

MacEachen finds his policy acceptable in Middle East

By Stephen Scott

External Affairs Minister Allan MacEachen's visit to the area in January was not of overriding importance in the context of the general Middle East situation. It hardly could be, coming as it did at a time when Arab and Israeli thoughts were turned in many directions — to war-torn Lebanon, to the Security Council Middle East debate, even to events in the Spanish Sahara. The Minister took no brilliant ideas for peace in the Middle East with him to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq or Israel. He had no special messages from United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger for leaders in the area, and he brought no messages away with him when he left after ten sometimes exhausting days.

But, having said that, it must be admitted that the Minister's first trip to the region since assuming his portfolio in 1974 and, in a way, the first such tour by any Canadian external affairs minister, was important both to Canada, and, if the remarks of their leaders are any indication, to the countries he visited. And, as all sides appeared well-satisfied with the talks that were held, the total visit must be considered a success.

Warmer relations

While it is difficult to foresee the ramifications of what Egyptian President Anwar Sadat called a "new era" in Canadian-Egyptian — and, by extension, Canadian-Arab — relations, it is certain that those relations are warmer today as a result of the Minister's tour than at any time in recent years. If there was any residue of anger from the controversy in Canada over admission of representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), it was dispelled. If nothing else, this warmer relation can only be of advantage to Canadian businessmen who are willing to work hard to cash in on the opportunities that are evident not only in the oil-rich states but in the poorer ones as well.

More important, probably, for Mr. MacEachen is the knowledge that he has returned home knowing that he need not

make major changes in his Middle East policies in order to pursue closer relations with the Arabs. He need make no early move to recognize the PLO, an action that would have explosive consequences at home, although the Arab League's Mahmoud Riad said, in a retrospective look at the tour, that such recognition was inevitable. Foreign Minister Yigal Allon's almost fulsome assurances of friendship while the Minister was in Jerusalem showed Mr. MacEachen that he need have no fears, while he was wooing the Arabs, for the traditionally-close relations with Israel.

The fact that the visit has given the most important Arabs in the Middle East an understanding of his policies must be comforting as Mr. MacEachen contemplates Canada taking its turn as a non-permanent Western member of the Security Council. It has been almost ten years since Canada's George Ignatieff sat in that seat with some distinction, and Mr. MacEachen feels that it is time to accept the responsibility again.

The Minister went to the Middle East to learn if he could involve Canada in its affairs and improve bilateral relations without having to pay the price of major policy changes. He also wanted to repair any damage done by the PLO debates at home. The trip was a natural progression from the new, more even-handed, attitude he has brought to the Department since taking over from Mitchell Sharp. That attitude has seen him in periodic discussion of Middle East affairs with a committee of Arab ambassadors, which resulted in invitations to visit some of their countries. Syria, not represented, did not extend an invitation and was not visited.

Mr. Scott is a journalist with the Canadian Press, based in Ottawa. He was part of the press party that accompanied the Secretary of State for External Affairs on his January 1976 visit to five Middle Eastern countries. The views expressed in this article are those of Mr. Scott.

*Preparation
for Canada's
return to
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