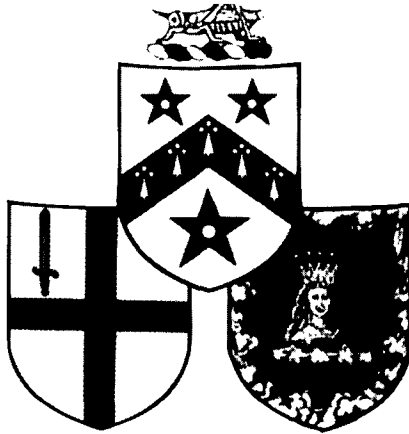


*G R E S H A M*  
*C O L L E G E*



PREMIERSHIP

Lecture 8

‘THE COLONEL AND THE DRAWING ROOM’:  
ANTHONY EDEN, 1955-57

by

PROFESSOR PETER HENNESSY BA PhD  
Gresham Professor of Rhetoric

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# ***GRESHAM COLLEGE***

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Anthony Eden is the most tragic figure to have occupied 10 Downing Street in the postwar period. A politician of charm, intelligence, and bravery with a powerful desire to ease the antagonisms of his class-deformed country, he was the only clear-cut heir apparent to succeed to the premiership in the period since 1945 albeit after too many enervating years as Churchill's number two. He reached the top in April 1955 only to see his possession of the glittering prize of political and public life sink beneath the waters of the Suez Canal less than two years after he won it leaving his reputation tarnished to this day. As Robert Rhodes-James, his official biographer, put it (borrowing the phrase used of Curzon by Churchill): 'The morning had been golden; the noontide was bronze; and the evening lead.'<sup>1</sup>

Suez stained the otherwise perfect elegance he maintained in the 20 years of life left him after he resigned in 1957 though, as David Dutton's interesting new biographical study shows, he could not leave the subject alone even in his very last days despite the determination of friends and guests to steer their conversation clear of that notorious waterway and the man who nationalised, it Colonel Nasser.<sup>2</sup> As the veteran Sunday Times Washington Correspondent, Henry Brandon, put it after encountering the Avons, as they had become, at the Harrimans' in 1976:

'It soon became clear...that Eden was using my presence to plead ...for justice before history, presenting his case as he saw it, offering new and dispassionate after-thoughts...The ghost of Suez was still stalking Eden as he was getting ready for the end and wondering about the verdict of history.'<sup>3</sup>

'In his mind his whole proud career', Brandon observed, 'had been scarred by a decision which misfired for lack of American co-operation.'<sup>4</sup>

A measure of his tragedy is Eden's place in the accumulated folklore which surrounds the job of Prime Minister. The lesson of his premiership is quite simple – how not to do it, largely, though not wholly, because of his conduct of the crisis precipitated by Colonel Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company on 26 July 1956. Lady Eden told a meeting of Conservative women shortly after that throughout those crisis months in No.10, she felt as if 'the Suez Canal was flowing through the drawing-room.'<sup>5</sup> In one sense it has flowed through Downing Street ever since each time a resident premier has sensed a possibility of Britain's Armed Forces having to resume active service in response to a crisis likely to involve an exchange of fire.

By way of illustration come with me to Mrs Thatcher's flat atop No. 10 Downing Street during the Sunday lunchtime following the Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands in April 1982. My source was present - a senior civil servant long steeped in the various manifestations of post-1945 Whitehall at war or near war. 'Carol [Thatcher] took lunch out of the fridge - a bit of ham and salad', he told me many years later.

'We had a gin and she [that's Mrs Thatcher] asked me, "How do you actually run a war?"'

'Had you written anything down?' I asked.

'No, I didn't write it down. I knew it and I said: "First, you need a small War Cabinet; second, it's got to have regular meetings come hell or high water; thirdly, you don't want a lot of bureaucrats hanging around." Then we talked about its composition.'

'In what sense did you know it?' I inquired.

