

TO TINKER OR TO TRANSFORM:
STATE POLICIES IN THE INDEPENDENT BELIZE
-Assad Shoman, BELPRI launch, UB Belmopan, 24 March 2025

15,890 days ago Belize became an independent nation state.

The day before that we were a colony of the United Kingdom and had been administered by the British Empire for 180 years.

Every one of those 15,890 days begs the question: what have we done to *undo* being a colony and to grow as an independent nation?

What have we done to decolonize?

Colonialism equals subjugation.

Decolonization means liberation.

Both are processes that take a long time. That is why one independence slogan screamed HOY INDEPENDENCIA MAÑANA LIBERACIÓN.

That tomorrow has not yet come. Will it ever?

That's up to the new generations.

BELPRI can play a fundamental role in helping to crush the serpent of colonialism and colonial thinking and nurture the bird of liberation.

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The demand for Belizean independence came in 1950, when Leigh Richardson, Philip Goldson, George Price and others formed the People's United Party (PUP) and denounced colonialism.

You must know the context prior to that event to understand how revolutionary that denunciation was.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the colony of British Honduras was run by a white man sent from England to rule over the natives. He was, appropriately, called a Governor.

The people had been taught in schools and elsewhere that the British brought them civilization and that this made them superior to those in neighbouring countries. Every year there was a ceremony marking an anniversary of a battle that cemented British rule **and** slavery, and every year distinguished black and brown citizens delivered a message of loyalty to the white Governor for transmission to the white Queen 5, 203 miles away.

In that context, in 1952, instead of a message of loyalty, the PUP sent a telegram to the Queen which declared its "opposition to the colonial servitude which oppresses and exploits us," and denounced colonialism as "the most despicable form of government ever inflicted on a helpless people".

I repeat: "the most despicable form of government ever inflicted on a helpless people".

Leigh, Philip, George, they said that.

If that judgement was true, and the experience of millions of colonized peoples the world over suggests that it was, why is it that many here cringe when British colonialism is attacked, as some of you just did, and why do so many embrace with pride the paltry “honours” sprinkled on them by the British monarch making them a member (MBE) or officer (OBE) of the **British Empire**, the same British Empire that murdered, tortured, imprisoned and starved millions of people in Africa, Asia and the Americas and carried out several genocides, including the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas?

The answer is simple: because the colonizers established systems of oppression and mental control through religion, schools, systems of government, language—note that I am using the oppressor’s language to talk to you— and when necessary, force. They made their subjects believe that the colonizers brought civilization to savage people, light to dark peoples, and that the only path to salvation and progress was through the ways of the colonizer.

Belize, therefore, was *created* by colonialism, chattel slavery, and wage slavery, or capitalism. And colonialism is inherently racist. You don’t cross the world to colonize a people and subject them to your rule, unless you think you are better than them.

In 1981, when Belize attained a late independence because of British duplicity, most Belizeans had forgotten how wicked colonialism was and had embraced the colonizer and felt grateful to the empire.

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How had this happened? One reason is that by then the country was completely divided, with almost half led by a party that sent its leader to the United Nations in October 1980 to plead with its members **not** to support the Belize resolution for independence within a year.

This had occurred because the British had skilfully manipulated local politics to divide the people. First they tried to use the issue commonly used throughout its colonies—communism—to discredit the nationalist movement, but when that failed they resorted to the use of the Guatemalan claim to the territory.

Most Belizeans have never understood that our independence was **not** delayed by Guatemala, but by the United Kingdom, which faced the **same** choice in 1950 as it did in 1980: settle its own dispute with Guatemala OR agree to guarantee the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Belize after independence. Instead, the British chose, perversely, to pressure Belize to cede some of its land to Guatemala to pay for Britain's broken promises.

It was only because Belize fought a decade-long international diplomatic struggle and got almost universal support for its demand for its secure independence on all its territory that the UK grudgingly agreed to defend Belize, and it only stayed for 13 years because the USA, afraid that Cuba would otherwise come to Belize's aid, pressured it to do so.

