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## Cabinet Government and the 1956 Suez Crisis

Paul Duckenfield

*College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences*

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# CABINET GOVERNMENT AND THE 1956 SUEZ CRISIS

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Government  
The College of William & Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

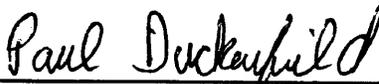
Paul Duckenfield

1995

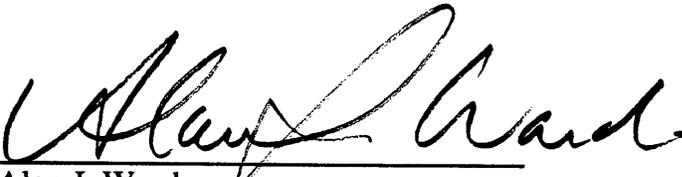
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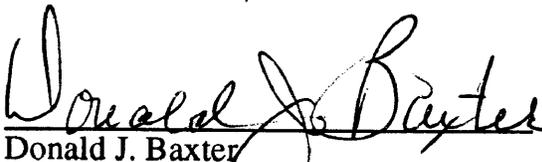
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the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts**

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Paul Duckenfield

Approved, December 1995

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Alan J. Ward

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Donald J. Baxter

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Clayton M. Clemens

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to determine whether the model of Cabinet Government functioned within the accepted parameters of the British Constitution during the 1956 Suez Crisis.

A review of traditional views of the British Constitution revealed that the Prime Minister, as leader of the Government, holds great power and, with the support of a tightly disciplined party in Parliament, is relatively secure in power.

Examining the Suez Crisis in 1956, it is revealed that the Prime Minister and many of his senior colleagues in the Cabinet engaged in a collusive agreement with France and Israel to attack Egypt and bring the Suez Canal under western control. Having contrived a *casus belli*, they proceeded to mislead Parliament and the public as to their true motives and actions.

Although the secret dealings with France and Israel are troubling, an analysis of these events leads to the conclusion that Cabinet Government functioned within the constraints of the model during the Suez Crisis. The parliamentary party would have supported the Government in its policy decision, regardless of how that decision was reached.

# **CABINET GOVERNMENT AND THE 1956 SUEZ CRISIS**

## INTRODUCTION

The Suez Crisis of 1956 makes an interesting case study of British Cabinet Government for a variety of reasons. First, when the Government embarked upon its policy in July, 1956, it had the strong backing of the nation, the united support of all parties in the House of Commons, and the unanimous support of the Western Alliance. Within three months, that unity had been shattered. British forces were committed to action under false pretenses and Britain faced almost universal condemnation throughout the international community. From such a positive start, how could a Government headed by a renowned foreign policy expert have chosen a policy doomed to failure? The failure of the Eden Government, backed by highly competent civil servants within a system of government that prides itself at wide-ranging consultation in order to promote consensus, clearly demonstrates that Cabinet Government cannot guarantee that it will avoid significant policy failures. While the Suez Crisis is unique in many regards, the role played by the various groups involved—the Cabinet, Parliament, the Opposition, the Civil Service and the Press—was entirely consistent with their perceived constitutional role. One cannot, therefore, interpret the Suez policy as a failure of process. Rather, it was a failure of judgment.

## CABINET GOVERNMENT

There is no “constitution” *per se* in Great Britain, rather governments are formed, operate, and are removed according to customs, known as conventions, which regulate the exercise of the royal prerogative. Though voluntary, the binding nature of these conventions is respected—most political actors realize that the flexibility of action provided by constitutional conventions is more to their benefit than the rigidity of constitutional laws. Over the life of the British state, the so-called constitution has been quite malleable, capable of adapting to changing times and a changing world without having to rely on the lengthy

court battles or constitutional fights over amendments characteristic of countries with formal constitutions, such as the United States and Australia.

Prior to the first Reform Act in 1832, the British monarch had significant control over not only the Government, but Parliament as well. By virtue of “rotten,” or “pocket,” boroughs that were controlled by a few men loyal to the crown, a king could always rely on significant support for ministers of his choosing. The Reform Act changed all that. The number of boroughs controlled by royal supporters declined dramatically, and appeals for votes had to be made to the general electorate. Membership in the House of Commons could no longer be based on family or business influence, or the wishes of the monarch. By 1841, it became apparent that the crown was compelled to choose a Prime Minister who had the support and confidence of the majority in the House of Commons, even if such a man were unpalatable to the monarch.

By the mid 19th Century, a general practice for appointing a Prime Minister had emerged. Following a general election, the leader of the party or coalition which had accumulated a majority of the members of Parliament was summoned by the crown and invited to form a government. While it took several decades for political parties to develop and establish tight party discipline within Parliament, future Prime Ministers always had a core following in Parliament that could generally be considered a “party”. Upon acceptance, which was signified by kissing the Queen’s hand, the party leader became the Prime Minister and he (and later she) then nominated a cabinet of senior ministers to lead the major departments of government. The monarch had to appoint the Prime Minister’s list of cabinet nominees, despite some nostalgic attempts by Queen Victoria to manipulate government formation. In modern times this approval has been purely *pro forma*.<sup>1</sup> The Prime Minister’s choice of colleagues is his or hers alone and the ministers serve at the pleasure of the Prime Minister through his or her advice to the Crown.

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<sup>1</sup>Ivor Jennings, Cabinet Government, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), p. 54.

In the 17th Century, the term “cabinet” referred to all the individuals who advised the Crown as members of the Privy Council. Over time, the number of Privy Councilors increased dramatically and many of them (appointed by Parliament) did not enjoy the full confidence of the king. Following the Civil War, it became readily apparent that the size and diverse political persuasions of the Privy Councilors resulted in an inefficient mechanism for governmental control. According to Charles II, “The great Number of this Councill ... made it unfit for the secrecy & dispatch that are necessary in many great Affaires.”<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, Charles came to rely on a small, secret committee known as the Foreign Committee for advice. Under the auspices of foreign affairs, they advised him on a wide range of issues and together they ran the country on a day-to-day basis.

While the Privy Council still met, though on an increasingly infrequent basis, the real power and authority of the government gravitated to the smaller body that became known simply as “the Cabinet.” Cabinet meetings were chaired by the King and were attended by a small number of his ministers. While he initially attended Cabinet meetings regularly, by 1717, George I’s attendance had become less frequent. While it has been suggested that this was due to his inability to speak English, MacKintosh believes that George appears to have preferred meeting with ministers individually instead of in groups since they were easier to control that way.<sup>3</sup> Over the next sixty years, the various monarchs appear to have attended fewer than a dozen Cabinet meetings.

By the 19th Century, the Privy Council had become a historical relic while the Ministers of State, meeting in the Cabinet and advising the crown, were the true center of power in Britain. The Ministry still worked in close concert with the monarch but the Reform Bill of 1832 fundamentally changed this relationship. With the abolition of rotten boroughs, a significant number of Members of Parliament were no longer reliant on royal

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<sup>2</sup>Charles quoted in John P. MacKintosh, The British Cabinet, (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 34.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.48.

preference for their positions, and had to appeal to broader electorate and the Sovereigns' influence in Parliament dramatically declined. It soon became apparent that a ministry without the support of an independent Parliament could not function and the monarch was compelled to summon as Prime Minister an individual who had a strong following in the Commons, whether or not that person was popular with the monarch. Following the 1832 Reform Act, royal acceptance of a Prime Minister's selection of colleagues also became purely formal. By the 1840's, the monarch had ceased to be part of the working executive and the Cabinet was wholly responsible to Parliament. In future, the monarch's role would be to simply "advise and to warn" about the appointment of ministers and other matters. She would have no choice but to accept the advice of the Prime Minister.

The Cabinet developed out of the need to strike a balance between the Sovereign's power and that of Parliament. The King and his ministers governed, but those ministers had to have the support of Parliament. The Cabinet therefore evolved as a link between King and Parliament, but it depends upon the support of Parliament. As Bagehot put it, the Cabinet is the "buckle" which fastens the executive to the legislature.<sup>4</sup> Since the 1840s, it has governed in the name of the Sovereign, but has received its authority from, and has been answerable to, Parliament. According to Patrick Gordon Walker, "In the Cabinet and the Cabinet alone could decisions of government be made and registered that were accepted and executed by all the servants of the State."<sup>5</sup>

The actual composition of the Cabinet is nowhere specified by statute. According to Ivor Jennings, "a minister is made a member of the Cabinet by a note from the Prime Minister requesting him to attend."<sup>6</sup> Charles II governed in close association with five or six ministers, primarily from the Treasury and the Admiralty, while his Privy Councilors numbered more than thirty. By the 19th Century, Cabinets were about twice the size of

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<sup>4</sup>Walter Bagehot, The English Constitution, (Government 410 Coursepack, 1867), p. 212.

<sup>5</sup>Patrick Gordon Walker, The Cabinet, (London: Jonathon Cape, 1972), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup>Jennings, p. 71.

Charles' and included all of the major ministry leaders. Cabinet Ministers now usually include the heads of all the major ministries, leaders in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and other party leaders who may serve as "ministers without portfolio." The number now is customarily between twenty and twenty-five.

The term "government" is much broader than the term "Cabinet." A government will include those holding major office who are members of the Cabinet, but will also include other members of the majority party who hold positions within the government. Some are ministers who head lesser departments, and others are known as junior ministers. Originally created to serve as assistants to departmental ministers, the responsibilities of junior ministers have evolved into shepherding a department's work and programs through Parliament. They have been able to lighten the burdens on their ministers by answering questions in Parliament, keeping party members advised of the department's program, and carrying on minor tasks which would tend to clutter the minister's schedule. While most junior ministers never rise above that office, it is considered a stepping stone to more important offices within the government.<sup>7</sup> In addition to junior ministers, the government will include a number of whips whose responsibility it is to keep the backbenchers in Parliament advised of government policies and help deliver winning majorities on all votes before the House of Commons. Governments typically have about a hundred members.

Members of the government are expected to adhere to the doctrine of Collective Responsibility, which is composed of three general principles<sup>8</sup>:

1. The Confidence Principle: In order for a Government to retain power, it must maintain the confidence of Parliament on votes of Supply and major votes on Government policy.
2. The Unanimity Principle: With very few exceptions, all members of the Government, from full Cabinet Ministers down through the junior

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<sup>7</sup>Kevin Theakston, Junior Ministers, (Padstow: T.J. Press Limited, 1987), pp. 9 - 10.

<sup>8</sup>Geoffrey Marshall, ed., Ministerial Responsibility, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp 3 - 4.

ministers, must speak in favor of, and support, the Government in the House of Commons.<sup>9</sup>

3. The Confidentiality Principle: The methods and discussions by which decisions are reached in Cabinet are strictly confidential and not to be revealed by any member of the Cabinet. The general premise derives from the Unanimity Principle which dictates that all decisions of the Cabinet are unanimous. To reveal divisions within the Cabinet over particular points of policy infringes upon that principle.

In addition to the doctrine of Collective Responsibility, individual ministers (be they in the Cabinet or not) are expected to maintain the confidence of Parliament. Any minister who fails to maintain Parliament's confidence must resign. Interestingly, few ministers have been dismissed in such a manner by Parliament.<sup>10</sup> Those who would be appear to be in danger see (or are advised of) the "writing on the wall" and resign before receiving the humiliation of a rejection by their peers.

Since the late 19th Century, the Cabinet has been the primary governmental authority in Britain. With a Parliamentary majority based on strong party discipline, the Cabinet can rest assured that its decisions will receive the necessary endorsements from the House of Commons. The Cabinet is responsible for setting the parliamentary agenda, introducing most legislation, and all financial legislation. Decisions and priorities are set by the Cabinet on all issues that are part of the government's agenda. Once decisions have been reached, the Cabinet presents its program to Parliament as a united front. In order to avoid unpleasant party splits that could destroy the effectiveness of the government, Cabinet ministers and other members of the government abide by Collective Responsibility. The doctrine stifles party dissent by placing all party leaders on one side of an issue, and it provides large numbers of votes from the junior ministers and whips. Nearly one-third of a majority in the House of Commons are members of the government.

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<sup>9</sup> This principle has occasionally been suspended by coalition governments or due to a divisive fracture over a particular issue within a party.

<sup>10</sup> Marshall, p. 5.

In modern Britain, Parliamentary approval of the Cabinet's program is almost automatic, given the rigid party discipline necessary to maintain a Parliamentary majority. While Members of Parliament will almost invariably back their party's leaders, Parliament still plays an important role in governance. It serves as the forum in which the Government must present its proposals and have them subjected to public criticism. In such circumstances, the Government must defend its policies and ensure that they stand up to public scrutiny. This process serves to keep the public informed of the Government's actions so that they will cast informed votes in subsequent Parliamentary elections. After receiving Parliamentary approval, the Cabinet is able to implement its decisions because Ministers have direct control over departments and the civil service.

This concentration of power has led to the widespread assertion that Britain does not really have Parliamentary government. Rather it has Cabinet Government. There are others who maintain that even this is not true, that Britain really has a Prime Ministerial government because of the Prime Minister's dominance in the Cabinet. Regardless of whether the model is best described as Cabinet Government or Prime Ministerial Government, the Cabinet plays a very important role in terms of policy coordination across departments and as the forum where the most important issues facing the government of the day are discussed and policy proscriptions adopted, and the Prime Minister plays a very important role within the Cabinet.

