'No Tyrants Here Linger': Understandings of Democracy in Modern Belize

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"I do imagine they will say
When
Your eyes are red
With weeping bleaching white rum
Or
Cannabis sativa L.,
They will point and say
YOU ARE UDP!!!
But if, if your heart is blue
Blue in
Despair, longing, or unrequited
Love
They will quickly conclude,
YOU ARE PUP!!!!
It will not occur to them
Even though
Your teeth may be white,
As white as the white in the red,
As white as the white in the blue
How excruciating for them ever to admit,
Perhaps you may be both."

'Maverick' by Evan X Hyde

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Introduction

At a time when questions continue to be raised over the future of democratic transitions in the rest of Central America, the case of Belize offers a different perspective. From the 1950s, through self-government and then independence, this small Caribbean country on the Central American isthmus has proudly preserved an uninterrupted democratic heritage. With a tradition of free and fair elections, a politicised electorate, and (since 1984) alternating ruling parties, Belizean democracy is superficially strong. And yet, the last decade of People's United Party (PUP) government has witnessed major and serious problems for Belize's democracy: the exposure of acute corruption, political patronage continuing unabated, and increasing disillusionment of the electorate with the artificial polarisation created by both political parties. This work asks whether such democratic decay can be sufficiently explained and addressed by dominant understandings of democracy in which 'procedure' is paramount, and seeks to offer an alternative interpretation. The dissertation draws on research in Belize between June and July 2007, involving both archival research in Belmopan and a series of interviews with prominent individuals in civil society and politics.

The first chapter outlines the dominant view that Belize's current malaise can be understood as the result of a failure to live up to Western democratic ideals and norms. Adopting a procedural and minimalist Schumpeterian definition of democracy, actors both in government and civil society have responded to perceived democratic decay by advocating political reform. The second chapter suggests that this perspective has its limitations, and therefore adopts a different methodological approach, drawing on the work of Laurence Whitehead on democratic transitions as drama (2002) and Harald Wydra on communist transitions in Eastern Europe (2007). This interpretive approach, thus far not applied to the Anglophone Caribbean, emphasises the need to see democracy as a creative "process of meaning formation" (Wydra 2007: 270) which occurs before and outside of the institutionalisation of formal procedural rules. Belizean democracy, in short, has its roots in the colonial oppression of the past. The process can

only, however, be understood as a historically and culturally specific experience. It therefore requires the abandonment of the "normative model of full political democracy, generated outside the historical context" that has thus far remained "the axis of analysis" (Wydra 2007: 279). Accordingly, this second chapter then explores three potentially transformative experiences in Belizean history: (i) the labour movements of the 1930s, (ii) the radical politics of the 1960s and early 1970s, and (iii) independence in 1981. These experiences, despite having a limited immediate impact, left a powerful symbolic memory in the Belizean consciousness that the current interpretation of democracy fails to fully appreciate.

The third chapter, breaking from an experiential analysis, suggests rather more speculatively that despite the failure of these past movements there may be signs of an opportunity for a new democratic awakening in Belize. Central to this is a broadened understanding of civil society which places it at the very centre of democratic transitions. Ultimately, however, whether or not this latest opportunity to reject the myths propagated by a continuing neo-colonial system will be taken, should it arise, may depend on the willingness of Belizean civil society to rally around a different narrative of what constitutes democracy. Without this new narrative, it may be impossible for Belizean citizens to reject the intuitively appealing myth, sung about so often in the national anthem, that Belize is a "tranquil haven of democracy", that "no tyrants [here] linger", and to embrace instead the lived experience of democracy as it has historically existed in Belize.

1 *Facing democratic decay: the limits of a procedural definition*

1.1 Democracy as procedure

The procedural definition of democracy was perhaps best formulated by Joseph Schumpeter. In his 1942 classic *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy,* Schumpeter challenged the 'classical' doctrine of democracy for invoking the people as a source of legitimacy for rule, when in fact they were the source in name only. Athenian democracy, famously excluding slaves and women, had justified an empire on the superiority of this form of government. Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Rousseau's general will and social contract and, more recently, Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat were all, according to this view, also tainted with the same brush of illusory democracy.

While Schumpeter recognised that a representative democracy, involving the people only at election time, fell short of the ideal in many ways, it was the introduction of the process of voting and selecting leaders which elevated it to a new, more meaningful level. It was the procedure and the process – rule *by* the people rather than of or for the people – which made democracy more than an empty promise. Crucially, Schumpeter's distinction has prevailed in the post-World War era in efforts to describe, analyse and predict waves of democratisation. As Huntington puts it, "the prevailing effect was to make democracy less of a 'hurrah' word and more of a commonsense word" (1991: 7).

The modifications and enhancements of this argument, though important, have tended to seek analytical precision (e.g. Dahl 1956, 1989) rather than challenge the basic premise. While the emphasis given to different criteria has been much debated in democratisation studies (Przeworski 1986; Cavarozzi 1992; Linz & Stepan 1996; O'Donnell 1999), the task of classifying democracies remains a relatively straightforward one. It is suggested here that such assumptions about the concept have not only

underpinned the way that democracy, and its apparent decay and increasing failure, have been interpreted in Belize, but that they are also central to the future imaginations held in the Belizean consciousness.

1.2 The political system

Along with former British colonial territories in the Caribbean, Belize adopted the 'Westminster model' as its system of government during the lengthy decolonisation process from the 1950s to independence in 1981. As one interviewee explained, the question of other potential models was simply not a part of the discussion:

> "The discussion back then was decolonisation… So the country grew up with that, they didn't know anything else… I didn't see it in terms of corruption … I didn't have a chance to review whether the party system was the best route to go or not" (Hulse: 2007).

In this context it was the PUP which, having identified itself with the anti-colonial struggle from its inception in the 1930s, was able to harness much of the country's electoral support. The PUP's hegemony continued until the national elections of 1974 when the United Democratic Party (UDP), newly formed out of the National Independence Party (NIP), Liberal Party and People's Democratic Movement (PDM), first became a serious threat. The UDP then won elections for the first time in 1984 and again in 1993, but lost to the PUP in 1989, 1998 and 2003. This means that Belize has now had four alternations in ruling party, demonstrating on the surface a healthy two-party system.

Belizean political parties have had a remarkably centralised decision-making process. George Price, the much-celebrated founding father of Belizean politics and Prime Minister until 1984, was renowned for his ability in the PUP's early years to handle discontents and bring them under the umbrella of the catch-all populist party. But the momentum of the nationalist movement could not be sustained over a period of three decades. As the PUP became accustomed to power, the populism became of a rather different, more disconnected sort. With the arrival of the controversial question of

constitutional change in the early 1960s and the increasing use of government-owned radio, "the PUP government did not maintain the same premium on mass meetings as a direction-giver, as a mood tester, as a solidarity-builder and as a means of communication between its leaders and followers" (Grant 1976: 246). This trend towards centralisation has persisted in PUP party politics until today. Indeed, even recent Cabinet infighting – involving the so-called 'G7' in 2004 when seven ministers resigned from Cabinet and, earlier this year, the resignation again by two of these same popular renegade ministers, Mark Espat and Cordel Hyde – seems to have not been able to influence the direction of the party.