'One had seen it so often in a funny sort of way...I knew about Berlin, Korea, Malaya. [And here comes the folklore Eden legacy] We'd had Suez which was a monumental cock-up. Cuba was different – very much a Number 10/Kennedy thing. And we'd long had this Transition to War Committee which actually met at the time of Suez and was the biggest shambles of all time. The one thing I was clear about was that you couldn't have this bloody thing where people weren't going to take decisions.'<sup>6</sup>

This was a classic and important example of Suez as a primer – as in Kipling's celebrated phrase about the Boer War, 'no end of a lesson.'<sup>7</sup>

I shall return to it in a moment.

But first we need to roll the newsreel back pre-26 July 1956. Eden had been Prime Minister for 15 months before the fuse was lit beneath his premiership. We must examine initially the forgotten first phase of his Downing Street stewardship from his succeeding Churchill at the beginning of April 1955 to the end of July 1956 when the Canal began to flow in No.10. On the surface, the start of the 57 year-old premier's stewardship appeared immensely promising. Seemingly recovered from his series of serious bile duct operations in 1953, Eden made a quick, decisive appeal to the electorate. During the campaign he shone both on the stump and on the television screen<sup>8</sup> en route to a raising of the Conservative majority in May 1955 from 16 to 58, the first time an incumbent Prime Minister had managed this since Palmerston.<sup>9</sup>

Behind the veneer of success, however, Eden's nerves and other people's doubts were concealed. That great Conservative party fixer, Lord Swinton, told Churchill early in 1955 'anybody would be better than Anthony...[who] would make the worst Prime Minister since Lord North...But...You announced him as your successor more than ten years ago.' 'I think it was a great mistake,' Churchill replied.<sup>10</sup> Eden himself dithered privately over that swift appeal to the country to the consternation of the Party Chairman, Lord Woolton<sup>11</sup> and showed a good deal of this tantrum side to his immediate entourage during the campaign<sup>12</sup> even though a split Labour Party, riven by Bevanite dissent and led by an ageing Attlee, never had a prayer at the polls for all the apparent truce between right and left as Labour tried to present a united face to the people.

Some Ministerial doubters among the Conservatives like John Boyd-Carpenter consoled themselves by 'saying it's a pity he knows nothing about economics or social security or finance, but at least we shall be alright with foreign affairs' 'That', Lord Boyd-Carpenter told me over thirty years later, 'was rather ironic.'<sup>13</sup> Others like Lord Hailsham saw in Eden both 'the most cultivated [and] civilised of all modern prime ministers'<sup>14</sup> and, after the 'one-off job' premiership of Churchill, welcomed what Hailsham foresaw as being 'a real peacetime Prime Minister and a real postwar government...[led by] a Prime Minister who represented contemporary manhood, rather than the pre-First World War generation.'<sup>15</sup> And Eden's political instincts were progressive – the creation of a 'property owning democracy' was at the core of his domestic agenda<sup>16</sup> and he was positively evangelical about industrial partnership as the banisher of class divisions between capital and labour.<sup>17</sup>

Yet all of Eden's ministerial experience had been on the foreign and defence side. His lack of confidence in domestic matters was publicly apparent from the start of his premiership when Butler, rather than the PM, fielded any questions at the opening press conference of the 1955 election campaign which required a detailed knowledge of home affairs.<sup>18</sup> As premier Eden sensed the need to examine a whole range of economic, social and industrial relations questions and would establish Cabinet committees to examine them ('wild cat' strikes and the feasibility of pre-strike secret ballots or the possible need to control Commonwealth immigration are good examples<sup>19</sup>) while never gripping such difficult issues let alone initiating action upon them. Though, to be fair, he did set in train long-term

reviews on both social services spending and military expenditure, the latter laying much of the ground work for the Macmillan/Sandys Defence White Paper of 1957.<sup>20</sup>

But long before secret Whitehall worries about Nasser, the future of the Suez Canal and the geopolitics of the Middle East had emerged from the obscurest of official Cabinet committees,<sup>21</sup> Eden's inadequacies as Prime Minister were the talk of both the private government and the public prints. Never, till John Major's post-election traumas of 1992 has a honeymoon been so brief. As Eden's chum, Noel Coward put it in February 1956 'Anthony Eden's popularity had spluttered away like a blob of fat in a frying pan'<sup>22</sup> and his opinion poll approval rating fell from 70 per cent in the Autumn of 1955 to around 40 per cent in the Spring of 1956.<sup>23</sup>

