

# The Repercussions of Repression

British Views on Repression in Singapore, 1959-1980

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## Abstract

This thesis examines British perspectives on political repression in Singapore, and how it influenced British economic policy towards the city-state between 1959 and 1980. On the basis of studies in the British National Archives, the thesis finds that British perspectives in 1959 and the first half of the 1960s, when Britain was eager for Singapore to become part of Malaysia, changed considerably after Singapore became an independent nation state. In the first half the 1960s they at first feared that the new PAP government would be too lenient towards the communist threat. But as the PAP became more eager to repress and arrest their opposition the British became more worried about its authoritarian tendencies. After Singapore became independent in 1965 this changed, and a sense of crisis contributed to make the British favour repressive policies in Singapore. As the political and economic situation in Singapore stabilized in the 1970s British policymakers view on repression became less tolerant, but British commercial interests in Singapore and the region made them keep quiet. Overall, the thesis finds that repressive policies in Singapore made British economic policy more favourable because it strengthened trust in the PAP government and created a conducive environment for investments.

In the conclusion the thesis establishes that British views on repression played an important role in the formulation of the 1959 constitution of Singapore, Operation Cold Store in 1963, the secession of Singapore in 1965 and the British economic aid in 1968-1971. These events and processes were pivotal in the political and economic history of Singapore.

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## List of Acronyms

BS – Barisan Socialis

CO – Colonial Office

CRO – Commonwealth Relations Office

DO – Dominions Office

FCO – Foreign and Commonwealth Office

FO – Foreign Office

ISC – Internal Security Council

PAP – People’s Action Party

UMNO – United Malays National Organization

## Introduction to the Topic and Research Question

The rapid development of East and Southeast Asia after the Second World War was one of the most consequential historical developments in the last century. It led to a dramatic redistribution of economic, political and military power. But much writing on this topic is dominated by the use of the nation state as the main analytical unit. The narrative often becomes the story of how a country and its leadership were able to overcome backwardness and lead their people to prosperity. Perhaps the best-known example of such a story is *From Third World to First*, the memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew (1923-2015), Prime Minister of Singapore from 1959 to 1990. It tells the story of how he and his political party the People's Action Party (PAP) took Singapore from a poor and unstable country in the 1960s to one of the wealthiest and most stable in the world.

These national histories often ignore the specific historical context in which development took place. They ignore the role played by historical processes of decolonization, the Cold War, economic globalization and state formation, as well as regional political and economic organisation. Discussions of the "Rise of East Asia" are thus reduced to a policy debate over what is the best development strategy. This thesis attempts to contribute to the multiplying voices who try to place the "Rise of East Asia" in its proper historical context. To do so I have chosen to look at Singapore with British eyes. This perspective forces us to look at how different problems are connected to the Cold War and decolonization. I have decided to restrict my inquiry to the way that British policymakers perceived the Singaporean government's repression of political opposition, in particular of the labour movement, and how this affected British economic policy. The British angle helps explore the relations between old Europe and new Asia in a period of radical change. By looking at whether British policymakers viewed political repression as necessary or deplorable, and how they reasoned or argued for one or the other view throws light on Western priorities in Singapore and Southeast Asia. It also gives us a good opportunity to realize that the political and economic development of Singapore was not only due to Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP but resulted from an alliance between the Singaporean leadership and British policymakers. Sometimes they disagreed, but they mostly cooperated on the basis of a sense of necessity. We will thus try to elevate our analytical view from Singapore as a nation state to the international and transnational forces and connections that drove much of its history.

## Theoretical Underpinnings of the Thesis

A historian's job involves looking at big quantities of data and information and from this extrapolate and interpret it in order to form a coherent narrative or way of ordering events and conditions in a certain period. Yet the sources do not speak by themselves. A historian must put them in a larger context in which inferences from the sources become part of a bigger picture. This process of putting historical sources into context is always affected by our preconceptions and theoretical assumptions. For a historian it is important to be aware and explicit about these preconceptions in order to understand the process of interpretation. Here I will present the analytical framework that I utilize when interpreting my sources.

An important dichotomy in much academic writing is the separateness of market and state. They are often posited as opposites with no sense of overlap. This division has affected how questions of economic policies are researched with for example economic history being one field and political history another. This split often fails to capture how politics and the economy are tightly knit together. The political economist Dani Rodrik has pointed to this and explains that “This dichotomy between markets and states – between trade and rule – is false and hides more than it reveals. Market exchange, and especially long-distance trade, cannot exist without rules imposed from somewhere.”<sup>1</sup> His point is that the market and the state are two sides of the same coin. For a market to function there must be an array of institutions that can support it. This ranges from providing security, to lowering transactions costs, providing a legal system and enforcing standards etc. From this perspective markets are not something that appears when there is an absence of government intervention, but often a product of government intervention. The historian Karl Polanyi puts it this way “the market has been the outcome of a conscious and often violent intervention on the part of government which imposed the market organization on society for noneconomic ends.”<sup>2</sup> Imposing such a perspective makes us depart from the traditional historiography. Much of the work on the history of the development of Singapore tried to understand if it was caused by efficient markets or efficient government intervention. If we abandon this dichotomy the question rather becomes: How did certain state and non-state institutions arise and establish certain political and economic institutions that facilitate or hinder economic development?

A historian that has pioneered this work in connection with East and Southeast Asia is Jim Glassman in the book *Drums of War, Drums of Development* in which he employs a

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<sup>1</sup> Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox*, (New York, W. W: Norton & Company: 2011), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, (Boston, Beacon Press: 2020), 258.

method based on Gramscian class analysis to see how the economic development of the region was influenced by US Cold War intervention:

I contend that the dramatic industrialisation dynamic of East and Southeast Asian countries that was witnessed from the 1960s onward (with some origins in the 1950s) owes far more to general geopolitical processes and their impacts on economic dynamics – including the effects of US military spending on US Vietnam War allies – than has been allowed in most of the literature on Asian economic and industrial growth.<sup>3</sup>

For Glassman it is important to look at the social processes that facilitated the development of what has been termed “developmental states”. For him it is not a question of looking at certain policies, but rather which social and geopolitical dynamics laid the conditions for the kinds of institutions that facilitated the high GDP growth in Singapore and many other East Asian states. As he puts it:

I argue that transnational class processes and the geopolitics they animate suggest the need for a geopolitical economy approach to development and industrial transformation, an approach that explodes the stereotypical ontological distinction between political economy and geopolitics pervading liberal social theory, including neo-Weberian approaches to development.<sup>4</sup>

Glassman’s answer is that the way some East Asian countries were incorporated into the US security umbrella and were integrated into the US Military Industrial Complex not only sent investments and aid that underpinned the economic take-off, but also formed a key part in social, political and economic dynamics of the countries in question. Glassman thus concludes that US involvement in the region played a key part in constructing a pacific ruling class that was key to the economic development of the region.<sup>5</sup>

That the US was quite involved in the economic growth of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan is clear in Glassman’s analysis, its influence on Singapore is less so. He shows that US procurement in connection with the Vietnam War was important in developing the electronics and engineering sectors, but the involvement analysed at length when it came to South Korea and Japan is not found in Singapore.<sup>6</sup> A similar analysis that Glassman employs on the US presence in Northeast Asia could be applied to the British presence in Southeast Asia. Before Britain withdrew militarily from east of Suez it played an important part in the economic and political dynamics of the region. In uncovering the geo-political economy (in Glassman’s terms) that underpinned the Singaporean development state, we must look at the relationship between Britain and Singapore.

