

BOOK REVIEWS

Dylan Vernon, *Political Clientelism and Democracy in Belize: From My Hand to Yours*

(Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2022), xvi + 299 pp.

Victor Bulmer-Thomas

Institute of the Americas, University College London

Belize since independence in 1981 appears at first sight to meet all the requirements of a fully functioning Westminster-style democracy. A two-party political system, with each party alternating in power every few years while accepting the results even when losing, and a good turnout by voters on election day secure Belize a high ranking in the democracy indices beloved of US think-tanks and international agencies. This, in turn, safeguards Belize's access to international financing under the criteria employed by the numerous aid agencies that give funds to the country.

In this book Dylan Vernon, a former Belizean diplomat and now adviser to the People's Constitution Commission that is drafting a new constitution for the country, takes us on a journey towards understanding the realities of the political system in Belize. At its heart is political clientelism, defined by the author (p. 1) as 'an informal and dynamic political exchange between individual or collective clients, who provide or promise political support, and patrons, who provide or promise a variety of targeted and divisible resources and favours'.

Political clientelism did not begin with independence, but can be traced to the years after 1954 when full adult suffrage was first adopted in Belize. At its core was George Price, the Father of the Nation and a revered figure in Belize today, who led the People's United Party (PUP) for 40 years. Promoting what seemed at the time innocent practices, in which voters would be rewarded with small gifts to help them in difficult circumstances, George Price was never interested in personal enrichment and had genuine concern for those facing the greatest hardships in Belize. Yet the deadly link between client and patron was forged under his guidance and Belize is paying the price today.

Vernon shows that, from its relatively benign origins, political clientelism has today grown into a monster that is crucial to the way in which perhaps 20 per cent of the electorate votes. As the margin between winner and loser is often very small in Belizean constituencies, vote-buying can decide the outcome of the whole election process. The system is still formally democratic, but the policy differences between the two main parties become increasingly irrelevant. Indeed,

in one election in 1998 the PUP (at the time in opposition) urged its supporters to 'tek di blue note [i.e. a bank note, from the United Democratic Party (UDP) government] but vote blue [PUP]' (p. 123).

Political clientelism requires money and Vernon shows that, from its small beginnings under George Price, it has come to represent big business. Those voters susceptible to political clientelism are no longer satisfied with 'a lee [little] five dollars' and expect scholarships, cars, loans and – above all – land. This does not come cheap and the author meticulously describes the links between politicians and the wealthy business people, in particular the British billionaire Michael Ashcroft, who have provided the funds that allow politics in Belize to operate in this way. Vernon also shows how part of the oil wealth in Venezuela in the first decade of the current century was drip-fed into the Belizean political system, with disastrous consequences.

With politicians providing ever larger bribes to a minority of voters, it is not surprising that these same patrons have been looking for ways to ensure that voters vote the 'right' way (it has not been unknown for members of the electorate to auction their vote to the highest bidder while taking money from both sides). This has meant that the vote in some cases is no longer secret, since the voter has to find a way of proving that they cast their ballot as promised. This undermines one of the fundamental tenets of modern democratic practices and yet it is simply one of the nefarious consequences that flows from political clientelism.

Belize is still rightly described as a democracy, in the view of the author. The majority of voters do not sell their votes even if there is very little to choose between the parties in terms of policy (there are third parties, but the lack of money and the first-past-the-post system make it almost impossible for them to have an impact). Some elections, such as the most recent in November 2020 that delivered a PUP landslide after three UDP governments, are so one-sided as a result of disgust and exhaustion with the incumbent party that vote-buying on an industrial scale is not really needed even if it is practised. And some constituency politicians are genuinely popular because of what they have done for the area they represent rather than merely for the votes they have bought.

Yet, as the author makes clear, this is no time for complacency and it is to be hoped that, in his role as constitutional adviser, Vernon will find ways of helping Belize to repair some of the damage done by political clientelism in the past. This will need to cover the all-important question of party finance as well as transparency in the ways the funds are spent. None of this will work, even if written into the new Constitution, without the full support of the two main political parties, but there are a few signs that senior politicians are beginning to question the system they both inherited and expanded during their careers.

This is an important book not just for those interested in Belize, but for all countries suffering from the scourge of political clientelism. Vernon shows how it can be approximately measured, the ways in which it works, its intended and unintended consequences and what might need to be done to reverse it. The author draws attention to the parallels between Belize and other parts of the Commonwealth Caribbean, but the truth is that the phenomenon of political clientelism is very widespread and the lesson is surely that it should be tackled earlier rather than

later. Vernon has done us all an enormous service by providing an account that not only satisfies academic rigour, but also displays an insider's understanding of how political clientelism works in practice.

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Piero Gleijeses, *America's Road to Empire: Foreign Policy from Independence to World War One*

(London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), vii + 379 pp.

Tom Long

Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick

Just how much did the United States' early foreign policy differ from that of its European contemporaries? The historian Piero Gleijeses deploys this comparison throughout his new book, *America's Road to Empire*. As the title suggests, Gleijeses sees US and European foreign policies during the long nineteenth century as driven by imperialist expansion, and therefore similar in many respects. However, where the power of several of those European empires waned during the period – particularly in the Western hemisphere – US power grew steadily. This expansion largely came at the expense of non-Europeans who stood in the way; while US policymakers were not unique in their racism, the proximity of racial 'others' added virulence to the racial politics of the young country.

Gleijeses' arguments about an imperial United States contradict old tropes of US exceptionalism and anti-colonialism, a contrast that the text underscores repeatedly. The emphasis on US imperialism and prejudice coincides with the last several decades of historiography regarding the United States and the world from the middle of the nineteenth century forward. The book, then, adds a voice to the chorus that Mark Gilderhus dubbed the 'revisionist synthesis' more than three decades ago ('An Emerging Synthesis? US–Latin American Relations since the Second World War', *Diplomatic History*, 16: 3 (1992)). In line with the development of this synthesis, *America's Road to Empire* emphasises the links between US imperial expansion and the enactment of white, male supremacy.

The book opens several decades before the US War of Independence. Although the white men of Britain's colonies enjoyed comparatively high levels of wealth and civil liberty, the colonies and, for its first decades, the new country, were weak. The recounting of US independence suggests the author's ambitions for a multinational study of US foreign policy, with the story of independence told as much through the politics of the Parisian court as through the debates of Philadelphia.

The book's 14 chapters stretch from the middle of the eighteenth century to the brink of the First World War. Much of the book addresses the relentless territorial expansion of the United States into the lands of American Indians, the pressure that