

Australia, the ‘Marshall experiment’ and the decolonisation of Singapore, 1955–56

Andrea Benvenuti

As decolonisation gathered pace in Southeast Asia, Singapore became a source of considerable concern to the Robert Menzies government. Britain’s hold on its colony appeared increasingly precarious as political turbulence gripped the island. With a predominantly Chinese population, Singapore was considered susceptible to communist China’s propaganda and subversion. By relying on previously classified Australian and British diplomatic documents, this article sheds light on the Australian approach to Singapore’s political and constitutional development between 1955 and 1956 and, in so doing, it hopes to make a contribution to a better understanding of Australia’s policies in a rapidly decolonising Southeast Asia.

Introduction

In the early 1950s, as decolonisation gathered force across Southeast Asia, Singapore became a source of significant concern to the Australian government. Still under British rule, the crown colony was Britain’s largest military establishment east of Suez and the linchpin of its security system in the Far East.¹ The Australian government considered the retention of the Singapore base crucial to the maintenance of a British politico-military presence in an area of growing strategic interest to Australia.² Fearful of communist penetration in Southeast Asia and apprehensive about the presence of a large, and unstable, Indonesia at its doorstep, Australia viewed a continuing British presence as a reassuring influence in a vulnerable region. Moreover, given its limited military and economic resources, Australia was dependent upon a close defence partnership with Britain to give substance to its regional defence strategy.³ Memories of the fall of Singapore in 1942 had reinforced Australian

Andrea Benvenuti is Senior Lecturer in International Relations, School of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of New South Wales, Sydney. Correspondence in connection with this paper should be addressed to: Andrea.Benvenuti@unsw.edu.au. The author thanks the National Archives of Australia for their financial support through a Margaret George Fellowship. He also thanks the University of New South Wales for funding his research in the British National Archives. The author would also wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions in revising this article for publication.

1 Karl Hack, *Defence and decolonisation in Southeast Asia 1941–1968* (London: Curzon, 2001), p. 235.

2 In this article the term ‘Singapore base’ is shorthand for the various naval, air and army installations/facilities scattered around the island.

3 On Anglo–Australian defence relations during the early Cold War, see, for instance, Andrea Benvenuti, *Britain, Australia and the turn to Europe, 1961–72* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2008), chapters 1 and 3; Hiroyuki Umetsu, ‘The origins of the British Commonwealth Strategic

perceptions of Malaya as a bridgehead between Australia and Asia, and had served to confirm the importance of Singapore as a forward base for the containment of communism and Indonesian regional ambitions.⁴ It is true that, since the onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s, Canberra's primary strategic goal had been to achieve, alongside a continuing British presence east of Suez, a greater American involvement in Southeast Asia. In some measure, this aim had been attained with the signing of the Australia, New Zealand, United States (ANZUS) and Manila treaties in 1951 and 1954, respectively.⁵ Yet, the problem remained that in spite of its growing interest in the stability of Southeast Asia, the Dwight D. Eisenhower Administration (1953–61) regarded the Malayan region as a Commonwealth responsibility, and carefully avoided any involvement in the area. As a result, Australia's 'forward defence' policy to its northwest relied significantly upon maintaining Britain's 'capacity for effective military action' in Singapore and the Far East, more generally, 'at the highest possible level'.⁶

In the mid-1950s, however, Britain's hold on Singapore appeared increasingly uncertain as anti-colonial ferment and left-wing radicalism engulfed the island. The tempo of nationalism quickly built up and, in contrast to the more moderate nationalist movement in Malaya, nationalists in Singapore became 'increasingly radical and militant, harnessing mass support through trade unions and students'.⁷ Growing anti-British feeling and extreme left militancy had the potential not only to threaten British rule there, but also to turn the colony into a communist outpost in Southeast

Reserve: The UK proposal to revitalise ANZAM and the increased Australian defence commitment to Malaya', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 50, 4 (2004): 509–25; David Lee, 'Australia, the British Commonwealth and the United States, 1950–1953', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 20, 3 (1992): 445–69 and 'Australia and allied strategy in the Far East, 1952–1957', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 16, 4 (1993): 511–38; Wayne Reynolds, 'Loyal to the end: The fourth British Empire, Australia and the bomb, 1943–57', *Australian Historical Studies*, 33, 119 (2002): 38–54.

4 On the importance of Singapore in Australia's regional defence strategy, see, for instance, National Archives of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NAA), A2031, 4/1959, Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy: Report by the Defence Committee, Jan. 1959; A1838, TS677/1A Annex, McCredie to Booker, telegram 963, 3 Aug. 1956.

5 For the uncertainties regarding the operation of both ANZUS and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) guarantees, see, for instance, Matthew Jones, 'The Radford bombshell: Anglo-Australian-US relations, nuclear weapons and the defence of South East Asia, 1954–1957', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 27, 4 (2004): 636–62; Lee, 'Australia and allied strategy in the Far East': 511–38; David Lowe, 'Percy Spender's quest', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 55, 2 (2001): 194–7 and 'Spender goes to Washington: An ambassador's vision of American–Australian relations, 1951–58', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 24, 2 (1996): 283–5. For the 1963 ANZUS understanding to provide a limited cover to Australian troops in Malaysia in the lead-up to the Indonesian–Malaysian *Konfrontasi*, see John Subritzky, *Confronting Sukarno: British, American, Australian and New Zealand diplomacy in the Malaysian–Indonesian confrontation, 1961–65* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 74–93; Peter Edwards with Gregory Pemberton, *Crises and commitments: The politics and diplomacy of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts, 1948–1965* (St Leonard's: Allen & Unwin, 1992), pp. 260–9.

6 NAA, A4926, vol. 28, 'The future of the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve in relation to the Malayan Defence Agreement. Report by the Defence Committee', July 1957. Incidentally, it was also for this reason that Canberra was hypersensitive to any hint that London's resolve to stay in Singapore might eventually waver. On this point, see David Goldsworthy, *Losing the blanket: Australia and the end of Britain's empire* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), p. 158.

7 C.M. Turnbull, *A history of Singapore, 1819–2005* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2009), p. 254.

Asia. With a predominantly Chinese population of approximately 80 per cent, Singapore was considered vulnerable to communist China's propaganda and subversion.

Understandably, Singapore's uncertain future alarmed policymakers in Canberra and rapidly emerged as one of the most awkward foreign policy issues faced by Robert Menzies' Liberal–Country Party government in the mid-1950s. In April 1955, Canberra had announced the despatch of an Australian military contingent to Malaya under the newly established Commonwealth Strategic Reserve. After a long gestation process, Canberra had finally agreed to deepen its commitment to the security of the Malayan region in collaboration with Britain and New Zealand.⁸ However, almost as soon as the Menzies government agreed to play a greater role in Southeast Asia, Singapore's political situation took a turn for the worse. The April 1955 election under the new Rendel Constitution marked 'a lusty, vociferous political awakening' in the life of the colony and ushered in a period of intense constitutional struggle between local nationalist elites and the British colonial authorities.⁹ The temporary easing of emergency regulations and the expansion of the electoral franchise produced a significant turn to the left, favouring those left-wing political parties calling for the swift demise of British rule.¹⁰ The emergence of raucously anti-colonial, radical and even pro-communist forces was an unexpected and unwelcome complication, for it threatened to derail Australia's containment policy and 'forward defence strategy'.

Notwithstanding Singapore's political and strategic importance in Canberra's Cold War calculations, almost no attention has been given to Australian responses to the Singapore problem in the literature on Australia's post-war foreign relations. This is all the more surprising if one considers the large body of work on Australia's regional engagement during the Cold War and the growing scholarly interest in Australia's attitude to decolonisation in Asia. The only exception is David Goldsworthy's article, *Australia's external policy and Britain's end of empire*, which devotes a short section to Australian responses to Britain's end of empire in Malaya and Singapore in the 1950s.¹¹ By relying on previously classified Australian and British diplomatic records, this article therefore aims to throw some light on Australia's approach to Singapore's political and constitutional development in the mid-1950s and to foster a better understanding of Australia's policies in a rapidly decolonising Southeast Asia. Although the vexed question of Singaporean independence would not be completely settled until the mid-1960s — and would therefore continue to exercise the Australian official mind for well over a decade — this article focuses on the months from April 1955 to May 1956. Not only did this short, hectic period witness the rise and fall of David Marshall's nationalist government and its

8 On this point, see Edwards with Pemberton, *Crises*, pp. 162–74.

9 Turnbull, *A history of Singapore*, p. 259; Albert Lau, 'The Colonial Office and the Singapore *merdeka* mission, 23 April to 15 May 1956', *Journal of the South Seas Society*, 49 (1994): 104.