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<sup>3</sup> Jim Glassman, *Drums of War, Drums of Development*, (Chicago, Haymarket Books: 2019), 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 162-163.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 485-494.



A historian who has approached the history of Singapore with a similar theoretic framework is Loh Kah Seng who in a chapter titled “The British Military Withdrawal from Singapore and the Anatomy of a Catalyst”, looks at the cooperation between Singaporean and British authorities during the British military withdrawal from Singapore and how this contributed to economic development. He writes “in post-war Singapore and Malaya, the British sought to safeguard their economic and strategic interests in the region by restructuring local societies and economies in their own image.” By looking at for example the cooperation between the British and Singaporean authorities in the handover of dockyards and infrastructure, Loh shows that an alliance formed on the basis of similar political and economic interests that helped contribute to the economic rise of Singapore.<sup>7</sup>

Before we move on a comment is necessary on who the “British” were. With this category I mean the British officials who were most influential in forming British policy in Singapore. This of course varied over time, but the group usually consisted of the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Colonial affairs, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, and the British High Commissioner in Singapore. Other British figures who will make an appearance in the thesis are junior diplomats in Singapore, civil servants in London and various cabinet ministers. These officials often disagreed and held different perspectives. “The British” must therefore not be understood as a monolithic block, but rather as persons with different backgrounds and personalities. These differences often played a role in forging the changing attitudes to the Singaporean Government and its repression of trade unions and political opponents.

Before we move on to give a historiographical survey of the field a definition of “political repression” is necessary.<sup>8</sup> The political scientist Christian Davenport has defined political repression as “a mechanism of force wielded by the government, (...) that restricts the freedom and/or inflicts bodily pain/injury on citizens.”<sup>9</sup> Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow have specified this definition by defining political repression “as the attempt by a state or its agents against challengers in order to end their challenge by arresting them, harassing them, or destroying their organisations.”<sup>10</sup> We can therefore think of political repression as the state’s

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<sup>7</sup> Loh Kah Seng, “The British Military Withdrawal from Singapore and the Anatomy of a Catalyst” in *Singapore in Global History*, ed. Derek Heng and Syehd Muhd Kairudin Aljunied, (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press: 2011), 198-202.

<sup>8</sup> The topic of political repression is of course a vast field in political science, for a more detailed discussion see: Christian Davenport, Hank Johnston and Carol Mueller (ed) *Repression and Mobilization*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 2005), and Christian Davenport, *State Repression and the Domestic Democratic Peace*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Christian Davenport, *State Repression and the Domestic Democratic Peace*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, (New York, Oxford University Press: 2015), 37.

attempt to defeat or remove their political opponents, not by engaging with their political arguments in a debate, but by using other means such as violence, arrests, fiddling with campaigns laws, control of media, deregistering, libel lawsuits and other means that hamper the ability of their political opponents to operate.<sup>11</sup> In this thesis I will investigate how the British looked at the necessity and legitimacy of these kinds of actions in Singapore.

By using these theoretical perspectives my thesis aims to enrich our understanding of the history of the relationship between Singapore and Great Britain, and the economic and political development of Singapore.

### Historiographical Survey

There are few or no published historical works that deal specifically with the question of British perspectives on political repression in Singapore. Most histories deal with either the history of Singapore, where works by historians such as Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki are not shy about dealing with political repression or focus on British imperial policy in Southeast Asia or Malaya, where decolonization and British defence policy are in focus.<sup>12</sup> Some of these historical works also touch upon the questions where these historiographical schools overlap. These works deal mainly with the years leading up to 1959 when Singapore gained internal self-government and the following four years, when Britain was still partly responsible for Singapore's internal security through the Internal Security Council (ISC).

In 1978, Stanley S. Bedlington published a history of the formation of Malaysia and Singapore, describing British arrests made with the cooperation of the government of Lee Yew Hock in 1956 and 1957 as a consequence of British fears of communism. Bendlington wrote that “the bogey of a Communist Singapore continued to exercise British officials.”<sup>13</sup> Bendlington saw these repressive acts by the colonial British government as a process of state building, where the aim was to achieve a non-communist Malaya. S. R. Joey Long has interpreted them in a wider transnational and international context. For him the decline of British prestige in the Third World after the 1956 Suez Crisis made the British government realize the need to speed up decolonisation in Malaya and Singapore. The Lim Yew Hock Government's willingness to use harsh measures, such as arrests without trial, to fight the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> For examples of the former see: C. M Turnbull, *A Modern History of Singapore*, (Singapore, NUS Press: 2020) and Michael D. Barr, *Singapore A Modern History* (London, Bloomsbury Academic: 2018). For examples of the latter see: P. L Pham *Ending 'East of Suez' The British Decision to Withdraw from Malaysia and Singapore, 1964-1968*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2010), and Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire the Road to Decolonisation 1918-1968* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Stanley S. Bedlington, *Malaysia and Singapore The Building of New States*, (Ithaca and London, Cornell University: 1978), 201.

communist threat, made the British confident that a self-governing Singapore would be staunchly anti-communist; thus, keeping the British bases in Singapore safe.<sup>14</sup> For Long the British support of the repressive measures of Lim Yew Hock were an important factor in British support for an independent Singapore.

Historical works that deal with the British perspective on political repression in Singapore after 1959 are centred on Operation Cold Store in 1963 and the events leading to it.<sup>15</sup> The historiographical debate has mainly followed the main split in the historiography of Singapore.<sup>16</sup> The traditional narrative presented by the historian Constance Mary Turnbull, as well as by Lee Kuan Yew in his memoirs, has claimed that the operation was supported by British officials on security grounds. In this school of thought it was the British fear of communist riots and insurgents that made them agree to the operation.<sup>17</sup>

In a revisionist narrative by Michael D. Barr and Matthew Jones, Lee Kuan Yew is seen as one of the primary supporters for Operation Cold Store with the British only agreeing in order to achieve the overarching objective of establishing Malaysia. They argue that it was the Tunku Abdul Rahman (1903-1990), Prime Minister in Malaya 1957-1970, that first demanded an operation to arrest suspected communist sympathizers before Malaya's 1963 merger with Singapore and that Lee Kuan Yew supported the proposal in order to neutralize his local opponents. The British saw the operation as unconstitutional and likely to cause political unrest, and only reluctantly agreed when they realized the Tunku would not agree to merger unless they acquiesced.<sup>18</sup> There is therefore a sharp disagreement in the literature on political repression of the opposition during Operation Cold Store.

There is a gap in the research literature on the development of British perspectives on political repression in Singapore in the period from 1963 to 1980. As I argued above, a better understanding of British perspectives on political repression in Singapore will help us to also understand British objectives and priorities in interactions with Singaporean authorities during

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<sup>14</sup> S. R. Long, "Bringing the International and Transnational back in: Singapore, Decolonisation, and the Cold War", in *Singapore in Global History*, ed. Derek Heng and Syehd Muhd Kairudin Aljunied, (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press: 2011), 221-222.

<sup>15</sup> Operation Cold Store will be dealt with in Chapter one, but in short it was a police operation where the leaders of the opposition and the leaders of several trade unions were arrested by the Singaporean authorities with the acquiescence of the British.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the historiography of Singapore see: Barr, *Singapore A Modern History*, 1-12.

<sup>17</sup> C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 445-446, and in Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story*, (New York, Harper Business: 2000), 471-472.

