Leadership and Change: Prime Ministers in the Post-War World - Anthony Eden

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Introduction

In 1977 The Times wrote of Anthony Eden: 'He was the last prime minister to believe Britain was a great power and the first to confront a crisis which proved she was not.' This was a verdict I endorsed in a book about the Suez Crisis that I published in 1988. (1) But perhaps I did so too readily. At all events, thirty tears after Eden's death it may be that a new perspective is beginning to emerge. For as Winston Churchill generously and presciently said of Neville Chamberlain at the time of his death in November 1940: 'In one phase men seem to have been right, in another they seem to have been wrong. Then again, a few years later, when the perspective of time has lengthened, all stands in a different setting. There is another proportion. There is another scale of values.'(2)

So I want here to reflect on whether The Times's verdict on Eden can today be seriously challenged. Three possible revisionist approaches will be considered. First, was Eden really the last Prime Minister to believe that Britain was a great power? Secondly, was he actually the first to confront a crisis which proved that she was not? Finally, is it possible that Eden himself was a far greater realist than has usually been recognised and that his approach to the seminal Suez Crisis, in which Britain, France and Israel colluded to attack Egypt in 1956, was not based on hubris or mental and physical illness? In short, did he see himself as engaged on an almost desperate bid to avoid both a national and a personal humiliation and on a bold quest to steer his country away from excessive subordination to Washington and towards a new and surprisingly modest strategic alignment in the world?

Did Later Prime Ministers than Eden Suffer from Delusions of National Grandeur?

At least three recent Prime Ministers appear to some extent to have done so. Harold Wilson was one. For he it was who asserted that Britain's frontiers lay on the Himalayas just before being driven by domestic party pressure to promise to withdraw all British forces from 'East of Suez', including those based in even friendly sheikhdoms in the Persian Gulf. Wilson too, most economists now agree, clung too long to delusions about the importance of the sterling area with dire consequences for British growth and in terms of national humiliation when the pound was finally forcibly devalued in November 1967. Immediately afterwards the Wilson Government's application to join the European Economic Community - which had been predictably handled with far too little humility - produced a contemptuous veto from President Charles de Gaulle.

Another recent Prime Minister to behave at times as Eden is supposed to have done was Margaret Thatcher. It was not for nothing that she was widely criticised for practicing 'megaphone diplomacy'.

Consider, for example, her public failure to prevent the reunification of Germany when Paris and the Bonn had signalled a clear intention to bring it about and when even Washington was acquiescent about it; and consider her personal crusade, in the face of opposition from the Europeans and the Commonwealth, to have no dealings with the African National Congress, which she initially publicly branded as 'a typical terrorist organisation', but that ended with her having to receive Nelson Mandela in Downing Street.

Finally, we can now see that Tony Blair is unlikely to go down to 'history' as a suitably modest leader of a country which, after all, possesses only one per cent of the world's population and is merely a regional power with fundamental assets quite similar to those of, say, Italy. For in Blair's own words, he sees Britain as a 'pivotal power' in the world - a claim presumably mainly based on its leadership of the ramshackle Commonwealth and its possession of a UN Security Council veto (notwithstanding the fact that ironically it was last exercised to the displeasure of Washington half a century ago by Eden). And Blair of course greatly overestimates - as incidentally do many of his critics - Britain's role in toppling Saddam Hussein. The Administration of George Bush the Younger was unalterably determined from quite early in 2002 to do this - and alone if necessary. But its members, with the exception of Donald Rumsfeld, were simply been too polite to tell the British that their participation or lack of it would make no essential difference.

