

Chapter 4 (1978-1981)

Ya Da Fu We Belize

In the years from 1978 to 1981 the Belize government went through some of the most difficult moments in its independence struggle. The UK and the US schemed to promote a settlement that would have truncated Belizean territory and compromised its sovereignty. At one point the UK handed a veto to Guatemala over Belize's independence, while a strong Opposition in Belize did the same and also declared a ten-year moratorium on independence. And while Belize continued to make unrelenting progress in winning global support, at home the situation almost got out of hand, seriously compromising the possibility of achieving independence. Even as a change of government in Britain in 1979 turned out to be propitious for Belize's cause, so too did the outcome of the US election in 1980 threaten it. The strategy of internationalisation clashed with strong countervailing forces, and the outcome was never assured.

US Pressures to Cede Territory Escalate

US-UK "Mediation" Plot

In November 1977 in Washington the UK and the US agreed that Guatemala would be granted territory up to the Moho as well as the island ranges of Sapodilla and Ranguana (the latter would bring the island territory at about the same parallel as Monkey River), along with territorial seas and

continental shelf. In addition, there would be treaty provisions tying Belize to Guatemala.¹ This would be accomplished by a pre-determined “mediation” with a US-appointed mediator. The FCO acknowledged the US government as the author of this package, and the US had persuaded the Guatemalan government to accept it.²

During the first three months of 1978 there was a flurry of intense diplomatic activity involving Belize, Guatemala, the UK, the USA, CARICOM countries and Mexico in several cities in the Americas and Europe, all designed to achieve the objective of having Price accept the US/UK pact. The British told Price that this was a US package and if he did not accept the US would feel insulted, and warned that if no agreement was reached soon they would simply call off independence indefinitely and maintain Belize as a colony, which would placate Guatemala and reduce the need for maintaining such a costly military presence.³

Price had to weigh these threats, for that is what they were, very carefully. He could not simply say “no” to a Great Power and to Britain, which was needed to agree to defend an independent Belize. And so Price had to play an elaborate game of listening, “considering,” keeping both the UK and the US engaged while still, at the end of the day, refusing to accept any land cession or diminished sovereignty. It wasn't easy.

On 11 January 1978 Rowlands reported to Vance that Price had shown a lot of flexibility, but did not agree with a pre-determined mediation. The Mexicans were being “awkward” and the Caribbeans tough in their opposition, but he would try to “neutralize” them. Rowlands stressed that an agreement had to be clinched in January because of upcoming elections in Guatemala, and said he could “guarantee” that

¹McEntee to FCO, 20 January 1978; Rowlands to FCO, 19 January 1978; McQuillan to FCO, 20 January, 1978; Jay to FCO, 20 January 1978; Cox to FCO, 21 January 1978; McEntee to FCO, 28 January 1978; all in DEFE 24/1649.

²Jay to FCO, 20 January 1978, DEFE 24/1649: “The Americans . . . were very pleased when Laugerud and Molina were able to agree to the Moho plus”.

³Jay to FCO, 21 January 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

Price would agree to a mediation formula in which the result is not pre-determined.⁴

That confident assertion was blown sky-high when he met Price in Jamaica on 18 January, where Price categorically rejected the US/British scheme. Rowlands asked Price to accept mediation without any prearranged solution, but admitted under questioning that the mediation proposal would certainly be territorial cession plus treaty arrangements tying Belize to Guatemala.⁵ Price refused and said “he would prefer to see his country continue as a colony rather than agree to such terms”. Rowlands wrote in desperation: “it looks as if we have come to the end of the road on the present negotiations”.⁶ Rowlands worried that “for the first time I may have mishandled him, [since] to date Price has never said ‘no’. In my view he appears to have done so now . . . The whole tenor of his remarks was along the line ‘not one inch’”.⁷ But there was nothing new about that, and years later Rowlands admitted that he had misread Price. He had thought that because Price “allowed me to go on negotiating” he would have accepted a settlement with minor territorial adjustments. “I didn’t get the impression until later on that he was so adamantly against it”.⁸

On the way home from Jamaica Price met Assistant Secretary of State Terence Todman in Miami on 19 January, and the different reports of that meeting have Price agreeing to consider a range of options. The British Ambassador in Washington reported that Price told Todman that after talking to Rowlands he had discussed the proposal with his Attorney General Assad Shoman and Ambassador Harry Courtenay and prayed about it all night and then told Rowlands he could not agree to mediation in those circumstances. He had asked to meet Todman to assure him that his refusal of the proposal was in no way intended as an insult to the US, and that he would accept a US legal opinion on what a settlement should be. Todman replied

⁴ Memorandum of Conversation Vance-Rowlands, Washington 11 January 1978, FRUS, 1977-1980, p. 51-54.

⁵ FRUS, 1977-1980, p. 56.

⁶ Drinkall to FCO, tel #29 of 19 January 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

⁷ Richard to FCO, 19 January 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

⁸ Interview with Rowlands in 2007.

that the situation was beyond legal issues and required a political solution, and Guatemala would not agree without some territorial element. He would be willing to sound out Guatemala to see if they would forego some of the treaty elements if Price could agree to some territorial cession. Price replied that if Guatemala would forego the treaty and there was an important development project for Belize he would consider a small territorial cession preferably below the Moho. That is one version.⁹

According to the British Ambassador in Mexico, Todman reported that Price “did not rule out acceptance of a territorial concession up to a line below the Moho River (presumably the Temash) if it were accompanied by aid and if the treaty concessions were put aside”. Price also told him he could accept a “negotiator” instead of a mediator, if he had a right of veto over his proposals.¹⁰

According to the State Department, “Price has greatly hardened his position and prospects for early settlement have receded. Opposition criticism in Belize apparently led Price to harden his position after the British thought they had his acquiescence to the modified plan of mediation. Todman met with Price in Miami yesterday; conversation confirmed negative British report. Price did say at end conversation that something might be worked out if either cession or difficult provisions of treaty dropped”. The US Embassy in Jamaica had reported that Rowlands was “bitterly disappointed” by Price’s announcement that “under no circumstances could Belize agree to mediation involving territorial cession”.¹¹

According to Governor McEntee, Price said he told Todman that both land cession and the treaty provisions were difficult, that he was not trying to undo all the good work the US had done, and assured him of his good relations towards them. Todman said he believed the Guatemalans would insist on land but the US would not be offended if Belize did not accept land cession. Price then told the Governor that the vital issue for Belize was security, and he would wish the

⁹ Jay to FCO, 21 January 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

¹⁰ Cox to FCO, 21 January 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

¹¹ FRUS 1977-1980, pp. 56-57.

British to remain long enough for Belize to establish its identity, become a member of the UN and the OAS and achieve regional treaties. He told McEntee he might accept a treaty with nothing offensive to the dignity of Belize “which might include a minimal area of land”. He later called the Governor and asked him to omit that last part, “as it would only lead us all into a quagmire over the word ‘minimal’”. He preferred to proceed on the basis of what FM Patterson of Jamaica and President Pérez of Venezuela suggest: no land changes and concentrate on joint economic projects. When the Governor asked him whether he thought the British might try to sell the deal to the people themselves, Price said there was no chance of that because of the stance of both the PUP and the UDP.¹²

Finally, Price himself has denied that he ever gave Todman any undertaking to cede any land,¹³ and subsequent events bear him out. When a few days later Todman met Molina in Guatemala, he could tell him only that “it may be that Price can be persuaded to accept some kind of cession, however unpalatable, but he will not accept anything he sees as ‘tying’ Belize to Guatemala”.¹⁴

After the Price meeting, Todman went to Mexico City and met with President Lopez Portillo, who said he regarded the principle of self-determination as more important than Mexico’s own claim, and that he supported a peaceful settlement negotiated through an international body that would respect international principles. This dismissal of the idea of US mediation was purposeful; earlier Foreign Minister Roel had suggested to Todman that maybe a Mexican mediation should be considered, which the British ambassador interpreted as “said tongue in cheek with the intention of conveying to Todman that both the US and Mexico are interested parties”. Norman Cox, British ambassador to Mexico, commented: “Both Todman and I have been impressed by the closeness of Mexican and Belizean thinking. It seems likely that some very close consultation between them is now taking place on a continuing basis. According to Todman,

¹² McEntee to FCO, 21 January, 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

¹³ Interview with Price.

¹⁴ FRUS, 1977-1980, p. 58.

Price now regards the Mexicans as his staunchest and most important allies".¹⁵ They were right about the close ties; sometimes Price met the President or Foreign Minister, most often Shoman briefed the Foreign Minister and Under Secretary Rosensweig-Díaz and other officials and kept Mexico close to Belize's positions.

Things were not moving the way the British wanted; desperate to bring the matter to a close before Laugerud left office, they summoned Price to a meeting in London to further pressure him to accept their plan. Price took Shoman and Courtenay with him, and they rejected both the Washington proposal and any land cession. The British record of the meeting suggests that Price was wavering: "Price made it clear that he remained opposed to any form of territorial cession," but "if territory in the south had to be ceded to Guatemala he would find it less difficult to accept cession of territory up to the Temash River". Owen said it was not likely the Guatemalans would accept anything less than Moho. On the cayes, Price "expressed his dislike of any cession of the cayes," and "expressed his particular opposition to the cession of the Ranguana cayes. If any had to be ceded he would prefer these to be limited to the southern Sapodilla cayes (a line between Hunting and Lime cayes)". Responding to Price's concern for security, Owen agreed to ask Cabinet for British forces to remain for one year after independence. Owen said he was willing to use the term "special negotiator" rather than "mediator," and that names mentioned included Andrew Young and Arthur Goldberg, but that Guatemalans would not find Young acceptable.¹⁶

In the joint statement after the meeting, Price reiterated the Belize position that the negotiations must be in accordance with the UN resolutions, while Owen admitted that discussions would continue between the British and the Guatemalans, and that these discussions included the possibility of territorial adjustment, but that any settlement must be acceptable to the government and people of Belize. At Price's insistence, it was agreed that any proposed settlement would be put

¹⁵ Cox to FCO, 21 January 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

¹⁶ Owen to Belmopan etc., 25 January 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

directly to the people of Belize (by referendum) and that the Commonwealth would be associated with this process of consultation.¹⁷

Price Goes to the People

The British were confused by Price. He knew that the security of Belize depended solely on the UK, and that therefore he could not risk their wrath. As much as possible he made the British feel he was at least considering their proposals, but he never wavered in his insistence that there would be no land cession. His carefulness was interpreted as vacillation, although Governor McEntee admitted that Price had always maintained his “no land cession” stand.¹⁸ Rowlands misrepresented this position, stating that “having gone along, kept the options open, he has now concluded that he cannot face up to the uncomfortable compromise. His own domestic situation has got on top of him; he has lost political courage”.¹⁹

But he had misread Price, who, as he had done often before in times of crisis, decided to go to the people. Upon his return to Belize he embarked on a series of public meetings emphatically rejecting the cession of any territory, having first made a radio broadcast which stressed that his government had always maintained its firm stand on territorial integrity and full sovereign independence. He informed that at the London talks, despite disagreements, “we got the renewed assurance of the British government to defend Belize and we maintained our friendship with the British government, for it is the British who are committed to our defence”. He explained why he had not previously revealed details of the negotiations in the past two years:

we were committed to the normal rules of keeping confidential certain matters between governments. To do otherwise would have endangered the very security of Belize. We must bear in mind that this confidence was required by the United Kingdom

¹⁷ FCO to Belmopan, 25 January 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

¹⁸ McEntee to FCO, 19 January 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

¹⁹ Richard to FCO, 19 January 1978, enclosing message from Rowlands to Owen, DEFE 24/1649.

Guatemala's Claim to Belize...

government which is responsible for the defence of Belize. One wrong step or one irresponsible word could lead to border incidents which must be avoided because our first concern is the safety of our land and its people.²⁰

Price revealed that the British had been discussing land cession with Guatemala and that the areas discussed included land from the Monkey River or from the Temash River, along with some of the southern cayes and continental shelf. He informed that “in November of last year I was informed in the strictest confidence about these discussions about giving up land and as the Foreign Secretary has confirmed in the House of Commons I protested and reaffirmed the determination of the government of Belize to maintain the territorial integrity of Belize”.

Price also revealed that high officials of the US government told him that they believed that any solution must involve land cession. He explained that the British had said that when they had a proposal they felt should be considered, they themselves would put it to the people of Belize in a referendum, but they would continue to defend Belize regardless of its outcome.

Owen defended the British position in parliament on 25 January, 1978, replying to questions by eleven members of parliament. He stated that if a proposal were put to the Belizean people, he would explain the case and make a recommendation, but he would not apply pressure. If the Belizean people did not agree to the proposal, Belize would remain a Crown Colony and Britain would continue to defend it.²¹ He affirmed that Vance had taken a great deal of interest and was helping to resolve the problem, and “if agreement could be reached, the fact that it would be underwritten by the United States would be one of the greatest safeguards for an independent Belize”. Owen was very clear about Price's position:

²⁰ Price's radio broadcast is in tels #38 and #39 of 28 January 1978 from McEntee to FCO, DEFE 24/1649.

²¹ Belize was not then a Crown Colony. Since 1962 it was referred to as a self-governing colony.

The Premier of Belize and the Government have *constantly, consistently and rightly held their position on territorial integrity and on the United Nations resolution . . .* Premier Price has attended all the formal negotiations and has been kept fully informed of all our informal discussions, but *he has not shifted from his basic position.*²²

Owen then made an arrogant and misleading statement that would be used by the Opposition in Belize to argue that Price was endangering Belize by pushing for early independence:

I agree that there is a choice between two evils. Many people want independence immediately without any form of territorial cession and no negotiation. That is what we have been unable to achieve over the last few years. They must grapple with the problem whether, in order to achieve independence, they will have to make some compromise. That is a choice which I think they can make.

A week later, when Rowlands met with Vance and Molina, he told them about his meetings with Price and other Caribbean leaders, which once more revealed their total opposition to land cession, about Price's "internal political problems" and the build-up of opinion in Britain itself against any form of territorial change.²³ Both the US and Guatemala said they could reconsider the November proposals, although Molina rejected the idea of a cession only up to the Temash. Rowlands felt he had succeeded in "the limited aim of ensuring that negotiations continue without our having made any specific commitments".²⁴

Rowlands' reference to opinion in Britain itself was revealing. Belize had been lobbying members of the Labour Party and the press in London. Although Labour was in office, in an emphatically worded resolution the Labour Party executive expressed strong support for the territorial integrity of Belize. It called on the British government to stand by the decision of the United Nations, the Commonwealth

²² Hansard, 25 January 1978, Cols. 1372, 1384-1391. Emphasis added.

²³ FCO to Valletta, 30 January 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

²⁴ Robinson to FCO, 2 February 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

Prime Ministers Conference and the wishes of the government and people of Belize for territorial integrity. It also called on the Carter administration to stop supplying Guatemala with military hardware and training facilities.²⁵ Articles and letters in the British press expressed similar sentiments; the Financial Times opposed the sale of British arms to El Salvador, arguing they could be used against British soldiers in Belize, since that regime was having a love affair with Guatemala.²⁶

In Guatemala, President Laugerud was doing a balancing act, on the one hand preparing his people to face the fact that they could not hope to recover all of Belize, but perhaps they could secure a way out to the Atlantic and leave the honour of the nation intact. On the other hand he admitted that had there been a war in June 1977, which he said could easily have occurred (“military contact was on the point of taking place with the British which any spark could have ignited”) it would have destroyed the economy, caused a number of deaths and had other consequences, but as he told President Carter last September, if there was any unilateral declaration of independence for Belize Guatemala would invade, whatever the consequences.²⁷

Meanwhile, in Belize the UDP continued to accuse Price of compromising Belize's sovereignty and territorial integrity because of his “mad rush” to independence. The PUP had lost the Belize City Council elections in December 1977; elections for the other municipalities were due in 1978, and the UDP was clearly in the ascendancy. Commenting on the UDP's electoral victory in Belize City, Guatemalan Foreign Minister Adolfo Molina Orantes crowed “I hope that Mr Price is feeling the pressure of his party's defeat . . . The opposition has a much more practical view in not pressing the issue of independence”.

The US remained very closely engaged in the process at the level of Secretary of State. On 1 February Vance met Rowlands, who claimed that Price had three concerns: “1. Cession of the black Carib village of

²⁵ Quoted in *The New Belize*, March 1978.

²⁶ Cited in *The New Belize*, March 1978.

²⁷ *La Nación*, 6 February 1978, cited in McQuillan to FCO < 6 February 1978, DEFE 14/1649.

Barranco south of the Moho. 2. Cession of both cayes. 3. The offensive features of the draft treaty”. Still holding out the prospect that Price would agree to some cession, he told Vance that the Belizeans want the line moved south to the Temash River, but he would only try to save Barranco, which would reduce the cession to 25 square miles. If he gets Barranco, he will not push the Guatemalans on the cayes. Rowlands apologized because he was unable to get Price’s agreement as he told the Secretary previously, and reported they have a problem with Guyana and the Caribbean. The US note of the meeting then includes this intriguing statement: “The British know money is being passed in Belize. If two or three people defect, Price can lose in Parliament. Price fired one man and this action prompted some defections. The British do not know what outside influences are at work and what their aims are. The Secretary promised to check into this and inform the British”.²⁸

When Vance met Molina two days later, the latter rejected the idea of the Temash, and added that on the economic package Rowlands had mentioned 15 to 20 million dollars, but that it would cost a minimum of \$50 million to pave the road which was necessary for the economic integration of Guatemala and Belize. Molina also insisted on the need to have a US mediator in order to sell the deal in Guatemala.²⁹

Meanwhile, Caribbean countries were standing firm with Belize. The British effort to ridicule the idea of a multilateral defence force including

²⁸ FRUS, 1977-1980, pp. 65-67. In January, McEntee reported that: Minister Fred Hunter, who had been disciplined for corruption by Price, had been approached by the Opposition and offered a ministry in a UDP government if he defected in order to bring the government down. Dr Aranda was sent to Dangriga to offer the same to Minister McKoy. Briceño, Hunter’s Parliamentary Secretary, is in the Party’s bad books and could possibly be bought over. Minister Louis Sylvestre is an uncertain quantity because Price did not support him when he was accused of corruption two or three months ago. The UDP meant to suborn PUP parliamentarians and introduce a motion of no confidence to unseat Price. McEntee suggests that Price changed from being willing to consider land cession to an outright no because he feared these members of the Party would split and join the UDP! Also that Mexico, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados urged no cession, and finally that Price was being unduly influenced by Courtenay and Shoman: McEntee to FCO, 19 Jan 1978, McEntee to FCO, 26 January 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

²⁹ FRUS, 1977-1980, pp. 67-70.

small nations was answered by Barbadian Foreign Minister Henry Forde telling the British Ambassador that Barbados would offer 100 men for the defence of Belize, and that he would go to Trinidad and Tobago to seek financial support, and hoped Nigeria would take part.³⁰ Prime Minister Manley of Jamaica met Prime Minister Callaghan in London, and when asked to support some territorial arrangement, he laid out Jamaica's position thus: 1. No need for land cession; 2. Any cession would create difficulties in the region, e.g. Guyana; 3. Only the people of Belize themselves could agree to that; 4. The fact was that at the present time Price and the people of Belize were against any sacrifice of territory.³¹

At Rowland's request, the US State Department proposed two documents to Britain on 10 February 1978: one suggesting possible ways of meeting security concerns, and a "draft agreement of amity and mutual security between Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico".³² The British pointed out that on the security issues, the US went further to meet the concerns of Guatemala than those of Belize.³³ Price was due to meet Vance soon, and Owen asked that Vance "stress to Price that the only real way forward to early and secure independence is a negotiated settlement, and point out to him the unreality of his present campaign to drum up a defence guarantee".³⁴

The Good Friday *Disagreement*

Price was indeed drumming up support, not only for a multilateral force but also for territorial integrity, in a manner that tried the patience of the British. At a meeting in Belize of the CARICOM foreign ministers serviced by the Commonwealth Secretariat, he revealed Owen's plan of seeking to reach agreement with the Guatemalans based on land cession and submitting this to a referendum, and asked for support

³⁰ Roberts (Barbados) to FCO 2 Feb 1978 DEFE 24/1649.