10 Turnbull, *A history of Singapore*, pp. 259–60; Lau, 'The Colonial Office': 104.

11 David Goldsworthy, 'Australia's external policy and Britain's end of empire', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 51, 1 (2005): 17–29. Goldsworthy also briefly mentions the Singapore question in his *Losing the blanket*, pp. 27–8. For Australian policy towards Malaysia and Singapore in the 1960s, see Peter Edwards, 'Singapore and Malaysia, 1965', in *Australia and the end of empires: The impact of decolonisation in Australia's near north, 1945–65*, ed. David Lowe (Geelong: Deakin University Press, 1996), pp. 187–98.

efforts to wrest political control from the colonial authorities amidst growing domestic unrest, but it also helped define the contours of Australian policy towards Britain's end of empire in Singapore. In doing so, the article argues that although the Menzies government did not favour rapid colonial change in Singapore, its approach to decolonisation in Southeast Asia was not as negative and intransigent as current scholarship on Australia's engagement with Asia claims.¹²

The April 1955 election

In order to counter the appeal of communism and hold anti-colonial sentiment at bay, the Winston Churchill government (1951–55) had carefully sought to promote greater political participation in Singapore by introducing a new constitution.¹³ Drafted by a multiracial commission under the chairmanship of Sir George Rendel, the new constitution granted limited internal self-rule.¹⁴ In British eyes, it was expected to be the first step in a lengthy process towards independence.¹⁵ Even though it introduced greater political participation and internal autonomy, London still banked on remaining in control of the pace of constitutional advance in Singapore.¹⁶ The new constitution had been designed to favour the colony's moderate forces, namely the conservative Progressive Party (PP) which stood for free enterprise and a gradual approach to constitutional advancement.¹⁷

12 See Gregory Pemberton, 'An imperial imagination: Explaining the post-1945 foreign policy of Robert Gordon Menzies', in *Menzies in war and peace*, ed. Frank Cain (St Leonard's: Allen & Unwin, 1997), p. 159; Frank Bongiorno, 'The price of nostalgia: Menzies, the "liberal tradition" and Australian foreign policy', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 51, 3 (2005): 408–9; Christopher Waters, 'After decolonisation: Australia and the emergence of the non-aligned movement in Asia, 1954–55', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 12, 2 (2001): 156.

13 Albert Lau, "'Nationalism" in the decolonisation of Singapore', in *The transformation of Southeast Asia: International perspectives on decolonisation*, ed. Marc Frey, Ronald W. Pruessen and Tan Tai Yong (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), pp. 180–96; see also James Hartley Pullé, 'The management of political change: British colonial policy towards Singapore, 1942–1954' (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1991), p. 20.

14 The Rendel Constitution established a 32-member Legislative Assembly with 25 elected members. The seven non-elected members were three British officials holding ministerial appointments (the so-called ex officio members) and four unofficial members nominated by the Governor. The Executive consisted of a Council of Ministers. Presided by the Governor, the Council of Ministers comprised of nine ministers, seven of which were elected members of the Assembly. The remaining three (Finance Minister, Chief Secretary and Attorney-General) were the British ex officio members mentioned above. The Chief Secretary was responsible for external affairs, internal security, defence and public relations, broadcasting and civil service. See Richard Clutterbuck, *Conflict and violence in Singapore and Malaysia, 1945–1983* (Singapore: Singapore National Printers, 1985), p. 101.

15 Pullé, 'British colonial policy', p. 262; see also Alan Watt, *Australian diplomat: Memoirs of Sir Alan Watt* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1972), p. 234.

16 The new Constitution increased the number of elected seats in the Legislative Assembly from nine seats in 1951 to 25 seats in 1955. See Ong Chit Chung, 'The 1959 Singapore general election', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 6, 1 (1975): 61–86. The electorate was raised to 300,000. See NAA, A1838, 3024/2/1 part 6, Singapore, Dec. 1957.

17 James Low, 'Kept in position: The Labour Front–Alliance government of Chief Minister David Marshall in Singapore, April 1955–June 1956', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 35, 1 (2004): 44; see also Turnbull, *A history of Singapore*, pp. 260–2; The National Archives, London (hereafter UKNA), Colonial Office and Commonwealth Office (hereafter CO) 1030/924, Note on the Political Parties in Singapore, undated.

Elections held on 2 April 1955, however, ended the conservatives' pre-eminence in the island's political system. The PP was almost wiped out.¹⁸ With 10 seats the winner was the Labour Front (LF), led by Marshall — a successful locally born criminal lawyer of Jewish–Iraqi background. The LF had campaigned for moderate socialism, union between Singapore and Malaya and a gradual transition to full self-government within the Commonwealth.¹⁹ Marshall's slogan was *merdeka* or independence, the goal towards which the Federation of Malaya was rapidly advancing across the Strait of Johor. With the support of the Alliance, which had secured three seats, and the backing of the three ex officio members and two of the four members nominated by the Governor, Marshall was able to form a government, thus becoming the colony's first Chief Minister.²⁰ Yet, with only a majority of four, he headed a weak coalition, whose survival was dependent upon British support and a divided opposition.²¹

On the left of the political spectrum were the People's Action Party (PAP) and the Independents, with three seats each, respectively.²² Established in November 1954, the PAP stood for immediate independence for a united Malaya (including Singapore) and was strongly critical of British rule.²³ The party was an uneasy partnership between extreme left-wing and pro-communist radicals, and English-educated socialists.²⁴ Led by Lim Chin Siong, a 22-year-old radical, the PAP's militant extreme left-wing faction had links with the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).²⁵ Its strength lay in the labour movement, especially in the radicalised 'Middle Road Group' which controlled the trade unions in several sectors of industry and the public service.²⁶ Lee Kuan Yew was the party's general-secretary. A 32-year-old lawyer, who had obtained a double first at Cambridge University, Lee was no communist.²⁷ A declared Fabian socialist, he was convinced that without the backing of Singapore's

18 Ibid.

19 Watt, *Australian diplomat*, p. 234; Low, 'Kept in position': 44–5. Marshall's parents had come from Baghdad. See Albert Lau, 'Marshall, David Saul', *Oxford dictionary of national biography*, available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com>. In this paper the terms 'full self-government' and 'independence' are used interchangeably to reflect the practice of the time.

20 The Alliance included the United Malays National Organisation (hereafter UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (hereafter MCA) and the Singapore Malay Union.

21 Marshall's coalition government only held 13 seats (out of 25). In practice, this meant that should the 12 members of the Opposition have decided to vote jointly against the government, the latter's survival would have hinged on the support of the majority of the nominated members. See Clutterbuck, *Conflict*, p. 103.

22 UKNA, Robert Black to Alan Lennox-Boyd, despatch 46, 26 Sep. 1955.

23 UKNA, CO 1030/316, Supplement 1 to Singapore P.I.J. 1955, People's Action Party, undated. See also Pang Cheng Lian, 'The People's Action Party, 1954–63', *Journal of Southeast Asia History*, 10, 1 (1969): 143. Diane Mauzy and R.S. Milne, *Singapore politics under the People's Action Party* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 38–9.

24 Low, 'Kept in position': 45.

25 Philip Murphy, *Alan Lennox-Boyd: A biography* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), p. 133. On the links between the Malayan Communist Party (hereafter MCP) and the radical left in Singapore, see also C. C. Chin and Karl Hack, *Dialogues with Chin Peng: New light on the Malayan Communist Party* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), pp. 186–202. For Lim Chin Siong, see *Comet in our sky: Lim Chin Siong in history*, ed. Tan Jing Quee and K.S. Jomo (Kuala Lumpur: Insan, 2001).

26 Clutterbuck, *Conflict*, p. 100.

27 For Lee's initial Fabian socialism, see Michael Barr, 'Lee Kuan Yew's Fabian phase', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 46, 1 (2000): 110–25.

Chinese-educated majority, the PAP would never become a successful mass movement.²⁸ For this reason he felt compelled to work with the radical leaders of the trades union movement, who held a much greater appeal among the Chinese-speaking masses. However, Lee's reluctance to break up with the PAP's extreme left also derived from his belief that, to secure independence, he needed the co-operation of all the progressive political forces in Singapore.²⁹

The April election dealt a brutal shock to the British. Contrary to their expectations, the election produced a marked turn to the left, favouring those left-leaning political parties calling for the swift demise of British rule.³⁰ Attracted by their fiery anti-colonial pronouncements and progressive political agenda, many new voters chose PAP or LF candidates.³¹ The emergence of these vociferously anti-colonial parties ensured that the new Assembly would become a forum for nationalist sentiment where the LF and PAP would outbid each other to cultivate an anti-colonial and progressive image. This, in turn, promised to stir greater opposition to colonial rule and complicate British plans for a gradual transfer of power. All of a sudden, colonial change was gathering momentum in Singapore.

The Marshall experiment

Relying on a shaky coalition and exposed to the PAP's relentless efforts to cast doubt on his nationalist credentials, the new Chief Minister could ill afford to be seen as a British stooge.³² As a result, he had no intention of playing the game of constitutional advance in accordance with the wishes of the British authorities in London and Singapore.³³ Unsurprisingly, he became increasingly inclined to attack British colonial rule and demand that the Rendel Constitution be modified in a calculated effort to secure the loyalty of an increasingly radicalised (and Chinese-educated) mass electorate and to improve his political position.³⁴ In late April 1955, therefore, he made it clear that one of his chief aims was to secure 'complete internal self-government within the life of this Assembly'.³⁵ In July 1955 he urged British Governor Robert Black to interpret the Rendel Constitution more liberally.³⁶ Upon Black's refusal, Marshall threatened to resign.³⁷ A relatively minor constitutional issue was soon transformed into a political storm.³⁸ Only the arrival of British

28 Pang, 'The People's Action Party': 143; Mauzy and Milne, *Singapore politics*, p. 39.

29 Clutterbuck, *Conflict*, p. 104.

30 Turnbull, *A history of Singapore*, pp. 259–60; Lau, 'The Colonial Office': 104.

31 Yeo Kim Wah, *Political development in Singapore, 1945–55* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1973), p. 276.

