

Independence Day Address 2012

By Leader of the Opposition

The Hon. Francis W. Fonseca

21 September 2012

His Excellency the Governor General Sir Colville Young and Lady Young

Prime Minister Barrow and Mrs. Barrow

Former Prime Minister Said Musa

My Lord Chief Justice and Mrs. Benjamin

Our Most Reverend Bishops and members of the Clergy

Members of the National assembly

His Worship the Mayor of Belmopan City and Mrs. Lopez

Councilors of the Belmopan City Council

Other Mayors and Councilors present with us here today

The Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Corps and Friends visiting with us from abroad

Our Public Officers, Officers of the Belize Police Department, the Belize Defence Force, and the Coast Guard Service

Invited Guests

My Fellow Belizeans

A pleasant good morning to each and every one of you.

In his book: "George Price-Man of the People" Rudolph Castillo records that it was on July 26th, 1981 at the Belize City Centre before a gathering of some 6000 people that then Premier George Price broke the news that Belize would become an Independent nation on Monday, September 21, 1981.

Castillo reports on the people's reaction:

"Ladies rushed unto the platform and kissed their leader. Men hugged him in joy. Soon he was lifted off his feet and showered with love and adoration by those gathered at the City Centre. In one corner people hugged and kissed one another; spontaneous dancing broke out; some just screamed; some broke into hysterical laughter.

Some older people transfixed by happiness, sat and just cried their hearts out as joy and happiness excited the crowd at the announcement of the long awaited day.

George Price had to be rescued from the unbridled love of a people for their great leader"

Fifteen days later on Thursday, September 10, 1981, just 11 days before Independence, George Price addressed thousands of Belizeans gathered at historic Court House Plaza for national Day celebrations.

He reminded those present that:

"31 National day Celebrations have helped to build the new nation of Belize with all its territory intact and to ensure its Independence."

In his well researched and written book: "George Price-A Life Revealed", Godfrey P. Smith brilliantly and dramatically recounts the birth of our nation:

"About a minute before midnight, the lights at the Governor's residence were switched off. As the seconds ticked by, a drum roll began. The Union Jack was slowly lowered in the darkness of the night and the Belizean flag hoisted in its place. On the stroke of midnight, lights in the compound were switched back on and spotlights illuminated the Belizean flag fluttering in the light September breeze. The 1st Gordon Highlanders played, Land of the Free, the National Anthem of the newly Independent Belize as Price, dressed in his white, long-sleeved guayabera, and the guests, stood to attention.

Across the harbor, clearly visible from the grounds of the Government House, the HMS Ariande discharged a 21 Gun Salute as Price proposed a toast to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth.

Later that day the official handing over of the Instruments of the Independence Constitution took place here in Belmopan and the following day Price flew to New York to be present when the UN Security Council and the General Assembly voted to approve and formally admit Belize as the 136th Member of the United Nations.

Indeed to think of Belize's Independence is to think of George Price.

Two days ago on September 19th our nation observed National Service Day in honor of the Father of our Nation.

It was on that date, one year ago, that the Lord called home this good and faithful servant.

The Lord saw that he had grown weary after a life of work and service to his people and nation.

If but for a brief moment, our nation stood united in its loss and sorrow.

Thousands travelled from our cities, towns and villages to pay their final respects and honor the man whose tireless efforts and sacrifice, above and beyond all others, had made it possible for us to be Belizean.

Maya, Creole, Mestizo, Garifuna, East-Indian, Mennonite, Asian, Hindu, Arab, African,-we all mourned as one.

On this Independence Day let us renew our commitment to this unity of spirit and purpose and let us guard against the growing danger of “intense individualism”.

A healthy democracy is not simply a society in which individuals pursue their own goals. Democracy flourishes when it is tended by Citizens prepared and willing to use their freedom to actively engage in the life of their nation, adding their voices to the public debate, electing representatives whose values reflect their aspirations, and accepting the absolute requirement for consultation, dialogue, respect, and tolerance in a free society.

Thirty-one years ago, as Smith records in his book, “there were many questions about the viability of Belize after Independence. The New York Times of October 4th, 1981 reported that amid the toasts following Independence, a lingering doubt floated among the foreign delegations-Belize had become an Independent State but was it viable as a Nation?