<sup>18</sup> Barr, *Singapore a Modern History ...*, 113-114, and Matthew Jones (2000) "Creating Malaysia: Singapore security, the Borneo territories, and the contours of British Policy, 1961-1963" in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 28:2, 85-109.

the early development of its independence. It is the aim of this thesis to contribute to filling this gap.

#### A Note on Structure and Sources

I have decided to structure my thesis in three chapters. They deal with successive phases in the decolonisation of Singapore. The first chapter covers the period from 1959 to 1963, when Singapore gained full internal self-government with the caveat that Malaya and Britain had a say in its domestic security situation through the Internal Security Council. External relations and defence policy were managed by Britain. This phase coincides with the last half of Harold Macmillan's premiership. The next phase runs from 1964 to 1971. In this phase Singapore became fully independent. First as a part of Malaysia from 1963 to 1965, and then as a separate city-state. But even though Singapore gained independence British military bases remained on the island. Britain announced in 1968 that it would withdraw from its bases by 1971, so even though Singapore was an independent state the British presence was significant until then. This phase overlaps with the first premiership of Harold Wilson from 1964 to 1970. The third chapter covers the post-colonial years from 1971 to 1980. In this phase British military presence was negligible. Some infantry remained after 1971 as part of a Five Countries Agreement, but they were withdrawn over the course of the decade. As British presence and influence in this period declined, I have decided to make this chapter shorter. The aim of the thesis is to see if or how the internal developments in Singapore, the different governments in London, and the changing nature of the relationship between Singapore and Britain affected the British perspective on political repression.

The primary source material that the thesis uses consists of documents in the British National Archives (the only exception is a document from the National Archives in Singapore). The documents are mostly cables between the British High Commission in Singapore and London, and internal memos, letters and summaries from the British government. When referencing the sources, I have used the titles given to dispatches, date and archival name. Most of the files from before 1964 also have page numbers. In those cases, I have provided the page number at the end of the footnote. In the cases where the documents have not been given a name by their author, I have made a title that is descriptive of the document, for example "British High Commissioner to Colonial Office". I have also used relevant memoirs and autobiographies written by politicians and British diplomats.

We will now proceed to the first chapter where we will begin by looking at the British response to the first universal election in Singapore in 1959.

## Chapter 1: Constitutional Constraints, 1959-1963

This chapter will examine how the British perceived the political and economic situation in the by 1959 fully self-governed State of Singapore. I will especially look at how the British analysed and understood PAP actions and repression towards political opponents and trade unions. We will focus on how British policymakers looked upon the political threat from communism and left leaning politicians in Singapore, and how this changed over time as the economic and political situation developed. Did the British see repression of left leaning politicians and unions as necessary, harmful, or counterproductive, and did British opinions on these questions change over time? We will also look at how these perspectives compared to the views of the PAP. Towards the end the chapter I will look at how British perspectives on the repression of left-leaning opponents of the PAP influenced the UK's economic policy towards Singapore.

An important factor in the British decision to grant independence to Singapore in 1959 lay in its confidence that Singaporean authorities would be firm with the “leftist” threat. In a press conference in 1958 in Singapore the British PM Harold Macmillan (1894-1986) told journalists that the present Singaporean Government led by Lim Yew Hock was “moderate and sensible.” He explained that Britain would go ahead with granting Singapore “internal independence,” but that he “expected any Singapore Government to carry out its side of the bargain.”<sup>19</sup> There was therefore an expectation from the British government that the Singaporean Government would not be squeamish when it came to repressing the threat from the political left. But in 1959 Lim Yew Hock lost power to the PAP and Lee Kuan Yew. How did British authorities perceive the likelihood and willingness of the PAP to follow up on this expectation to use political repression of the left if necessary?

### British Reaction to the Election of the PAP in 1959:

An answer to this question can be found in a report that reached the desk of Macmillan on the 31st July 1959. The Secretary of State for the Colonies had forwarded him a report from the British High Commissioner William Goode in Singapore about the PAP who had just won the first universal election in the now fully self-governed State of Singapore. In the report Goode analysed the position and intentions of Lee Kuan Yew, the leader of the PAP, and laid out some of the challenges that his government would face. The High Commissioner identified opposition to communism as one of the main planks of the PAP platform: He wrote, “Above

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<sup>19</sup> Harold Macmillan, *Riding the Storm 1956-1959*, (London, Macmillan: 1971), 409.

all else they are obsessed by the threat of communism.” He continued to describe the PAP strategy to counter the communist threat:

They propose to meet this threat not by repressive police action, but by winning the minds of the people of Singapore to democratic socialism, by fostering loyalty to Singapore and Malaya in the Chinese population, and by showing that in Singapore’s circumstances democratic socialism is effective in providing a welfare state without the rigours of communism.<sup>20</sup>

At this Goode breathed a sigh of relief and he wrote: “The will and ability of the PAP to face and fight the challenge of Communism will obviously be one of the major concerns of the United Kingdom.”<sup>21</sup>

Goode wrote that the signs the PAP had sent so far augured well. But he pointed to some worrying elements that could jeopardize the long-term stability of the new Singaporean constitution. He especially pointed out the daunting economic problems that Singapore faced in the coming years. The problem of unemployment would be acute as a rising population meant that new and younger workers arrived in growing numbers into the labour market, and the government would have to ensure there were enough jobs for them. Unfortunately, in the eyes of Goode the “obsession with the political and ideological struggle to win the minds of the masses to democratic Socialism in preference to Communism is likely to prejudice a competent approach to the other problems of making Singapore’s economy work.” He was also sceptical of the political organisation of the PAP. The PAP was organised on a Leninist model with a cadre system similar to what the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were using. Goode wrote that “their discipline, their emphasis on party rule, their doctrinal approach and ruthless methods are characteristic of Communism and could well prepare the way for the Communists to take over.” He therefore concluded: “Their political ideologies and sensitivities throw doubt on the determination of the PAP leaders to do what they know to be right when they judge that it will weaken their popularity.”<sup>22</sup> In other words he was convinced of the PAP’s intention to fight communism but doubted their willingness to use unpopular repressive measures if necessary.

Goode concluded that the election of the PAP to govern Singapore gave grounds for cautious optimism, but that the battle in no way was won. He wrote, “the main battle with Chinese chauvinism, Communism and above all, with the grave economic problems of Singapore, has not yet been joined.”<sup>23</sup> Macmillan underlined this paragraph.

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<sup>20</sup> “Singapore, the New Government”, 30 July 1959, PREM 11 2659, 3, BNA.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 3-5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 5.

The analysis and conclusion from the High Commissioner would form the foundation of British perspectives on political repression in Singapore in the coming years. Goode described Singapore as being on knife's edge when it came to which way it would go politically. Now it was slightly leaning towards democracy built upon social democratic values, but the political and economic odds stacked against it could easily tip it towards going communist.<sup>24</sup> In the view of the British the best bulwark against a communist government was a prosperous Singapore as a part of Malaya (which had gained formal independence in 1957), governed according to democratic principles.<sup>25</sup> However, this was a long-term goal as such an outcome would take time to achieve. Meanwhile the British and the government of Singapore had to deal with the immediate threat that communism posed. This could require repression and harsh tactics incommensurable with democratic governance. There was therefore an inherent tension in the long-term and short-term political objectives of the British as their short-term objective might sabotage their long-term objective and vice-versa. As Goode's report made obvious, their initial worry was that the PAP would be too lenient on perceived communists. How did these political objectives and the balance between them affect the British perspective on political repression in Singapore?