Part of this slump, of course, had to do with the shadow of the titan he had replaced (something else John Major would understand). Attlee, who knew both Churchill and Eden extremely well, captured this with one of his cricketing metaphors in January 1956 when Gaitskell asked him who would have supposed that Churchill's departure would have made such a difference? 'Yep', observed Attlee. 'It's the heavy roller, you know. Doesn't let the grass grow under it.'<sup>24</sup> But Eden compounded mightily the inevitably unfavourable comparisons with his predecessor about which he was immensely sensitive. (For his part, Eden had wounded Churchill by virtually excluding him from the Conservatives' 1955 election campaign<sup>25</sup>).



Eden famously overreacted to newspaper criticism uttering 'a pained and pungent oath', according to 'Rab' Butler, when Donald McLachlan penned his famous leading article in The Daily Telegraph on 'The Firm Smack of Government' or lack of it in January 1956<sup>26</sup> and foolishly let his Press Secretary, William Clark, deny rumours that he was contemplating resignation (What The Daily Telegraph actually wrote was: 'There is a favourite gesture with the Prime Minister. To emphasise a point he will clench one fist to smash the open palm of the other hand but the smash is seldom heard'<sup>27</sup>) 'Rab' Butler, characteristically, did not help matters when, leaving for a holiday, he allowed reporters to trap him into agreeing that Eden was 'the best Prime Minister we have got.'<sup>28</sup> On the wider economic and political fronts, inflation moved against the Government and so did by-elections.<sup>29</sup>

But it was within his own Cabinet Room and the Whitehall machine over which he presided where Eden aroused serious doubts about his temperament, his judgement and his poor health long pre-Suez. For Eden was the greatest fusser to have filled the premiership probably this century certainly since 1945. His nerves set other ministers' nerves on edge and civil servants found him very trying.

The diary entry made his Foreign Office, Private Secretary, Evelyn Shuckburgh, after a Cabinet Office cocktail party in March 1954 records the mixed opinions of Eden (and 'Rab' Butler too) sculling around the Whitehall private office network at that time. 'Talked to Norman Brook [Cabinet Secretary], George Mallaby [member of the Cabinet Secretariat] and [Tim] Bligh Bridges' Private Secretary' wrote Shuckburgh

'and they all complained about the Chancellor [Butler]. He is moody and impossible to deal with, having his Budget shortly ahead. Norman attributes his character to the fact that Mrs Butler [the formidable Sydney Courtauld] ought to have been a man – is a man – so that Rab has become a woman. I said pity both the Chancellor and Foreign Secretary [Eden] should be women.'<sup>30</sup>

Make of that, ladies and gentlemen, what you will. But, however one reads it, the irritation with Eden is apparent.

Yet as Prime Minister Eden meant well. He tried to accommodate and reassure his ministers. He imitated Baldwin, under whom he came to his political maturity, by inviting colleagues to Downing Street to chat à deux about their departments. But unlike those of his model, Baldwin, or Labour's latterday Baldwin, Jim Callaghan, who revived the practice 20 years later,<sup>31</sup> Eden's sessions were occasions to be endured rather than enjoyed.<sup>32</sup> As his official biographer, Robert Rhodes James, put it, 'it is fair to say that British Prime Ministers tend to fall into one of two categories – the Olympian and the interferer. From almost the day he entered Downing Street, Eden was the latter.'<sup>33</sup>

The telephone call from the Prime Minister was the most dreaded manifestation of this passion for meddling. Even that most amiable of men, Alec Home, the Commonwealth Secretary, found such conversations profoundly exasperating<sup>34</sup> David Dutton has compiled a kind of lexicon of examples of such irritation in his Eden biography, starting with Harold Macmillan:

He kept on sending me little notes, 'sometimes twenty a day, ringing up all the time. He really should have been both PM and Foreign Secretary,' Macmillan recalled.<sup>35</sup>

Initially, this counterproductive impulse might be seen as a consequence of Eden's not creating the Cabinet he wanted until the reshuffle of December 1955 (a delay in stamping his own mark on Whitehall which he came to regret<sup>36</sup>). But this was not so. It was almost congenital and continued long after the reshuffle and right through to his last days in No.10. And in Selwyn Lloyd he had from December 1955 the kind of cipher at the Foreign Office that Macmillan never could have been. But, to continue the Dutton lexicon:

