

THE PASSION OF ESCOTT REID: A CANADIAN TEMPLATE FOR MODERN DIPLOMACY?

Since the Berlin wall crumbled, on 9th November 1989, we have had 15 years in which to seek the "peace dividend", and the spread of democracy so energetically trumpeted by the victors of the Cold War. While it is true that Latin American dictators may be an endangered species, in too many parts of the world there is a resurgence of ethnic strife and the worst manifestations of nationalism. The only surviving superpower's military spending keeps rising to drive the national debt. The United Nations all too often seems as impotent now as it did in the Security-council veto days of its infancy. The 51 member states in December 1945 have grown steadily to 191 at the end of 2002. Indecision, conflicts of interest and plain apathy can all impede rapid response in a crisis. Well, what about diplomacy?

Perhaps we must go back in order to progress, and review the life and times of one of Canada's most eminent diplomats. Today, 21 Prime Ministers and 137 years removed from Confederation, many Canadians may not think that the country has much diplomacy of which to boast. This was certainly not the case in the central decades of the 20th century. Canada had an active foreign service, with some exemplary strategists and negotiators. One such was Escott Meredith Reid, a tenacious worker, who was by turns Rhodes scholar, political researcher, career diplomat, World Bank regional director and the founding principal of Glendon College at York University in Toronto. Reid was born into the family of an Anglican minister on 21 January 1905 at Campbellford, a small town on the banks of the Trent river in southeast Ontario. Today, few in Campbellford have heard of him: not surprising, as his parents were, in a sense, just passing through. His father A.J. Reid hailed from Shropshire in England, mother Morna Meredith was born in the Rosedale area of Toronto. The family settled in the town for a decade, 1901-1911. It was to be the last-but-one of his father's clerical postings, which culminated in a lengthy tenure in Toronto. Reid described his father as "something of a Christian socialist" and a great influence, although the son in adulthood became a "wistful agnostic". His mother was very well-read, "a sceptic about things temporal".

Reid wrote that he was especially proud of his contributions to six national and international institutions, including the Department of External Affairs (in which he served from 1939-1962), the UN and NATO. He possessed formidable, long-term stamina for the crafting of reports and speeches, and strove for good governance and a human-rights agenda at a time when Big-Power *realpolitik* often trumped the longer-term perspectives that one might wish to see in an effective United Nations. In Reid's heyday, External Affairs was not an institution noted for diversity: the climate of the times ensured that the "mandarins" were overwhelmingly white, male and middle-class, mostly anglophone, often combining clerical lineage and an Oxford education. Prime Minister Mackenzie King was consistent in steering a firm course away from foreign entanglements.

However, King's stance was contrary to the instincts of some of his capable subordinates, including Reid and future prime ministers Louis St. Laurent and Lester Pearson. These idealistic Canadians were especially keen to build economic and social relationships, not purely military alliances, and argued accordingly in clauses that they drafted for the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 and other agreements. Other senior civil servants of a more "realist" stripe, such as Hume Wrong and Norman Robertson, frequently felt compelled to rein in Reid's exuberant prose and ambitious gambits. Pearson, as often as not, was in fortunate counterpoise between them. Often enough, stolid resistance from one or more Security Council members would bog down a Canadian initiative. At other times, Reid saw notable success with the content of UN and NATO clauses, and in Pearson's 1950s adventures in the termination of the Korean war and the resolution of the Suez crisis. Canada emerged from World War II as a substantial military power, with naval forces honed by years of convoy duties in the Atlantic. This, the enthusiasm and skill of the foreign-service professions, and the ability of Canada to intercede with some of the "non-aligned nations" such as India gave the country enviable diplomatic prestige from the 1940s to the late 1950s.