Mention of the British relationship with Washington does, however, lead me to point out that a case can certainly be made for claiming that Eden's clashes with the Dwight Eisenhower Administration is what decisively distinguishes him from Wilson, Thatcher and Blair. And on one view, by daring to confront Washington, Eden is thus clearly confirmed as the last Prime Minister to believe his country to be a truly great power. On the other hand, during the Suez Crisis France was also 'Edenite' in its lack of deferential respect for Washington and indeed rather more so at times. And of course under de Gaulle and his numerous successors as President of the Fifth Republic has ever since stuck steadily to such an approach. Yet France has broadly accepted ever since the loss of Indochina in 1954 that it is a regional rather than a truly global power. So maybe to be an 'Edenite' in London in 1956 was merely to be a British proto-Gaullist rather than to be a peddler of more unrealistic pretentions such as some would associate with Wilson, Thatcher and Blair. In short, was Eden not the last British Prime Minister to believe that Britain was a great power but the only one so far, with the possible exception of Edward Heath (who incidentally served as Eden's Chief Whip during the Suez Crisis), to realise that she had the resources to be merely a regional power?

Were Earlier Prime Ministers than Eden Driven to Recognise that Britain Might No Longer Be a Great Power?

A case can certainly be made for this proposition and it can up to a point be pushed quite far back in time. But here we must confine our analysis to Eden's three immediate predecessors, with all of whom he served in office. Let us begin with Chamberlain. He began his Premiership in May 1937 with Eden as his Foreign Secretary. In private at least he was keenly aware of the limits set to British power. In January 1938, for example, he wrote to a correspondent:

'We are a very rich and a very vulnerable Empire, and there are plenty of poor adventurers not very far away who look on us with hungry eyes... we are in no position to enter lightheartedly upon war with such a formidable power as Germany, much less if Germany were aided by Italian attacks on our Mediterranean possessions and communications.'(3)

And at a meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence in July 1938 he said:

'The ideal, no doubt, was to be prepared to fight Germany or Italy or Japan, either separately or in combination. That, however, was a counsel of perfection which it was impossible to follow. There were limits to our resources, both physical and financial, and it was vain to contemplate fighting singlehanded

the three strongest Powers in combination. He did not leave out of account that we should probably have allies in such a war, notably France, but France at the present time was not in a very strong position to give us much help...'(4)

It was of course Eden who failed to see the point and who accordingly resigned rather capriciously as a protest against Chamberlain's policy of appeasement - but not, it should be noted, appeasement of the Germans but rather of the Italians whom the Prime Minister wanted to detach from their axis with Berlin. So maybe this evidence tends to fit in with the now traditional view that Eden in 1956 was as usual blind to power realities. On the other hand, maybe by 1956 he had learnt some lessons from his earlier experiences.

Another of Eden's predecessors was Clement Attlee. And he too was no blind jingoist, having a keen grasp of the limits of British power during his post-war premiership. He did not, for example, share Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin's view that the country's 'economic Dunkirk', when it was forced to accept severe American conditions for a massive dollar loan, would quickly be forgotten and that the British would soon be back on a level playing field with the Americans and the Russians. And Attlee easily crushed the aspirations of Bevin's successor, Herbert Morrison, to invade Iran after the nationalisation of the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's refineries. He spoke words in Cabinet in September 1951 in his succinct way that most now think Eden should have spoken in 1956: use of force was inexpedient 'in view of the attitude of the United States Government'. (5) Eden, then Shadow Foreign Secretary, while not being explicitly an advocate of war, contrived to imply that he favoured a more robust approach to Iran than that of the Labour Government.

As for Churchill, he too was by no means consistently reckless in playing his country's hand during his two spells in Number Ten (1940-1945 and 1951-1955). One example from each term will have to suffice. Urged in 1944 by the Polish Government-in-Exile to confront the Soviet Union over Stalin's brutal plans for their country's future, Churchill's response showed beyond doubt that he could see how little real power Britain would have in the post-war world:

'Britain would always do her best against tyranny in whatever form

it showed itself. But Britain, though better situated, was not much bigger than Poland... It was no good expecting us to do more than we could... His heart bled for them, but the brutal facts could not be overlooked. He could no more stop the Russian advance than stop the tide coming in.' (6)