32 Lau, 'The Colonial Office': 104–5.

33 Murphy, *Alan Lennox-Boyd*, p. 133.

34 Lau, 'The Colonial Office': 105; Matthew Jones, *Conflict and confrontation in South East Asia 1961–1965: Britain, the United States, Indonesia and the creation of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 15.

35 Marshall quoted in Low, 'Kept in position': 45.

36 Lau, 'The Colonial Office': 104.

37 NAA, A1209, 1957/4313 part 1, Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations to UK High Commissioner, Canberra, cablegram 195, 20 July 1955.

38 UKNA, Prime Minister's Office (hereafter PREM) 11/1307, Black to Lennox-Boyd, 22 Oct. 1955; Low, 'Kept in position': 50–1. According to Low, Marshall did not mastermind the constitutional crisis to suit his political agenda, but was genuinely surprised by Black's negative reaction to his demands. For

Colonial Secretary Alan Lennox-Boyd in Singapore on 31 July defused tensions. Willing to compromise, Lennox-Boyd accepted some of Marshall's demands and agreed to hold talks with the Singapore government in 1956 'to consider the situation in the light of a year's working of the Constitution'.³⁹

Marshall's constitutional wrangling took place amidst growing domestic unrest. In April and June 1955 Singapore had been hit by a wave of strikes, which were believed to have been fomented by the PAP and elements associated with the MCP. Since the April election, the MCP had increased efforts to penetrate political, educational and labour groups in Singapore in order to further radicalise the colony's already charged political atmosphere.⁴⁰ The largest of these strikes were at the Singapore Harbour Board and Hock Lee Amalgamated Bus Company.⁴¹ There was also unrest in the island's Chinese middle schools where radical students had been rioting in support of the strikes.⁴² Labour disturbances and mob action were not simply the work of communist agitators, but also the result of genuine socio-economic grievances.⁴³

Sympathising with the strikers at Hock Lee Bus Company, Marshall initially adopted a conciliatory approach, trying to mediate between them and the Hock Lee management. He also vacillated in dealing with unrest within the Chinese middle schools. In mid-May, the situation rapidly got out of hand and turned into widespread rioting.⁴⁴ The situation was brought under control early on 13 May by the intervention of the police.⁴⁵ In June, however, the PAP-controlled unions instigated strikes in support of the ongoing dispute between the members of the Singapore Harbour Board Staff Association against the Singapore Harbour Board.⁴⁶ This time the government did not show any sign of softening its position and, thanks to the restraining influence of the moderate Trades Union Congress (TUC), the dispute subsided. At the end of 1955, however, industrial unrest remained widespread in Singapore.⁴⁷

Marshall's hesitant behaviour called into question his ability to rein in the apparently unstoppable rise of left-wing activism and communist-inspired extremism in the colony. His political credibility received a further blow in November when he was left without a working majority in the Assembly due to the defection of two LF assemblymen to the opposition.⁴⁸ To bolster his vacillating position, Marshall 'resorted to

the view that Marshall provoked a crisis to suit his political aims, see, for instance, Lau, 'The Colonial Office': 105–6.

39 NAA, A1209, 1957/4313 part 1, Singapore: Commonwealth Relations memorandum, 18 Sept. 1955.

40 Albert Lau, *A Moment of anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the politics of disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998), pp. 8–9.

41 Murphy, *Alan Lennox-Boyd*, p. 134; UKNA, CO 1030/235, FO to various posts, intel 113, 24 June 1955; CO 1030/235, John Nicoll to John Martin, 30 Apr. 1955.

42 UKNA, CO 1030/235, FO to various posts, intel 113, 24 June 1955; Murphy, *Alan Lennox-Boyd*, p. 134.

43 S.R. Joey Long, 'Containment and decolonisation: The United States, Great Britain, and Singapore 1953–1961' (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 2004), pp. 89–90.

44 UKNA, CO 1030/235, FO to various posts, intel 113, 24 June 1955.

45 Ibid. British troops were also brought in from Malaya to prevent the situation from deteriorating further. UKNA, CO 1030/235, Nicoll to A.M. MacKintosh, 16 May 1955.

46 UKNA, CO 1030/235, FO to various posts, intel 113, 24 June 1955.

47 UKNA, PREM 11/1307, Black to Lennox-Boyd, 22 Oct. 1955.

48 On the Labour Front's internal disagreements, see Chan Heng Chee, *A sensation of independence*.

various populist and anti-colonial ploys'.⁴⁹ In early December he flew to London for a round of preliminary constitutional talks with Lennox-Boyd. On his way to Europe, he had stopovers in Ceylon and India. In Colombo he publicly denounced British colonialism, promising to bring it down.⁵⁰ In Delhi he threatened the British to turn Singapore into another Cyprus unless his demands were met.⁵¹ In his talks with Lennox-Boyd, he pressed for complete internal self-government (with defence and foreign affairs remaining under British control) by April 1957. On this point he had secured bipartisan agreement prior to his departure.⁵²

Marshall's demands posed a difficult political problem to Anthony Eden's Conservative government (1955–57) and forced British ministers and officials to consider what to do with him. Despite his anti-colonialist rhetoric and somewhat volatile personality, they generally viewed Marshall as reassuringly anti-communist.⁵³ Hence, they wondered whether Britain should not accept some of his demands to keep him in power. British policymakers were concerned that if his requests were not met, he would resign in protest; fresh elections would then have to be held and these might well usher in a pro-communist PAP administration, which was known to be opposed to a continuing British politico-military presence in Singapore. On the other hand, they also wondered whether it would not be pointless, and indeed dangerous, to make concessions to Marshall, considering that his weak administration was unlikely to remain in power for too long anyway. In that case, concessions would not only fail to prevent Marshall's downfall, but would also be seized upon by a future PAP administration to pursue its radical agenda.⁵⁴ Either way, Singapore's future looked grim indeed. The island seemed to be heading for a period of heightened political tensions and left-wing radicalism.

David Marshall: A political biography (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2008), pp. 164–6; see also Low, 'Kept in position': 54–5; New Zealand National Archives, AAEG 950, Box 5740, 455/4/1 part 1, Commissioner for New Zealand in Southeast Asia to Minister of External Affairs, 19 Nov. 1956.

⁴⁹ Low, 'Kept in position': 54–5.

⁵⁰ Chan, *Sensation of independence*, p. 173.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* In the mid-1950s Britain was confronted with an increasingly difficult situation in the crown colony of Cyprus, whose military installations were considered vital to the maintenance of British politico-strategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. See UKNA, Cabinet Office (hereafter CAB) 129/69, C(54)245, 21 July 1954; CAB129/69, CP(55)94, 25 July 1955. In response to London's refusal to accept Greek Cypriots' demands for union with Greece (*Enosis*), the National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA) began a campaign of terrorist violence against a British presence on the island in Apr. 1955. This campaign, which lasted until the grant of independence to Cyprus in 1960, ended up tying down about 27,000 British troops. See John Darwin, *The empire project: The rise and fall of the British world system, 1830–1970* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), p. 632. On the Cyprus question, see Ronald Hyam, *Britain's declining empire: The road to decolonisation, 1918–1968* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), pp. 202–8 and 269–70.

⁵² Lau, 'The Colonial Office': 109; UKNA CO 1030/81, Black to MacKintosh, 21 Jan. 1956; CO 1030/81, Discussions between the Secretary of State for the Colonies and Ministers from Singapore during December 1955, undated (circa Dec. 1955).

⁵³ It was for this reason that the British included Marshall in Tunku Abdul Rahman's delegation for the Baling talks (December 1955) with the MCP leader, Chin Peng. For some background on the Baling talks, see *Malaya*, ed. A.J. Stockwell (London: HMSO, 1995), documents 381–2, 384–6 and 391.

⁵⁴ Murphy, *Alan Lennox-Boyd*, pp. 134–5; UKNA, CAB 129/76, CP(55)97, 10 Aug. 1955; CAB 128/29, CM(55)28th mtg, 15 Aug 1955.

The Menzies government's initial reaction

The Australian government took time to react to the developments in Singapore. At the end of October 1955 Menzies announced the decision to seek a fresh parliamentary mandate by calling an early election for 10 December.⁵⁵ With ministers busy campaigning around Australia, Cabinet's examination of Southeast Asian issues awaited the end of the election. It was not until Menzies formed his new Ministry in mid-January that Singapore began to receive ministerial attention. The opportunity was afforded by the convening of an Anglo–Malayan constitutional conference in London on 18 January to discuss Malaya's political future.

