

EVOLUTION OF GOVERNANCE IN BELIZE

Public Meeting 1765—Legislative Assembly 1853—Legislative Council 1871— Legislative Assembly 1959—National Assembly 1963—National Assembly 1981

*I Myrtle Palacio
January 2021*

THE PUBLIC MEETING 1765

In the beginning there were the buccaneers who came, remained, owned land, and carved out a way to regulate and govern themselves from among themselves. As the settler population increased, a formal body was introduced in 1765 called the Public Meeting, to govern the affairs of the Settlement of Belize. These settlers were the principal owners of large tracts of land, and were recognized as the privileged. The Public Meeting through its members was responsible for electing Magistrates, and exercised not only judicial, but also administrative functions over the Settlement. By 1787, a Superintendent was introduced to carry out all administrative functions; but by 1832 those powers had extended to the appointment of Magistrates as well.

The political and economic atmosphere changed thereafter due to a downturn of the mahogany trade which was the major mainstay of the economy, and the abolition of slavery in 1838. Freed coloured people and non-whites became active in political affairs and eventually dominated the Public Meeting. By around 1847 the ethnic landscape changed when the population doubled. This was the result of the Guerra De Las Casas in neighbouring Yucatan, when thousands of Maya and Mestizo became refugees in the North and West of Belize.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY 1853—First Formal Constitution

The first formal Constitution was introduced in 1853 and the Public Meeting was abolished and replaced with the Legislative Assembly. The life of the Legislative Assembly was for four years, but the Superintendent had the authority to dissolve the Assembly at any time. The Legislative Assembly consisted of 21 members, and criteria for membership were limited to those persons with means; such as appropriate salary and ownership of real property. The qualifications to vote were similarly as stringent. The Settlement continued to be governed by a Superintendent and the Legislative Assembly until 1871.

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL 1871

In 1871 Belize became a Crown Colony and the Legislative Council replaced the Legislative Assembly. The Superintendent became the first Lieutenant Governor, and formally represented the British Government. The Governor exercised both executive and legislative powers, and presided over the Council's meetings. All members of the Legislative Council were nominated--four official members who were employees of the Crown and four unofficial members representing business interests. Along with other constitutional amendments, several factors changed the structure of the Legislative Council during the period 1890 to 1931. Firstly, the local elites clamoured for a return to elections, and the labouring classes openly showed their dissatisfaction to the status quo. Several political concerns surfaced, including:

- The new municipality called the Town of Belize was established in 1911 as per Ordinance No. 18 of 1911, situated 2 miles from the Court House.
- Race riots in the Town of Belize in July of 1919, sparked off by disbanded soldiers who were subjected to racist treatment as members of the British West Indian Regiment in World War I
- In February 1934 the Unemployment Brigade marched in protest through the streets of the Town of Belize
- In March 1934 the Labour and Unemployment Association led by Antonio Soberanis was formed to protest the conditions of the working class countryside

By 1931 membership in the newly amended Legislative Council had increased from eight to thirteen and included five elected members. This number was increased to six elected members in 1938. By 1945 the composition of the Council had changed to: three official members who were employees of the Crown, four nominated members, six elected members. As a result, there were now 13 members, six elected and 7 nominated.

Five elections held between 1936 and 1948 demonstrated that only a small percentage registered to vote, due to the rigid eligibility criteria to register as an elector. This was a reflection that the qualifications and disqualifications for registering electors was very stringent, particularly the literacy and financial requirements. As a result, the working class people did not have a voice through the vote in these elections.

ELECTIONS UNDER ADULT SUFFRAGE 1951—First Election 1954 & Quasi Ministerial System 1955

Through the agitation of the PUP and members of the General Workers Union (GWU), the Constitution was amended to allow for Universal Adult Suffrage in 1951. Universal Adult Suffrage meant that working class persons, all adults (male and female) 21 years and over will have the right to vote for the very first time—gone were the qualifying factors based on land ownership and financial earnings. The political party system was implemented to advance leaders to be voted for. The People’s United Party (PUP) emerged in 1950, and the National Party (NP) in 1952. The first national election took place on Wednesday, April 28, 1954 to elect nine members to the Legislative Council. The PUP/GWU coalition won eight seats and one seat was garnered by the National Party.

