

BRITISH HONDURAS; END OF THE WORLD

COMMENTARY

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On January 1, 1964, the British Colony of British Honduras attained full internal self-government. In the name of his people, Prime Minister George Price became the first native of British Honduras to assume responsibility for the well-being of his country. With the withdrawal of the British Governor to a more symbolic position in the country's affairs, the first step towards full independence had been taken.

- 2.27 British Honduras is a country unknown to the outside world. Its 150 miles of coastline are lined by unfriendly mangrove swamps, and behind these lie the jungle of Central America
- 2.53 A strip of land only 40 miles across at its widest point, British Honduras is overshadowed by more powerful, more colourful, more densely populated neighbours - Mexico to the north, Guatemala to the west and south. Poor communications with even the nearest countries give British Honduras a provincial air.
- 3.13 A peaceful country, British Honduras produces no sensations. Fishing boat. Yet in many ways it is unique.
- 3.17 Its population of around 100,000 is tiny - yet it is composed of a kaleidoscope of elements - Black Caribs
- 3.24 Creoles, descendants of Negro slaves
- 3.32 Mestizos, people^s of part Spanish descent
- 3.42 Indians, the original inhabitants of the American mainland
Syrians and Lebanese, who form part of the merchant class
- 3.50 East Indians, imported during the 19th century as plantation-workers
Mennonites from Canada and the United States, communal farmers and others, in a mixed population that has doubled in 25 years.
- 4.00 Black, white, brown, yellow - all are British subjects, for this is the only colony of an overseas power left in Central America.

- 4.12 Racial relations are excellent - 30 years before the American Civil War, slavery was voluntarily abolished by the liberal slave-owners of British Honduras, and racial equality established by law.
- 4.30 The population of this deeply religious country is, predominantly Roman Catholic - but other sects flourish freely.
- 4.53 The capital city, Belize, is situated on a neck of land that stretches out into the Bay of Honduras. This area of the mainland, swampy and unhealthy, was never occupied by American Indians, for the maize on which the great Indian civilizations depended cannot be grown here. The country was probably first settled by British pirates, who turned to cutting logwood, which was used for making dyes, and fetched fantastic prices in Europe. The Baymen, as they came to be called, imported Negro slaves and founded the city that now has 40,000 inhabitants, almost half the total population of the country.
- 5.44 Almost all the buildings, for poor and well-to-do alike, are made of wood. The traditional style is to build on stilts, to allow the wind to flow underneath, which helps to keep the house cool in the tropical heat. But the famous British Honduras timber is disappearing, and newer houses follow more universal styles.
- Britain, at the height of its colonial ambition, was indifferent to the repeated requests by the Baymen for official recognition as a colony, and for 200 years the territory's status with regard to England was ambiguous. But finally, in 1862, this recognition was extended, and the territory became a British Colony. The most important consequence of this was that British Honduras was guaranteed protection against the claims of the Spanish, which at times had led to armed invasion.
- From that date, the country was set apart from the rest of Central America.

- 6.32 Alone of the countries of the Southern American continent, British Honduras has English as the official language. And 300 years of British influence have left their mark on the country in ways as impracticable as the narrow streets - and - for America - as surprising as the unarmed policemen.
- 6.51 The people of British Honduras respect the law, and are not tyrannised by it. In a continent where violent change comes more naturally than democratic change, this country has never known revolution.
- 7.04 The patterns of administration of the parent country have been repeated in Belize city. The lawcourt bears the familiar English motto, "God is my right".
- 7.15 The freely elected Legislative Assembly is a tiny but dignified miniature of the House of Commons. Even the Speaker wears the same traditional robes as his British archetype, despite the hot climate. But these are only the outward shows of an intense political interest from people who now, for the first time, have the opportunity to govern themselves.
- 7.40 Premier George Price respects the British political tradition to such an extent that his dominating ambition is to practice it in full independence, without further British
- 7.49 An organized Opposition, The National Independence Party, exists, but the Premier's People's United Party has a monopoly of elected seats in the Assembly, and his aims and policies have the enthusiastic support of the majority of British Hondurans.
- 8.18 However, the residence of the Governor, who is appointed in Whitehall, 4,000 miles away, is a reminder that British Honduras is not yet fully independent of a system that at times placed more emphasis on providing the Governor with a tidy lawn -

- than on providing the people of Belize with an adequate water supply. The only available water is rain, which has to be collected in rain-butts. Except in the rainy season, there is a constant water shortage.