Since the end of the Second World War, British policy in Malaya had aimed at promoting limited self-rule in order to come to terms with the young Malay nationalism and to avoid replicating the Dutch and French experiences in Indonesia and Indochina.⁵⁶ The outbreak of the Malayan Emergency in 1948 had pushed British ministers and officials to consider a greater degree of political autonomy for Malaya. For both the Clement Attlee (1945–51) and Churchill governments, the communist insurgency could only be overcome through greater political co-operation with the non-communist elements within Malaya's colonial society.⁵⁷ Independence was the ultimate price to pay, but London envisaged an orderly and relatively lengthy transfer of power: the communist insurrection would have to be liquidated and a multi-ethnic state established, first. This, inevitably, would take time.⁵⁸ London's long-term goal was to establish a postcolonial state sympathetic to British interests in the Far East. However, the Alliance's landslide victory in the July 1955 federal election shortened this time frame and pushed British senior ministers to grant Malaya independence much earlier than previously assumed.⁵⁹ Regarding Malayan Chief Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and his Alliance government as staunchly anti-communist, Eden thought it safe to accommodate Malayan demands for independence provided that British and Commonwealth defence interests could be safeguarded.⁶⁰

With London's Malaya policy undergoing significant change, the new Australian Cabinet met on 16 January 1956 to assess the political implications of such change for Canberra's interests in Southeast Asia.⁶¹ In general, Menzies and his ministers viewed British plans with some anxiety. In their view, the transfer of power in Malaya was bound to affect the British and Commonwealth (hence Australian) defence position there. In particular, they were concerned that a newly independent Malaya might impose restrictions on the movement of British and Commonwealth troops in and

55 A.W. Martin, *Robert Menzies: A life, vol. 2, 1944–1978* (Melbourne: MUP, 1999), pp. 314–15.

56 Hyam, *Declining empire*, pp. 156–7.

57 Peter Lowe, *Contending with nationalism and communism: British policy towards Southeast Asia, 1945–65* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 44–5.

58 A.J. Stockwell, 'British imperial policy and decolonisation in Malaya, 1942–1952', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth Studies*, 13, 1 (1984): 83–4; Hyam, *Declining empire*, pp. 156–7; Lowe, *Nationalism*, p. 45.

59 Hyam, *Declining empire*, p. 199. Rahman's Alliance included UMNO, MCA and the Malayan Indian Congress.

60 On this point see Lowe, *Nationalism*, pp. 51–6; Hyam, *Declining empire*, pp. 199–200.

61 NAA, A816, 14/301/682, Cabinet decision 4, 16 Jan. 1956; see also A816, 14/301/682, Department of External Affairs (hereafter DEA) to London, cablegram 97, 17 Jan. 1956.

out of Malaya in support of Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) operations in Southeast Asia.⁶² With neutralism on the rise in Asia following the Bandung Conference of April 1955, they thought it unlikely that the Tunku would seek public identification with SEATO.⁶³ Regarding SEATO, and an effective Commonwealth role within it, as crucial to the successful defence of Southeast Asia, Australian ministers did not want London to enter into any firm commitment unless it had secured an effective defence agreement with Malaya.⁶⁴

While uppermost in their minds, Malaya was not the sole concern preoccupying Australian policymakers. Intimately linked to the question of the transfer of power in Malaya was the political future of Singapore. Senior ministers in Canberra wondered whether the island would soon follow a similar path. With Malaya likely to be given independence, how could Singaporean aspirations be thwarted for long? And if they could not, how would the transfer of power in Singapore affect British and Commonwealth defence interests there? From an Australian standpoint, Singapore presented 'problems in some ways more difficult — in the longer term at least — than those of the Federation'.⁶⁵ Hence, how did the British government propose to handle the transfer of power in Singapore? On 17 January Menzies told Eden that no defence arrangement for Malaya could be considered separately from the future of Singapore. In fact, as far as the Commonwealth defence position in Southeast Asia was concerned, 'much would seem to depend upon the attitude of the Singapore Government'.⁶⁶ If no satisfactory agreement with the Malayan government could be reached, and the planned power devolution in Malaya went ahead regardless of an increasingly problematic political situation across the Strait of Johor, what would become of the British and Commonwealth posture in Southeast Asia? Menzies did not say it openly, but it was evident that the uncertain future of the Commonwealth defence position in Southeast Asia weighed heavily on him. The initial reaction of the Australian government was, therefore, to advise extreme caution while seeking to gain greater insight into British policymaking.

Eden's response sought to dispel Australian concerns. He agreed with Menzies that the security of the two territories could not 'be considered in isolation from each other', but felt that Britain could afford to be more forthcoming towards Rahman. The Tunku was 'fully alive' to the danger of communism and appeared 'determined to deal with it'.⁶⁷ Eden knew that the question of internal security in Singapore was 'a much more difficult problem than in the Federation' and this was

62 NAA, A1838, TS383/5/2 part 2, DEA to London, cablegram 97, 17 Jan. 1956.

63 Hack, *Defence and decolonisation*, p. 227.

64 NAA, A1838, TS383/5/2 part 2, DEA to London, cablegram 97, 17 Jan. 1956.

65 NAA, A816, 14/301/682, Cabinet decision 4, 16 Jan. 1956.

66 NAA, A1838, TS383/5/2 part 2, DEA to London, cablegram 97, 17 Jan. 1956.

67 NAA, A1838, TS383/5/2 part 2, Anthony Eden to Robert Menzies, 23 Jan. 1956. The British were reassured by Rahman's deft handling of his talks with MCP Secretary-General Chin Peng at Baling in northwest Malaya on 28–29 Dec. 1955. In May 1955 the MCP had indicated its willingness to negotiate a ceasefire provided the following conditions were met: recognition of a political role for the MCP in a post-Emergency Malaya and a generous amnesty for the communist guerrillas. At Baling, however, the Tunku demanded that the MCP be disbanded and its guerrillas 'screened' before they could be reintegrated into society. For a brief examination of the MCP's 'peace offer' and Rahman's handling of the Baling talks, see Hack, *Defence and decolonisation*, pp. 138–40 and 222–4; Lowe, *Nationalism*, pp. 52–5; Stockwell, *Malaya*, documents 381–2, 384–6 and 391.

why he ‘had no intention of allowing our hand to be forced in Singapore by anything we may agree to in regard to Malaya’. As for Malaya, however, it was in London’s best interest to see a fully self-governing postcolonial state ungrudgingly co-operating with Britain and its Commonwealth allies in the defence field. He was pleased to inform Menzies that ‘the preliminary indications are that the Malayan representatives are, broadly speaking, prepared to meet our defence requirements and they have in fact taken the initiative in proposing a defence agreement with us’.⁶⁸

The Australian government judged the outcome of the constitutional conference in London with mixed feelings. In a submission to Cabinet, Minister for External Affairs Richard Casey, who since his appointment in 1951 had taken a strong interest in Southeast Asian affairs, noted with a tinge of disappointment that Malayan independence was now ‘considerably closer than we would have desired — or than the United Kingdom previously led us to believe’.⁶⁹ The government did not oppose, in principle, the gradual transfer of power in Malaya, but, quite pragmatically, it was anxious to ensure that this process would accord with Australian defence interests in the region. In this respect, Casey told Cabinet that there ‘is ground for satisfaction that the Malayan representatives have accepted the formula relating to Commonwealth defence cooperation, including specific reference to the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve’.⁷⁰ However, he was careful to point out that some members of the Tunku’s ministerial team did not wish Malaya to be part of a firm Commonwealth defence arrangement, but favoured neutralism on the model of Jawaharlal Nehru’s India. Hence, until firm defence arrangements covering British and Commonwealth defence interests had been endorsed by the future Malayan parliament, Australia needed to watch developments in Malaya very closely.⁷¹

Australia and the question of Singapore’s constitutional progress

However, the government also needed to monitor the Singapore situation very carefully. Although Singapore’s political landscape in early 1956 appeared somewhat less tense than in mid-1955, this was deceiving. The threat of political violence and civil unrest remained palpable.⁷² Political intimidation of the workforce persisted and Chinese middle-school students were not averse to confronting the authorities at every possible occasion. In recalling those months, British journalist John Drysdale wrote in his history of Singapore that ‘tear-gas, water hoses and detention without trial were prophylactic measures, which, whilst preventing serious disorder and maintaining public services, had the effect also of encouraging large numbers of people (mainly the Chinese-educated) to join the ranks of the disaffected’.⁷³ In both London and Canberra, therefore, there was little doubt that the Marshall

68 NAA, A1838, TS383/5/2 part 2, Eden to Menzies, 23 Jan. 1956.

69 NAA, A1838, TS383/5/2 part 2, Malayan constitutional development, 6 Feb. 1956. On Casey’s growing interest in Southeast Asia, see W.J. Hudson, *Casey* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 236 and Watt, *Australian diplomat*, pp. 186–7.

70 NAA, A1838, TS383/5/2 part 2, Malayan Constitutional Development, 6 Feb. 1956.

71 *Ibid.*

72 John Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle for success* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2006), p. 133.