Upon retirement, Reid channeled his considerable writing energies into books, six in all, published between 1973 to 1989. His strength as an author is bolstered by the immediacy of events: he was there as the postwar institutional architecture was erected and embellished. His years in External Affairs saw the dawning of the United Nations and NATO, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Reid's book "Time of Fear and Hope", has been acclaimed as the key text on the origins of the North Atlantic Treaty. Other books outlined aspects of the creation of the United Nations, the operations of the World Bank, and the Hungary and Suez crises of 1956. Two favourites, in terms of narrative and wider insight, are "Envoy to Nehru" and his formal memoir, "Radical Mandarin". The former recounts his time as High Commissioner to India, 1952-1957, a challenging post linking two large and contrasting Commonwealth countries. A few years later, J.K. Galbraith served as a highly-respected U.S. Ambassador to India, and his book on this experience makes an interesting foil to Reid's. Galbraith is quoted as saying of "Radical Mandarin" that the book was a superb chronicle of "the exceptionally useful life of an exceptionally and sometimes inconveniently independent public man", and that "its lessons on foreign policy, including its account of some elegantly institutionalized stupidities, are important for Canadians and even more, I think, for Americans". Glimpses of Reid's career occur also in the memoirs of other diplomats such as George Ignatieff and Lester Pearson, and the work of Canadian historians such as J.L. Granatstein, J. English and P. Stursberg. A new book entitled "Escott Reid, Diplomat and Scholar", edited by G. Donaghy and S. Roussel, has recently been published by McGill-Queen's University Press.

Reid's interest in international aid was fostered by a trip with Pearson to the Colombo conference in 1950, by his years in India, and by a stint with the World Bank as director of the South Asia / Middle East department. His view of development was clear: improved living standards for

the poor, as opposed to pumped-up per-capita gross national product and big projects for consulting firms from the donor countries. One does not need to be a general, an economist or a banker to appreciate his contributions to the notion of collective security (a passion shared with Pearson and St. Laurent) and the provision of appropriate technology and financing for aid programs.

Reid's long and active life ended at Ottawa on 20 September 1999. He, his wife Ruth Herriot and their three children had spent years on the diplomatic trail. Home was best defined as Ottawa and the family farm in the Gatineau, acquired in 1946. His writings and those of his peers reveal a very human person, albeit a perfectionist, at times exasperating, and for many years a self-confessed workaholic, as were several of his "NATO generation" colleagues. January 2005, the centennial of his birth, has now arrived, and it is fitting to recognize the contribution of Reid and his colleagues by taking a look at the ancient art of diplomacy in the world, and how it may be improved.

A lifelong social democrat, Reid modified his views in accordance with evidence. His neutralist views of the 1930s were dropped as the Nazi tide overran western Europe. Notably, he became a strong proponent of containing Stalinist menace. Having seen the failure of the League of Nations in his early years, Reid would surely be disappointed by some current aspects of the institutions that his tireless penmanship helped to mould. At the least, he would hold strong views on multi-party gridlock at the United Nations, the unilateral stance of the U.S.A., the administration of aid programs, and possibly the non-meritocratic elevation of political appointees over career diplomats for high-ranking posts.

Andrew Cohen (*Globe and Mail*, 27 November 2004) recently invoked Reid, "the restless visionary and diplomat" as a senior figure in Canada's glory days of "building institutions to advance peace, order and good government" around the world. Were Reid still a player on the diplomatic stage, one would imagine that he would strive to simultaneously adapt and preserve the institutions he helped craft more than half a century ago. In these days of "failed states", one adaptation might surely be to draw limits on the definition of a sovereign, legitimate government, a key obstacle in the U.N.'s too-often hamstrung efforts to serve as world policeman. Increased aid and peacekeeping budgets coupled with heightened forensic accounting of the cash flow might be another.

An informed, transparent foreign service is surely an asset to its masters at home. Governments that are clearly having a positive affect on the world stage do not need a fawning media machine to "spin" dubious strategies to advantage for the public at home. Positive feedback from such stories could do much to defeat the current cynicism and apathy regarding politics and government, and even rescue some erstwhile citizen-voters from the pathetic "Reality TV" abyss (see Allan Gregg's recent essay on the malaise of democracy in *The Walrus*, September 2004, pp.26-29). That would be a fitting legacy for Escott Reid and his contemporaries in External Affairs.

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Footnote: Here are the six volumes that Reid published in his retirement, plus some excellent background readings on 20th-century Canadian diplomacy, with much information on Reid, Pearson and their contemporaries. Galbraith (1969) does not mention Reid himself, but offers an interesting foil to Reid's "Envoy to Nehru" (Reid was Canadian High Commissioner to India, 1952-1957; Galbraith was the American Ambassador in New Delhi, 1961-1963) – both books make excellent reading.

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