

When I had just turned 10, my parents took me with them to an open day at Talindert, the property of Sir Chester Manifold, at Camperdown in Victoria (my great great grandfather, Dr Daniel Curdie, was a neighbour of the Manifold family in the mid-1800s). The Prime Minister, Robert Menzies was there, a large man in a double-breasted suit, talking to some journalists. At my mother's insistence, I approached Menzies and asked for his autograph. He ignored me. I asked again, with the same result. When I asked for a third time, the journalists asked Menzies to give me an autograph, probably just to be rid of me. Menzies did so. I immediately lost it. I realized two things, however – Menzies didn't like me, and I didn't like him.

It was wryly amusing, therefore, some 60 years later, to have spent much of the decade from 2011 onwards pursuing a research project for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) on the part played by Australia, under the Menzies Government, in the Suez Crisis of 1956.

Seven Cabinet submissions, and more than 20 Cabinet decisions made Suez the key Middle East policy issue of the 1950s for Australia. But my introductory analysis of the documentary record became so extensive that the Department decided it warranted publication in 2019 as a separate monograph, *Australia, Menzies and Suez: Australian Policymaking on the Middle East Before, During and After the Suez Crisis (Australia in the World: The Foreign Affairs and Trade Files, No. 6)* to highlight key issues and provide a guide to the material in its companion volume of edited documents. The edited volume published in 2021, *Australia and the Suez Crisis 1950-1957*, was co-edited with Matthew Jordan.

Though not trained as a historian, I found the subject of Suez a fascinating source of insights into two important, timeless concerns of diplomacy. One was the interaction between advice and policy-making – especially the management of the grey space between analysis and advice on the one hand, and the politics of policy-making on the other. It is the upper-level battle space in which senior officials must operate, and it is under-studied.

The second question arising from Suez was how to approach relationships with allies when the global relativities of national power are changing. It is a question that involves notions of identity and values, as well as strategic, economic and political concerns. For Australia, ultimately, Suez was not about Menzies, or Nasser, or the Canal. It was, essentially, about the dilemmas of identity politics, and adapting to changing realities of national power. And because it went to the heart of what drives alliances, it raises questions for Australia in the present era.

Australia had joined the UK in seeking to reverse the nationalization by Egypt of the Suez Canal Company in July 1956 following the abrupt withdrawal of the possibility of securing US and British funding for the construction of the Aswan High Dam, the centrepiece of Nasser's plans for modernization of the Egyptian economy. At the request of the United States and Britain, Menzies led a delegation to Cairo seeking, without success, to persuade Nasser to relinquish control of the Canal.

Menzies was at pains to show his was not a 'negotiation' with Nasser but rather a presentation and explanation of the proposals arising from the London conference of Canal user countries. He was keen to attribute some blame to Eisenhower for the outcome, but he was hardly bothered by it: he had gained a measure of international prominence and positive political focus within Australia for playing a part, and it stood him in good stead with Eden and others whose approval he desired.

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From British and French perspectives, Nasser's refusal was an outcome they welcomed, as part of 'clearing the deck' for attempting to fulfil their undeclared ambition of Nasser's removal from power. From Dulles' perspective, the mission, like the Suez Canal Users Association fiasco that came in its wake, was a means of buying time for tempers (hopefully) to cool in London. In that limited sense, Dulles also was at least somewhat successful. Moreover, although it probably mattered little to the personal and political calculus of either man, Menzies' discussions with Nasser were not acrimonious most of the time – although Nasser rose to the theatrical possibilities of the occasion by threatening to walk out when Menzies rather clumsily told him there would not be a problem unless Nasser failed to agree.

Although later negotiations under UN auspices showed signs of resolving the dispute, Anglo-French forces invaded Egypt in early November 1956, supposedly to protect the Suez Canal from fighting between Egypt and Israel. In fact, the attack, launched initially by Israel in late October, was part of a plan conceived by France and Israel, and coordinated with the United Kingdom, seeking to achieve the overthrow of Nasser through the humiliation of a major military defeat.

At the direction of Menzies, who had the enthusiastic backing of almost all of his Cabinet except the foreign minister, Richard Casey, Australia gave strong support to the actions of Britain and France. It did so in the UN Security Council, where it was a member at the time, in very limited company. However, the outcome – a ceasefire followed by withdrawal imposed on the UK and France by Eisenhower, the humiliation of Eden and the UK Government, and the end of Eden's political career – was as inevitable as it was predictable. Australia's diplomatic relations with Egypt were severed by the Egyptians on 6 November 1956 and were not restored until late 1959. Australia became part of the UK imperial twilight in the Middle East.