73 *Ibid.*

government was unlikely to survive for much longer. ‘The problems he [Marshall] has to face,’ the Australian Commissioner for Southeast Asia in Singapore (1954–56), Alan Watt, told Casey in January, ‘are so intractable that it is difficult to be optimistic enough to believe that he will succeed in solving them.’⁷⁴ Hence, as Watt put it, would the British government at the forthcoming Anglo–Singaporean Constitutional talks be prepared ‘to yield to Mr. Marshall’s demands for substantial self-government in order to help keep him in office — only, perhaps, to find that within a few months of his return to Singapore, he is no longer in office but has been replaced by some leader and party far less satisfactory from a British point of view?’⁷⁵

What could Australia do, then? In late February and early March 1956 Australian policymakers began to discuss the Singapore problem. In assessing British policy options, the Assistant Secretary of the Department of External Affairs (DEA), James Plimsoll, set the limits of what Australia could regard as politically acceptable. On the one hand, Britain should be careful to ‘avoid rejecting independence as the ultimate aim for the people of Singapore’ for the ‘refusal of substantial concessions to Marshall may very well of course be followed by considerable unrest in Singapore which would require additional British forces’. On the other hand, under no circumstance should early independence be granted to Singapore at the forthcoming London talks for ‘if Singapore becomes independent now there is real danger of its becoming communist very soon. Effects of this would be grave politically for Malaya, Indonesia and elsewhere in the Far East.’ ‘To avoid this,’ Plimsoll believed, ‘it might be worth hanging on to Singapore even if strikes and civil resistance were to make it valueless militarily.’ Hence, whatever the British government decided to do in the end, it was imperative that it retained, at least, the ‘control of defence and external relations and some rights to intervene to maintain law and order’.⁷⁶

From Singapore the experienced Watt also counselled caution. A former head of External Affairs, whose appointment as a Commissioner signalled Australia’s growing interest in Malaya and Singapore, Watt told Canberra that any Australian calls on Britain to delay Singaporean independence required careful consideration of two points:⁷⁷ first, the Australian government should be aware that ‘if Marshall learns or believes Australia is placing obstacles in his way, it is more than likely he will turn full weight of his sense of frustration against Australia’ and he would ‘charge that objections by us would be based on racial grounds’; second, ‘it is not easy for Australia to urge the United Kingdom to refuse or delay independence — thus

74 NAA, A1209, 1957/4313 part 1, Alan Watt to Richard Casey, 21 Jan. 1956. At the end of 1953 Casey appointed Watt as Australian Commissioner for Southeast Asia. Conceived as an Australian imitation of the British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, the post of Australian Commissioner in Singapore was established to oversee and loosely coordinate the work of Australian missions in Southeast Asia. Accredited to the British colonial authorities in Singapore, Malaya and the Borneo territories, Watt was also expected to gain greater insight into British politico-military thinking on Southeast Asian affairs and to assess political developments across the region. On this point, see Watt, *Australian diplomat*, pp. 202–3; see also Alan Watt, *Interview with Sir Alan Watt* [sound recording; interviewer Bruce Miller] (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1974). For an examination of the role of British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, see Hack, *Defence and decolonisation*, pp. 14–16.

75 NAA, A1209, 1957/4313 part 1, Alan Watt to Richard Casey, 21 Jan. 1956.

76 NAA, A1209, 1957/4313 part 1, James Plimsoll to Arthur Tange, cablegram 154, 29 Feb. 1956.

77 Watt was appointed Secretary of the DEA in 1950. Before then, he served in Washington and Moscow. Watt joined External Affairs in 1937.

making more likely the use of British troops to meet violence, when Australia has informed the United Kingdom that Australian troops must not be used to deal with internal disturbances'.⁷⁸ Watt made it clear that he did not mean that 'Singapore should be promised independence at the April talks', but that he just wanted to reiterate the 'complexity and delicacy of the problem — not least for Australia'. On the contrary, he remained convinced that 'the sole proposal which makes military and economic sense is to attach Singapore to the Federation'.⁷⁹

The Australian External Affairs Representative in London, Laurence McIntyre, concurred.⁸⁰ He advised Canberra that the 'balance of advantage lies in conscious decision to write-off Singapore as not worth considering as [a] separate political and economic entity, concentrate on persuading Malaysians to drop their reservation about fusion and side strongly with them in pressing for integration of Singapore as Twelfth Malaysian state as soon as possible'.⁸¹ 'All this,' McIntyre added, 'would, I suppose, exacerbate trouble in Singapore and would at any rate not end it. It would also, of course, amount to another act of faith in the Malaysian leaders. But it seems to me that if it came off it might make Singapore more manageable by diffusing its instability along with its separate identity in [a] larger and potentially more stable political unit.'⁸²

This, of course, was easier said than done. While British policymakers supported closer association between Malaya and Singapore, merger remained a relatively distant proposition.⁸³ In January 1955 the Tunku had made it clear that it was 'still a very long way off' and was in no mood to consider this option until Malaya had secured independence.⁸⁴ Not only was he concerned that talks on merger would inevitably slow down Malaya's progress to independence, but he also worried that a political union between Malaya and Singapore would upset the former's racial balance and produce a postcolonial state with a Chinese majority. As a defender of Malay interests, the Tunku was unlikely to accept this. Merger, however, raised a further concern — that of communist contagion. As it was to become increasingly apparent in the months to come, Rahman regarded Singapore as a hotbed of pro-communist militancy and feared that its inclusion in a wider federation would radicalise Malaya's

78 NAA, A1209, 1957/4313 part 1, Watt to DEA, cablegram 155, 29 Feb. 1956.

79 Ibid.

80 Until 1972, when its control passed to the Department of Foreign Affairs (formerly DEA), the London High Commission was under the political and administrative control of the Prime Minister's Department. Between 1954 and 1969 the DEA maintained its own separate 'political channel' (also known as External Affairs Office) within the High Commission. The officer in charge was called the Senior External Affairs Representative and reported to the DEA.

81 NAA, A1209, 1957/4313 part 1, Laurence McIntyre to DEA, cablegram 645, 9 Mar. 1956.

82 Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

83 On British views on a possible fusion between Singapore and Malaya, see NAA, A1209, 1957/4313 part 1, Casey to Menzies, cablegram 47, 29 Feb. 1956 and McIntyre to DEA, cablegram 644, 9 Mar. 1956. In fact, since Britain's return to Southeast Asia following the end of the Second World War, the aim of British colonial policy there had been to foster closer association of the British territories in the region. On this point, see Pullé, 'British colonial policy', pp. 262–3; see also Stockwell, *Malaya*, p. xlix.

84 Rahman cited in Lau, *A moment of anguish*, pp. 10–11; Tan Tai Yong, *Creating "Greater Malaysia": Decolonization and the politics of merger* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), p. 93. In December the Tunku had told the UMNO General Assembly that Singapore and the Borneo territories should consider joining the Federation. See Mohammed Noordin Sopiee, 'The advocacy of Malaysia — before 1961', *Modern Asian Studies*, 7, 4 (1973): 724.

domestic politics and perhaps even rekindle the communist insurgency on the mainland.⁸⁵

In early 1956, however, the Malayan Chief Minister gave at least the impression that he was a little more forthcoming on the question of merger and that he saw this as a possible solution to the worsening situation on the island. In January 1956, he spoke of Singapore's inclusion into Malaya as a 'subordinate unit' so that Kuala Lumpur could exert control on 'the affairs of Singapore, especially subversive activities now being carried out there'.⁸⁶ Then, in response to Marshall's representations in March 1956 that his government was prepared to discuss merger, Rahman told him that Singapore should, for the time being, 'limit his London objective to self-government' since it 'could hardly expect to be granted independence on its own'.⁸⁷ If Singapore, the Tunku added, wanted independence, 'it could do this by joining the Federation later'.⁸⁸ As a result, there were hopes in Canberra that Rahman would eventually be amenable to discussing merger. Unfortunately for Canberra, this did not prove to be possible in the short term. Only a few months later, in January 1957, the Tunku would shatter these hopes by declaring that he would never allow a merger to go ahead.⁸⁹ In doing so, the Malayan leader began to show an inclination to 'blow hot and cold on the matter'.⁹⁰

Canberra weighs up its options

With the opening of the London constitutional conference less than a month away, Australian senior ministers gathered on 23 March to examine the Singapore problem. Before them, they had a submission prepared by the DEA, a note by the Prime Minister's Department (PMD) and a report by the Defence Committee (DC).⁹¹ In its report, the DC stressed the strategic significance of Singapore in Australian defence calculations. While regarding Malaya as key to the Australian and Commonwealth defence effort to 'hold' Southeast Asia, the Committee recognised how, at the present, the bases in Malaya were only 'subsidiary to the main bases in Singapore'; the installations on the island were therefore 'essential to the successful defence of Malaya', and, as such, they should 'be denied to a potential enemy'. Hence, whatever political concessions the British government felt necessary to make to accommodate Singaporean and Malayan demands (British and Malayan authorities were still negotiating the nature of their future defence treaty), in no way should these concessions inhibit 'the retention of a Commonwealth force in the territories of

85 See, for instance, UKNA, Dominions Office (hereafter DO) 169/27, A. Brown (BHC Kuala Lumpur) to W. Le Bailly (CRO), 13 July 1961; DO 169/28, Greater Malaysia: Note by Tory, 7 Aug. 1961; A.J. Stockwell, 'Malaysia: The making of a grand design', *Asian Affairs*, 34, 3 (2003): 232; Lau, *A moment of anguish*, p. 11; Tan Tai Yong, *Greater Malaysia*, p. 50.

