

REVIEW OF POLITICAL CLIENTELISM AND DEMOCRACY IN BELIZE

Political Clientelism and Democracy in Belize: From My Hand to Yours by Dylan Vernon.
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As part of its *Constitution 101 Webinar Series*, the Young Leaders Association of Belize (YLAB) invited the attorney-at-law and lecturer Darrel Bradley to address the virtual audience on the history and significance of the constitution. Bradley, with his experience serving as Belize City's mayor and as president of the Senate – and in his characteristically engaging style – bemoaned the dearth of debate in the halls of government, including the National Assembly of which he was a part, and the absence of undergirding philosophies on display. “Our political system is lost,” he said, “because we do not have ideological and policy divide in our political system. No policy discussions or ideological discussions. Nothing of substance goes on in there. They do not say anything.”

Deliberately provocative, Bradley's criticisms suggest that parliamentary exchange consists more of zingers and barbs than of philosophical or ideological debate. The indication is that power brokers' primary philosophical bent is conservative; the tendency to preserve the status quo and entrench power wherever it is perceived to be held is paramount. The consequence here is that politicians are dispassionate about the specific ideologies of those who lobby them for changes so long as they help to secure power. Because money talks, those who have, have subsequently more voice.

The sentiment that there is no longer any substantive philosophical difference between major political parties in Belize is echoed in conversations in the public square. This idea is borne out by the quip that when your party is in power “dah taim fu eet!”. Those who display party colours alternately shrink to shadows or cling remora-like upon the appearance of red or blue bodies that circle alternately in the pelagic zone of public politics.

PUDPisation, or the sublimation of all ideological difference between Belizean political parties, is but one of a litany of complaints associated with the phenomenon of political clientelism. Dylan Vernon – governance consultant, social researcher, and former ambassador of Belize to the EU – offers a more precisely formulated definition but, in general, the term refers to the situation where politicians provide material goods or services to citizens in exchange for their support. In such scenarios, citizens are more interested in the goods or services they receive than in good governance and may therefore vote for politicians based on the goods or services they promise. An erosion of democracy results as, likewise, politicians become more concerned with providing those goods and services to their supporters than with issues of good governance.

In its charting of clientelism through Belizean political history, Vernon's book offers an utterly convincing account of how we got here, and what is at stake if we do not change – whether through a critical mass of people demanding change, or formal government review. Neither possibility would have seemed likely but for the glimmer of hope represented by union-led anti-corruption and good-governance demands in 2020 which galvanized protests from many quarters for anti-corruption, and other political reforms, and the launch of the People's Constitutional Commission empowered by accompanying legislation tasking commissioners to transparently and objectively consult the Belizean public toward constitutional reform.

Timely and Overdue

Given this context, the book seems both incredibly timely and remarkably overdue. An extended historical overview of the Belizean political landscape has been waiting a long time for treatment by an astute observer. That such a work appears at a moment of purposeful national reflection (the roughly twenty-year interval at which the nation engages in constitutional review), regional decolonisation, and monarchical transition, seems propitious.

Vernon cites seminal works by O. Nigel Bolland, Asaad Shoman, Joseph Palacio, Victor Bulmer-Thomas, and Anne Macpherson, but his own study contrasts standard historical approaches to capturing historical sweep through its focussed trailing of the conceptual thread of clientelism through recent Belizean history. In this way, his book joins others, like Macpherson's *From Colony to Nation*, whose laudable thematic approach highlights the outsized impact of women in politics given their under-representation, and Shoman's *Guatemala's Claim to Belize: The Definitive History*, which considers Belize's independence struggles from the unique insider perspective of negotiator, to consider the recent past in another way. The thread-tracing works to bind the book and argument together with an objective coherence that eludes narrow ideological pigeonholing – though neoliberalism noticeably comes under fire for its role in exacerbating clientelist problems.

Vernon's argument in the book is that the phenomenon of political clientelism or handout politics is so pervasive and accepted in Belize, so deeply entrenched, that we are likely blind to the deleterious effects it has on our nation. He argues that we have reached a critical point – as evidenced by the lack of ideological differences between parties Darrel Bradley cited – where outright election buying is present. Belizeans as a whole then have become apathetic to the damage this politics causes in society and for our Westminster-derived system of democracy.

Model of Research

The conclusions, trends, and observations Vernon provides are derived from qualitative methods: ethnographic techniques, archival research, and scores of informal interviews and discussions involving all the elected representatives of four electoral constituencies selected for close reading as purposive sample.

A qualitative rather than quantitative approach is employed to perform a historical comparison of Belize's development between different periods and its place within a larger Caribbean context. The approach is validated by standard legitimation techniques: triangulation, prolonged engagement, and persistent observation. The general qualitative orientation is befitting on multiple fronts. For one, the types of interactions under investigation between patrons and individual clients are generally informal, hidden, and sometimes *illegal*; the data is generally discreet and unreported. Further, Vernon's desire for narrative insights and systemic analysis of implications of clientelism would be underserved by quantitative methods alone.

Part of what makes the argument throughout the book so convincing is the corroborating interviews with key players. I suspect that the degree of access to high level political players required by this type of fieldwork would render comparable research difficult to perform for other countries. Perhaps one of the reasons the work is so valuable regionally is this remarkable feature of the researcher's Belizean experience, embeddedness, and clout. The insight on offer in the publication foregrounds the need to conduct more such research and will hopefully

inspire other projects that productively utilise voices and interviews with those possessors of oral history up to the present day in all domains.

Accessibility

While a work of political science, the book is a good read for students of history, development studies, and those generally interested in political reform. The work could serve even outside of its discipline, as a teaching text or reference tome for graduate students engaging in qualitative research. Readers who have experienced the events referenced in the book will appreciate their deft narrative treatment. Younger readers will appreciate the book as a textual reference for events that they might have only encountered via oral accounts. That said, although Belizeans in general will benefit from reading the text and the reflections it generates from a novel treatment of Belize's past – one that includes a sober counter to the usual hagiographies of George Price in its locating the seeds of clientelism in his legacy – the price point may be beyond most general readers.

Implications

Perhaps resulting from its trained focus on establishing the evolving phenomenon in question, the mood of the book is bleak. The reader is offered a chilling diagnosis rather than prescription. Some broader discussion of potential 'cures' beyond the suggestion that clientelism may be a self-limiting condition (p.198) seems wanting. Other potential reforms, like campaign finance legislation, are cited because they have failed to manifest due to clientelism's 'disincentive effect' (p.182). Granted, these topics may be better served by a companion volume. While the book concludes that the outlook for change is grim given that clientelist entrenchment has resulted in the phenomenon being culturally tolerated, constitutional reform is cited as a possible method of effecting change to curb political clientelism and escape the social and economic problems it exacerbates. But such reform is only likely to be successful with broad public pressure. Therefore, it behoves proponents of such reform to absorb and share the lessons of the book.

With the current constitutional reform process underway, there is perhaps no better recent published call justifying the urgency of that work and responding to the question of why we should care.

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