

# Suez reappraised

by Michael Fry

*This article is a reappraisal of the Suez affair of 1956, of Canada's role in that affair and of Escott Reid's involvements from India, where he was Canadian High Commissioner. Mr. Reid writes of that in his new book **Hungary and Suez 1956: a View from New Delhi**, published in 1986 by Mosaic Press of Oakville, Ontario.*

*Michael Fry, who is Professor of International Relations at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, notes:*

*The author gave Escott Reid modest assistance. With characteristic generosity, Mr. Reid described him in the acknowledgments as his historical adviser. The author is involved in the Suez project organized by the Middle East Centre, St. Anthony's College, Oxford, and the Wilson Center, the Smithsonian Institution, Washington. Several of the conclusions presented here come from that project, which involves an international group of scholars and practitioners.*

The public records of Britain, Canada and the United States for 1956 began to open in January 1987; the French promise an official volume of the Suez crisis within the next two years. Participants and scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, and of the Canal, sense that it is time to reassess the conduct and consequences of the Suez affair.

Canadian policy was developed and implemented, essentially, by the Department of External Affairs, led by the Secretary of State, Lester Pearson. Within the department, Jules Leger, John Holmes, Marcel Cadieux and G.C. McInnis carried weight. Abroad, Pearson was served by a galaxy of trusted friends; Arnold Heeney in Washington, Norman Robertson in London, Escott Reid in New Delhi, Dana Wilgress at NATO, the still controversial romanticist and humanist Herbert Norman in Cairo and Beirut, and R.A. MacKay at the UN. General E.L.M. Burns commanded the UN Truce Supervisory Organization in the Middle East. Pearson was well served from Paris and Tel Aviv, less so from Moscow.

Pearson was generally liked and respected abroad. He was a pragmatist on Middle Eastern affairs, but with a marked preference for Israel. This set "Rabbi" Pearson apart from opinion in the Defence Department. Canada did not have an elaborate Middle East policy in 1956. A deep concern over refugee and relief matters, involvement in the maintenance of the armistice agreements, and a willingness to play a modest, stabilizing role in arms transfers (the central question being the sale of F-86 jet fighters of Israel), complemented a belief that incremental, confidence-building measures, both political and economic (the mirage of

functionalism), would help bring about a settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute. That settlement must involve both the United States and the Soviet Union. The St. Laurent government accepted the fact that the West faced a new phase of Soviet activism in the Third World generally, and in the Middle East in particular. It seemed futile to ignore Soviet influence with the Arab states, secured by arms and economic assistance, and exercised reasonably in 1956, and it seemed irresponsible to allow her to maneuver unchecked. Specifically, the West should secure Soviet agreement to an arms control policy for the Palestine region which neither undermined the Baghdad Pact and weakened Iraq's ties to the West, nor left Israel vulnerable to Egypt's newly-acquired bomber force. Canadian officials doubted that the Baghdad Pact constituted a barrier against communism and may have actually prompted increased Soviet penetration of the region. President Nasser remained a critical but inscrutable and enigmatic factor.

## Canada fashions its view

The United Nations was pivotal in Canadian thinking. The incremental steps to promote a Middle East settlement and the agreement itself should be pursued under UN auspices. Should a crisis result in war in the Middle East, UN action, as in Korea, would halt it more effectively than seeking to implement the Tripartite Declaration of 1950. Much would depend on the policies of Britain and the United States, and on the extent of their cooperation. Thus, the acid tests for Canada in a Middle East crisis would be whether it was handled through UN procedures and whether it damaged the Atlantic accord. The preservation of Commonwealth and NATO unity provided the other measures of significance. Properly managed, a Middle East crisis should not result in a regional or global war. In adopting these views, the St. Laurent government did not feel that it was in any way seriously at odds with the British or United States governments. Eden, for example, though more sympathetic toward the Arab states than toward Israel, seemed committed to generally sensible, reasonable and cautious policies, to the Atlantic alliance and to UN processes. He had handled Cyprus badly, but Egypt well. Eden's subsequent behavior thus seemed all the more incomprehensible and unjustifiable.

To understand Canadian policy in the reactive phase, from July 26 to late October 1956, one has to know exactly what Pearson and his colleagues knew about British policy and the subtleties of Anglo-French relations, and about United States policy and the intricacies of Anglo-American relations. Canada's national interests were not directly affected, as were Britain's, by Nasser's dramatic, deplorably unilateral but legal act of nationalization on July 26, 1956.