86 Rahman cited in Lau, *A moment of anguish*, p. 11.

87 NAA, A1209, 1957/4313 part 1, Kuala Lumpur to DEA, cablegram 38, 7 Mar. 1956.

88 Ibid.

89 NAA, A1838, 3024/10/1/1 part 4, T.K. Critchley to Tange, 19 July 1957.

90 Lau, *A moment of anguish*, p. 11.

91 The Defence Committee advised government on defence and strategic issues. It comprised the permanent heads of the DEA, the Prime Minister's Department (hereafter PMD), the Department of Defence and the Treasury (the latter generally represented by his deputy). It also included the Chiefs of Staff. On this point, see, for instance, Peter Edwards, *Arthur Tange: Last of the mandarins* (St Leonard's: Allen and Unwin, 2006), pp. 103–4.

Malaya and Singapore, its reinforcement in the event of war, and the use of essential facilities and bases'.⁹² How to reconcile vital Commonwealth defence interests with the complex political realities on the ground, the DC did not say. It was left to the DEA to try to sketch out a workable compromise.

In the DEA submission, Casey argued that there were 'formidable differences between Singapore and the Federation of Malaya that make the granting of so-called "independence" to Singapore a very much more difficult matter than to Malaya'. The problem was that Singapore was far less stable than Malaya. Given Marshall's precarious hold on power and the growing influence of pro-communist elements within the PAP, the trade union movement and the Chinese middle schools, the prospects for a stable government in the crown colony were bleak. However, the situation could become even bleaker if Singapore were to be granted full self-government without qualifications. There was 'a real possibility that any constitutional concessions now granted to Singapore may in practice prove to be concessions to a successor Government of dubious political colour'. Mirroring British assessments of the Singapore situation, Casey claimed that in a city with an 80 per cent Chinese population, it was not difficult to envisage a scenario in which the 'left-wing', 'Chinese-dominated' and 'pro-communist' PAP became Singapore's largest single party at the first general election after independence and then came to some arrangement with the Liberal Socialist Party — a party representing Chinese business and commercial interests and which he regarded as opportunist and nationalist — to produce a Chinese-dominated government oriented towards communist China.⁹³

However, while, as Casey admitted, there were risks in going too far in accommodating Marshall, there were also risks in refusing to meet some of his demands. Marshall threatened to resign unless his constitutional demands were met.⁹⁴ Should he step down, he was most likely to be replaced by Lee Kuan Yew and, with 'a left-winger (even a Communist) Chief Minister', the danger of 'Singapore becoming in effect a colony of Red China' was real. In that event, 'the extent to which Singapore could be held, and for how long, by force or arms alone — bearing in mind the parallel of Cyprus, in which 70,000 British troops have had difficulty in holding a population of 400,000' remained uncertain. Casey agreed that 'the only hope for the Malayan Peninsula is for a Union or Federation of Malaya and Singapore'. He realised that the Tunku did not oppose a merger in principle, but recognised that he would not go ahead with it until Malaya had become independent. Casey therefore argued that 'even if the actual act of union between Singapore and the Malayan Federation is delayed for eighteen months or more, it is obviously necessary that nothing should be done meanwhile to make such union more difficult or even impossible'.⁹⁵

92 NAA, A5954, 1403/3, Future Defence Arrangements with Malaya and Singapore: Report by the Defence Committee, 20 Mar. 1956.

93 NAA, A4940, C1524, DEA Submission 92, 21 Mar. 1956; A1209, 1957/4313 part 1, A.S. Brown to Menzies, 27 Mar. 1956. In 1956 the Progressive Party merged with the Democratic Party to form the Liberal Socialist Party (LSP). See Turnbull, *A history of Singapore*, p. 260.

94 NAA, A4940, C1524, DEA Submission 92, 21 Mar. 1956.

95 *Ibid.*

Casey believed that ‘the possibility exists for Australia to influence the formation of the policy at a relatively early stage’. Australian policy, therefore, should recognise that ‘it is clearly impracticable for the United Kingdom to make no concessions’ at all as ‘to do so would mean the virtual abandonment of the few moderate elements in Singapore’. He also emphasised the risk that if Australia took a leading part in obstructing Marshall’s demands, ‘it is more than likely that he would turn the full weight of his sense of frustration against Australia’.⁹⁶ Casey concluded that ‘there are formidable risks, which cannot be accurately assessed, in any line of action. I believe, however that there is probably rather less risk in going to the limit of reasonableness in meeting Marshall’s demands than in adopting a “tough” policy.’⁹⁷

Hence, Singapore should be granted full self-government with the exception of internal security, defence and foreign affairs. In the area of internal security, however, London should accord the Singapore government greater administrative control of the local police while retaining its prerogative to revoke the Constitution and reimpose direct ‘Governor’s rule’ if the local authorities proved unable to maintain law and order. Furthermore, the British government should be prepared to discuss further devolution of power at a conference to be held in the second half of 1957. By then, Casey hoped that Rahman would be in a position to consider a merger between Singapore and Malaya and discussions to this end ‘should take place as soon as practicable’ after Malaya’s independence in August 1957. Casey’s ultimate aim remained Singapore’s incorporation into the Federation and, in order to achieve this goal, London should avoid taking steps that would make merger more difficult to attain.⁹⁸

Casey’s strategy was clearly intended to buy time until the Alliance government in Kuala Lumpur was prepared to discuss closer association with Singapore. The External Affairs view was that, in the meantime, attempts should be made to buttress Singapore’s moderates by gradually accepting their demands for greater self-rule. Far from opposing decolonisation in Singapore, the DEA was willing to go along with it on condition that Singapore could be kept in safe hands. The DEA’s strategy, of course, was not without risks and limitations. Not only was it too reliant on Malayan agreement to discuss a merger, but it also seemed to assume that Singapore’s moderates would remain in power long enough to see the merger through. But would they? And even if they did — and this was by no means assured — would Rahman really accept a political union with Singapore once he had secured independence? Furthermore, even assuming that Malaya would be ready to negotiate a merger with Singapore, was there not a risk that a neutralist Malaya would impose restrictions on the use of British facilities in Singapore for SEATO military exercises and operations in Southeast Asia?

More cautious was the PMD’s position. While prepared to accept most of Casey’s recommendations, it believed that the British should be told not to commit, at this stage, to discuss further devolution of responsibility in areas such as internal security, external affairs and defence at a future constitutional conference to be held in 1957.⁹⁹ Until Marshall’s position was safer, it would be too risky to speed up the transfer of

96 Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

99 NAA, A4940, C1524, Notes on Submission 92 undated (c. Mar. 1956).

power in Singapore.¹⁰⁰ The PMD also advised ministers to wait for the British to reveal their negotiating strategy before making the Australian position clear to them.¹⁰¹ According to the PMD, if ministers moved before British intentions were known, Australia 'would leave [itself] open to the charge that they [the British] have adopted a particular policy at our suggestions and therefore should help them give effect to it'. As the PMD put it in rather stark terms, 'If the United Kingdom were placed in the position of being able to say that they had accepted our advice ... would they not be equally entitled to ask for Australian troops?'¹⁰² While generally more inclined than the DEA to stress the importance of close Anglo–Australian ties, the PMD was nonetheless careful to avoid any Australian military involvement in Singapore's internal situation.¹⁰³

The Australian position was conveyed to the British authorities on 27 March 1956. In a message to Eden, Menzies argued that although no far-reaching concessions should be made to the Singapore delegation, Britain should nonetheless go 'to the limit of reasonableness in meeting Marshall's demands'. Hence, while the long-term future of Singapore lay in a merger with Malaya, greater internal self-government should be contemplated in the meanwhile. Some degree of Singaporean control over internal security should also be accepted. Britain should also agree in principle to accept future Singaporean control over internal security provided the Singapore government was committed to develop its capacity of carrying out such a responsibility.¹⁰⁴ On the whole, Menzies accepted Casey's arguments for a moderately helpful approach to Marshall. The only concession he made to the objections of his PMD officials was that, for the time being, no date should be set for the holding of a future conference to review the future of Singapore.¹⁰⁵

While Australian ministers and officials were reviewing the Singapore situation, their British counterparts were reaching broadly similar conclusions.¹⁰⁶ From Singapore Commissioner General for Southeast Asia (and Foreign Office representative in the region) Robert Scott argued that 'only minor concessions should be made to Marshall'. If the British government regarded its defence interests as having priority over any other consideration, then 'nothing should be granted to Singapore at the April talks which would lessen our ability to maintain law and order'. Internal security should therefore 'remain firmly in British hands'.¹⁰⁷ In London, the Chiefs of Staff concurred. Believing that Singapore 'was becoming increasingly important as a naval base', they were opposed to any concession that would endanger the tenure of

100 Ibid.

101 In mid-March, the Australian government had sought an indication of the Eden government's preliminary thinking on the approach that the British were planning to adopt during the forthcoming talks. See NAA, A4940, C1524, Menzies to London, cablegram 538, 15 Mar. 1956.