The UDP, despite its apparent conservatism, also tries to play up its popular links; in this case through its approach in the 1980s and 1990s of actively involving local youth supporters as candidates at a high level in the party. PUP supporters, however, claim this is nothing more than a desperate solution to a lack of leadership talent in the UDP. Arguably, moreover, the image of a decentralised UDP is born of the party's origins as a coalition party in which the three constituent factions initially preserved a strong degree of their own identity, requiring constant internal debate. Today, there remain powerful centrist and right-wing factions within the UDP which continue to require a means of resolving their differences constructively. While the UDP may make claims to possess a marginally less centralised power structure, therefore, both parties remain guided by a select few at the top.

1.3 The nature of the PUP/UDP division

While Belizean society is deeply polarised along PUP and UDP party lines – with families often split into blue and red camps respectively – the ideological differences are becoming increasingly obscure. Traditionally, the PUP was the left-of-centre party of social justice while the UDP sees itself as a conservative party, promoting its record of fiscal conservatism under previous Prime Minister Dr. Manuel Esquivel in contrast to the current PUP government's borrowing of enormous loans (Faber 2007). Nevertheless, these traditional differences have become increasingly slight. As UDP Chairman Doug

Singh suggested, for dependent countries such as Belize ideology may simply be a luxury: "in the modern world we live in today, each party has to have a mix of conservative principles and practices and labour-oriented – social-oriented – principles and practices" (2007). The primary differences and political arguments have therefore long been about *how* to best achieve Belize's goals – and who is technically most able to achieve them - than about what the goals are. Accordingly, the forthcoming elections in 2008 look likely to be fought over the ever-present issues of corruption, political reform and technical expertise at managing the economy. Bitterly fought and important though these issues will doubtless be, they are hardly ideological.

Rather than fundamental ideological differences, the two issues that have perhaps most dominated Belizean politics over recent decades have been Central American immigration and the Guatemalan claim. The former is based on an oft-perceived ethnic divide in the parties, whereby the PUP is supposedly at heart a Central American party catering for the mestizo Hispanic population while the UDP has its historical and geographical roots in the Afro-Belizean population, particularly in Belize City. Demographic shifts and immigration from war-torn Central America (and simultaneous creole emigration to the US) have exacerbated these ethnic tensions. There is, however, very little evidence thus far to suggest that different ethnic groups vote along ethnic lines; support for the parties has been almost equally split in both the predominantly mestizo areas of Orange Walk, Corozal and Toledo as well as in the principally creole Belize City. Nevertheless, there does remain a fear that at some future date Belizean racial divides could easily be exploited by power-hungry politicians.

The issue of the Guatemalan territorial claim has caused rather more open and violent confrontation. At three points - in 1968 with the US-mediated Webster Proposals, in 1981 with the Heads of Agreement and in 1991 with the Maritime Areas Act – Belizeans reacted angrily and violently to even the merest hint of territorial concessions to Guatemala (Thorndike 1983, Shoman 1994a). Traditionally the NIP and then later, less doggedly, the UDP led and co-opted this popular reaction. Because the demonstrations were often led by Afro-Belizeans in Belize City (fiercely nationalistic and fearing for

their survival under potential Guatemalan rule) the issue has throughout been partially aligned with both the ethnic Afro-Mestizo divide and the UDP-PUP split. Nevertheless, there are signs that Belizeans are disinterested in politicians' exploitation of the issue and increasingly assume that enough talented diplomats work behind the scenes to ensure that the issue will never again be a serious threat. Paul Morgan, Leader of the Vision Inspired by the People (VIP) Party, suggested that people were increasingly being turned off by the parties because "the Guatemala issue is being played as a football" by politicians (2007).

What, then, can be made of the two dominant political parties? Clearly, the Westminster system is designed to thrive on artificial opposition. The concept of having an entrenched opposition holding the government to account, even when ideological differences are not that great, is central to the functioning of the House of Representatives. Nevertheless, the famous critique of the Westminster system in the Caribbean as formulated by the People's Revolutionary Government of Grenada remains as relevant for Belize as ever:

> "We are insulted and we insult ourselves for as long as we continue to swallow the idea that where people are not divided into two camps facing each other across an imaginary line drawn by those in command, there is no democracy" (1981: 84).

Indeed, the take of Belize's own Left on the matter has been nearly as critical; Assad Shoman comments that "the role of the political parties, and of the party system, is to mediate between the dominators and the dominated, to give an illusion of popular autonomy, and to maintain a division of society along essentially irrelevant lines" (1987: 89). In an era without the stark ideologies and visions of the Cold War, however, the PUP and UDP's apparent convergence should hardly come as a surprise. What is worrying is how deeply politically polarised Belizean society is, even without these fundamental splits. The daily bitterness of the predominantly partisan media, combined with the viciousness of the parties' rhetoric, makes for an uncompromising atmosphere in which daily life becomes remarkably politicised. As one interviewee remarked,

"whether you're blue or red has nothing to do with the real issues of the day, but it becomes the most important thing" (Vernon 2007).

1.4 Political patronage and clientelism

This polarisation, however, is best understood as the result not only of the two-party system but also of endemic clientelism and political patronage, neither of which show any signs of diminishing. First, resources – at both national and local level – are commonly distributed politically. For example, the UDP Council of Belize City complained earlier this year that funds were being delayed from reaching them by the central PUP government (Channel 5, 3rd July 2007). UDP representative Patrick Faber interpreted this approach as, "spiting the entire community simply because you want to play politics" (2007). Second, public shows of mass support also tend to be tainted with the brush of political patronage; the violent demonstrations in Belmopan against perceived corruption on 18th May 2007, according to the PUP, were made possible by the UDP paying for free buses in which their supporters were encouraged to descend upon the capital. Similarly, the 10,000 that were estimated to be at the National PUP Party Convention in Corozal (Amandala, 4th July 2007) were encouraged somewhat by the free transport, food and beer provided by the PUP party machine. Third, it is also allegedly a common practice for funds to be distributed by a victorious government to their own *unelected* candidates in each constituency. The candidate can then use these funds to garner support amongst his supporters ahead of the next election. The tradition of the weekly political clinic, supposedly to enhance the constituent-representative link, also still runs strong. But according to Patrick Faber, this tradition derives from the days of George Price, who was "the one who created that culture of every time you go to the Prime Minister's office he gives you a little money in an envelope" (2007). While the UDP are probably correct in accusing the PUP of being better able to win votes through resources, this is, as UDP Chairman Doug Singh admitted, simply because "the party in power has a lot of resources so they can afford to do it more than we do. I think if we had more resources, we'd probably do it just as much" (2007).

There are three principal effects of this culture of patronage. First, liberal democracy's concept of voters rationally choosing policies from a 'marketplace of ideas' is overshadowed by more immediate material concerns. Second, as Dylan Vernon, Director of the Katalyst Institute for Public Policy and Research, observed, "the entire state's safety net welfare system is being undermined in a very un-transparent and unaccountable way" (2007). This threatens the provision of the very genuine and basic necessities (such as water, electricity, and school costs) that do exist. That the safety net for these kind of needs depends on one's political allegiance clearly is not desirable. Third, and perhaps most significantly, it raises the stakes of political competition. In recent years the UDP has been characterised as a party prone to inciting civil disobedience and even violence. While this may not be true of the party's leadership, UDP supporters at a grassroots level will inevitably go to great lengths to return their party to power. Paul Morgan explained the dangers inherent in this:

> "For the first time in this country, one set of beneficiaries are out in the cold for more than five years. And so it is getting desperate. They must win this time, otherwise there are dire consequences for their people" (2007).

