

Pearson's legacy worth remembering, author says



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Lester B. Pearson's genius was at work during the Suez Crisis. *UPI*

With a new Liberal government about to take

office, a book on Lester Pearson, peacekeeping and Canadian diplomacy makes for a timely conversation. Peter Robb talks to Antony Anderson, author of *The Diplomat: Lester Pearson and the Suez Crisis* in advance of his appearance at Spur Ottawa on Nov. 6.

Q. Can you remind readers about the significance of Pearson's role in Suez?

A, Suez was an incredible conspiracy. London and Paris had encouraged Israel to attack Egypt ... and retake the Suez Canal which had been nationalised by Cairo.

Pearson was instrumental in pointing a way out. He couldn't impose the peace or force any power to back down but once everyone came to their senses, or realized they had no other option, he was there with the lifeline.

When Pearson flew to the UN on Nov. 1, 1956, with his deceptively simple idea to send a UN police force to Egypt, he had no idea if he would even introduce it. Within 72 hours he managed to persuade the General Assembly to establish the UN's first peacekeeping force. It reached Egypt an astonishing three weeks later.

I doubt any other diplomat who could have pulled this off. He was respected, experienced, and supremely connected. And so critical, Canada had no military, political, or economic interests in the Middle East. He was the right person at the right time. Of course, it's very difficult to duplicate that moment and we've been pining ever since.

Q. What sort of person was Pearson as Foreign Minister?

Wise, pragmatic, and, as a working diplomat, unrivaled in his experience. Unlike Stephen Harper's all too estimable run of *six* foreign ministers, Pearson had toiled in the Department of External Affairs for almost 30 years, shaping policy, drafting memos and speeches, attending international conferences, building contacts and networks, chairing key UN committees, and serving as the President

of the General Assembly. He was twice nominated for the position of Secretary General. I highly doubt we will ever again see someone that experienced hold the portfolio – though ministers like Mitchell Sharp, Joe Clark, Lloyd Axworthy and Bill Graham kept the flame alive.

Q. Did Pearson deserve the Nobel for his plan?

A. Very much. He was so far ahead of the curve during the crisis. The Americans came to the emergency session simply calling for a straightforward ceasefire. Quite understandably, the African, Asian and Arab delegations wanted to put Britain, France and Israel on trial. Pearson stood up in the frenzy and proposed what he called a UN police and peace force. He went further and advocated a peace settlement for the Middle East. This was very characteristic of him. He tended to look beyond the immediate panic to the bigger picture.

Q. Did he work alone?

A. Of course not. Even the idea, as he stated in Parliament and wrote in his memoirs, was not original. It was his tactical skill, his diplomacy that proved so memorable. He fielded a superb team of colleagues who worked every connection they had in Washington, London, Paris, Cairo, New Delhi, and beyond. Pearson didn't believe in making proposals that wouldn't go anywhere. And he worked behind the scenes to enlist superpower support.

Q. Is peacekeeping a cop-out for governments?

A. Peacekeeping is simply a tool, one of many in the foreign policy arsenal. There's that old line about a foolish craftsman blaming his tools for shoddy work. That applies to diplomats as well.

Q. What sort of Canadian diplomacy does he represent?

A. Lester Pearson exists in the eye of the beholder. He was an idealist and a pragmatist but I suspect most Canadians only see the idealistic side and think of him as a kind of neutral boy scout going around the world calling for peace. They forget he had signed up to serve in the Great War. They forget he supported dropping the atomic bomb on Japan to end the Second World War. He properly saw the Soviet Union

as an evil empire and believed in serious defence spending. He supported the large scale UN force to push back the North Korean invasion of South Korea. He believed in both hard power and soft power, in the sword and the ploughshare.

Q. Many critics and commentators have suggested that Canada under former prime minister Stephen Harper has strayed from Pearsonian diplomatic tradition?

Canada's role and image in the world has survived a great deal of damage over the years – though of course, everyone has their own definition of damage and repair. I see Harper's time on the world stage marked largely by ineffectual posturing. His obsession with pipelines, his amateur and public irritation with American hesitation and delays needlessly soured the vast and essential relationship with the U.S.

However, I think he was right in supporting the bombing missions in Libya and Syria and arguably Pearson would have supported those missions as well, even without UN sanction. At the same time, Harper allowed spending on defence, development and diplomacy to plummet to levels not seen since the 1930s. The Canadian International Council has produced a damning report that argues, persuasively, that we have become international poseurs catching free rides whenever we can. Hopefully Trudeau will help to make us credible again. I'm not sure, however, Canadians want the federal government to spend significantly more on these areas.

Q. What message does Pearson's legacy offer the new government?

A. Hopefully they will see that Pearson did not envision peacekeeping as an end in itself but as a short term military mechanism to buy time for the much harder work of long term political solutions. It is vital to understand that Pearson did not make the actual peace at Suez. Washington did that when it threatened Britain with economic blackmail. Only then did the British government cease fire.