Selwyn Lloyd fared no better – thirty telephone calls from Chequers over the Christmas weekend of 1955. 'He cannot leave people alone to do their job', judged Shuckburgh.<sup>37</sup>

And then there were the temper tantrums. The list of those on the receiving end was truly comprehensive ranging from the hapless Lloyd to the 'communists' in the BBC, Foster Dulles in Washington to Randolph Churchill in the Evening Standard. Of course, it wasn't just a question of nerves. He was ill. The fevers associated with his botched operation were reoccurring before the strain of Suez was imposed upon that tired and stressed frame and oh so brittle temperament. As his Parliamentary Private Secretary, Robert Carr, told me many years later:

He was never the same man after the gall bladder operation that went wrong in 1953. He appeared to be getting very much better, but then within the first six months of his premiership he started getting the fevers again...When he actually appointed me to be a junior minister I had to go and see him in his bedroom, where he had a temperature of 102°. That was ten months before the crisis of Suez.<sup>38</sup>

Eden himself explained his post-1953 condition to be Cabinet on 9 January 1957, the last time he presided over it. 'As you know', he told then a few hours before he went to the Palace to resign,

It is now nearly four years since I had a series of bad abominable operations which left me with a largely artificial inside. It was not thought that I would lead an active life again. However, with the aid of drugs and stimulants, I have been able to do so.

During these last five months, since Nasser seized the Canal in July, I have been obliged to increase the drugs considerably and also increase the stimulants necessary to counteract the drugs. This has finally had an adverse effect on my rather precarious inside.<sup>39</sup>

According to Dr Hugh L'Etang, leading scholar of the pathology of leadership, Eden was suffering from 'the toxic effects of bile-duct infection, and the chemical effects of stimulant and possibly other medication': benzedrine was almost certainly a factor here.<sup>40</sup>

Add to the effect of the benzedrine, poor sleep and the desperate need for a holiday as the 1955-56 session of Parliament drew to a close, and you have a cocktail of mania-inducing qualities ready mixed at the precise moment when, if Lloyd's Minister of State at the Foreign Office, Anthony Nutting, is to be believed, Eden's greatest tantrum-causer, Colonel Nasser, took his dramatic action in Alexandria on the night of 26 July 1956.

Nutting had experienced a kind of tantrum-dry-run for Suez in the Spring of 1956 when, Eden believed, Nasser was behind King Hussein's removal of General Glubb from command of the Arab Legion in Jordan.<sup>41</sup> Thirty years later Sir Anthony Nutting recalled for me the rage of Eden that night of 1 March 1956 as if it were yesterday:

The telephone rang and a voice down the other end said: 'It's me.' I didn't quite realise who 'me' was for a moment. However, he gave the show away very quickly by starting to scream at me. 'What is all this poppycock you've sent me about isolating Nasser and neutralizing Nasser? Why can't you get it into your head I want the man destroyed?' I said, 'Ok. You get rid of Nasser, what are you going to put in his place?' 'I don't want anybody,' he said. I said, 'Well, there'll be anarchy and chaos in Egypt.' 'I don't care if there's anarchy and chaos in Egypt. Let there be anarchy and chaos in Egypt. I just want to get rid of Nasser.'<sup>42</sup>

Not the frame of mind one would expect in the most polished political diplomat of his generation whose expertise on the Middle East especially, had waxed mightily since he took his First in Persian at Oxford in 1921.<sup>43</sup>

This is not the place to reprise the lengthy and tangled genesis and course of the Suez imbroglio of 1956. For the purpose of this lecture I want to examine it through the prism of the fabled, perpetual prime ministerial versus Cabinet government debate and in the context of how – or how not to – create and use a 'War Cabinet' for a so-called limited war. But, in essence, Eden and several of his colleagues felt once the canal company was nationalised, this was where the British Government would have to take its stand or, in Home's words to Eden, 'I am convinced that we are finished if the Middle East goes and Russia and India and China rule from Africa to the Pacific'<sup>44</sup> [Alan Lennox-Boyd put it even more graphically when he told his PM that if 'Nasser wins or even appears to win we might as well as a

government (and indeed as a country) go out of business'<sup>45]</sup> Eden needed little prompting here and added a fierce personal animosity towards Nasser whom he felt had personally betrayed him after his (Eden's) efforts as Foreign Secretary to negotiate Britain's withdrawal from the Base in the Canal Zone in the teeth of Churchill's initial doubts.<sup>46</sup>

