

Lester B Pearson and the Nobel Peace Prize 1957 – 60th Anniversary

Dec 11, 2017 | Michael Pearson

Sixty years ago, on December 11, 1957, Lester Pearson delivered his Nobel peace prize lecture in Oslo, Norway. He hadn't expected to be there.

The announcement two months earlier by the all-Norwegian Nobel committee that he was the recipient for his contribution to the resolution of the Suez crisis took him by surprise. The man who some claim to have invented the blue beret in that crisis through the creation the first major United Nations peacekeeping force – called the UN Emergency Force or UNEF - was at that time a member of Canada's political opposition. Four months earlier his Liberal Party had been defeated and out of office for the first time in 22 years. The longtime diplomat and nine-year veteran as Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs was out of a diplomatic job for the first time in almost 30 years.

When he first heard the news from a journalist seeking comment, the best the surprised backbencher could come up with was: “*gosh, I am thunderstruck*”. The disappointed media contact may have hoped to get a quote closer to what Pearson may well have been thinking: ‘thank God someone still remembers me!’

He may have been pleased by the recognition, but the timing was awkward. October 14, 1957 also happened to be the day when Canada's National Parliament reopened under new Prime Minister, Conservative John Diefenbaker. The ‘Chief’, a man who was to be Pearson's main political rival for the next 10 years would have seen this day as his moment in the sun. That the Queen, the young Elizabeth II, had agreed to formally preside over the Opening – the first occasion in Canadian political history that a British monarch had done so – must have felt like icing on the cake.

Then he finds out his emerging rival steals the headlines with the Nobel award announcement. Pearson's face, not the Chief's, appeared on the front page of the Ottawa Citizen that day. Worse, he had to endure, at a Rideau Hall state dinner that evening, the diverted attention of the Queen and many others who were busy congratulating Pearson on his peace prize! So much for the old saying, ‘to the victor go the spoils!’

The ‘spoil’ that the Nobel prize medal represented was indeed a special one. First awarded in 1901, many eminent individuals and organizations had previously received it. When a second, luckier journalist contacted him that October day, he said: *“I am overwhelmed by the honour of an award of this kind. I don’t think any greater honour can come to any individual than an award for work for peace.”*

That ‘work for peace’ took the form of quick action at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to stop a widening war over the Suez Canal in November of 1956. It was a remarkable achievement. Not only its legacy – UN Peacekeeping – but in how quickly that legacy came about.

When one considers the time and effort it takes these days to find multilateral solutions to complex international crises, the only two-week time period from when French and British forces landed at the Canal and the arrival of the first UNEF troops, under the direction of the first UNEF Commander, Canadian General E.L.M. Burns, is truly amazing.

The credit goes to many, but everyone agreed after the crisis that Lester Pearson’s diplomacy was a key factor. There is an old saying that diplomacy is “the art of letting someone else have it your way”. This in fact encapsulates perfectly the diplomacy of Lester Pearson in New York in the fall of 1956.

In political memoirs and historical accounts of the crisis, there are various claims from British, American and other major players - Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers, ambassadors and others - saying THEY, not Mike Pearson, had the ORIGINAL idea of UNEF. I think if he were alive today he would not seek to dispute the claims because their authors in many ways, by their actions, enabled him to succeed with the plan that created it.

He had already been planting the seeds of the idea for weeks; when he saw others were warming to it, he struck while the iron was hot. The others took credit for the contents of the UNEF resolution; Pearson got the votes to support it without a single dissenting voice. He was letting someone else have it his way.

My grandfather’s special talent was his wonderful capacity for friendliness, honesty, and even-handedness. That trust-earning reputation, and his many personal relationship with key players made the difference during Suez. Decision-makers in Washington, London, Paris and New York all knew him; he was friends with Nehru of India, a pivotal influencing force on Egypt and President Nasser. He even knew Nasser a little, having met with him a year earlier. Not all these men trusted my grandfather, Nasser least of all. However, none of them had reason to doubt his motives or his integrity and all knew he acted with the complete trust and support of his PM, Louis St. Laurent.