And he was similarly realistic in recognising that the Soviets must have a free hand in Romania if there was to be any hope of Britain getting a free hand to secure Greece from the threat of a Communist takeover. True to form, however, Eden, then in his second spell as Foreign Secretary, seemed less aware of the limitations of British power. At all events, Churchill felt driven to send to Eden in January 1945 a minute that must rank among the most inhumane that any British Prime Minister has ever written. Dismayed by the remonstrations to the Soviets being made by British diplomats in Bucharest about the transportation of thousands of Romanian citizens to the Soviet Union for slave labour purposes, Churchill rebuked Eden for not bearing in mind 'what we promised about leaving Roumania's fate to a large extent in Russian hands'. He added: 'I cannot myself consider that it is wrong of the Russians to take Roumanians of any origin they like to work in the Russian coal-fields in view of all that has passed.'(7) Again, in 1954 Churchill was arguably extremely realistic, other than perhaps in a short-run context, in urging on Eden (then in his third spell at the Foreign Office) a policy over Indochina that would not unduly antagonise Eisenhower and his formidable Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. But Eden prevailed over his Prime Minister (whose health was failing) and in the short-run also over Eisenhower and Dulles. Hence Indochina was partitioned at the Geneva Conference. But of course Eden (and Britain) paid a price two years later when the Americans were never more than lukewarm in their support for proposed countermeasures against Egypt after it had nationalised the Suez Canal Company.

The point of this section has been, then, to establish that all three Prime Ministers prior to Eden, rather contrary to The Times's judgement, had faced crises that had taught them that Britain's great power status was at least considerably less than popularly assumed. But the question we must now address is where Eden stood during his own premiership and especially during the Suez Crisis. Did he simply carry on with the approach that had led him to differ so frequently from his predecessors, preferring at times with almost bovine bravado not to countenance policies based on recognition of national decline and blithely disregarding many of the perils that his country increasingly faced? Or did he belatedly see the error of his previous ways? In short, was the Suez Crisis when he finally recognised the need for Britain to become a mere regional power aligned with France at whatever cost to her supposed global role and to the 'Special Relationship' with the United States that Churchill in particular had seen as the only vehicle for preserving it?

Eden and Suez: Towards a New Perspective?

In my view the most important point about Eden as a Prime Minister is that, possibly for the first time in his political life, he became deeply pessimistic on a sustained basis about his country's future prospects. It was central to this pessimism that he had gradually lost all confidence in the United States as a long-term provider of security for any states outside its own hemisphere. Another premise that guided him was the belief that at the heart of the threat to Britain's interests was not the Soviet Union and World Communism but rather anti-Western Third World dictators and especially those in the Middle East who had a potential to halt the vital flow of oil to Western Europe. (This was well before the opening up of North Sea energy resources.) As he confided to Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin just months before Egypt's seizure of the Suez Canal Company:

When we discussed the Middle East in London, I told the Russians that the uninterrupted supply of oil was literally vital to our economy. They showed an understanding of our interest and appeared to be willing to meet it. I said I thought I must be absolutely blunt about the oil, because we would fight for it.(8)

As for the 'Special Relationship', Eden believed that it was simply not 'fit for purpose' as a cure for Britain's security woes. The Americans seemed to him to be too obsessed with the supposed ideological menace of Communism and insufficiently knowledgeable to play the leading role in areas of great complexity outside their own hemisphere. And this, Eden thought, was particularly true of the Middle East, where, for example, he deplored the negative US attitude towards the Baghdad Pact. His judgements on these matters led to his resignation in 1957 and the medium-term ruin of his reputation. And even by the time of his death two decades later he was not widely seen to have been vindicated. For the United States, which had taken over Western leadership from the British in the Middle East, had not been shown to have performed there in a wholly disastrous fashion; oil, apart from a brief interruption in 1973, had continued to flow to Western Europe; and the 'Special Relationship' in general was alive and well under James Callaghan and Jimmy Carter. After a further three decades, however, the state of the Greater Middle East and the consequent vulnerability of Britain (and indeed most of Europe) to energy cut-offs may mean that Eden's assumptions may now deserve a more sympathetic scrutiny.

