The Suez Canal Crisis

The Suez Canal Crisis of 1956 showed Canadians the potential and problems of their status as a middle power. The French had constructed the Suez Canal between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea in the 1860’s. Soon after, the British had bought a majority of shares in the Suez Canal Company, to make the canal part of their route to India. Then they had occupied Egypt. In 1955, with Britain’s Eastern Empire gone, British Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden agreed to withdraw the garrison from Egypt.

That was one triumph for Egypt’s leader, Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser. Another would be the completion of the Aswan High Dam across the Nile. In 1956, because of Nasser’s dealings with the Soviet Union, Britain and the United States cut off aid for the Aswan project. In return, Nasser seized the Suez Canal Company. He also stepped up guerrilla attacks on Israel, and invited the Soviets to help Egypt finish the dam. Eden was furious. He was sure that the Americans and the Commonwealth shared his viewpoint.

The Commonwealth, with the exception of Australia and New Zealand, did not. Newer members were not sympathetic to what they saw as old-fashioned British imperialism. As for Canada, it had no interest in who owned the canal, but a great deal of interest in the new members of the Commonwealth. Above all, Canada realized what Eden did not: that the Americans might disapprove of Nasser’s action, but would not approve of the violent retaliation Eden was planning.

France, on the other hand, sided with Britain. So did Israel. It was planned that Israel would strike first, on November 1, 1956; then the French and British would use the attack as a pretext to step in and guard the vital international waterway. If Nasser’s government was toppled by the attack, all three attackers would be pleased.

To Canada, this plan promised disaster. Canada’s two parent nations would be set against its powerful neighbour, the United States. The newer Commonwealth nations would be outraged, and the Soviet Union delighted.

On October 29, Israeli paratroops struck. On October 30, Britain and France ordered both Egypt and Israel to stay 16 km away from the canal preventing any Egyptian attempt to meet the Israeli invasion. Only then were Canada and the other Commonwealth countries informed. Next, the Royal Air Force moved to bomb Egyptian airfields, and an Anglo-French invasion force was organized to land near the canal.

The Soviet Union issued an ultimatum: Atomic bombs would rain down on London and Paris if the invasion did not end. Far from being toppled, Nasser’s government gained popular support. The Americans were furious with the
British. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles raged at Lester Pearson, now Canadian Secretary of State for External Affairs: “They’ve damaged the whole cause of freedom by placing us in an inferior position morally to the Russians.” When the UN Security Council ordered Israel to withdraw, Britain and France used their vetoes for the first time. Yugoslavia used a ploy that the western allies had used earlier against the Soviet Union: It moved to have the issue taken before the UN General Assembly. There, 65 nations supported a resolution denouncing the invasion and ordering a cease-fire. Canada abstained.

Canada was divided over the issue. The Gallup poll showed that a small majority supported the British invasion. Prime Minister St. Laurent and his government certainly did not. He and Pearson had done their best to prevent a breach of international law and to keep NATO allies together. The British and French had not only ignored them but had kept their true plans secret. Then Eden had asked Canada for help in what St. Laurent and Pearson saw as an act of imperialism. The reply was that there would be no help at all. The British had counted on Canada; Pearson’s reply caused consternation in London.

Pearson told other delegates at the United Nations that he had abstained from the resolution because it offered no more than a cease-fire. Something more was needed. On November 3, Pearson proposed that an “emergency international United Nations force” be sent in. The proposal was supported by 57 nations, with none opposed. By November 7, Pearson had collected enough offers of troops to make a UN Emergency Force possible. The French and British had a pretext to withdraw. Nasser agreed that the force was acceptable, but it must leave when he directed, and there must be no Canadians. They were, he said, “too British”.

Nasser’s ban on Canadians was a blow to Pearson and the others who had worked hard for a solution to the crisis. The support of the UN Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjold, soft-ended Nasser’s position. Canada could provide the Emergency Force’s supply and support troops, but a battalion of the Queen’s Own Rifles, one of Canada’s oldest regiments, had to return to Calgary. The name was “too British”.

Canadians watched the events with mixed feelings. “Canada Turns Her Back on UK”, shouted the Vancouver Province. That view was echoed by the Progressive Conservatives and Social Credit. Many Canadians were bewildered that Canada had not supported Britain; few understood what Pearson had done.

The achievement was impressive; Pearson had found the formula, which kept Britain and France from utter humiliation at the UN. NATO and the Commonwealth survived the crisis. Eden’s career was over, but his successor, Harold Macmillan, soon rebuilt British prestige and prosperity. In 1957, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts. It was the climax of Canada’s role as the first of the middle powers.