



Throne Speech - Ceremonial Opening of the National Assembly of Belize

Belmopan - 14 March, 2008

GOVERNMENT SPEECH

Traditionally read by the Governor-General of Belize,

His Excellency, Sir Colville Young

Today marks the inauguration of the tenth House of Representatives and the eleventh Senate since Belize's attainment of Self Government in 1964. Today also marks the sixth change of Government since independence and the beginning of the third Government of the United Democratic Party. Belizeans can be proud that we have proved to ourselves and to all those who wish us well that we are a people committed to our democracy and determined to preserve our God given freedoms against all odds.

My Government is acutely aware that when the people spoke on February 7th, they were registering their demand not merely for a changing of the guard, but a demand for a fundamental paradigm shift in the way our country is to be governed. It was a demand for national reconstruction based on foundation stones of openness, honesty, and transparency.

This Government understands that it must build upon this foundation the brick and mortar necessary for economic rescue and social and moral renewal. The Manifesto of this new Government clearly sets out the broad scope of what must be done in response to the many problems that must be faced, the many programmes that must be instituted, the many legislative and constitutional changes that must occur if the demands of the people are to be addressed. Although all issues must be tackled, and all have claim to priority attention, the Government must identify those areas that will receive particular attention during the first session of its five year term of office.

A – GOOD GOVERNANCE

In this session of the National Assembly the Government shall restore and maintain good governance. To achieve this:

The Belizean people will be empowered with the right to recall elected representatives and impeach the Prime Minister.

The people will have easy access under a revised Freedom of Information Act to information on government contracts, operations and projects.

The people will have the right to call for a referendum on matters of great public importance.

The Senate will be empowered to initiate and conduct public enquiries into mismanagement or corruption by public officials.

The peoples' elected representatives from both sides of the House will be empowered by the fair allocation of funds to enable them to serve their constituencies.

The Social Partners will be empowered with greater control over statutory bodies such as the Social Security Board and the DFC.

Senate reform, legislation to outlaw secret contracts, to prevent conflicts of interest, nepotism and cronyism, and to punish unjust enrichment by elected or public officials are all to be addressed in this first session. The people demand justice and restitution where economic and political crimes have been committed.

B – CRIME

My Government recognizes that the drug trade, pervasive corruption, social injustice, and the breakdown of our social systems are the root causes of crime. The Government's plan therefore is to simultaneously address all these factors.

Government will transform the Police Department into a highly trained, adequately equipped, creative and professional security team. A democratic policing style with respect for the rule of law and respect for the constitutional rights of citizens will in turn enhance citizens' respect for the police. This will be coupled with improvements in the terms and conditions of service for our police men and women to attract and retain competent officers. Government will institute a fair and competitive merit-based promotion system based on performance, education and experience.

A special "Gun Court" will be created to deal fairly but swiftly with crimes involving the possession or use of guns and ammunition. The anti-drug unit will be strengthened with improved mobility, training and intelligence gathering to deal not only with drug dealers, but also with the illegal gun trade.

Government will invest the necessary human and capital resources to confront the problem of gang violence. To this end a Gang Violence Prevention Unit within the police department will be established comprised of specially trained police and public officers. On the positive side, a secretariat dedicated to youth development will be established to offer young Belizeans a positive alternative to violent behaviour and gang life. A National Employment Agency and Small Business Development Programme, coupled with adult education programmes to assist school dropouts wishing to improve their lives will assist job seekers and employers alike.

The corruption that has invaded all levels of government and society has eroded citizens' confidence in our systems of justice and governance. We cannot expect a standard of behaviour of our youth which is not met by their elders. To restore faith in our institutions my Government is determined to recruit competent and trained professionals who will serve with the highest level of integrity and ethical conduct. The Office of the Ombudsman and Contractor – General will be further empowered to investigate wrongdoing and negligence on the part of the Department of Public Prosecution and the Magistracy in order to ensure equal justice for all. The Internal Affairs Department of the police will be improved to strengthen its investigative abilities and to make it accountable to an oversight Police/Civilian Board.

C – EDUCATION

My Government's plan for education is grounded on these three integrated principles: education for self, education for strength, and education for life. To give life to these principles the process of education must:

START STRONG: Government will provide access to high-quality preschool programmes, beginning by attaching preschools to primary schools, especially in disadvantaged areas. The preventive health care needs of every child will be addressed, and a national school feeding programme will be introduced at the primary level in partnership with the private and social sectors.

BUILD STAMINA: Government will begin the process of expanding compulsory education from eight years to ten years by including secondary level courses in pilot primary schools, particularly in rural areas that are denied easy access to secondary schools. The free secondary school tuition policy established by the 1993 UDP Government will be improved with a direct annual grant of \$300 to deserving first and second form students to assist parents with the additional fees now being charged by secondary institutions. Government will review the school book programme instituted in 2007 with a view to eliminating the numerous administrative and educational problems which arose due to its hasty implementation. This review will not result in a disruption of the programme in the coming new school year.