Immediately after the election the British faced the tension from these conflicting objectives. The PAP demanded that if it were to form a government some of its members who had been imprisoned by Lim Yew Hock's government in 1957 had to be released. Singapore's new constitution afforded it a high degree of internal self-government. The only areas of government where the British kept their prerogatives was in foreign policy and internal security. To handle internal security the British had set up the Internal Security Council (ISC). On this body the British government, the Singaporean Government and the government of Malaya were all represented.<sup>26</sup> The body had been set up specifically because the British did not trust the Singaporean Government to handle internal security.<sup>27</sup> The new Singaporean Government could therefore not ensure the release of political prisoners themselves. They needed this to be signed off by the British and the government of Malaya. This was problematic, as the PAP, the British and the government of Malaya did not see eye to eye on the risk these prisoners constituted. To the British they posed a risk due to their perceived communist

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<sup>24</sup> Singapore was important to the British due to the military bases on there. They underpinned British power in the region, and it was vital to have a government in Singapore that allowed them free use of the bases.

<sup>25</sup> Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore* ..., 433, and Nicholas Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain in South-East Asia*, (Singapore, Oxford University Press: 1993), 199-204.

<sup>26</sup> Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish Singapore in Malaysia and the politics of Disengagement*, (Singapore, Eastern Universities Press: 2003), 11-12.

<sup>27</sup> S.R. Joey Long, "Bringing the International and Transnational back in: Singapore...", 222.

leanings and this was even more so in the eyes of the Malayan government, which was still engaged in fighting a communist insurgency on its territory.<sup>28</sup>

The demand from the PAP for the release of the prisoners was no surprise to the British. It was something that the PAP had promised in its electoral campaign and the British had, with a PAP victory seeming likely, already prepared their policy. The 28<sup>th</sup> of May 1959, Alan Lennox-Boyd, the Secretary of State for the Colonies (1954-1959), sent a note to Macmillan where he discussed the topic. He wrote “This matter requires the most careful handling if the prospects of a successful inauguration of the new constitution are not to be prejudiced.”<sup>29</sup> Lennox-Boyd continued to explain the dilemma: “If we dig our toes and refuse to yield to Lee Kuan Yew’s request, then we may create a very difficult situation in Singapore, leading possibly to unrest.” But he wrote, “If we agree to do as he wants – and as I am recommending we should – then we shall certainly be accused by some of weakness and of having ceased to care about what happens in Singapore.”<sup>30</sup> Lennox-Boyd and the British had not changed their view of the risk they constituted. They saw the prisoners as having communist sympathies and as likely to continue their “subversive” activities. But he thought it was essential to establish the new constitution of Singapore on a firm footing. If the British denied the first request of the first universally elected government of Singapore, they would endanger the constitution before it had come into effect, undermining the goal of a democratic Singapore.<sup>31</sup> But he wanted this conclusion to be secret as if the PAP won a less overwhelming victory and received a weaker mandate, the British government could keep the prisoners detained. In this situation the blocking of the release would be seen as less of a breach of good faith and might thus be worth the political risk.<sup>32</sup>

These diplomatic exchanges show that the release of the political prisoners was not the preferred British choice, but that the necessity of having the new constitution start on a firm footing to help establish a stable Singapore was an objective that outweighed this consideration. To make a decision part of the cabinet met on the first of June 1959. They agreed to the recommendation from Lennox-Boyd that the best solution was to accept the release of the seven prisoners to ensure a smooth transition and a good start to the new democratic constitution. They agreed that “There was reason to hope that once in office Mr Lee Kuan Yew would try to maintain a non-communist attitude and pursue policies designed to preserve the

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<sup>28</sup> Secretary of State for the Colonies to Sir W. Goode, 29 May 1959, PREM 11 2659, 32, BNA.

<sup>29</sup> Lennox-Boyd to Macmillan, 28 May 1959, PREM 11 2659, 37, BNA.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Secretary of State for the Colonies to Sir W. Goode, 29 May 1959, PREM 11 2659, 32, BNA.

<sup>32</sup> Secretary of State for the Colonies to Sir J. Robertson, 27 May 1959, PREM 11 2659, 39, BNA.



commercial life of Singapore.”<sup>33</sup> After the decision had been made Macmillan sent a telegram to Lee where he wrote it was “our belief – as I know it to be yours Mr. Prime Minister – that the first way to beat communism is a free government.”<sup>34</sup> The message was ironic given that the preferred action by the British were to keep the prisoners behind bars. This shows that at the beginning of self-government in Singapore the British saw repression of political opponents and dissidents as necessary and a viable political tactic to achieve their political objectives. They saw the new PAP as too sympathetic to the “leftist” threat and too squeamish when it came to using repressive tactics to suppress it. But political pressure from the PAP, the need to form a good relationship with the political leadership and public in Singapore made London concede and agree to the release of the prisoners. The Conservative British government was thus willing to risk the short-term stability of Singapore in the hope of achieving its long-term objective of a democratic, stable and non-communist Singapore.

#### *British Perspectives on PAP policy vis-à-vis the Labour Movement in 1960-1961:*

As 1959 progressed popular opinion of the PAP in Singapore declined and a number of strikes broke out in different sectors. How did British policymakers evaluate the reactions of the Singaporean Government to handle the strikes and the unruly labour movement?

In the eyes of the British government the PAP failed to deal with the strikes adequately.<sup>35</sup> The new High Commissioner Lord Selkirk, a former Conservative politician who had served in Macmillan’s cabinet, took over in December 1959. He wrote that the strikes were led by extreme-left unions and had been the result of “hasty statements” by the Ministry of Labour and that the Singaporean Government had been “reluctant to allow the police to intervene effectively against violence at the scene of the strike.”<sup>36</sup> But in December 1960 Selkirk wrote a despatch where he was glad to report that there had been a change in the PAP’s approach to the strikes: “I am glad to say that the government have recently taken a firmer grip on the industrial situation with the result that the tide of industrial strife has for the time being halted if not turned.” When the Secretary of State for the Colonies read the dispatch, he underlined this part of the report. Amongst the firmer action that the PAP had taken that he commended was the arrest of around 40 workers that were on strike in a glass factory. He wrote, “The action taken by the police was firm and patient and did not result in any adverse

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<sup>33</sup> Minutes of a Meeting held at 10, Downing Street, 1 June 1959, CAB 130/164, BNA.

<sup>34</sup> Secretary of State for the Colonies to Sir W. Goode, 1 June 1959, PREM 11 2659, 17, BNA.

<sup>35</sup> Selkirk to Colonial Office, 5 April 1961, CO 1030/1143, 31, BNA.

<sup>36</sup> Selkirk to CO, 5 April 1961, CO 1030/1143, 31, BNA.

publicity.”<sup>37</sup> Selkirk also pointed out that Lee Kuan Yew had removed one of the political secretaries in the Ministry of Labour, one Fong Swee Suan, an “extremist left-wing” in the eyes of Selkirk, to another ministry. In this way Lee had decreased the influence of the leftist faction of the PAP over industrial policy.<sup>38</sup>

But even though Selkirk was reassured by the recent actions of the government, he was concerned by the action of the opposition. As government policy had become firmer so did support for opposing views increase. He wrote: “as the above developments were occurring, extremist criticism of the Government was mounting within the left-wing group of unions under the direction of Lim Chin Siong and Fong Swee Suan.” Furthermore, Selkirk wrote that the unions had written a memorandum to the government where they said that if the PAP’s industrialisation plan failed to result in economic growth and higher wages for workers, they would demand that the PAP government turn to the communist bloc for aid and economic assistance.<sup>39</sup> The Secretary of State underlined this section as well. This is a good example that shows the British were conscious that excessive repression constituted a political risk as it might increase opposition and instability.