³¹ Private secretary, Downing street to FCO, 13 February 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

³² Jay to FCO, 10 February 1978, DEFE 24/1649. I have found no trace of the documents.

³³ Owen to Washington, 13 February 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

³⁴ Owen to Washington, 22 March 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

against this plan. The foreign ministers undertook to tell Britain that “it is worse if you hold a referendum on agreed UK-Guatemala proposals which are rejected than if you stop now,” since it was obvious that land cession would be rejected in any referendum.³⁵ A public communiqué supported the Belize government’s insistence that land cession was unacceptable. The ministers also agreed to support the quest for a multi-lateral defence guarantee, including “the preparation of a basic plan outlining the required military capabilities,” although in private the Commonwealth representative, Abass Bundu, said that “none of them seemed to think that an international defence arrangement was practicable”.

Neither, of course, did the British, who became particularly incensed over Price’s insistent attempts to secure military support from countries of the region. In March 1978, Price stated at a press conference in Georgetown that Guyana, Barbados, Jamaica and a Latin American state had agreed to take part in a multilateral security arrangement to defend Belize on independence.³⁶ The British worried about this initiative and sought to contest and discredit it.³⁷

Price, accompanied by Shoman, went to the State Department in Washington on 24 March 1978. It was a Good Friday, and the building was all but deserted. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance greeted them amiably; he was accompanied by Todman. They explained that they thought it was imperative that an early resolution be found to the conflict, but that it seemed impossible to get Guatemalan support for a settlement if there was not a territorial element involved. They brought out maps which they had prepared, showing different levels of land cession, including islands, and asking whether any of these was acceptable or at least could be considered in order to find an early and peaceful way out of the impasse.

The Belizeans told Vance that they could never agree to any cession of territory and that the *status quo* was not tolerable, as it would lead to

³⁵ Bundu to Ramphal, 16 March 1978, File 33/2/99, Belize 1978, CSL.

³⁶ Gautrey to FCO, 10 March 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

³⁷ Gautrey to FCO, 16 March 1978; Fonseca to FCO, 17 March 1978; Drinkall to FCO, 23 March 1978; Gautrey to FCO, 23 March 1978; all in DEFE 24/1649.

Guatemala subverting Belize over time. There were now three UN resolutions that had attracted world-wide support, including from many Latin American countries, and Belize felt certain that later that year more such countries would support the resolution, and Guatemala was increasingly isolated. If Guatemala remained inflexible and insisted on land cession, which Belize would never agree to, then we must think in terms of Belize attaining independence without reaching a settlement with Guatemala. The only way forward was through a multilateral defence guarantee, which was supported by the Commonwealth Caribbean and Panama; the UK had undertaken to participate. Vance tried very hard to get Price to agree to some small cession of land, but Price adamantly refused to even consider it. The meeting ended without Vance having achieved what he had hoped to, but they parted on friendly terms.³⁸

In his remarks to the press in Washington after the meeting, Price repeated that land cession was not acceptable, and that he was in search of a multilateral force in which the UK would be involved. He admitted that the UK was in favour of land cession, but that “they would respect the decision of the Belizean people not to accept the land cession and we do not accept it”.³⁹ When the State Department asked the British to confirm whether they had in fact agreed to join the multilateral force, their reply was that

Price was being disingenuous to say the least. We have made no undertaking other than that given by the Secretary of State to the Commonwealth Committee in New York last September when he said that if some kind of international security guarantee could be obtained, Britain would play her part.⁴⁰

³⁸ The State Department record of this conversation is incomplete in many ways. It fails to mention the presence of Shoman or Vance's attempts to pressure Belize to accept land cession, although it records Price's refusal to do so, and focuses instead on Price's narration of his efforts to put together a defence guarantee: FRUS, 1977-1980, pp. 70-72.

³⁹ Jay to FCO, 28 March 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

⁴⁰ Jay to FCO, 25 March 1978; Owen to Washington, 27 March 1978; DEFE 24/1649.

Well that was precisely the undertaking Price was talking about! Rashleigh Jackson, Guyana's ambassador to the UN, reminded the British that Prime Minister Callaghan had said at the June CHOGM that if a force were to be drawn from some Commonwealth countries and a Latin American country Britain would be prepared to support it.⁴¹ In any case, the British were incensed, and Rowlands sent a message to Price saying that "we are now seriously out of step on the question of an international defence guarantee," and added that

Continued misunderstanding on this can be dangerous. The idea of a multilateral force is tied up with that of unilateral independence. As you know, the assessment that we and the Americans make is that the Guatemalans will be bound to react militarily to unilateral independence. Consequently any talk of a multilateral force, however bland, raises the temperature and increases the possibility of British troops being shot at, a matter for which we not you share responsibility.⁴²

Price was undaunted. He insisted that his understanding was that Britain would participate in a credible multilateral force provided it comprised at least one other Latin American country in addition to Panama. Governor McEntee told him that this was a fall-back position, but that the effort now was to achieve a negotiated settlement, and by publicising the fall-back position he was prejudicing the chances of success of negotiations.⁴³

Price opened the widening gap with London some more in mid-April, when the PUP Convention passed a resolution condemning the UK for conducting negotiations with Guatemala involving land cession. It requested the UK to "stop immediately" any such discussions, and "to actively pursue the alternative road to independence by concluding suitable security arrangements".⁴⁴ Price told McEntee that he was very unhappy about the way Britain was "appeasing Guatemala," and that "his government could no longer cooperate or take part with Britain

⁴¹ Gautrey to FCO, 17 April 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

⁴² FCO to Belmopan, 30 March 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

⁴³ McEntee to FCO, 31 March 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

⁴⁴ McEntee to FCO, 17 April 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

in any discussions in which land was an issue or if the terms of the UN resolution were breached".⁴⁵

Price had followed a pattern in reaction to the extreme pressures from the UK and US since November 1977 to cede land: while not alienating them by an outright refusal, he sabotaged their scheme by getting friendly heads of government to insist on territorial integrity, telling the British he was constrained by the Opposition at home, telling the press about the UK/US pressures, demanding that the UN resolutions be fully complied with, organizing meetings of CARICOM ministers who insisted on territorial integrity, accusing the British government of double dealing, talking directly to the people and having a Party convention state the hard line. His actions did not go unnoticed by the British.

Owen was furious because his plan to reach a quick settlement with Guatemala based on the US plan for land cession was being made impossible by Price.⁴⁶ He told the Governor to convey to Price "the strength of my feeling about his recent activities and deny firmly that we have been dealing with the Guatemalans behind his back . . . I am fed up with Price's behaviour and intend to do a little plain speaking. He must decide whether to go fishing or simply to cut bait".⁴⁷ He asked for a meeting with Price and with Dean Lindo, the Leader of the Opposition, in New York in early June.

Disunity Favours Guatemala

The "MOU": No Independence Without Settlement?

Owen's decision to bring the Opposition into the negotiating process on an equal footing with the government was prompted by the position taken by Price not to participate in any further negotiations that violated the UN resolutions, and strengthened by the electoral ascendancy of the

⁴⁵ McEntee to FCO, 24 April 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

⁴⁶ Owen's "quick deal" plan "was very much more an Anglo-American plan than perhaps people realise": Interview with David Jenkins (assistant to Owen).

⁴⁷ Owen to Belmopan, 15 May 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

UDP and the widely-held view that it would win the next general elections.

On 8 February 1978 the UDP issued a declaration proclaiming that independence should be deferred for a period of not less than ten years; that the UK should immediately be asked to stop all negotiations based on the granting of Belizean land and sovereign rights to Guatemala; that the national army of Belize should be developed to the maximum fighting strength possible; and that the UK and Belize should jointly seek the military cooperation of friendly nations in the defence of Belize.⁴⁸ The actions proposed in the UDP statement were the same as the government's platform, except for the demand for deferral of independence for at least ten years, which made any meeting of minds impossible. Neither the British nor the Belize government could agree with that timetable, and if it favoured anyone it was the Guatemalans—that certainly was the view of the Governor, who wrote that “We know that Eduardo Rodríguez [Guatemalan, *Consejo de Belice*] tried to contact Lindo when he was here and that he has since tried to do so through Vernon of TPP. I therefore think that we cannot discount altogether possibility that the UDP statement in fact reflects Guatemalan views”.⁴⁹

The meeting between Owen, Price and Lindo in New York on 2 June 1978 produced a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that defined the positions of the three parties in six points: the Guatemalan dispute would be put above party politics in Belize and the search for a solution would be treated as a national objective; both the Government and the Opposition would be represented at future talks between the British and Guatemalans; any final agreement would be put to the people of Belize in a referendum; “the present series of talks have come to an end and the parties are not bound by any previous proposals”; the attendance of the three parties at future talks would be “without prejudice to their respective positions or to the rights and responsibilities of the British government”. None of that was particularly contentious, but the final article of the MOU was rich with the seeds of controversy:

⁴⁸ McEntee to FCO, tel #67 of 12 February 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

⁴⁹ McEntee to FCO, tel #66 of 12 February 1978, DEFE 24/1649. Indeed, the UDP Declaration was quoted extensively and approvingly by the Guatemalan delegate during the Fourth Committee debates at the UN in 1978: A/C.4/33/SR.32, pp. 8-9.

It is agreed that a solution to the Anglo-Guatemalan dispute is highly desirable for progress to be made towards the independence of Belize. It is understood that the solution of the Anglo-Guatemalan dispute, and the independence of Belize, are separate issues.⁵⁰

For the Belize government, and for anyone with a sense of the meaning of words, the last sentence meant that Guatemala could not be allowed to hold a veto over Belize's independence, since the solution of the dispute, being a separate issue, need not be consummated before independence; a settlement was "highly desirable," yes, but not a pre-condition for independence. The Opposition, on the other hand, claimed that it meant that there must be an election before independence, and touted the MOU as a major victory.⁵¹ It is impossible to reach the conclusion from the words of the MOU that it required elections before independence, but Owen himself also gave it that spin. Why?

The British were concerned that Guatemala and the US not interpret that clause to mean that independence would precede a settlement, since this would aggravate Guatemala, smacking of "unilateral independence". To that extent, on this issue, the Opposition, the British, the Guatemalans and the US were on the same page. In describing that paragraph to the US, Owen said that it was devised

*to meet the desire of Lindo that the question of independence should be considered only after a settlement had been reached, thus giving them more chance of winning an election between the two and of being in power before the country goes to independence. There is no implication that independence might precede a settlement and Ted Rowlands has already reassured Molina on this point by telephone and will do so again when he meets him.*⁵²

Owen is here clearly admitting that he schemed with Lindo to interpret the phrase to mean that independence would not even be considered unless and until Guatemala agreed. Obviously Price would never agree

⁵⁰ Richard to FCO, 2 June 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

⁵¹ McEntee to FCO, 8 June 1978, DEFE 24/1649.

⁵² Owen to Washington, 9 June 1978, DEFE 24/1649. Emphasis added.

to that, and so time would pass and the UDP would eventually win elections, which is what Lindo wanted, “being in power before the country goes to independence”. This looked like a repeat of what the British had done in Guyana in 1964.

Guatemala Gets a Veto

Given the positions taken by the US, the UK and the UDP, it is not surprising that the Guatemalans were emboldened to continue pressing for a settlement on their terms. At his first meeting with the US Ambassador in Guatemala, President Lucas insisted that Guatemala must be granted land at least to the Monkey River, and warned that if independence were granted without Guatemalan consent, the Army would have to move. He also played the Cuban card: “Lucas maintained that the Cubans were trying to take advantage of the situation, and alluded to contacts between them and Belizean Attorney General Assad Shoman”.⁵³

Rowlands met Dr Molina on 18 June 1978; Molina lamented that talks had not been productive, blaming this on Price being “rather inflexible,” while Rowlands noted that Price had created a UK domestic problem by his lobbying, which made any discussion of territory difficult. But Molina was assured that **“it was implicit in the Memorandum of Understanding that a settlement would come before independence”**. Molina described Price’s idea of a multilateral security force as “damaging,” suggesting that only Cuba would support it. He noted that six Cubans had attended the recent ECLA meeting in Belize and that four of them had spent the time travelling around the country. Rowlands replied apologetically, saying that “this was foolish but we had managed to keep tabs on them,” and boasted that “we had just refused visas to two Cubans to travel to Belize”.⁵⁴

Obviously, the Guatemalan government was able to “keep tabs” on movements in Belize as well. Molina was not bashful about admitting subversive activity within Belize. Rowlands chided him for his

⁵³ FRUS, 1977-1980, pp. 73-74.

⁵⁴ Record of meeting on 18 June, DEFE 24/1649.

government interfering in Belizean politics, noting that the Guatemalan government had been very active in southern Belize, paying money to people like Vernon of the TPP and beaming TV and radio programmes. Rowlands charged that such activities were designed to subvert the local population and were not in the interests of a negotiated settlement. Molina, unrepentant, riposted that the activities were not subversive, but rather enhanced relations with the people of southern Belize “who felt closer to Guatemala than to the rest of Belize from which they are cut off by the Maya Mountains”.⁵⁵ Molina must have known how implausible that sounded even to Rowlands, given Guatemala's widely-known racist oppression of its indigenous people. In his address that year to the Fourth Committee, Vernon revealed that the Government of Guatemala had offered to help Toledo farmers with loans from Guatemala's National Bank of Agricultural Development.⁵⁶

In any case, by telling them that a settlement would come before independence, the British had handed Guatemala a veto over the independence of Belize, since they could block it simply by not reaching agreement. They had thus also assured that Guatemala would be able to impose the terms of any settlement. This was strengthened by the fact that the Opposition in Belize had taken the position that there must be a settlement with Guatemala before Belize became independent, thus confirming Guatemala's veto over Belize's independence. All those positions would have to change if Belize were to achieve secure independence with its territory intact.

The international campaign was refined to reflect this new reality, and at the NAM meeting of Foreign Ministers in Belgrade attended by Shoman in July 1978, a resolution insisting that independence was in no way dependent on a settlement with Guatemala and emphasising the UK's responsibility was passed unanimously:

The Ministers endorse the policy of the Government of Belize aimed at achieving the early and safe independence of the territory and note that this can be done *either by means of a negotiated*

⁵⁵ Ibid. and FCO to Belmopan, 23 June 1978, DEFE 24/1649

⁵⁶ Fourth Committee meeting Wednesday, 22 November 1978, pp. 12-16, A/C.4/33/SR.23.

settlement acceptable to its people or by establishing security arrangements that may be necessary for guaranteeing the independence and territorial integrity of Belize. In this connection, the Ministers also note the special responsibility of Great Britain to assist Belize in attaining a secure independence.⁵⁷

Ignoring the importance of such a significant pronouncement from a body representing more than two-thirds of the members of the UN, the opposition in Belize pounced on the fact that Shoman had gone to a communist country, and tied that to the fact that several Belizeans, with his encouragement, were selected to attend the International Festival of Students and Youth, a known leftist event, in Cuba no less, to warn against the dangers of communism and of a Cuban take-over.⁵⁸

This was a most difficult moment in the struggle of Belize for independence, and it would last until there were significant political changes in both the UK and Belize. In the meantime, Belize would have to cooperate with the British in the negotiations with Guatemala while seeking to maintain and strengthen its international support.

From Guatemala to Guatepeor⁵⁹

The too-obvious electoral fraud that brought Laugerud to power in 1974 made his period in office one of great political and economic instability. While the army continued its repressive actions against the people and the guerrilla maintained their activities, the 1976 earthquake had also brought about an upsurge in civil society organisations.

One action undertaken by the Laugerud government was to have important consequences for Belize in the future: the creation of the Franja Transversal del Norte, a region of some 3,500 square kilometres rich in resources, which boosted the export agricultural sector based

⁵⁷ Cited in record of the meeting of the CMCB of 28 September 1978, October 1978, CMCB (78)3, pp. 6-7, CSL. Emphasis added.

⁵⁸ See, for example, *The Beacon* (newspaper of the UDP) of 22 July and 9 September 1978.

⁵⁹ Most of the facts and opinions in this section are from Berganza, pp. 48-57.

on cheap labour. The creation of that huge Zone also had a strategic military objective, since it included the departments of Quiché, Alta Verapaz and Petén, where the guerrilla forces were very active. The army decided to build access roads and the infrastructure that would give them greater control, and most of the lands in the Zone were given to military chiefs and government cronies. One side effect was the huge increase in population in the areas adjoining Belize, with consequences we shall note later.

The 1976 earthquake brought significant assistance from abroad, much to the relief of the government, which was in dire financial straits. At the same time, the guerrilla increased in strength as a result of the earthquake, recruiting many persons who had lost everything, while also gaining sympathy from international aid workers, many of whom established support groups in their home countries for the guerrilla. The earthquake also brought a huge increase in neo-Pentecostal evangelical missionaries from the USA and elsewhere, who were to play a major role in supporting the army's counterinsurgency strategy and in the formation of future governments.

The exposure of Guatemala to large numbers of international aid organisations and workers also made Laugerud more cautious, for a while, in implementing repressive measures against the people. This opened the door for the resurgence of mass organisations, including workers, students and indigenous people. Important contacts were made between peasant leaders from the countryside and labour leaders in the City, and the guerrilla would profit from these alliances.

Laugerud maintained the structures established by Arana Osorio in the counter-insurgency State, so that, for example, he took care to include civilians in his Cabinet, but it was clear that the military had the final say. The increased intensity of the guerrilla war resulted in the military carrying out a major rearmament, including air transport planes and helicopters, and the Galil rifle from Israel became the standard weapon for the infantry. The military and its associated death squads stepped up the selective assassination of political and labour leaders, as well as students and journalists. The indiscriminate and massive killing of people, which had become common since the 1960s, continued. In 1978,

in the last days of Laugerud's government, in the massacre at Panzós, Alta Verapaz, 53 peasants were murdered and 47 injured.

During this period too there came to light differences within the Catholic Church, whose Archbishop Mario Casariego had long been a supporter of the military regimes and a staunch anti-communist. The Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church, in contrast, published the pastoral letter "Unidos en la esperanza" (united in hope), which condemned exploitation and political and social repression, the first in a series of such pronouncements taking the side of the poor and impoverished, in line with the Theology of Liberation that was sweeping the Latin American Catholic Church. On 30 June 1978, the last day of Laugerud's presidency, the priest Hermógenes López Coarchita was assassinated; this was the beginning of the open repression of Catholic Church leaders by government.