RAISE THE BAR: Government will subsidize the cost of external secondary school examinations so that no student will be deprived of the opportunity to take these exams due to an inability to pay the fees. A national education standard will be introduced to identify under-performing schools in need of help and position remedial teachers to assist students who are falling behind. Government will encourage private sector involvement in on-the-job training programmes, partnering in vocational and technical institutions, and providing scholarships and grants at the tertiary level.

TEACH THE TEACHER: My Government will provide financial incentives for teachers to upgrade their professional qualifications by establishing a Continued Professional Development Fund for teachers to access loans and small grants for continuing their professional training.

D – HEALTH

The roll out of the National Health Insurance has commenced with an eventual annual cost of some thirty-eight million dollars with no budget and no sustainable source of funding. Nevertheless, this new Government is determined to maintain the programme, though suspending a further rollout while a

plan for sustainable funding is being developed. The Government will focus on preventive health services, early childhood nutrition and immunization, more and better equipped rural clinics, public health education, the removal of GST from medical service and medications that are currently subject to tax. Government will expand support for the Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital as the peoples' hospital and upgrade facilities at all regional hospitals. The District hospitals in Corozal, San Ignacio, and Toledo will be properly funded to provide all basic testing and primary care services.

Secondary and tertiary medical care at the KMH will be expanded with the introduction of oncology and dialysis treatment facilities. At the same time, Government will establish formal partnerships between the Ministry of Health and KMH and hospitals in the United States of America, Mexico, and Guatemala to enable Belizeans to more easily access medical care not yet available in Belize. Since the cost of medical care abroad is prohibitive for most Belizeans, my Government will create a special government/private sector mechanism for administering financial assistance for those needing to travel abroad for medical care.

HIV/AIDS continues to be a major social and health problem in Belize. Government commits itself to fund the National AIDS Policy recommendations, and will continue to work closely with community organizations serving infected or affected persons through the National Aids Commission.

Government will work closely with mental health professionals to ensure that sound and proven approaches to the treatment and care of patients with mental disorders are established and supported by establishing a Department of Mental Health Care within the Ministry of Health. Acute mental health centres and support systems for families of affected persons will be established at all regional hospitals.

Belize's health care professionals have long taken a back seat to the political bureaucracy. This Government believe that our medical professionals, public and private, must be integrated into the policy development process. Government will implement a system of performance based promotion while offering competitive benefits to attract and retain motivated and qualified individuals. Government will seek to identify areas of specialist training the country lacks for the purpose of determining the allocation of scholarships and other training incentives. Special attention will be given to nursing education and attracting and keeping well trained and qualified nurses.

Government will grant greater autonomy to our regional health authorities as well as private sector health providers to improve efficiency and quality of services provided. The regulatory role of the Ministry of Health in monitoring and evaluating the performance of the health system will at the same time be strengthened.

(E) STRENGTHENING A DAMAGED ECONOMY

Now, more than ever, Belize needs fiscal responsibility, integrity, and steady economic growth. This Government is determined to rescue our country from its current economic crisis while responsibly managing our runaway national debt. Government will implement major infrastructure projects to rebuild our streets and roads, bridges, and drainage systems, creating jobs in the process. Wasteful spending and bloated contracts will no longer be tolerated. The autonomy of the Central Bank and other regulatory bodies is being restored, and a new development financial institution will rise from the wreckage of the once proud DFC.

The woeful 2% estimated growth in the past year will be transformed to a targeted 6% annual growth through responsible management and growth oriented policies. Government is mindful of the commitments made by the last administration to the international financial community. At the same time, tax policies that impede growth and impoverish those who are already poor will be replaced by the judicious reduction of those taxes that discourage job-creating investments or that fall heaviest on the poor.

F. OIL AND ENERGY

My Government believe that legally and morally the oil resources of Belize belong to and must benefit the people of Belize. Proper management of this industry will increase our standard of living, fund our children's education, create jobs, and help to realize the Belizean dream of a prosperous future. The Government is committed to the notion that all Belizeans have a right to a personal stake in this industry, consequently Government will create a mechanism whereby the masses of Belizeans can collect personal dividends from the national petroleum wealth.

G. UTILITIES

My Government recognizes that the high cost of electricity, water, and telephone services is a major obstacle to economic development. The Public Utilities Commission will be empowered to better carry out its obligation to regulate the utilities in support of the consumer and our national interests. Utility providers must not stand in the way of competitors willing and able to provide lower cost service by means of the new technology that is readily available throughout the world.

H. THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Government will appoint an assertive and independent Public Services Commission in consultation with the Public Service Union. A National Quality Assurance Coordinator will be appointed with the main goal of implementing a quality process aimed at streamlining all government procedures and reporting. Our public officers represent the backbone of good governance. Their contribution must be recognized, their authority renewed, and their advice heard. My Government will require accountability of Ministers, political appointees, and public officers and lessen the influence of partisan politics in the work of government.