

Independence Day Address 2014

By Leader of the Opposition

The Hon. Francis W. Fonseca

21 September 2014

His Excellency The Governor General Sir Colville Young and Lady Young

Prime Minister Hon. Dean Barrow and Mrs. Barrow

My Lord Chief Justice Kenneth Benjamin

Our Most Reverend Bishops and Members of the Clergy

Members of the National Assembly

His Worship The Mayor of Belmopan City Mr. Simeon Lopez and Mrs. Lopez

Members of the Diplomatic Corp.

Our Public Officers and Members of our Security Forces

Invited Guests

Friends

My Fellow Belizeans

Unlike any other day in our National Calendar, September 21st imbues us with patriotic sentiment and a deep sense of national pride whether you are here, or you live elsewhere. Indeed the entire month of September is regarded as our most patriotic month with homes, parks, office buildings and vehicles lavishly adorned with decorations and our streets and monuments festooned with flags and streamers in our national colors.

In between savoring the soulful Afro-Caribbean rhythms of sweet steel pan music and delighting in the wildly creative costumes of Carnival, our abiding sense of history and gratitude

should oblige us to pause to pay collective tribute to the founding fathers of Belize's nationalist movement: George Price, Antonio Soberanis, Philip Goldson and Leigh Richardson.

It was the vision, courage, sacrifice and tireless work of these national leaders, over decades, that swelled the powerful headwaters of our freedom movement and burst the dam of colonial resistance to sweep us to our rightful date with independent self-determination.

But we must take care not to fall victim to the tendency of history to focus solely on leaders. Let us not forget the tens of thousands of courageous Belizeans all across the country who rallied to the call to throw off the shackles of colonialism, courageous in the belief that we were ready for Independence and could construct a free state on the foundation stones of self-government.

On the morning of that first September 21st in 1981 George Price, the Father of the Nation declared that Independence was not just a changing of the guard but a chance to create a new society in which each Belizean man and woman would be assured of a fair opportunity to improve his standard of living in the new Belize.

Our task, as contemporary national leaders, is to strive with a sense of purpose, direction and urgency to deliver on this promise of Independence.

We recognize that Independence is not a single isolated event. It was just the first important step in the ongoing task of building a nation.

This involves a sustained commitment by all Belizeans to work towards a national vision; to toil tirelessly in the fields of national endeavor; to respect other cultures and ethnicities; to protect and uphold the rights of our indigenous peoples and to forge a society united in its commitment to justice and equality for all.

We celebrate the 33rd anniversary of our independence amidst a world in turmoil. The emergence of ISIS threatens to once again unleash the dogs of war and fragment global stability in to alliances of "good" and axes of "evil" and draw the international community inexorably in to the global war on terror.

The continuing crisis in Northwestern Europe portends the coming of a new cold war between NATO and the west and Putin's Russia.

The latest seven-week war between Israel and Hamas has left an estimated 2100 Palestinians dead, mostly civilians and children, and some 64 Israeli soldiers have also lost their lives.

Viewed against this global tapestry of terror and turmoil, Belize remains relatively peaceful- even while we are not quite the tranquil haven of democracy we once boasted of. Our challenges even appear by rigorous comparison to be tame. But they are real nonetheless.

Real for the hundreds of families who have lost loved ones to senseless violence unleashed in the urban terror that besieges Southside Belize City and is slowly spreading to other population centers of the country.

Like the global war on terror, the battle to stem the rushing tide of violence by marginalized Belizeans, especially our youth who have very little to lose, can never be won with brute force and aggression and without understanding and focusing on the root causes of the problem and without investing more in people and less in meager, unsustainable handouts.

The political rewards may be less tangible immediately but ultimately our nation will be better off socially and economically.

While we are grateful that we do not have to face incoming rocket fire across our borders as in Israel and Gaza, we recognize that we are nonetheless at war. A war we are currently losing.

Even as we celebrate in our towns and cities across Belize, deep inside the magnificent Chiquibul and other protected rainforest areas of our country, hundreds of acres of our pristine national patrimony are being lost to illegal farmers, miners, and extractors of Xate and rare artifacts. Virtually all originate from our neighbor, Guatemala.

Precious hardwoods and important wildlife, including endangered species are being illegally harvested and hunted.

And our water security is being imperiled from contamination and pollution through illegal and indiscriminate activities from those coming across our borders.

We are a country of limited financial resources but the situation demands that we re-prioritize so that we can invest in adequate security infrastructure, including helicopters.