For the March 1978 elections the official candidate was Laugerud's Defence Minister Fernando Romeo Lucas García, with his Vice-Presidential candidate being Francisco Villagrán Kramer, who considered himself centre-left and had contacts with some leftist parties and individuals. The elections took place in a climate of violence and insecurity and only 36.5% of the electorate came out to vote. Romeo Lucas was declared the winner, and took office on 1 July 1978. His was not to be a smooth presidency either. The elections had, like others before, been totally fraudulent. The US Embassy cabled that "substantial fraud marred" Lucas's election "but probably less than was the case in President Laugerud's 1974 victory".⁶⁰

Lucas García vowed to put an end to the insurgency and crush the guerrilla, and his terror machine was directed not just at the fighters, but at any civilian or social movement that was not in accord with the government's views. He utilized all sorts of terror tactics, including killings in public places in broad daylight and the systematization of massacres. Among his famous victims of assassination were Manuel Colom Argueta, a popular politician and former Guatemala City mayor, and the same Alberto Fuentes Mohr who had been the only faint hope

⁶⁰ FRUS, 1977-1980, p. 72.

for a settlement with Belize. Many priests and religious people also joined the ranks of the “disappeared” or were forced into exile. “Between 1979 and 1982 Guatemala lived its moments of greatest anguish and violence that can be recalled throughout the political history of the 20th century”⁶¹ Those were the very years that Belize was steadily moving towards independence.

The Human Rights division of the State Department was clear on the Guatemalan government's actions: “From at least 1966 to 1976, the uniformed military, with the knowledge and cooperation of other government officials, was involved in death squad operations in both rural and urban areas of Guatemala. As many as 20,000 persons are believed to have been detained and killed in these operations . . . in rural areas, disappearances in which military and other government officials are involved continue and may have actually increased . . . During the past several months, we have continued to receive reports of such disappearances. The most dramatic incident occurred last May in Panzos, when government troops reportedly killed at least 38 Indians. The Minister of Government, Donaldo Alvarez, who commands the police, has publicly stated that death squads serve to clean the society.”⁶²

Lucas García' murderous military continued to receive significant military aid, training and support from Israel: “in Guatemala, the army Chief of Staff under the Nazi-like Lucas García regime thanked Israel for the military aid it was providing, adding that ‘the Israeli soldier is a model and example for us’”.⁶³

It was with this regime, and in this climate, that Belize had to continue the negotiations.

⁶¹ Gustavo Berganza (ed.), *Compendio de Historia de Guatemala 1944-2000*, ciudad Guatemala, 2004.

⁶² The position of the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Department of State is stated at FRUS, 1977-1980, pp. 79-80. The Bureau consequently recommended against continued funding for Guatemala for military education and training, but Acting Secretary of State Warren Christopher approved the funding.

⁶³ Noam Chomsky, *Fateful Triangle*, Southend Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999, P. 290

The Cart Road Revisited

In late August 1978 President Lucas made a significant statement about Belize:

The Constitution of the Republic is clear in respect of territorial integrity. However, we must recognise that it will be impossible to obtain all of Belize, as we have over us the opinion of hundreds of countries which support its independence. The geographic position of Belize has us closed in on the Bay of Amatique and we do not have an exit to the sea, and that has to be resolved.⁶⁴

The President asserted that there had been no settlement because of Price, who was opposed to any solution, but that talks with Britain were to be held soon. It is clear that the Guatemalans were confident that the new British position after the MOU, and the US support for territorial adjustment, made it possible for Guatemala to gain some Belizean territory. President Lucas was attempting to explain to his countrymen that it was no longer possible to insist on “recovering” all of Belize, while assuring them that enough territory would be gained to satisfy Guatemalan interests and pride.

The talks were held on 25th September 1978 in New York; Price did not attend because a hurricane that struck Belize caused severe damage. Rogers represented the Belize government and Dean Lindo, UDP leader, was also present. Owen’s new proposals to Foreign Minister Castillo Valdés did not include land cession, but rather a seaward boundary to give Guatemala access to the high seas through its own territorial sea, free port facilities, a treaty of regional security, and the proposal to pave a road from the Petén to Belmopan.⁶⁵ Both Price and Lindo later “said they would be surprised, but delighted, if the Guatemalans accepted our proposals”.⁶⁶ Owen informed the State Department that Castillo had shown interest in the idea of “a road paving scheme which could be

⁶⁴ Wilmshurt to FCO, 29 August 1978, DEFE 24/1650. This is a condensed version, translated by the author.

⁶⁵ Richard to FCO, 25 September 1978, DEFE 24/1650.

⁶⁶ McEntee to FCO, 6 October 1978, DEFE 24/1650.

presented as the equivalent and therefore the fulfilment of the 1859 Treaty, thus enabling Guatemala to accept recognition of Belize's boundaries".⁶⁷ He asked the US to send a special emissary to President Lucas encouraging him to go for a quick settlement.

But the US, obviously aware that the Guatemalans would never agree to that proposal,⁶⁸ indicated that "for the US government to get off the fence now and encourage President Lucas to accept our proposals would be premature". The best time to intervene would be when Guatemala presented counter-proposals, which they would probably not do soon, since they were playing for time "partly to get through the Fourth Committee without too much trouble, partly in the hope that elections in Belize will produce a new, and more amenable, government".⁶⁹

Owen pressed Vance to tell Castillo that he had tried but failed to get the Belizeans to accept land cession, that international, including Latin American, opinion was against any cession of territory, and that "there is no chance of an agreement except on the terms I have offered".⁷⁰ Vance spoke to Castillo the following day and urged Guatemala to give Owen's proposal serious consideration, but Castillo simply told him that he was preparing a counter-proposal, without giving any hint of what that might be, and Vance said he could do no more until the counter-proposal was received.⁷¹ The counter-proposal never came. The Guatemalans were waiting for elections in Belize to provide a change.

The CMCB met in New York on 28 September 1978, and considered a paper submitted by the Belize government which warned that "the British government had been having discussions with the Guatemalans which implied a possible land cession," reiterated its firm position against that and called for consideration of a security arrangement for the

⁶⁷ Owen to Washington, 5 October 1978, DEFE 24/1650.

⁶⁸ The US Embassy in Guatemala had written that "We believe the British are deluding themselves if they are banking on the GOG accepting a formula, even one sweetened with assistance projects, which does not give Guatemala land territory, however token it may be". FRUS, 1977-1980, p. 79.

⁶⁹ Wilmshurst to FCO, 17 October 1978, DEFE 24/1650.

⁷⁰ Owen to Washington, 8 November 1978, DEFE 24/1650.

⁷¹ Bridges to FCO, 9 November 1978, DEFE 24/1650.

independent Belize. Owen admitted that the British did conduct such negotiations with Guatemala, but lied that he “had never asked the government of Belize to shift their own position which was and had consistently been one of total opposition to such land cession”.⁷² He admitted that it had become increasingly evident that “any referendum on land cession was extremely unlikely to get through” and that many of the Latin American countries themselves were against changing the map. He added that it seemed that the new Guatemalan government might like to get a settlement, and that he had put new proposals to the Guatemalans which he knew would be acceptable to the people of Belize.

For Belize, Rogers noted that the history of talks with Guatemala showed that a feeling of optimism had invariably ended in disappointment, and that the Committee should actively pursue a defence arrangement in the event that negotiations failed. The discussion on this point was again inconclusive, and a consensus emerged that the idea be kept alive, but that the outcome of the talks be awaited.

On 28th November in the Fourth Committee, Richard took the highly unusual step of making public the proposals that Owen had presented to Castillo in September. He noted that the dispute sprung from Guatemala’s contention that Britain had not complied with the “road” obligation and said that

the United Kingdom had therefore proposed in September 1978 that it would help with a major road project which would aid in developing the Petén. That project would be the modern equivalent of the provisions of article VII of the 1859 Treaty.⁷³

Rogers, accompanied by Lindo, alerted members to the fact that

while Guatemala has purposely prevaricated and refused to give a formal response to [the new British] proposals, they have

⁷² Record of meeting of CMCB on 28 September 1978, October 1978, CMCB (78)3, p. 4, CSL. But if he didn’t ask the Belize government to accept land cession, what was the point of discussing it with Guatemala, while Britain continued to proclaim that it would not force a solution on Belize?

⁷³ A/C.4/33/SR.27, 28 November 1978, UN, p. 7.

made clear in other ways that they have certainly not abandoned their expansionist ambitions and neo-colonialist designs over Belizean territory.⁷⁴

Rogers also refuted the Guatemalan pretension, which had become part of the lexicon of the British as well, that it would be wrong if Belize were to move to independence “unilaterally,” meaning without Guatemala’s agreement: “it is for the people of Belize to decide when to ~~declare~~ request the independence of Belize”.⁷⁵

In 1978 there were again two draft resolutions before the Committee. After some hard bargaining between Belize and its Caribbean allies on the one hand and Britain on the other, it was agreed to include the following operative paragraph, which hinted at the need for an alternative road to independence and placed the responsibility on Britain:

[The General Assembly] 6. Recognises that it is the responsibility of the United Kingdom, as the administering Power, to take all necessary steps to enable the people of Belize to exercise freely and without fear their right to self-determination and to a firm and early independence.⁷⁶

The Caribbean draft, sponsored by 45 states, was approved on 5 December 1978 in the Fourth Committee by 116 votes to 5, with 12 abstentions. The other, pro-Guatemalan draft, sponsored by nine states, was rejected that same day by a vote of 82 against and 15 in favour, with 33 abstentions.

The General Assembly voted on the resolution on 13 December 1978 by a vote of 127 to 0, with 12 abstentions. Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador did not take part in the voting. The most significant addition to the yes votes was **Costa Rica**, which became the first core Central American country to abandon Guatemala and

⁷⁴ “Statement of Deputy Premier C.L.B. Rogers to Fourth Committee, 29 November 1978,” PF; a summary is in A/C.4/33/SR.29, 29 November 1978, UN, pp. 12-14.

⁷⁵ Ibid. The typed version of the speech has the word “declare” rather than “request” in the last phrase; the British requested the change and Rogers complied in his spoken words.

⁷⁶ A/C.4/33/L.19, 27 November 1978, UN.

vote for Belize. **Colombia** also voted in favour for the first time.⁷⁷ The defection of Costa Rica was a serious blow to Guatemala's pretensions; it could no longer claim to have even core Central American solidarity. Also noteworthy is the fact that nobody voted against, meaning that not even the Central American countries had the resolve to vote against the Belize resolution. Indeed, they would *never* vote against the Belize resolution, ever again. In fact, no future Belize resolution received a single "no" vote. The battle at the international level was won. The USA continued to abstain.

The Guatemalan government never presented counter-proposals to those the British had made in September 1978. Instead, on 30 November Foreign Minister Castillo Valdés, in a radio broadcast, "solemnly declared" that the Government of Guatemala "categorically rejects" the British proposals. Guatemala was prepared to continue the process of negotiations with Britain and "find by way of direct negotiations with the people of Belize" a solution to the dispute. He did not explain how Guatemala would bypass the Belize government and negotiate directly with "the people". He also said that the government would not resume diplomatic relations with Britain "so long as that nation insists on staying on Central American soil by subterfuge".⁷⁸

Changes in the UK, the Region and Belize

There were no formal negotiating sessions in 1979, with the Guatemalans waiting out elections in Belize, and in Belize itself the push for independence faltered, but there were developments elsewhere that were of critical importance for the playing out of Belize's independence struggle.

The Thatcher Years

In the UK, the 3 May 1979 elections ushered in the era of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and her close ally Nicholas Ridley became

⁷⁷ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-third session, 81st Plenary meeting, 13 December 1978, paras. 121-122.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

the FCO Minister responsible for Belize. Ridley, a civil engineer by training and a Thatcherite by conviction, was a pragmatic, no-nonsense man with a sense of purpose, and in the negotiations that he managed relating to British sovereignty over the remnants of Empire, he readily grasped the essence of the problem and sought the quick solution. In negotiations with the Argentines over the Malvinas/Falklands, for example, he had in 1980 proposed transferring sovereignty to Argentina, but with continued British administration for a limited period, an idea killed by strong opposition in Parliament. A headstrong and outspoken man, he was forced to resign in 1989 for calling the European Community “a German racket”.⁷⁹

When Ridley studied the Belize file and saw the impasse created by the intransigence of both the Belizean and Guatemalan governments, it didn't take him long to come to the conclusion that Britain would have to change its policy of no defence guarantee for Belize if the matter were ever to be resolved. Barely two months after he took office, Ridley revealed his thinking to the United States, and “emphasized that HMG was determined to get out of Belize, and might consider granting independence without waiting for resolution of the dispute, leaving behind for the time being whatever forces were necessary to assure security”.⁸⁰ He did not disclose this to the Belizeans, and he tried over the ensuing months to get them to agree to Guatemala's demands for land cession, but he had made up his mind to sort out the problem by whatever means were necessary, and that was how it played out in the end.

Sandinista!

In 1979 Central America was in recession. The “oil shock” of that year adversely affected the balance of payments and encouraged greater borrowing from the banks, while principal exports decreased in price, wages fell, and the pattern of positive growth since 1945 took a downward

⁷⁹ David Childs, *Britain since 1945*, Routledge, London, 2006, pp. 226, 267.

⁸⁰ FRUS, 1977-1980, p. 96. US Embassy in the UK telegram of 6 July, 1979.

plunge.⁸¹ A renowned scholar of Central American economies has stated that the very severe balance of payments crisis, coupled with the political problems, justified the term “regional crisis,” and included significant capital flight, deteriorating terms of trade (which fell by 29.7 % in 1978 and 1981) and the massive rise in external public indebtedness.⁸² In addition to Guatemala, guerrilla wars were raging in El Salvador and Nicaragua, the latter having the greatest effect on Belize’s diplomatic offensive.

The *Frente Sandinista por la Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) was founded in 1961, named after Augusto César Sandino, the peasant farmer who in 1927 started a guerrilla war against the US Marines that were occupying the country. He succeeded in expelling them in 1933, but not before they created an army led by Anastacio Somoza García, who murdered Sandino in February 1934 and declared himself President three years later. That Somoza was killed by a poet in 1956, but he was succeeded first by his son Luis then by Anastacio, who became known as “the last Marine” in that he maintained the domination of the USA, with whose backing he remained in power until 1979.

The *Sandinistas* waged a guerrilla war for many years. They built up their strength in the countryside and, increasingly, in the towns, and also won the support of progressive Catholics, including Ernesto Cardenal, who came to Belize in 1976, and became Minister of Culture under the *Sandinista* government, and Miguel D’Escoto, who became Foreign Minister. Costa Rica, the place of refuge for many *Sandinistas* over the years, severed diplomatic relations with Nicaragua in December 1978. In January 1979 there were large demonstrations, and in February, finally, the US suspended military aid to Somoza. On May 30 the FSLN declared a final offensive, won victories all over the country and finally entered the capital Managua victorious on 19 July 1979.

The Belize independence cause was greatly advanced by the triumph of the *Sandinistas*. Somoza, the region’s longest serving dictator, had

⁸¹ Dunkerley, p. 211.

⁸² Victor Bulmer-Thomas, *The Political Economy of Central America since 1920*, Cambridge University press, 1987, pp. 237-244.

been the natural ally of the Guatemalan dictators. The *Sandinista* government immediately supported Belize's independence as assiduously as Torrijos, leaving Guatemala with only El Salvador and Honduras in its camp, a situation that had seemed impossible just three years before. An astute Belizean journalist commented at the time: "In international politics it is an inescapable fact of life that actions speak louder than words; during one week in July the comandantes, guerrilleros and muchachos of the FSLN did more to advance the prospects of Belizean independence than five years of UN resolutions, Commonwealth conferences and Anglo-Guatemalan negotiations".⁸³

The erosion of support for Guatemala spread to the wider region and even to the body it had assumed to be on its side, the OAS. At the General Assembly held in Bolivia in October 1979, the OAS, overturning its former ruling, recognized Belize as a colonial possession in the Americas, and not, as Guatemala asserted, a territory occupied by a foreign power. Significantly, only Guatemala voted against, five countries abstained and seventeen voted in favour.⁸⁴

Independence on Hold

But while Belize was making these impressive gains in Latin America, at home the independence movement was in grave danger. The people were understandably fearful of the military dictatorships in Guatemala. They knew about the massacres they carried out against their own people, and when they issued threats to invade Belizeans took them seriously. Between 1972 and 1977 three credible threats of imminent invasion had to be forestalled by urgent British reinforcement. In early 1978, Governor McEntee was convinced that Price's repeated assertions that in the absence of a negotiated settlement Belize should take independence unilaterally with an international defence guarantee "has given the Belize people the willies because they have faith only in the British forces".⁸⁵

⁸³ Stewart Krohn, *Breakdown* #8, 1979.

⁸⁴ Cited in Carpio Nicolle, *Belize Punto y Aparte*, p. 85.

⁸⁵ McEntee to FCO, 14 February 1978.

Apart from the PUP, the major political party was the NIP and its successor, the United Democratic Party (UDP), formed in 1973. Although it had never won a national election, it had significant support throughout the country, bordering on half of the electorate, and it often won municipal elections. The UDP won 6 seats at its first general election in 1974, but just three years later, in the Belize City Council elections on 7 December 1977, it won a spectacular victory over the PUP's "Dynamic 9," the most educated and professional slate the PUP had ever fielded, including Evan X Hyde, Said Musa, young lawyers Lois Young and Edwin Flowers and prominent educators Signa York and Leroy Taegar. The UDP took all nine seats.⁸⁶ But this seemed to be just the beginning of a UDP roll, and in country-wide Town Board elections scheduled for late 1978, the UDP were expected to replicate their victorious performance. Belying their municipal character, the UDP campaign in these elections was based on the inter-related themes of fear of independence and alarums of communism: if Belize tried to go for independence without a settlement, they said, Guatemala would invade, and Price would call for Cuban assistance. And if the PUP won these municipal elections it would hasten the pace toward creating a communist State.

The 1978 Town Board elections on 20 December 1978, therefore, were far more important than their municipal character would imply, particularly in San Ignacio. That town had become the base of the head of the Belize Mission at the UN, Assad Shoman, who had run there in the 1974 elections for the PUP and lost narrowly to the local favourite and incumbent, the charismatic and popular Joe Andrews. Price had then made him a senator and a minister. In 1975 the PUP had retaken the town board from the UDP, and in 1978 the UDP were confident of taking it back, in keeping with what appeared to be a national swing in its favour. After Price, Shoman was the figure that the UDP most loved to hate. As an activist in UBAD and PAC, he had been declared a communist by the NIP, the PUP and the media, and his presence in the PUP was owed only to Price's desire to use him in the independence struggle. Most PUP leaders still considered him a communist and an enemy. San Ignacio had become a national centre of sorts for the

⁸⁶ *The Reporter*, 11 December 1977.

independence struggle; annual solidarity concerts were staged there, with musicians and artists from the Caribbean and Central America.

