

Correspondence

The Editor
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Dear Sir,

I refer to Gerald De Cruz's letter in the March 1970 issue of your journal. Nearly all the events alleged by him to have occurred between 1945 and 1948 are recorded in my notes on an interview I had with him in 1965. The reason why many of the points raised by him were not incorporated in my article, "A Study of Three Early Political Parties in Singapore, 1945-48", is an important one. I have not been able to verify them, and the question of verification is specially important in this case for several reasons. Firstly, both during the interview and in his letter, Gerald De Cruz is factually wrong in several places, inaccurate or misleading in others, and tends to exaggerate the role and the impact of the leftwing movement on Malayan political developments during the early postwar years. Secondly, his account differs considerably from the primary written sources and from published and unpublished works on the MDU and the AMCJA-PUTERA. He did not substantiate his case with party or other documents as he told me that whatever documents he had had been destroyed during the Emergency. Thirdly, his version of the MDU was in many aspects different from what I gathered from the other MDU leaders I had interviewed. And, of course, I have not been able to obtain the views of MDU leaders such as Lim Hong Bee, John Eber, P.V. Sharma, Eu Chooi Yip and Lim Kean Chye who, except the last, are in political exile.

According to the notes of my interview with Gerald De Cruz, he did not state that "the idea of the MDU was conceived by Lim Hong Bee and the MCP during his association with the MPAJA in Endau during the Japanese Occupation". The birth of the MDU, as recorded in my notes, is as given in my article. Gerald De Cruz, however, did tell me that he recruited John Eber — 'his protegee', to use his own words — and that when he left for Kuala Lumpur to edit "The Democrat" he invited the latter to take his place on the executive committee of the MDU.

It is clear that Gerald De Cruz regards his version of the birth of the MDU as the gospel truth. I am not so sure about that. An early account on this point based on interviews with John Eber was given in 1950 by V. Thompson and R. Adloff, who state that

The MDU had been set up in Singapore as long before as December 1945 by few middle-class intellectuals whose idealistic plans for Malaya's future was thought out during their wartime internment by the Japanese.

Other writers such as V. Purcell, J.H. Brimmell, Thomas Bellow, Rene Peritz, Usha Mahajani, G.P. Means, and Silcock and Aziz make no mention at all that the MDU was conceived by "Lim Hong Bee and the MCP during his association with the MPAJA in Endau during the Japanese Occupation". Incidentally, three of the writers listed above had interviewed Gerald De Cruz while they were engaged on their research projects. For instance, Usha Mahajani, who had also interviewed Gerald De Cruz, writes of the MDU:

In December 1945, the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) was formed by John Eber, an intellectual with profoundly democratic ideals, and Gerald De Cruz, then a member of the Malayan Communist Party. The programme of the new party was worked out by these two during their internment by the Japanese.

I wish to emphasise that I have raised these points not to discredit Gerald De Cruz's version of the MDU but to show that the exact origins of the party do not appear to be clear. His account, however, has given a vital twist to the widely-held view that the party was conceived by non-Malay leaders during their internment by the Japanese. Hence, only two things seem certain about the party from available information. First, the MDU was conceived during the Japanese Occupation; second, its founders were

p. Hoalim, Gerald De Cruz, John Eber, Lim Hong Bee, Lim Kean Chye and Wu Tian Wang. It may be possible to arrive at a more definite conclusion when the views of the leaders now in exile are available.

It is true, as Gerald De Cruz asserts, that the Japanese Occupation had convinced politically-conscious leaders that the old British colonial order could not be re-established in Malaya. I have, therefore, readily endorsed the view that the MDU was conceived during the Japanese Occupation. Anyone who reads the documents of the early postwar days in 1945 could not have failed to be impressed by the exhilarating sense of expectation among politically-conscious Malaysians of important constitutional reforms for the country. In this situation the official announcement of the Malayan Union Scheme in general terms seems to have encouraged the MDU leaders "to believe that a new democratic order would soon be introduced into Malaya". I did not state in my article that the Malayan Union Scheme convinced the MDU leaders that the old order was gone for good and could not be re-established in Malaya.