Eden clearly became disillusioned with the 'Special Relationship'. He wrote as early as 1954 to one British diplomat: 'The Americans may think the time past when they need to consider the feelings or difficulties of their allies. It is the conviction that this tendency becomes more pronounced every week that is creating difficulties for anyone in this country who wants to maintain close Anglo-American relations.'(9) And another British diplomat noted in his diary at the time of the Geneva Conference of the same year: '[Eden's] conviction is that all the Americans want is to replace the French and run Indo-China themselves. 'They want to replace us in Egypt too. They want to run the world...'(10) Furthermore, in his memoirs Eden went so far as to write of 'an apparent disinclination by the United States Government to take second place even

in an area [Egypt] where primary responsibility was not theirs' and of the 'withholding of wholehearted support which their partner in N.A.T.O. had the right to expect'.(11) But if Eden had come not to believe in the 'Special Relationship' as the basis for preserving British security in general and its energy security in particular what did he believe was the alternative?

Some may assume that Eden had become by the time of the Suez Crisis, perhaps under the influence of illness, a crude Colonel Blimp believing only in go-it-alone gunboat diplomacy long after the power basis required to underpin such an approach had disappeared. True, Eden back in 1925 had undoubtedly been something of an unreconstructed imperialist as is illustrated by this extract from what he had to say to the Commons about the possibility of Britain terminating its mandate status in Iraq:

'no words, however strong, could exaggerate the harm which we should do to our reputation not only in Iraq, but throughout the East, if we were now to scuttle, like flying curs, at the sight of our own shadow. Hon. Members know that if we pursued a course like that, our name would be a jibe in the mouth of every tavern-lounger from Marrakesh to Singapore. It might take centuries to recover.

I am not myself enamoured of Western forms of government in Eastern lands. With us democracy, whatever its merits or demerits may be, is at least a plant of natural growth. In the East, it is a forced growth, an importation, and foreign to the soil. Consequently, it needs many years more to develop and many more to grow to be understood by the people.' (12)

But any close scrutiny of Eden's conduct during the last six months of 1956 will suggest that this kind of patrician Blimpishness was no longer at the core of his thinking. For example, he did not respond to Egypt's nationalisation coup in July with an immediate declaration of war but rather with a willingness, however reluctant, to refer the issue to the United Nations and to enter into other international diplomatic efforts under US sponsorship. And in these negotiations he seems to have been prepared by mid-October to acquiesce in principle to a compromise settlement based on a six-point programme negotiated between British and Egyptian Foreign Ministers Selwyn Lloyd and Mohammed Fawzi. What destroyed the prospects for this deal in my opinion was that Eden concluded that 'hawks' in his Cabinet, led by Chancellor of the Exchequer Harold Macmillan, would reject it, would resign if defeated and would brand him an appeaser. The situation was not helped by the fact that the Conservative Party Conference, by chance meeting in mid-October, was also in a belligerent mood. So Eden chose instead to opt for the now well-known and by any normal standards dishonourable collusion with France and Israel. The sequel was the abortive attack on Egypt that had to be humiliatingly halted when Macmillan (who, like Churchill and unlike Eden, had an American-born mother) suddenly became a 'dove' in the face of a US-instigated run on sterling. Incidentally, either before or after the ceasefire no fewer than four Cabinet Ministers (Macmillan himself, R. A. Butler, Lord Salisbury and Walter Monckton) had disloyal dealings with the American Ambassador in London without the knowledge of either Number Ten or the Foreign Office. So with colleagues capable of such duplicitous conduct 'damned if he did and damned if he didn't' was probably what awaited Eden once the Canal coup had taken place. But his ultimate choice of the doomed French option rather than that urged by Washington shows us where Eden's long-term strategic thinking was taking him. And it is of interest here that in retirement he was even to be an honoured guest of de Gaulle in Paris. So it is with a consideration of Eden's eventual alignment with France that we can most appropriately end this review of the place of his Premiership in British history.