The Cabinet functions much as a corporate board of directors does in the corporate world. The Prime Minister, as chairman of the Cabinet, sets the Cabinet's agenda, determines what the feeling of the Cabinet is, and charts the Government's course from there. Seldom is a formal vote taken. As can be imagined, this system leaves the Prime Minister with the power to determine what the consensus of his Cabinet is. Although it would be an unwise Prime Minister who never heeded the advice of his Cabinet, the ability to act decisively and independently is there. In describing one of Herbert Asquith's

Cabinet meetings, David Lloyd George once said, “They were all against it and said so; and then Asquith rubbed his chin and said: ‘I think the balance of the argument is in favour’ and put it through. He did that lots of times.”<sup>11</sup>

Anecdotes such as this one have led many to believe that the Prime Minister is more than just *primus inter pares*— first among equals— in the Cabinet.<sup>12</sup> The Prime Minister has the power to appoint all the members of the Cabinet and the Government, he can remove them at will, and he can dissolve the Government of his own volition.<sup>13</sup> There is little check on his authority since he is not only leader of Government, but also of the majority political party in the House of Commons and a mass, political party in the country. As long as he can maintain the loyalty of his party, his hold on power is secure. Since the Cabinet generally includes most the leading figures in the party’s parliamentary delegation, the necessity of maintaining the Cabinet’s support serves as an important safeguard against arbitrary Prime Ministerial rule.<sup>14</sup>

In day-to-day operations of the government, Cabinet ministers are responsible for the efficient running of their departments and make sure that the government’s programs are implemented by the department. Since ministers can only rely on a couple of political appointees in the persons of junior ministers to assist them within the department, they are compelled to forge strong working relationships with the permanent civil servants who actually run the department. In exchange for their loyalty, the civil servants in each department expect their Cabinet ministers to defend the department in the Cabinet and Parliament, and, most importantly, to defend their budgets each year. Civil servants also advise ministers on the merits of various policy proposals. In this capacity, they serve as another safeguard against misguided or hastily developed Government policies. Since

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<sup>11</sup>Walker, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup>Karl Loewenstein, *British Cabinet Government*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 159.

<sup>13</sup>Alan Ward, *Responsible Government*, (Government 410 Coursepack, 1991), p. 6.

<sup>14</sup>Margaret Thatcher’s removal from power in 1991 by the Conservative Party Convention is a case in point. By alienating many leading members of her Cabinet and the majority of her Party’s Members of Parliament, she failed to win what should have been simply a pro-forma re-election.

ministers are usually generalists, not experts, it is a foolish minister indeed who does not seek the advice of his senior civil servants.

While many ministers function almost exclusively within their large departments (for example, the Department of Education), several have responsibilities that require a special relationship with the Prime Minister and the rest of the Cabinet. The first among these is the Foreign Secretary, who is responsible for managing relations with foreign countries. Generally, the Foreign Secretary is given a place on each Cabinet meeting's agenda so that he can brief the Cabinet on diplomatic and international events. In modern times, the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister have worked very closely on a daily basis coordinating the intricacies of foreign policy management. There are many theories as to what sort of relationship they should have, but generally speaking, the Foreign Secretary must either be a loyal lieutenant to the Prime Minister who sets major policy, or be trusted by the Prime Minister to carry on his job independently. Conflict between the two will lead, eventually, to embarrassing tension, lack of policy coordination, and the ultimate departure of the Foreign Secretary.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer also holds a unique position within the Government. As the individual in charge of setting the national budget each year, he is often considered to be the second most powerful member of the government, next to the Prime Minister. His official residence at 11 Downing Street does nothing to dispel this impression. In close consultation with the Prime Minister, the Chancellor helps determine fiscal and monetary policy for the nation. In his role supervising the national budget, he has close contacts with all other departments of government, ascertaining their needs and requirements for the coming year.

The modern Cabinet meets for only two to three hours a week and usually has a full agenda discussing items of foreign policy, determining party strategy, the parliamentary agenda, and coordinating the many offices of government. As a result, the full body

cannot devote lengthy periods of time to discussing particular issues. In order to distribute the burden of many on-going questions such as defense, economic policy and parliamentary agendas, Cabinet committees are formed of principal ministers. Attendance at Cabinet committees is not limited to members of the committee, and often other ministers, junior ministers, military chiefs of staff, and civil servants are asked to attend. Cabinet Committees are often responsible for drafting legislation that is too complicated for a single minister to draft or inappropriate to turn over completely to civil servants.<sup>15</sup> While the Cabinet maintains hierarchical authority over a Cabinet Committee, the Committees exercise a great deal of power because of the responsibilities that have been delegated to them. Once the general principles of a particular issue have been set by the Cabinet, the issue is generally directed to a committee to set the details and report back to the Cabinet when it has completed its task. Often, reporting is very nominal. In fact, the Cabinet Committee makes the decision, but the whole government is bound to it by Collective Responsibility.

If a particularly complicated or fast-developing issue arises, the Cabinet often creates an *ad hoc* Cabinet Committee to address the issue. This committee will work out the major issues and disputes and present a course of action to the Cabinet for approval, or it may take action in the name of the Cabinet, without consultation if it has been given that authority. Cabinet Committees have also been established to investigate scandals, misdeeds, or governmental debacles. By delegating authority in this manner, the Cabinet can maintain nominal control over decisions without spending a great deal of time discussing the specifics, which many members may not understand or care about greatly. Cabinets are wary of rejecting the recommendations of Cabinet Committees, since the premise behind the Committee is that it is acting in the stead of the whole Cabinet. Depending on the issue, Cabinet Committees can wield great power, controlling the

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<sup>15</sup>MacKintosh, p. 250.

governmental apparatus as it applies to a particular issue and actually control government policy for periods of time.<sup>16</sup>

The press in Britain is often viewed as the “fourth estate” in political life. Unelected by the broader public, it plays a major role not only in influencing public opinion, but also influencing public officials. Most newspapers in Britain tend to support one of the major political parties in their editorial endorsements. In fact, politicians often have close relationships with editors and reporters which allows them to influence the content of press coverage and, through that, public opinion. In partisan elections, favorable press coverage can significantly influence the results. Likewise, lukewarm endorsements or criticisms from the media can have a negative effect of party support at the polls and on the tone of criticism in Parliament. During times of crisis, the Government can seek to win over the press by controlling the information provided to it and publication of potentially damaging stories can be prevented under the Defence of the Realm Act by service of a “D-notice.” The service of a D-notice is obviously a serious matter and the government can suffer significant damage if their use is considered for political advantage. As a result, the use of D-notices is very infrequent. The role of the press, although very public in appearance, is often very subtle in its effect. The degree to which party leaders will modify their position on issues to curry favor with the press is difficult to pin down. Nevertheless, the role of the press in Parliamentary political life in Britain should not be underestimated.

Modern Cabinets by themselves are unable to manage all the operations of Government. As a result, they have relied on delegation of authority to Cabinet Committees or to individual Ministers, preferring to give, or approve, only broad outlines of goals, rather than specific policies. Although the Cabinet maintains overall responsibility for decisions, it is not intricately involved in the finer details. Parliament and the press are publicly involved in the criticism and defense of various Government policies

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 438.

(or lack of policies), but are usually much further removed from the details of policy creation than the Cabinet. As a result, policy development often rests in the hands of a few Ministers whose departments have responsibility for implementing the policy. This process provides no guarantee against failure.

### **THE HISTORY OF THE SUEZ CRISIS, 1956**

Anthony Eden became Prime Minister in April, 1955, the hand-picked successor of Winston Churchill. Eden had a degree from Oxford in Persian and Arabic and had, for a time, thought of entering the diplomatic service. Instead, he entered Parliament where he became, at age thirty-eight, one of the youngest Foreign Secretaries ever in 1935. Eden had participated in the Chamberlain Cabinet prior to World War Two, but resigned to protest Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. He returned as Foreign Secretary in Churchill's Cabinet during World War Two. He also served as Foreign Secretary in Churchill's Cabinet from 1952-55. In that capacity, in 1954, he negotiated the 1954 Anglo-Egyptian Agreement for withdrawal of British forces from the Suez Canal zone and gained Cabinet approval despite doubts expressed by Churchill.<sup>17</sup> The agreement implemented the phased withdrawal of British troops from Egypt that was called for in the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Agreement, "provided they were no longer needed." The new treaty allowed Britain to return to the Canal Zone if an Arab State or Turkey were attacked by a non-Middle Eastern power.<sup>18</sup> In opposition to this agreement, a group of Conservative MPs, known as "The Suez Group," was formed.

On July 19, 1956, the United States abruptly withdrew \$130 million in loan guarantees for the construction of the Aswan High Dam, Egypt's major public works program. This move was prompted by concerns about Egyptian President Gamel Nasser's close association with the Communist bloc states and his repeated attempts to play the superpowers against one another. The following day, Britain followed suit, withdrawing

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<sup>17</sup>Keith Kyle, *Suez*, (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1991), p. 50 - 54.

<sup>18</sup>David Carlton, *Britain and the Suez Crisis*, (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 12 - 13.

the \$80 million in loan guarantees. In retaliation for the American and British action, Nasser announced the nationalization of the Anglo-French Suez Canal Company on July 26. At the July 27 Cabinet meeting, the Cabinet created an *ad hoc* Cabinet Committee comprised of Eden, Lord Salisbury, Harold Macmillan, Selwyn Lloyd, Lord Home and Walter Monckton, the Egypt Committee, to take responsibility for managing the Suez crisis.<sup>19</sup>

Eden, the Cabinet, and Parliament were all very concerned about the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company and its impact on British interests in the Middle East. Since its opening in 1869, the Canal had long been considered the vital link between Britain and its most important colony, India. Even after India had gained independence, the Canal was viewed as an important strategic asset and an important transit point between Europe and the Far East. Selwyn Lloyd notes:

In 1955, 14,666 ships had passed through it, one-third of them British, three-quarters of them belonging to NATO countries. Annually 70 million tons of oil came through it, of which 60 million tons was for Western Europe. That was two-thirds of Western Europe's total oil supplies, and to bring it round the Canal would require twice the tonnage of tankers.<sup>20</sup>

The Canal had been operated by the Universal Company of the Suez Maritime Canal under an exclusive concession that was supposed to last through 1968. The company was chartered in Egypt and publicly traded, with the British Government owning 44% of the shares and the balance being traded on the Paris stock exchange. According to Cabinet minutes, the Cabinet conceded that the nationalization of the Canal was completely legal under international law because Nasser had undertaken to compensate all the shareholders of the Company at the prevailing share price the day prior to nationalization, so no reasonable claim could be made that Nasser had acted illegally. There was no immediate military remedy available to the British because it would take many weeks to assemble the

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<sup>19</sup>Kyle, p. 139.

<sup>20</sup>Selwyn Lloyd, *Suez 1956: A Personal Account*, (London: Jonathon Cape, 1978), p. 83.

forces necessary to seize the Canal, so there was no doubt that the problem would be a drawn out one. The Cabinet decided that the Canal was not just “a piece of Egyptian property but an international asset of the highest importance [which] should be managed as an international trust.”<sup>21</sup> It almost goes without saying that they felt such an international trust would be dominated by Britain and France.

To facilitate the return of the Canal to reliable, friendly control, parallel strategies were undertaken. On the diplomatic front, Selwyn Lloyd, the Foreign Secretary, was instructed to carry out discussions with the French in order to coordinate a common response. Eden also sent a message to President Eisenhower advising him that the British were seeking a peaceful end to the crisis by putting political pressure on the Egyptians, but that military force would be used as a last resort.<sup>22</sup> On the military front, the Chiefs of Staff were asked to undertake planning for an offensive to restore the Canal Zone to British control, and many Reservists were called to action. On the domestic political front, Eden gave a speech in the House of Commons condemning the nationalization of the Canal and stating that Britain would not allow one nation to control it, and possibly exploit that control in the future. Hugh Gaitskell, the leader of the Opposition Labour Party, gave a strong speech in support of the Government’s firm stand over the nationalization. He referred to Nasser as a Hitler or a Mussolini, and was roundly cheered (instead of jeered) by the Conservative backbenchers. The British Press was equally bellicose, demanding immediate action to return the Canal to British control.<sup>23</sup>

The initial American reaction to the Anglo-French response to the nationalization of the Canal was positive. Secretary of State Dulles was adamant that some sort of international authority had to be established to run the Canal; that it could not be left to Nasser and the Egyptian Government. The Joint Chiefs of Staff perceived nationalization

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<sup>21</sup>Cabinet Minutes quoted in Carlton, Britain and the Suez Crisis, p. 133.

<sup>22</sup>Carlton, Britain and the Suez Crisis, p. 113-14.

<sup>23</sup>Richard Lamb, The Failure of the Eden Government, (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987), p. 201.

as a threat to vital American interests and developed plans to support a British-French invasion, even envisioning a possible confrontation with the Soviet Union. In their reasoning can be seen the foundations of the “domino theory” that was to become more widely known a decade later when applied to Southeast Asia. Daniel Calhoun writes:

The Joint Chiefs concurred, and then some! Nasser had to be “broken.” America and her allies had to put the Canal “under a friendly and responsible authority at the earliest practicable date.” The alternative was a triumphant Nasser dominating the Arab world “from Morocco to Iraq” and threatening U.S. interests throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Western prestige would sink so low that, ultimately, the United States would be ousted from its bases from Iceland to the Azores, from Spain to the Philippines. The Soviet Union would move in to take effective control of the entire Middle East, denying our European allies their oil supplies and effectively breaking them economically. The United States could not let all that happen.<sup>24</sup>

Unfortunately for the British and French Governments, these views did not carry the day with Eisenhower. He was advised by hawks at the Pentagon who favored a military move, but he himself favored a less military response. Despite his own long career in the military, Eisenhower was not inclined to let the military dictate American foreign policy. The experts at the State Department had concluded that the nationalization of the Suez Canal, although not in the United States’ best interests, was based on solid legal ground. With this in mind, Eisenhower wrote back to Eden urging him to avoid military force, and instead, to call a conference of maritime nations to discuss the disposition of the Canal.<sup>25</sup> This letter should have alerted Eden that Eisenhower was not inclined to support military intervention.