With people's livelihoods depending on the candidate they support coming to power, the mobilisation and polarisation in Belizean politics and society becomes more understandable. What to outsiders appears as a politically interested electorate firmly endowed with democratic norms, under a closer cultural examination, turns out to be a population held in the grip of political parties, suspended permanently in a state of dependency. The people, of course, are as responsible as the parties for the perpetuation of a process of clientelism that is two-way. On an individual level, however, it may be unrealistic to expect any one voter, any more than any one politician, to sacrifice their interests by refraining from operating within and exploiting the existing system. In short, any attempt to break out of this cycle of patronage through political reform has to confront the question of causality. Patrick Faber, lamenting the example of one constituent who made continuous excessive demands and threatened not to vote for him, observed that "it continues because the people are the ones wishing it…it's a

chicken and egg situation. Which do you fix first? Do you fix the politicians or do you fix the people?" (2007).

1.5 Corruption

Unlike clientelism, the issue of corruption has a particularly high profile in Belize. Since being included in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index in 2003, every successive year has seen a worsening of Belizeans' perception of corruption (CPI Report 2003-2006). The prevalence of (mostly UDP) political posters and graffiti in visible public space decrying the PUP's alleged corruption (with slogans such as 'Pirates of the Caribbean') may be a reflection of the growing sentiment that, as Patrick Faber put it, "the PUP are about creaming this country, raping this country of its resources and giving it to just a few" (2007). Daily stories and hearsay abound as to the fantastic mansions that PUP leaders are allegedly in the process of buying abroad. But such unsubstantiated rumours undoubtedly arise in part from the very real scandals of recent years.

Particularly representative of the public's concerns has been the outcry over the controversial policy of economic citizenship (giving citizenship to foreigners dependent on investment). As Paul Morgan put it, "when you sell your citizenship and don't account for the money… you're squandering it away, it's like selling your children's birth-home, and spending it on alcohol" (2007). In July 2002 a scandal was exposed in which top-level Immigration Department officials were accused of selling passports despite farcically completed applications. In the BELIPO scandal of October 2005 a prominent PUP Cabinet Minister, Godfrey Smith, was implicated in benefiting as an interested party in the sale of the Companies Registry, for which the Government inexplicably paid the stamp duty (Channel 5 News, 20th October 2005). Significantly, though his prospects as a potential future PUP leader may have been somewhat damaged, Smith emerged relatively unscathed. The affair, moreover, was indicative of a much broader feeling that the numerous privatisations of the 1990s and 2000s involved government politicians taking payments from the buyers.

The most recent scandal to erupt, in April 2007, which is at the time of writing in the courts, is that of the government guarantee for the indebted Universal Health Services (UHS). A guarantee loan of thirty three million dollars was signed by Prime Minister Said Musa and Attorney General Francis Fonseca without it passing the constitutional requirement of first going to the National Assembly. Though there are no indications that Musa personally benefited from the guarantee, the incompetence suggested by his later uncertainty over whether the amount was in US or Belizean dollars exacerbated the general crisis of confidence. In this environment of distrust, Godwin Hulse, an independent representing the local business community in the Senate, caught the national mood by suggesting that the politicians "need the whole of their bodies tied right now, not only their hands!" (2007).

1.6 The political reform process

Dylan Vernon, the Chairman of the Political Reform Commission, starkly observes that "our democracy is worse off now than it was in 1981" (2007). Facing this powerful cocktail of corruption, clientelism and artificial political division, the campaign for political reform has, over the last decade, gathered momentum. In March 1994 it was the Society for the Promotion of Education and Research (SPEAR), a prominent NGO, that led the calls for radical political reform. Two subsequent bi-partisan committees set up by the UDP government in November 1995 and June 1997, however, failed to make serious progress. It was only with the election of the PUP government in August 1998, partly on a mandate of reform, that the process culminated in the launch of a fourteen member independent Political Reform Commission, to which Prime Minister Said Musa suggested that no aspect of the Belizean political system should be treated as taboo or closed to inspection. Though the final report of the Political Reform Commission admitted that it did "not pretend to be the last word on political reform for Belize" ('Final Report of the PRC' 2000: 10), its in-depth analysis and exhaustive considerations recommended, amongst many other things: a unicameral legislature, election of the senate, increased independence of the judiciary and urgent review of campaign finance.

Above all, there was an emphasis on the need for political education, observing that "lack of awareness about Belize's political system and political issues are significant constraints to people's participation in Belize's democracy and to making political reform really work" (2000: 135).

Despite apparently having a genuine opportunity to effect changes, however, the (non-)implementation of many of the Commission's key recommendations left much to be desired amongst the leaders of civil society organisations (Perera 2007, Vernon 2007). Dylan Vernon was particularly scathing about what was an "ad hoc approach, a band-aid approach" (2007) to attempts at political reform, suggesting they had been "more cosmetic… than real in impact" and failed to get to the heart of the problems. This is not to suggest that the whole political reform process was fruitless; real advances, for example, were made in increasing the independence and efficiency of the judiciary. Moreover, as Vernon remarked, aside from tangible reforms, the process has had the unintended consequence of "increasing awareness of what people can achieve. And the very act of doing that, the process of doing that, was a democratic act in itself" (2007).

The political reform debate will not, however, go away. The issue of an elected senate this year, for example, has come to the fore. And with the UDP recently releasing its programme for political reform, including a recall mechanism (enabling the mid-term removal of representatives) and campaign finance reform, the issue looks as though it will only become more politicised. At the same time, civil society organisations, with increasingly limited capacity and funding, have begun to tire – to the extent of "almost putting a moratorium on political reform for a while" (Vernon 2007) - of pressing home a message that falls on the deaf, self-serving ears of political parties hungry only for the immediate votes that piecemeal promises of political reform seem to ensure. Nevertheless, while the immediate future may offer disappointment for those who charge themselves with reforming Belize's political system, it is the gradual act of raising political consciousness which may be the most important, and yet unintended, effect of the reform process. As Vernon concluded, "people are at a higher level of understanding

[of] what Belize's problems are now, and … that's attributable to the whole political reform process" (2007).

1.7 The limits of a procedural interpretation

Alma Young is not alone in noting that in Belize "there are two political parties, there has been electoral turnover in office, legislation is crafted by an elected body, and there is popular interest and participation in the political arena" (1994: 113). One particularly influential work in the 1980s placed Belize firmly in the context of war-torn Central America, warning that "the Belizean domino… could topple without energetic and well-directed support from the United States and other industrial countries" (Fernandez 1989: vi). Fernandez therefore argued that leaders should be quick to promote "an enviable track record as a stable democracy in a region of insurrections, revolutions, and wars of national liberation" (1989: 96), thus deploying the concept of democracy not only as a tool for economic development, but also as an indicator of just which side Belize was on in the Cold War.

But even for those who disagree with positive conclusions about the state of Belizean democracy and emphasise instead the decay outlined above, the approach has nevertheless tended to be one of how to reduce the gap and best implement the global formulae for good governance. Crucially, the assumptions which persist about the procedural nature of democracy derive not from the Belizean experience but from externally imposed models. That Belize has experienced enormous circular migration with the United States, retains British colonial links, and as a small dependent country is exposed to global models has made Belizeans likely to adopt such a definition. In interviews with the author, in citing the shortcomings of Belizean democracy, prominent actors referenced countless times the UK or US systems as an ideal benchmark of democratic governance.