For some Eden's fatal compact with France really only began at Chequers on 14 October 1956 with the visit of Albert Gazier and Maurice Challe, was carried forward by Eden himself in Paris on 16 October and cemented with the sojourn of a Foreign Office team in Sevres from 22 to 24 October. On this reading it could be seen as a mere improvisation by a leader at his wits' end. And there may be some truth in this - particularly given the emerging threat that Israel was making to invade Jordan, raising the prospect of Britain, under its treaty obligations to Amman, finding itself at war on the same side as Egypt! Yet there is another way of looking at matters. It is to see Eden as farsightedly attempting to align Britain with a more reliable long-term ally than, as he saw it, the United States could ever be. And the strongest case for arguing this has only recently received much scrutiny. It is that as early as September 1956, that is before the Suez Crisis had become desperately acute, Eden responded positively to a remarkable demarche from

French Premier Guy Mollet who suggested a far-reaching pooling of British and French sovereignty. While inevitably not ready for a complete and immediate union, Eden was sympathetic to France being allowed to join the British Commonwealth, to France acknowledging Queen Elizabeth II as head of state and to the French being accorded 'common citizenship on the Irish basis'.(13) This was, then, a variant on Churchill's proposal made to France during the last days of the Third Republic in June 1940. And Eden with some apparent enthusiasm instructed officials to explore the detailed implications. Nothing of course came of the idea after the British Cabinet let down France by forcing a premature ceasefire on 6 November. But had the bold plan of Mollet and Eden to topple President Gamal Abdel Nasser not been scuppered by Eisenhower and by Eden's Cabinet colleagues the Entente Cordiale could have developed along quite spectacular lines during 1957. For there might have been no great nostalgia for the 'Special Relationship' in London's political circles. After all, in the aftermath of the ceasefire no fewer than 127 Conservative backbench MPs signed a Commons motion criticising the United States for 'gravely endangering the Atlantic Alliance'. And there can be no doubt that many Labour MPs also had at least reservations about the desirability of subordination to Washington - though usually for rather different reasons from those motivating the 127 Conservatives.

To all this some will say that Eden could never have been serious about pooling sovereignty with any continental country. After all, had he not set his face against European quasi-federalism to an even greater extent than Churchill? In January 1952, for example, he told an American audience at Columbia University:

If you drive a nation to adopt procedures which run counter to its instincts, you weaken and may destroy the motive force of its action? You will realise that I am speaking of the frequent suggestions that the United Kingdom should join a federation on the continent of Europe. This is something which we know, in our bones, we cannot do. (14)

And on his own watch as Prime Minister Eden sent Russell Bretherton, a civil servant, to make clear to those negotiating what became the Treaty of Rome (or European Economic Community) that British participation was out of the question. Bretherton's words bear quoting:

The future treaty which you are discussing has no chance of being agreed; if it was agreed, it would have no chance of being ratified; and if it were ratified, it would have no chance of being applied. And if it was applied, it would be totally unacceptable to Britain. You speak of agriculture which we don't like, of power over customs, which we take exception to, and institutions, which frighten us. Monsieur le president, messieurs, au revoir et bonne chance .(15)

But maybe in Eden's eyes making moves towards a merger with France was quite distinct from joining a multinational quasi-federation starting with six states (or seven with Britain) with no defined limit to future enlargement (now 27). In short, Monnet 0, Mollet 1.

For half a century Eden's vision of a Franco-British pooling of sovereignty has had no following at all on either side of the Channel. But might Eden's hour at last be approaching? There would appear to be two preconditions. The first is that the 'Special Relationship' should effectively end. If this is to happen the initiative will surely not come from London. For even at the depths of the disillusionment over Iraq the House of Commons recently strongly endorsed Blair's wish to sign up to a new Trident agreement with Washington - with not a voice raised in favour of an alternative arrangement with Paris. But the 'Special Relationship' may be in jeopardy all the same. For in the wake of a massive apparent defeat in Iraq (which now seems inevitable) but also in the entire Greater Middle East (which may not be), the United States, as a broken-backed hyperpower with less than five per cent of the world's population, could turn in disillusionment to a hemispheric security approach retaining some residual interests in the other hemisphere only in parts of Africa (as a source of oil) and in East Asia.