102 NAA, A4940, C1524, Notes on Submission 92 undated (c. Mar. 1956).

103 For a brief discussion on the PMD's attitudes towards Britain, see John Subritzky, *Confronting Sukarno*, p. 13.

104 NAA, A1209, 1957/4313 part 1, DEA to London, cablegram 616, 27 Mar. 1956.

105 Ibid.

106 UKNA, CAB 128/30, CM(56)25th mtg, 27 Mar. 1956; CAB 129/80, CP(56)85, 23 Mar. 1956; CAB 128/30, CM(56)29th mtg, 17.4.1956; CAB 129/80, CP(56)97, 14.4.1956.

107 UKNA, PREM 11/1307, Robert Scott to Eden, 18 Feb. 1956 and 8 Mar. 1956; FO 371/123212, D1052/4/G, Scott to Lennox-Boyd, 18 Feb. 1956.

Britain's military facilities there.¹⁰⁸ As for the Colonial Secretary, Lennox-Boyd told Cabinet that independence for Singapore was 'a delusion' since the island would not be viable as an independent state.¹⁰⁹ In his view, the government should encourage Singapore's merger with Malaya 'unless we are prepared to see it become an independent Chinese outpost at the strategic heart of South-East Asia'.¹¹⁰ This, however, did not mean that the British government should not try to meet some of Marshall's demands in the hope of keeping him in power. In the forthcoming talks, the government should instead 'show that we have gone as far as our vital strategic and economic interests permit towards meeting the desire of the people of Singapore to manage their own affairs'.¹¹¹ Hence, it should 'negotiate with the [Singaporean] delegation the fullest measure of self-government consistent with reserving to the Governor control over external affairs, defence, and internal security'. As the subversive threat in Singapore remained serious, Britain should 'be able to ensure that firm action is taken when necessary, and this depends in the last resort on British troops since there are no local forces'.¹¹² He made it clear that 'the maintenance of law and order is vital to the security of the base itself, so that a continuing authority in internal security matters is essential to our defence interests'.¹¹³ Eden supported Lennox-Boyd's position.¹¹⁴ Only Governor Black held the view that Marshall's demands should not be resisted if the British government could obtain sufficient guarantees on the military bases. From Singapore Black warned the Colonial Office that a refusal to support Marshall's requests was most likely to lead to his downfall. Resentment against the British government would then increase and this would be exploited by the PAP.¹¹⁵

On 17 April the British Cabinet accepted Lennox-Boyd's position: Britain should offer the maximum degree of self-government compatible with its defence interests and agree to some symbolic changes such as the transformation of Singapore from colony to 'state' or 'free city' and the modification of title of 'governor' to 'high commissioner'.¹¹⁶ The nominated members of the Legislative Assembly should, for instance, be abolished while the number of elected members should be increased from 25 to 50. The Council of Ministers should also be made up of fully elected members. More importantly, while internal security should be reserved to the Governor, local ministers would be associated with it through a defence council. Police matters

108 UKNA, CAB 128/30, CM(56)29th mtg, 17 Apr. 1956; AIR 19/623, Brief for Secretary of State for Air and Vice Chief of the Air Staff, Apr. 1956.

109 UKNA, CAB 129/80, CP(56)85, 23 Mar. 1956 and CP(56)97, 14 Apr. 1956.

110 UKNA, CAB 129/80, CP(56)85, 23 Mar. 1956.

111 Ibid.

112 Recruiting for the first Singapore battalion started off in 1957, but proceeded very slowly. By the time Singapore merged with Malaya in 1963, the Lion City had only two infantry regiments and an armoured squadron. The problem of insufficient local forces to maintain law and order on the island was compounded by the fact that Singapore's predominantly Malay police force was not regarded as reliable in all circumstances. On this point, see Hack, *Defence and decolonisation*, pp. 260 and 268 (n. 6). See also UKNA, CO 1030/656, DCC(FE) (59)261, The outlook in Singapore up to the end of 1960, 22 Sept. 1959.

113 UKNA, CAB 129/80, CP(56)85, 23 Mar. 1956.

114 UKNA, CAB 195/14, CM25(56), 27 Mar. 1956.

115 UKNA, CAB 129/80, CP(56)85, 23 Mar. 1956.

116 UKNA, CAB 128/30, CM(56)27th mtg, 17 Apr. 1956; CAB 129/80, CP(56)97, 14 Apr. 1956.

should be transferred to the portfolio of Chief Minister.¹¹⁷ Britain, however, would retain control over defence and foreign affairs.¹¹⁸ ‘This,’ Lennox-Boyd told his Cabinet colleagues, ‘is indeed going a long way.’ He added that, even then, it might not be enough to secure agreement in the forthcoming talks, but this was as far as Britain was prepared to go in meeting Marshall’s demands.¹¹⁹

The London Constitutional Conference and the end of the Marshall experiment

Was the British offer likely to satisfy the Singapore Chief Minister? Not quite. When the negotiations began on 23 April, Marshall wanted more than the British were willing to concede: he flatly demanded independence for Singapore in April 1957 although he also made it clear that he would consider ceding back temporarily control of external affairs (excluding commerce and trade) and defence to Britain. He expected internal security to be the responsibility of the Singapore government even though, in the interim period (lasting up to six years), Britain would retain the right to suspend the Constitution should domestic unrest threaten the viability of the British military installations on the island.¹²⁰

Lennox-Boyd and the Colonial Office judged Marshall’s proposal unacceptable. For the Colonial Secretary it was a messy compromise, which would ‘give Singapore nominal independence in 1957’, but would then ‘withhold the substance at least for the interim period’.¹²¹ Its principal shortcomings were twofold: the interim period envisaged, and the transfer of internal security responsibilities to the Singaporean authorities. As to the interim period, this was not only too short, but it also made for a risky proposition given the fact that it made no allowance for a prolonged period of unrest in Singapore going beyond the six years. As regards the internal security issue, Marshall’s proposal would make it impossible for the colonial authorities, during the transitional phase, to intervene to restore law and order until it was too late.¹²²

For his part, Marshall showed no willingness to budge in spite of the fact that all members of the delegation, with the exception of the pro-communist Lim Chin Siong, were willing to settle for the British offer.¹²³ Unsurprisingly, therefore, the constitutional talks failed. On 17 May Marshall called a press conference dismissing the British proposal as a ‘Christmas pudding with arsenic sauce’. He announced his intention to resign upon his return home.¹²⁴ The collapse of the talks in London was received calmly in Singapore.¹²⁵ Black informed London that their failure, ‘far from provoking disorder, left an atmosphere considerably calmer than it had been before

117 UKNA, CAB 128/30, CM(56)27th mtg, 17 Apr. 1956; CAB 129/80, CP(56)97, 14 Apr. 1956.

118 Local ministers would be given the right to conduct negotiations on trade matters.

119 Ibid.

120 UKNA, DO 35/9871, Singapore Constitutional Conference, Cmd 9777; see also Lau ‘Colonial Office’: 109–12; Hack, *Defence and decolonisation*, p. 238.

121 Lennox-Boyd cited in Lau ‘Colonial Office’: 112.

122 Hack, *Defence and decolonisation*, p. 238; Lau ‘Colonial Office’: 112.

123 Hack, *Defence and decolonisation*, p. 238; Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 1998), p. 237.

124 ‘Constitution offer refused’, *Times*, 17 May 1956.

125 ‘Singapore awaits return of delegates’, *Times*, 18 May 1956.

the Talks had started'.¹²⁶ International reactions were also relatively muted. While the Asian press was generally critical of British policy towards Singapore, non-communist governments across the region were sympathetic with the United Kingdom.¹²⁷ While careful not to criticise Marshall in public, in private Thailand, Pakistan, South Vietnam, the Philippines and Ceylon all expressed understanding for the British position.¹²⁸ So did the Indian government, which regarded Marshall as 'impatient'.¹²⁹ Despite his vocal anti-colonialism, Indian Prime Minister Nehru had so far refrained from criticising London for its handling of the decolonisation process in the Malayan region. He found the prospect of a Chinese-dominated (and communist) government in Malaya and Singapore 'distressing' and was, therefore, in favour of a gradual transfer of power in Singapore.¹³⁰ As for Indonesia, while there had been little interest in Jakarta in the question of Singapore's self-government, the Indonesian embassy in Canberra was reported to have 'shown concern about the growth of Communism in Singapore'.¹³¹ There was also very little reaction in Malaya. Upon being told that the constitutional talks had failed, the Tunku replied that he was 'very, very sorry indeed', but added: 'please can I now go back to bed?'¹³²

The Menzies government supported Britain's conduct of the constitutional talks. Addressing the House of Representatives on 17 May, Casey made it clear that Australia did not regard the failure of these talks as 'a permanent check to constitutional advances in Singapore'. On the contrary, the Australian government supported the transfer of power in Singapore. However, this process needed be gradual as there were 'very considerable dangers' in too precipitate an advance towards independence. Nowhere, Casey argued, were 'these dangers more apparent, and indeed obvious, than in the case of Singapore'. On its own, Singapore had no 'means of maintaining social stability and internal security'. A balance, therefore, had to be struck between Singapore's legitimate political aspirations and the need to prevent the island from falling into communist hands.¹³³ From Ceylon Menzies made a similar point. He declared that while he entirely sympathised with the Singaporean desire for independence, he also 'quite understood the British attitude'. Since Singapore was 'vitaly essential' to Commonwealth defence, he believed that the situation 'called for compromise arrangement at least for [the] present'.¹³⁴

126 UKNA, DO 35/9873, Commonwealth Relations Office to Canberra, savingram 196, 25 July 1956.

127 NAA, A1945, 248/10/3, DEA to All Posts, savingram 10, 21 June 1956; NAA, A1838, TS696/6/1 part 2, Manila to DEA, cablegram 87, 18 June 1956.