Why did the Belizean leaders choose to maintain the same systems and tools that *the most despicable form of government* used to govern and control the colony? Perhaps they had no choice. Consider the following:

- The crucial independence conference in London, where the Belize Constitution was agreed, could not be attended by Premier Price nor some of his closest advisers because of continuing unrest in the country. The Opposition UDP also boycotted the conference.
- In 1981 we were still afraid that the Guatemalan military, armed and trained by the Israelis, was poised to invade us, and so we asked the British to leave their troops here. This limited our freedom of action.
- We depended on the US government to keep the Guatemalan military in check—a further limitation on our freedom to act.
- From July 1981 until November 1982 one of the most severe economic downturns in the post-World War II era occurred, forcing the new nation to abide by the dictates of USAID and the world financial institutions controlled by the US, and thus to cut support for small farmers, reduce social spending, privatize state property, and take other measures that led to greater inequality.

The task of decolonization was therefore made almost impossible at the time, and if there was ever to be a chance to decolonize, the people would have to learn the truth about the nation's past.

By 1983 the Ministry of Education had commissioned a book for elementary and secondary schools, *A History of Belize, Nation in the Making*, which for the first time told some truths about chattel slavery in Belize and the exploitation of workers after emancipation. The editor of the Belize Times, organ of the PUP, wrote to PUP Minister of Education Said Musa as follows (excerpts):

“I have just read “A History of Belize”.

It is a disgrace!

The sum total of the book is to teach the school children to despise the white people, the rich people, the English and the U.S. Governments, Capitalism, and anyone who admires or even agrees with them.

Slavery was bad, yes, but not bad as all that. It can be painted up to look better. (Where would all the Creoles and Garifuna be if it wasn't for slavery? Not here, certainly. Not even alive.)”.

We should be grateful for slavery, then, for without it we would not exist.

That letter should be an object of scrutiny and deconstruction in every Belizean school, for it says much about why we are still so far from decolonizing Belize.

And why we need a body like BELPRI to help us break down the structures of colonialism and build our own.

But how to do that, with what tools?

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The Master's Tools

Audre Lorde, self-described Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, warrior poet:

“For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”

That is why the Father of the Nation did not call for reform but for Revolution, a peaceful and constructive REVOLUTION. I know that he appreciated Fidel Castro’s concept of revolution:

Revolution means to have a sense of history;

it is changing everything that must be changed; . . .

it is being treated and treating others like human beings;

it is achieving emancipation by ourselves and through our own efforts; . . .

it is defending the values in which we believe at the cost of any sacrifice;

it is never lying or violating ethical principles . . .

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One of the tools used by the colonizer to govern us was the Constitution. In Belize, the first modern constitution was in 1853, the last colonial one in 1963, and the independence constitution is hardly distinguishable from the 1963 one.

The only major changes were the inclusion of a section on Protection of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms and a Preamble that proclaimed some revolutionary policies, calling for social justice, a fair distribution of wealth, education and health on the basis of equality; and policies of state that eliminate economic and social privilege and disparity, ensure gender equality and prohibit the exploitation of man by man.

How different Belize would be if those principles and policies were implemented! But the Constitution itself in its operative clauses does nothing to further these ideals. It is **not** a constitution **by** the people, and it is certainly not one **for** the people. We are called to change it.

To change from a monarchical to a republican system, or from a first-past-the-post to a proportional representation system, to institute campaign finance reforms—that is to tinker with the system.

To create a system where poverty is abolished, inequality reduced, and land and other resources distributed equitably—that calls for a revolution.

In 1975, a study on the history of land tenure in Belize showed that “in Belize today only three per cent of the landowners own 95 per cent of all the freehold land, and over 90 per cent of all the freehold land is owned by foreigners”.

I have been unable to ascertain the distribution of land in Belize today, not even what percentage is owned by foreigners and big landowners. What I know is that it is painful to visit the village of Hopkins now and see that much of the land that used to belong to the villagers is now owned by white foreigners.

That 1975 study ended with this warning: “Now that Belize is poised to take its political freedom, the people of that emerging nation must concern themselves with *repossessing* the land that has been relinquished to absentee landlords, in order to avoid the consequent "economic servitude and social and political decay".

We have not done that.

The importance of doing that is illustrated today by what is happening to South Africa, whose Black people suffered long and horrendous years under white racist domination, and whose freedom was won after years of armed struggle and international solidarity. But they were forced to make a fatal compromise: they did not repossess the land that was robbed from them by the European invaders.