A second precondition for a triumph for Eden's strategic vision (if we may call it that) would be for the European federal project to collapse and for great parts of the continent to be rebalkanised. Pointers in this direction could be the rejection by the French and the Dutch people of the constitution; growing asymmetries between France and Germany in energy dependence on Russia; and the evident tensions between different parts of Europe concerning the policies pursued by the European Central Bank in the management of a single currency still not in sight of being underpinned by a single system of taxation.

Neither precondition seems likely to be met in the near future or indeed at all. All the same, the odds against may now be rather shorter than at any time since Eden's resignation fifty years ago. And what if a Franco-British merger did again become a proposition seriously discussed by Heads of Government in Paris and London? The leading role would surely no longer be automatically reserved for Britain as it was assumed would be the case in both 1940 and 1956. For in half a century the Commonwealth has been greatly devalued and it is difficult to imagine any French President (whose role was greatly enhanced in 1958) accepting anyone from the House of Windsor as head of state. France has also meanwhile become a truly independent nuclear-weapon state, while Britain's status in this respect (fully independent in 1956) is one of ever-increasing dependency on the United States. And the French have enviable supplies of peaceful nuclear energy. But the British still do have something massive to offer a partnership. I refer of course to the City of London that has no conceivable equivalent in France.

Half a century after the Suez Crisis there are no statues of either Eden or Mollet in London or Paris - though there is a modest bust of the former in the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Might there be such statues by the middle of the present century? Stranger things have happened in the modern era. And many of them have been a good deal less agreeable.

Professor Geoffrey Warner

Because we do not have much time, I should simply like to add some brief comments on the intriguing hypothesis raised by David Carlton's fascinating and typically provocative lecture: namely that, at the end of his premiership, Eden was considering the desirability of moving away from the Anglo-American 'special relationship' towards a more pro-European orientation. There are two additional documents which add support to this hypothesis:-

The first document is what Peter Hennessy, in his recent book Having It So Good, calls 'Eden's own very secret mini-inquest' on Suez, which appears to have been written over the Christmas holiday in December 1956 and which concluded: '(W)e must review our world position and our domestic capacity more searchingly in the light of the Suez experience, which has not so much changed our fortunes as revealed realities.' The outcome, Eden went on, ?may be to determine us to work much more closely with Europe?, although he warned that 'Europe will not welcome us simply because at the moment it may appear to suit us to look to them.'

In the second document, a cabinet paper completed on 4 January 1957, the Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, provided a very powerful reason for persuading Europe to 'welcome' Britain. This was nothing less than a proposal addressed to the other six countries of the Western European Union (i.e. the same countries which had recently set up the European Economic Community) for 'a joint research and development programme for atomic and thermo-nuclear weapons, including all the means of delivery.' Lloyd recognised that such a military association 'would in practice entail a close political association', but expressed the hope that '(a)s part of a larger confederation we could hope to make Western European influence stronger, i.e. in Africa and the Middle East.' In doing so, '(w)e should take our place where we now belong, i.e. in Europe with our immediate neighbours, and thereby give greater cohesion and strength

to Europe.'

It is hard to believe that Lloyd, the most loyal of ministers would have made such a revolutionary proposal without having received Eden's blessing. Unfortunately, however, Eden was not present at the cabinet meeting on the afternoon of8 January 1957, when the above paper was discussed. The Prime Minister was, in fact, on his way to Sandringham to tender his resignation to the Queen. Whether his presence would have made any difference is hard to say, but Lloyd's imaginative suggestion was shot down in flames by his colleagues. Lord Salisbury's contribution to the discussion was typical. He told his colleagues that he 'doubted whether a policy on these lines could be pursued consistently with the maintenance of the Anglo-American alliance' and he felt that Britain should 'continue its co-operation with the United States. This... was the better course of action and one which was more in accordance with the fundamental basis of our foreign policy.' Once again - and this was confirmed by the new Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's visit to Bermuda in March 1957 to confer with President Eisenhower - Britain chose the United States instead of Europe. It is still doing so.

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