

Subjugating a nation

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The Guardian [has reported](#):

The Conservative deputy chairman, Lord Ashcroft, [has] denied a charge from the prime minister of Belize that he had "subjugated an entire nation" through his extensive business interests in the former British colony.

Through his spokesman in London the peer, whose business empire was founded in Belize, said that the attack made on him in parliament by the country's prime minister, Dean Barrow, was "entirely party political".

Accusing the peer of being "predatory" and of subjecting Belize to his will, the prime minister told MPs: "Lord Michael Ashcroft is an extremely powerful man. His net worth may well be equal to Belize's entire GDP. He is nobody to cross. But this is our house, this is our country, here we are the masters. And with the full weight of that sovereignty we must now put an end to this disrespect, to this chance-taking, to new age slavery."

Behind the rhetoric lies a long history of costly court battles, including in the US, Canada and the London court of international arbitration — where the government lost an Ashcroft-related case last week, that is unlikely to end with this week's political manoeuvres.

I have [just mentioned](#) the capture of Jersey by the financial services industry resulting in tax increases on local people when it is clear that the tax should be on corporate interests — most of whom pay nothing at all in that island.

Whether the prime minister of Belize is right or wrong, he is making much the same claim, that his state has been captured.

We saw Alan Stanford do this — in his case (and unlike Jersey and Belize, I stress) fraudulently.

I will shortly be blogging the consequences for another state.

What is my concern? It is three fold. First I worry for local people. Second I worry about the consequences for reform when states are challenged by powerful commercial interests. Third I worry that when they have captured states these commercial interests get seats on international bodies supposedly reserved for governments — which I fear in the OECD tax haven process, for example.

There seems no risk of this capture in Belize right now — because Dean Barrow is there - but the point is that the repetition of the issue suggests it is a very real one, and one which must be of massive international concern. To prevent that we need more prime ministers like that of Belize, willing to stand up for their people and provide necessary balance, but I wonder how many there are?

Dean Barrow may have been melodramatic in his language — and no doubt there is a real issue of contention underlying the dispute in Belize — but my point is that at least in Belize the risk is being tackled by having a political process that is acting to balance commercial power, as is its duty on occasion. Does such a system exist elsewhere, I wonder?