The tightening of PAP control over the trade unions strengthened the trust the British had in the party and removed some of the concerns they had earlier on the election of the PAP.<sup>40</sup> The PAP seemed to move in a direction where they would live up to “their end of the bargain” as Macmillan put it. But even though the anti-communist credentials of the PAP were strengthened in the eyes of the British, the political developments in Singapore raised concerns that the communist threat had not gone away. On the contrary it might be more acute. This shows that British policymakers thought that a firm line against the labour movement, that arrests, was necessary in order to foster economic development and political stability in Singapore. To the British the trade unions’ strikes and protests were irresponsible and damaging, and thus repressive actions against them were called for. But the British also thought that this action had to be measured in order not to harden the very opposition that they were

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>40</sup> Selkirk summarised the despatch: “the Government have made welcome steps in this direction during the past few weeks and there is no apparent slackening in their resolve to continue tightening their grip, even where repressive measures against Communists in the trade unions are concerned. It is to be hoped that (...) the Government will not be deterred from this realistic course by the mixture of blandishment, defiance and threat at present emanating from the T.U.C.” Selkirk to CO, 5 April 1961, CO 1030/1143, 34, BNA.

fighting against. They also feared that excessive repressive measures could attract unwanted international attention from for example the ILO.<sup>41</sup>

But while the British were increasingly satisfied with the PAP's repressive measures towards the labour movement, they started to worry about the repressive political measures of the PAP. This started in late 1960 when the British began to suspect that some of the arrests that the PAP argued for in the ISC were made on political grounds.<sup>42</sup> These suspicions were strengthened when Selkirk made the observation in 1961 that the PAP failed to understand the concept of democratic government, and that instead of engaging in discussion with the opposition they sought to destroy them by personal attacks. For the PAP there was no concept of a loyal opposition.<sup>43</sup> These worries would be vindicated by political developments in 1961.

#### The Tunku Calls for Merger and the Formation of the Barisan Socialis

The issue of the trade unions and the left-wing detainees that had not yet been released from prison caused a rift in the PAP. On the one side there was Lee Kuan Yew who was in favour of a stricter policy towards the trade unions and was reluctant to release detainees. On the other side was Lim Chin Siong (1933-1996) who favoured a more pro-union policy and wanted to see more left-wing detainees released from prison. A speech held on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 1961 by Tunku Abdul Rahman, escalated the conflict within the PAP to a full split. In the speech the Tunku outlined his suggestion of forming an independent Malaysia with Singapore, Sarawak, Brunei and Sabah. Lee's faction of the PAP supported this to ensure the security and economic prosperity of Singapore by linking the city up with an economic hinterland. The faction of the PAP led by Lim Chin Siong was not against merger in principle but saw the proposal of a united Malaysia as a way to wipe out the left in the PAP and Singapore. The Tunku, who would most likely become Prime Minister of the new Malaysia, was an ardent anti-communist who helped the British crush the Malayan Communist Party during the 1948-60 emergency.<sup>44</sup> The British fully supported the Tunku's proposal. They saw Malaysia as a promising bulwark against the encroachment of communism from China, Indonesia and Indochina. A strong

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<sup>41</sup> Geoff Wade, "'Operation Cold Store': A Key Event in the Creation of Malaysia and in the Origins of Modern Singapore", in the *1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore: Commemorating 50 Years*, ed. Poh Soo Kai, Tan Kok Fang and Hong Lysa, (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Center: Kuala Lumpur, Pusat Serajah Rakyat: 2013), 21-22.

<sup>42</sup> Wade, *Operation Cold Store* ..., 21.

<sup>43</sup> "Where the Government have chiefly fallen is over their complete failure to understand the mechanics of successful democratic government. (...) Lee Kuan Yew thought that he must crush rather than tolerate him and tried to do this by casting reflections on his personal veracity and private life in a series of elaborate enquiries and debates." Selkirk quoted in: Wade, *Operation Cold Store* ..., 23.

<sup>44</sup> Barr, *Singapore: A Modern History*, 115.

Malaysia would in their eyes be able to contribute to economic development to undercut communist appeal and ensure security through military force.<sup>45</sup> These developments would dramatically change the political landscape and dynamics in Singapore. We will now look at how these changes affected the British perspective on political repression in Singapore.

The issue of independence through unification with Malaysia led to a split in the PAP. After calling for a vote of confidence which he won, Lee Kuan Yew expelled Lim Chin Siong from the PAP along with other members of his faction. As a response those who were expelled from the PAP decided to form their own political party. This party was named Barisan Socialis (BS) meaning “socialist front”.<sup>46</sup> Upon forming the new party Lim Chin Siong and the new party issued a statement where they attacked Lee’s leadership. They said “Mr. Lee was crying communism in order to stifle criticism within the party and to deny civil liberties to the people.”<sup>47</sup> The split in the PAP also led to a split in the labour movement. Trade unions that supported the BS set up the Singapore Association of Trade Unions (SATU). They had support from some of the most important trade unions, with workers in industrial plants, transportation companies and the docks.<sup>48</sup>

How did the British interpret and see the political split in the PAP and how did it affect the way they perceived repression of political opponents? The British preferred the moderate policy of the PAP and saw the BS as leftists that could threaten British interests in Singapore. This is obvious from a report by H. G. L. Poppitt who was the Assistant Labour Advisor at the British High Commission. Poppitt on many occasions referred to the leftist unions as the “extreme left.”<sup>49</sup> Selkirk copied significantly from a report by Poppitt when, on the fifth of August 1961, he sent a memorandum on these developments to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. But Selkirk decided not to refer to the new leftist unions’ organisation as extreme. Instead, he quoted a lot from the democratic rhetoric used by the leaders of the SATU. For example, in his report made a reference to how “A democratic trade union movement was vital to the establishment of industrial peace and economic prosperity and that trade union leaders owed their first loyalty to workers and not to political leaders.” He chose to end his report by blaming the leader of the Singapore Trade Union Congress (STUC) of “having invited the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>46</sup> Selkirk to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 4 August 1961, CO 1030/1196, 8, BNA.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>48</sup> “The Labour Scene in Singapore August 1961”, August 1961, CO 1030/1400, 43-44, BNA.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 45.

Minister of labour and Law to dissolve the STUC.”<sup>50</sup> These sentences are taken from a paragraph that Selkirk lifted in its entirety from the report by Poppitt.

This is interesting because it is apparent from these reports and other reports that the British still supported the PAP and saw the political objectives of the BS and the SATU as a threat to their interests in Singapore. For example, in a report later on an upcoming election Selkirk wrote that “If Barisan Socialis obtain a majority at a general election (and this is quite possible) merger would be off.”<sup>51</sup> But despite the clear British preference for the PAP as the best vehicle to serve British interests there were few signs of urgency or expression of fear of the BS seizing power. This cannot be because the British perceived the BS chances to win an election as small. The quote from the report by Selkirk clearly shows that he saw this as a possible outcome. The more likely explanation is that this was part of a British balancing act of ensuring that Singapore became a non-communist democracy in a wider Malaysia. MacMillan’s Conservative government (1957-63) did see the BS as a threat to British interests, but as long as they played by democratic rules a crack down on them would be counterproductive to Britain’s main objectives. Not only would it undermine the still fresh constitution of Singapore, but it would also be a provocation that could lead to escalation from the left for example by strikes and riots that in turn could destabilize Singapore and usher in a Communist takeover.

