



BELIZE SELECTING OUR LEADERS

PAST AND PRESENT

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HOW THE ELECTION PROCESS DEVELOPED

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INTRODUCTION

Why the Fuss over Leaders of our Country

In any organization whether large or small, a family/household unit, a Church, a Lodge; leaders are needed to manage the smooth running of the organization, to make decisions for the betterment of the organization. The leaders need to ensure that rules and regulations are adhered to, make rules

and policies when necessary, guarantee that the most experienced people are handling the day-to-day administration.

This role is similar to that of leaders who manage the affairs of a country. They govern through an institution or organization called Government. So that governance is the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs. Government employees called Public Servants are the front-line persons responsible for carrying out the day-to-day administrative and judicial activities. Their actions, or lack of on the job, directly affect governance positively or negatively.

Leaders Selected by a Few

Belize's political culture started with its first settlers, the buccaneers, around the middle of the 17th century. The country's economic mainstay was based on logwood and mahogany exportation. Slave labour was utilized in the industry until its abolition around 1838. Belize was governed first by the Settlers who owned the land, then the Colonial Office through the Superintendent and later the Governor.

Those who formed the Meetings, Assemblies and Councils were primarily nominated, selected, or even handpicked. Later on when the citizenry was allowed to vote for a small handpicked few, the majority could not, primarily due to the stringent eligibility requirements.

Election of Leadership by a Majority

It took more than 200 years for the working class people to have a voice in the affairs of the country through their vote for leadership. This happened in 1954. They endured another decade before elected leaders acquired control over some aspects of the affairs of the country through a Ministerial System. Prior to 1961, executive and administrative decisions were directly under British scrutiny and control.

In 1978, the eligibility to register as an elector was changed when the voting age was lowered to 18 years. This further accommodated more Belizeans to be able to vote for their leaders in government. Independence of 1981 gave full control to Belizeans and political leaders to fully manage the affairs of the country. Since then, four peaceful and fair elections have been held.



CHRONOLOGICAL EVENTS 1765 - 1948

The Public Meeting

In 1765, the "landed" settlers formed a legislative body called the Public Meeting to govern the affairs of the settlement of Belize. These settlers were the principal owners of large tracks of land and were recognized as the privileged. The Public Meeting through its members was also responsible for electing magistrates, who exercised not only judicial, but administrative functions over the colony. The British formally appointed a Superintendent in 1787 to carry out administrative functions. However, the "landed" gentry had consolidated enough power to be influential in administrative matters.

The power of the "landed" gentry started to wane around 1832 for several reasons, including:

- They lost economic control due to a downturn in the mahogany trade
- The British Government flexed its muscle-the magistrates were now appointed by the Superintendent and not by the Public Meeting
- After the abolition of slavery in 1838, "coloured" men and non-whites became active in the political affairs and eventually dominated the Public Meeting
- The ethnic landscape changed and the population doubled after the Guerra De Las Costas (1847) in Yucatan. Thousands of Maya and Mestizo refugees settled in the North and West of Belize
- By 1840 the laws of the British Government were enforced through the Superintendent

The Legislative Assembly of 1853

The first formal constitution was approved and introduced in 1853, when the Public Meetings were abolished and replaced by the Legislative Assembly. The life of the Legislative Assembly was for four years. However, the Superintendent had the authority to dissolve the Assembly at any time. The Legislative Assembly consisted of 21 members, with the following criteria for membership:

- Be a British subject
- Be 21 years or over
- Have a net worth of at least £400

Eligibility to register as a voter was

- Be a British subject
- Be 21 years or over
- Own real property value at £7
- Receive a salary of £100 per year

The Settlement continued to be governed by a Superintendent and a Legislative Assembly until 1871. Membership to the Legislative Assembly was limited to those persons with the appropriate salary and property to qualify for membership.

The Legislative Council of 1871

In 1871 Belize became a Crown Colony. The Superintendent became the first Lieutenant Governor. The Legislative Assembly was replaced by the Legislative Council. Under this system, the Governor who formally represented the British Government exercised the executive and legislative powers. The Governor also presided over all Council meetings. The members of the Legislative Council were all nominated and consisted of

- Four official members (employees of the Crown)
- Four unofficial members

The unofficial members invariably represented the business interests-the "landed" and the merchants. They exercised total control both politically and economically. Between 1890 and 1931, several factors changed the structure of the Legislative Council.

