption struggle, I must talk about the Lands Department.

Now Independence Day is no time for cesspool political rhetoric, even if delivered piccolo. So I will not engage in any back and forth with those hurling brickbats and lobbing stink bombs. I therefore do not stop even to point out the pharisaic nature of a campaign mounted by people whose own horribly disfigured tenure is a matter of historical record. I concentrate rather on the fact that long before any public disclosure, we instituted leadership change in the Lands Ministry. And since January of this year, in a further effort to demonstrate the seriousness of our reform purpose, I have myself assumed Constitutional responsibility for Lands. Day to day oversight has been given to Minister of State Dr Carla Barnett. And her competence, managerial and technical experience plus reputation for honesty, make her absolutely the right choice. Results have already been forthcoming both by way of additional human and financial resources for the Department, and by way of new legislative and administrative measures. Matters have been moving and over a thousand National Estate instruments have been signed by Dr Barnett. The ministry therefore expects to have its entire backlog completely cleared by year's end.

I wish to emphasize that Dr Barnett is the third professional from outside the House that I have brought in to head the ministry since the 2015 general election. Of course, there has been no whiff of scandal under any of their stewardships. When things go wrong, this Government successfully takes action. And the difference with the past is clear.

I conclude today by noting that in this digital and social media age, the world's upheavals circulate daily on the screens of our smartphones, televisions and computers. We watch the ravages of the drug war to the north, and to the south the dystopia of lives perpetually devastated by the culture of the maras. Farther afield, we see the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, the legacy of a region torn apart by internal conflicts and civil strife. And, perhaps most alarmingly, in Asia we witness the gravest threat of nuclear Armageddon since the Cuban missile crisis. In the circumstances, we thank a Merciful Providence for the blessings of our land as we reflect on how comparatively well off we are. Our determination to keep things stable and our country free must never falter. And it is in that context that I endorse this September's thematic call for us to ceaselessly renew our nation-building resolve. But let our patriotism be year-round, and not just a seasonal thing. Let it be a wellspring for inexhaustible optimism, for never seeing through a glass, darkly. And let it ensure that the inevitable disagreements within a democracy on the move, never become so dissonant as to upset our ultimate oneness and indivisibility. As it is on

this day, on this venerated hill, so let it be always: that red and white and blue and white in the end merge to become red, blue and white.

Thus may we remain tethered to one flag, to one anthem, to one identity. Thus may we hold fast to a Belizeanness that is a light perpetual, ever illuminating our way ahead. And thus may our children and grandchildren continue to be inspired by the greatness of our forebears, of Price and Goldson, of Ramos and Canul, of Natchakan and Guerrero.

All this to enable us to proclaim year after year the Integrity of our imperishable cry: Independence today, Independence tomorrow, Independence forever!

Happy 21<sup>st</sup> everyone, y que Dios nos bendiga.