At the urging of American Secretary of State Dulles, the British Government called for a conference of users of the Suez Canal because, in the words of Dulles, “a way had to be found to make Nasser disgorge what he was attempting to swallow.”<sup>26</sup> Despite the

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<sup>24</sup>Daniel F. Calhoun, *Hungary and the Suez, 1956: An Exploration of Who Makes History*, (Lanham: United Press of America, 1991), p. 135.

<sup>25</sup>Kyle, p. 160.

<sup>26</sup>Carlton, *Britain and the Suez Crisis*, p. 41.

earlier message from Eisenhower expressing disapproval of any British plan to seize the Canal by force, it was Dulles' belligerent talk that convinced Eden that the Americans would back him up if push came to shove. Egypt was invited to the conference, the goal of which was to come to some reasonable accommodation over the future operation of the Suez Canal. The London Conference began on August 16 and was attended by 22 nations—only Egypt and Greece declined invitations to attend the conference. It called on Egypt to let the Canal be administered by an independent international body, and to open the Canal to the ships of all maritime nations, regardless of political affiliation. Nasser rejected the Conference's recommendations out of hand.

Meanwhile, the British Chiefs of Staff had submitted a plan for a military response to the Egypt Committee on August 10. The plan, known as "Musketeer," was quite ambitious. It went beyond the limited objective of seizing the Suez Canal to the goal of seizing all of Egypt and driving out Nasser. While the plan envisioned using only British troops, the French had promised their support for British action and had committed forces to serve under British command. In the Egypt Committee, the Chancellor, Harold Macmillan, favored the Musketeer plan while Eden and Lloyd favored a scaled-down version, with the Canal as a limited objective, so as to avoid antagonizing world opinion.<sup>27</sup>

Following the rejection of the London Conference proposals by Nasser, Dulles suggested to the British and French that another conference be called in London to set up a body to be known as the Suez Canal Users' Association (SCUA). Despite French misgivings, the British Cabinet agreed to support this idea on September 11. Macmillan stated his opinion that this conference was simply another *pro forma* step towards the use of force, which he perceived as inevitable, but this view was not accepted by the Cabinet as a whole which felt that force should only be used if peaceful means failed.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, Gaitskell and the Labour Party had changed their tune and were no longer in complete

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<sup>27</sup>Kyle, p. 175.

<sup>28</sup>Cabinet Minutes quoted in Carlton, Britain and the Suez Crisis, p. 137-39

support of the Government's policy. They now insisted that any military action be taken under the auspices of the United Nations.

The SCUA was established at the Second London Conference on September 21. The SCUA was to be an international organization of maritime states that used the Suez Canal. It would be responsible for administering the Canal and setting tolls and would work in concert with the Egyptian Canal Authority. Egypt would then be given a percentage of the tolls at a rate determined by the SCUA and the remainder would go towards maintenance and development of the Canal. The British and French felt betrayed by Dulles' manipulation of the conference that left SCUA with only limited powers. According to Eden's spokesman, William Clark, "Dulles pulled rug after rug from under us and watered down the Canal Users' Association till it was meaningless."<sup>29</sup>

This proposal immediately ran into trouble with Nasser who was not pleased with any of the proposed conditions, asking rhetorically, "Would Britain ever concede control of the Docklands to some 'Port of London User's Association'?"<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Washington began distancing itself from imposing the already limited SCUA by force, with Dulles proclaiming that the U.S. "wouldn't shoot its way through the Canal" if denied transit by Egypt.<sup>31</sup> This infuriated Eden, because it was Dulles who had proposed the SCUA in the first place.

With the U.S. distancing itself from SCUA, a diplomatic schism was beginning to become apparent. On September 11, Eden proposed to take the matter to the United Nations Security Council, in part to head off the Soviet Union, which appeared to be following a similar path, in part to appease the Labour Opposition, who were demanding that Britain use the United Nations collective security apparatus established after World

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<sup>29</sup>Kyle, p. 254.

<sup>30</sup>Calhoun, p. 123.

<sup>31</sup>Kyle, p. 246.

War Two, and in part to assure public opinion that everything possible was being done short of war.

Given the failure to supply the SCUA with “the teeth” necessary to enforce its proposals, the Foreign Secretaries of Britain and France were dispatched to the United Nations in New York to carry on direct negotiations with the Egyptian Government. Great progress was made at these meetings, with six points for a peaceful settlement being agreed by all parties:<sup>32</sup>

1. There should be free and open transit through the Canal without discrimination, overt or covert.
2. The sovereignty of Egypt should be respected.
3. The operation of the Canal should be insulated from the politics of any country.
4. The manner of fixing tolls and charges should be decided by agreement between Egypt and the users.
5. A fair proportion of the dues should be allocated to Egyptian development.
6. Unresolved disputes between the Suez Canal Company and Egypt should be settled by arbitration.

Although diplomatic efforts appeared to be making progress, at the same time military preparations were ongoing. Reservists remained activated and ships and matériel were in transit to staging areas for an invasion designed to secure the Canal Zone. The invasion could be put on hold for only so long before the troops had to be ordered either to stand down or to attack. Pressure from the Chiefs of Staff was building for a stand down order to be given. Eden was not prepared to stand down for fear of appearing weak, but with Selwyn Lloyd’s apparent progress on the diplomatic front, it was difficult to justify continuing the operation. The French were to give Eden a way out.

On October 14, Albert Gazier, the French Acting Foreign Minister, and General Maurice Challe, Deputy Chief of Staff for the French Air Force, arrived at the Prime Ministerial retreat, Chequers, to meet secretly with Eden and the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anthony Nutting, without the presence of civil servants or ambassadors.

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<sup>32</sup>Carlton, *Britain and the Suez Crisis*, p. 52.

The French proposed to the British that Israel should be encouraged to attack Egypt, thereby creating a “threat” to the security of the canal. Britain and France would issue an ultimatum to both sides to withdraw from the area around the Canal so that British and French forces, in the role of peacekeepers, could occupy the Canal and ensure that the free flow of shipping was not hindered. Hence, the Canal would be returned to Western control and the Suez Crisis effectively ended. General Challe commented of Eden:

“His anxiety was to have the appearance of not being the aggressor. The general hypocrisy required that one prepared more or less lame pretexts. They deceived nobody but certain persons pretended to believe them. As if confiscation of the Canal was not enough. Thus I presented the pretext or rather the scenario that he wanted.”<sup>33</sup>

Eden promised the French that he would send them a reply by October 16. According to Nutting, Eden was instantly enamored with the plot. He adds, “I knew then that, no matter what contrary advice he might receive over the next forty-eight hours, the Prime Minister had already made up his mind to go along with the French plan.”<sup>34</sup>

Lloyd returned from the United Nations in New York immediately after being summoned by Eden and the Egypt Committee met again in secret on October 16 with all the members present, plus Lord Kilmuir and Peter Thorneycroft. Eden brought up the French plan for collusion. Monckton had some objections, but the rest of the committee supported the Prime Minister, including Lloyd, although he still believed his diplomatic efforts might be successful.<sup>35</sup> It was determined that Lloyd and Eden would go to Paris to confer with the French and iron out the details of the arrangement. In Paris, Eden and Lloyd met with Guy Mollet, the French Premier, and once again, civil servants were excluded. This resulted in a stinging letter from the British ambassador to Lloyd demanding to know why he had not been invited to attend the talks. Following Eden’s instructions, Lloyd brushed

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>34</sup>Anthony Nutting, No End of a Lesson: The Story of Suez, (London: Constable, 1967), p. 94.

<sup>35</sup>Lamb, p. 233.

off the ambassador's protests.<sup>36</sup> At the meeting, Eden insisted that Britain should be "kept strictly out of the 'collusion'" and that the French make all the appropriate arrangements with the Israelis, thus guaranteeing that in public, Britain's honor would be intact.<sup>37</sup>

On October 18, the Cabinet met and Lloyd reported on the progress of his talks in New York with which he was quite pleased. He felt that the six principles endorsed by the Security Council could form the basis for negotiations with Egypt. The Cabinet decided that Lloyd should, in concert with the French, request that the Egyptians submit a proposal for implementing the six principles. The Prime Minister then reported on his trip to Paris, although he was not entirely forthcoming. He indicated that the Israelis were gearing up for some sort of military move, not that Britain and France were encouraging them to invade Egypt. Eden also pointed out that if Israel attacked Jordan, British obligations to Jordan required that Britain defend it against aggression. Since it was not in Britain's interest to be engaged in war with the Israelis, he had asked the French to let the Israelis know that Britain would honor its obligations to Jordan, but since "Egypt was in breach of a Security Council resolution [regarding free transit of Israeli shipping through the Suez] and had repudiated Western aid under the Tripartite Declaration,"<sup>38</sup> Britain would not come to its assistance in the case of an Israeli attack. No objections were raised when Eden informed the Cabinet that he felt that fighting over the Canal should be avoided at all costs, but Eden was actually priming the Cabinet for military action, just as negotiations at the United Nations were beginning to bear fruit.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, Walter Monckton moved out of the Defence Ministry and into the role of "Paymaster General" because of his opposition to any alliance with France and Israel to attack Egypt. Nevertheless, he stayed

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<sup>36</sup>Kyle, p. 303.

<sup>37</sup>Calhoun, p. 275.

<sup>38</sup>The 1950 Tripartite Declaration by the United States, France and Britain guaranteed borders in the Middle East and promised an armed response to any aggression in the region.

<sup>39</sup>Cabinet Minutes quoted in Carlton, Britain and the Suez Crisis, p. 142.

in the Cabinet because he felt his departure during the crisis would severely damage the Government.<sup>40</sup>

The Israelis were not motivated by British or French interests. They felt that the Egyptian blockade of the Red Sea port of Eilat and *fedayeen* terrorist attacks on Israel from the Sinai and the Gaza Strip justified a preemptive Israeli attack on Egypt, quite independently of Egypt's nationalization of the Canal. David Ben-Gurion, the Israeli Prime Minister, was wary of the British efforts to avoid direct contact with his government and demanded a face-to-face meeting with a senior member of the British Government before any invasion plans were decided. He did not feel that it was wise for Israel to "mount the rostrum of shame so that Britain and France could bathe their hands in waters of purity."<sup>41</sup> On October 22, Lloyd traveled secretly to the Paris suburb of Sèvres with Patrick Dean, Deputy Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, to meet with Ben-Gurion to discuss the terms under which Israel would initiate action against Egypt with British assurances of support. There appears to be ample evidence that Lloyd was not pleased with his task, and he might even have attempted to sabotage the meeting. Moshe Dayan, the Israeli Chief of Staff who was present at Sèvres, recalled in his memoirs that "Britain's Foreign Minister may well have been a friendly man, pleasant, charming, amiable. If so, he showed near genius in concealing these virtues. His manner could not have been more antagonistic. His whole demeanor expressed distaste— for the place, the company and the topic."<sup>42</sup> According to Nutting, he had "seldom seen a man more confused and unhappy than Lloyd was on this occasion."<sup>43</sup>

Lloyd returned to London empty-handed. There was, as yet, no agreement with France and Israel, but according to Cabinet minutes, Eden reported to the October 23 Cabinet meeting that "[f]rom secret conversations which had been held in Paris with

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<sup>40</sup>Lord Birkenhead, Walter Monckton, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), pp. 307 - 309.

<sup>41</sup>Callhoun, p. 276.

<sup>42</sup>Moshe Dayan, Story of My Life, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), p. 180.

<sup>43</sup>Nutting, p. 99.

representatives of the Israeli Government, it now appeared that the Israelis would not alone launch a full-scale attack against Egypt.”<sup>44</sup> This indecisive report was matched by Lloyd who reiterated his view that diplomatic negotiation might result in Egypt meeting all British demands for the operation of the Canal, but the goal of bringing down Nasser (or at least limiting his influence) was not a reasonable prospect. He also advised the Cabinet that the military preparations that had been underway since late July could not be held in readiness many days longer.<sup>45</sup>

According to Lloyd, only Charles Peake, Minister of Pensions, and Lord Woolton, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, were not present on October 23.<sup>46</sup> Of the eighteen Cabinet Ministers, therefore, all but two were at this crucial meeting where it was revealed that the Government had been in contact with Israel, that the topic of discussion was action against Egypt, and the Israeli would not act alone.

On October 24, Eden sent Dean and Donald Logan, Lloyd’s Assistant Private Secretary, back to Sévres with specific instructions to make a deal with the French and Israelis. And despite Ben-Gurion’s clear intention that Britain should declare its support for Israel, Eden also had Dean deliver a letter specifically declaring that Britain was not asking Israel to take action.<sup>47</sup> Dayan commented in his diary, “Save for the Almighty, only the British are capable of complicating affairs to such a degree.”<sup>48</sup> After a brief discussion, Dean signed the following document, the Sévres Protocol:<sup>49</sup>

The results of the conversations which took place at Sévres from 22-24 October 1956 between representatives of the Governments of the United Kingdom, the State of Israel and of France are the following:

1. The Israeli forces launch on the evening of 29 October 1956 a large scale attack on the Egyptian Forces with the aim of reaching the Canal zone the following day.