Price had established the pattern of calling elections on Wednesdays, and the 1978 town board elections were no exception. Following a long campaign where the main attack by the UDP was that the PUP in San Ignacio was being led to communism, the mostly Roman Catholic population went to church the Sunday before election day to be handed a leaflet by nuns in their full white habits. The leaflet displayed a picture of the iconic Sacred Heart Church in the middle of town and was entitled "Keep Your Church Doors Open". It warned that a vote for the PUP would be a vote for atheistic communism.⁸⁷ Three days later, the PUP lost the elections, and the UDP won 35 of the 49 seats, capturing five of seven Town Boards, including San Ignacio.⁸⁸ General elections were due in 1979, and nobody was betting on the PUP.

The majority of PUP cabinet members argued that the PUP was losing ground everywhere only because of the fear of communism fanned by the presence of Shoman in their ranks. Shoman resigned from Cabinet and from the Senate, and for the next few months walked the Cayo North constituency, held regular "liberation classes" explaining the importance of independence to the people and promoting a socialist society, while quietly supporting the continuing independence initiative behind the scenes. He maintained contacts with the Guatemala guerrilla and wrote, along with Barcelona immigrant Joan Duran,⁸⁹ in the newly created monthly journal *Gombay*, replete with accounts of regional and global liberation struggles and photos and quotes from the *Sandinistas*, Fidel and Ché.

In that journal during much of 1979, Shoman criticised the PUP for becoming tepid on the independence issue and, defying the charges of communism, the journal fully supported the struggle and then the triumph

⁸⁷ See copy at Appendix 6.

⁸⁸ Belize Gazette, 6 January 1979.

⁸⁹ Duran arrived in Belize with his wife Montse in 1972, and soon after he made Shoman's acquaintance he was preparing booklets, posters etc. for use in the independence campaign at home and at the UN and was instrumental in organizing the solidarity concerts in San Ignacio.

in 1979 of Maurice Bishop's socialist New Jewel Movement in Grenada and of the *Sandinistas* in Nicaragua, among other progressive forces in the region and the world. But the main focus was taking independence soon, and in an article entitled "Unilateral Independence: The Only Way"⁹⁰ he argued that after 17 years of fruitless negotiations, it should be clear that a negotiated settlement was an impossible dream. He affirmed that Belize has the right simply to decide to take its independence whenever it wishes, without asking anyone's permission. The gradualist approach to independence, however, had blunted the people's image of colonialism, once correctly seen as brutal and inhuman, now viewed as a soothingly paternalistic necessity. Guatemala's strategy of creating fear in the population by occasional sabre-rattling, along with the widespread hysteria about the spread of communism engendered in the Cold War, had paid dividends.

He said that the UDP had purposely set out to create fear and revulsion towards independence and that their stating that a negotiated settlement must come before independence gave Guatemala a veto over Belize's independence. He argued that Belize need not fear a Guatemalan invasion because Guatemala needed its army to suppress its own people. An invasion of Belize would spark off greater guerrilla activity, general strikes, etc. Belize, he noted, also had links with other liberation movements in the isthmus, and the huge support Belize had internationally would come into play. "That prospect of regional upheaval would be so great that even the United States of America," he wrote, "would feel constrained to impose a restraining hand". The article concluded that "Guatemala's threat of invasion is a bluff. If Belize does not call that bluff, it will never be independent. Belize needs to declare its independence as soon as possible. Unilaterally. It's the only way".

But the reality was that, as an independent journal declared, "As the major architect of the PUP government's original hard line policy on independence, former Attorney General Assad Shoman today stands almost alone in maintaining an allegiance to those principles with which the PUP was so recently enamoured". *Breakdown* described two resolutions passed by a PUP national convention on 11 February 1979, which, it explained, would "rule out the possibility of a Third World (read Cuba)

⁹⁰ *Gombay*, December 1978.

defence guarantee and furthermore quash any idea about unilateral independence, a strategy known to be favoured by Mr Shoman. What the resolution does in practical terms is to significantly reduce Belize's latitude at the bargaining table," and concluded that "independence, for 30 years the *raison d'être* of the PUP, was being relegated to the back burner".⁹¹ Price's National Day Address on 10 September 1979 was described by the Governor as "anodyne," although he thought that "even in the rather gentle form presented [it] would not win him many voters since there is still an inordinate fear of Guatemala and of insecure independence".⁹² In his address Price spoke extensively about that fear and the need to overcome it, and said that "there is no certainty at this time when independence will come to pass".

Price himself, however, was very much afraid—not of Guatemala or of independence, but of losing the elections and therefore losing the chance for Belize to become independent without any strings tying it to Guatemala and with its territory intact. The anti-communist hysteria was at its height on the rostrum, in the media, from the pulpit and within the top leadership of the PUP, and a delegation from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry had told Price that if Shoman ran as a candidate for the PUP, it would campaign for the UDP. A worried Price even tried to get Shoman to step down as a candidate, but the Cayo North constituency rejected his request.

Meanwhile, the US State Department had made it known to the British that the Guatemalans were playing for time in the "hope that elections in Belize will produce a new, and more amenable, government," and they considered it "unlikely that the Guatemalans would seriously negotiate on Belize until after the Belizean general elections".⁹³ Accordingly, no talks were held for the whole of 1979; Romeo Lucas had decided to wait out the Belize elections, confident that the UDP would win and Guatemala's position would be strengthened.

A few days before the 1979 general elections in Belize, the US Ambassador in Guatemala called on President Lucas and reported

⁹¹ "PUP: A Reluctant Right Turn," in *Breakdown* magazine, no. 3, 1979, p. 6.

⁹² McEntee to Falconer, 6 September 1979, FCO 99/389.

⁹³ FRUS, 1977-1980, p. 97.

that “the President then said he believed the current impasse with the United Kingdom re Belize could be salutary. Elections in Belize are due soon. He believes the opposition will win. The opposition knows that independence is not a viable alternative for Belize . . . The President said Guatemala could get along with a Lindo government”.⁹⁴ He emphasised that “an independent Belize will fall easy prey to the Cubans”. Indeed, the UDP election campaign focused on the scare that if elected a new PUP government would bring in the Cubans and make the country communist.

In May 1979 the UDP’s *Beacon* carried a gaudy first page banner headline story, stating that for the past six months two trade unions infiltrated by communist leaders in the PUP had been receiving “communist goods” from Russia via Cuba, some of which were labelled “medicines,” but could well be arms.⁹⁵ Lindo told foreign correspondents that the first danger to Belize was “communism, which every day is nearer, with Castro’s threats and the recent changes in Nicaragua”. He declared that “the PUP is infested with communists, but with communists in the true sense of the word”. Guatemalan Vice-President Francisco Villagran Kramer had said that “If Lindo wins the elections, he will not seek immediate liberation, but rather a negotiated settlement by which Great Britain and Guatemala will jointly defend Belize”. Lindo then told a Mexican newspaper: “with regard to Villagran Kramer’s statements, we think he said the truth, except that he was not the adequate person to make the statement”. He proclaimed: “Let us be realistic. We don’t need independence here. What we need is protection from the United States”.⁹⁶

The 1979 UN Resolution and Belize Elections

In 1979 the Caribbean resolution was once again strengthened by the addition of the following operative paragraph, which was directed more at the UK and the US than at Guatemala:

⁹⁴ FRUS, 1977-1980, pp. 102-103.

⁹⁵ *The Beacon*, 19 May 1979.

⁹⁶ Interview by Blanche Pietrich in *uno más uno*, quoted in *Gombay*, November 1979, p. 12.

[The General Assembly] 4. Calls upon the parties concerned to refrain from exerting any pressure or the use of threats or force against the Government and people of Belize to prevent the full exercise of their inalienable right to self-determination, independence and territorial integrity.⁹⁷

In the Fourth Committee, Guatemala alone put forward a document containing seven proposed amendments to all the substantive paragraphs of the Belize Resolution.⁹⁸ On 5 November they were all defeated by huge majorities.⁹⁹ On the same day, the Caribbean resolution, sponsored by 50 Member States, was approved by 123 votes to 1, with 9 abstentions. Guatemala was the only country to vote against. In the General Assembly on 21 November the resolution was adopted by 134 votes to 0, with 8 abstentions.¹⁰⁰ Guatemala did not participate in the vote.

After the vote, Guatemala noted that the opposition party in Belize, “which tends to be the majority party,” had asked for a moratorium on independence, that Guatemala had taken the same position over the years, and it took as a positive sign that there was a convergence of views. Elections in Belize, he reported, were taking place even as he spoke. He hoped, and like many including the US and the UK, expected that Price and the PUP would lose the elections and that the party with which Guatemala had a “convergence of views” would win.

The general elections in Belize were contested squarely on the issue of independence: the PUP promised to move quickly to independence with or without a settlement but with a British defence guarantee. All indications were that the UDP would win and carry out its platform of delaying independence for 10 years and then proceed to independence only if an agreement was reached with Guatemala first.¹⁰¹ The stakes

⁹⁷ A/C.4/34/L.14, 31 October 1979, UN.

⁹⁸ A/C.4/34/L.15, 1 November 1979, UN.

⁹⁹ A/C.4/34/SR.24, 5 November 1979, UN, pp. 5-8.

¹⁰⁰ A/34/PV.75, 101, 21 November, 1979, UN.

¹⁰¹ UDP Manifesto, *PUP Manifesto for the New and Progressive Revolution, 1979-1984*, Belize City, 1979.

were the highest they had ever been or would ever be. Godfrey Smith tells the story:

The first sign that a major upset was in the making was the announcement that UDP's leader Dean Lindo had been sensationally defeated by Said Musa . . . When the official results were declared it was a hugely surprising victory for the PUP . . . A dismayed and shocked Lindo managed to issue a brief statement describing the defeat as "a great loss for Belizean democracy" and predicting that the new PUP government would accelerate its move towards its already well-established communist ideology . . . The central accusation was that the general elections had been stolen by the PUP government using rigged ballots printed by a friendly communist government [Cuba]. The ballots were supposedly chemically treated which caused UDP "Xs" to disappear when marked by the voters on the ballot with a pencil.¹⁰²

Campaigning during 1979 had been relentless; the existence of Belize as an independent entity was at stake. At that time there was a strong, progressive trade union movement nation-wide, and several of its leaders went to San Ignacio, symbolic also because it was near the border with Guatemala, to lend support to the independence movement, while campaigning against PUP candidates, who they considered corrupt, in their own districts. In the event, Shoman won his seat, the PUP won the general elections and the policy of an early and decided move to independence without a settlement was reconquered. Governor McEntee explained the importance of the results to the FCO: "The over-all turnout was very high, 89.89%. In the event, therefore, the result must reflect positive support for the PUP's main election platform, secure independence as soon as possible . . . The vote for Shoman and Musa seems to be positive support by the newly-registered voters (who are in the 18-25 age group) for these two radical and uncompromising radical youthful leaders".¹⁰³

¹⁰² Godfrey Smith, pp. 225-226.

¹⁰³ McEntee to FCO, 22 November 1979, FCO 99/389

The Impact of Changes in Central America

Throughout 1978 and much of 1979 the mood in Belize seemed to have shifted from confident espousal of independence in the early 70s to one of fear and hesitation, and it appeared independence would be postponed indefinitely. What changed in 1979, allowing an endorsement by the people of taking independence with or without a settlement? Undoubtedly the *Sandinista* victory on 19 July 1979 and the rise in guerrilla victories in Guatemala and El Salvador had the greatest impact and returned confidence to the majorities in Belize that the country could move safely to independence without Guatemala's approval.

This mood was caught in the headline of the British newspaper *The Guardian*: "Belize: Waiting for its enemies to fall":

Belizeans are now watching with abated breath, and sometimes barely-concealed delight, as thousands of young revolutionaries push Guatemala and . . . El Salvador, to the brink of civil war . . . the overthrow of the old oligarchies in both countries, in the wake of the Nicaraguan revolution, would almost certainly mean the dropping of the territorial claim and enable Mr Price to lead the colony to full independence after nearly two decades of frustration.

The article suggests that the Belizean people, keenly aware of the liberation wars underway in Central America, and especially after the *Sandinista* victory, were losing the fear engendered by Guatemala and its local allies crying "communism" and highlighting the danger of a Guatemalan invasion. "The fears of some here," it states, "that the return of the Leftist firebrand Mr Assad Shoman to the government, combined with the small local Cuban link through the *Gombay* group of intellectuals and trade union leaders, might set alarm bells ringing in Guatemala City and Washington, seem to have been forgotten in anticipation of a reshuffle of the Central American political map".¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ *The Guardian*, 15 February 1980, p. 7.

“Independence With or Without a Settlement”

Although Ridley continued to press Belize to consider land cession, he soon realised that it would be as impossible to convince Belize to give up land as to get Guatemala to withdraw that demand. With the overwhelming majority of Latin America in Belize’s camp, the US would find it harder to continue abstaining on what was becoming the Caribbean/Latin American resolution. It was President Carter’s last year in the White House, and by mid-year it was fairly clear that Ronald Reagan would be the next President, and that he would impose a different world-view and make it increasingly difficult for Belize to gain the support of the US. The elections in Belize had given the PUP a fresh mandate to lead Belize to an early independence, and the virtually unanimous support at the UN convinced the Government of Belize that it must move quickly and achieve independence while the international situation was so favourable.

At a seminal meeting with Price in London in January 1980, Ridley insisted that serious efforts to reach a settlement with Guatemala must continue. Price was no less adamant about the futility of negotiations and the need to put together a credible defence strategy for the independent Belize. Price wanted to renew the pledge to submit any proposals for a settlement to a referendum, but Ridley noted that if in the end Belize were to proceed to “unilateral independence . . . we would not wish this to be put to a referendum and therefore no commitment to hold a referendum should be made”. Here then was the first firm suggestion made by Ridley to Price that the UK would contemplate “unilateral independence” for Belize—and therefore that Britain would provide a defence guarantee. The surprise election results in Belize had clearly had their effect.

Ridley referred often to the Guatemalan fear of communist infiltration through Belize, and wondered how they could be given a guarantee that this would not occur. He admitted that “it was a UK responsibility to put any kind of defence guarantee together,” and suggested that at the beginning of the talks the UK should announce its intention to move Belize to independence with a time limit, and that “we should try immediately afterwards to start the independence procedures and

get the Bill on the Statute Book. If the talks failed, we could then proceed. This pressure could be useful. As long as we continued to behave as if Guatemalan sanction was necessary for independence, they had a veto”.¹⁰⁵

This was an important change in British policy. The Labour Minister, David Owen, had assured Lindo, the US and Guatemala that there would have to be a settlement before independence, thereby giving Guatemala a veto over Belize's independence. Here now was the Conservative minister talking to Price about a “unilateral independence” and of denying Guatemala a veto. At last the British seemed to understand what Price had been proclaiming for years. Ridley insisted, however, that it was essential for negotiations to take place and to last at least one or two days before they broke down, in order to show good faith attempts. In terms of the negotiations, Price reiterated that what could be offered was sea access in the south, a modern equivalent to the cart road of the 1859 Treaty, and a continued international or British military presence after independence to allay Guatemala's fears about communist infiltration. Ridley wondered whether this was enough.

The US obviously did not think so. On 16 January Cyrus Vance sent a message to Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington, stating that “Our conclusion is that Guatemalan acquiescence is critical to prospects for a reasonably lasting solution. Two judgments are critical to this assessment: First, that under present circumstances, Belizean independence in the face of Guatemalan opposition would unleash significant destabilizing forces—in Belize itself, in Guatemala, in Central America, and in the Caribbean. It would invite increased Cuban involvement, and be detrimental to US and, we believe, Western interests generally. Second, that any process that excludes Guatemala from some role in the negotiations leading to Belizean independence would rapidly prove unworkable—regardless of what pressures the United States might unilaterally bring to bear on Guatemala”.

Categorizing unilateral independence for Belize as a “destabilizing event,” Vance warned that “Guatemalan preoccupation with potential expansion of Cuba's role in Central America through Belize has been

¹⁰⁵ Record of Price/Ridley meeting on 15 January 1980, FCO, 23 January 1980, PF.

heightened by events and trends of the past year. I share some of these concerns. Cuba has become more active in the Caribbean and in Central America. The changes in governments in Grenada and Nicaragua have given the Cubans footholds. We are trying to counter these Cuban advances but conservative governments such as Guatemala realize that they are more exposed. In short I do not believe that the Central American and Caribbean areas, already in turmoil with major Western interests threatened, can afford another destabilizing event that creates a potential opportunity, direct or indirect, for Cuba. Thus a negotiated solution is imperative”.¹⁰⁶

At the State Department on 18 January, Ridley was told that “Castro, after many years of extreme caution, last year abandoned this caution when he saw the opposition to Somoza gaining ground. Castro sees a new opportunity for effective revolution in El Salvador and is beginning to provide greater assistance to the extreme Left in that country. Wherever there is evidence of a real vacuum in the region, it appears that Castro will be increasingly willing to take advantage of such targets of opportunity”. Minister Ridley agreed with this assessment, [and] described Price as having grown up as a revolutionary who has sought Belize independence all his life. “If Price is frustrated in seeking independence, the hotheads in his party may become uncontrollable and seek help from Cuba. Of course, Price has resisted”.

Ridley assured the US that the UK must go forward with independence but that negotiations with Guatemala would continue. He explained that Price will offer maritime rights in the Caribbean, suggest that the UK build the road according to the 1859 treaty, and ‘tidy up the boundary but without substantial territorial concessions’. Belize will then guarantee no Cuban infiltration through its territory. He said that independence would likely be in about 18 months, and that “the UK would be willing to keep some troops in Belize for an unspecified but limited time after independence”. He repeated that Premier Price would not cede territory to Guatemala.¹⁰⁷

Meanwhile, the situation across the border was heating up.

¹⁰⁶ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, Washington, January 16, 1980, FRUS, 1977-1980, pp.104-105.

¹⁰⁷ FRUS, 1977-1980, 106-109.

Civil War in Guatemala

After the assassinations of Fuentes Mohr, Colom Argueta and many other popular leaders, the guerrilla group *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (EGP) issued a declaration in June 1979 stating that those two men had represented for the middle classes and many in the popular sectors the possibility of a democratic alternative of political transformation and economic reforms that would benefit the people. After their murders the only alternative remaining was a struggle uniting the popular masses with democratic and progressive forces to achieve revolutionary change.¹⁰⁸ In September 1979 another guerrilla organisation surfaced, Organización del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA), led by Comandante Gaspar Ilom (Rodrigo Asturias, son of Nobel Prize-winning writer Miguel Ángel Asturias), bringing to four the active guerrilla groups throughout Guatemala: FAR, PGT, EGP and now ORPA. By the end of 1979 the civil war in Guatemala took on a new dimension. It transcended national frontiers, and was seen not only as a sub-regional conflict but as an “East-West” conflict. The guerrilla groups had excellent communications and even their own offices in several countries, and the government of Guatemala lost credibility and went on the defensive. The military continued their terror campaign against the population, especially against the indigenous people.

The Jesuits of Guatemala and Central America issued a document on 11 January 1980, “The pain and hope of the people of Guatemala”. It denounced that “here a system of anti-Christian power dominates, one that kills life and persecutes those who fight for life. Here people are kidnapped, tortured and killed, and the terror is both selective and indiscriminate and massive. In the first 10 months of 1979, the so-called Death Squad killed 3,252 people. The indigenous people of Guatemala, more than half of the population and producers of the greater part of the national wealth, are exploited and discriminated against. The Latin American Church affirmed in Puebla (Mexico): ‘Fear of Marxism prevents many from facing up to the oppressive reality of liberal capitalism’. The Latin American Church has described the situation of inhuman poverty in which millions of Latin

¹⁰⁸ Cited in Villagran Kramer, *Biografía*, p. 171.