It is suggested here that the prevailing definition of democracy as a set of procedures, universally applicable to individual situations, is unhelpful by itself in

understanding the Belizean experience because it does not account for longer-term processes and experiences that are culturally and historically specific (Chabal & Daloz 2006; Whitehead 2002; Wydra 2007). Such a model, moreover, ignores the normative and legitimising impact of democracy and is therefore "insufficient, because it excludes the inescapable teleological component of democracy which is what gives it emotional force" (Whitehead 2002: 10). As Whitehead writes, "'democracy' is best understood not as a pre-determined end-state, but as a long-term and somewhat open-ended outcome, not just as a feasible equilibrium but as a socially desirable and imaginary future" (2002: 3). Belize, then, for too long has held its democracy up against an illusory, externally-derived benchmark and failed to appreciate that in fact democracy is as much a work of consciousness creating imaginary utopian futures as it is a mere political system.

2 *Towards an interpretive approach*

> "Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning".
>
> Clifford Geertz, 1973: 5.

To begin to approach a question of politics from the perspective of an anthropologist is no accidental mistake. "The only justification for what we do," Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz remind us, "other than to construct models in the air, is to further the understanding of political processes across the world" (2006: 27). Method, in short, is but a means to an end. As Eric Voegelin once wrote of political science's tendency towards positivism, "science is a search for truth concerning the nature of the various realms of being. Relevant in science is whatever contributes to the success of this search" (1952: 4-5). With this in mind, an interpretive approach is suggested. As Laurence Whitehead outlines, "instead of seeking to understand large historical processes such as democratisation by procedures aimed at suppressing all elements of subjectivity and perspective on the part of the analyst, and all nuance and complexity in the object of analysis, the narrative approach requires the conscious and trained deployment of all these resources" (2002: 248). The art of interpretation, then, is necessarily imprecise. And yet, despite being so, it offers the potential to illuminate the processes of Belizean history and democracy by virtue of placing the country's cultural and historical specificity at centre-stage. Belize, however, with its democratic-constitutionalism-within-a-colonial-framework, is no clear-cut case of democratisation complete with obvious critical junctures (such as, for example, Latin America or Eastern Europe). If, as Harald Wydra writes, "democratic aspirations result from the historical creativity of transformative experiences" (2007: 277), then where are these to be found in Belizean history, given the superficial appearance of political continuity?

2.1 The labour movement and the emergence of nationalism

The growth of the nationalist movement, and in particular the People's United Party, has previously been attributed primarily to the devaluation of the British Honduran dollar by the British colonial government in 1949 (Grant 1976). As Shoman acknowledges, the decision certainly had a catalytic effect; "the wretched conditions under which people had lived hitherto had been gradually worsening over decades, but now here was an act which by a shake of the pen visibly and dramatically aggravated their situation" (1979: 46). Nigel Bolland, however, argues that the genesis of nationalism can be found much further back in the labour disturbances of the 1930s (1988, 2001). After the riots of 1919, in which demobilised soldiers returning from the First World War protested against their perceived mistreatment, there was an unmistakeable mood of discontent. When in the 1930s the already-strained market for mahogany and forest produce collapsed amid the effects of the global depression, unemployment rose dramatically. In 1931, Hurricane Hattie devastated British Honduras, leaving a (proportionally massive) 1,000 dead (Bolland 1988). Despite these ever-worsening conditions, the colonial authorities were able to offer relief work for only 150 people.

By 1934, the masses of unemployed began to organise. At the fore of the self-styled 'Unemployed Brigade', later to become the Labour and Unemployed Association (LUA), was the militant Antonio Soberanis Gomez. According to Peter Ashdown, Soberanis "in his somewhat incoherent but messianic and vociferous speeches… called for the institution of a fair wage and work for the unemployed and he attacked Crown Colony government, imperial neglect of Belize and colonial officialdom" (1978: 63). Bolland observes, though, that the effects of the militants' rhetoric were far-reaching; "while the labourers made specific demands for relief and a minimum wage, these demands were couched in broad moral and political terms that began to define and develop a new nationalistic and democratic political culture in Belize" (1988: 164). Specifically the demands also created an unprecedented space of protest for the labour movement, with labour reforms and the legalisation of trade unions in 1941. In 1943, penal sanctions were finally removed for breach of contract, meaning that workers could

add to their legal arsenal of protest the weapon of labour strikes. Accordingly, in 1943 the influential General Workers' Union (GWU) was registered, which "more than any other organisation" went on to raise "the political consciousness of the working people in the 1940s" (Bolland 2001: 631).

Soberanis, however, may have been more than willing to hand over the reins of the developing nationalist movement to more intellectual individuals (Ashdown 1978). But those who came to the fore were from a decidedly business-oriented elite. Amongst others, the self-made chicle millionaire Robert S. Turton – who later sponsored and encouraged his employee George Price to lead the PUP – promised to look at the employment question when elective principles were reintroduced in 1936. According to Ashdown, they "overnight became the 'people's men'" (1978: 71). When the People's Committee, the precursor to the People's United Party, was formed in 1950 it quickly and effortlessly co-opted the momentum of the GWU, taking over leadership of the nationalist movement. But "although the PUP relied on the GWU to win the first national elections, it eschewed class politics as well as ethnic politics, developing instead a typical populist party of national unity" (Bolland 2001: 653). The intellectuals to which Soberanis and others in the labour movement had relinquished control, then, tempered the potential radicalism of the nationalist working class movement, aware that allowing it to develop to its natural conclusion would be dangerous, because after all the "anger of the working class was not just directed towards the Colonial Government but also towards the mercantile elite and privileged classes to which they themselves belonged" (Ashdown 1978: 69).

"The independence movement in general, and the PUP in particular, grew out of this labour movement, which", as Bolland observes, "had been developing for 16 years before devaluation" (2001: 633). As an invigorating, participatory democratic experience the labour movements were therefore cut short, in some sense betrayed by the middle-class business orientation of the populist PUP. As Shoman puts it, it was hardly surprising that while the PUP "could have moved in the direction of true democracy… sometime around 1960 it became just another rock and roll band, seeking

accommodation with the British and with the local middle class and bourgeoisie, with the result that it became mildly reformist rather than revolutionary, and that the real decolonisation process invoking radical cultural change was stopped in its tracks" (1994b: 10). In the context of a creative transformative experience, shaping the meaning of democracy, the labour movements promised much but ultimately delivered little. As Ashdown concludes with reference to Antonio Soberanis, "it is perhaps ironic that the practice of 'democracy' in action removed the last vestiges of support from the only true democrat in the 1930s" (1978: 71).