Most historians point to ideological blinkering and systemic weaknesses under Menzies in the formulation of foreign policy where Britain was concerned. Moreover, my research assistant Miguel Galsim found that Menzies was in possession of correspondence between Eden and Eisenhower highlighting Eisenhower's rejection of Eden's arguments for the use of force, which he withheld from his Cabinet colleagues. And although there is no report in the Australian Archives of his meeting with Eisenhower on 3 August 1956, we know from an American summary that Menzies was told by Eisenhower that he hoped the UK and France would exercise restraint.

But it would probably have made little difference if Menzies had shared that advice. Throughout the crisis the intellectual quality of debate within the Menzies Cabinet regarding Suez was abysmal. And when the conflict broke out, Cabinet's determination to support the UK was based entirely on political grounds, unencumbered by strategic analysis, willingness to question UK motives, consideration of possible consequences for US-Australia relations, or even any assessment of Eden's prospects for success. There was a general feeling in Cabinet of condescension toward the United States, including references to the need to 'tone up' the US approach to align with that of the UK. Analysis of regional political realities was entirely absent. Casey counselled restraint, but Casey's unsolicited advice went unheeded.

Throughout the crisis, moreover, those External Affairs officials regarded by Menzies as 'Casey's men', including the Secretary of External Affairs, Arthur Tange, were marginalised. Tange was excluded from the meetings between Menzies and Nasser. Later, when Eisenhower insisted on the withdrawal of UK and French forces, Tange tried to dissuade Menzies from criticism of the US role. He failed. In the complex nexus between politics, personalities and foreign policy advice, romanticised notions of a British Australian identity – Tina Turner's 'sweet, old-fashioned notion'—impacted powerfully upon Australia's policy

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choices on Suez. And they did so despite obvious shifts in the relativities of national power in the post-World War II Middle East.

Officials skirted the question of whether, as the US insisted, Suez was being used by the UK merely as a pretext for a reassertion of British power against Nasser and revisionist tendencies sweeping the Middle East. External Affairs never examined and offered advice whether the overthrow of Nasser (as distinct from military pressure to leverage diplomacy) served Australia's interests –including whether it was appropriate, feasible and sustainable.

Most surprisingly, it did not highlight the potential for damage to Australia's relations with Washington that could arise from too close an association with Eden over the issue. In practice, Australia directed its diplomatic energy toward goals that were either beyond reach, such as the restoration of international control of the Canal; or the question of freedom of navigation through the Canal, whose disruption was perhaps a 'disconcerting possibility', as a Cabinet submission put it, but was far from an actual or unmanageable threat.

Meanwhile, British flattery of Menzies spoke to mythologies about a shared British identity, and nobility of purpose, that were largely immune from Casey's concerns and arguments. Menzies, the Anglophile Australian nationalist, wanted Eden to throw him the ball. Eden was happy to oblige by waving him off to Cairo to deal with Nasser. Menzies repaid the favour by giving Eden the strongest possible personal and political support as events unfolded and the British position deteriorated, maintaining direct contact with Eden throughout the crisis, mainly through the UK High Commission in Canberra and only very rarely through the Australian diplomatic communications network. There is no evidence of inputs by External Affairs to his correspondence with Eden.

My monograph also provided an opportunity to describe one of the most remarkable, but almost unknown moments in Australian diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> Some 11 days after President Eisenhower had imposed his will on the British and broken Eden's career as Prime Minister, Menzies took it upon himself (with Eden's enthusiastic support) to write to Eisenhower castigating him for the US stance. The idea of interjecting unsolicited advice into the spat between Eden and Eisenhower should, as Banjo Paterson would have said, made even the boldest hold their breath. But Menzies waved his proverbial stockwhip and told Eisenhower that the British role – furiously rejected by Eisenhower – had been proper and correct.

Menzies said that the United States had failed to understand the British position, that US handling of the issue in the United Nations had been inopportune, and had left the British and French 'not only rebuked but humiliated', to the benefit of the Russians and Nasser. He warned Eisenhower that unless the UN peacekeeping force being assembled as the Anglo-French forces withdrew was 'cohesive, powerful and effective enough' to settle the 'great issues' (that is, as Menzies put it elsewhere, to prevent Nasser from remaining 'in possession of the spoils') then 'quick consideration may conceivably be given to resuming military operations ...'.