Americans live as a devastating and humiliating scourge, and many Catholic bishops in many countries have raised their voices. God is present in the struggles of our peoples for justice. The Church has exhorted all Christians of this continent, without class distinctions, to accept and embrace the cause of the poor, which it calls the cause of Christ. It is therefore our obligation to contribute to this struggle for justice that represents the hope of the poor and the recognition of the one true God”.¹⁰⁹

Then on 31 January 1980 a group of indigenous peasants peacefully occupied the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City to call attention to the extreme cruelty of the military’s repression in Quiché province. After only four hours of negotiations, and disregarding the pleas of the Spanish ambassador, the police entered the premises by force; soon after the place was in flames and 39 persons died in the disaster. A well-known visitor who had been involved in negotiations with Belize also perished: former Foreign Minister Adolfo Molina Orantes. Subsequently the guerrilla war intensified and Spain (which had until then acted as the intermediary in diplomatic communications with Britain) broke off diplomatic relations with Guatemala, which it was not to renew until 1985. Guatemala was now more internationally isolated than ever. However, the election of Ronald Reagan in the USA gave it renewed hope.

The guerrilla forces were openly proclaiming their support for Belize’s independence. The EGP declared that it saw “**Belizean independence as part of our struggle**” in a manifesto published internationally on 26 October 1979 in return for the release of the EGP’s hostage, Jorge García Granados, the same notorious diplomat of the 1957 crisis in Belize.¹¹⁰ And in June 1980 the FAR issued a manifesto that affirmed their solidarity “with all the peoples of the world in their anti-imperialist struggle, especially those of the Caribbean and Central America. Let us support the struggle of the Salvadoran people for their

¹⁰⁹ “*Ante el dolor y la esperanza del pueblo de Guatemala,*” statement by the Jesuits of Central America, published in *El Gráfico*, a Guatemala City newspaper, on 16 January 1980. Author’s translation, a condensed version.

¹¹⁰ *The Guardian* (London), *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, 26 October 1979.

definitive liberation. **Let us support the independence of the people of Belize**".¹¹¹

The EGP had active guerrilla fronts in Quiche, Huehuetenango and Guatemala City, and they were becoming more and more active. The government and the army realized that the situation was adverse for them, and they asked Israel to advise them on intelligence gathering and in new methods for combatting the insurrection, and to find new ways to acquire war *matériel*.¹¹²

There is no doubt that the course of the guerrilla war in Guatemala in 1979-1982 made it increasingly difficult for the government to even contemplate military action against Belize. In 1979 the rebels were active in over half the national territory and in June 1981 they launched a general offensive; "the army suffered heavily and was greatly stretched". The guerrilla war was at its highest in the period just before and after Belize's independence, also significantly affecting the economy and leading to panicky capital flight: between January 1979 and October 1981 foreign reserves fell from \$774 million to \$81 million, "intense rebel activity in September [the month Belize became independent] having prompted the export of \$119 million in 5 days".¹¹³ The action intensified further, and in January 1982 the four guerrilla groups formed the *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (URNG). This opened the door to greater international recognition as well as to increased supplies and support from socialist movements in the region and world-wide. The URNG had permanent political commissions in many European countries, resulting in an internationalisation of the conflicts in Guatemala and in Central America generally.

Carter's ban on military sales and aid, initiated in 1977, was effective until after 1985, despite President Reagan's attempts to overturn it in July 1981. Nevertheless, between 1977 and 1985 the military had nearly quadrupled in size, thanks to critical assistance in both supplies and advisers from Israel. Its provision of Arava aircraft, arms and

¹¹¹ FAR, "Manifiesto de Junio de 1980 al pueblo de Guatemala y a todos los pueblos del mundo," cited in Villagran Kramer, *Biografía*, pp. 204-205. Author's translation.

¹¹² Villagran Kramer, *Biografía*, pp. 206-207.

¹¹³ Dunkerley, p. 488.

artillery in 1975 was only the beginning, and by 1980 Israel had “consolidated its position as the country’s principal source of weapons, when the M-1 was replaced by the [Israeli] Galil as the army’s standard infantry rifle”.¹¹⁴

The US government was fully cognizant about the extent of the Guatemalan government’s repression: “the powerful Guatemalan ultra-right, which includes substantial elements of the middle class as well as the wealthy, and has close ties to the military, police, and rural militias, has a long tradition of employing force, including terrorism, against its opponents”.¹¹⁵ Robert Pastor, Carter’s close advisor on Latin America and Caribbean Affairs in the National Security Council, advised that “the Guatemalan government is one of the most brutal regimes in the world . . . Their policy is to eliminate all Communists, and their definition is so broad, it would probably include Zbig [Zbigniew Brzezinski, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs]”.¹¹⁶

The Carter administration found that it could not influence the Lucas regime on human rights issues. Like Laugerud waiting for a Lindo victory in Belize in 1979, in 1980 Lucas was waiting for a Reagan victory. Pastor wrote that “Lucas expects a Reagan victory, and believes that Reagan is not only sympathetic to Lucas’s strategy to stop subversion, but indeed would be supportive. It does not make any sense for him to modify that strategy as long as he thinks Reagan will be elected”.¹¹⁷

It is in this general context within Guatemala that Belize was taking its final steps in the international arena to secure support for its bid for independence.

No Sovereign Military Bases

On 30 April, 1980, one day before going to Belize to meet Price, Ridley told State Department officials that “the British Cabinet is in

¹¹⁴ Dunkerley, p. 489.

¹¹⁵ FRUS, 1977-1980, p. 118.

¹¹⁶ FRUS, 1977-1980, p. 125.

¹¹⁷ FRUS, 1977-1980, pp. 82, 117, 125-128, 137-141.

a “bullish” mood about the Belize issue and wants it settled. He said Price has been adamant on not giving up land but otherwise appears to be ready to make accommodations. He admitted that “for such a small country, cession of territory was inflicting damage unnecessarily.” There was a possibility of the British keeping a “sovereign” military base in Belize. Price, he thought, would welcome it and it might be reassuring to the Guatemalans. He repeated that if the negotiations do not progress the British are prepared to let the Guatemalans know they would have to fight the British if they invade Belize.¹¹⁸

The following day, Ridley met Price and his team to agree on the parameters for the upcoming negotiations with Guatemala. Ridley reiterated that “we are ultimately prepared to move to independence without agreement, but we must spend much time on negotiations”. He said that the **Cabinet had agreed to keep a purely British force in Belize after independence, but the UK would like a sovereign area or two for military bases.** Shoman asked whether the sovereign bases were to be in perpetuity; Ridley replied that “sovereignty is sovereignty”. Said Musa said that it was difficult to accept sovereign bases in an independent Belize. This prompted an angry outburst from Ridley, who had told the US that Belize might accept such sovereign bases: “there aren’t so many mugs and fools as we are to commit millions to defend people like you. If you’re not prepared to help us, why should we be prepared to help you? We’re going a very very long way to help you”. Despite this offensive outburst, Belize maintained its opposition to a British sovereign base on its territory.¹¹⁹

Ridley added that the US had made it known to Guatemala that “the UK will not give Guatemala a veto over independence and that if necessary we’ll go ahead unilaterally”. He noted that the US would welcome a change if it was “democratic middle of the road,” but that they were terrified of the Cubans taking control. That was the main US concern, he insisted, and whatever else they said about Belize was peripheral. He asked Price whether if in the negotiations a small strip

¹¹⁸ FRUS 1977-1980, pp. 112-114.

¹¹⁹ “Meeting with Minister Nicholas Ridley, 1 May 1980,” PF.

of land would seal an agreement Belize would agree; Price replied that there would be no land cession.

The following day, Ridley reported that he had told the new Leader of the Opposition, Dr Aranda, that the MOU was dead because both he and Price were against renewal. He again asked Mr Price if he were willing to consider land cession, perhaps of the cayes; Price said his position against any cession was unchangeable.¹²⁰ Ridley went back to the fear of Cuba, which he said the UK shared, and asked Price whether he would accept some of the Cubans then gathered in the Peruvian Embassy in Havana, since “it would be helpful if you’d take enemies of Castro. This would be a plus in Guatemala’s eyes”. Price absolutely refused.

Talks between the three governments were held in Bermuda on 19 and 20 May 1980.¹²¹ Ridley proffered a six-point agenda: security, economic matters, maritime boundaries, land communications, constitutional issues and territorial boundaries. After discussion on each of these topics, separate committees were appointed to explore the questions of land, security and maritime boundaries.¹²²

At the meeting of the committee charged with discussing land, Ridley proposed looking at “cosmetic solutions,” such as that the UK retain part of Belize and freeze it for 25 years, its eventual fate left open, but Foreign Minister Castillo Valdés said he didn’t see how that could lead to a solution, since territory was the key to the problem. Shoman laid out Belize’s position:

Belize did not recognize any rights whatsoever in Guatemala to decide on the future of Belize or to negotiate over Belize . . . [and] no amount of threats or military might could shake us from our commitment to preserve our sovereignty and territorial

¹²⁰ “Meeting with Mr Ridley, 2 May 1980,” PF.

¹²¹ See British preparatory briefs for the meeting at “Anglo-Guatemalan Talks Bermuda 19-20 May 1980,” FCO 99/633.

¹²² “Anglo-Guatemalan Talks, First Plenary Session, 11:15 a.m. Bermuda 19 May 1980,” and “Second Plenary Session, 4:00 p.m.,” Belizean record of talks, PF.

integrity . . . we are not prepared to allow Guatemala to exercise a veto over our independence for much longer.¹²³

The committee assigned to deal with security issues reported that they had defined the objective as “the necessity to create a force that prevents communist infiltration into Belize and Guatemala”. They had agreed that this could be accomplished by Britain maintaining “the necessary forces after independence to stop the communist threat until Belize is in a position to take on this responsibility”. There would be a military aid treaty between Belize and Guatemala, and mutual commitments not to allow the territory of one to be used by mercenaries intending to invade the other. Belize would also become a signatory to the Rio treaty and hopefully (for Guatemala) join CONDECA as well.¹²⁴

A confident George Price accepted the invitation of the *Sandinista* government to attend the first anniversary celebration of the revolutionary victory on 19 July 1980, where he addressed a crowd of 600,000 people and declared that “A Revolution is the driving force which changes history and can lead us to a better world. The *Sandinista* Revolution is a historic and irreversible fact. It is an invincible force with the support and participation of the people”. The main speaker was Fidel Castro, with whom Price and his small delegation met in the course of their visit. Fidel was keen to know about the development of Belize, particularly in agriculture, and once again reiterated his government's total support for Belize's secure independence and territorial integrity. Nothing was said at that meeting about military support from Cuba, but the Guatemalans, the British and the US didn't know that.¹²⁵

On 25 July, the House of Representatives in Belize passed a resolution urging the Government of Belize “to initiate the measures necessary to bring Belize to a safe and secure independence with or without the agreement of the Government of Guatemala” and calling upon the United Kingdom to discharge its responsibility to protect an independent Belize against the imperialistic demands of the Government of Guatemala for

¹²³ “Meeting of Committee on Land,” 11:00 a.m., 20 May 1980, PF.

¹²⁴ “Third Plenary Session,” 12 noon, 20 May 1980, PF.

¹²⁵ Personal notes from the author, who was present.

Belizean land and its threat of military force arising out of the Anglo-Guatemalan dispute.¹²⁶

In August 1980 Ridley once again visited Belize and said that “in New York the Guatemalans put forward some positions which were not so unreasonable”. He urged Belize to bear in mind “the balance between the concessions we need to make and going ahead unilaterally . . . a settlement is better than the risk of going it alone”.¹²⁷ Price retorted that “The proposals do not square with the UN resolution for they include land cession of the Sapodilla and Ranguana Cayes and the proposals involve a violation of the sovereignty of Belize”. It was therefore important to plan for alternative routes to independence.

Ridley complained that “there is no use negotiating if when things are negotiated and people go home then what is negotiated is promptly repudiated”. But he was being unfair: Belize was not negotiating territory, had never done so or indicated it ever would do so, and had in the clearest possible terms told Britain it should not do so. He was also not being entirely up front with the Belizeans. The day after that meeting in Belize City he went to Guatemala and met with President General Romeo Lucas, and told him that “we would want to remove British troops as soon as possible after independence and this would give us a means of putting pressure on Price to negotiate satisfactory arrangements for his own security”. The General replied that if the British left, Price would inevitably ask Cuba to help defend Belize, to which Ridley riposted that “Price might still invite Cuba and Nicaraguan intervention to help him win independence through terrorist activity if British troops were to remain in Belize and an attempt were to be made to prolong the colonial relationship indefinitely”.¹²⁸ While the British were trying to placate the fascists with imagined scenarios, Belize was busy creating growing international solidarity with its cause.

¹²⁶ “Belize House of Representatives votes for Secure Independence and NO land session,” Belize, 25 July 1980.

¹²⁷ “Memorandum, 11 August 1980, Old Government House, Belize City,” PF.

¹²⁸ “Record of a meeting between the Minister of State, Mr Nicholas Ridley, and the PPresident of Guatemala, General Romeo Lucas García, at 1700 on 1 August 1980 in Guatemala City,” Mexico and Caribbean Department, FCO, August 1980, PF.

The Significance of Solidarity

Led by the Belize Independence Secretariat and supported by trade unions, students and members of the public, the cause of Belize's independence won many adherents in the region as well as in other parts of the world. Beginning in 1978, solidarity concerts jointly organized by Shoman and Catalonian immigrant Joan Duran in San Ignacio, a town near to Belize's western border with Guatemala, were politico-cultural events in support of Belize's independence. Apart from Belizeans, there were artists from Central America, including Guatemala, Cuba and the English-speaking Caribbean. It was there that the Nicaraguan Luis Enrique Mejia Godoy authored the song that would become the unofficial anthem of the independence struggle, *Belice Vencerá*, with the words "Ya Da Fu We Belize,"¹²⁹ later used by Lord Laro in his own song championing Belize's sovereignty, *Tell Guatemala leave Belize Alone*. People came from all over the country to enjoy these concerts and support the independence cause.

Of great importance were the many journalists, academics and writers from countries of the Americas who wrote articles and books against Guatemala's claim and for Belize's independence: in Mexico, journalists Luis Suárez and Blanche Pietrich of *uno más uno*, the Argentines Stella Caloni and Roberto Bardini, whose book¹³⁰ was the only Spanish-language one explaining and promoting Belize's cause. El Salvador's Fabio Castillo, who exposed the 1972 Guatemala-Salvador plot to invade Belize and the Costa Rican Danilo Camacho, worked hard with their associates in all the Central American countries to build support for Belizean independence without strings. In Honduras, Jorge Arturo Reina, Vice-Chancellor (Rector) of the national university, along with many students, actively supported Belize. In England Greg Chamberlain (*The Guardian*) and Hugh O'Shaunessy (The Financial Times) and the famous writer Graham Greene, first sent to meet Price in Belize by Omar Torrijos, were very helpful. A team of university film makers

¹²⁹ In the local Creole, it means "Belize belongs to us".

¹³⁰ Roberto Bardini, *Belice: historia de una nación en movimiento*, Tegucigalpa, Ediciones Universitaria, 1978.

was sent to Belize by Torrijos to film documentaries in support of the independence struggle.

In the United States, the Belize Mission at the UN was active in courting members of the Black Caucus, personalities like Muhammad Ali, and NGO groups and academics, and held meetings with members of the Congress and the Senate. Robert Armstrong of the prestigious North American Congress for Latin America (NACLA) was helpful in lobbying for Belize. Price had friends at the Miami Herald who helped to spread the message, and increasingly since 1975 academics and community leaders in several US cities, concerned about human rights abuses in Guatemala and supportive of Belize's independence cause, reached out to assist Belize.

In addition to the efforts of the BIS in lobbying UK parliamentarians, a group of Belizeans in London, who were anti-Price and against early independence but very patriotic and totally against cession of any kind to Guatemala, was instrumental in getting several members of parliament to put questions to the government regarding its intentions to negotiate land cession to the Guatemalans or to agree on any settlement against the wishes of the people of Belize. This helped to make the British government aware that it was being watched by members of its own parliament and to tread carefully in its attempts to achieve a negotiated solution at the expense of Belize.

Last Talks in 1980

The CMCB met on 30 September 1980, and Price emphasised that the forthcoming negotiations with Guatemala must be in accordance with the terms of the UN resolution, and insisted that if the negotiations failed, "Belize must be prepared to move on without further delay to independence with a peaceful security arrangement".¹³¹ Ridley, who was attending a meeting of the Committee for the first time, confirmed that Britain had come to accept the 'parallel procedures' of negotiations and progress towards independence, and hoped that the UN resolution would urge the "continuation of negotiations and of progress towards independence with perhaps a terminal date for independence mentioned for the first time".

¹³¹ Record of meeting of CMCB on 30 September 1980, CMBCB (80)2, CSL.

Guatemala's Claim to Belize...

Rashleigh Jackson, who had become Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Guyana, urged the Committee to also plan as if the negotiations would fail and decide on an appropriate resolution and the necessary arrangements to provide for the future security of Belize.

Belize also got strong support from the extraordinary meeting of the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the NAM, which “reiterated its unconditional support for the early and secure independence of Belize with all its territory. It was agreed that the independence of Belize should no longer be delayed and that the Non-Aligned Movement will give its full support to an early time-table for the independence of Belize”.¹³²

At the negotiating table on 13 October 1980, Castillo Valdés repeated that a solution must include a territorial aspect. Ridley noted that pressure was mounting from the Commonwealth and at the UN for early independence for Belize, and that “we should see the negotiations in future as being two parallel courses—one, the process to independence, and the other a series of negotiations to meet the problems that still remain . . . Some items can be negotiated now, some in the next few months, some after Belize is independent, at which time the UK would cease to play a part.¹³³ Ridley then put forward a set of seventeen proposals he had prepared.¹³⁴ The following day Castillo replied that two things remained critical for Guatemala: territory had to be part of the solution and Guatemala would not accept unilateral independence, so that the only road forward was negotiations. Premier Price had the last word:

We want to be independent. On the road to independence we met this problem between the United Kingdom and Guatemala.

¹³² “Communiqué of the Extraordinary Meeting of the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Heads of delegations of the non-aligned countries to the General Assembly at its thirty-fifth session,” A/35/542, 17 October 1980, UN.

¹³³ “Anglo-Guatemalan Negotiations,” United Kingdom Mission, New York, 13 October 1980, Session 1, 11:20 a.m.,” PF.

¹³⁴ The seventeen proposals included sea concessions, economic cooperation, free ports, roads, oil pipelines, Belize’s entry into Central American institutions and a long lease of some southern cay to be negotiated after independence, and an undertaking by Belize that its territory will not be used for subversion against Guatemala.

