1950 - 1972

Belize “Inherits” the Claim

The Nationalist Movement

POLITICAL BACKGROUND – British Honduras

In 1862 Belize was declared a colony of Britain, and in 1871 it became a Crown Colony, ruled by a Governor and with a Legislative Council made up of officials and nominated members. In 1936 an elective element in the Council was allowed; in 1945 the Council consisted of four official members (British), four nominated members and six members elected on a very narrow franchise (in a population of close to 60,000, the electorate numbered 822).
the British-owned Belize Estate and Produce Company, which held a fifth of the colony’s land—over a million acres.

British Honduras 1945 (after World War 2) – POWER and OWNERSHIP (the local Oligarchy)

The population of Belize then was about 60,000, of which 60% were of mainly African and Afro-European descent (hereinafter referred to by the local term “Creole”), about 27% were Mestizo and Maya, 7% “Black Carib” (now known as Garifuna), 4% European and 2% of Indian descent.

The abolition of slavery had not meant the end of racism and exploitation.

Many acts of rebellion and resistance occurred, the most important being the workers riots of 1894 and 1919 and the uprisings led by workers and unemployed between 1934 and 1939.

Power and wealth, and especially land ownership, were highly centralised and unequal. Real power lay with the Governor, who supported the local oligarchy, in particular the British-owned Belize Estate and Produce Company, which held a fifth of the colony’s land—over a million acres.
The economy still depended heavily on the exploitation of the forests, and conditions for the workers were little better than during slavery.

Economic conditions had become worse after World War II, a British reporter concluding that

“Belize [City] with its 22,000 people is about the most shockingly depressed spot in the whole British West Indies—perhaps in the Commonwealth. Hunger, poverty, the filthy conditions under which the people exist are incredible”.
The devaluation of the Belize dollar on 31 December 1949, imposed unilaterally by the Governor, was the spark that gave birth to the organized nationalist movement. A People's Committee formed to protest against devaluation quickly became a movement for self-government.

In September 1950 the People's Committee transformed itself into the People's United Party, “to achieve and preserve for the people of this country national unity and political and economic independence”.

Thus, in July 1952, PUP leader Leigh Richardson insisted that “political independence is the first essential step forward, in order that a government may be established representative of the people and not subservient to the exploiting monopolist interests”.

The PUP had in fact repeatedly refuted the pro-Guatemala charge: “We want the end of British colonialism in our country. We do not want the beginning of Guatemalan colonialism. The present evil is British colonialism. That evil the people must fight until it is dissolved”. 
What the United States of America (USA) thought of Belize? (1960s)

Britain’s last remaining defence commitment on the mainland of the hemisphere is Belize, and this is strictly marginal in Washington’s scheme of things. America’s concern is for the nurturing of the tender shoots of democracy in Guatemala, the restraint of its military, and the enhancement of development in that last firebreak between a Central American conflagration and Mexico. So the festering problem of Belize has been an irritant and a side-show as far as American strategy in Central America is concerned for years.
What the UK Govt. thought of Belize:

British Honduras is an embarrassment to Her Majesty’s Government, both politically, militarily and financially . . . Politically, it is anachronistic to maintain a colony on the American continent in the 1960s: its existence complicates Her Majesty’s Government’s relations with all the Latin American States (who are passionately anti-colonial) . . . Indirectly, this also has repercussions on our relations with the United States. Militarily, the maintenance of a garrison in British Honduras is a commitment which we ought to shed as soon as possible. Financially, British Honduras costs Her Majesty’s Government half a million pounds per annum simply to balance the budget. Added to these general disadvantages is our long-standing dispute with Guatemala, which is costing us about £1 million per annum in lost trade already, and if the Guatemalan Government decides to break relations with us, could lead to the loss of substantial British assets as well.
What is the Webster Proposals?

It should really be called the US Government Proposals. In 1965, against the wishes of Belizean leaders, both PUP and NIP, the British bowed to Guatemalan pressure and asked the US Government to mediate the dispute and propose a solution. The US government appointed a US lawyer, Bethuel Webster, to conduct the mediation. During the mediation the British Foreign Secretary shamelessly agreed to give Guatemala such wide financial, political, development and security control over Belize that even the US mediator found it repulsive. Still, in 1968 Webster published the proposals of the US government which gave Guatemala such control over Belize that US Secretary of State Dean Rusk said “Even though the Treaty will result in an independent Belize, Guatemala will receive numerous tangible benefits and the opportunity to exert significant influence over Belize now, and greater influence as time passes by”.

How did the Belize government escape from this trap?