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<sup>44</sup>Calhoun, p. 142.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>46</sup>Lloyd, p. 185.

<sup>47</sup>Lamb, p. 241.

<sup>48</sup>Calhoun, p. 278.

<sup>49</sup>Kyle, p. 565 - 566

2. On being apprised on these events, the British and French Governments during the day of 30 October 1956 respectively and simultaneously make two appeals to the Egyptian Government and the Israeli Government on the following lines:
  - A. To the Egyptian Government:
    - (a) halt all acts of war,
    - (b) withdraw all its troops ten miles from the Canal,
    - (c) accept temporary occupation of the Canal by the Anglo-French forces to guarantee freedom of passage through the Canal by vessels of all nations until a final settlement.
  - B. To the Israeli Government:
    - (a) halt all acts of war,
    - (b) withdraw all its troops ten miles to the east of the Canal.

In addition, the Israeli Government will be notified that the French and British Governments have demanded of the Egyptian Government to accept temporary occupation of key positions along the Canal by Anglo-French forces.

It is agreed that if one of the Governments refused, or did not give its consent within twelve hours the Anglo-French forces would intervene with the means necessary to ensure that their demands are accepted.

  - C. The representatives of the three Governments agree that the Israeli Government will not be required to meet the conditions in the appeal addressed to it, in the event that the Egyptian Government does not accept those in the appeal addressed to it for their part.
3. In the event that the Egyptian Government should fail to agree within the stipulated time to the conditions of the appeal addressed to it, the Anglo-French forces will launch military operations against the Egyptian forces in the early hours of the morning of 31 October.
4. The Israeli Government will send forces to occupy the western shore of the Gulf of Akaba and the group of islands Tirane and Sanafir to ensure freedom of navigation in the gulf of Akaba.
5. Israel undertakes not to attack Jordan during the period of operations against Egypt.  
But in the event that during the same period Jordan should attack Israel, the British Government undertakes not to come to the aid of Jordan.
6. The arrangements of the present protocol must remain strictly secret.
7. They will enter into force after the agreement of the three Governments.

(signed)

David Ben-Gurion  
Israel

Patrick Dean  
United Kingdom

Christian Pineau  
France

Dean and Logan promptly returned to London with their copy of the Protocol. Eden was shocked to find that these two civil servants had actually signed something, and ordered it destroyed. Dean and Logan were sent back to Paris to retrieve the French and Israeli copies, but were unsuccessful because the Israelis had already returned to Israel and the French would not destroy the only remaining copy of the agreement.<sup>50</sup>

The October 25 meeting of the Cabinet was to prove to be fateful. Eden informed the Cabinet that an Israeli attack on Egypt now appeared imminent, possibly as soon as October 29. Apparently, he did not mention the Sèvres Protocol, or the meetings with the Israelis, to the whole Cabinet. He did report the French Government had indicated that, in the case of an Israeli attack on Egypt, they would intervene regardless of British actions. Eden felt that it would be appropriate for Britain and France to issue an ultimatum to both sides calling for a cease-fire and for the withdraw of their forces from within ten miles of the Canal so that a joint Anglo-French force could occupy and protect the Canal. Failure to comply with the ultimatum would result in forced British and French intervention in the Canal Zone.<sup>51</sup> This statement was wholly in line with the British commitment made at Sèvres, but did not make clear that Britain and France had already committed themselves to support Israel. The following statement by Eden appears in the Cabinet minutes:

We must face the risk that we should be accused of collusion with Israel. But this charge was liable to be brought against us in any event; for it could now be assumed that, if an Anglo-French operation were undertaken against Egypt, we should be unable to prevent the Israelis from launching a parallel attack themselves; and it was preferable that we should be seen to be holding the balance between Israel and Egypt rather than appear to be accepting Israeli co-operation in an attack on Egypt alone.<sup>52</sup>

As with the letter Eden had Dean deliver to the Israelis, requesting they not take action, this would appear to be an attempt either to leave a false trail for future historians, or to mislead

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<sup>50</sup>Lamb, p. 241 - 242.

<sup>51</sup>Cabinet Minutes quoted in Carlton, *Britain and the Suez Crisis*, p. 146.

<sup>52</sup>Lamb, p. 243.

members of the Cabinet, or both. After discussing the pros and cons of the plan, the Cabinet gave the Prime Minister the approval he needed to issue an ultimatum in the event of Israel's attack on Egypt. The Cabinet decision was unanimous, with Lloyd giving his full support to the Prime Minister despite the apparent progress he had been making at the United Nations.<sup>53</sup>

On October 29, the Israelis attacked Egypt, in compliance with to the commitments they had made at Sévres. The next day, the British Cabinet met to discuss the situation and Lloyd was authorized, in concert with the French, to send an ultimatum to Egypt and Israel in the spirit of the October 25 Cabinet discussions. Since the action appeared so blatantly opportunistic, and as Eden recognized in Cabinet on October 25, would appear to be collusive with Israel, the position of the Government was difficult for some to support. It immediately faced the resignation of two Junior Ministers, Nutting and Edward Boyle, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who left to protest the action. Nutting's departure was particularly harmful because, in his role as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and as a Middle Eastern specialist,<sup>54</sup> he was privy to the plan of collusion. However, as one Cabinet official said a century before, "This is a bad case, an indefensible case. We must apply our *majority* to this question."<sup>55</sup> And that is exactly what the Eden Government proceeded to do. In Parliament, Eden blamed Egypt's terrorism and blockade of Israel for the Israeli invasion, and he effectively abrogated British obligations under the Tripartite Declaration, thereby reversing his commitment to the House less than a year earlier that Britain would "assist Israel if she were attacked or assist an Arab country if she were attacked by Israel."

Despite earlier speeches by Gaitskell and Bevan railing against Colonel Nasser's regime in Cairo, the Labour Party was not convinced of the good intentions of the

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<sup>53</sup>Calhoun, p. 289.

<sup>54</sup> He was later to write three books on the Middle East and one on the Suez Crisis.

<sup>55</sup>Bagehot, p. 295.

Government because of its failure to act through the United Nations. Christopher Mayhew, a Labour backbencher, suggested in the House that the Government was “using this opportunity to fulfill their long-cherished designs to regain control of the Suez Canal... they are trying to link up the Israeli incursion with the Suez problem.”<sup>56</sup> Eden asked that the Opposition “not impugn our motives,”<sup>57</sup> but Mayhew’s comment was an astute one and would have been entirely correct, even if Eden had not invited the Israeli attack.

The full debate in the House of Commons the next day was even more bitter than the brief discussion which followed Eden’s announcement on October 29. For the Opposition, Gaitskell demanded to know why the matter had not been referred to the United Nations Security Council. He failed to find any legal justification for the Government’s actions, and was bewildered by the sudden shift in foreign policy in favor of Israel. The statements of Henry Cabot Lodge, the American ambassador to the United Nations, further fueled Labour’s fire. Lodge was particularly vocal in expressing American opposition to British and French action outside the framework of the United Nations and without prior consultation with the United States. The Government found it difficult and embarrassing to explain the obvious trans-Atlantic breach. Eden’s response to his failure to work through the United Nations was that the Security Council could not be counted on to move quickly and the Russian veto made it impossible to make any real progress at the United Nations. Lloyd reiterated that the imminent nature of the Israeli threat to the Canal called for British intervention, but Labour was not convinced and divided the House on the adjournment vote. Although the Government won handily, Labour had set the stage for a divisive Parliamentary battle instead of the show of national unity that the Government would have preferred as it entered into the crisis.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Nutting, p. 119.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Kyle, p. 361.

The normally Conservative-friendly press was less than fully supportive of the Government. Eden personally briefed Iverach McDonald, the Foreign Editor of *The Times*, about the British arrangement with the French and Israelis. McDonald did not report his full knowledge of the events behind the Suez War, but the paper did not endorse the Government's actions.<sup>59</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* announced its endorsement of the Government's action because the editorial board believed that the United Nations had failed in the Middle East. The *Daily Mail*, although generally supportive of the action, stated that prior United Nations approval would have been a preferable course of action.<sup>60</sup> The *Liberal Observer* ran an editorial which included the line, "We had not realized that our Government was capable of such folly and such crookedness."<sup>61</sup>

The situation began to deteriorate badly for Eden's Government almost as soon as the joint ultimatum had been issued. In New York, the United Nations Security Council met in emergency session to discuss the Israeli invasion and the British and French ultimata and the United States tabled a motion demanding that Israel withdraw to its own borders. Pierson Dixon, Britain's United Nations representative, was instructed not to support any measure calling for Israeli withdrawal and was, in effect, told to avoid any commitments being made by the Security Council. The American motion moved rapidly to a vote despite the best efforts of Britain and France at delay, and it was vetoed by Britain and France, the first ever veto by Britain.<sup>62</sup> On October 31, British planes began bombing Egyptian air fields, to fulfill the British commitment to neutralize the Egyptian Air Force, and leaflets were dropped suggesting to Egyptians that they depose Nasser, hardly the act of a neutral peacekeeper.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 303.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 388.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 405.

<sup>62</sup>Lamb, p. 245.

<sup>63</sup>Calhoun, p. 386.

It should come as no surprise that the next debate in Commons on November 1 was bedlam because it was on a Labour motion of censure. The Opposition front bench openly accused the Government of collusion with Israel and France and the jeers of its members made debate almost impossible. At one point, the Speaker suspended the sitting for half an hour so that tempers could cool. Gaitskell contemptuously asked the Government about the United Nations veto:

The Foreign Secretary has made much play with the fact that the United Nations is not much good because anything put forward is vetoed. Who was responsible for the veto this time? Only the British and French Governments. If it had not been for their action, there would have been a unanimous resolution of the Security Council. I can only describe this as a major act of sabotage against the United Nations.<sup>64</sup>

Lloyd responded to the charge of collusion by saying, "It was wrong to suggest that Israel had been incited on this occasion by the British Government. There was no prior agreement between us about it."<sup>65</sup> According to Suez historian Keith Kyle, "The first [statement] could presumably just be excused on the grounds that the incitement came from the French Government and was merely abetted by Britain. But one need go no further than the second to answer the question of whether or not the House was specifically misled."<sup>66</sup>

Not only did the Government face opposition from the Labour Party, they were also faced with the possibility of a challenge from their own backbenchers. On November 1, there were already signs that Eden's plot was becoming public knowledge and that the Conservative Party was fracturing on the issue:

Mr. William Yates (The Wrekin, C.) on a point of order, said: I am a young member of this House and I desire your advice, Mr. Speaker. I have been to France, and I have come to the conclusion that her Majesty's Government have been in an international conspiracy. (Loud and prolonged Opposition cheers, and Conservative cries of "Sit down!")

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<sup>64</sup>"In Parliament," *The Times*, November 1, 1956, p. 4.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Kyle, p. 379.

“Would it be right (he continued) if I disagreed with what the Government have done? (Renewed interruptions.)

“I want to know whether it would be considered right and patriotic for a person deliberately to try to bring down her Majesty’s Government in these circumstances? (Loud Opposition cheers and Ministerial cries of “Sit down!”)

“The Speaker said that was not a point of order. ‘If my impression is right, there are quite a number of members of this House who are engaged in that enterprise.’ (Laughter.)<sup>67</sup>

Although the Whips were to keep Yates and most other doubting M.P.s in line, their best argument for holding the Conservative Party together was loyalty to the nation at a time of international crisis.

Yates was obviously correct that there was an international conspiracy. The French were making little secret of their close interactions with Israeli forces. French planes were stationed on Israeli soil and bore joint force markings. French ships had shelled Egyptian positions in support of Israeli land assaults in the Sinai. At the Foreign Office, Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, the Permanent Secretary, received a cable from Ralph Murray, a British Political advisor in Cyprus, that stated, “as seen from here there is little if anything covert about French close and active support of Israel.”<sup>68</sup> The British, more concerned with appearances, were generally going about business as if they really were even-handed peacekeepers. The French behavior only served to infuriate Eden, but there was little he could do to stop them.<sup>69</sup>

At the United Nations, debate on the Israeli invasion and the British-French ultimatum was moved from the Security Council to the General Assembly where Britain and France no longer had the benefit of the veto. On November 2, the General Assembly voted to censure Britain and France for their actions and the arguments of the Government that Egypt was in breach of Security Council resolutions sounded even less impressive than they had four days earlier. In the censure vote, sixty-five nations voted in favor while only

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<sup>67</sup>“In Parliament,” *The Times*, November 2, 1956, p. 5.

<sup>68</sup>Kyle, pp. 409 - 410.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid..

five voted against (Britain, France, Israel, New Zealand and Australia). There were eight abstentions, including Canada.<sup>70</sup>

On November 4, the Cabinet met to discuss the future of the operation against Egypt and the prospect of Egypt and Israel supporting a cease-fire before Britain had a chance to intervene. It would have been difficult to justify military intervention between conflicting parties who were no longer in conflict. The Cabinet was split on what to do in such a contingency, with a clear majority favoring intervention, using the argument that Britain was only holding the fort until United Nation's forces could arrive to relieve them. In the middle of the Cabinet meeting, news was received that the Israelis had not accepted the cease-fire. Thus, a Cabinet split was avoided over the issue and Eden was given approval to begin landings as soon as practical.<sup>71</sup>

The troops had hardly begun arriving on November 5 when they were ordered to "expect a premature cease-fire" at midnight.<sup>72</sup> Pressure on the Government from the United States had reached the critical stage. Macmillan reported to the Cabinet that sterling reserves had fallen to a critical level and that unless there were loan guarantees from the United States, Britain could not prevent a run on the pound. Eisenhower had made it plain that no such support would be forthcoming until Britain had begun to take demonstrable steps towards withdrawal. Under such circumstances, Macmillan felt compelled to make an abrupt about-face and advised that American demands be met so that Britain could protect the pound. This was the decisive political turning point in the operation.<sup>73</sup> The United Nations General Assembly called again for a cease-fire and the Cabinet decided to use this in an attempt to save face. Eden's statement to the House of Commons on November that a cease-fire had been ordered for midnight was met with cheers from both

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<sup>70</sup>Lloyd, p. 201.