Gerald De Cruz alleges that I have been guilty of over-simplification in three of my conclusions about the MDU. One of these over-simplifications, according to him, concerns my conclusion that "The MDU approach on citizenship was unacceptable to the Malays". He points out the support given to the Melayu citizenship proposals in the People's Constitution by the Malay Nationalist Party (MNP), the Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (API) and other leftwing Malay political parties. He then states that the MDU approach on citizenship was the united and unanimous approach of all the members of the PMCJA and claims that "This latter body included the MNP, the API etc." The latter statement is incorrect because the leftwing Malay political parties were not members of the PMCJA at the time they supported the People's Constitution. In January 1947 they resigned from the PMCJA and formed their own coalition called the PUTERA. Further on, Gerald De Cruz writes, "These Malay organisations unanimously agreed with the non-Malay bodies in the Council that there should be set up a full national status to be termed Melayu". This is misleading because the order should have been reversed. The term Melayu did not originate with the non-Malay bodies in the AMCJA as Gerald De Cruz's statement implies. It was the PUTERA which conceived the 'Melayu status' for the citizenship proposals and which succeeded in getting the AMCJA to endorse it as early as January 1947. Finally, if Gerald De Cruz had read footnote 28 of my article more carefully, he would not have missed my statement that the AMCJA-PUTERA "published the People's Constitutional Proposals as an alternative to the Federation Agreement". He is therefore wrong in accusing me of ignoring the support of PUTERA for the Melayu citizenship proposals as defined in the People's Constitution. It is legitimate, when one talks of Malay support in general terms, to refer only to the political stand of the Malay community as a whole. And there is no doubt at all that the Malay community as a whole opposed the People's Constitution in general and the Melayu citizenship proposals in particular. It is in this context that my conclusion that "The MDU approach on citizenship was unacceptable to the Malays" is to be read. In this light it is interesting to note that all the 20,500 copies of the People's Constitution and allied documents sold during the All-Malaya Hartal in October 1947 were in Chinese. No Malay version of these documents was available at the time of the hartal.

Gerald De Cruz regards as another over-simplification my statement that "the MDU lacked organisation and mass support" and "concentrated on the dissemination of political ideas". This is so, he argues because "Legal political activity only came into being in the postwar years and it was therefore necessary for a large part of any political party's time to be spent in educating the general public to the necessity of politics, of the struggle against imperialism, of social justice and of freedom". This is mere rationalisation of a short-sighted policy of the MDU. The Second Political Report of the MDU issued in April 1948 explains the position in the following manner:

We used to work on the assumption that so long as we kept up a steady campaign of publicity, organisation and all else would take care of themselves. It was a serious failure in our work. We remain where we were.¹

¹ The MDU Second Political Report, April 1947 to May 1948. p. 15.

The MDU therefore concentrated on the dissemination of political ideas not because party politics was 'new' in Malaya but because it was a matter of policy. The realisation of this vitally important mistake caused the party to attempt to build a mass base through its trade union group in 1948.

The third over-simplification alleged by Gerald De Cruz concerns my conclusion that the MDU "not only lacked organisation but enjoyed no mass support". That the MDU had no elaborate organisation or a mass base is only too obvious and indeed was openly admitted by its leaders in 1948. It is equally obvious that the AMCJA-PUTERA owed its mass support to the communist-controlled labour movement and, hence, depended for its very survival on the policy of the MCP. I am, therefore, unable to follow the logic in Gerald De Cruz's statement that "no organisation before or since has enjoyed such wide mass support as the MDU did, through the PMCJA". One might as well assert that the several minor democratic parties, which allied with the Chinese Communist Party during the Sino-Japanese War, enjoyed national support through the Maoist united-front movement in China.

I remember distinctly Gerald De Cruz telling me that he alone opposed the dissolution of the MDU and was outvoted by 14 to 1 against. And I have not stated anywhere in my article that all the 15 central committee members voted unanimously for the dissolution of the party. But this is precisely what I have been accused by Gerald De Cruz to be guilty of because of footnote 64 of my article. Let me quote the relevant part of the paragraph referred to by him:

The leaders therefore chose to ensure the safety of party members by a voluntary dissolution rather than to continue functioning in an emergency environment that would seriously curb its activities and freedom of expression.⁶⁴

Footnote 64 states "all the MDU leaders I interviewed were fully agreed on this point".

