

Education and Good Governance - Imperatives to Social and Economic Development

Address by Carla Barnett to the Graduating Class of 2009
Galen University, October 3, 2009

I want to join in the congratulations being showered on today's graduates as you mark this very important occasion in your lives. I wish you the very best. As I look out on you, proud and upright in your gowns and caps, I remember my own graduation 30 years ago. At that time, as a fresh new graduate, I thought I knew a lot, but 30 years has given me a lot of perspective. I know, now, that graduation is a milestone along the learning road. I know now that university gave me tools.

- Tools to apply in my work, my community and my life,
- Tools to create knowledge, to better understand the ups and downs of the times in which we live, and,
- Hopefully, tools to make positive change in the world around us.

So today, I wish you many more years of applying the tools and the skills that you have gained here at the University to your jobs, your communities and to your own lives. Today is but a milestone along the road of learning - a milestone which rightly invokes a sense of pride and accomplishment; and it is good that we take the time to acknowledge the achievements, especially since these achievements have been the result of sacrifice and hard work. But tomorrow, that road will be there and I hope that as you move ahead, that learning road will take you to places where you can contribute the best of yourselves, where you will make a positive impact, and where you will feel that you have done the best that you can do.

And so I salute you. Congratulations to the graduating class of 2009.

Congratulations also to Galen University, its faculty and staff, for continuing to expand the scope of its offerings and giving our young people and working professionals a means of developing themselves.

I am very pleased and very honoured to be your invited guest speaker today. When I was invited to give this address, I immediately thought that this would be the perfect place for me to talk about the impact of the ongoing global economic crisis and the challenges facing Belize. Last week I spoke to good friend of mine, who is on the Galen University faculty, who suggested that it would be good to speak about some of the challenges and choices I had to make as I became involved in addressing the fiscal crisis which peaked in Belize in the 2004-2006 period, leading up to the negotiation of the now famous "super bond". He thought that there may be lessons from my personal experience in that exceedingly difficult period that could be of benefit to you graduates.

Indeed, I had begun to write a speech that spoke of:

- Issues of globalisation and the new world order that is being created;
- Of Belize's place in that new order, and
- Of the challenges and opportunities that you graduates face as you move out of the university and into the real world full time.

And then 2 things happened that made me re-think what I would say to you today.

One was the indiscriminate shooting in Belize City in which primary school children were hit by stray bullets - collateral damage, so to speak, in an escalating and expanding war on Belize City streets. In a week in which, in addition to several other acts of gruesome violence,

- a 14 year old boy was battered to death
- an adult male was brought down by a spray of bullets in his yard by, it would seem, a teenager,

this random act of violence in which little more than children were endangering little children, was only the most recent evidence of the destruction of our social fabric. One of the most troubling parts of this tragedy is that some of the little children who were in the vicinity of the shooting actually ran towards the sounds of the gunshots to see the action.

The other thing that happened to make me rethink what I would say today was the long-simmering financial management scandal in Belize City Hall which saw charges being brought for the first time in Belize's history against a sitting elected official. Without passing any opinions on the merits or otherwise of the case, it is true to say that the fact that it has happened is in and of itself momentous. More than that, how this matter is handled within our judicial system and within the political system can have long term implications for the future of governance and the political process in Belize.

You may ask: what do these things have to do with one another? I want to attempt to answer that question today.

I want to begin by proposing to you that the central and most fundamental development challenges facing Belize lie in the governance and education systems. If we succeed at everything else, and we fail at governance and education, our successes will be transient. These two are intricately intertwined and interdependent. The push to strengthen governance comes from an educated and conscious people. And the development of an educated and conscious people requires our education system to be efficient and equitable. In other words, the principles of good governance are critical to success in the education system.

Governance

What do we mean by governance? Governance is defined as “a concept that goes beyond the traditional notion of government to focus on the relationships between leaders, public institutions and citizens, including the processes by which they make and implement decisions”. “Good governance”, a term that has been bandied about by public officials for years, is governance “that is characterised as being participatory, accountable, transparent, efficient, responsive and inclusive, respecting the rule of law and minimising opportunities for corruption”.¹

Education

With regard to education, I want to agree with those who say that the *education we get in schools is only a small, if vitally important, part of what forms our culture and our view of ourselves and of the world. The entire society, the entire world, is a vast educational system that contributes to*

¹ Transparency International, *The Anti-corruption Plain Language Guide*, available on the Transparency International website.

*our formation: the family, the religious organizations, government, the community, business, the media*².

Therefore, when we speak of the education system, although we are usually referring to the formal school system in isolation from the wider community, we need to be cognizant that the wider society conditions the minds and character of our children before they enter the school system, during the formal education process and after they have left the school system.