<sup>71</sup>Cabinet Minutes quoted in Carlton, Britain and the Suez Crisis, pp. 150-51.

<sup>72</sup>Carlton, Britain and the Suez Crisis, p. 76.

<sup>73</sup>Birkenhead, p. 308.

sides of the aisle. By the time the cease-fire went into effect, British and French forces had managed to secure only 23 miles of the Canal south of Port Said.

The military operation, such as it was, was effectively over, but it had taken its toll on Anthony Eden. On doctor's orders, he was sent to Jamaica for rest. R.A. Butler was left to preside over the Government in his absence and was charged with handling the withdrawal of British soldiers from the Canal zone. During Eden's recuperation in Jamaica, Opposition questions to Ministers about their foreknowledge of the Israeli attack were met repeatedly with twisted denials. On December 5, when Butler announced the withdrawal to the House, Evelyn Shuckburgh, once Eden's Private Secretary and then a Foreign Office Middle East expert, commented, "All the Services feel they have been betrayed, and that we will never be able to show any independence as a nation again."<sup>74</sup> With bitter sarcasm, one Conservative MP asked the Foreign Secretary, "Can my right honorable and learned friend assure us now that we have agreed to withdraw our Army from Egypt with no effective safeguards for our vital interests, that the necessary American consent will be forthcoming, in due course, to bringing back our Prime Minister from Jamaica?"<sup>75</sup>

Upon his return to the House on December 14, Eden was met with little fanfare. Even the normally supportive *Times* mentioned how awkward the moment was for both the House and the Prime Minister.<sup>76</sup> On December 20 Eden addressed the issue of collusion head-on during Question Time:

I do want to say this on the question of foreknowledge, and say it bluntly to the House: There was no foreknowledge that Israel would attack— but there was something else. There was, we knew perfectly, a risk of it. In the event of a risk of it, certain discussions and consultations took place, as I think was absolutely right and as every Government would do.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Evelyn Shuckburgh, *Descent to Suez: Diaries 1951 - 56*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p. 366.

<sup>75</sup>Calhoun, p. 515-16.

<sup>76</sup>"In Parliament," *The Times*, December 15, 1956, p. 4.

<sup>77</sup>"In Parliament," *The Times*, December 21, 1956, p. 2.

In light of the negotiations at Sévres and the signed agreement with the Israelis and French, there would appear to be little doubt that Eden, like Lloyd before him, lied to the House.

On January 7, Eden visited the Queen and resigned his position due to ill health. After consultations with ranking members of the Conservative Party in both Houses of Parliament, the Queen asked Macmillan to form a Government. In April, 1957, Egypt reopened the Canal and offered its services to the British and French under the Six Principles that had been negotiated the previous October by Lloyd.

### ANALYSIS

The Suez Crisis was a foreign policy disaster for Britain, but it was not just a disaster in hindsight. The probable international repercussions of the plot with the French and the Israelis were readily apparent to those in the government at the time. Why, then, did the Eden Government embark upon an international adventure that would abandon the three fundamental tenets of Britain's post-war foreign policy: "solidarity with the Commonwealth, the Anglo-American alliance, and adherence to the Charter of the United Nations?"<sup>78</sup> These were not the rash actions of any one individual, but rather the concerted policy of the whole government. How could such a policy have received the endorsement of the Government despite the safeguards that normally exist in Cabinet Government?

One of the significant questions surrounding the Suez Crisis is whether the Prime Minister and other members of his Government corrupted the democratic process that is essential to a properly functioning, responsible government. To varying degrees, most of the principal organs of government were misled as to the true actions of the government. Under such circumstances, a closer look at the roles of the various components of the policy process is warranted— in particular, the Cabinet, the Civil Service and Military, Parliament, and the Press. Then we can ask if the system performed well or poorly in this case.

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<sup>78</sup>Hugh Gaitskell quoted in Nutting, p.125.

### *The Cabinet*

The modern Cabinet meets infrequently, generally once a week for about two hours, to discuss issues of importance to the Government. Through consensus, it determines government policy and legislative strategies. The Cabinet always approves major initiatives so as to assure that policies have been adequately prepared before being publicly introduced, as well as to keep Ministers informed of the developments in other departments so as to ensure broad-based support within the Government. Since Ministers are collectively responsible for any action taken by the Government, it is important that they be actively involved in Cabinet to ensure that policies are consistent with their political principles and beliefs.

Modern interpretations of Cabinet Government identify the Prime Minister as the pre-eminent actor in the Cabinet. To what extent was the Suez policy determined by Anthony Eden? Was it primarily his failure? Anthony Nutting, the Minister of State at the Foreign Office, places much of the blame for the crisis on Eden's personal belief that Nasser was seeking to undermine the British position in the Middle East and had to be removed. Nutting states that Eden's hatred of Nasser originated with the dismissal of Glubb Pasha, the British commander of the Arab Legion in Jordan, by King Hussein on March 1, 1956. Eden felt that the embarrassing (for Britain) dismissal had been instigated by Nasser's brand of Pan-Arabism. He therefore was determined to cut Nasser down to size lest he further damage British prestige in the Middle East. Nasser also had close relations with the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia and had recently recognized Communist China, which indicated to the British that he was a potential ally of Communists, working with them to undermine British interests. When Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, memories of Hitler's march across Europe also stirred in British minds, not least the mind of Anthony Eden, who had served in the Foreign Office under Chamberlain and had resigned to protest appeasement. Eden determined that Nasser had

given Britain a final, unacceptable provocation, and that it was time for him to go before he irreparably damaged British interests in the Near East.<sup>79</sup> Eden cabled President Eisenhower in Washington expressing his concerns:

In the nineteen-thirties Hitler established his position by a series of carefully planned movements. These began with the occupation of the Rhineland and were followed by the successive acts of aggression against Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland and the West. His actions were tolerated and excused by the majority of the population of Western Europe... Similarly, the seizure of the Suez Canal is, we are convinced, the opening gambit in a planned campaign designed by Nasser to expel all Western influence and interests from Arab countries. He believes that if he can get away with this, and if he can successfully defy eighteen nations, his prestige in Arabia will be so great that he will be able to mount revolutions of young officers in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Iraq. (We know he is already preparing a revolution in Iraq, which is most stable and progressive.) These new Governments will in effect be Egyptian satellites if not Russian ones. They will have to place their united oil resources under the control of a United Arabia led by Egypt and under Russian influence. When that moment comes Nasser can deny oil to western Europe and we here shall be at his mercy.<sup>80</sup>

As Eden saw them, therefore, the stakes were extremely high, but key members of the Cabinet appear to have agreed with him.

To address the threat posed by Nasser, the Cabinet established the Egypt Committee and presented it with a dual mission— first, to return the canal to international control, and second, to deal a crippling blow to Nasser's standing in the Arab community, preferably by toppling his regime.<sup>81</sup> This was not Eden's policy alone. He was joined in his distaste for Nasser by the overwhelming majority of his Cabinet. The members of the Egypt Committee were fully informed at each stage of the crisis and one cannot, therefore, attribute the Suez debacle to Eden's judgment alone, not can it be blamed, as some have argued, on the ill state of his health at the time of Suez.<sup>82</sup> There is no question that his

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<sup>79</sup>Nutting, p. 18, pp. 34 - 35 and p. 48.

<sup>80</sup>Robert M. Bowie, *Suez 1956*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 124.

<sup>81</sup>Lamb, p. 211.

<sup>82</sup>Nutting, p.32.

physical condition was far from ideal. Eden himself never accepted that his health impaired his judgment or his performance, and certainly his closest colleagues, Macmillan, Lloyd, Salisbury, Butler and Head, were unanimous in their support for his policy. The fact is that despite his health problems, Eden carried his colleagues with him through each stage of the crisis, and no one at the time expressed doubts about his capacity to lead the nation.

The question which remains, however, is whether Eden and the members of the Egypt Committee misled their colleagues in the Cabinet about collusion with Israel? The chief protagonist, Anthony Eden always denied that there was any collusion, preferring instead to acknowledge only that “a report came that Israel was about to mobilize.”<sup>83</sup> In their memoirs, ministers were reluctant to mention knowledge of any collusion with the Israelis because such a deal did not reflect positively on their character and integrity, and they were all covered by the convention of Cabinet confidentiality. These denials have led many outside the Government to suppose that Eden and the members of the Egypt Committee misled the rest of the Cabinet on the extent of Britain’s contacts with the Israelis. Harold Macmillan, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, is typical of most Ministers. He stated in his memoirs:

In addition to my share in these months as Chancellor of the Exchequer, I took my full part during the negotiations in the weeks and months that followed in the deliberations in the Committee of Ministers especially appointed to deal with the crisis. A detailed account of the various moves has been set out by Eden, and by many other historians. I shall confine myself to those parts of the story which affected me particularly. But the Prime Minister kept me in close touch with all his plans during these anxious times, from the day of the seizure of the Canal to the cease-fire. I share to the fullest extent the responsibility of all the decisions, not merely from the normal responsibility of a Cabinet Minister, but because I was one of the circle of colleagues whom Eden consulted. Naturally, as I was fully employed with my own problems from the financial point of view, I could have only a general knowledge of the intricate, but alas, ineffective attempts to reach a peaceful solution in accordance with the claims of justice and equity.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Anthony Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden: Full Circle*, (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1960), p. 584.

<sup>84</sup>Harold Macmillan, *Riding the Storm, 1956-59*, (London: Macmillan and Company, 1971), p. 106.

Despite this reticence, there is evidence that Macmillan was one of the advocates of a “tough” policy in Egypt and the deal with Israel in particular. In a memo circulated to the Egypt Committee on August 3, just a week after the Canal nationalization, Macmillan argued for encouraging the Israelis to make some sort of move against Egypt right before an Anglo-French invasion.<sup>85</sup> Despite his claims of only “general knowledge” there is more than ample evidence that he was in the thick of things, if not leading the pack.

R.A. Butler, Leader of the House, was an advocate of the “straight bash” involving a direct assault on the Canal with the stated intention of liberating it from Egyptian control, a position generally supported by the Chiefs of Staff. Although somewhat Machiavellian in nature, it had the benefit of being relatively easy to explain to Parliament, the country, and the world as necessary in the pursuit of a vital national interest. When discussions of a possible Israeli attack on Egypt were raised initially at the October 18, 1956 Cabinet, before there were any direct contacts with the Israelis, Butler recounted:

[Eden] confirmed that it was suggested with [the French] that in the event of war between Israel and Egypt we should go in with the French to separate the combatants and occupy the canal. I asked if it were not more likely that Israel should attack Jordan. He replied that in such an event, we would have to keep our word to defend Jordan: the French had therefore been asked to make this clear to Israel. I was impressed by the audacity of the thinking behind this plan but concerned about the public reaction. I wondered whether an agreement with the French and Israelis, designed to free the canal and eventually internationalize it, would not meet our objective, but the Prime Minister said that things were now moving the direction he had described and in all the circumstances I said that I would stand by him.<sup>86</sup>

There is little in these words to indicate opposition to Eden’s goals, except perhaps a desire to keep everything “above board”. Ultimately, the course embarked upon by the Cabinet was to involve an agreement with the French and the Israelis, but it was also to include a dishonest ultimatum and the introduction of British and French forces under the fairly

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<sup>85</sup>Lamb, pp. 209 - 210.

<sup>86</sup>R.A. Butler, The Art of the Possible: The Memoirs of Lord Butler, (Boston: Gambit Incorporated, 1972), p. 192.

transparent guise of “impartial” policemen, rather than as agents furthering a vital national interest.

The only obvious Cabinet dissent appears to have originated with the Defence Minister, Walter Monckton. He was originally assigned to Defence because it was supposed to have limited Parliamentary responsibilities that would give him a much needed rest from the demanding tour he had just completed in the Ministry of Labour.<sup>87</sup> Unfortunately, events were not kind to him and he found that he was soon immersed in the intricacies of the Suez Crisis, surrounded by hawks waiting for the opportunity to use force against Nasser. Throughout August and September, Monckton argued against military action in the Egypt Committee, which included one particularly strong outburst directed at Macmillan, who insisted on speaking of the use of force as a foregone conclusion at the August 24 Egypt Committee meeting.<sup>88</sup> On October 18, Monckton resigned as Minister of Defence because of his opposition to any association with the Israelis. He remained in the Cabinet as Paymaster General, however, for fear that his resignation from the Government would result in its fall— apparently a worse eventuality than anything that he perceived could happen as the result of British intrigue in Egypt.<sup>89</sup>

Despite the descriptions by Eden, Butler, and Macmillan of the Cabinet discussions surrounding Suez, ultimately they tell us little about what truly happened in Cabinet because each felt obligated to avoid mentioning the negotiations with Israel and France that led up to the Israeli invasion on October 29. Fortunately, one crucial set of Cabinet minutes, opened to scholars in 1987, and Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd’s surprisingly candid history of the conflict, published in 1978, are more enlightening. The October 23, 1956 Cabinet minutes noted, “From secret talks which had been held in Paris with representatives of the Israeli Government, it now appeared that the Israelis would not alone

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<sup>87</sup>Eden, p. 354 and Birkenhead, p. 305.