When Nelson Mandela became President, 87% of the land was owned by whites, who were less than 13% of the population, and the situation has not changed much since. Today, when the government is attempting to implement some land reform, the US government is punishing South Africa, claiming it is practising apartheid against whites!

It is hard to overstate how vital land is for making a reality of our independence, for ensuring all the people benefit from it. The right of Belizeans to land, to a fair distribution of wealth and other resources must be enshrined by *practical* provisions in the Constitution. We continue to apply the concepts of property that the most despicable form of government used to appropriate our land for a few. Does that even make sense?

Now that BELPRI exists, the government should, if it is serious about creating a People's Constitution, task it with the job of doing the research and advocacy necessary to achieve this.

“Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality...”. Malcolm X said that.

“The most coveted area of conquest is always the mind; empires can lose land, but if they control people's minds their domination is assured”. I said that.

Mind Control

We have seen how jealously education about our history was guarded by the colonizers, so that not even after independence were we supposed to “tell the children the truth”. But while there has been tinkering with the system, and many reforms attempted with differing success, we have never had or even attempted the revolution in education required to liberate it. This is partly because those in charge don't want to change it and partly because those who *do* are afraid to fight for change.

Me, I have been on both sides of the battlefield. In 1963 I wrote an essay praising the Church-State system of education. I corrected myself in November 1990 at SPEAR's National Education Symposium, where I showed that the system where government financed schools but churches controlled them was both inefficient and *undemocratic*, and profoundly counter to the basic tenet of education, that children should be free to explore the truth and that **no** ideology is sacred and beyond question.¹ Children should be taught *how* to think, not *what* to think.

I *don't* blame the Christians for the Church/State system's durability. They believe that they have the key to the truths of the universe, that those who believe will be saved and go to heaven, and those who don't will perish in hell, forever. They feel a duty to save the children from that horrendous fate.

No, I blame the state, which is abdicating its responsibility to provide education equally for all without regard to creed or class, an education that enables the students to think for themselves, to analyse issues critically based on evidence; to understand the world they live in and be empowered to change it for the better. Students must therefore not be forced to conform but rather encouraged to question and to transgress.²

There are many other things wrong in our education system, but if we don't address this one, the others will be more difficult to tackle. Religions have more freedom in Belize than anywhere else on earth, so, please, do your saving in your churches and leave the schools alone.

¹ Assad Shoman, Why a National Education Symposium?, in Assad Shoman, *Backtalking Belize*, Angelus Press, 1995.

² See *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks, Routledge, 1994.

Let us turn now to the teaching of Belizean history.

During our entire colonial period we were taught that the Empire was a bearer of civilization, that the white man's values and dogmas were the ideal for all to follow. What have we done to counter this narrative?

We pay lip service to the Bob Marley saying "If you know your history, then you would know where you coming from,"³ but do little to promote Belizean history in schools. There have been exceptions. The push for the teaching of African and Maya history, first spearheaded by Evan X Hyde, witnessed a brief flowering at the turn of the century but was then abandoned. It is still in the curriculum, but it is almost a dead letter.

A major problem is that Belizean history is not a separate subject in the curriculum, but rather one of many of a motley crew of topics under the rubric of "Belizean Studies" that each school decides which to teach and how. This, even though in 2018 the Caribbean Examinations Council resolved that "Caribbean countries should make the teaching of History a compulsory core subject for all students at primary school and at secondary school to the fifth form". We don't.

Another obstacle is the lack of training for history teachers. We wouldn't dream of having a person teach chemistry if they didn't study that discipline, but managers feel that any teacher can teach history. And students feel the impact of this, and the received wisdom is that history is a boring account of the past, where they must memorise dates and the names of Henry VIII's wives.

³ Buffalo Soldier, Robert Nesta Marley, 1983

But teaching history is not *about* the past. It is about *how* what happened before now is interpreted *now* and *why*, and how we can use that to understand our reality and change it.

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To conclude, a word about international relations. Only a fool thinks that because the Guatemalan claim to our land is an existential issue it is the only issue that must concern our foreign policy.