It fell to Casey, who was in New York, to deliver the message to Eisenhower in Washington. Fortunately for Casey, Eisenhower did not want to see him. While he waited for an appointment, Casey and his senior accompanying External Affairs official, James Plimsoll shared the Menzies message with their British counterparts and came up with what Casey described as a 'summary of its main points', which they handed over, together with the Menzies letter, to the Acting US Secretary of State, Herbert Hoover Jnr. The 'summary' (which Casey wisely did not send back to Canberra until after his meeting) and the record of the discussion with Hoover excluded the condescending language employed by Menzies, and the

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<sup>1</sup> See my *Australia, Menzies and Suez*, pp. 80-83.

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inflammatory reference to resuming the conflict, in favour of some gracious comments about US strength and prestige and the importance of the United States and Britain resolving their differences. Eisenhower provided a cool but courteous response to Menzies a week later, and the exchange of letters between the heads of government sank without trace.

There is no doubt that the finest diplomacy exercised by Australia during the Suez Crisis was the part played by Casey and Plimsoll between Menzies and Eisenhower.

I have outlined the history of Australia's role during the Suez Crisis here in some detail because, as noted earlier, it raises questions about contemporary challenges facing Australian foreign policy, when a rebalancing of the global order is in progress.

Suez posed, or perhaps in retrospect should have posed, fundamental questions for Australia about the decline of an empire to which, in many respects, Australia and most Australians still wished to belong. For Menzies, and his senior political figures, there was a deep reluctance to acknowledge the tectonic changes that had taken place in the Middle East region and in Britain's standing globally, including in relation to the United States. Cabinet discussions – and inputs from External Affairs – were almost entirely devoid of discussion of what those changes meant for Australia's interests. Australia's determination to back Britain was driven primarily by political instincts and identity politics, not strategic calculation. And the political position hardened over time.

In the cauldron of human and political chemistry of Cabinet, there was unwillingness to breathe the rarefied air of uncertainty posed by the declining global position of Britain in the post-colonial era. Casey therefore had few supporters in his opposition to the use of force against Nasser. At no stage at the political level was the Suez crisis the subject of fundamental questioning about the values Australia was seeking to uphold by extending unadulterated support to the United Kingdom.

Therein lies a contemporary dilemma for Australia as it confronts change in the relativities of power in the Asia-Pacific. The dictum about having no permanent friends, only permanent interests, is only partially correct. Suez showed that the perception of interests is not easily separated from notions of identity. Where Britain was concerned, Menzies and his cohort were unwilling – personally, politically, ideologically and intellectually – to confront the challenge of change consequent upon Britain's post-war decline. Suez demonstrated that the loyalty we may feel toward a relationship, which in the case of the United States is also a relationship which for excellent reasons we seek constantly to cultivate, may contribute to failure at the political level to pay sufficient attention to tectonic changes affecting our future.

By the standards and expectations of the time he served, mostly after the Second World War, Robert Menzies was a fine Prime Minister. It would be unfair to judge him by his Anglophile pretensions, or his lamentable performance over Suez. His government reshaped the focus and direction of Australia's foreign policy toward the Asia-Pacific. At home he brought a progressive vision of Australia to fruition. He was an exceptionally gifted politician, who towered above his contemporaries on all sides of politics. Even Menzies' role in regard to Suez has some utility, in retrospect, insofar as it reminds us of the perils of political leadership that seeks to function within an echo chamber of assumptions and perceptions of national interest. It is a clear warning against setting notions of identity ahead of inclusive and constructive debate about strategic perils and possibilities.

Alongside the failures of the Menzies government at the leadership and Cabinet levels over Suez, in the 1950s External Affairs similarly lacked a forward-looking, objective, policy analysis mechanism that could connect the Suez crisis to a much larger picture, correctly interpret British motivations and US intentions, and invite attention to the policy questions that the decline of Britain in the post-war era posed for Australia. Instead, insurmountable political and

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bureaucratic odds faced those officials who might otherwise have urged and facilitated greater clarity of thinking from ministers about Australia's policy objectives, and the means of achieving them in a changing global and regional context.

The importance of having such a mechanism examining and recommending policy to ministers is at least as important now as it was then.

More than six decades have passed since the Suez crisis. We have seen the unfolding of a very different Middle East, and a very different Australia. But Suez still provides a wealth of evidence and insight to those who seek to understand the factors that may shape outcomes arising from the complex relationship between, on the one hand, the demands of providing policy advice to government, and on the other hand the shaping of policy outcomes at the political level. And it reminds us that when questions of identity become entangled with shifts in the relativities of power, and sober, balanced advice is ignored, or worse still, not offered at critical moments, Suez still has cautionary lessons for us all.



## **Dr Robert Bowker**

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