Hopefully the Trudeau government will realize that Pearson ensured we were ready, willing and able to get involved with the heavy lifting and dirty work. If we decide to keep Canada on the sidelines, no one

will take us seriously. And we will never fulfill our potential.

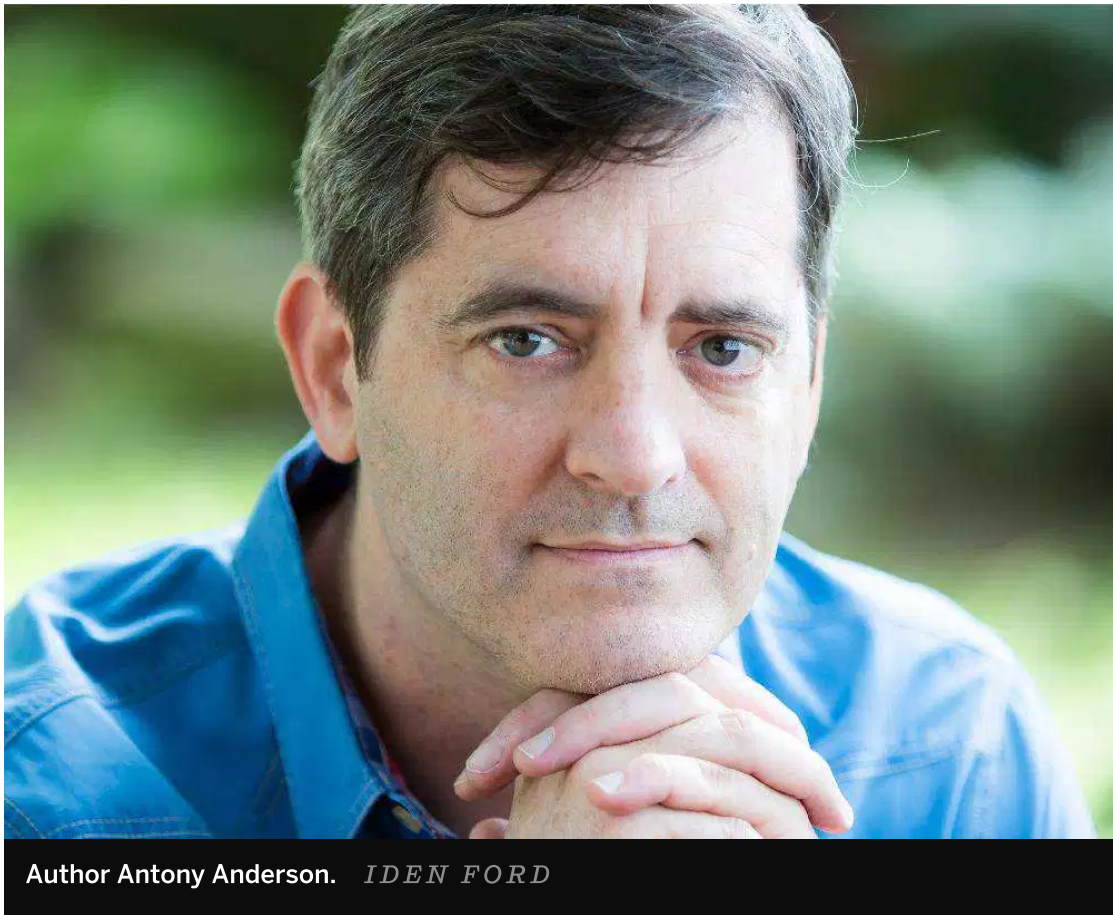
Q. What does his legacy offer an increasingly dangerous and unstable world?

A. Pearson saw the world as inescapably interdependent. A fixation on sovereignty and nationalism would more often than not lead to violence. In his view, there were no end points in diplomacy, only on-going accommodations. And sometimes merely keeping a bitter dialogue going was enough to be thankful for.

9. Tell me a bit about yourself and why you chose to write this book?

I grew up around the world and didn't move to Canada until I came for university. It was impossible to understand our story, who we are, what we had achieved without, again and again, encountering Pearson's legacy. From the flag to laying the foundations for official bilingualism and national medicare to his diplomacy, he embodies the best of who we are and can aspire to be. Here was a leader who was generous, creative and inclusive, a public servant for all – something we haven't seen in a very long time.

The Diplomat: Lester Pearson and the Suez Crisis



Author Antony Anderson. *IDEN FORD*

Antony Anderson (Goose Lane)

In town: The author will be at Saint Brigid's Centre for the Arts (<http://spurfestival.ca/ottawa/places/saint-brigids-centre-for-the-arts/>), 310 St Patrick St. on Friday Nov. 6 at noon as part of Spur Ottawa. Spur Ottawa is a festival of ideas. This year's event runs from Nov. 5 to 8 at various locations in the city. For more information spurfestival.ca (<http://spurfestival.ca/ottawa/events/>).

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