We must recall that we became an independent nation with all our territory not because of the UK and the USA but *despite* them.

The US government's preferred solution to the Belize question was to make Belize a satellite of Guatemala, as they proposed in 1968. And everybody knows about the immense pressures exerted on Belize by the UK and USA, right up to July 1981, to cede land to Guatemala.

If they didn't help us get independence from the Hondo to the Sarstoon, who and what did?

The who is the four CARICOM countries, Cuba, Omar Torrijos of Panama, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Commonwealth led by Shridath "Sonny" Ramphal, the socialist countries.

The what is the United Nations, the system of the international rule of law, the right of colonized peoples to self-determination, the principles of not acquiring territory by force, of not displacing peoples from their land, of not having to live under a system of apartheid.

Before and after our independence, it was taken for granted that those systems and those rights were inviolable, but they have recently been crumbling before our eyes. Israel has violated all the relevant international laws, shredded the UN Charter along with all applicable international conventions, practised ethnic cleansing and apartheid and treated the world to its first livestreamed genocide, all with the full support of the governments of the USA, the UK and other western powers.

What is Belize to do to safeguard its interests in those circumstances? Will it help us to behave like those colonized people described by Aimé Césaire as men “in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkeys”⁴

Will our leaders worry about the measures the neighbourhood bully *might* mete out to them and strive to avoid his anger by *not* doing all in their power to stop the genocide, which is what the treaty Belize ratified *obliges* us to do? And does anyone think that *not* standing for principles we rely on for our existence will make us somehow safer?

⁴ Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism (p. 43). Monthly Review Press.

And purely as human beings, how can one not react to what the Israeli state is doing to the people of Palestine? The UN Secretary General said “The nightmare in Gaza is more than a humanitarian crisis. It is a crisis of humanity”.⁵ That was on 6 November 2023. You all know how much more destruction and deliberate killing and starvation has occurred since and is occurring today—and I mean *today*, 24 March 2025, and tomorrow.

There is absolutely no moral distinction between what the German state did to the Jews and others in the 1930s and 1940s and what the settler colonial Zionist state is doing to Palestinians—except that the culpability is graver, since the perpetrators openly boast of their barbarity and announce its continuation until all Palestinians in Gaza—and increasingly now in the West Bank—are expelled or killed.

Meanwhile the Western countries, who we were taught were models of democracy and humanity—and some of you still believe that—are complicit in the genocide or actively perpetrating it with the supply of weapons, intelligence and the guarantee of impunity.

How does one react to such inhumanity? Do we ignore it? Do we say we have done enough or done more than our neighbours and turn our backs on the victims and cuddle up to the perpetrators?

⁵ António Guterres, UN Secretary General, 6 November 2023, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2023-11-06/secretary-generals-press-conference-the-middle-east>

And now we are directly challenged by the same perpetrator of genocide and ethnic cleansing: send home the Cuban doctors and nurses or your ministers and officials will lose their US visas. Some leaders of Caribbean countries have made public pronouncements, like Prime Minister Mia Motley of Barbados: “If we cannot reach a sensible agreement on this matter, then if the cost of it is the loss of my visa to the U.S., then so be it . . . Principles only mean something when it is inconvenient to stand by them”.

Will our leaders take the same stand?

Should they?

These are crucial issues, and there will be many others that our policy makers will have to take decisions on. In doing so, they would serve us better if they based their decisions not on emotions but on evidence-based analysis which an institute like BELPRI can supply.

Too often important decisions that affect the lives of many are taken without proper or any serious study. There is an ad hoc committee for this and an ad hoc committee for that, and we end up ad hoc-ing our way in circles instead of moving deliberately and devising and implementing policies “in synergy with long-term development planning”. BELPRI promises: rigorous research, sound analysis, meaningful consultations, through people-centred approaches that improve policy making and its impact on Belize’s sustainable development.

Not a minute too soon is it being created.

And I truly hope that it will be given the independence it needs to do its work. I recall that when I recommended the creation of NICH, the National Institute of Culture and History, I strongly advised that it be made totally independent from ministers and CEOs. It was not, and it has suffered accordingly.

BELPRI will not succeed if it is not independent.

Please, ministers, leave BELPRI alone. But make sure it has money to thrive, please.

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