2.2 'The crowd called UBAD': radicalising democracy

As V.S. Naipaul wrote in 1969, PUP dominance in this supposed peripheral backwater could not remain unchallenged forever. "The world", he observed, "intrudes. The sons of people once content with the Premier's benediction go away to study and come back and curse both parties. They talk of Vietnam and Black Power. They undermine the Negro loyalty to the slave past" (1969: 217). Three such returning students were Evan Hyde, Assad Shoman and Said Musa. Returning from a scholarship-funded university education in the USA, Hyde espoused an uncompromising Black Power message, forming the United Black Association for Development (UBAD). But while the spiritual return of 'Afro-Hondurans' to their African roots, as opposed to the mimicry of white customs and values to which they were apparently accustomed, remained central to Hyde's vision (1995), it was the inclusive definition of black that made his vision palatable to other Belizeans. Black, he argued, was not only about skin colour but also a state of mind, historically determined by one's exposure to forms of oppression. As he wrote in his seminal piece 'Knocking Our Own Ting' in 1969, describing attitudes towards his critique of the foundation myth of the Battle of St. George's Caye in 1798, "if you are black you think like me. If you're high brown you think like the Loyal and Patriotic Order of the Baymen. If you're white, you couldn't have read so far. You must be thinking black" (Hyde 1995: 17).

While Hyde has been extensively criticised - both by his opponents in the PUP for being guilty of black racism and more recently for reinforcing male chauvinism (Macpherson 2007a; 2007b) – it was this broad and instinctive approach to radical struggle which made possible his links to the more class-orientated Shoman and Musa. On 4th May 1969 the *Belize Billboard* interviewed Assad Shoman as a member of UBAD, though according to Hyde he had in fact only ever been a guest speaker (Hyde 1995). In the interview, Shoman adopted a similar line of thought to emphasise the common goals of the radical movement:

> "By 'black' we mean non-white, and as applied specifically to our country it means the so-called Spanish Latin, the so-called Creole, Carib, Mayan, Arab, Chinese, Indians, Mestizos. We consider all these people, of different races, but to a large extent inter-mixed, as one people, who must unite to present a solid front against the imperialist which is based in the USA" (1995: 5-6).

This tension – between the broadly cultural aims of Hyde's UBAD and the political and socioeconomic emphasis given to the struggle by Shoman and Musa – existed throughout the loose coalition between the two elements. Shoman and Musa who, with Lionel del Valle, had formed the Political Action Committee (PAC) to apply a socialist dependency analysis to political matters in Belize, needed access to the kind of popular, mobilised support that only Hyde was able to arouse in Belize City, the centre of Afro-Honduran identity politics. Nevertheless, while these differences between cultural and political aims never disappeared, and in fact ultimately resulted in the two elements drifting apart, the marriage of convenience – at its closest in October 1969 when UBAD and PAC merged to form the Revolitical Action Movement (RAM) – was nevertheless able to captivate its Belizean audience. After a while, as Hyde put it, "everything bad became UBAD" (1995: 40).

UBAD, PAC and RAM were important perhaps more for the critique they offered rather than their proximity to the centres of power. When UBAD finally, after the breakdown of the RAM merger, formed the 'UBAD Party for Freedom, Justice and Equality', only Evan X Hyde stood as a candidate. He proved unable to break the political parties' grip on power, winning just 89 votes in the Collett constituency and

soon after removing himself "from the political spotlight" (Hyde 1995: 101). But the radicalisation of the concept of democracy remained; the cry of Amandala, an African word for 'people power', though now with more than a touch of bitter irony about it, still resonates. As Shoman had put it back in 1969, "we believe in the People's power and that this is the true definition of democracy. This has no relation to the kind of democracy that they speak about so often for that is sheer hypocrisy, not democracy" (1995: 4).

UBAD's legacy, however, may be more than an astute critique of Belizean party politics. Musa and Shoman were both brought into the PUP by George Price and have been responsible for maintaining and emphasising its social justice credentials. Musa, while his current government may seem rather distant from the aims of PAC and RAM, has nevertheless been able to guide Belize in a direction that is doubtless shaped in part by his personal experiences of the 1960s and 1970s. Shoman, meanwhile, has continued to exert a strong influence behind the scenes, as well as being largely responsible for the international developments that made Belize's independence possible. Hyde, for his part, has hardly withdrawn from the political scene entirely; as well as reneging on his earlier hatred of the PUP, he has also remained an influential voice in Belize. The UBAD newspaper *Amandala* has gone on to be the best-selling paper and offers a rare non-partisan perspective. *KREM Radio*, also set up by Hyde, has similarly ensured that although institutionalised and much transformed, UBAD's voice has not been entirely silenced.

But tangible effects aside, there is no reason to think that the transformative experience of the radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s will be easily forgotten in the collective Belizean memory. The culmination came, importantly, in the state's attempted repression of the radical movement. Following an article entitled *Games Old People Play*, Ismail Shabazz and Hyde were put on trial by the PUP government for sedition. Here seemed to be the colonial government using, as Shoman put it, "the courts as a cover-up for what is really political repression" (1995: 269). In the trial in July 1970 that captured the imagination of the country, the stakes could not have been higher. As Shoman,

providing pro bono legal defence with Musa, told the jury: "you will decide whether you will assume responsibility for the extermination of all voices of dissent, or whether you will go down in history as having upheld the freedom of dissent that, we are told, is an integral part of so-called Christian Democracy" (1995: 269). To the delight of the crowds packed into the squares outside the courthouse, the jury acquitted Shabazz and Hyde. Shoman and Musa, their political stock never higher, were carried on the shoulders of the people. As Anne Macpherson writes, "it was a moment at which political culture in Belize seemed to be changing dramatically, when healthy elements of substantive criticism were added to that culture" (Shoman 1995: 265).

2.3 A dependent independence?

In the attempt to build the "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) of the nation, the occasion of independence should have offered Belize the opportunity to cement new allegiances through the creation of symbols and shared histories. In 1981, however, the Guatemalan issue came to overshadow the entire affair. The 1979 elections, according to Shoman, centred around the issue of independence:

> "Many observers expected the UDP to win, since there was growing dissatisfaction with the economic situation… … The UDP campaigned on the platform that independence should be delayed for at least ten years… … The PUP, recognising its weakness in other areas, based its campaign squarely on the early attainment of independence… … The elections were, in effect, a referendum on whether or not Belize should proceed to independence as soon as possible" (1994a: 231).

The PUP, unexpectedly, got their victory by 13 seats to 5. But the split along party lines now reflected – or rather, had manufactured – a division over the issue of independence. This fed into predominantly ethnic concerns over the PUP government's attitude towards the Guatemala issue. Afro-Belizeans in particular feared that the Heads of Agreement (in which the PUP attempted to guarantee Belize's security by offering Guatemala permanent and unimpeded access to the sea and the use of certain cayes in exchange for earlier recognition of Belize's sovereignty) constituted a sell-out by a pro-Hispanic party. The fact that the country was divided, at least loosely, along both party and ethnic lines over the issue of independence - to the extent of the rioting and national crisis that came before 21st September 1981 – left a rather bitter taste in the Belizean

mouth. Perhaps worse, it meant that the foundation myth for the postcolonial state of Belize was one of division, disunity and moderate violence. That the British had accepted and welcomed the idea of Belizean independence for almost twenty years before it finally happened, moreover, meant that the anti-colonial movement did not culminate in the defeat of a common enemy, but rather entailed kindly requesting the former colonial master for a defence guarantee as he willingly withdrew.