That the British government did not see the BS as a direct threat is shown in the report by Poppitt: “It is not anticipated that the left-wing unions (...) will be used to promote wide scale industrial unrest.” The reason for this was that at the present moment the BS had sufficient political support to use the political arena to further their agenda. He also wrote that the leadership of the left-wing trade unions understood “that they must not unnecessarily drive industrial and commercial investment out of the state.” Poppitt continued by explaining that at the present moment “the left wing union leaders have been careful not to stir up industrial trouble” and had been “proceeding steadily in negotiating fresh contracts for improved wages and conditions.” But he added a warning that all these contracts were conveniently set to expire in two years, meaning that they would come up for renegotiation at the same time as the government of Singapore were due to have constitutional talks with the British government. This Poppitt wrote could be “a potential weapon if the extreme left wing are in opposition and would decide to use their trade union power for their political ends.”<sup>52</sup> Poppitt thus did not see

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<sup>50</sup> Selkirk to CO, 19 August 1961, CO 1030/1400, 54, BNA.

<sup>51</sup> Selkirk to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 4 April 1963, CO 1030/1569, 1, BNA.

<sup>52</sup> “The Labour Scene in Singapore August 1961”, August 1961, CO 1030/1400, 47, BNA.

the BS or what he called the extreme left-wing as an immediate threat to the stability of Singapore, though he did not exclude that the latent political power they had mainly through the trade unions could constitute a potential threat in the future. Repressive actions were therefore not necessary at this point. The British had seemingly changed their position on the need for repressive measures against the “leftist” threat.

Why did the British government change its position? It is important to keep in mind here that many of the persons (Lim Chin Siong for example) that formed the BS and the SATU were the same persons that the former British Colonial Government had arrested and reluctantly released in 1959 under pressure from the PAP. Why were the British in favour of keeping these political opponents locked up in 1959 and against imprisoning them in 1961-62? The answer is partly one of pragmatism and convenience. Keeping prisoners that were behind bars is a less controversial or provocative action than making new arrests. Also making arrests in a fully self-governed Singapore would be more controversial than the previous rounds of arrests under the colonial government. If they did not have the Singaporean Government on board, it would have required the suspension of the constitution and that would in all likelihood alienate the PAP and the Singaporean public against the British, increasing the chances that they would look to the communist countries for help. The British had also recently experienced in Nyasaland how repressive actions could backfire and cause political unrest and attract negative international attention in the UN. They were not eager to relearn the lesson in Singapore.<sup>53</sup> But it is not only convenience and pragmatism that explains the “leniency” of the British. It was also a sincere loyalty and belief in the new constitution that the British had helped form in 1959. As Selkirk emphasized in a meeting with the future leadership of the BS, at what would later be called the Eden Hall tea party, “the constitution was a free one, which they should respect.”<sup>54</sup> And if the BS and the far left respected the constitution, they should be allowed to continue their political agitation. As Selkirk’s deputy put it: “in Singapore today we have a political and not a security problem”, and a political problem required a political solution.<sup>55</sup> Selkirk particularly emphasized this.

The balancing act by the British would from the moment BS was formed be complicated by the fact that at this moment a split took place between the British and Lee Kuan Yew’s PAP. Lee saw these developments in a different light than the British.<sup>56</sup> For Lee the split

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<sup>53</sup> Jones, “Creating Malaysia...”, 86.

<sup>54</sup> Turnbull, *A Modern History of Singapore*, 441.

<sup>55</sup> Moore to Colonial Office, 18 July 1962, CO 1030/1160, 363, BNA.

<sup>56</sup> Selkirk to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 4 August 1961, CO 1030/1196, 16, BNA, and Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 44.

of the PAP and the formation of the BS was a threat to his own and the PAP's political survival.<sup>57</sup> From this moment Lee and the PAP increasingly saw political threats against themselves as threats towards the stability and prosperity of Singapore as a whole. That meant that going forward the British problem was no longer a PAP that was too lenient on political opposition, but rather a PAP that was *too* aggressive and repressive towards it. We will now look at how British policymakers reacted to increasing calls from Lee and the PAP to arrest the BS and the political opposition during the negotiations for merger.

### Negotiations for Merger and Operation Cold Store

The differing perspectives between the British and the PAP on the BS and the need to suppress the far left in Singapore would become an important sticking point between Lee Kuan Yew, the Tunku and the British in the negotiations for the formation of Malaysia. For the British the main objectives in the negotiations on the merger were to secure the stability of Singapore and to keep free use of their military bases in Singapore. The weakening position of the PAP with the rise of the BS made merger even more important and urgent because of the political differences between the BS and the British.<sup>58</sup> Merger was thus a way for the British to support the PAP in Singapore, make Kuala Lumpur responsible for security of Singapore, and to keep the British military capacity in the region.<sup>59</sup>

For the PAP and the Tunku the reason for wanting merger was less complicated. For the PAP merger was a way to secure their own position in power. They hoped that by giving away responsibility for internal security that they could make the Tunku culpable for detention and repression of the BS and other political opponents.<sup>60</sup> What caused the Tunku to change his mind was the weakening position of the PAP.<sup>61</sup> As much as he was sceptical of the PAP he was much more worried about a Singapore ruled by the BS.<sup>62</sup> But the Tunku only agreed to merger on the condition that the ISC ordered a round-up of suspected communists and communist front men in Singapore before merger.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Pang Cheng Lian, *The People's Action Party: Its History, Organisation, and Leadership*, (Singapore, Oxford University Press: 1971), 15.

<sup>58</sup> The British were certain that if the BS gained power in Singapore with their stronger anti-colonial stances than the PAP, the British military forces would be kicked out. Jones, "Creating Malaysia: ...", 87-88.

<sup>59</sup> Jones, "Creating Malaysia: ...", 89-90.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 87-88.

<sup>61</sup> For an account of how regional developments affected the Tunku see: Danny Wong Tze Ken, "Malaysia During the Early Cold War Era: The War in Indochina and Malaya, 1946-1963", in *Connecting Histories Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945-1962*, ed. Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F. Ostermann, (Washington, D.C, Woodrow Wilson Center Press: 2009).

<sup>62</sup> Barr, *Singapore a Modern History*, 115-116.

<sup>63</sup> Jones, *Creating Malaysia...*, 95.