<sup>88</sup>Kyle, pp. 203 - 204.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p. 304,

launch a full-scale attack against Egypt.”<sup>90</sup> In his history, Selwyn Lloyd refers to these discussions with Israel as part of a contingency plan that would only be executed in the event that negotiations with the Egyptians failed. Following the signing of the Sévres Protocol on October 24, the Egypt Committee decided to recommend the contingency plan to the full Cabinet the following day. According to Lloyd, the decision of the Cabinet to support the Egypt Committee’s recommendation was without dissent, following a full discussion.<sup>91</sup>

On July 27, the Cabinet had decided that “[Egypt] must be subjected to the maximum political pressure which could be applied by the maritime and trading nations whose interests were most directly affected. And, in the last resort, this political pressure must be backed by the threat—and, if need be, the use— of force.”<sup>92</sup> On October 18, the Cabinet had discussed for the first time the possibility of an Israeli attack against Egypt. It was accepted, in principle, that if Israel attacked Egypt, Britain and France would intervene to protect the Canal from the fighting. As with the decision about the ultimate use of force, the Cabinet was unanimous in accepting this policy.<sup>93</sup> On October 25, the most critical meeting of all, the Cabinet had to make a decision dependent on actual events, not on hypothetical situations. The Cabinet reiterated its earlier decision to intervene in the Canal Zone in the case of an Israeli invasion of Egypt, perhaps because it was difficult to back away from the decisions it had already made on October 18.<sup>94</sup> Only two members appeared to have had significant doubts— Monckton and Amory. Neither raised more than token objections and both went along with the collective decision for action.<sup>95</sup> According to one Cabinet Minister, “The whole Cabinet knew about Israel from the beginning. The

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<sup>90</sup>Cabinet Minutes quoted in Carlton, Britain and the Suez Crisis, p. 142.

<sup>91</sup>Lloyd, pp. 188 - 190.

<sup>92</sup>Carlton, Britain and the Suez Crisis, p. 133.

<sup>93</sup>Lloyd, p. 177.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>95</sup>Robert Rhodes James, Anthony Eden, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p. 537.

Israel thing would have come to the top of the pile only after no other pretext remained.”<sup>96</sup> By late October, all other options for action had apparently been exhausted.

The Cabinet’s decision on October 25 to intervene with France in the event Israel attacked Egypt conformed to the Sévres Protocol, but it was apparently made without many of the ministers knowing of the collusion with Israel. Was this the case? There is little doubt that most ministers knew that talks with Israel had actually taken place because the contacts with the Israeli Government are mentioned in the October 23 Cabinet minutes. Whether or not they knew that a promise of British action against Egypt was a *sine qua non* for Israeli action is another question. None of the ministers’ memoirs of the crucial October 25 meeting reveal whether or not the Sévres Protocol was specifically mentioned. Most authors assume that it was not, but Anthony Head revealed to Alistair Horne, Harold Macmillan’s biographer, that there were four Cabinet meetings, held without minutes per Eden’s instructions, at which the subject of collusion was discussed.<sup>97</sup> According to Walter Monckton, however,

One of the curious features of the whole affair as far as the Cabinet was concerned was that partly owing to a not unnatural habit on the Prime Minister’s part of preferring to take into complete confidence only those with whom he agreed, many of us in the Cabinet knew little of the decisive talks with the French until after they happened and sometimes not even then.<sup>98</sup>

There is no doubt that at least half the Cabinet knew of the plan. Eden, Lloyd, Butler, Macmillan and Head all knew because they were all present when Dean delivered the Protocol to Downing Street.<sup>99</sup> Salisbury, Thorneycroft, Monckton, and Kilmuir were all present at the October 18 meeting of the Egypt Committee when the French plan was initially discussed, but perhaps other ministers had the luxury of turning a blind eye and only dealing with a “hypothetical” situation. By the time the Cabinet met on October 25, all

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<sup>96</sup>Kennett Love, Suez: The Twice Fought War, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 370.

<sup>97</sup>Alistair Horne, Harold Macmillan: Volume I, 1894 - 1956, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989), p. 429.

<sup>98</sup>Birkenhead, p. 308.

<sup>99</sup>Lloyd, p. 188.

of the crucial players had already signed off on the plan and the other members of the Cabinet were either not told or were simply presented with a *fait accompli*. They would have had to oppose all the senior party leaders if they had objections. If Head and the other, anonymous, Minister are to be believed, the arrangement with France and Israel was discussed by the full Cabinet. Head, as we have seen, is very specific that the collusion was discussed at four unminuted Cabinet meetings. Given that the whole Cabinet was informed that there were talks with the Israelis, it is reasonable to assume that those present at the crucial Cabinet meetings chose to avoid being specifically tarred by their association with the Government's Suez decisions, and were able to do so because of the systematic way in which Eden removed any reference to collusion from the public record. This allowed them to deny having known of the plan with a reasonable assurance that no one would contradict them.

The impetus for the decision on October 25 to support the Israeli attack was the need either to initiate action or to stand down the 40,000 British troops who had been mobilized in July and August and were biding their time at bases in Malta and Cyprus. Their state of readiness was rapidly deteriorating, car batteries were running down, engines were in need of maintenance, supplies were going bad, and the morale of the troops was declining. The Chiefs of Staff pushed the Egypt Committee to allow a partial stand down, but that was resisted because the removal of the military threat against Egypt might have harmed the British negotiating position over the Canal. Having adopted a "tough" policy at their July 27 meeting, the Cabinet was disinclined to change that policy in late-October. The agreement with France and Israel to start a war in the Sinai solved three of the fundamental problems facing the British: the need to do something with the troops in the field, to bring the Canal under effective international control in the form of the Royal Navy, and to rein in President Nasser. Since the Cabinet had no other policy available to it that didn't make it look like Britain was backing down, it opted in late October for the final

contingency plan, the "Israeli Option."<sup>100</sup> When the time for choosing which course of action to follow arrived, therefore, the Ministers were divided only over means.

Although the Cabinet was one with the plans for invasion, they did not carry the entire Government with them because there was some dissension in the ranks of the junior ministers. The decision resulted in three resignations from the Government. Anthony Nutting, the Minister of State at the Foreign Office, resigned to protest the deal with Israel. Edward Boyle, one of the Treasury Ministers, and William Clark, Eden's Press Secretary, also resigned, although it is not evident that either knew of the collusion with Israel. All three defections were public embarrassments to the Government, and Nutting's could have been particularly damaging had he decided to condemn the Government in Parliament in his resignation speech, but at the urging of Macmillan, he chose not to give one and undermine the Government while British troops were in action.<sup>101</sup> None of the defections had any impact upon the Cabinet's course of action.

### *The Civil Service and Military*

The traditional role of the Civil Service in British politics is to advise Government Ministers on available courses of action and to see that Governmental policy, once determined, is implemented quickly and efficiently. Since many modern issues of domestic and international politics are quite complicated, the Civil Service also offers legal opinions and serves as the source of institutional knowledge upon which ministers can rely for advice. One of the philosophic foundations of the Civil Service is that it is the non-partisan servant of the Government. Although sometimes accused of having an agenda of its own, the Civil Service likes to pride itself on its loyalty and impartiality. Ministers are highly reliant on their permanent staffs and usually forge close working relationships with the Civil Servants.

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<sup>100</sup>Ibid., pp. 189 - 191.

<sup>101</sup>Nutting, p. 161.

Government officials in the Civil Service and the senior officers in the military did not play a role in preventing, or even significantly altering, the Cabinet's decision to take action at Suez. In fact, one of the unique characteristics of the Suez Crisis was the unusual distance that existed between ministers and most permanent officials in the critical departments. The exclusion of officials from the decision-making process, and the systematic way in which the Prime Minister and the Cabinet avoided their advice, exemplifies for many why the Government's policy was doomed to failure. For purposes of this discussion, only the Foreign Office and Defence Ministry will be examined because they were the two departments most integrally involved in implementing the Government's Suez policy.

In the post-war Foreign Office, there remained a bias in favor of the Arabs in the Middle East. Britain maintained an informal empire there consisting of a series of protectorates, the Gulf Emirates, and nominally independent countries like Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq led by Anglophile leaders who were economically and militarily supported by the British. British support for these leaders dated to the First World War when their predecessors rose in the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire at the urging of British agents, such as T.E. Lawrence. The British maintained close ties with these states partially out of feelings of obligation but more so because of the ready supply of cheap oil they provided to fuel the British economy. In the middle of this cozy relationship was Israel, a "Zionist Entity" that occupied much of the former British League of Nations Mandate in Palestine. Most Arabs, including those in the formerly French states of Syria and Lebanon, felt that Israel was a colonial base dropped in their midst by the British to serve Western interests in the region. Anti-Western feelings ran high in the general population but were always tempered by leaders who sought Britain's favor. The Foreign Office had always sought to keep Israel at a distance and to embrace Arab leaders because of the value of Middle Eastern oil. Israel had little that benefited Britain. None knew this Foreign

Office bias better than Anthony Eden, a Persian expert who had spent most of his ministerial career as Minister of State or Foreign Secretary prior to becoming Prime Minister.<sup>102</sup>

Following the nationalization of the Suez Canal, a Civil Service committee, composed of officials from the Foreign Office and Defense Ministry, was set up to parallel the Egypt Committee and plan many of the particulars that did not concern Cabinet Ministers. Among other things, as part of the Musketeer Plan for toppling Nasser, the committee drew up detailed plans for an occupation government of Egypt. The role of this committee was only to devise plans for implementing the proposed attack on Egypt, not to determine when such an attack should take place.<sup>103</sup> When it came to the secret deal with the Israelis and the French, few in the Foreign Office were privy to the Government's secrets. When the French first proposed unleashing the Israelis to Eden at Chequers, Nutting was allowed to put together a position statement with two Foreign Office officials, Ivone Kirkpatrick, the Permanent Undersecretary, and Archibald Ross, the Assistant Undersecretary (Middle East). Although Nutting was allowed to present this Foreign Office brief, which opposed any collusion with the French and Israelis, at a "small meeting of Ministers," Eden had decided beforehand to reject the recommendations out of hand.<sup>104</sup>

Kirkpatrick was an atypical Civil Servant with an imperial attitude and a penchant for dressing down "representatives of unsatisfactory smaller states."<sup>105</sup> Unlike his senior colleagues at the Foreign Office, he was not inclined to pander to Arab sensibilities, telling Evelyn Shuckburgh, a former colleague, "[Eden] was the only man in England who wanted the nation to survive; that all the rest of us have lost the will to live; that in two years' time Nasser will have deprived us of our oil, the sterling area fallen apart, no European defense possible, unemployment and unrest in the U.K. and our standard of

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>103</sup>Kyle, p. 211.

<sup>104</sup>Nutting, pp. 95.

<sup>105</sup>Kyle, p. 88.

living reduced to that of the Yugoslavs or Egyptians.”<sup>106</sup> Despite assisting Nutting in writing the Foreign Office’s paper indicating the pitfalls of allying Britain with France and Israel, it is doubtful that he tried to restrain Eden’s aggressive ambitions in the Middle East.

Throughout the negotiations at Sévres, only a few civil servants were involved. During Eden and Lloyd’s October 1 meeting with French ministers, the British ambassador to France was specifically not invited, an almost unheard of event and a significant protocol violation which resulted in a letter of protest from the ambassador.<sup>107</sup> He was also excluded from the key meetings on October 22 and 24 and, due to their secret nature, it is doubtful that he was subsequently informed that they had taken place. Donald Logan, Lloyd’s junior private secretary, accompanied Lloyd to Sévres on October 22, but he was not significantly senior to advise the Foreign Secretary on policy. On October 24, Eden personally briefed Patrick Dean, a Deputy Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, who led the follow-up mission to Sévres at which the Sévres Agreement was signed. To ensure continuity between the two trips, Logan accompanied Dean to Paris, but again, not as an advisor on policy. Upon his return, Dean reported to a group of ministers including Eden, Lloyd, Head, and Butler. Earl Mountbatten, Admiral of the Fleet, was also present.

During the crisis itself, the Foreign Office often found itself at something of a loss to explain Britain’s ultimatum and the military action with France, in large part because so few officials knew of it. Since the action was entirely inconsistent with the long-established British policies of promoting peace and stability in the Middle East and support for the United Nations, many ambassadors particularly found themselves in awkward situations. When he lamented the gulf that separated Britain and Israel, Britain’s ambassador to Israel, John Nicholls, was informed by Ben-Gurion that he had not been fully briefed and that “our relations are a good deal closer than you think.”<sup>108</sup> William

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<sup>106</sup>Shuckburgh, p. 360.

<sup>107</sup>Kyle, p. 302.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., p. 346.