Eden's object was to retake the canal, to 'topple' Nasser in the process and, with both French and American assistance, construct a new régime for the Middle East in defence, oil and international relations terms. He was, in today's argot, going to draw a line in the sand that would end Britain's slow retreat as a great power. In just over three months he had succeeded in alienating not just the Arab world, but the US President, Eisenhower, the bulk of the Commonwealth, most of the big players at the United Nations. He had also succeeded in splitting his country, dividing this Cabinet and Party severely worrying his Sovereign and causing the near collapse of the pound while leaving Nasser untoppled, his prestige in the Arab world almost off the Richter scale and his own health and career broken.

Eden has also been treated by history as playing fast and loose with the British constitution, not only by lying in the House of Commons on 20 December 1956 when he denied there had been any 'fore knowledge' of the Israeli attack on Egypt of 29 October,<sup>47</sup> but by practicing a malign and self-defeating version of prime ministerial government to the detriment of the collective pattern of decision-taking which is supposed to lie at the heart of the British system.

The case for the prosecution here was put at its most eloquent in the years to come by 'Rab' Butler, Lord Privy Seal and constant Suez doubter and, even later, by his (Butler's) Civil Service Private Secretary at the time, Ian Bancroft. For Lord Butler the Suez affair saw Eden acting as a 'one-man band' and moving 'much nearer to being a dictator than Churchill at the height of the war.'<sup>48</sup> For Lord Bancroft the state was turned into a travesty of proper government:

There was a little committee [the Egypt Committee to which I shall return in a moment]...everything seemed to be conducted in a hurried, reactive almost furtive way...it seemed to me to typify the dangers of trying to run something as if it were a private laundry and not, as we then were, a major country on the world stage engaged in a singularly difficult adventure.'<sup>49</sup>

The Civil and Diplomatic services were deeply scarred by Suez – they were kept in the dark to a very high degree about the secret, collusive diplomacy in mid to late October between France, Israel and the UK and their advice was spurned, especially that furnished by Sir Gerald Fitzmaurice, the Foreign Office's top international lawyer, that there was no legal case for armed intervention to reverse an act of company nationalisation.<sup>50</sup>

The opening of the archives has softened the view that Eden virtually hijacked proper Cabinet government for the duration. At a full Cabinet meeting the day after Nasser's initial move, the 'fundamental question' before ministers, as the minutes put it, 'was whether they were prepared in the last resort to pursue their objective



by the threat or even the use of force, and whether they were ready, in default of assistance from the United States and France to take military action alone.' The Cabinet in the first flush of outrage against Nasser agreed 'that our essential interest in the area must, if necessary, be safeguarded by military action and that the necessary preparations to this end must be made.'<sup>51</sup>

The Egypt Committee was set up to run both the military preparations and the diplomatic efforts to tackle the crisis.<sup>52</sup> As time passed those whom Eden called the 'weaker sisters' in the Cabinet expressed growing doubts and reservations. Some to this day (Ted Heath, the Chief Whip, for example) maintain that the full Cabinet did not know of the secret arrangements, made with the Israelis and the French (Israel would invade Egypt; France and Britain would then go in as peacemakers and protectors of the Canal). This was the plan with which the French tempted Eden at a secret meeting at Chequers on 14 October with Lloyd, many believe, within touching distance of negotiating a settlement at the United Nations in New York.<sup>53</sup>

The Cabinet minutes tell, I think, a different story from the all too convenient 'not me, guv' line that some ministers took subsequently. On 23 October the full Cabinet was told that 'from secret conversations which had been held in Paris with representatives of the Israeli Government, it now appeared that the Israelis would not alone launch a full-scale attack against Egypt.'<sup>54</sup> (I shall never forget the moment at the Public Record Office when my BBC producer, Mark Laity, found those words in an about to be released Confidential Annex to the sanitised Cabinet

conclusions. It struck us both as a 'smoking minute'<sup>55</sup>) At full Cabinet on 25 October, ministers were informed that the Israelis were 'after all, advancing their military preparations with a view to making an attack on Egypt.' Eden went on to tell them that, if British forces went in, 'We must face the risk that we should be accused of collusion with Israel.'<sup>56</sup> He himself was the first to use the 'C' word that dogged him until his last breath.