The British opposed these repressive actions. Selkirk argued that they were indefensible and would strengthen the opposition. Philip Moore, Selkirk's deputy wrote "I cannot stress too strongly the unwisdom of repressive action in Singapore at this stage." He continued "It is going to be difficult enough to steer Singapore into merger under a Government which has lost its popular appeal and would almost certainly lose a general election without giving the Opposition the rallying point for which they are searching so desperately."<sup>64</sup> The British also doubted if the leaders in the BS were communists at all.<sup>65</sup>

In March 1962 Lee Kuan Yew travelled to Kuala Lumpur to meet the Tunku to discuss conditions for merger. At the meeting they agreed to arrests of suspected communists before merger and also proposed to set-up a working group that would "Discuss and make recommendations in regard to a phased plan of action against Communists and Communist-sympathizers in Singapore prior to merger."<sup>66</sup> In a telegram the High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur wrote that the Tunku suspected Lee of playing a double game where he was trying to get the leaders of BS and other political opponents arrested while at the same time putting the blame on the Federation and the British.<sup>67</sup> The British refused to take part in this working group as long as the premise was that repressive actions were necessary. They proposed setting up a Working Party in the ISC to evaluate the security situation in Singapore and based upon this see if there was need for repressive actions.<sup>68</sup> The Secretary of State for the Colonies approved this course of action.<sup>69</sup> However the Tunku and Lee did not agree to this.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of April Tory wrote a letter to Selkirk where he said that it was time to face the fact that the Special Branches of Malaya and Singapore already had agreed to "a phased programme of some sort."<sup>70</sup> It is apparent from the letter that the British were worried about pressure from Lee and the Tunku to arrest the opposition. Tory wrote that "What happens next is not easy to foresee" and he then continued "Maybe the Federation or Singapore will suggest discussion in the I.S.C., (...) In that case we should find ourselves in a minority of one and having to decide whether to exercise our power of veto against the wishes of the lawfully constituted Government of Singapore."<sup>71</sup> The political pressure from Lee already manifested

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<sup>64</sup> Moore to Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs, 4. May 1962, PREM 11/3866, BNA.

<sup>65</sup> The High Commissioner would in the summer 1962 cable the Commonwealth Office and write "that there has been no recent proof of Communist activity or allegiance on their part.", 28. June 1962, DO 169/214, BNA.

<sup>66</sup> The quote continued: "To include all necessary action such as arrests banishments and propaganda." Kuala Lumpur to CRO, 16 Mars 1962, CO 1030/1157, 180, BNA.

<sup>67</sup> Kuala Lumpur to Commonwealth Relations Office, 16 Mars 1962, CO 1030/1157, 181, BNA.

<sup>68</sup> Moore to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 20 Mars 1962, CO 1030/1157, 171, BNA.

<sup>69</sup> Secretary of State for the Colonies to Selkirk, 21 Mars 1962, CO 1030/1157, 169, BNA.

<sup>70</sup> Kuala Lumpur to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 19 April 1962, CO, 1030/1157, 44, BNA.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 44.



itself on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April when Lee had a meeting with Selkirk. In the meeting Lee presented a paper that the Special Branches of the Federation and Singapore had produced. Lee argued for introducing laws that would tighten regulation of the Chinese press. “This phase is designed to provoke Lim Chin Siong into unconstitutional action” Lee explained. His reaction would then be used as a pretext to make a round of arrests. In the report on the meeting Selkirk wrote that in his response to the paper that: “We have made it clear to Lee that we regard the Special Branch Paper more as an attack on a political party than on the communists.”<sup>72</sup> From these documents it thus becomes apparent that the British in Singapore were firmly opposed to repressive actions in April 1962, but that Lee was now clearly in favour. It is also apparent that Lee put pressure on the British to agree to arrests before merger, quite contrary to what Lee would later write in his own memoirs.<sup>73</sup>

But the British officials in Singapore and the decision makers in London perceived the repression of political opponents in Singapore differently. In a report Selkirk wrote to the Secretary of State for the Colonies on the demand for arrests he stated “If you agree I think that the best course will be for me to go to Kuala Lumpur and put our views frankly to the Federation Government.”<sup>74</sup> In other words he wanted to talk straight to the Tunku and explain that the British could not agree to a round up both because he thought it was politically unwise, but also because he did not believe there was any evidence that could justify the arrests. At this Reginald Maudling, who was the Secretary of State for the Colonies at this time, responded “Such simple confrontation of irreconcilable views may carry the risk that the Tunku, unconvinced by our argument or unwilling for reasons of face to admit that he was convinced, would retreat into obstinacy and refuse further Malayan participation in the Internal Security Council.” He therefore instructed Selkirk to say that they in principle accepted “the request in paragraph 5 of his letter, i. e. we would naturally be prepared to initiate action in I.S.C. whenever we are in agreement with the Federation.”<sup>75</sup> Maudling said that Selkirk should then list the circumstances under which the British would be willing to agree to such action as the Tunku had suggested.<sup>76</sup> Maudling therefore wanted to signal that the British were not opposed to the action in principle, but rather made it a point of certain conditions that had to be met for it to be agreed to.

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<sup>72</sup> Telegram from Singapore to Secretary of State for the Colonies, CO 1030/1157, 143-144, BNA.

<sup>73</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, (Singapore, Times Editions: 1998), 472.

<sup>74</sup> Selkirk to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 19 February 1962, CO 1030/1157, 226, BNA.

<sup>75</sup> Secretary of State for the Colonies to Selkirk, 23 February 1962, CO 1030/1157, 211, BNA.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 211-212.

The traditional narrative is that events in Brunei changed the British position on conducting a round of arrests. In December 1962 a revolt broke out in Brunei against the Sultan and the plan to merge Brunei into Malaysia. Turnbull argues that the arrests were made because Lim Chin Siong and the leadership of the BS were “suspected of involvement with A. M. Azahari, the socialist leader of the Brunei Party Rakyat”, who played an important part in the revolt. In this version the meeting between Lim Chin Siong and A. M. Azahari before the revolt changed the mind of the British on the risk Lim Chin Siong and the BS constituted.<sup>77</sup> In other words the revolt made the British see the BS as a security threat and not only a political threat anymore.

I argue that the British never changed their mind on the threat that the BS constituted, but that it was political pressure from the Tunku and Lee that made them relent and agree to the operation. The British leadership in London deemed the goal of keeping the PAP in power and ensuring the merger of Singapore and Malaya to be more important than defending the constitution of 1959. The meeting between Lim Chin Siong and A.M. Azahari in advance of the Brunei revolt was not the reason the British agreed to the operation, but rather a convenient excuse that was offered when the British realized that they had to give way to the pressure from Malaya and Singapore. Mathew Jones writes that after the British had reluctantly agreed to the arrests that “A pretext for the pre-merger arrest programme still had to be found. On the eight of December, one was conveniently provided by the outbreak in Brunei of a popular rising by A. M. Azahari’s Party Rak’yat.”<sup>78</sup> Jones then quotes a telegram from the Secretary of State for Colonies to Selkirk that was approved by the PM,<sup>79</sup> “As you know I have all along been reluctant to give blanket approval in advance for arrests of subversive elements in Singapore. But if we are to avoid a dangerous disagreement with the Malayan Government we shall have to take some actions of this kind before merger.”<sup>80</sup> The Secretary wrote that the revolt in Brunei would provide “the best possible background against which to take this action.”<sup>81</sup> The revolt was therefore clearly seen as a pretext and never significantly altered the British perspective on the need for repressive action.

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<sup>77</sup> Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 445.

<sup>78</sup> Jones, “Creating Malaysia ...”, 99.

<sup>79</sup> Macmillan makes passing reference to this event in his memoirs. He wrote: “At the same time, the troubles in Brunei were beginning to spread, with increasing bitterness between the pro- and anti-Federation parties in Singapore.” He does not mention Operation Cold Store, but in this passage, he writes about it as a part of suppressing the Brunei revolt, and not as convenient occasion the way the archival material bears out. Harold Macmillan, *At the End of the Day*, (London, Macmillan: 1973), 256.

<sup>80</sup> Jones, “Creating Malaysia ...”, 100.

<sup>81</sup> Secretary of State for the Colonies to Selkirk, 12 December 1962, CO 1030/1160, BNA.