Independence also failed to represent a break with the past through an end to dependency. The realisation around the rest of the Anglophone Caribbean years before that formal independence hardly equated to actual independence - or to a less peripheral position in global capitalism - did not, in certain circles, take all that long to sink in. Assad Shoman concluded of independence that "ordinary Belizeans today have no more control over their natural resources, no more power to decide their economic and social policies, than they did before independence" (1994a: 236). In 1991 the Society for the Promotion of Education and Research (SPEAR) produced a report, the product of a conference, entitled 'Ten Years After Independence', in which the changes – and more importantly the continuities – between 1981 and 1991 were discussed in depth.

Independence, then, took on the appearance of a lost opportunity. While the labour movement of the 1930s and then the radical movement of the 1960s and 1970s had both represented, in some sense, a popular attempt to redefine the discourse of democracy (though not primarily presented in this way), independence in 1981 was not so much the betrayal or co-optation of a popular attempt as a foundational moment that Belize's diplomatic history contrived to deprive of much meaning. Like the labour demonstrations and UBAD movement before, it was far from the democratic transition that optimists might once have hoped that it could be.

2.4 Reclaiming a history of popular resistance

History in Belize, as Shoman argues, has tended to be written and owned by (neo)colonial elites and used as an instrument of ethnic division. In recent decades,

however, real attempts have been made to reclaim Belizean history; in 1994, for example, SPEAR organised a conference entitled 'People's Resistance and Social Change in Belize'. One example of moderate success in re-imagining Belize's history as one of popular resistance was the controversial debunking of the myth of the Battle of St. George's Caye, which Evan X Hyde had described as "the most effective historical source of division between the tribes in our society" (1995: 1). Celebrated on September 10th each year, the Battle of St. George's Caye in 1798 was the moment when the white colonial Baymen of British Honduras, against all the odds, defeated a Spanish fleet off the coast of Belize City. This turned out to be the foundation myth of British Honduras as a British colony, with the Spanish never to re-assert their claim.

According to the (white) authors of the original myth, the black slaves willingly fought as free men alongside their white masters and it was their support that was decisive in winning the battle. Such a myth, it was argued, cemented the slaves' allegiance to the British over the Spanish and gave them a central role in the imagined future of British Honduras. It was, however, a rather dubious role in which their loyalty as subordinates – whether to slave masters or, later, to colonial employers - was promoted as a desirable characteristic on which their symbolic importance in the nation rested. According to Macpherson, the authors effectively "asserted their white male ancestors' command of loyal male slaves as a metaphor of their own ability to lead and control the Creole working class, and thus of their fitness to legislate" (2003: 109). Moreover, the myth glorified Belize's slavery, which – along with a pride in the logging camps over the sugar plantations that had been present elsewhere – had the effect of inaccurately portraying the Belizean experience of slavery as considerably less arduous than in other Anglophone Caribbean countries. Finally, the myth used the idea of a degree of social mobility to divide Afro-Belizean unity, suggesting that by putting on Fanon's 'white mask', the 'high brown' (to use Hyde's phrase) could escape the poverty and neglect otherwise associated with their skin colour.

The debunking of the St. George's Caye myth is no longer as controversial as it once was. Neither, perhaps, are the attempts to revise the British history of Mayan

resistance, promoting rebellion leaders like Marcos Canul in 1872 not as uncivilised savages but as heroes of the anti-imperialist struggle. Nor, for that matter, is the search to uncover "the countless ways in which slaves resisted slavery; not only by escapes and revolts, but in their day-to-day practice by which they signified their rejection of their status and proclaimed their humanity through their cultural practices, legal challenges, petitions, demonstrations, work stoppages and yes, even assassinations and suicides" (Shoman 1994b: 6). But more recent academic works have also drawn attention to the continuities of resistance and struggle in wage labour. Despite the lack of collective resistance or labour organisation thus far among workers in the banana industry, Mark Moberg prefers to emphasise the culture of resistance that nevertheless persists on an individual level; "despite the fact that farmowners manipulate ethnic and national loyalties to control labour, their goal of a docile workforce remains elusive… … Through sabotage, theft, and foot-dragging…banana workers continue to exact a high toll on the productivity and profits of export agriculture" (1994: 3).

Perhaps most important, though, is the recent work done to recover a gendered history of Belize. Much ignored in previous histories of Belize (e.g. Dobson 1973, Grant 1976), there have now been more successful attempts to redress this imbalance and to emphasise a gendered analysis (Macpherson 2003, 2007a, 2007b; Shoman 1994b). One recent volume explores the role that women played in twentieth century politics, suggesting that both the female middle-class reformers within the political system, and those radical labour activists outside of it, made different contributions to an inherently male-dominated system. As Macpherson concludes, "their combined record of pressuring the state from within and without, and their common experience of becoming hostages to party politics and the national question, provide Belizeans – especially the women's movement, which has faltered since the 1990s – with critical lessons and tools for confronting the challenges of the past and present" (2007b: 284). Though there will undoubtedly be much more to be said on the subject, it is the attempt to outline a historical role of struggle for women in Belize that is most relevant here.

These combined efforts interpret Belizean history as a combination of oppression and resistance. In the attempt to outline a past culture of people power, historians have suggested that the oppressive colonial and post-colonial experiences existed alongside a popular reaction against them. This dissertation, however, argues that instead of understanding oppression and resistance as mutually interacting opposites, democracy should be seen *as having its roots in the oppression, exploitation and incivility of the colonial and post-colonial experiences*. While the movements outlined here were doubtless important for the popular resistance that they embodied, their true significance is as potentially transformative moments in which Belizean democracy could have been re-imagined. As suggested, however, the labour movement, radical movement, and independence all failed to actually lead to significant democratic change. Each, in its own way, fell short and neither destroyed the moral order of the colonial way of life, nor replaced it with a different, democratic approach valuing civility, tolerance and equality. In spite of this, there remains the possibility that a future possible transformation, a future democratic awakening, may yet take place.

3 *A "miracle in progress in Belize"?*

3.1 Civil society

Rather like democracy, the conceptualisation of civil society is potentially of the utmost importance to Belize. One perspective would highlight civil society as an associative arena in which non-political entities operate, creating the effect of a counterbalance to political society. In this pluralist model, the existence of depoliticised interests is seen as ensuring that not all in society will become subject to totalitarian or utopian political visions. In much of European history, the bourgeoisie became equated with civil society and has therefore been seen as playing a role in bringing about democratisation. But as Andrew Levin points out, "the composition of civil society must be acknowledged to be historically contingent and variable" (11:1995: 405) because elsewhere in the world "the bourgeoisie has more often than not been allied with and protected by the repressive governments resisting democratisation. Other forces have led the fight for democratisation, and this has resulted in a different notion of civil society, the democratisation process, and ultimately, of democracy itself" (Levin 1995: 404). The role of a broader, less quantifiable civil society in recent democratisation processes, from Poland to Haiti, has led to the recognition that it must be reconceptualised. Previous interpretations simply no longer universally explain these experiences. There is, as Levin observes, "an often unknowing reliance on the comfortable old notion of civil society as the private realm centred in the free market. Much of the confusion results from attempts to apply this historically specific, two-hundred-year-old European model to situations it simply does not fit" (1995: 441).

Perhaps more useful is a definition of civil society in which 'civility' is central. Pivotal transformations of political society from un-civil to civil, in this sense, require institutional reform to create changes in norms and values. Crucially, however, they would also rely upon the contingent consequences of unexpected events and experiences which simply cannot be predicted or deliberately brought about.