Some scholars, including David Dutton and Iain Macleod's biographer, Rob Shepherd, reckon there is (in Dutton's words) still uncertainty about what ministers outside the most inner circle understood (the unwieldy Egypt Committee ceased to meet from mid-October until two days before Macmillan, fearful of American-engineered oil sanctions and the collapse of sterling, led the retreat from invasion in the teeth of Eden's wishes<sup>57</sup>). For Rob Shepherd, Eden at the Cabinet meetings on 23, 24 and 25 October 'sought to mislead the Cabinet. He kept the Sèvres Protocol secret [that's the secret, collusive agreement signed in Paris] and spoke as though the scheme that had in fact been agreed with the French and the Israelis was merely a contingency plan.'<sup>58</sup>

My own view is that this, rather than 6 November, (a week after the RAF had started bombing Egyptian airfields when the Cabinet finally reined the PM in) was the moment for proper Cabinet government to come off ice. Ministers should have subjected those reports and hypothetical speculations of Eden's to the heat of questioning and, ultimately, to decision by the whole collectivity. They did not need a background at GCHQ to decode the import of those messages given in the

Cabinet Room. If ministers remained deceived it involved a high degree of self-deception.

Let me round off by returning to where I began – on Suez as an object lesson in how not to run a war. Earlier this year, drawing on Lord Hankey's 1928 briefing for Baldwin on Cabinet control of limited wars<sup>59</sup> and from the literature on such conflicts since 1945, I drew up six criteria against which they could be tested:

1. The 'War Cabinet' should have as close and constant a relationship with the full Cabinet as possible.
2. The 'War Cabinet' should consist of no more than six constant ministerial attenders. For the efficient conduct of affairs, diplomatic or military, it needs to meet regularly. The 'War Cabinet' requires adequate military, Civil Service and Diplomatic Service back-up, an efficient advice system and a constant flow of high quality intelligence from the Joint Intelligence Committee.
3. The 'War Cabinet' should take pains to avoid 'tunnel vision' and the technical 'overload' than can afflict small groups directed towards a single overriding purpose under conditions of great stress.
4. There needs to be constant awareness of the needs, priorities and attitudes of allies (or potential allies) and the politics of those international organisations in which, to whatever extent, the conflict is either being

monitored or played out.

5. As full, accurate and timely as possible disclosure on matters affecting conflict or near-conflict should be made to Parliament, the media and the public.

6. Ministers in the 'War Cabinet' should remember at all times that, as a very thoughtful airman put it nearly twenty years ago, the essential nature of armed conflict is 'to destroy things and kill people', and that the highest duty on politicians in authority is, therefore, to ensure that all steps which can be taken to avoid war – whether through early preventive action, quality diplomacy or high class intelligence – are taken.<sup>60</sup>

On my reckoning, Eden bust all six criteria during the Suez crisis though it is difficult still to reach a judgement on the intelligence angle on Suez.

We know from the briefings the Queen received, which were, to my amazement, declassified in 1994, that British intelligence was seriously worried that the Soviet Air Force might move in the direction of the Middle East.<sup>61</sup> I suspect we shall never know the identity or the reliability of the source condemned 'Lucky Break' which the Secret Intelligence Service was thought to have very close to Nasser who convinced Eden that the Soviets were using him as a pawn in their drive intended across the Middle East and into Africa.<sup>62</sup> M16 is not required by the public records legislation to release its key 'CX' material – its raw intelligence

reports – without which anything approaching a full reconstruction of the secret intelligence feed is impossible (though Scott Lucas in his Divided We Stand has worked wonders with what is available at the Public Record Office). What is known is that Nasser's own secret service rounded up a sizeable M16 network in Egypt, consisting of 30 plus people, in the period between the nationalisation and the invasion.<sup>63</sup>

The Egypt Committee was the worst run 'War Cabinet' of all the postwar variations whose papers have reached the public domain. My student, Mark Brown, discovered far more ministers than we thought – 22 in all – attended it at various times<sup>64</sup> despite Eden's intention of restricting its deliberations to 'the narrowest possible circle.'<sup>65</sup> Dr Chris Brady has calculated that one has to add to this tally eight military figures, ten civil servants and eight secretaries.