For the first time elected members formed the majority in the Legislative Council. These elected leaders are as follows:

<u>ELECTED LEADER</u>	<u>ELECTORAL DIVISION</u>	<u>POLITICAL PARTY</u>
George C. Price	Belize North	PUP/GWU
Phillip S.W. Goldson	Belize South	PUP/GWU
Herman Jex	Belize Rural	PUP/GWU
Leigh I. A. Richardson	Belize West	PUP/GWU
Enrique De Paz	Cayo	PUP/GWU
Nathaniel Cacho	Stann Creek	PUP/GWU
Charles Westby	Toledo	NP
George Flowers	Orange Walk	PUP/GWU

Besides the nine elected members of the Legislative Council, there were six others--three nominated and three official members who were employees of the Crown, making a total of 15 members. The Legislative Council was presided over by a Speaker nominated by the Governor. Provisions were also made for an Executive Council, chaired by the Governor, and whose membership consisted of ten persons--four elected members, four official members who were employees of the Crown, two nominated members.

Some 20,801 electors voted in the 1954 elections representing 70.5% of the total electorate. The number of electors, as well as voter turnout, painted the mood of the times relative to 1948. For the first time elected leaders formed the majority in the Legislature, but still the minority in the Executive Council.

One year later in 1955, the Quasi Ministerial System was introduced. George Cadle Price became Associate Member for Natural Resources, Leigh I. A. Richardson Member for Natural Resources, Phillip S.W. Goldson Member for Social Service, and Herman Jex Member for Public Utilities.

ELECTIONS AFTER ADULT SUFFRAGE—Legislative Assembly of 1959

In 1959, Sir Hilary Blood was appointed by the British Government to assess the existing Constitution and to make recommendations based on his findings. With the influence of the political and social climate, and augmented by Blood's report, the constitution was amended and local autonomy increased as follows:

- The Full Ministerial system was introduced.
- The Office of First Minister was created
- A Cabinet of Ministers was created
- The role of political parties was given constitutional validity

A Legislative Assembly replaced the Legislative Council with 25 members, 18 of whom were elected, five nominated and two ex-officio members. The composition of the Executive Council also changed, to include: five elected members, one nominated member and two ex-officio members. The Legislative Assembly was presided over by a Speaker, nominated by the Governor. The Executive Council was still chaired by the Governor, but was a non-voting position. For the first time the people's representatives were the majority on the Executive Council. The new Constitution came into effect after the 1961 national elections on Wednesday, March 26. Three political parties contested this election to fill the 18 seats, namely PUP, National Independence Party (NIP) and Christian Democratic Party (CDP). There were also two independent candidates. The PUP won all eighteen seats and George Cadle Price became the First Minister.

SELF GOVERNMENT 1963—The National Assembly of 1963

In 1963 Belize gained full internal self-government, the final formal step before independence. One significance of self-government was that responsibility for certain affairs of the country was in the control of the elected leaders. However, the Governor was still in charge of Foreign Affairs, Defence, Internal Security and Civil Service. The 1963 amended Constitution formed the National Assembly, and introduced the bicameral legislature or bicameralism. The bicameral

system consists of two legislative (law making) houses or chambers; which are the House of Representatives and the Senate. The idea is that the bicameral system distributes power within the two houses that should check and balance each other, rather than concentrating power in a single or unicameral body. The National Assembly was such a body whereby the House of Representatives consisting of all elected leaders oftentimes introduced bills (laws), and sent to the Senate for confirmation.

The House of Representatives was presided over by a Speaker, and the Senate by a President who was appointed from among or outside the membership of the House. Presently the Senate is composed of 13 members—six appointed on the advice of the Prime minister, three appointed on the advice of the Leader of the Opposition; one each on the advice of Chamber of Commerce and the Belize Business Bureau, the Council of Churches, the National Trade Union Congress, the NGOs.