Foreign Analysts argued that it would be difficult for Belize to generate its own wealth. A third of Belize’s total imports consisted of food, it had virtually no industry and employment opportunities remained scarce.”

Prime Minister Price’s Independence Day message on 21st September, 1981 was devoid of any triumphalism or the un-bounding of grandiose ambitions. He was conscious of and preoccupied with the everyday practical problems that lay ahead. Like, quite literally, how he would meet the payroll and debt obligations of his Government.

Since that time, Belizeans-as government and people have together been writing our own chapters in the book of Independence.

Ours is a story that has tracked back and forth between triumph and adversity, prosperity and paucity, hope and despair. But, taken in the balance, what we have accomplished as a small nation fills us with the optimism to take up, year after year, the immortal challenge issued to all Belizeans from the father of the Nation, to be committed Nation Builders.

By any standard, there are very good reasons for us to pay tribute to Belize and its people. Pressed against our backs, propelling us forward is a short but compelling history of peace and stability, ethnic cohesion, democratic traditions, primacy of human rights and respect for international obligations and international law.

It is, after all these hallowed values and traditions that have consistently won us respect and support from the community of nations in the face of threats to our territorial integrity.

As a small, vulnerable and highly dependent nation, maintaining the support of the international community must rank among our paramount objectives.

In a few short hours, these formal ceremonies being held across the districts of Belize will come to an end, giving way to people's celebrations.

This is as it should be.

But as responsible citizens and leaders we are aware that, on Monday, after we've shaken off the residue of month long revelry, serious challenges await us as a nation.

We know them only too well.

- 30,000 Belizeans actively seeking a job cannot find one
- 148,500 Belizeans living on less than \$5.50 per day for food
- the ongoing restructuring of the 2029 Bond
- the scourge of violent crime threatens our social fabric
- less than 50% of our children are completing secondary school
- oil revenues are on the decline
- Foreign Direct Investment remains elusive
- and the unfounded Guatemalan claim persists

Challenges, yes.

But no one dare question the viability of our beloved nation.

Belize has 8,867 square miles or five million six hundred and seventy four thousand eight hundred and eighty acres of land, twelve miles of territorial sea, two hundred miles of exclusive economic zone, untold natural wonders, and the skill and ingenuity of an over one hundred and thirty thousand strong labor force.

It has geographic proximity to and shares the English language with the wealthiest country on earth. It has other large markets in its immediate vicinity and it has inherited the preferred and familiar English Common law system.

Thirty one years after Independence it is time for us to competently and efficiently maximize the use of all these resources and comparative advantages to achieve economic growth and development.

We must reinvent ourselves to be relevant to present and future challenges.

We must forge strong, meaningful alliances with civil society, the church community, and the private sector to create a more just and equitable society and a more productive, competitive and prosperous nation.

Independence, even 31 years on, offers us no guarantees.

It is both a promise and a challenge.

It is a promise that Belizeans working together can govern ourselves in a manner that will serve our aspirations for personal freedom, economic prosperity, and social justice.

It is a challenge because the success of that Independence rests upon the shoulders of the citizens of Belize, and no one else.

Independence requires that we Belizeans share both in its benefits and its burdens.

We who have embraced the work of nation building and self-government must commit ourselves to the principles of individual freedom, human rights and the rule of law for those who are yet to come.

Our vision for Belize must be one in which our children are born into strong functional families, receive a quality education which equips them with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to find or create employment and lead lives of dignity while raising a family and preparing for a comfortable and secure retirement.

On this 31st Independence Day celebration this must be our shared vision.

If Belize is to grow and develop, all of us must be committed to a strong Belizean economy and society grounded in credible, practical plans and solutions to the social and economic challenges we face.

Our Government must be a Government for all the people not a Government just for those supporters of the political party in office.

The results of the March elections demand respect and dialogue.

We in the opposition People's United Party have been patient and respectful in light of the serious social and economic challenges our country faces.

The authority of our duly elected representatives must not be undermined and the needs of those we represent must not be disregarded and ignored.

We can do better Belize!

We must do better!

In the words of the Psalmist, let us call out to our God:

“show me your ways, O Lord;

Teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you

Are the God of my salvation;

On you I wait all my day.”

HAPPY INDEPENDENCE DAY!

MAY GOD CONTINUE TO GUIDE AND BLESS BELIZE!