You identify the problem as territorial. In the last century maybe it was possible to get land from the UK; but they no longer own Belize, so they cannot give land. It is up to the Belizean people, and we do not want to give land . . . So, like good politicians, go back and take this message: change the constitution. Your fight is between you and the UK. The UK, as a good UN member, will decolonise Belize. So let us live together in peace, and an independent Belize will be able to help Guatemala.¹³⁵

Ridley reported to US Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher that British forces would remain after independence and that the Guatemalans would accept no one else. If there were no agreement, the British would retain a garrison of sufficient size to counter any belligerent act by Guatemala. However, the British had cautioned Premier Price they would only defend Belize against an unprovoked attack from Guatemala, but not against Guatemalan military action launched in response to the presence of foreign troops in Belize, such as the *Sandinistas*. Ridley said that Price understood this condition and was prepared to make a pledge not to interfere in the internal affairs of Guatemala. However, Price did have some reservations about turning away what he termed “political refugees” from Guatemala. Christopher said the US would be reconsidering its previous position of abstaining on this question.¹³⁶

The following day, Ridley reported on this meeting to the CMCB; he stated that land cession was out of the question and that “he was confident that this was already accepted” by Guatemala. He confessed that “pressure upon UK at the United Nations on the Belize question had grown into such a momentum that they neither could, nor cared to, resist it”.¹³⁷ Ridley asked that the UN resolution avoid harsh language and do no more than “administer the ‘first shock’ of setting a date for independence”. Price and Shoman contradicted this assessment,

¹³⁵ “Anglo-Guatemalan Negotiations, United Kingdom Mission,” New York, 13 October 1980 Session 3, 14 October 1980.

¹³⁶ FRUS, 1977-1980, pp. 153-157.

¹³⁷ Note from Noel Sinclair on CMCB meeting, 17 October 1980, File SG/CF/BEL, CSL.

however, stating that the Guatemalans still insisted on land cession, and that the resolution should be a strong one.

The Final UN Resolution

In the Fourth Committee debates in October 1980, Skinner-Klee for Guatemala stated that “in 1979 the negotiations had marked time awaiting the outcome of the elections held in the United Kingdom and Belize,” and that the elections in Belize had revealed the Opposition (UDP) there to be “a decisive factor,” which “indicated the importance of that section of the population of Belize which did not share the Government’s attitude to independence and which had stated the need to postpone it until the people were ready to face the problems it would bring”.¹³⁸

The Guatemalans were so enamoured of the UDP position that they were still championing it and suggesting it represented the true position of the Belizean people almost a year after the people of Belize had decisively rejected it. UDP leader, Dr Theodore Aranda, addressed the Fourth Committee on 28 October 1980 and supported Guatemala’s position by arguing that Belize should not proceed to independence until there was a settlement of the dispute, since any defence arrangement would be uncertain, and “a military solution by itself would tend to perpetuate the problem”.¹³⁹ The message was clear, reiterating the UDP position to the world: no independence unless Guatemala agrees. Guatemalan delegate Skinner Klee requested that the statement by Dr Aranda be reproduced in full in the summary record of the meeting.¹⁴⁰

The British delegate stated that his government had sought a negotiated settlement with Guatemala, but that “it would be unfair to delay any longer the constitutional processes enabling Belize to move on to

¹³⁸ A/C.4/35/SR.17, 28 October 1980, UN, p. 10.

¹³⁹ Theodore Aranda, UDP Leader, to Fourth Committee, A/C.4/35/SR.18, 28 October 1980, pp. 3-6.

¹⁴⁰ Jorge Skinner Klee, Guatemala, to Fourth Committee, A/C. 4/35/SR.17, 28 October 1980, pp. 10-11.

independence”.¹⁴¹ And Rogers declared that Belize was not prepared to allow Guatemala to exercise a veto over Belizean independence.¹⁴²

Trinidad & Tobago, on behalf of 56 co-sponsors, including Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama, then introduced the pro-Belize resolution. The following day, a revised draft of the Belize resolution was introduced, the first time Belize had seen fit to revise a draft resolution. Why?

The United States, knowing that Britain was dead set on proceeding to independence in 1981, decided to support the resolution. The State Department memo that addressed the question noted that “the Belizeans have interpreted our abstention on past UN resolutions on Belize as a vote for Guatemala and have told us that this year’s UN vote will offer the last opportunity for the US to demonstrate where it stands on the question of Belizean independence. Our stand on this year’s resolution could set the tone for our future relations with an independent Belize”. The unanimous State Department recommendation to vote for the resolution advised:

The major drawback to a “yes” vote is the potential impact on Guatemala. To help limit any damage to our present and future bilateral relationship that our switch in vote might entail, we would plan to seek modifications in the resolution to make it more palatable to Guatemala. The desire of the Belizeans to obtain US support on the resolution may be sufficiently strong that they would be willing to ask their supporters to go along with some minor changes in the resolution, provided the provisions dealing with the independence deadline and rights of the Belizean people were not altered . . . Whether or not our modifications were accepted, our attempts to have them incorporated would signal to the Guatemalans that our vote in favor of the resolution did not reflect a US decision to punish them, and would demonstrate our continued sensitivity to their concerns.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ A/C.4/35/SR.19, 29 October 1980, UN, pp. 7-8.

¹⁴² A/C.4/35/SR.19, 29 October 1980, UN, p. 23.

¹⁴³ FRUS, 1977-1980, pp. 162-166.

This was the first time the Belize delegation at the UN engaged in negotiations with the US on the wording of the draft; the changes were agreed in negotiations between Assad Shoman and US Ambassador Andrew Young. The amendments in no way affected the scope or effectiveness of the resolution, and were really purely cosmetic. As members of the Guatemalan delegation remarked, they merely allowed the US to say it had negotiated changes which made it possible for them to support the resolution.¹⁴⁴

The resolution had several new critical elements. It declared that Belize should become independent by the following year and asked Britain to convene a constitutional conference. It requested the relevant organs of the UN to facilitate the attainment of Belize's independence and to guarantee its security and territorial integrity thereafter, and it called on Guatemala and independent Belize to work out arrangements for post-independence cooperation on matters of mutual concern.¹⁴⁵ The resolution was adopted in the Fourth Committee by 130 votes to 1 (Guatemala), with 8 abstentions. The most important development in the voting was that, for the first time, the United States of America voted in favour of the draft resolution.

The Resolution¹⁴⁶ passed to the General Assembly, where it was voted upon on 11 November, 1980, with a recorded vote of 139 to 0, with 7 abstentions.¹⁴⁷ Israel did not follow the US in voting yes, and maintained its record of never voting in favour of Belize's independence; its military and political ties to Guatemala were closer than those of the USA with Guatemala. All the members of the Security Council voted for it and no country voted against. The remarkable thing was that, in the case of Britain, paragraph 6 called on the UK "to continue to ensure the security and territorial integrity of Belize"; and in relation to the US, paragraph 7 called on the relevant organs of the UN "to facilitate the attainment of independence by Belize and to guarantee its security and territorial integrity thereafter".

¹⁴⁴ The original resolution is at A/C.4/35/L.8 and the amended one at A/C.4/35/L.8/Rev. 1.

¹⁴⁵ UNGA 35th Session, Official Records, 11 November, 1980, UN, pp. 214-215.

¹⁴⁶ For complete text see Appendix 8.

¹⁴⁷ UNGA, 35th Session, Official Records, 11 November 1980, UN, p. 997.

Both countries were acknowledging that Belize must become independent in 1981 and that its sovereignty and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by the UK and the UN.

Since almost all Latin American countries had supported the resolution, Shoman decided to take the battle to the very place that had been Guatemala's stronghold just a few years before, the Organisation of American States. Shoman's draft included in the operative paragraphs "The OAS resolves 1) To endorse the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 35/20 of November 11, 1980 on the question of Belize and 2) To offer its cooperation in keeping with the principles of self-determination to facilitate the constitutional evolution of Belize as a sovereign independent State of the Americas, in accordance with United Nations General Assembly Resolution 35/20 of November 11, 1980, and thereafter to assist the independent State of Belize to develop harmonious and friendly relations with its neighbours and other States in the hemisphere". The OAS vote on that resolution was taken on 27 November, with a vote of 18 in favour (including Argentina) and 7 abstentions, with only Guatemala voting against.¹⁴⁸ This endorsement of the UN resolution by the OAS, including its terms on territorial integrity and defence, was a resounding victory for Belizean diplomacy that few at the time thought it possible to achieve.

Belize now felt that with virtually unanimous support at both the UN and OAS, it must forge ahead quickly. Belize was not yet in the clear, since Britain, despite the UN resolution, was still refusing to finalise the defence guarantee, arguing that greater efforts must be made to reach a settlement with Guatemala, and it was still insisting that Belize consider land cession.

Inside Belize the hand of the *independentistas* was strengthened when in December 1980, confirming the change of the political landscape since 1979 and the determination of the majority to take independence, the PUP won a landslide victory in the Belize City Council elections on 17 December 1980. This undoubtedly helped the Belize negotiators with the British, and assisted the work of implementing the 1980 UN and

¹⁴⁸ OAS, Tenth Regular Session Washington DC, 19-27 November 1980: Proceedings, vol. 1, certified texts of the Resolutions, General Secretariat OAS, Washington, 1981.

OAS resolutions calling for an early and secure independence. This mood was not marred by the destruction by arson five days after the elections of the building housing the PUP headquarters and its newspaper, *The Belize Times*. “We will rebuild,” said Mr Price, “and nothing will stop the advance to the secure and safe independence of Belize with its territory intact”.

On 30 January 1980 a White Paper with the government's proposed terms for an independence constitution was introduced in the House. The UDP was still arguing that the dispute should be settled before independence, and Price observed that “to say in one breath that you are against land cession and in the next breath to say postpone independence until the dispute is settled was to be trapped in a destructive contradiction”. Price, aware of the people's fear of Guatemala and their faith in a British defence commitment, assured the House that his government had “selected the Monarchical System of Government as the initial constitutional move on attaining independence. The future may justify alternations when and where the circumstances warrant”.¹⁴⁹ He proposed a bipartisan committee of the Assembly to consider the Constitution, but the Opposition refused to serve. A nation-wide consultation with the people produced a virtually unanimous agreement with the monarchical system; only the Cayo North division proposed a republican system of government.

The Heads: Passport to Independence

Breakdown of Talks

At technical level negotiations in February 1981, Harry Courtenay headed the Belize delegation; Britain's team was led by Derek Day, Deputy Undersecretary of State in the FCO and Guatemala's by Jorge Skinner-Klee, who after a long preamble concluded that no solution was possible without land cession. The only one of Ridley's seventeen points that the Guatemalans showed any real interest in was the “long lease of some southern cayes”. Skinner-Klee said that apart from the

¹⁴⁹ *The Belize Sunday Times*, 1 February, 1981.

Sapodilla cayes, the Ranguana cayes and a part of the mainland had to be part of the lease, but Courtenay killed that idea immediately. Skinner-Klee insisted that Guatemala wanted sovereignty over the Ranguana and Sapodilla cayes, and that they would be willing to consider any mechanism which gave them some presence on the mainland. Day put on record that territorial cession had already been discussed by Ministers and was not considered feasible. When Price was informed that the talks included the Ranguana cayes, he directed that the talks be suspended for consultations.

The talks resumed the following week, with Rogers and Shoman added to the Belizean team. The brief they carried was to restrict any territorial consideration to a level that would appear preposterous to Guatemala, but that would result in Guatemala, not Belize, causing the talks to break down. They had written instructions from Price, with fourteen proposals, all variations on Ridley's. The delegates concentrated on the lease idea. The Belize offer was for one of the cayes on the Sapodilla range, Lime Caye, which they insisted was very beautiful, to be leased to the UK, with authority to sub-let to Guatemala at an economical rent for 20 years. The cayes must not be used for military purposes, and any development must be agreed by both parties. On the following day, Skinner Klee complained that the week before "the British side said it was prepared to consider the lease of certain cayes; now it turns into a sub-lease of one cayes because that cayes is pretty. Such a proposal is absolutely frivolous, tinged with insolence and arrogance". He said the talks were over, rose along with his delegation and left. He later agreed with the British not to declare that the negotiations had broken down, and to fix an early date for a ministerial meeting in London. The stage was set for what was to lead to the Heads of Agreement.

The Lancaster House Solution: Heads of Agreement

The scene for this negotiation that turned out to be the passport to Belize's independence was the magnificent Lancaster House, once rated the most valuable private house in London and now a national building. It was steeped in colonial history, having "played a prominent part in

the evolution from Empire as successive independence conferences have been held under its glittering chandeliers".¹⁵⁰ Just the year before, it had been the scene of the excruciatingly difficult constitutional conference that led to the independence of Zimbabwe, where Britain was stopped from selling the black people of that country short by the determined stand of the Commonwealth.

George Price, V. H. Courtenay and Assad Shoman were there for Belize, and Foreign Minister Castillo Valdés represented Guatemala. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, Lord Carrington, opened the meeting on 5 March 1981, and the rest of the sessions were conducted by Ridley.¹⁵¹ Castillo Valdés argued that the territory in dispute was the whole of Belize. Guatemala was making a generous effort to leave intact the territorial integrity of Belize within its geographical frontiers and was only asking for the reintegration to Guatemala of the Ranguana and Sapodilla chains of cayes, which would have the additional value of defining reasonably, logically and permanently the territorial waters of the Gulf. Guatemala was ready to recognise the independence of Belize and cooperate with the new State, but only the territorial element could solve the dispute.¹⁵²

Ridley replied that the British side had always made it clear that "the actual cession of the territory of Belize was not something that could be contemplated," but that they wished to be flexible on every other aspect of discussion, and noted that the proposals on the sea boundaries would be in perpetuity. Price said that as a sign of friendship, Belize had offered to negotiate a lease of some cayes in the Sapodilla range *after independence*. This was not proposed as part of a settlement of the differences between Guatemala and Britain; the intention of the proposal was to help the Government and people of Guatemala to understand that Belize wished to determine its own future as a Central American nation endowed with its sovereign territory, and as a good and friendly neighbour to Guatemala.

¹⁵⁰ Shridath Ramphal, *Glimpses of a Global Life*, p. 367.

¹⁵¹ "Draft Record of Anglo-Guatemalan Talks: 5 March," FCO paper, 5 March 1981, PF.

¹⁵² "Draft Record of Anglo-Guatemalan Talks: 6 March, Unapproved version," FCO paper, 6 March 1981, PF.

After this, the negotiations developed into a series of short plenary sessions interspersed by long periods in which Ridley engaged in shuttle diplomacy, going from the Belizean to the Guatemalan delegations in different rooms at Lancaster House. He applied pressure first to one side and then to the other, and often proposed to the plenary sessions compromise solutions that had not been accepted by either. At the evening session on Friday 6 March Ridley said that he felt that a possible agreement was that there should be no formal transfer of sovereignty but that arrangements should be made for the Ranguana and Sapodilla cayes whereby Guatemala would enjoy special rights in both groups of cayes. Castillo agreed that that formula could be productive, if the agreement would “practically establish all the rights of sovereignty” for Guatemala. Price said that his delegation would study the new British proposal carefully and go as far as possible in accordance with Belize’s stated position. The meeting was adjourned for the weekend.

Over the weekend, the Belizean delegation was subjected to intense pressures from the British side to satisfy as much as possible Guatemala’s demand for “practical sovereignty” over the Ranguana and Sapodilla cayes. One early British version stated that “Guatemala shall have rights of possession, use and administration of the Ranguana and Sapodilla Cayes above low-water mark”; it implied that the laws of Guatemala prevailed on the cayes. Another clause stated that Guatemala would confine military use of the cayes to such activity as may contribute to the defence of Guatemala and Belize—broad scope indeed for militarization of the cayes.¹⁵³ The British officials proposed several scenarios, including leases with a time limit or in perpetuity, a lease for a limited purpose, transferring sovereignty and establishing an “administrative condominium” where control would be exercised jointly by Guatemala and Belize.¹⁵⁴ The Belizean delegation rejected all these proposals.

Ridley opened the sessions on Monday 9 March by submitting a draft paper containing 17 “Heads of Agreement,” with considerable

¹⁵³ “Cays, 8 March 1981,” Draft article prepared by the FCO, PF.

¹⁵⁴ “Possible negotiating positions for the Belize delegation at their negotiations with Guatemala in London on 9 March 1981,” prepared by the FCO, PF.

detail on some of the major points, particularly that relating to the cayes, which stated that “Guatemala shall have rights of presence, use and enjoyment of the Ranguana and Sapodilla cayes above low-water mark,” and gave Guatemala “the exclusive right to develop the cayes, for tourist purposes and associated commercial development, and such other peaceful purposes as may be agreed by the Joint High Commission”. The law of Belize would continue to apply to Belizean and non-Guatemalan nationals on the cayes, but any Guatemalan national who was alleged to have committed a criminal offence on the cayes would be transferred to the Guatemalan authorities on the basis that Guatemalan law applied to his conduct on the cayes. Ridley acknowledged that Guatemala would be unhappy about restricting use of the cayes to non-military purposes, and also about the applicability of law. Belizeans wanted Belizean law to apply and Guatemala wanted Guatemalan law to apply; he had “endeavoured to use the judgment of Solomon and to cut not the law but the population in half”. He proposed a lease for 25 years after which the arrangements could be reviewed, but if they were terminated by Belize then Britain would quite understand that the Guatemalan claim to Belize would not necessarily be extinguished.¹⁵⁵ If the lease was not renewed Guatemala would be sure to revive its claim, so that this formula came close to being a lease in perpetuity. That proposal was rejected by both Belize and Guatemala.

Skinner-Klee reiterated that Guatemala must also have military use of the cayes; it was incongruous for Guatemala to recognise Belize's full sovereignty over the mainland but for Belize to impose limits on Guatemala's use of the cayes. He also questioned the temporary nature of the leases and the idea that the treaty had to be submitted to periodic review and revision. In such a case, it would be better for Guatemala to keep its claim intact and see what would happen in the next 200 years. The day ended without the positions of the parties coming any closer to each other.

¹⁵⁵ “Anglo-Guatemalan Talks: 9 march 1981, Unapproved Version,” CO paper, 9 March 1981, PF.

Virtually the entire day of 10 March 1981 was taken up with Ridley's shuttle diplomacy, his major attempts being directed at pressuring the Belizeans into accepting more of Guatemala's positions. When these attempts failed, Ridley refused to allow the talks to break down, and he prevailed on both Guatemala and Belize to settle for a document called "Heads of Agreement," with all details removed and merely setting out topics for future discussion. The Belizeans were assured that if despite all efforts no agreement was possible then Britain would go ahead with the independence of Belize without a settlement. The plenary session resumed at 6:30 p.m., and a few further amendments to the Heads were made. On the most conflictive paragraph relating to the cayes, the concept of a lease had been completely removed, and the final version stated only that "Guatemala shall have the use and enjoyment of the Ranguana and Sapodilla cayes, and rights in those areas of the sea adjacent to the cayes, as may be agreed".¹⁵⁶ The following morning, Wednesday 11 March 1981, the Heads of Agreement were signed by Ridley, Castillo and Price.