Hayter, the ambassador to Moscow, declared at a Kremlin reception, upon hearing of the Israeli invasion of the Sinai, that Britain and France would vote against Israel in the Security Council. Upon arriving back at the embassy a short time later, he was greeted with a cable of the Anglo-French ultimatum. According to Hayter, "As I read it, I could not believe my eyes; I began to wonder if I had drunk too much at the Kremlin. I felt quite bewildered. The action we were taking seemed to me flatly contrary to all that I knew, or thought I knew, about British policy."<sup>109</sup>

The Foreign Office was not advised of the talks with France and Israel for a variety of reasons. First, as has been previously mentioned, Eden was well aware of the Foreign Office's pro-Arab bias, which would probably have led it to counsel against an invasion of Egypt. Eden wanted to avoid fighting a battle with the bureaucracy that might put limitations on his freedom and he felt that the Foreign Office might throw up some significant obstacles to his agreement with the French and Israelis. When Nutting suggested that a legal opinion on the plan be obtained from Sir Gerald Fitzmaurice, the Foreign Office Legal Advisor, Eden declared, "Fitz is the last person I want consulted. The lawyers are always against our doing anything. For God's sake, keep them out of it. This is a political affair."<sup>110</sup> Eden's fears of lawyers were well-founded. Two of the "weak sisters"<sup>111</sup> in the Cabinet, Butler and Monckton, were lawyers by profession who remained ill-at-ease about the *casus belli*— Butler because he felt the pretext unnecessarily complicated the invasion and Monckton because he wanted to exhaust all other options before resorting to force. Finally, the Sèvres Protocol called for complete secrecy about the terms of the agreement. Beyond sharing it with Cabinet colleagues, a handful of people at the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence, and a few members of the military staff who had to know in order to put the plan into effect, Eden kept the full secret of the plans

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<sup>109</sup>Love, p. 507.

<sup>110</sup>Nutting, p. 95.

<sup>111</sup>Eden, p. 623.

with France and Israel carefully contained. All told, only Kirkpatrick, Ross, Logan and Dean at the Foreign Office appear to have known of the deal with the French and the Israelis. Others might have guessed, but only those four had direct knowledge of its existence.

The British military has always been responsive to civilian authority and is one of the most disciplined armed forces of any country in the world. British leaders have always been able to rely on the ability and willingness of the military to serve their political masters. The British military has always concerned itself solely with military missions and left political questions to their masters in the War Office and the Cabinet.

At the Ministry of Defence, the Suez story was somewhat, although not entirely, different from the information vacuum that existed at the Foreign Office. One of the problems with the agreement with the French and Israelis was that from the moment of activation, the British invasion fleet, based in Malta, had to load its supplies and make the 1,000 mile journey to Port Said. All told it would be a ten day operation. The ability to have the fleet just over the horizon from Port Said at the time of the ultimatum, and thus to present the world with a *fait accompli*, was preferable to waiting a week and a half for the forces to deploy, but unfortunately, the pretext for the action, that the British and French were going to act as peacekeepers, created a difficulty for the British. They could not deploy the invasion force in advance of the Israeli attack because it would have been very difficult to say that they were reacting to the Israelis if the invasion fleet appeared immediately following the expiration of the ultimatum.<sup>112</sup> One of the reasons the operation failed, therefore, was because of the necessary delay involved in introducing British and French forces into the Canal Zone, although efforts were made to accelerate the process.

Throughout the forces, only Lord Mountbatten, First Lord of the Admiralty, knew that the Sèvres Protocol actually existed, committing the British to support the Israeli attack

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<sup>112</sup>Kyle, p. 342.

on Egypt. However, the military did not necessarily need to know that the agreement had been signed in order to be instructed to begin preparing for a “police action” in the Canal Zone. Senior officers all knew that there was a military option for resolving the crisis, but some knew more than this. For example, General Sir Charles Keightley, the Allied forces Commander-in-Chief, was present at the October 16 meeting at Downing Street during which it was agreed that Lloyd would be sent to Sévres and his understanding of the situation was similar to that of the Chiefs of Staff. Because of his knowledge of Lloyd’s mission to Sévres, Keightley knew that the Israelis proposed to invade the Sinai on October 29. He was also well aware of the fact that if British forces could not begin preparing to deploy until October 30, then they would not arrive at the Canal until November 10, a long wait indeed. By the evening of October 30, however, Keightley was able to dispatch to London that the invasion fleet had embarked six hours before the expiration of the ultimatum, “as a result of previous preparedness and excellent work by all officers and men.”<sup>113</sup> This meant that the invasion fleet was able to trim almost four days off the timetable which would have had it arrive ten days after the British-French ultimatum. The Malta invasion fleet had been scheduled to begin a signals exercise on October 27, and this had been used as a cover to allow the British to begin loading and deploying some of their ships. They were unable to load the invasion troops into their landing craft, however, for fear of being unable to feign “surprise” at the Israeli invasion. An unsigned minute on October 26, entitled, “Points for the Prime Minister,” stated, “The operations must now be run as required militarily. But we will not make any overt moves which are not essential. We will use the signal exercise as a cover plan.”<sup>114</sup>

Lt. General Sir High Stockwell, the Task Force Land Commander was also well-informed. On October 22 he learned from his French joint-staff of the planned Israeli attack set for October 29. Two other British officers on his staff were advised, along with

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<sup>113</sup>Love, p. 488.

<sup>114</sup>Kyle, p. 340.

three others, at the War Office in London. On October 26, the French advised Stockwell that the plan was definitely on and he advised the four admirals in the Mediterranean fleet, Grantham, Durnford-Slater, Lancelot, and Power. Orders were issued which called for ships to be loaded and prepared for the invasion, despite the fact that no official word had come down from the Ministry of Defence, other than to hold Musketeer in a high state of readiness.<sup>115</sup>

General Templer, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, informed the Quartermaster-General, "The PM has decided that the landing at Port Said must take place as soon as possible but has also said that no one is yet to be told." Various steps were taken by lower-ranking officers to bring their troops to readiness, all the time hindered by London's concern that their moves should not be later used as evidence of the secret plot.<sup>116</sup> Many of the British officers and soldiers were able to put two and two together and knew that the real invasion was on without being specifically told and were able, "coincidentally," to take steps to advance the operation's timetable.<sup>117</sup>

Some highly-ranked officers objected to their civilian leaders that the invasion seemed somewhat foolhardy. Most notable among these was General Keightley, the Allied Commander-in-Chief, who expressed his concerns to the Prime Minister about the impending operation on October 26, wondering whether Britain was going to be better off afterwards. According to Mountbatten, "Eden gave him a very severe dressing down and told him that these were questions with which military commanders should not concern themselves."<sup>118</sup>

It is difficult to say to what extent officials in the Ministry of Defence knew of the agreement with France and Israel. It is entirely possible that none of them knew. Certainly the permanent officials do not merit even a passing mention in the various histories of the

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<sup>115</sup>Ibid., pp. 341 - 342.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid.

<sup>117</sup>Douglas Clark. *Suez Touchdown. A Soldier's Tale* cited in Kyle, p. 342.

<sup>118</sup>Kyle, p. 335.

Suez Crisis. In all likelihood, they were simply instructed to begin secretly preparing for the invasion of the Canal. Since the Government had set and postponed invasion dates no less than three times in September due to progress in diplomatic talks, this hot-cold policy on Suez would not have been surprising to the Civil Servants at Defence.<sup>119</sup> While the coincidental timing of certain events could lead to later questioning, the Department could readily pass responsibility to their political superiors. The implication of this is that Ministry of Defence personnel were not able to advise the Government on the wisdom of the policy.

In responsible government, the Civil Service is deeply involved in policy development.<sup>120</sup> Policy options are extensively analyzed and reports are written detailing the advantages and disadvantages of particular courses of action. During the Suez Crisis, this appears not to have been the case. The extent to which senior officials of the Civil Service and the military were involved in the collusion with Israel goes only so far as carrying out the decisions already made by senior members of the Government. In this respect, their role as advisors was effectively abrogated. In fact, except for a few officials at the highest levels of the Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence, no one in the Civil Service knew of the Government's dealings with France and Israel. In such circumstances, the Civil Service could not exercise any restraining influence on the Cabinet.

### *Parliament*

In the Cabinet Government model, the Cabinet is responsible to Parliament for its actions and must resign if it loses the support of a majority in the House of Commons. Given that the Government represent a disciplined parliamentary party, it is very rare for them to be dismissed because a majority of the Commons lose confidence in their policies.

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<sup>119</sup>Love, p. 458.

<sup>120</sup>David Butler, Andrew Adonis and Tony Travers, Failure in British Government: The Politics of the Poll Tax, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 209.

It is still the case, in modern Governments, that Cabinet Ministers must appear before Parliament to justify the actions and policies of their departments, but the nature of the two-party system and the tight party discipline, enforced by the party whips, dictates support of the ministry by the Government's Parliamentary Party, almost regardless of the policy. While dissension within the ranks of the Government's supporters can be tolerated to a point, when the time comes to affirm the Government's position in Parliament, all members of the party are expected to vote in support of the Government.

Parliamentary opposition to the Suez policy in 1956 was vocal, but for the most part, ineffective. The Conservative Government was able to apply its 59 member majority to every division and win each vote comfortably. The party whips, led by future Prime Minister Edward Heath, held wavering members in line and clearly demonstrated that "the main task of Parliament is still what it was when first summoned, not to legislate or govern, but to secure full discussion and ventilation of all matters."<sup>121</sup> Looking at the Suez debates, it would appear that the proper role of Parliament is to compel the Government to defend its policies in public while at the same time creating a forum in which the Government is assured of maintaining support. In addition, the Government may have been aided by the fact that the Opposition chose to make the crisis a partisan issue. Not a single Conservative MP was willing to vote against the Government for fear of contributing to its downfall and possible replacement by a Labour regime. This fear put steel into the spines of doubting Conservatives at a time when they might otherwise have questioned their party's leadership.<sup>122</sup>

Parliament met in almost constant session throughout the Suez Crisis, including a rare Saturday afternoon debate. During this time, there were three significant votes on the Suez policy, all of which the Government easily won. On October 30, Labour

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<sup>121</sup>L.S. Amery, Thoughts on the Constitution, quoted in David Butler, p. 224.

<sup>122</sup>Leon Epstein, British Politics in the Suez Crisis, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), pp. 93 - 94.

unexpectedly divided the House upon adjournment when Eden refused to delay action until the Security Council, the United Nations, and the U.S. had been consulted. On November 1, the House divided again, this time on a motion of censure tabled by Gaitskell. The Government prevailed with the unanimous support of its voting members, although it lost the support of the Liberal Party. The final relevant vote on the Suez Crisis was on November 8, immediately following the cease-fire announcement, when Labour tabled a motion of no confidence in the Government. This time eight Conservative MPs deliberately abstained from voting in support of the Government, despite the significance of the vote, but they did so knowing their votes would not destroy the government.

Throughout the debates in September over the Government's Suez policy, Labour made it clear that it would only support the use of force if it were to occur under the auspices of the United Nations. Eden rejected such a notion, stating that the Government would act when it determined that action was appropriate and in the national interest. When the Prime Minister announced to the House on October 30 that the Israelis had invaded the Sinai and that Britain and France had delivered an appeal to the two belligerents, Labour offered not to divide the House if the Government were to refer the matter to the United Nations. When Eden rejected Gaitskell's offer, the Government carried a 52 member majority into the lobbies.<sup>123</sup>

The division of the House on October 30 was unexpected and the Whips had little time to organize their forces. Subsequent votes on the crisis on November 1 and following the cease-fire on November 8 were three line whips. Although there has long been speculation that there were approximately 40 "Suez Rebels" in the party, few took the unseemly step of voting against the Government or abstaining in Parliament.<sup>124</sup> In fact, not a single Conservative deliberately opposed the Government or abstained on a vote supporting the Government in Parliament during the crisis. Nutting, clearly an opponent,

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<sup>123</sup>Eden, p. 590.

<sup>124</sup>Epstein, p. 87.

ceased attending Parliament. Following the announcement of the cease-fire, eight M.P.s deliberately abstained on a Labour motion of censure to protest the Government's action. Of these, four were removed by their constituency associations. In addition to the eight M.P.s who abstained, two others were reprimanded by their constituency associations.<sup>125</sup>

The Labour benches were unusually united in their opposition to the government, despite the party's open support for Israel and the large number of strongly Zionist Jews in the Labour ranks. The sixteen Jewish members of the Parliamentary Labour Party voted across the board with the party, causing the *Jewish Chronicle* to report:

Amid the vociferous protests of the Labour party against the Government's attitude in the Israel-Egypt clash, Jewish Labour M.P.s were in a difficult position.

The Party Whips won the day, for, to a man, the Jewish members of the Labour Party in Parliament voted against the British and French military intervention in the Middle East.<sup>126</sup>

Only one member of the Labor party broke ranks. Stanley Evans was roundly cheered by Conservative backbenchers when he rose to support the Government on November 1. He abstained from Labour's vote of censure, but voted with the Party on the November 8 vote following the cease-fire announcement. In response, his constituency association demanded, and received, his resignation as their M.P.<sup>127</sup>

During the crisis, Parliament was the scene of loud and divisive debating that clearly represented the split in the nation over the Government's policy. The large parliamentary majority of the Conservative party was never seriously threatened by defections and the damage done by junior ministerial resignations appears only to have been to their own careers. Nevertheless, the abuse heaped upon the Government by the Opposition was extreme and virulent. Selwyn Lloyd, a favorite target of Labour hecklers, noted in hindsight, "I thought at the time that we were subjected to unnecessary burdens and that the Leader of the House, Butler, and the Chief Whip, Heath, were being too

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<sup>125</sup>Epstein, p. 97.

<sup>126</sup>Jewish Chronicle (London), November 9, 1956, p. 8 quoted in Epstein, p. 193.