UN Secretary General Dag Hammerskjold wrote of Pearson that they worked so well together during the crisis, trusting each other, that relations between he and the Canadians were indistinguishable from those with his own staff. He had been a sceptic about UNEF at first: *“To be or not to be for a UN Force”* he wrote on a photo he gave my grandfather of the two of them huddled together in the GA; his added words *“with deep gratitude”*, showed his scepticism had been won over. Together, they had seized the day. Pearson would have been more than happy to share the peace prize with Hammerskjold had that been the decision of the Nobel Committee.

Making a good speech to mark a special event is a desirable thing. Pearson almost missed his. The transatlantic flight to Oslo was late. *“It was a wild night, with a blizzard blowing”* my grandfather remembered. *“The plane had to circle for an hour before it could land.”* Many of us Canadians know what it’s like to sit at an airport or on an airplane in ‘the winds of winter’, hoping for salvation! Eventually airborne, Pearson, his wife Maryon and all the other passengers enjoyed a special surprise from the aircrew: *“they started serving this very deluxe unprecedented seven course Nobel Peace Prize dinner. We were almost to Norway by the time we got through the last course.”*

The chair of the Nobel Committee introduced Pearson at the Oslo award ceremony with words that highlighted two of his important diplomatic gifts employed during the Suez crisis: *“his exceptional ability to put forward constructive ideas for the solution of a problem”* and his *“attempt to understand the other party and meet him halfway”*.

An approach that seeks to ‘meet halfway’ can be a tricky business; many critics decry that as weakness, gullibility or even betrayal. Pearson had plenty of those accusations thrown his way. Given the controversy, one might have expected him to defend and explain his actions at Suez in his Nobel speech, in part to address his critics. After all, it came only six days after he had announced his candidacy for the leadership of the national Liberal Party.

But he didn’t do that. Instead, the Peace Prize speech focused on his enduring preoccupation with peace. In what he called the Four Faces of Peace - Trade (as in free), Power (as in the control of it), Policy (as in diplomacy to avoid war), and People (as in cross-cultural understanding) - he explained his philosophy, derived from much experience, that peace and security required a multiplicity of strategies, simultaneously pursued. *“The choice is as clear”* he said in Oslo, *“now for nations as it was once for individuals – peace or extinction. The life of states cannot, any more than the life of individuals, be conditioned by the force and the will of a unit, however powerful, but by the consensus of a group, which must one day include all states.”* Prophetic, if not necessarily original, ideas.

The few remarks that LBP made in Oslo on peacekeeping were also prophetic. *“I do not exaggerate the significance of what has been done. There is no peace in the area. There is no unanimity at the United Nations about the functions and future of this force. It would be futile in a quarrel between, or in opposition to, big powers. But...we made at least a beginning. If, on that foundation, we do not build something more permanent and stronger, we will once again have ignored realities, rejected opportunities and betrayed our trust. Will we never learn?”*

A good question. What we have learned, if the recent debate about Canada’s role in peacekeeping is any guide, is that there’s a mythology amongst many Canadians that if only we donned the blue beret again, our peacekeeping reputation could be restored. However, in a world where there is apparently no peace in any conflict area to keep, traditional peacekeeping as it took place at Suez hardly exists anymore. You cannot make policy on the basis of mythology. Pearson’s Nobel speech recognized its limitations if attendant political will to resolve conflict did not exist.

That said, memory and reputation as a basis for decision-making is important too. Canadians want and expect their country to be a difference-maker in world affairs, as it was at Suez. We will never be a “big power”, but we have the assets and capacity to directly contribute to multilateral peace operations. The government’s recent announcement was important in this regard. Boots on the ground may be a valid next step, although we must be careful to ensure the result is not another UNEF (or Cyprus), where our presence didn’t lead to more than temporary security, or Afghanistan where even temporary security cost too many lives, or Somalia where it led to worse outcomes. In this sense we can and do learn.