Bedlam in Belize

The Heads of Agreement¹⁵⁷ were published on Monday 16 March, and despite assurances by the government of Belize that the topics mentioned in the Heads had yet to be negotiated and that it would be firm in the negotiations to protect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Belize, the Opposition party, the civil service and other civil organisations called for strikes and mass demonstrations. These began the very next day and included the closure of schools, offices and businesses, sometimes in support of the call for closure, sometimes yielding to the threat or use of force, and continued for over two weeks.¹⁵⁸

The riots and closures continued even after Price had presented a motion to the House and promised a referendum when a proposed settlement is reached even if there is no land cession or erosion of sovereignty, and

¹⁵⁶ "Anglo-Guatemalan Talks: 10 March Unapproved Version," FCO paper, 10 March 1981, PF.

¹⁵⁷ See Appendix 9 for full text.

¹⁵⁸ See Godfrey Smith, pp. 233-237 for a more detailed description of the disturbances.

radio time for both parties before the referendum.¹⁵⁹ The situation became so critical that on 2 April the Governor, on the advice of the Premier, declared a state of emergency, with British forces poised to help enforce it. The Constitution was not suspended, but there was a ban on public meetings and a curfew from 9:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m.

A lot of disinformation and misunderstandings circulated. When Guatemala published a booklet for home consumption claiming that the Heads gave Guatemala everything it needed, some influential Belizeans treated that as the gospel truth and promulgated it to the rest of the population. Opposition to the Heads appeared more significant because the public officers called a strike which succeeded in paralysing virtually all government offices. When government offices, and the services they provide, are shut down for several days, the effect on the population is considerable. Also, there was a small group of people in Belize City who organised well to use force and the show of force to intimidate people in businesses and schools and cause them to close their institutions. The disturbances were largely confined to Belize City, where the Opposition concentrated its efforts, although the UDP had support country-wide for its stand. There were many among the leaders as well as the rank and file of the PUP who urged Price to call a demonstration and face down the rioters in Belize City, but he believed that this would cause a great deal of civic violence and tarnish the image of a peaceful Belize, and instead decided to ask the Governor to declare a state of emergency.

The most militant union, with the greatest number of members country-wide (the United General Workers Union), and which had been actively pushing the PUP to take independence, organised a series of radio programmes where Mischek-Chigayo Mawema and Thomas Martínez questioned one of the negotiators of the Heads, Assad Shoman, on details of the agreement. He made it clear that in the negotiation of the Heads, the Belize side would ensure that there was no erosion of sovereignty and no violation of Belize's territorial integrity, and if this was not accepted, then there would be no agreement. In any case, any agreement reached

¹⁵⁹ *Belize Times*, 29 March 1981.

would be put to the people to decide in a referendum. The effect of this and other initiatives gradually helped to swing the tide.

The incidents around the Heads were a bad moment in Belize's history, but it was, after all, only a moment. Although some have tried to represent it, even decades later, as a supreme example of the PUP's perfidy, the fact is that a mere four months after their publication it became clear that the pronouncements of those who denounced them as a sell-out were untrue, when the negotiations failed because the government refused to make any compromises on sovereignty and territorial integrity. And thirty-five years later, one of the most important detractors of the Heads of Agreement, *Amandala* Publisher Evan X Hyde, admitted that "it was the Heads of Agreement which made independence possible for Belize".¹⁶⁰

Negotiating the Heads of Agreement

On 17 March, one day after the "Heads" were announced, the CARICOM Foreign Ministers held an extraordinary meeting in Belize. The meeting, registering the changes already being felt with the advent of the Reagan administration, noted that

the recent perception of Central America as an area in which there are strong threats to US interests . . . could seriously influence the question of whether the US maintains the support so recently given to Belize. It could also embolden Guatemala despite the recently negotiated accord to embark on new and aggressive initiatives.¹⁶¹

The meeting agreed to mount a diplomatic campaign to ensure that the US maintained its support for Belize, and called for working closely with the Commonwealth to provide technical assistance in the negotiations and to hold Britain to the 1980 UN resolution, which set parameters for negotiations. The Foreign Ministers issued the

¹⁶⁰ Evan X Hyde, "From the Publisher," *Amandala*, 27 March 2016.

¹⁶¹ Report of the meeting, 17-18 March 1981, Caribbean Community Secretariat, 6 April 1981, Rep. 81/1/12 FP (Ex).

Guatemala's Claim to Belize...

“Declaration of Belmopan,” which, at the request of the Belize negotiating team, stated that “the following principles and objectives should govern the negotiation of the treaty or treaties in pursuance of the Heads of Agreement

- (a) the independence of Belize must be achieved before the end of 1981 irrespective of the progress of these negotiations;
- (b) the territorial integrity of Belize must be fully respected and preserved;
- (c) any privileges granted by Belize in a spirit of goodwill and conciliation must not derogate from its sovereignty or be of such a nature as to undermine the promotion of peaceful co-existence and the development of stable and harmonious relations among the States of the region.¹⁶²

The Declaration also stated that it was the responsibility of Britain to continue to ensure the territorial integrity of Belize and, in concert with the government of Belize, to pursue appropriate arrangements to guarantee the security of an independent Belize.

On 28 March 1981 the Premier made a statement to the House of Representatives affirming that

Our participation in the Anglo-Guatemalan negotiations and the signing of the London document . . . does not in any way affect our right to independence or our exercise of that right. The independence of Belize is set on an irreversible course and it cannot be derailed or delayed by the negotiations foreseen in the Heads of Agreement.¹⁶³

The Constitutional Conference for the independence of Belize was held in London in early April, with the Belize delegation led by Deputy Premier Lindy Rogers, while Price remained in Belize along with Shoman and Musa to deal with the difficult domestic situation. The Opposition boycotted the constitutional conference, which was

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ “Statement by Hon. George Price, Premier, House of Representatives, 27 March 1981,” PF.

presided over by Ridley and which emerged with an agreed constitution for the independent Belize but with no date fixed for independence, as Britain was still intent on first having the Heads of Agreement negotiated and the dispute with Guatemala brought to an end by an agreed settlement.

Ridley visited Belize in May to press the government to accommodate Guatemala, especially with regard to the waters and the cayes, but he made no headway. He refused to agree a date for independence until after the negotiations either resulted in agreement or breakdown, but in a press conference at the end of his visit on 7 May he said that “it is not an option for Belize to remain a British colony,” thereby repudiating the insistence of the Opposition that it would be better to remain a colony for at least ten years more. “Agreement or not,” he emphasised, “Britain will take Belize to independence”.¹⁶⁴ And, crucially, “he assured the press that, in the event that there was not a negotiated settlement with Guatemala, Britain had made a commitment to see to the defence of Belize after independence and that there was no change in this policy”.¹⁶⁵

The Commonwealth Secretariat, at Belize’s request, had retained P. J. Patterson, the former Foreign Minister of Jamaica, and his partner R. C. Rattray, as consultants for the negotiations on the Heads. The Belize government instructed them that the Heads were to be interpreted as narrowly as possible; that Belize would cede no territory to Guatemala; that it would allow Guatemala only so much and no more of Belizean territorial seas as would be necessary to ensure Guatemala’s unimpeded access to the high seas under international law; that after independence Belize would claim a twelve-mile territorial sea limit. With regard to the cayes, the “use and enjoyment” would be such as were already being enjoyed: swimming, sport fishing and general touristic use. No military use was to be allowed of the cayes or of any other facility covered by the Heads, whether roads, oil pipelines, ports or whatever, and it must be made clear that full sovereignty resided in Belize. Any proposals which did not conform to sovereignty and territorial integrity

¹⁶⁴ *Belize Sunday Times*, 10 May 1981.

¹⁶⁵ Godfrey Smith, p. 238

for Belize must be rejected, and it must be made clear that the independence of Belize was a matter separate from the negotiations.¹⁶⁶ Most of these points were later accepted by the British.

The first meetings of the Joint Commission to negotiate the Heads of Agreement were held in New York from 20 to 28 May 1981, with Rogers, Courtenay and Shoman representing Belize. The Opposition had been invited to attend, but they refused.¹⁶⁷ The Guatemalans sought to get as much territory as possible. They argued that the island at the mouth of the Sarstoon, which under the 1859 Treaty belonged to Belize, should become part of Guatemala. They also wanted a large area as Guatemalan's territorial sea and for them to have the use of the cayes as if for all practical purposes they belonged to Guatemala. Free port rights and the oil pipelines were to be given in perpetuity and Guatemala would have rights to police them, as well as rights to the use of Belizean roads. In particular, they would be able to use the cayes and waters for defence purposes. On those matters it was impossible to reach agreement; agreed texts were achieved in relation to other Heads. The next meeting was set for mid-June.

In early June, Shoman and Musa were dispatched to Central American and CARICOM countries respectively. In Panama, Torrijos listened attentively to Shoman's explanation of Belize's strategy for the negotiations, and showed a keen interest in all the details. He agreed with Belize's position on the cayes, but advised that it should have several alternatives to keep throwing out in negotiations, so that the ball would be in the Guatemalan court when the whistle blew.¹⁶⁸ This was the last I saw of the General. On 31 July 1981 he was assassinated through a bomb placed in his aircraft; he had been assisting the guerrilla in El Salvador, apart from supporting other freedom causes, and those close to him are convinced that the CIA had a hand in his death. And so the man who had led the charge in Latin America in support of Belize's independence would not be with Belizeans on 21 September celebrating the independence he had done so much to help realize.

¹⁶⁶ The interim report is in Patterson to Ramphal, 11 June 1981, File SG/CF/BEL, CSL.

¹⁶⁷ *Belize Times*, 24 May, 1981.

¹⁶⁸ Torrijos-Shoman talks.

Musa's visits to Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana, Barbados and Jamaica consolidated support for Belize's positions, and the Foreign Ministers proffered advice as well as practical technical assistance in several areas.¹⁶⁹ Harry Courtenay, who had been dispatched to Washington, met with Ambassador Thomas Enders, Under-Secretary of State in the State Department, who told him that Belize must be more flexible in the negotiations; in particular it should seek to meet Guatemala's complaint that Belize was not prepared to give anything of value on the sea passage, and that Belize's offer was a ridiculous one-mile passageway, thus reducing what Guatemala was already enjoying. He suggested that Belize limit its territorial seas in the south to three miles. Enders also pressed Belize to allow Guatemalan coast guard or police patrols in the cayes. He said that the US was prepared to offer Belize bilateral economic and military aid when it became independent *if there was a settlement*. Courtenay told him that Belize was willing to be more flexible on the territorial seas, but that it could not agree to any military use of the cayes.¹⁷⁰

In London, on 30 June, the bill for the independence constitution of Belize was passed by the House of Commons, enabling the British government to grant independence by order whenever a firm date was set. Ridley explained that a date would be set after the parties completed their ongoing negotiations, whether they succeeded or failed. He also assured Parliament that the UK intended "to make arrangements for the security of Belize which will be appropriate in the circumstances, whatever they may be".¹⁷¹

Despite these clear assurances to the highest authority in the realm, however, the British government, fearful of precipitating a Guatemalan military reaction if Belize were to become independent without a settlement, was vacillating and insisting on reaching a settlement. Ridley summoned the CMCB ambassadors in London to a meeting at the FCO in July, and told them that Belize had asked for independence on 21 September even if the treaty was not complete, which was totally

¹⁶⁹ "Report on Brief to Caribbean Governments," Said Musa, 15 June 1981, PF.

¹⁷⁰ "Report by V. H. Courtenay to Hon. Premier on Washington meeting," 15 June 1981, PF

¹⁷¹ "British Parliament House of Commons Debate 30th June 1981," Belize, 1981.

unacceptable to Guatemala. He declared that his government would *insist that there should be a Treaty before independence*. If negotiations failed, or if the referendum threw out the Treaty, a very serious situation would develop which Guatemala would not take lying down. US arms would begin to flow to Guatemala by the end of the year. In such a situation *he doubted that HMG could be persuaded to leave British troops in Belize*.¹⁷² Ridley added “if the Treaty was wrecked by Belize either through the Treaty talks or through the referendum . . . *it should not be taken for granted that the British army would defend Belize*”. On the other hand, if the talks failed because Guatemala was “palpably at fault,” then Britain would honour security undertakings to see Belize through.

When the Belizean leaders received the report of this meeting, they knew they had to conduct themselves in the negotiations in such a way as to appear to be considering making concessions, but in the end ensuring that the talks failed and that the Guatemalans appeared responsible by their intransigence for that failure. It would not do to have an agreement rejected in a referendum—there simply must be no agreement reached. The talks must break down.

The second session of the Joint Commission was called for on 6 July 1981 in New York. Price, Courtenay, Shoman and Musa met with Ridley and Guatemala's FM Castillo, but no meeting of the Joint Commission took place. In private meetings, under very heavy pressure from the British, the Belize delegation, which was convinced that Guatemala would not agree to anything short of land cession, agreed to offer to maintain its existing three-mile limit in the south, but with the clear understanding that all the seas between the islands and the shore were internal waters. It did not budge on the question of the sovereignty or use of the cayes. Guatemala, on the other hand, continued to insist on virtual cession to them of the cayes in perpetuity and for them to be able to use the cayes for military purposes.¹⁷³ It became clear that no agreement would be possible, and the meeting adjourned with a Joint

¹⁷² Malhoutra, “Brief given by Mr Ridley to members of the CMCB on 19 June at the FCO,” 24 June, 1981, File SG/CF/BEL, CSL. Emphasis added.

¹⁷³ Interim report. Meetings in New York, 5-10 July 1981, P.J. Patterson, 16 July 1981, PF.

Communiqué which recognised that the talks did not lead to final agreement but that existing channels of communication between the participating governments should continue. It concluded that “the Ministers reaffirmed their desire to promote and preserve peace in the Region and are determined to build upon the understanding and respect which have been created at this and earlier meetings”.¹⁷⁴

A separate UK/Belize Statement on the same day said the two governments “look forward to further consultations in London in the near future on the programme leading to the early and secure independence of Belize in accordance with the UNGA Resolution of November 11, 1980”. This was a clear signal to the international community that the negotiations had ended, and that Belize would nonetheless be proceeding to independence. In a sense the Guatemalans played into the hands of the Belizeans, who were banking on their being intransigent with respect to territorial cession. The Guatemalans were caught in a bind of their own making; their repeated declarations over the years that Belize belonged to Guatemala and that it was the duty of the government and the military to recover it at all costs, and the fact that this claim was entrenched in their Constitution, made it politically impossible for a government to agree to do otherwise. As the FCO’s Patrick Duff had suggested five years earlier, the Guatemalans would find it easier to accept that the UK grant independence to Belize unilaterally rather than to have to justify their “surrender” by agreement.

The upshot was that Britain, with a wink and a nod from the US, and with Guatemalan acquiescence, proceeded to make preparations to have its military forces remain in Belize to defend it against any possible Guatemalan invasion—and to reassure the USA and Guatemala that Cuban troops would not enter Belize.

Onward to Independence

Price held talks in London with Ridley on 22 July, and on his return summoned to his home those members of Cabinet who had worked

¹⁷⁴ Joint Communiqué, 13 July 1981, PF.

most closely with him on the issue over the years—C.L.B. Rogers, V.H. Courtenay, Assad Shoman and Said Musa—and told them that the British were only prepared to commit forces to defend Belize for up to nine months after independence, and asked whether Belize should accept this offer. There was hardly any discussion; all agreed that Belize should move forward to independence even with such a limited time-frame for its defence, convinced that as long as a real threat remained, and with the US concerned about Belize asking Cuba for help, it would be virtually impossible for Britain to simply pack its guns and go home after nine months.

Of course, it would have been impossible to make the nine-month commitment public: Guatemala would rejoice and prepare for invasion as soon as the troops left. Price did not share the information with any other members of Cabinet, some of whom were suspected of having links with the Guatemalan government. Instead, he called a convention of the People's United Party on 26 July 1981, where he read a Statement on Defence agreed with the British government:

Recognizing its responsibility to bring Belize to secure independence, Her Majesty's Government has agreed with the Government of Belize appropriate measures to ensure a sound basis for the future security of Belize from any external threat. It was agreed that British forces would remain in Belize after independence for an appropriate period, under arrangements to be made in an Exchange of Notes between the two Governments on the attainment of independence by Belize.¹⁷⁵

Price announced that “in pledge of this defence commitment and in readiness for any eventuality, the British Government is arranging for the number of Harriers in Belize to be restored to its former strength by the end of this month”. He then announced, to roars of approval and jubilation, that “it has been agreed that the date for the independence of Belize will be Monday, the twenty-first day of September, 1981”.

¹⁷⁵ “Radio Statement on independence and the future security of Belize by Premier George Price, 26 July 1981, City Centre, Belize City,” Belize, 1981.

The struggle for the independence of Belize was over; all that remained was for the formalities to be carried out. But the sense of a threat still hung in the air. On Independence Day, the British commander in Belize was in a helicopter carrying Ridley and the royal representative to Belmopan when he received a message from the captain that an air attack from the Guatemalans was imminent. He put the Harriers in the air, and nothing came of it.¹⁷⁶ Sixty-three countries from every continent sent delegations to the independence ceremony on 21 September: 11 at the level of Heads of State or Government and 23 at ministerial level. In addition, representatives were present from fourteen regional and international organisations, including the UN, the OAU and the EEC, though not the OAS.¹⁷⁷ The extent of the international interest in Belize's independence can be measured by the fact that there were almost 200 journalists representing the world media.¹⁷⁸

The Guatemalan government, meanwhile, had packed up its consulate in Belize City and left the country a few days before, and on 20 September issued a statement denouncing Britain for stripping Guatemala of its territory and, by the farce of independence, creating a weak state to face the just claims of Guatemala, which would continue to fight firmly for the return of its territory by all peaceful means that international law and practice allowed it.¹⁷⁹

Belize did not relax its diplomatic offensive; a "Commonwealth Consultative Declaration" was issued on 21 September, in which Canada joined Britain and five CARICOM countries in "pledging their readiness to consult together in the event of an externally organised or supported armed attack on Belize".¹⁸⁰ That same day, Belize sent a telegram to the Secretary General of the OAS applying for membership

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Brigadier Anthony Vivian.

¹⁷⁷ Belizean Independence Secretariat paper, PF.

¹⁷⁸ *Breakdown*, no 5, Belize, 1981, p. 11.

¹⁷⁹ Cited by Ambassador Santizo, Permanent representative of Guatemala to the OAS, at the meeting of the Permanent Council of the OAS on 23 September 1981, transcript of tapes of session, PF.

¹⁸⁰ Paper by the International Affairs Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat, 11 November 1982, File I 33-2/4, E/22, CSL.

and engaged its CARICOM colleagues in the OAS to move that Belize be invited to the General Assembly to be held in Saint Lucia in December. Of course Belize knew it could not become a member of the OAS at that time, because Article 8 of its Charter barred American States from joining the organisation if they had a border dispute with a current OAS member, which prevented both Belize and Guyana from being members of the OAS.¹⁸¹ This was a way of protesting the existence of that prohibition, and if a majority of members agreed, Guatemala could not prevent Belize from being invited to be present at a General Assembly. At the meeting of the OAS on 23 September, the Guatemalan delegate objected to the invitation, and demanded a roll-call vote. Guatemala was defeated by 24 votes to 1, it being the only country to vote against the motion.

On 23 September the Security Council of the UN approved Belize's membership, ratified by the General Assembly two days later, when Belize became the 156th member of the United Nations. It still had the Guatemalan claim hanging over its head, but its strategy of decolonisation by internationalisation had been crowned with success.