- Among other constitutional amendments, the local elites also clamoured for a return to elections

- The labouring classes openly showed dissatisfaction

During this period, several issues of political interest surfaced such as **

- 1911-Belize became a municipality called Town of Belize (Ordinance No. 18 of 1911)
- 1919-Race riot in Belize City in July sparked off by disbanded soldiers. They were subjected to racist treatment when they were members of the British West Indian Regiment that supported Britain in World War I
- 1934-In February the Unemployed Brigade marched in protest through the streets of the Town of Belize
- 1934-In March the Labour and Unemployment Association was formed with Antonio Soberanis as leader, to protest the condition of the working class countrywide.

The new municipality called the Town of Belize was situated two miles from the Court House. The word Belize when not preceded by "Town of" meant the Town of Belize including Ambergris Caye, Caye Caulker and St. George's Caye.

By 1931, membership in the New Legislative Council had increased to thirteen members including five elected members. Its composition was as follows:

- The Governor
- Five official members (employees of the Crown)
- Two nominated members
- Five elected members

The number of elected members increased to six in 1938, and by 1945 the composition had changed to:

- Three official members (employees of the Crown)
- Four nominated members
- Six elected members

Due to the rigid eligibility criteria to register as an elector, only a small percentage registered to vote between 1936 and 1948. This is demonstrated in the following table.

Election Year	Population	Registered Electors	% of Registered Voters
1936	56,071	1,035	1.8
1939	58,759	1,155	2.0
1942	61,723	1,383	2.1
1945	64,327	822	1.3
1948	63,139	1,772	2.8

Source: Assad Shoman, "Party Politics in Belize-1950-1986"; Cubola Productions 1987

After all this however, the qualifications and disqualifications for registering electors had not changed much. These qualifications and disqualifications are listed below.

► **Qualifications**

- Has attained the age of 21 years

- Is under no legal incapacity
- Is a British subject by birth or naturalization

OR

- Has resided in Belize for a period not less than three years **AND**
- Possesses one of the following qualifications
 - Assessment of property tax valued at not less than \$6.00 per annum
 - The rental value of premises occupied is not less than \$96.00 per annum
 - Receive an annual salary of \$300.00 or more
 - Reside in Belize at least 12 months before registering as a voter
 - Reside in the same premises at least six months before registering as a voter

►Disqualifications

- Cannot read or write the English language
- Has within three months previous to registration, any relief from public or municipal funds
- Is an undischarged bankrupt
- Has been sentenced in any part of His Majesty's dominions to death **or** penal servitude **or** imprisonment with hard labour for any term exceeding twelve months
- Received a free pardon from His Majesty

ELECTION UNDER ADULT SUFFRAGE

With the emergence of political parties, the Peoples United Party (PUP) in 1950, the National Party (NP) in 1952, the first national election took place on Wednesday, April 28, 1954. Through the agitation of the PUP and members of the General Workers Union the Constitution was amended to allow for Universal Adult Suffrage in 1951. This came into effect in time for the elections in 1951. This meant that all adults age 21 and over had the right to vote in that election. Gone were the qualifying factors based on land ownership and/or financial earnings. It meant that the working class, the rank and file was able to vote for the very first time.

The composition of the Legislative Council was changed to include the nine elected and consisted of

- Three nominated
- Three official members (employees of the Crown)
- Nine elected

The number of elected members increased by three and for the first the elected formed the majority of members. There were also provisions for an Executive Council comprising of

- Four official Members (employees of the Crown)
- Two nominated members
- Four elected members

The Legislative Council was presided over by a Speaker nominated by the Governor, while the Governor chaired the Executive Council. The Governor also had direct influence in the Executive Council by way of a vote.

Some 20,801 electors voted in the 1954 elections representing 70% of the total electorate. The amount of persons registered and voted compared with the 1,772 in 1948 can paint the mood of the times. It meant that several thousands had been disenfranchised simply because they were too poor to be on the list.

The PUP walked away with 66% of total votes cast, and 8 out of 9 seats. The nine leaders elected under adult suffrage by a majority of the people were

1. George C. Price	- Belize North	5. Enrique De Paz	- Cayo
2. Phillip S.W. Goldson	- Belize South	6. Nathaniel Cacho	- Stann Creek
3. Herman Jex	- Belize Rural	7. George Flowers	- Orange Walk
4. Jose Leon Chang	- Corozal	8. Charles Westby	- Toledo
9. Leigh I.A. Richardson	- Belize West		

Eight of the nine leaders represented a coalition of PUP and the GWU, while the ninth Mr. Charles Westby represented the National Party. One year later in 1955 the **Quasi Ministerial System** was introduced. George Cadle Price became **Associate Member** for Natural Resources. Three other elected members became **Members**.