Importantly, modernity, as well as the concomitant state-society relations of totalitarianism, authoritarianism and intolerance, may all be prerequisites for a subsequent opportunity to foster a transformation of consciousness. In other words, only after the possibilities opened up by modernity have been exhausted and rejected can they be deliberately overcome; "the [previous] inability of the state to penetrate social life is not at all the same thing as the creation of social practices which make state-society interactions civilised" (Hall 1995: 4).

Under this interpretation, civil society is inextricably linked to the civilising process of democratisation, where democracy is not so much an outcome as an act or process of meaning transformation in the direction of civility. Where democracy consists of this civilising process, a 'civil society' is clearly a central component. As Wydra writes, "if there is an 'essence' to democracy, then it can be the question about what makes people denounce claims to total power, resist despotic and unaccountable rule, and submit decision processes about legitimate power to the scrutiny of public opinion and the ensuing act of voting" (2007: 280). Moreover, such a denunciation must necessarily involve a transformation from something to something else. In other words, "the civilising process needs to engage with situations that liberal democratic theory and much of comparative politics would consider coterminous with the failure of consolidation" (Wydra 2007: 278). Democracy, as a civilising process, is born under conditions of authoritarianism; in Belize, under colonial and neo-colonial forms of rule.

Civil society, or rather 'civilising society', is central to democratisation. It should no longer be restricted to a depoliticised role, as developments in the latest global wave of democratic transitions have made clear. Indeed, the assertion by democratisation theorists that the term democratic consolidation should increasingly include changes in norms and values may be a sign that 'civil society' is, though in a rather different sense, being acknowledged as a major factor in democratisation. As Levin observes, "of particular interest is the role the revival of civil society has played in this embrace of democratic process as a core value. Scholars who want to cabin democracy within the political sphere have overlooked this development. In missing this dynamic aspect of

civil society, they fail to see the tremendous implications of civil society for democratic theory as a whole" (1995: 403). The argument, then, is that understanding modern processes of democratisation requires developing the concept of both a politicised civil society but also, simultaneously, a civilised, depoliticised 'democracy'.

By broadening the definition of civil society, the possible futures for Belizean society may be better understood. Thus far, however, 'civil society' has tended to be interpreted according to the dominant, though rather unhelpful, definition of associative organisations; usually referring to civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or the unions. With the NGO Act of December 2000, the partnership between Belizean NGOs and the government was institutionalised. This partnership derives principally from what Gustavo Perera, Executive Director of SPEAR, described as "the global model of governance", referring primarily to the idea of a "tripartite partnership between government, civil society and the private sector – civil society representing more the people and broader population" (2007). But while some CSOs, such as SPEAR and the Katalyst Institute for Public Policy and Research, undoubtedly do their utmost to represent the interests of the Belizean population, to restrict 'civil society' to these organisations or, worse yet, other less representative associative organisations such as environmental NGOs or the unions, would be to adopt an unhelpfully narrow, restricting and increasingly meaningless definition. Laurence Whitehead argues that,

> "NGOs tend to lack the surrounding ethos, the sense of authenticity, and the spirit of autonomy celebrated by theorists of civil society. They cannot be relied upon either to stand together or to constrain the excesses of authoritarian power, as civil society enthusiasts would wish. Nor do NGOs necessarily have the well-structured community support that civil society would claim to possess. If civil society is to play the role of *primum mobile* in the long-run processes of democratisation, it must be more than a cluster of NGOs" (2002: 68).

3.2 A new Belizean awakening

Belizean NGOs, despite their valuable work, have clear limitations. While now having a seat at most policymaking tables – Witter opines that "in this sense Belize is

further ahead in CARICOM in formally instituting relations between civil society organisations and the government" (2007: 20) – the question of how influential they can be remains uncertain. As part of the political reform process the PUP designated three seats in the Senate for independent sectors (one each for civil society, business and the Church). But while this enables some monitoring of legislation, these Senators remain otherwise outnumbered and impotent. The place given to CSOs and NGOs, therefore, in policymaking remains "totally advisory in nature" (Vernon 2007) and apparently more of a token nod in the direction of global governance models than a real re-imagination of state-society relations.

NGOs, in any event, have an extremely limited capacity. Funding, of course, is a major issue; the giddy days of Belize being an anti-communist island in Central America, with all the associated US funding, have been succeeded by an era in which Africa and Iraq have taken centre-stage. But, according to Dylan Vernon, there is also a minor leadership crisis caused by burnout; "these people have too much to do. I mean, they're doing everything… there's always people expecting you to do more, to lead, to do this, to do that" (2007). In a climate in which political parties are seen, at least partly, as preying on the Belizean voters, some NGOs are increasingly taking on by default the responsibility of representing the people. Such a burden is understandably overwhelming for organisations typically staffed only by a few people. That NGOs should seek to effect change through accommodation with government, then, rather than confrontation is hardly surprising in these circumstances.

A broadened active civil society, beyond simply NGOs and CSOs, defies easy categorisation. As suggested above, the concept cannot be pinned down, unfortunately for the analyst, to any one type of associative entity or organisation. But in Belize, it can be found today in a number of loose manifestations. Efforts to increase accountability, for example, can be found in the Belize Covenant Movement, launched by Derek Aikman on July 1st 2007. Despite attracting only 127 people (because of accidentally clashing with the PUP National Party Convention) it promised, albeit with rather religious overtones, to "keep watch with the angels, the stars and the moon" over

Belizean politics (The Independent Reformer, 27th July 2007). Around 2002, Godwin Hulse was involved in the movement calling itself 'We the People', which began by monitoring government legislation closely, before splitting over the issue of whether to run as a political party.

The Belizean media, traditionally either government-owned or highly partisan, is showing signs of increasing independence. While *Amandala* and *The Reporter* remain the only papers with a significant circulation not affiliated to a party, it is the increasing, though as yet partial, independence of the radio and television channels that is beginning to provide Belizeans with more reliable news sources and challenging analysis. In particular, the popular morning talk shows – especially on *Love FM* but on other radio and television stations as well – have provided an unlikely avenue for popular discontent, and deserve further research. Though the views aired can be uninformed and highly opinionated, talk shows can contribute not only to the debate over a prominent topic, but also towards gathering momentum around a controversial issue (such as the UHS guarantee earlier this year). As Dylan Vernon observed, "if you are a politician [then] anything [in] the media said about you negatively or positively more than once, twice, ten times, becomes an issue" (2007). Finally, the age of communications will continue to have some clear effects. Internet and online blogs are becoming increasingly influential as a cheap, easy and quick way to facilitate the spread of ideas. One example is *Xanthe TV*, an independent TV company established by, Edwin Colon, a young Belizean from the United States, which hopes to provide a forum for tech-savvy Belizeans to express themselves. *Xanthe Films*, a sister company, hopes to establish an independent Belizean film industry. Tellingly, a trailer for the forthcoming documentary, 'Fahrenheit Belize', pertinently asks of the country's politics and society: "where is the unity?"