Clearly, the point referred to in the footnote is that all my MDU interviewees, including Gerald De Cruz himself, fully agreed that the MDU was dissolved to ensure the safety of party members. It does not mean nor imply anything else. As to his claim that he alone opposed the dissolution of the party, it is not relevant to the point I make in that particular statement. And I did not incorporate his claim in my article because it cannot be verified. Philip Hoalim, Seow Cheng Fong and D. Siddons, who attended the meeting to dissolve the party, did not mention to me that he alone opposed the move and was outvoted by 14 to 1 against.

Gerald De Cruz asserts that the People's Constitution was jointly drafted by John Eber, Willy Kok and himself on the basis of the six principles of the AMCJA-PUTERA. The last part of this statement is inaccurate because the People's Constitution was based on the ten principles of the AMCJA-PUTERA. And in the words of Silcock and Aziz, this impressive document "shows clearly the mark of being the work of one hand" and "probably the author of the greater part of it was Mr. John Eber". Indeed, this excellent document bears the mark not only of "one hand" but of a sharp legal brain as well. Of the three persons mentioned above, only John Eber had any legal training and was a lawyer of some standing at the time. I am inclined to believe that others had contributed their ideas and thoughts to the People's Constitutional Proposals, but I am not convinced that it was drafted by "more than one hand" unless I am able to verify Gerald De Cruz's statement.

In the third paragraph of his letter, Gerald De Cruz alleges that he recruited John Eber and "a few months later" invited the latter to take his place on the executive committee of the MDU. It is on record that both of them represented the Eurasians' Progressive Association at the inaugural meeting of the MDU on 21 December 1945. And according to the type-written list of the first central executive committee of January 1946, John Eber was a member but not Gerald De Cruz. This list was published in the *Malaya Tribune* and the *Straits Times* of 21 January 1946, exactly a month after the inauguration of the MDU. I am therefore puzzled as to which central committee Gerald De Cruz refers to and on which he claims to have sat for "a few months". Again, Gerald De Cruz, Osman China, Jacko and Willy Kok did not appear in the

type-written list of the central committee, 1947-48, but were listed as members of the last central committee for the period, May-June 1948. I am willing to concede that they might have been co-opted into the central committee by October 1947, as Gerald De Cruz claims they were. I wish however to point out that this, if true, is not substantiated at all by any available record. In any case, I am aware that Gerald De Cruz, followed by the others, returned to Singapore late in 1947 when the "Democrat" closed down apparently because of financial difficulties. This appears to have been the cause of the increased communist influence in the MDU since the time. I have therefore concluded in my article that by then the MDU had apparently become communist-dominated.

With this Gerald De Cruz disagrees. He then proceeds to explain that the MDU "was not a mere stooge of the MCP". I have not alleged anywhere in my article that the MDU was a stooge of the communists and it never was. And I certainly do not regard the terms "communist-dominated" and "a mere stooge of the MCP" as synonymous. Let me pick an example to substantiate my belief that the MDU had apparently become communist-dominated by late 1947. In December 1946 John Eber explained that his party might accept the Federation Proposals provided the Executive was subject to the control of the Legislature. He wrote as follows:

The position of the High Commissioner under this scheme I would liken to that of a Prime Minister, that is, head of the Executive, with a "cabinet" consisting of Officials. It is not practical politics, I think, for us to demand full responsibility for the Executive, so we give this to the "Ang Mo" for the time being, on the understanding that their executive function is subject to our Legislature. The High Commissioner would be the President of the Federal Legislative Council, and his Residents or Advisers or whatever he likes to call them, as President of the State Legislative Council.²

In a memorandum on an alternative constitution to the Federation Proposals in mid-1947, Eber re-affirmed his belief that it was premature to try to wrest full executive authority or defence from the colonial power.³ But late in 1947 the MDU championed for full responsible self-government for Malaya, including local control over foreign affairs and defence. It justified this on the grounds that "there is no half-way house between colonial and self-government status" and that the existence of the High Commissioner's veto and reserved powers "would have rendered legislative control over other matters valueless and empty". Apparently, the MDU was influenced by the communists into adopting a position which it knew to be not quite "practical politics". This volte-face would be easier to explain if it were true that Gerald De Cruz, Willy Kok and Jacko were co-opted into the central committee of the MDU in October 1947. Then, I would find it incredible indeed, that with these communists (including Willy Kok, allegedly "the most profound thinker of the MCP") in its policy-making committee, the MDU could survive as an independent party.