Quasi Ministerial System

George Cadle Price-Associate Member for Natural Resources
Leigh I. A. Richardson-Member for Natural Resources
Phillip W. Goldson-Member for Social Services
Herman Jex-Member for Public Utility

A NEW CONSTITUTION

In 1959, Sir Hilary Blood was appointed by the British Government to assess the existing Constitution and present recommendations based on his evaluations. With the influence of the political and social climate of the times, and augmented by Blood's report, local autonomy increased.

▶The Full Ministerial System was introduced

- The Office of First Minister was created
- A Cabinet of Ministers was created

▶The role of political parties was given constitutional validity

- The appointment of two out of five members was on the advice of the First Minister
- The appointment of a third was on the advice of the opposition party leader

The composition of the Legislative Assembly changed and increased to 25 members. The number of elected members doubled to 18 members.

- Five nominated members
- Two ex-officio members
- Eighteen elected members

The composition of the Executive Council

- Five elected members
- One nominated member
- Two ex-officio members

The Legislative Assembly was presided over by a Speaker nominated by the Governor. The Executive Council was still chaired by the Governor, except that it had become a non-voting position. For the first time the people's representatives were majorities on the Executive Council.

The new constitution came into effect after the 1961 national elections, Wednesday, March 26. Some 26 persons representing three political parties offered themselves as candidates. The PUP won all 18 seats, and Hon. George Cadle Price became First Minister.

In 1963 Belize gained full internal self-government. This was the final formal step before independence. The significance of self-government was that responsibility for certain internal affairs of the country were finally in the control of the elected members. However, the Governor was still in charge of Foreign Affairs, Defence, Internal Security and Civil Service.

The 1963 constitution formed the National Assembly, which consisted of the House of Representatives and the Senate. The National Assembly was referred to as the "Legislature" because it was the body that makes the laws. Bills were oftentimes introduced in the House of Representatives and sent to the senate for confirmation. The members of the House of Representatives were the elected leaders. It is presided over by a Speaker.

Similarly, the senate was presided over by a president who can be appointed from among its membership or outside of the membership. There are a total of 8 appointed members-5 on the advice of the Premier, 2 on the advice of the Opposition Leader and 1 by the Belize advisory Council. The Cabinet is the policy-making arm of government. The Premier heads the Cabinet and its members are drawn from the National Assembly.

Elections for 18 elected members continued to the national election held November 21, 1979. Amendments to the Ordinance in 1978 were of great importance in our election history for two main reasons.

- A new registration introduced the ID card
- Eligibility to register as electors changed to make way for 18 year olds to vote

The Elections and Boundaries Commission also became a reality. The first general election under these new changes was held on November 21, 1979. Some 44,990 voters representing 89.9% of total electorate turned out to vote.

ELECTIONS IN POST-INDEPENDENT BELIZE

After nearly 200 years of British rule, September 21, 1981 heralded the independence of Belize. There was a new Constitution in the horizon, a Belize Constitution. Belizean Government was now responsible for both the internal and external affairs of the country. In our system of government full independence also meant that a Governor General would represent the Queen of England as Head of State in Belize.

The Belize Constitution, which was passed on September 20, 1981, is the supreme law of Belize. It calls for a National Assembly consisting of a House of Representatives and a Senate. Members of the House are all elected. The number of members increased to 28 in 1984 by Act No. 16 and later

to 29 in 1993. A Prime Minister chairs the Cabinet.

The first election after independence was held on December 4, 1984. Some 64,441 electors were registered and 49,311 electors representing 74.9% of total electors went to the polls. The United Democratic Party won to form the first government after independence. Three other general elections have been conducted since then, the last being August 27, 1998. The victorious party was the Peoples United Party, to form the present government.

Plurality of registration is illegal. No person shall register in more than once. All qualifications and disqualifications required to register as electors are listed below.

► **Qualifications**

- 18 years of age or over
- Is a Belizean by birth or naturalization
- Is a British subject resident in Belize for a period of not less than 12 months
- Resides in the electoral division for a period of not less than 2 months

► **Disqualifications**

- Is less than 18 years old
 - Under allegiance, obedience or adherence to any foreign power or state which is not a member of the Commonwealth
 - Is under a death sentence imposed by the Supreme Court or any Court in the Caribbean
 - Is serving a sentence of imprisonment exceeding 12 months
 - Is under a death sentence or imprisonment, the execution of which has been suspended

 - Is certified to be insane or adjudged to be insane
 - Is a patient in any establishment maintained for the treatment of mental illness or mental defectiveness
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Flow Chart of the Registering Process