In addition to the full Cabinet, Dr Brady's research which, co-authored by Dr Peter Catterall, will be published next year under the title, Assessing Cabinet Committees, 1945-66<sup>66</sup>, discovered that no fewer than 11 Cabinet committees were charged specifically with handling one or other aspect of dealing the crisis and its aftermath, and that does not include the Chiefs of Staff Committee and its outriders, the Joint Intelligence Committee and the Joint Planning Staff.<sup>67</sup> This tally also excludes the informal and largely unrecorded (in terms of minutes) ministerial groups which made so much of the running in the last days of October

1956. And, once the invasion was halted, the issue also preoccupied at least two or three of the Cabinet's economic committees as the Government struggled with the consequences of America's use of the money weapon to prise the last British troops off the canal bank.

Finally, however, Cabinet government reasserted itself. On 6 November, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Harold Macmillan, led the about turn<sup>68</sup> with the US Sixth Fleet having harrassed the Anglo-French Task Force as it approached Port Said, the authorities in Washington blocking British access to its IMF standby and the United Nations, with American encouragement, threatening oil sanctions.<sup>69</sup> Eden's authority was gone. Broken, he repaired to 'Goldeneye', Ian Fleming's remote house in Jamaica, to recover. The Cabinet even insisted on doctoring the statement he proposed to make on his return to Heathrow removing its defiantly bellicose and anti-American passages.<sup>70</sup> Cabinet government has a habit of reasserting itself eventually when usurped to any serious degree by a prime ministerial variant.

Less than two weeks before stepping down, Eden penned a kind of political last-will-and-testament shown only to Lloyd, the Defence Minister, Antony Head, and his old friend, Lord Salisbury, which was declassified several years after the core archive was opened. Reality of a kind had broken through; so much so that Eden questioned the value of British bases in Tripoli and Libya (which had been unusable during the Suez Crisis for fear of inflaming Arab opinion still further) the sustainability of the British Army of the Rhine at its current level, the cost of the

welfare state and, extraordinarily for the man who disdained the notion of a Common Market and virtually ignored the post-Messina talks which led to its formation so distracted was he by Suez, he even wondered if Britain's future might not lie in working 'more closely with Europe.'<sup>71</sup>

From 'running in blinkers', to use the phrase of Lord Sherfield (who returned from the Washington Embassy to head the Treasury in October 1956 and found all his unequivocal warnings that Eisenhower would not condone the use of force by Britain and France had been ignored), Eden now regained a degree of perspective. And an Eden Cabinet, which itself had been so preoccupied by Suez that it did not once discuss the unfolding tragedy of the Hungarian Uprising in that fraught autumn of 1956, regained its composure too but only once the outwardly calm Macmillan had seen off Butler and secured the Queen's commission to form a government. As Churchill had feared, Eden couldn't do it. His friend Noel Coward summed it up to sympathetic perfection. 'Poor Anthony has resigned', he wrote in his diary, 'given up, and is on his way to New Zealand, a tragic figure who had been cast in a star part well above his capabilities.'<sup>72</sup>

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**'THE COLONEL AND THE DRAWING ROOM':  
ANTHONY EDEN, 1955-57.  
ENDNOTES**

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4. *Ibid*,
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18. Ramsden, The Age of Churchill and Eden, pp.278-9.
19. Peter Hennessy, Cabinet, (Blackwell, 1986), p.53.
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21. I am grateful to Dr Chris Brady for alerting me to the discussions in the Middle East (Official) Committee in the Spring of 1956. Public Record Office, CAB 134/1297. See its meeting of 25 May 1956.
22. Graham Payn and Sheridan Morley (eds), The Noel Coward Diaries, (Macmillan, 1982), p.308.
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