The content and process of education cannot ignore the reality of the society in which we live without alienating the youngsters who pass through the system. There are communities in our country where the sound of gunshots is a daily or nightly occurrence, where every child knows several persons who have been killed in the streets. Our nightly news is littered with blood and gore. For many children, this experience of violence on the streets and in the home has been internalised by the time they get into the school system. As far as I am aware, this context is not taken into account in the content of the school work. After school programs, which could offer a means through which to address the impact of the violence in the wider society, are virtually non-existent.

Educators cannot continue to see education as something that takes place in individual schools and limit their responsibility to marshalling the students under their care to learn their subjects.

Education must be seen in wider social and economic context to understand that failure to educate our children, all our children, taking their social context into account, condemns future generations to continued social destruction and economic isolation.

Broken Governance

This brings me back to the two events that have led me to talk about governance and education today.

Think about it. Think about the growing violence in our cities and towns. Think about the fact that the perpetrators of violent crimes are getting younger and younger. The crimes are getting more hideous, more clearly evident of inhumanity. There really is no secret to the inability of the police to effectively control crime - the police are actually playing a game of catch up because as a society we are creating criminals. We are educating, particularly, our young men to become criminals at an astonishing rate. The justice system is burdened by cases that cannot be brought to conclusion because evidence disappears with reluctant witnesses. Clearly this aspect of our governance is under strain.

Think now of the financial administration scandal at Belize City Hall. As a society, we have been practically enthralled by the unfolding drama of the past several months. For many, it seems to be high entertainment of political gamesmanship. It is somewhat like the frenzy that attended the revelations about the use of the grant funds from Venezuela last year; or the misuse of Social Security funds and DFC funds in previous years; or the heavy public debt burden that we all have to bear because of ill-conceived, badly implemented projects that have left white elephants in various parts of this country. These events are appearing rather like episodes in a never ending soap opera of broken governance.

What I am suggesting to you here is that what has been happening in our streets and what has been happening in the management of our public affairs are but two manifestations of our broken

² Assad Shoman, Opening Address to the Education Summit, May 2004.

governance. What I am also suggesting is that the way to address this broken governance is through education.

But it cannot be education the way we are doing it right now. Let me tell you why.

Broken Education

Statistics show that a little less than 90% of primary school age children are in school. That is not too bad. It could be better. It should be better, considering that attending school is mandatory at this age. But let us accept that it has been improving over time.

The picture at the secondary level changes drastically. Statistics show that the net enrolment rate for secondary education is only 45%. That essentially means that only 45% of secondary school age children are in school. This is the 13 - 17 age group - the same age group that increasingly is becoming involved in criminal activity.

Who are the children not going to high school? The poverty survey of 2002³ showed that the net enrolment rate of the wealthiest 20% of the population was 75% while the net enrolment rate of the poorest 20% was less than 35%. In the rural areas, the proportion of enrolment in secondary school was only one-half that of the urban areas.

Approximately 6% of students were going on to tertiary education in 2002. So pursuing a university degree is still very special and quite uncommon.

These statistics are from 2002, and there is an ongoing poverty survey that should deliver updated statistics in the next several months. But there is no reason to expect that since 2002, secondary school enrolment statistics have improved significantly, or that there is notable improvement in equity of access to secondary school.

Government spends one-quarter of its recurrent budget on education. This spending has been growing both in percent of gross domestic product as well as in percent of the total budget of government. But the net enrolment rates for secondary school appear to remain basically unchanged over the past several years. In other words, we have been spending a larger portion of public money to educate at the same net enrolment level. More than that, government's contribution per student varies significantly across secondary schools with the highest per student contribution being double that of the lowest contribution per student.

What does this add up to? The bottom line is that our education system appears to be both inequitable and inefficient.

1. The enrolment rate for secondary school is nowhere near acceptable if we are serious about long term social and economic development of Belize.
2. Access to secondary education is inequitable, with significant disadvantage for lower income families.
3. There is significant inequity in distribution of resources within the formal education system.
4. There must be significant inefficiencies in the secondary education system if we are paying proportionally more for the same result.

³ Living Standards Measurement Survey, 2002, Government of Belize National Human Development Advisory Committee

What do we have to do to significantly improve the net enrolment rate at secondary school level? First, we have to use our existing resources better and second, we have to find ways of making greater investment in education. We will have to plan how we will make secondary school compulsory. There is no getting around that if we are serious about long term social and economic development of Belize. Can we seriously expect to advance economically if we are educating not even one-half of our population to what is now the minimum requirement for basic entry level jobs at the lowest pay grades?