Without the ability to quickly reach our borders, patrol our seas and safeguard our natural resources, proclaiming our sovereignty and territorial integrity risks becoming nothing more than empty, clamorous rhetoric.

I say to every Belizean in cities, towns and villages; in sugar cane fields, in citrus factories, on banana farms, on the seas fishing, in the tourism sector, in our schools and churches, in our health institutions, to public officers and the workers preserving our rainforest and marine reserves, keeping our communities clean, caring for our elderly and disabled, to the youth of Belize;

I say to you: RISE UP. AWAKE. It is NOW tomorrow's noon. And each and every one of us has our part to play in building on the hopes, dreams and aspirations of independence.

We are the sons and daughters of George Price, the inheritors of Soberanis, the heirs of Richardson and Goldson. God's goodness may have given this land to us, to honor and to love- but it was given, above all for us to sustainably develop and preserve. Let us join hands, hearts and minds in the service of that sacred task for our nation.

Belizeans do not expect miracles from their leaders. What they want, what they truly expect is that we act to fulfill the true promise of independence which was so hard-won 33 years ago.

They expect us to recognize and accept that we are servants of the people and that each day we are honored with the responsibility of public service, we work tirelessly to resolve the many challenges facing our nation.

We cannot buy our way to a safe society; we all must make the necessary sacrifice and investment to achieve it.

We cannot protect the ordinary citizen against abuse of power by keeping our eyes closed and our mouths shut, we must speak out against injustice and corruption whenever or wherever we see it, in our homes, our businesses, our communities, on our streets, and in our government.

A publication at the time of Independence in 1981 entitled: "The Road to Independence" states:

" With Independence a serious task faces the Belizean people-not only to transform a society marked by centuries of colonial exploitation and dependency, but to build a national unity shattered by decades of political strain under the weight of the Guatemalan claim."

In 2014, we are unquestionably united in our rejection of the unfounded claim but new threats to national unity of our own making have arisen.

A growing political divide grounded in a troubling brand of governance which offers no regard or respect to duly elected representatives of the people who do not belong to the Party in Government.

Political Parties are important and necessary but once elected to Government, that Political Party and its Leader have a solemn duty and obligation to serve the people of Belize wherever they may live and regardless of whom they voted for.

The nation's resources are not the purview of any one political party. There must be equity and respect for all our communities across the country.

Today, my fellow Belizeans, we must quietly resolve that ours will be a united and dedicated mission of national renaissance, renewing our commitment as a people to build an egalitarian society based on social justice and economic achievement.

I myself am resolved, unshakeable in my belief that together we can build our nation with pride in ourselves.

We can become an efficient, forward-thinking, forward-planning and united nation of 350,000 people that uses its natural resources in a sustainable way, secure in social justice and confident in the hope of real political and economic change.

A country where our children will raise our grandchildren and their children with a shining future to look forward to. That should be our dream, our hope, our goal. Not just to promise change. To deliver change. To achieve change.

That change must result in real, purposeful economic reform, governance reform and health and education reform.

Economic reform is about building a creative, innovative, dynamic economy which attracts investment and creates jobs.

In 2014 no one credibly questions the importance of investment, both domestic and foreign, to national development. The challenge is to attract investment that is compatible with the goals and aspirations we have set for ourselves as a nation and people.

Similarly, by focusing on sustainable employment we assure sustainable economic growth and development.

Governance is about the systems and structures in place which determine how the collective wealth and resources of the nation is managed, allocated and distributed, and ultimately the quality of life that each of us as citizens enjoy.

Governance is about you, your family, your community, your country.

It is entirely unacceptable that as we celebrate 33 years of Independence there is no functioning Public Accounts Committee and no Integrity Commission.

The absence of oversight means waste, inefficiency and corruption.

Education and health reform remain essential ingredients for real national development. These reforms are about preparing our youth, our workforce, our people, both mentally and physically, for full and active participation in the work of nation building.

As written in the "Road to Independence": " the victory of Independence belongs to each and every Belizean throughout this history who in no matter how small a way, demonstrated by his or her action, their conviction that nothing is more abhorrent than slavery in any form, and that nothing is more precious than freedom and independence."

I wish you all, on behalf of myself, my family, my Party, a peaceful, safe and Happy Independence Day!

Feliz Dia de nuestra Independencia a todos en nuestro paiz!

May God Bless each of you, your families and our beloved Belize!