

## Jamaica Gleaner Online

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There are many ways, the saying goes, to skin a cat. But the process is unlikely to be efficient with a blunt axe, wildly wielded in a crowded room.

You may, in the end, get the cat, but with great collateral damage and at a cost far greater than intended, or you dared to contemplate. Which is what we fear is likely in the English-speaking Central American country of Belize, where the United Democratic Party administration of Prime Minister Dean Barrow is attempting the ninth amendment of the Belizean constitution and is in a fight with almost everyone in the country over the matter.

Jamaica has an interest in the events unfolding in Belize, for like our island, Belize operates a Westminster-type system of government and is a member of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). And a few Jamaican companies have interests in Belize.

It matters little that the proverbial cat the Barrow administration is trying to skin is Lord Michael Ashcroft, the hardly liked and shadowy former deputy chairman of Britain's Tory Party, who casts a long, and some claim manipulative, shadow over the Belizean economy.

Lord Ashcroft, who for years avoided paying taxes in the UK by claiming resident status in Belize, controls a wide range of business in that country, from banking and offshore business registration to telecommunications. Ashcroft's holdings include Telemedia, which is a near-monopoly in Belize's telecoms sector.

Lord Ashcroft developed a seemingly cosy relationship with the former People's United Party (PUP) administration which, his critics say, allowed him privileges, as well as an appointment as Belize's permanent representative to the United Nations, until the PUP lost power in 2008.

privatisation muddle

In 2009, Mr Barrow's party, using a hurriedly passed telecommunications law, nationalised Telemedia, over whose secretive licensing arrangements there was much controversy. The acquisition was upheld by the Belizean Supreme Court but was this year overturned by appeal judges, who held that the government did not have sufficient or compelling reason for the nationalisation.

Now, Mr Barrow, who needs more than 75 per cent votes in Parliament to amend deeply entrenched clauses of Belize's constitution, is attempting to place Telemedia's nationalisation beyond doubt by making a provision of the constitution that the government must control public utilities.

The water company, privatised in 2001, has been back in government hands since 2005, but Mr Barrow recently nationalised the electricity company, owned by Canada's Fortis Corporation.

Telemedia's status remains in limbo. While the appeal court held its nationalisation to be wrong, it made no specific ruling on what to do. So the government says the board of directors it appointed remains in place. Lord Ashcroft's lawyers have taken that and related issues to the Caribbean Court of Justice.

In the meantime, Mr Barrow is moving ahead with his constitutional amendment, including an adjustment to Section 69, to remove "all doubt" that any "law passed by the National Assembly to alter any provision of this Constitution which is passed in conformity with this section shall not be open to challenge in any court of law on any grounds whatsoever".

Mr Barrow should be warned that his government's action is having a chilling effect on the private sector and

is bad for Belize's economy. But worse, this high-handed behaviour, because he has the parliamentary numbers, poses graver danger for Belizean democracy.

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