8.48 Public pumps exist, but the water they contain is not drinkable.

The drainage system operates through open sewers, which are supposed to drain into the river, but as there is seldom enough water to flush them, refuse and excrement collect in stagnant pools, which breed mosquitoes, and make the city stink.

9.20 But then, the Governor's residence is freshened by sea-breezes.

The residence of the Governor is also a reminder of the fact of economic dependence upon Great Britain - the unfavourable balance of imports over exports is made up by British subsidies.

Caution and slow evolution have under colonialism been the way of life in British Honduras.

9.33 Many British Hondurans are disturbed by the prospect of independence, and think the country is far from ready to stand on its own feet.

In 1963, Britain donated about £5,000,000 in grants and loans for hurricane rehabilitation and construction generally.

The visit of Hurricane Hattie in 1961 was one of the few times when this insignificant country made the world's headlines. Scars of the devastation that occurred over 2 years ago still remain.

especially in the minds of the destitute of Belize city, who found "temporary" homes in Hattieville.

11.38 The lucky inhabitants of Hattieville are the ones who have work, even if they have to go 10 miles to Belize. But there are many who have no work, and no prospect of work.

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- 11.49 Even the inefficient system of water-collection from rain-butts is not applied here, and water has to be brought by truck.
- 12.08 Hattievillle's hospital is run by Mennonite volunteers. There are many sick in Hattievillle. But even the small fee asked by the Mennonites is beyond the means of the majority.
- 12.27 It might have been expected that poverty like this would have encouraged the other threat from the Caribbean besides hurricanes - communist subversion and infiltration from Cuba. But of all the Latin American countries, British Honduras is probably the one where the communist doctrine meets with least sympathy.
- It is not from the east, but from the west and south that many British Hondurans think the real threat comes.
- 12.49 Punta Gorda, the southernmost town of British Honduras, is a peaceful fishing community.
- But across the bay lies Guatemala, a country which persistently claims British Honduras as a province on grounds that go back to the year after Columbus' discovery of the New World - over a decade before any European had even set foot in what is now British Honduras
- Even more important, the one essential fact ignored by the Guatemalan government is that no-one in British Honduras ^{wants a neighbour with whom there is little in common} ~~wants political annexation by~~
- 13.12 From the offices of the "Belize Billboard", one of Belize's daily newspapers, the paper's owner and chief editor, Philip Goldson, for the benefit of his 2,000 readers, wages a crusade against the overwhelmingly popular People's United Party.
- Philip Goldson is leader of the Opposition. Whilst the aims of his National Independence Party scarcely differ in most respects from those of the party in power,
- Goldson's chief weapon is the claim that Premier George Price-

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that Goldson/

is working subversively to sell out their country to Guatemala after independence. Goldson wants to retain the links with Britain, and build up a deterrent defence force.

- 13.54 Whilst many other British Hondurans agree with Premier Price that their country cannot afford the luxury of an army, they would welcome the continued presence of British troops, as a free insurance policy against invasion.
- 14.05 Doubts about their own political and economic maturity, their ability to stand on their own feet, are often expressed by British Hondurans. The legacy of British administration - under which few native British Hondurans were required to think for themselves - is fear of responsibility. The severe shortage of work encourages this attitude - familiarity with insecurity has bred the unwillingness to run any risks. These longshoremen have plenty of time to waste between the two or three boats a week that need unloading. The waters off Belize Harbour are much too shallow for large vessels, and there is not the trade to attract more boats.
- 14.47 These workers on a banana plantation will be out of a job when the banana crop is gathered in. But unlike the longshoremen, they can at least grow a little food on their home plots.
- 15.04 But poor as it is, of all the countries south of the Rio Grande, British Honduras has the highest literacy rate, over 90% - not bad for a mixed population speaking English, Spanish, Carib, Maya, Creole, Kekchi, German and Arabic. Primary education on the British model is compulsory for children from 6 - 14.