Some sectors of society, moreover, are increasingly realising their power. One is the business sector. Doug Singh argued not only that they were "actually taking stronger stands than they've ever taken" but that the strength of independent sectors like business, civil society and the unions "depends on [this] ability to be active" (2007). But

perhaps the two greatest areas of empowerment for citizens today are civil protest and the vote. Dylan Vernon commented that "the space that has become most effective is the space of civil protest. That's where you see governments actually making changes to things that people are pissed off about". Moreover, with few other avenues open, "changes in governments are one of the few real tangible tools, weapons, that the voters have to send messages. And because of that, then it should be used" (2007). While elections, however, remain rare moments of expression, it is demonstrations, go-slow days at work, and more general manifestations of civil protest that are becoming a principal channel for discontent. Of course, the opposition inevitably will seek to co-opt and lead civil protest wherever it is at all directed against the government in power, and maintaining the independence of the civil movement when the party stranglehold is so strong will be difficult.

There are, however, signs that such discontent with the dominance of the two parties is growing. In October 2005 a SPEAR poll found that 49% of Belizeans would vote for a third party, and one newspaper editorial saw this and a string of subsequent polls as strong evidence for the viability of a third party (Amandala, 14th December 2006). But while party popularity is difficult to measure, the hope for third party leaders like Paul Morgan is that the new forms of communication and independent movements will help to turn these uncertain and unquantifiable expressions of discontent into something rather more concrete:

> "lately there seems to be a miracle in progress in Belize. I do believe that it is a modern-day miracle. I have never seen developments in the political arena so fast…Day by day, action that is going on here. I have never seen parties that were so dominant be braced like this because of actions that they really can't control…begging, both of them begging from all corners. To me, it is a miracle in progress that only the Belizean voter can finish" (2007).

A 'miracle', of course, may be an exaggeration. But, as Dylan Vernon pointed out, even should both the PUP and UDP retain their grasp on electoral politics, "the aftermath of elections will result in some changes away from some of the problems that

were there before to some hope. And one of these times people have to spring on that hope and move it to another level" (2007).

3.3 A socially grounded narrative: conceptualising democracy

That these voices of dissent exist in Belize is certain. But it is less certain just what effect they may have. As already outlined, other more co-ordinated and coherent movements in Belizean history have failed to have their desired impact. Nevertheless, if a truly democratising process is to occur in Belize it must begin from contesting previously held assumptions, beliefs and myths. Such a contestation over the concept of democracy has the potential to highlight areas of commonality amongst this diverse nascent movement and increase the chances that, unlike efforts in the past, it will not be still-born. Deconstructing the concept, moreover, is more than an exercise in unnecessary theory. As Whitehead observes, "deliberation arises not because of reasoning from first principles, or due to the creation of artificial institutions, but because it becomes necessary in order to tackle social needs" (2002: 25).

Of course, the danger in deconstructing and contesting the dominant interpretation of democracy is that any number of differing interpretations has the potential to fill the vacuum. It is, "in principle… evidently possible that more than one imagined future may occupy popular consciousness at one time" (Whitehead 2002: 33). In this potential abyss of cultural relativism, it is theoretically possible for numerous unpalatable interpretations of democracy to surface. Indeed, Belizean culture may be immersed so deeply in colonial understandings that they too will undoubtedly influence the interpretation that arises, and cannot be dismissed in any sense as less authentic. But as Whitehead makes clear, where it is the popular movement reinventing democracy, there remains an in-built protection against the pitfalls of relativism:

> "To persuade the community to take an unfamiliar interpretation of democracy seriously it will be necessary to parade a variety of credentials – clear logic, good evidence, familiarity with the culture, and a reputation for a sound judgment may all be needed to pierce the defensive barrier of conventional thinking. Sometimes abusive claims may succeed, and on other occasions potentially 'valid' interpretations may fail to pass the test… But the critical point for our purposes is that this deliberative filter

> constitutes a major socially grounded protection against the destruction of meaning and value that would otherwise accompany the contestability of concepts" (2002: 22).

Belizeans, therefore, should have the faith and confidence that their own people will infuse the term 'democracy' with appropriate meaning and that their understandings will, in the last resort, be socially grounded. The importance of having this self-assurance cannot be overstated. The confidence of Belizeans, no less than other Caribbean citizens, has thus far been "bottled up within them partly because they have conceded to the mystifications of professionals (politicians, economists, lawyers, engineers, bureaucrats) that the latter have both the language and the key to governance. This has to change and a Caribbean cultural way has to be allowed to emerge from our collective wisdom" (Duncan 2003: 171).

Conclusion

This work has argued that if an interpretive approach is adopted on the ground, Belizean democracy will be seen less as a procedural minimum worthy of protection and fossilisation at all costs and instead as something that should be open to confident re-interpretation, which is likely to align it more closely with the social reality of Belizean people. Assertions and assurances, however, that such a re-interpretation will come for Belize are fraught with difficulties. First, it clearly may just not happen. This could be because Belize may not have the opportunity for meaning re-invention suggested here. But it could also be because there is an unavoidable contingency in such transformations, necessarily allowing for an opportunity or situation to culminate in any number of outcomes (and, indeed, be easily reversed). Belize, in other words, may be ripe for democratic change and yet it still may not happen. Time alone will tell in this respect.

Second, however, there is an inherent contradiction in claiming that 'democracy' is primarily an imagined future and yet simultaneously using this same analysis as a platform to suggest a program for a socially desirable future. Indeed, for that matter, to cautiously aspire to a successful 'transformative experience' is to misuse a term that should, in the interpretive methodology, only refer to a 'really existing' experience rather than a potentiality. There is, then, admittedly an uncomfortable fit between the first and second stages - analysis and prediction – of the argument submitted here. If the first stage of analysis is to offer any value for Belizeans other than historical interest, however, this may be an unavoidable discomfort.

Nevertheless, even if one should disagree with predictions or prescriptions for the future, this basic analysis still stands. This work concurs with Wydra that "while democratic essentialism tries to tame uncertainty and violence through democratically shaped institutions…the historical foundations of democracy develop under conditions of the absence of constitutional guarantees and of democratic 'values'" (2007: 270). In

Belize, therefore, democracy does not exist as a consequence of British colonial values instilled at an early age. In fact the truly democratic values – the rejection of colonial oppression rather than the embrace of minimum procedural criteria – have only developed as a reaction to this oppressive element in Belizean culture. The argument, however, is also that this rejection of colonial oppression has thus far not been fully formulated. But to the extent to which democracy does exist, it is a consequence of the authoritarian experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

If there is one tragic quality to the Belizean understanding of democracy, it lies in the people themselves. Gustavo Perera is not unrepresentative of wider opinion when he suggests that, "the strength [of Belizean democracy] has to be the people, that the people have proved to be very patient, very tolerant and people remain hopeful. People keep a certain amount of faith in the process, in the democratic process" (2007). But just how much of a strength is this patience in the circumstances? Laurence Whitehead perhaps best summarises the tragic futility of such misplaced tolerance when he writes that "under the spell of a collectively imagined eventual democracy the citizens of defective 'really existing' new democracies may sometimes be willing to endure their current disappointments encouraged by the belief that at some point the promises of their regime will be more fully realised" (2002: 240). The original author of this spell may long have disappeared, and the spell may be a compelling one. But this does not make any less urgent the need to confront it, and to put Belizeans' unending pride and creativity to achieving more fruitful ends.

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The photograph on the front cover was taken by the author at the National PUP Convention in Corozal, northern Belize, on Sunday 1st July 2007. It captures PUP followers trying to make a public show of support in spite of the stifling heat.

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