The Cabinet became the policy-making arm of the government headed by the Premier, the Hon George Cadle Price. All members of Cabinet were drawn from the National Assembly.

Amendments made in 1978 were of great importance in our election history for two main reasons.

- A new registration system introduced the Voter Identification Card
- Eligibility to register as elector extended to 18 year olds
- The Election and Boundaries Commission became a reality.

The first general election under these new changes was held on November 21, 1979. Some 44,990 voters representing 89.9% of the total electorate turned out to vote. The United Democratic Party (UDP) gained 5 seats, while the PUP garnered 13 seats to form the government. Hon. George Cadle Price continued to lead the government as the Premier of British Honduras.

ELECTIONS IN POST-INDEPENDENT BELIZE to 2020

After nearly 200 years of British rule, September 21, 1981 heralded the independence of Belize. There was a new Constitution in the horizon, a Belize Constitution. Belize attained independence under the leadership of Premier Hon. George Cadle Price, who became Belize's first Prime Minister. A Belizean Government was now responsible for both the internal and external affairs of the country. Full independence also meant that a Governor General replace the Governor as representative of the Queen of England as Head of State in Belize. The Belize Constitution, which was passed on September 20, 1981, became the supreme law of Belize. It calls for a National Assembly consisting of two houses, the House of Representative and the Senate. Members of the House of Representatives are all elected members. The number of the members of the House of Representatives increased to 28 in 1984 by Act No. 16, later to 29 in 1993, and to 31 since 2005. The Prime Minister chairs the Cabinet which is the policy arm of the government. The size of Cabinet in members varies, and members are selected from elected members, and presently may also include members of the Senate.

The first election after the attainment of independence was held on December 14, 1984. Some 64,441 electors were registered and 49,311 electors representing 74.9% of total electors went to

the polls. The UDP won this first election after independence to form the government under Prime Minister Hon. Manuel Esquivel. The PUP lost for the very first time since the first national election under universal adult suffrage in 1954, a total of seven consecutive elections garnered, and some 30 years of involvement in governing.

Eight other general elections have been conducted since then, the last being November 11, 2020. The victorious party was the PUP, who have won four out of the nine parliamentary elections in post-independent Belize. To date, Belize has seen five Prime Ministers: Rt. Hon. George Cadle Price 1979 - 1984 and 1989 – 1993, Hon. Manuel Esquivel 1984 – 1989, Rt. Hon Said Musa 1993 - 2003 and 2003 - 2008, Rt. Hon Dean Barrow 2008 – 2012; 2012 – 2015 and 2015 – 2020, and presently as of November 2020 Hon John Briceno. Musa served for two consecutive, full-term governments in post-independent Belize. While Barrow presided over three consecutive governments, two of the three were not full-term. Rt. Hon. George Cadle Price was the Premier until the attainment of independence in September 1981 when he became the first Prime Minister.

Historically, since the first formal Constitution in 1853, amendments have been made which significantly altered governance in the Settlement of Belize to the Town of Belize to the Country of Belize. Since the attainment of independence Belize has experienced alterations in the Constitution. The first alteration of the Constitution by the UDP in 1988 included changes to Section 88, which represents a function of Elections and Boundaries Commission. This resulted in watering down the role and power of the Commission and established a second electoral management body called the Elections and Boundaries Department in 1989. The Department became responsible for electoral administration with staff under the direct jurisdiction of the Public Service.

Three-quarters (**75%**) of all members of the House of Representatives, a super majority win of **23 seats** can amend **specific** and **IMPORTANT** areas of the Belize Constitution—*fundamental rights and freedoms, democracy, governance, judiciary*. Any other section of the Constitution except those listed above can be amended by two-thirds (**21**) of all members of the House of Representatives (Ref. “Belize Constitution: Making Alterations). The PUP garnered a super majority with 83.9% of the seats in the November 2020 parliamentary elections. Although the governance framework and strategies to be employed have not been publicly established; a ministry charged with constitutional and political reform has been introduced. This is an original—a new business of government.

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