I ask: what do you think happens to the 55 per cent of secondary school age children who are not in high school, for whom there are not enough high school places, and who have very little by way of skills and knowledge to make a living? The answer is that many of them fall through the cracks.

This suggests a need to address governance systems and processes in the education system. The principles of “good governance” as we defined them earlier must be equally applied to education as to every other aspect of our society. That is, the education system must be “participatory, accountable, transparent, efficient, responsive and inclusive, respecting the rule of law and minimising opportunities for corruption”.

I know that some of this work has begun. I recognise that there is a struggle ahead to access additional resources and to improve resource allocation and use in the education system so as to be able to achieve better results for our children and for our society. I hope that all participants in the process understand that we cannot afford to fail at it. I pray that all participants in our church-state educational partnership believe that access to education on an equitable basis is the root of social justice.

The Cost of Weak Governance

This brings us back to the larger issue of governance and accountability in the management of our public affairs. We have become so used to hearing about the need for accountability and transparency in the management of public finances that I think we are becoming numb to what they really mean.

Accountability and transparency are key components of good governance. But they cannot be applied to good effect, if they are applied indifferently or unevenly.

If the public service is to be transparent and accountable, then we have to be prepared to be transparent and accountable at the level of the individual public officer as much as at the level of the political directorate. We, as citizens, have to be prepared to **demand** transparency and accountability at all levels of government.

Private sector agencies have to operate transparently and accountably in their personal dealings with the public sector, or they will have no moral authority to demand accountability from the public sector.

This is important not only because we want to be sure that all the rules are followed and the pennies are fully accounted for in every fiscal year. It is also important because every penny that has been added to the cost of a project by way of waste, inefficiency or corrupt activity over the years, is one less penny that would have been available to allocate to expanding educational opportunity, fighting the growing involvement of youth in violent crime, or to address any other development constraint for that matter.

That is the point: waste, inefficiency and corruption drain resources and reduce the scope to address the issues that stand in the way of social and economic development.

Weak transparency and accountability mechanisms create scope for corrupt activity and studies show that the cost of corruption is high. Corrupt practices drive away business and increase operating costs for existing businesses. The World Bank estimates that corruption can reduce a country's growth rate by 0.5 to 1.0 percentage points per year.⁴

That is why it is important to demand that oversight agencies do their work without fear or favour and, where wrong doing is found, to invoke whatever corrective procedures are set out in existing laws and regulations. And this must be done fairly, without giving in to the temptation to play politics.

Let us be clear, though, that corruption is not the only drain on public resources that we need to be concerned about. Weak planning, absence of performance management and reporting and lack of accountability for policy and programme impact also drain the public purse through waste and inefficiency. Every time a government department begins to implement a project without knowing

- what the total cost will be,
- what the operating cost will be when the project is completed,
- where the total financing will come from,
- what the impact on the environment will be, etc

it runs the risk of wasting public funds and should be held accountable.

That is why we have to support and push elected officials as they move to fulfil their commitments to strengthen the laws, regulations and administrative practices that define our governance and accountability processes. This must extend beyond financial accountability to accountability for the results of projects and programmes.

Conclusion

The picture I have painted here is a harsh one; but it is real. This country of ours, this “beautiful jewel” as we are often reminded, faces tremendous challenges as we struggle to build a better future for our children. I am suggesting to you that education and good governance are the keys to unlocking that future. The way that we address the education gaps and weaknesses in governance will determine what our society looks like in the future.

For you who are graduating today, you are a part of that small 6-7% of our people who have the opportunity to accomplish a tertiary level education. That is a great accomplishment. It also presents a unique responsibility. When you leave here, you have choices/decisions to make. In fact, you should have been making those choices/decisions already. Do I go to work [or back to work] or do I go on to further studies? Do I stay in the public sector, or do I move into the private sector?

I want to ask you to think differently as you leave here, to consider, as well, a different kind of question. Ask yourself: am I comfortable with the way Belize is developing? If not, what can I do to contribute to positive change in our development process? What can I do to make Belize a

⁴ Tenth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, 2002, *Cost of Corruption*.

better place for my children and their children? How can I use the skills and knowledge that I have gained here at Galen University to this end? Am I prepared to take a stand, whether in the public or private sector, against weak governance?

The answers to these questions may be uncomfortable for some - or maybe not. I hope not. I trust that if there is one single thing a tertiary education is providing to you, it is the desire and the ability to ask the right question and listen carefully to the answer. You may find yourself challenging the status quo and contributing answers to the fundamental question I am posing to you today: how do we fix our education and governance systems - for **if we succeed at everything else, and we fail at governance and education, our successes will be transient**. I hope you will agree with me that failure is not an acceptable option.

Congratulations to all of you. I wish you all the best as you move into the next phase of your lives.

Thank you very much.