Gerald De Cruz states that the AMCJA boycotted "the February 1948 Legislative Elections in Singapore" and that "with this boycott, every existing political party in Singapore had declared itself against participation, for they were all under our banner". The statement is inaccurate because the first Singapore Legislative Council Election took place not in February 1948 but on 1 April 1948. It is also factually wrong because the Singapore Malay Union was never under the AMCJA banner and did not "declare itself against participation" in the Election. It is true that the Singapore Malay Union did not officially field any candidate, but its chairman, Sardon bin Jubir, stood as an Independent candidate and was elected to the legislature. In my article I argue that because of its involvement in the AMCJA-PUTERA movement the MDU switched from co-operation with the Reconstitution Committee to a boycott of the Singapore Election in 1948. Gerald De Cruz now explains that the AMCJA, including the MDU, decided to boycott the Election mainly because the MNP and other Malay nationalist organisations had decided to do so. This only confirms my point that the MDU boycott of the Election arose out of its involvement in the AMCJA-PUTERA movement.

² Letter from J. Eber to Tan Cheng Lock, Penang 31.12.1946.

³ Memorandum on Counter-Proposals for the Future Constitution for the consideration of the AMCJA 1947.

I now come to Gerald De Cruz's evaluation of the MDU and of the AMCJA-PUTERA movement. Firstly, he is wrong in claiming that the AMCJA-PUTERA "held within its ranks all the political parties of the time, ON BOTH SIDES of the Causeway (except for UMNO and the just-born Progressive Party)". The Singapore Malay Union and the Kuomintang (which exercised considerable influence within the Chinese business community) were not members of the leftwing coalition. Secondly, Gerald De Cruz's statement is misleading and tends to give the impression that the coalition commanded wider support than it actually did. It is on record that thirty-five organisations were invited to form and inaugurate the PMCJA on 22 December 1946 at the MNP Headquarters at Batu Road, Kuala Lumpur. Eighteen of them did not accept the invitation nor did they subsequently join the coalition. Among these were the 3 Straits Chinese British Associations,⁴ the 2 Eurasians' associations, the Dravidian Federation, the Asiatic Young Men's Association, the Estates' Union, the Malayan Chamber of Commerce, the Ceylonese Federation, the Penang Indian Chamber of Commerce and most important of all the Singapore and the Malayan Chinese Chambers of Commerce. Throughout the period 1945-48, the Chinese Chambers of Commerce pursued an independent policy, though apparently they helped finance the AMCJA-PUTERA. While the latter boycotted the Consultative Committee early in 1947, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce submitted lengthy memoranda and two of their leaders (both former KMT officials), Leong Yew Koh and Colonel H.S. Lee, sat on the committee. Again, the all-Malaya Hartal was suggested by the Selangor Chinese Chamber of Commerce and was endorsed by the Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce which then invited the AMCJA-PUTERA to throw in its support. The leftwing coalition agreed to do so on 29 September 1947 and entrusted J. Eber and Gerald De Cruz to persuade the Chinese leaders in Singapore and the Federation respectively to endorse the People's Constitution as the alternative constitution to the Federation Proposals. Both failed in their mission, and the Chinese Chambers of Commerce therefore launched the October Hartal purely as a negative protest against the Federation Proposals.⁵ In other words the People's Constitution was not only opposed by the Malay community as a whole, but also by an extremely important section of the Chinese community as well. Nor apparently did it have the support of the Indian business interests for soon after the Hartal the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), a member of the leftwing coalition, came under severe attack from Indian leaders for accepting the Melayu citizenship. It is vital to bear all these points in mind when one reads Gerald De Cruz's statements that the AMCJA-PUTERA "held within its ranks all political parties of the time", that it was "a gigantic national front" and that it "shook this country up as it had never been shaken up before by political activity against imperialism and for independence".