128 NAA, A1945, 248/10/3, DEA to All Posts, savingram 10, 21 June 1956; UKNA, FO 1091/44, Scott to Lennox-Boyd, telegram 138, 5 Dec. 1956.

129 NAA, A1945, 248/10/3, Delhi to DEA, cablegram 118, 29 May 1956; A1945, 248/10/3, Delhi to DEA, cablegram 111, 21 May 1956; A1945, 248/10/3, DEA to All Posts, savingram 10, 21 June 1956.

130 Charles H. Heimsath and Surjit Mansingh, *A diplomatic history of modern India* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1971), p. 248; National Archive Record Administration, College Park, Maryland, RG 59, BOX 3261, 746F.00/7-556, Singapore to State Department, telegram 8, 5 July 1956; RG 59, BOX 3261, 746F.00/7-556, Memcon, R.K. Tandon (Indian Commissioner) and William Anderson (American Consulate), 28 June 1956.

131 NAA, A1945, 248/10/3, DEA to All Posts, savingram 10, 21 June 1956.

132 NAA, A1838, TS696/6/1 part 2, T.K. Critchley to Casey, 18 May 1956.

133 NAA, A1838, TS696/6/1 part 2, DEA to various posts, unnumbered cablegram, 17 May 1956.

134 NAA, A1838, TS696/6/1 part 2, Colombo to DEA, cablegram 113, 18 May 1956.

On his return to Singapore, Marshall resigned. No unrest ensued. Lim Yew Hock, another LF man, took over from him. Lim's steady hand, and his crackdown on left-wing extremists in September–October 1956, would earn him important concessions from the British.¹³⁵ In March 1957 Lim led an all-party delegation to London for a new round of constitutional talks, which resulted in London granting full internal self-government.¹³⁶ While by no means defeated, left-wing radicalism appeared, at least temporarily, under control. It would again raise its head in the early 1960s when, expelled from the PAP, Lim Chin Siong and other pro-communist sympathisers established the Barisan Socialis (Socialist Front) and challenged Lee Kuan Yew's moderate government.¹³⁷ By then, however, the Tunku was finally prepared to consider a merger with Singapore.¹³⁸ The creation of Greater Malaysia in 1963 removed, once and for all, the risk of Singapore becoming a Cuba of Southeast Asia.¹³⁹ And while Singapore left the Federation in 1965, by then the moderates were in control of the internal situation. A gradual transition to independence had finally been achieved. Gradualism had paid off.

Conclusion

This article has examined the Menzies government's initial approach to Britain's end of empire in Singapore. In doing so, it has focused on the crucial months that stretched from the April 1955 election to Marshall's failed *merdeka* mission in April–May 1956. This period marked a veritable watershed in the recent history of Singapore, as it transformed a relatively calm political scene into a highly unstable one, where mounting nationalist demands for self-determination dangerously coalesced with rising left-wing and communist militancy. Given Singapore's significance in Western strategic planning, it is not surprising that Australian ministers and officials were alarmed by the island's descent into political instability and that, as a result, they adopted a cautious approach towards self-government. It has been this article's main contention that, although the Liberal–Country Party government was certainly

135 See Hack, *Defence and decolonisation*, pp. 239–40. For Lim Yew Hock's 1956 sweep against the radical left, see the following files: UKNA, DO 35/9872 and CO 1030/187.

136 Under a new Constitution, Singapore would now be responsible for its internal security while London would retain the right to suspend the Constitution in an emergency (with external affairs and defence still a British responsibility). Singapore would become known as the State of Singapore. The ex officio and nominated members of the Legislative Assembly would be abolished and the number of elected assemblymen increased to 51. The title of Chief Minister would be changed to that of Prime Minister and the office of Governor would be abolished. In its place, the Queen's representative would be a Malayan-born person under the title of *Yang di-Pertuan Negara* (head of state). For the full record of the Constitutional Conference proceedings, see the following files: UKNA, CO 1030/507, CO 1030/508 and CO 1030/509.

137 For the post-Anson by-election (July 1961), the split with the PAP and the creation of Barisan Socialis, see file UKNA, CO 1030/1149.

138 For Rahman's decision in 1961 to accept a union with Singapore as a part of a wider Malaysian federation including the Borneo territories, see the following files: UKNA, PREM 11/3418; DO 169/27, 169/28, 169/29, 169/30; CO 1030/979, 1030/980, 1030/981, 1030/982, 1030/983, 1030/984, 1030/985.

139 For the creation of 'Greater Malaysia', see, for instance, Jones, *Conflict and confrontation*. See also Tan Tai Yong, *Greater Malaysia*; Stockwell, 'Malaysia': 227–42.

‘not one for forcing the pace of colonial change, and certainly not where security interests were involved’,¹⁴⁰ its response was sensible and far from negative.

This conclusion no doubt contrasts with the prevailing views on the attitude of the Menzies administration towards the end of European colonial empires in Asia. Much of the current literature on Australian post-war foreign policy is very critical of Menzies’ approach to decolonisation. For his critics, antipathy and fear fuelled Menzies’ responses towards Asian nationalism. Frank Bongiorno has spoken of his ‘hostility to decolonisation in general, especially the British variety’.¹⁴¹ Christopher Waters has claimed that, while ‘there were exceptions on the conservative side of politics to this general mood’, the Coalition government remained ‘opposed to the idea of self-determination for the people of Asia’.¹⁴² For his part, Gregory Pemberton has argued that ‘because the principle of self-determination, which Menzies opposed, increasingly became the moral yardstick in international relations displacing imperial solution to decolonisation, the Menzies government had to deny expressly and implicitly that it was opposing this process. In short, it chose to lie and lie often’.¹⁴³

These characterisations of the Menzies government’s approach to Britain’s end of empire in Southeast Asia profoundly misunderstand the prudential concerns animating the foreign policy of the Liberal–Country Party administration during the early Cold War years. It is, of course, true that Canberra was not enthusiastic about the prospect of early Malayan independence and greater self-government for Singapore. Yet, its attitude to decolonisation was not as intransigent as its critics maintain. As this article has tried to suggest, Australian ministers and officials were not opposed, in principle, to the gradual transfer of power in Singapore (and Malaya); rather, they sought to ensure, quite pragmatically, that this process would not produce outcomes contrary to Australian politico-strategic interests in the region. In Singapore, Australian policymakers felt that Britain and its Commonwealth allies faced a complex and difficult challenge. With an increasingly radicalised Chinese-educated electorate and with the growth of communist influence within the local trade unions, student population and the major opposition party, the threat of communist subversion could not be easily discounted. In these circumstances, the grant of full self-government appeared to invite trouble.

Awake to this danger were not only the British and Australian governments, but also their non-communist counterparts across the region, including the soon-to-become independent Malayan government and Nehru’s non-aligned (and vocally anti-colonial) administration in New Delhi. For this reason the failure of Marshall’s *merdeka* mission did not entice official protests in much of South and Southeast Asia. And within Singapore itself, Marshall and his main political adversary, Lee Kuan Yew, were also conscious of the danger of mounting radicalism. That is why, notwithstanding their public and vocal manifestations of anti-colonial sentiment, their demands were more moderate than they could have been. Indeed, Marshall’s successors, Lim Yew Hock and Lee Kuan Yew, would both value Britain’s presence in Singapore as ‘a counter-weight to communism’.¹⁴⁴ In short,

140 Goldsworthy, ‘Australian external policy’: 19.

141 Bongiorno, ‘Price of nostalgia’: 408–9.

142 Waters, ‘After decolonisation’: 156.

143 Pemberton, ‘An imperial imagination’, p. 159.

144 Hack, *Defence and decolonisation*, p. 248.

decolonisation in Singapore was a very complex matter, which did not lend itself to easy simplifications. The choice was not, as Menzies' critics seem to believe, between the ills of colonialism and the benefits of self-determination. Rather, the choice was between a rushed transfer of power that would generate instability, and a more gradual pace of decolonisation that would hopefully lay the basis for the long-term stability of the Malayan region. It is no wonder that Menzies and his ministers chose the second option.