



BELIZE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

4792 Coney Drive, 2nd Floor Withfield Tower, P.O. Box 291 , Belize City, Belize, Central America

OUR REF: BCCI/PRES: 38/09-2020

September 28, 2020

Hon. Dean O. Barrow
Prime Minister
Office of the Prime Minister
Belmopan City, BELIZE

Re: General Election Day being Declared a Public & Bank Holiday

Dear Prime Minister,

The Belize Chamber of Commerce & Industry (BCCI) takes note that at the House of Representatives Meeting held on Friday, September 25th, the Leader of the Opposition rose to recommend that this year's General Election be treated as a public and bank holiday due to increased risk posed by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Subsequent to his recommendation, we also recognized the fact that you and other members of Cabinet indicated your unofficial and "personal" agreement the logic governing the Leader's suggestion.

Naturally, the rationale—which appears to be rightfully founded on a desire to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19—is sound; however, it simultaneously presents a cost concern for struggling employers. This cost, as you may already be aware, stems from the holiday pay that employers must now find, as well as from the overtime to be paid to any essential worker who would still need to report to work on said 'holiday'. In the case of the latter, such employees would be paid at time and half in accordance with *section 117(3)* of the Labour Act, which states:

"All work done on public holidays other than Christmas Day, Good Friday and Easter Monday, which fall on a scheduled work day on which a worker would have worked but for the public holiday, shall be paid for at one and one-half times his ordinary rate of pay."

This additional cost would have been challenging even during 'normal' times but is exacerbated during the currently depressed economic conditions. Candidly speaking, many businesses—absent any government subsidy to this effect—will be financially hard-pressed to comply with the stipulations of the Labour Act. In particular, this change would severely affect the rebounding tourism industry. While current legal obligations of employers would be to give sufficient time off to allow for an employee to vote with the implication that the employee requesting time off is a registered voter, the declaration of a public holiday for Election Day would impose obligations on employers beyond those contemplated in the law as all

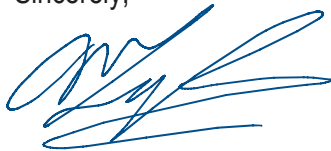
employees would be entitled to the day off, whether they are registered voters or not, and whether they live/work in the district in which they vote.

That said, however, we do agree that a more “flexible” arrangement is required, as like you and the Leader of the Opposition, we in the Business Community are equally concerned how best to manage a General Election during COVID-19. To that end, we believe that a practical middle-ground solution that satisfies the aforementioned objective *without* further burdening businesses in the midst of the present economic hardship **is to hold the General Election on a Sunday**.

While this may be described as ‘unprecedented’ by some quarters, it must be underscored that that adjective could virtually describe this entire year in which the world is wrestling with a pandemic that has induced a global recession and pushed many activities—business and social—online. Further to this, it cannot be outside the realm of possibility that General Elections are moved to a Sunday since this is the day on which political conventions are typically held by both mass parties. Fundamentally, it is our view, therefore, that the COVID-19 rationale promulgated by the Leader of the Opposition and supported by you and the BCCI can be best achieved via a General Election held on a Sunday.

We anticipate your kind reply to the foregoing, and as always, we stand ready for any questions and need for further clarifications.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Marissa Longsworth', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Marissa Longsworth (Ms.)
President

cc: Hon. John Briceño – Leader of the Opposition