Gerald De Cruz describes the MDU as "the spearhead of a gigantic national front, the AMCJA-PUTERA" and claims that it "led this formidable multi-racial nationalist movement". This evaluation of the MDU is open to serious doubts. The following was the position of the MDU in the AMCJA-PUTERA coalition. In December 1946 John Eber advised Tan Cheng Lock:

Do not hesitate to silence speakers [during meetings] who hold the floor too long. The Council needs strong chairmanship. Be particularly on your guard with Indian speakers, whose voice, as I have said, although loud, is not important, and see to it that the speakers for GLU, whose voice, though not loud is very important, are listened to with respect and attention. They have only one vote in spite of the fact that their membership is certainly at least half of the total membership of all the Joint Council associations. They are very co-operative on this question of having only one vote, and it is up to us to see that their voice carries great weight. Their membership is about 300,000, you see.⁶

⁴ On the 14 December 1946 J. Eber and Tan Cheng Lock sponsored the first Council of Action (CJA) in Singapore. The Singapore branch of the Straits Chinese British Association was a member of this Council.

⁵ Minutes of the Third Delegates' Conference of the AMCJA-PUTERA held in Kuala Lumpur at the premises of the New Democratic Youths' League 3.11.1947.

⁶ Letter from J. Eber to Tan Cheng Lock, 31.12.46. The GLU (the Labour Unions) which

And as far as can be ascertained, the following was the allotment of representations to the member bodies in the policy-making committees of the AMCJA-PUTERA. In January 1947 the policy-making committee of the AMCJA had 4 communist-controlled, 5 non-communist and 1 indeterminable votes.⁷ As some of the rightwing organisations eventually left the Council, the MCP gained complete control over it. The policy-making committee of the AMCJA-PUTERA known as the Joint Working Committee consisted of 5 MCP-controlled, 2 MDU, 5 MNP, 1 MIC and 1 indeterminable representatives. A Board of Secretaries of 6 members of the Joint Working Committee implemented policies laid down by the latter. This Board had 1 MNP, 2 MDU, 1 MIC and 2 MCP-controlled representatives.⁸ And the key post of the Board — the Deputy General-Secretaryship — was held by no other than Gerald De Cruz himself. Officially, he represented the MDU but actually, being a communist, he worked for the MCP. As the Deputy General-Secretary, he virtually controlled the daily administration of the AMCJA-PUTERA, supervised the activities of the member bodies, and had the authority to convene extraordinary meetings of the coalition. This was the set-up late in 1947 but there does not appear to be any appreciable difference in the position of the AMCJA-PUTERA in the early part of that year. The MCP permitted the MDU appreciable freedom of action because it recognised the unique position of the latter as an ally. The MDU was led by remarkably articulate and erudite English-educated intellectuals who were in the fortuitous position of being most able to expound the anti-colonial, democratic-liberal and non-communal programme of the anti-Federation movement. But it is misleading and incorrect to claim that the MDU led the AMCJA-PUTERA in the effective sense of the term. There is no doubt that the AMCJA-PUTERA was a communist front, and that the very survival of the AMCJA in particular and the AMCJA-PUTERA in general depended on the willing support of the MCP.

Finally, Gerald De Cruz disagrees with footnote 47 of my article which states, "It is believed that at this Calcutta Conference a decision from the Russian Communist Party was transmitted to the MCP directing the latter to take to arms". This is the orthodox view and by far the most widely accepted version of the communist uprising in Malaya. Gerald De Cruz, however, thinks that the MCP knew of this decision long before this, in mid- or late 1947. As far as I know, this seems to be a new interpretation of the communist revolt. I look forward to the time when Gerald De Cruz is able to substantiate his theory.

Yours sincerely,
Yeo Kim Wah

later became the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions and the Singapore Federation of Trade Unions.

⁷ The voting system of the PMCJA (and of the PMCJA-PUTERA) allotted Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions one vote each, and independent state organisations of common nature and interests such as the Clerical Union of Selangor one vote only to be shared among themselves. Hence, the communist front organisations such as the various Federation of Trade Unions, the Women Federations, the New Democratic Youths' Leagues, the Malayan Ex-MPAJA Comrades' Associations, only had 4 votes. See Agenda of the First PMCJA Meeting 22.12.46. Minutes of Third Delegates' Conference of the AMCJA-PUTERA, 3.11.47.

⁸ *Ibid.*