- 15.34 This free service is largely in the hands of missionary bodies which operate with financial assistance from the Government. Secondary education has to be paid for. For higher education, students must leave the country and travel to Jamaica, Great Britain, the neighbouring Latin American countries, or the U.S.A. and few have the means to do this. There is a chronic shortage of trained teachers and of text-books, many classes sit together in the same room, with no separating partitions, and the teaching methods are archaic.
- 16.52 Volunteer teachers from Kennedy's Peace Corps - here seen playing volleyball with a Belizean team - have blown a little of the dust off antiquated teaching methods, and provided a vitalising stimulus to the life of the community. The young volunteers are very popular, and the Government has asked for more like them. Canada also helps with educators. But the supply of such people falls far short of demand.
- 17.28 After school is finished, time hangs heavy on the hands of the young men of British Honduras. They have no useful skills, and there is no work available.
- 17.39 They kill the time in poolrooms, hankering for the day when they will be able to get to the United States, the fabled land of opportunity. They may have to play many games of pool, for about 10% of the population of British Honduras has applied for immigration visas to the States. Only a few are accepted.
- 18.04 Even if the people are poor, seasonally or permanently unemployed, it is said of British Honduras that no-one has to starve. To provide food for himself and his family, a man has only to do a few hours' fishing in sea or rivers that are thick with fish.
- Unfortunately, all too many are content to jog along in just that way, and do no more than the minimum of work.
- 19.57 Despite the poverty of its people, the country is potentially rich, fully capable of supporting a population much bigger than the present one. In a world that is getting hungrier very fast, for a country to be self-supporting is going to mean a great deal. It is said, that even the telegraph poles take root here.

- 20.10 The irony is, that British Honduras imports expensive canned foods, many of which can be found fresh in the market. Wrapped bread is flown in from Florida, and has a snob-value that the better-tasting and cheaper home-made bread cannot compare with. Goods are imported from England which could certainly be obtained cheaper from Mexico or Guatemala.
- 20.32 The land is ideal for citrus, cocoa, bananas, pineapples, maize and sugar, as well as livestock and milk products, rice and dairy farming. There are 2,000,000 acres of virgin land crying out for cultivation - but there are no people willing to clear the land and work it, although the out-of-works line the pavements of Belize City.
- For the town-bred Creole despises farming as work unfit for a man. He would rather wait on the slender hope of emigrating to the United States sometime in the vague future than help in developing his country now.
- The Indian subsistence farmer, who with tortuous labour only manages to grow enough to feed himself and his family, is the object of eulogies from the politicians.
- When that little extra is produced that can be sold to others, substantial progress is being made towards the ideal of a self-supporting country. One of the most serious charges that can be laid against British colonial rule in British Honduras is its almost complete neglect of agriculture.
- Unlike its nearest Commonwealth neighbour, Jamaica, British Honduras is not determined to industrialize at all costs. The party in power welcomes new industries, but realizes that it can never become competitive in industry with a country like Mexico. Instead, top priority is given to agriculture. The 2,000,000 unused acres must be cleared of jungle and put to work. So the Government has embarked on an educational programme to make British Hondurans aware of the importance and profits of farming, as well as to show them modern techniques and equipment. Besides this, an "open door" immigration programme is followed, to attract potential farmers into the country.

- 23.05 Industries dependent upon the products of the soil are gradually growing up in British Honduras, a country that numbers its industries in precious ones and twos. Capital for this factory for fruit juice concentrates in the citrus-rich Stann Creek Valley comes from abroad - British Hondurans themselves have not the money to finance such enterprises. All investment designed to change the underdeveloped nature of the country is welcomed with offers of up to 11 years of tax-exemptions and duty-free privileges.
- 24.32 Another company to take advantage of the opportunities offered by British Honduras is this rosin plant at Big Creek. Apart from being one of the few remaining rich sources of pine stumps from which rosin is extracted, British Honduras attracted this North American project by its political stability and protection of private property assured by British Law - factors which give British Honduras the lowest insurance rates in Latin America. For British Hondurans, it means work where there was none before, and the beginnings of technical training.
- 25.09 The rosin plant at Big Creek and the neighbouring community of Mango Creek, with their deep-water harbour, constitute the most rapidly growing area of British Honduras.
- The mushrooming rosin industry had to build houses for its workers where there were none before.
- Nearby are the older houses of the workers belonging to the long-established logging industry. Unlike the year-old rosin plant, logging in British Honduras has a 300 year history. Mahogany, cedar and pine still account for a large proportion of the export trade. But there has been a criminal neglect on the part of the British-owned lumber companies of the need for re-afforestation schemes. The Government's Forestry Commission is now trying to make good this irresponsible rape.
- British Honduras is a pioneer country that has to be put into motion.

From its as yet modest resources a new nation must be bulldozed, a motley people shoved into national consciousness.

Like a schoolteacher talking to children anxious to learn, Premier George Price addresses a crowd of his supporters at a PUP meeting, what he calls "The University of the Market-place" Carefully he instructs them on the move towards complete independence, skilfully he outlines to them the future of their country, and tells them how to behave when they are no longer "British Hondurans" but "Belizeans.....

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Stockholm, 1964