<sup>127</sup>Epstein, pp. 128 - 132.

accommodating to the Opposition. On reflection I think that they were right; it acted as a safety valve; it kept the argument off the streets and in the House of Commons.”<sup>128</sup> There is significant merit in this statement. While Parliament allowed for a full airing of divergent views, the Government’s freedom of action was never hindered in the slightest by Parliamentary criticism. But would the Government have survived if the collusive deal with the French and Israelis had been publicly acknowledged?

Certainly, Parliament was grossly misled and lied to on at least two occasions, once by Lloyd and once by Eden when each denied specific foreknowledge of the Israeli assault. If Nutting had exposed them in a resignation speech to the House, it might, on the one hand, have brought down the Government. On the other hand, it must be remembered that the purpose of the collusive deal was to present the world with a pretext for action in the Canal Zone which several members of the Cabinet favored without the pretext. They were in favor of a “straight bash” with the stated purpose of liberating the Canal. Such a mission would not have required any collusive or immoral agreement and would probably have been accepted purely on face value, in the pursuit of the national interest. Since the Cabinet had committed to using force and was strongly supported by its backbenchers for a strong line against Egypt, it is doubtful there would have been any desertions from the party. According to Macmillan, “collusion wouldn’t have been disreputable if Anthony hadn’t said it wasn’t true.”<sup>129</sup> If the Parliamentary Conservative Party was willing to stand by the Government in circumstances that were highly suspect, as they were in late 1956, they certainly would have stood behind the Government if it had declared that all other options had been exhausted. In that sense, the issue of collusion is immaterial.

While Conservative support for the Government in Parliament was almost unwavering, that support was by no means assumed by the Prime Minister. On several occasions during the Suez Crisis, Eden seriously questioned whether or not Parliament

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<sup>128</sup>Lloyd, p. 196.

<sup>129</sup>Home, p. 433.

would back his policy, in particular when he announced the cease-fire to the house. Just prior to announcing the cease-fire to the Commons, Eden confided in President Eisenhower, "If I survive here tonight, I will call you tomorrow."<sup>130</sup> Clearly, he was in doubt as to whether or not his party would support such a move prior to the Canal being fully secured. Two years later, he told Selwyn Lloyd that he felt the whole Government should have resigned when it became apparent that their policy had completely failed.<sup>131</sup> In either event, although Eden questioned whether Parliament maintained confidence in his Government, and even felt that they should have resigned, the Government never lost the support of the majority.

Parliament certainly lived up to its obligations under the model of responsible government. That is, it required that the Government publicly defend its policies and be subjected to criticism by its opponents. However, the fact that the Government was able to present a false pretext to Parliament to justify the invasion raises a question as to the extent to which the Cabinet is really responsible to Parliament. In the face of a policy failure and an embarrassing withdrawal, the Government was able to maintain its Parliamentary majority without an early dissolution. If the Suez Crisis demonstrated to the world that Britain and France had ceased to be first-class world powers, it demonstrated to observers of British politics the true strength of party discipline in Britain, albeit at the expense of weakened Parliamentary authority.

### *The Press and Public Opinion*

The press in modern democracies has long made claims of holding a special place in the decision-making process. Certainly, this has been the case in Britain, with its widely-circulated daily newspapers and heightened public awareness of political issues. The role of the "fourth estate" is sometimes difficult to pin down and is certainly highly

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<sup>130</sup>Kyle, p. 470-1.

<sup>131</sup>Carlton, *Britain and the Suez Crisis*, p. 92.

controversial, especially in cases such as the Suez Crisis, when the nation is divided. The press can often influence as well as mirror the public's feelings about controversial events.

Looking back to the origins of the Suez Crisis, it is possible that Eden was influenced by the press to take a strong stand against Nasser to demonstrate that he was a strong leader. According to Nutting, Eden had been particularly stung by an editorial in the *Daily Telegraph* that implied that he needed to be in firmer control of his Government. The article stated that the Prime Minister had a habit of emphasizing points by placing his fist into the palm of his other hand, "but the smack is seldom heard!" Having lived in Churchill's shadow for fifteen years, Eden was sensitive about perceptions of being a weak leader. As a result, it is possible that his firm line against Nasser was motivated, in part, to prove his critics wrong.<sup>132</sup>

Newspapers and radio and television news reporting were all evident during the Suez Crisis. Newspapers, in particular, took sides on the issue. Using the circulation counts of various newspapers to weight their importance, one survey found a breakdown of 43% of circulation in favor of British action, 40% opposed, and the balance neutral. The breakdown followed traditional lines with pro-Conservative papers taking a supporting line and anti-Conservative papers taking an opposing line.<sup>133</sup> The only significant departure, as has been previously mentioned, was the Conservative *Times* which sat on the fence because of its editor's concerns about the deal with the French and Israelis brought on by his briefing by Eden.<sup>134</sup>

The BBC, and its Overseas Services in particular, faced a unique challenge not faced by the print media. Since its reach was global, the BBC could be a propaganda arm for the Government. Unfortunately for the Government, the BBC liked to think of itself as autonomous and nonpartisan, which presented a unique challenge for a Government

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<sup>132</sup>Nutting, p. 25.

<sup>133</sup>Epstein, p. 156.

<sup>134</sup>Kyle, p. 302.

embarking on a foreign policy adventure in the face of strong public opposition, which the BBC reported. On several occasions, Eden requested that the Foreign Office try to reign in the BBC, going so far as to send Nutting to the BBC to advise the broadcasting services that the Government needed to have its views presented “without having contrary views also carried to the confusion of peoples in certain parts of the world who do not understand our political system.”<sup>135</sup>

While the BBC attempted to remain impartial throughout, it was being pulled in more than one direction. Following an address to the nation on November 3 by Eden in which he put forth the Government’s policy and the reasons for action in Egypt, the Opposition demanded the opportunity to reply. Although British forces were in action and the Government portrayed the Prime Minister’s speech as a “national occasion,” and not partisan, Gaitskell was able to convince the BBC to give him time, in part, because he threatened to denounce any attempt to suppress the Opposition. On November 4, therefore, Gaitskell addressed the nation, urging everyone to appeal to his MP “to support a new Prime Minister in halting the invasion of Egypt, in ordering a cease-fire and complying with the decisions and recommendations of the United Nations.”<sup>136</sup> While the speech was generally well-received, many Government supporters considered it a treasonous act, their hostility reinforced by the fact that Gaitskell had no record of military service. The speech clearly added to the divisive atmosphere surrounding the controversy. The Government, therefore, had to operate in the climate of a very critical media. Unlike World War II, when the press was a conduit for Government propaganda, every aspect of the Government’s Suez policy was subjected to critical scrutiny. On balance, however, this did not affect policy. Britain ceased its military operation in Egypt because of international pressures, not criticism in Britain.

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<sup>135</sup>Ibid., p. 337.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., p. 433.

Public opinion similarly had no marked impact on policy. There is no question that Britain was greatly divided by the Government's policy. The political consequences of appearing to be disloyal while soldiers are fighting and dying can be serious for the opposition in most countries, but the Government's failure to gain wide spread support before embarking on the invasion emboldened the Labour leadership to try to exploit the issue. The huge attendance at the Labour rallies in Trafalgar Square give testimony to the fact that many of Labour's supporters backed their representatives in Parliament, but public opinion polls taken during the crisis clearly show that the Conservative Government received a 5% positive bump in the polls while Labour sank less than 3%. Liberal Party support, never large to start, was unaffected by the party's stand against Suez. Polls taken to gauge the public's support for the Government's policy found half the population supporting the decision to send British troops to occupy the Canal Zone while more than a third opposed the action. More than 75% of Conservatives supported the Prime Minister as well as 28% of Labour supporters and half of all Liberal supporters. After the crisis was resolved, the only change in the numbers was an increase in support for the Tory Government to 95% among Conservatives while support among the other parties remained the same.<sup>137</sup> The Government lost no support within the general population following this obvious policy failure.

Two months after British forces had to stop short of their objectives, the Government held the same level of public confidence as it did the day the intervention was announced, but public support for the action showed a clear split by party affiliation. Rank-and-file supporters of the Conservative Party were overwhelmingly in support of the intervention, many because they felt it was long overdue. The question remains, though, would the Government have maintained this support if the collusion with Israel were publicly acknowledged? The answer is probably yes. The Israeli invasion was a pretext

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<sup>137</sup>Ibid., pp. 145 - 147.

for intervention. If the Government had simply decided to invade the Canal Zone in the national interest, without any other *casus belli*, they would probably have maintained the support of their supporters in the general public, many of whom looked back nostalgically on Britain's colonial past. Even after the cease-fire was announced, support for the Government's intervention actually increased, leading one observer to speculate, "This suggests ... that many Englishmen were not originally so much troubled about the moral or legal offensiveness of Britain's action, or even about its likely failure, as they were about the sheer physical consequences of a war that might spread or be prolonged."<sup>138</sup> Unlike the politicians in Downing Street and at Westminster, it is possible that voters had more practical concerns than the significant legal questions surrounding the action. They were willing to support the Government, regardless of the justification, as long as the campaign was short and contained.

### CONCLUSION

One fundamental question posed by the Suez Crisis is whether or not Cabinet Government lived up to its constitutional responsibilities, despite the tensions and irregularities imposed by the collusive agreement with the French and the Israelis. There appears to be ample evidence that the Cabinet was kept fully informed of the Prime Minister's negotiations with the French and Israelis, and even had an opportunity to reject the policies that he was pursuing. While it can be argued that the Cabinet was either advised too late in the process to prevent the secret deal with Israel from being consummated or not advised at all, there is no doubt that it agreed unanimously to follow the scenario proposed by the Prime Minister, which differed only in detail from the Sévres agreement. Collusion or not, the policy of the Cabinet would not have changed. If the Cabinet had opposed an invasion, neither the operation against Egypt nor Eden's premiership could have continued. The Cabinet shares collective responsibility for the

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<sup>138</sup>Ibid., p. 171.

actions of the Government and in this case it exercised its authority collectively. All major decisions were made by a united Cabinet, and the failure was a collective one. The only way in which the Cabinet Government model fails to accurately explain the development of the Suez Policy was the deliberate decision to exclude the civil service from the process, with few exceptions. As a result, the usual process of inquiry and review was by-passed, but it was done knowingly by the Prime Minister and his colleagues.

Constitutionally, the entire Government was responsible for the Suez debacle. Collective responsibility serves to protect those responsible for failures in governmental policy. Such is certainly the case of the Eden Government. Had it not been for his health, Anthony Eden probably could have continued as Prime Minister without facing significant opposition within his own party, but his position was weaker than it had been and the international relationship with the United States was severely damaged. Eden's resignation served to solve many problems, not the least of which were restoring close ties with the United States and shifting responsibility for the Government's Suez Policy from the remaining senior ministers' shoulders.

Once the Suez policy emerged from the Cabinet and entered Parliament and the media, the British model worked about as well as it could. Parliament is, at best, a sounding board. Given the realities of majority government, Parliament could do no more than air the issue, and open the Government to scrutiny. It did this, as did the press. However, the model concentrates enormous powers in the hands of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, and the Suez Crisis demonstrated the full implications of this fact.

In the final analysis, the Government's parliamentary majority was secure and the British public was convinced that something needed to be done about Nasser. The pretext for the invasion, that it was a peacekeeping mission, was unnecessary for Parliament or public opinion. Rather, it was created for foreign consumption and to meet a new international standard in a world that was very different from the one that existed prior to

World War Two. In a situation that placed great demands on the British Constitution, Cabinet Government continued to function within the confines of convention. While the Cabinet failed in its responsibilities to inform Parliament fully of its actions, Parliament and the public continued to support the Ministry, even though it was embarking on a highly questionable adventure. The conventions that tie Parliament to the Government held tighter sway over MPs than did the events of the time. By complicating a major Government policy with secret deals and deceit, the Government succeeded only in testing the conventions that bound them to their supporters.

## APPENDIX I

## THE EDEN CABINET - OCTOBER 1956\*

Prime Minister	Anthony Eden
Lord President of the Council	Lord Salisbury
Foreign Secretary	Selwyn Lloyd
Chancellor of the Exchequer	Harold Macmillan
Leader of the House of Commons	R.A. Butler
Lord Chancellor	Lord Kilmuir
Minister of Defence	Anthony Head
Home Secretary	Gwilym Lloyd-George
Colonial Secretary	Alan Lennox-Boyd
Secretary for Commonwealth Relations	Lord Home
Secretary of State for Scotland	James Stuart
Minister of Labour	Iain Macleod
President of the Board of Trade	Peter Thorneycroft
Minister of Housing and Local Government	Duncan Sandys
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster	Lord Woolton
Minister of Education	Sir David Eccles
Minister of Agriculture	Derek Heathcoat Amory
Minister of Pensions	Charles Peake
Paymaster-General	Walter Monckton**

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\* Richard Lamb, *The Failure of the Eden Government*, (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987), p. xii.

\*\* Walter Monckton was Minister of Defence until October 18, 1956. Anthony Head was War Minister, one of the Junior Ministers in the Ministry of Defence.

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## VITA

Born in Bebington England, May 16, 1970. Graduated from D.W. Daniel High School in Central, South Carolina, June 1988. Received B.A. in History from Carleton College, 1992. M.A. Candidate in Government, College of William & Mary, 1994 - 1995, with an emphasis in international relations and a specialty in national security. Upon completion of the requirements for this degree, the author intends to begin a career in foreign affairs.