The Story So Far: What Does It Mean

The period 1978 to 1981 was the most difficult for Belize's independence prospects. In 1978 it became clear that Belize's internationalisation effort was a resounding success. The Belize resolution at the UN, for the first time, had no countries voting against, and it was clear that Belize would win the overwhelming support in Latin America that it already enjoyed in the rest of the world.

¹⁸¹ On 8 January 1991, Belize finally became a member of the OAS. In 1985 the OAS had passed a Protocol of Reforms which, among other things, would eliminate, after a period of five years, Article 8 of its Charter, which had prevented Belize from becoming a member.

But 1978 also heralded difficulties on other fronts. British Foreign Secretary David Owen forced acceptance of a MOU which he interpreted to mean that Guatemala must first agree to a settlement before Belize became independent—and proceeded to assure Guatemala and the USA that this was indeed so. The USA, for its part, intensified its efforts to persuade Belize to give up territory, Secretary of State Vance himself pressing this on Price on Good Friday. Guatemala, armed with these assurances from both the UK and USA, remained intransigent in its demand for land as a *sine qua non* for accepting Belize's independence.

Within Belize, the UDP swept the municipal elections in 1978 and were expected to win general elections in 1979 and enforce their demand that independence be conditioned on agreement with Guatemala and a moratorium of ten years. The UDP had also increased its accusations of “communism” against key figures in the government, echoing the fears expressed by Guatemala that an independent Belize would bring in Cuban troops. In 1980 and 1981, the UDP intensified its communist scare-mongering, thereby wittingly or not playing into the hands of the Guatemalan dictatorships. In August 1980, for example, UDP Leader Aranda told the London Daily Mirror that supporters of Fidel Castro were smuggling arms into Belize ready to set up a Cuban style dictatorship, and that Russian Aeroflot planes had brought arms on civilian flights from Cuba.¹⁸²

The Anti-Communist Society of Belize was launched in November 1980 by Santiago Perdomo, a minister of government for 20 years who had resigned the year before. Other executive officers of the Society represented the Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry and other businesses. It had the support of high-ranking Government Ministers, such as Louis Sylvestre and Fred Hunter. Perdomo joined the UDP in 1981, and explained why:

I am convinced that Assad Shoman is a communist with strong ties to international communism, ties that can provide money, propaganda, personnel and perhaps when the time is necessary the overthrow (covertly or overtly) of Constitutional government

¹⁸² Reproduced in *Belize Sunday Times*, 24 August 1980.

and democracy and the installation of a Communist dictatorship. I am convinced that Premier George Price has accommodated himself, over the years, to Assad Shoman's radical statist and communist philosophy [and] that there is a definite and unchecked trend to radical socialism in the government of the People's United Party.¹⁸³

This fed into the propaganda of the Guatemalan regime and also created uncertainty and fear in the people, making it more difficult for them to wholeheartedly support the cry of Independence Now.

In 1981 the disturbances over the Heads of Agreement threatened the independence agenda. Had this effort prevailed, Belize would have the choice of either giving up territory or remaining a colony; it was a moment of existential danger, and no-one could predict how it would play out.

Clearly what was critical to the independence effort was the question of security: if the British could be convinced to keep their troops in an independent Belize then independence would be viable. If not, not.

For many years, through Labour as well as Conservative governments, the UK had consistently refused to agree to a defence guarantee for Belize, and then in 1980 it changed its position. Why did this occur? There was indeed a material difference in the approach of the Labour and Conservative parties with regard to their willingness to commit British forces. Callaghan had been unwilling to do so in order to bring an end to the Rhodesian crisis, but Thatcher did not hesitate. And many have wondered whether Labour would have gone to war in the Falklands. There are indeed good grounds for speculating that the difference in approach of the two parties *did* make a difference, and this has been reluctantly admitted by two of the key Labour players in the negotiations. Rowlands notes that "Ridley took the chance at independence that the Guatemalans wouldn't react; our assessment was that they would react seriously to any unilateral declaration . . . So I guess we were ultra-cautious in Belize, because as it turned out

¹⁸³ *The Reporter*, Vol. 14, no. 32, Sunday, 9 August 1981.

we could have faced them down.¹⁸⁴ And Richard admits that “the Tories are more inclined to use the defence card . . . in a sense, yes, we lost five years, and we have to give the Conservatives credit for biting that particular bullet”.¹⁸⁵

But there was more to it than the Conservatives’ bravado. By 1980 the US had decided to support Britain’s decision to grant independence with a military presence, confident that it would prevent Cuba from using the territory to support insurgent forces in Central America. Although Washington kept insisting that it was impartial in the dispute, the US saw and used Guatemala as a bulwark against “communism” in Central America. Guatemala had a strategic importance for them, while Belize was seen as just another unviable small state in the region that would be susceptible to Cuban influence.

What turned out to be extremely fortunate for Belize was that Carter appointed civil rights leader Andrew Young, who had been a close co-worker of Martin Luther King, as his ambassador to the UN, and Young “was a man who personally always maintained an anti-colonialist and progressive position. He knew a lot about the issues of the day relating to the liberation struggles in Africa and also about Belize, and generally assumed positions that were respectful, correct and positive”.¹⁸⁶

Ricardo Alarcón, the Cuban ambassador to the UN at the time and later Foreign Minister, also thinks that, despite the Cold War, US policy and the style of negotiations during the Carter presidency were “much more sensitive to the international community and to the UN than any other administration before or after”. It was the luck of Belize’s independence movement that it was able to take advantage of the policy inertia during the brief period after Carter and while the Reagan policies had not yet taken root.

Part of the reason why Belize was so successful at the UN was also that Guatemala was so ineffective. Guatemala’s ambassador at the UN in

¹⁸⁴ Interview with Rowlands.

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Richard.

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Ricardo Alarcón. He was a friend of Andrew Young.

1975, Alejandro Maldonado Aguirre, later admitted that his country's positions were excessively legal and formalistic, ignoring the essential social and political factors of Belize, Guatemala and the region. At that time, he notes, Guatemalan politics was dominated by ultra-nationalist values, which affected not only the political leaders but also the press, and favoured radical positions and intransigent attitudes. The Guatemalan discourse, he lamented, was obsolete; it maintained pre-war positions that clashed with the new currents of thought. Belize, in contrast, developed its policies with great skill. Guatemala, he laments, would arrive late at all the forums that the Belizeans had already approached. In addition, Maldonado adds, Guatemala's foreign policy decisively influenced the negative reaction of the majority of UN members, in particular because of Guatemala's blind support for the US, its alliance with Israel and its isolation from the Africans.¹⁸⁷

Away from international fora, however, the Guatemalans were heartened by the readiness of the UK and the US to support land cession, and once they knew these major players supported the principle of territorial concessions, they kept pushing for as much as they could get, as Villagrán Kramer admitted.¹⁸⁸ They were also very adept at using the Cuba card to create a knee-jerk reaction from the US, and got invaluable help for this position from the UDP, sectors of the PUP leadership and *The Reporter* newspaper in Belize.

As to whether, for all their excessive sabre-rattling, the Guatemalan government ever intended to carry out the invasion threats in the 1970s, we shall probably never know. What is certain is that had the Guatemalans invaded southern Belize in 1975, British forces would have been unable to prevent their holding a piece of territory, and, as the British commander said, "it is likely that there would be pressure from UN for a cease fire and the Guatemalans would be left holding the territory they desire".¹⁸⁹ The Guatemalans must have thought that the US would not take measures to force them to withdraw; even the British Governor

¹⁸⁷ Interview with Maldonado Aguirre.

¹⁸⁸ Interview with Francisco Villagrán Kramer.

¹⁸⁹ Fraser-Orr (Commander, British Forces Belize) to Governor, 28 February 1975, FCO 7/2846.

allowed that “the attitude of the USA would probably be equivocal”.¹⁹⁰ If indeed the Guatemalans had considered invading, they vacillated too long; the British reinforced the garrison and the Guatemalans lost their chance. As Rowlands has reflected, referring to the later Falklands war, “we didn’t see the Argentines coming”.¹⁹¹ Luckily for Belize, they at least thought they saw the Guatemalans coming.

Former Vice-President Villagrán claims that they did not actually intend to invade, that it was simply “a tactic of the Guatemalan powers to change the attitude of the Belizeans in the negotiations and to put Britain under political pressure”.¹⁹² As we have seen, however, this tactic failed to influence the Belizean government either in negotiations or in international fora, although it certainly led many Belizeans to fear independence and it influenced the British government into trying by any means to force a negotiated settlement. But, except for a few months in 1978 and 1979, the Belize government did not waver.

The Belizeans were also resourceful enough to take advantage of certain undercurrents in international relations which are always left unspoken but which have tremendous force in influencing people’s reactions. One case in point is the use of the “race card” against Guatemala. At Price’s first intervention in the Fourth Committee, he took time to define the Belizean identity, and emphasised its African and indigenous roots as well as its close affinity with the black Caribbean nations. Belize’s lobbying also highlighted this, and linked it to the endemic racism of the Guatemalan elite against the Maya majority in their own country and against black people, and quoted from those leaders and from the Guatemalan press to prove the point.

In Belize’s lobby booklet at the UN in 1980, Guatemalan army Chief of Staff René Mendoza Palomo was quoted in reference to the problem of absorbing Belize’s population after a Guatemalan take-over: “at the very least, the blacks will have to be deported. They are not Guatemalan citizens, but rather descendants of those who invaded Guatemalan

¹⁹⁰ Posnett to Eyres, 4 March 1975, FCO 7/2846. Posnett had served at the UN for four years before going to Belize.

¹⁹¹ Interview with Rowlands.

¹⁹² Interview with Villagran Kramer.

territory. Quite simply, we would send them back to the land of their ancestors".¹⁹³ The British also recognised this: "it would be extremely embarrassing for US Latin American policies to appear to be backing the takeover of a small black democratic country by a right-wing military dictatorship".¹⁹⁴ Price even used this card directly with the US; he told them that "there is the perception by some that the US is not saying "hands off Belize" for racial reasons, since Guatemala is white."¹⁹⁵ By which he meant, of course, that the ruling elite was white.

Guatemala's Ambassador Maldonado Aguirre, for his part, has admitted that "some imprudent politicians expressed themselves as if the only thing that mattered to Guatemala was the territory and not the people. Race was indeed a factor in shaping the political image emitted by Guatemala at the UN".¹⁹⁶ Pomerance has suggested that the massive UN support for Belize "may not be unrelated to the fact that Belize's population . . . consists mainly of Creoles, Mayas and Caribs, and thus qualifies for the 'indigenous' label".¹⁹⁷

In addition, Price was very much respected and admired by the Caribbean leaders; he won their affection by his humble bearing as much as by his stubborn stand against the British, and he was careful throughout the 1970s to constantly seek, and most often follow, their advice. This was critical because, as Alarcón points out, Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago and Barbados, despite their small size, had disproportionate influence at the UN and in international fora, and enjoyed very friendly relations with countries of Africa and Asia, which would seek their advice on all matters affecting the region. The committed support of the Caribbean countries, and the great competence of their representatives at the UN, was absolutely indispensable to the success of Belize's strategy.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹³ *Free Belize Now*, Belize government UN booklet, 1980, quoting from the Mexican magazine *Expansión*.

¹⁹⁴ McQuillan to FCO, 26 March, 1975, FCO 7/2846.

¹⁹⁵ Meeting with US Undersecretary for Political Affairs Phillip Habib in Washington on 9 July, following the failed talks in 1977: FRUS, 1977-1980, p.24.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Maldonado Aguirre.

¹⁹⁷ Michla Pomerance, *Self-Determination in Law and Practice*, The Hague, 1982, p. 22.

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Alarcón.

Belize was also favoured by the significant support given to it by Panama's Omar Torrijos, which resulted in completely fracturing the "Latin American solidarity" that supposedly favoured Guatemala. After the victory of the *Sandinistas* in Nicaragua, the balance tipped convincingly in Belize's favour. At the UN, apart from the obvious support base, Belize was singled out for special assistance, for example, by the representatives of Norway, of Sierra Leóne, of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, who year after year dedicated many hours of their time to help us, although we could do nothing to help them. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the solidarity Belize received from so many countries and from groups and individuals within countries, one we can only repay by supporting just causes and denouncing injustice anywhere in the world.

The window of opportunity for Belize to gain its goals had narrowed considerably in 1980, the last year of Carter's presidency and the eve of the Reagan era. Although Carter's human rights policies had by then taken back seat to national security concerns, he still felt that he had moral ground to uphold. One year later Reagan's policies were firmly established, his obsession with communism in Central America and the Caribbean was paramount, and he would most likely have not approved the 1980 resolution.

Twice in a decade—in 1969 and again in 1979—it seemed that the PUP would lose national elections and the new government would put the brakes on the move to independence. Indeed, if that had occurred, it is more than likely that Belize would never again have been able to achieve a secure independence with all its territory. Had Labour won the elections in 1979, it would probably not have committed British troops to defend Belize. Had Torrijos not decided to support Belize, had López Portillo not succeeded Echeverría as President of Mexico in those crucial years, had the *Sandinista* Revolution not triumphed when it did, had the Commonwealth Secretariat not been headed by Ramphal, had the international climate not been one in which the NAM and the UN were at the height of their influence in world affairs, and, critically, had Cuba not shown with its military backing of Angolan independence that its support for a just cause must not be taken lightly, the story might well have ended differently. A year later, with Reaganism on the ascendancy, the world had changed. And his obsession with

Maurice Bishop's socialist agenda in Grenada, his determination that there be "no more Grenadas," would have negatively impacted on Belize.

An absolutely essential part of the conjuncture was the internal situation in Guatemala. By coincidence rather than by strategy, the guerrilla offensive became more intensive, and the possibility of the rebels winning the war became more real, precisely around the time that Belize was taking its final steps towards independence. The military government had its hands full coping with the civil war, and could not possibly conceive of taking any actions against Belize. This in large part accounts for their docile acceptance of the failure of the "Heads" negotiations and their pledge not to use force to assert their claim. Like it or not, the guerrilla helped make Belize's independence possible. Equally important was the fact that the *Sandinistas* controlled the Nicaraguan State after July 1979. Not only did the Guatemalan Generals lose their best ally, Somoza, but the new Nicaraguan government supported Belize totally and everyone assumed they would be helping the guerrilla in El Salvador and Guatemala as well. General Torrijos was also helping the guerrilla, and Guatemala felt very isolated indeed—even the USA still maintained its arms embargo for Guatemala's violations of human rights.

However, favourable conjunctures can exist without being taken advantage of. What clinched success for Belize was its conscious determination to "internationalise" its independence struggle. One of the important stepping stones to internationalisation—what made the strategy possible—was that Belize wrested from the UK the right to pursue an activist foreign policy agenda, and to have foreign relations with countries at the highest level, long before it became independent; this surely was unique in the annals of decolonisation. As Rowlands has commented,

You guys, you were fantastic; you weren't supposed to have diplomacy or a foreign policy, but you did. The Commonwealth was a very important pressure point on us. You were obviously interested in opening several fronts. We didn't want that; there was a difference, because we didn't know how it would play, how it would affect the negotiations, or the US. They were useful pressure points, but we

didn't want them to get out of hand; it wasn't in our interest to have the issue opened up on too many fronts.¹⁹⁹

But the Belizeans persisted in opening as many fronts as were necessary to realize their strategy, including those that were forever hidden from the British, such as direct contacts with the guerrilla in Guatemala²⁰⁰ and clandestine meetings with the Cubans. The biggest front, of course, was the UN itself, which the British strongly resisted at first; Rowlands admits that “we didn't want to go, but on balance I think you ran us rather than we ran you”. Belize's unrelenting international campaign made Britain take the path it had resisted for so long, as Ridley confessed: “pressure upon UK at the United Nations on the Belize question had grown into such a momentum that [the British] neither could, nor cared to, resist it”.

We cannot fail to recognize, however, that in the final analysis the UK would never have made a move unless the US agreed. They did, and indeed came to insist on the British presence, for two reasons. First, the fact that the guerrilla struggle was gaining ground in Guatemala and El Salvador made the US want to avoid any other conflicts in the region. It also had to do with the USA's incomprehensible but chronic fear of Cuba. By then Cuba was deeply engaged in the defence of Angola against imperialist attacks led by apartheid South Africa, and its military engagement would eventually lead to the independence of Namibia, then occupied by South Africa, and hasten the end of apartheid in South Africa, as Nelson Mandela recognized. Thus did Cuba, by its very existence, apart from the other ways detailed above, help us to get the defence guarantee we needed to take independence with all our territory and without Guatemala having any say over our affairs. Within Belize, however, this Cuban card was used against the independence movement by the UDP, and in particular its leader Dean Lindo, who was an obsessive anti-communist, and by several leaders of the PUP, who were equally ideologically challenged.²⁰¹ Indeed, it was a former PUP minister who formed the

¹⁹⁹ Interview with Rowlands.

²⁰⁰ The Guatemalan intelligence services knew of these contacts, and fingered Assad Shoman in relation to them: Interview with Villagrán Kramer. President Lucas had said as much to the US as well.

²⁰¹ As *Brakedown* magazine noted, “It would be safe to say that Assad Shoman is hated more viciously by certain members of his own party than by any member of the Opposition”. *Brakedown*, no. 3, 1979

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Anti-Communist Society and eventually attacked Price himself as a communist.

Undoubtedly the entity that must be given the biggest kudos for Belize gaining its independence with security and territorial integrity is the people of Belize. In a highly religious society with a majority Catholic clergy dominated by US-based priests and nuns controlling education, they had been bombarded on a weekly basis for years by a media campaign reminiscent of that used by the CIA to overthrow the democratic government of Guatemala in 1954. In a hysterical and shameless campaign, newspapers like *The Beacon* and *The Reporter* manufactured lies and wild accusations week after week, denouncing the government as being Communist, inventing fake news about Communist arms being imported, about Cuban operatives already in place waiting to assist the communists in the government to carry out a coup and make Belize a communist State, about Guatemalan guerrilla finding refuge with the support of the government. Today, with the UDP government having such good relations with Cuba, with Cuban doctors propping up our health system and dozens of Belizean doctors trained in Cuba, it is impossible to get an idea of the intensity of that media campaign without reading those newspapers of 1974-1984.

The truly amazing thing was that the people of Belize in their majorities, subjected to this merciless barrage of lies and fabrications, when they had to make a choice in December 1979 they chose to cut through the bull and decided to endorse the move towards independence. Had they not done so, it is very doubtful that the independent Belize we know today, from the Hondo to the Sarstoon and with no ties to the government of the Guatemalan State, would exist.

The story of Belize's struggle for independence is the story of a tiny state that out-manoeuvred two major powers and a regional power by opting for the strategy of internationalisation, using skilled negotiation, diplomacy and coalition building and taking advantage of a fortunate opportune moment in the international environment. It is a story of the quiet resilience of a people's quest for freedom overcoming Cold War paranoia manufactured from without and from within. The Belize case also demonstrates how dispute settlement can be side-lined (the dispute with

Guatemala is still far from being settled decades later) and subordinated to the exercise of the right to self-determination and independence.

But independence did not end Guatemala's claim. How it pursued, and continues to pursue, that claim, what consequences it has for Belize and the efforts to end it, is the subject of the following Chapter.