Jones also notes that there was disagreement between Selkirk and Sandys. Selkirk was reluctant to vote in favour of the programme of arrests. Right before a meeting in the ISC Lee added names from the United People's Party in Singapore, a party to the right of the PAP and whose leader Ong Eng Guan had started the political crisis for the PAP by defecting in 1961. Jones writes that Lee added Ong Eng Guan's name for him to "learn to behave himself". This made Selkirk even more sceptical of the operation and he reached out to the Secretary of State for the Colonies to again register his opposition to the arrests. At this Sandys "was insisting that the operation could not be allowed to collapse again, and the detentions would have to go ahead."<sup>82</sup> This shows that the British were not convinced of the need on security grounds for repressive actions, but rather acted on political interests.<sup>83</sup>

### British Perceptions of Repression and Economic Policy

Now that we have looked at how the British perceived the repression of the PAP's political opponents and the labour movement, we will look at British economic policy towards Singapore and see if this was in any ways affected by the developments we have sketched.

It was apparent from the beginning that a key to the effective struggle against communism in Singapore was economic development. The fear for British policymakers in Singapore was that the high rate of unemployment at the commencement of the constitution in 1959 would cause riots, strikes and ultimately give the communists an opportunity to seize power.<sup>84</sup> The focus on development was a big reason why the British supported the PAP government. The PAP and the British shared this important objective. Selkirk would discuss this with Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Keng Swee in June 1960 where they both agreed to the importance of economic development and economic cooperation between Singapore and the UK in order to fight communism.<sup>85</sup>

It is also in this light that the perceived need for merger by the British and the PAP must be seen. The PAP government turned to the World Bank for advice on development and they sent a United Nations Industrial Survey Mission led by the Dutch economist Albert Winsemius to Singapore in 1960. The consequent report said that Singapore should seek merger with Malaya in order to create a large domestic market that Singaporean industry could sell their

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<sup>82</sup> Jones, "Creating Malaysia ...", 101.

<sup>83</sup> Selkirk to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 15 July 1963, CO 1030/1575, 198, BNA.

<sup>84</sup> Selkirk to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 2 June 1960, CO 1030/1183, 108, BNA.

<sup>85</sup> Selkirk to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 28 June 1960, CO 1030/1157, 247, BNA.

goods to. Another important part of the plan was control over labour and wage moderation in order to attract both international and domestic private capital.<sup>86</sup>

It is in this context the frustration of the British over how Lee handled the industrial unrest in 1960 and 1961 must be understood. Selkirk wrote about these events in December 1960, in the aftermath of the PAP government cracking down on the strikes, that: “These welcome events have not, however, disposed of the fundamental problem of the Government, which is to create conditions in which industrial investment and expansion will be encouraged.”<sup>87</sup> In other words the need for Singapore to be a welcome place for investment in order to boost economic development and thus fight communism made the British condone the PAP’s crack down on strikes and unions. As we saw earlier Selkirk would even criticise the PAP for not being stricter with the unions and taking firmer action. We can therefore conclude that the repressive action taken vis-à-vis unions in 1960 by the PAP did not dissuade British economic cooperation with Singapore; to the contrary it encouraged it.

The Singaporean Government used the report from the United Nations to fashion an economic development plan with input from the British. The plan was formulated in the course of 1960 and presented in the beginning of 1961.<sup>88</sup> The total expenditure of the plan was around M\$871. In the plan around 500 million would be sourced from local revenue in Singapore while the remaining gap of 376 million would be covered by loans and grants sourced from the World Bank, International Development Association and the UK.<sup>89</sup> Selkirk wrote in a report on the plan that “I consider, in fact, that it will be necessary for H.M.G. (...) to underwrite the whole plan and to authorise Goh Keng Swee to return to Singapore with a statement to that effect in his pocket.” The arguments Selkirk cited was the threat that Goh had set forth that if they could not get financing from the West for the development plan, they would turn to the Soviet bloc. Selkirk therefore argued that if the British were to cover the gap in the Singaporean development plan, they would fix Singapore as a Western ally in the fight against communism. He also wrote that Lee Kuan Yew’s government was dependent on making development work and that if they failed to achieve this there would be no incentive for Lee to strive to uphold the new constitution.<sup>90</sup> Economic aid was thus seen as a way to ensure that the democratic constitution of 1959 survived. Crack down on the unions were seen by the British as a means

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<sup>86</sup> Gary Rodan, *The Political Economy of Singapore’s Industrialization: National State and International Capital*, (London, Macmillan: 1989), 64.

<sup>87</sup> Selkirk to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, December 1960, CO 1030/1143, 31, BNA.

<sup>88</sup> “Singapore Development Plan, 1960-64”, June 1960, CO 1030/1183, 48, BNA.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>90</sup> Selkirk to Secretary of the Colonies, 2 June 1960, CO 1030/1183, 107-108, BNA.

to foster economic development and therefore as important to achieve British political objectives. Economic aid and development were seen as a way to protect the constitution and ensure that Singapore stayed a constitutional democracy allied with the West. In other words, curtailing union activities was a way to facilitate development, and development was seen as a method to ensure that Singapore stayed “free”.<sup>91</sup>

#### Conclusion:

In the period 1959 to 1963 the British wrestled with achieving their long-time goal of a Singapore merged with Malaya in a democratic anti-communist state. In the beginning the British wanted to see a government that was harsher on their political opponents and more repressive towards the trade unions. The first case where this was obvious was with the demand by Lee Kuan Yew that some of the political prisoners, amongst them Lim Chin Siong, arrested by the British colonial government in 1956, be released before he was sworn into office. That the British were in favour of more repressive measures was also evident by how they saw the PAP handling of strikes and labour unrest. Economic development was seen as a pre-condition for an anti-communist Singapore to survive and the strikes and labour unrest threatened the Singaporean development plan. The British therefore wanted the PAP to crack down on this unrest.

This changed when the PAP split and the leftist faction of the party, led by Lim Chin Siong, formed the BS. In March 1962, less than a year after the split, Lee would agree to a proposal by the Tunku to round up “subversive” elements in Singapore. The British opposed this. They were afraid that arrests of political opponents would cause riots and imperil the stability of Singapore, thus undermining the constitution. They also did not believe that the BS engaged in unconstitutional action and did not really believe they were communists either. Arresting them would thus undermine the free constitution of Singapore. The tables had turned. Now it was the British who opposed repression of political opponents and the PAP who favoured it. But due to political pressure from the PAP and the Tunku, and fear that if the British did not agree to the arrest of the BS leadership, merger would be cancelled, the British relented and agreed to Operation Cold Store. Merger was seen as so important by the British for the survival of an anti-communist Singapore that they deemed it worth the risk.

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<sup>91</sup> Secretary of State for the Colonies in letter to a MP, CO 1030/1184, 185-187, BNA, and Secretary of State for the Colonies, CO 1030/1184, 69-70, BNA.

## Chapter 2: From Secession to the British Military Withdrawal, 1964-1971

The question in this chapter is how the secession of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965, the formation of a new Labour government in Britain by Harold Wilson in 1964, and the British decision in 1968 to withdraw militarily from “east of Suez,” and close the bases in Singapore affected the British view on repression of political opponents in Singapore.

On the 16th of September 1963 Singapore merged with Malaya, Sarawak and Sabah to form the Federation of Malaysia. With this an important goal of the British government had been achieved. The merger ensured that Britain kept its military bases, and that Singapore was made secure from communist subversion by the anti-communist government of the Tunku. The only negative side of this development from the British perspective was that they, in order to get agreement to form Malaysia, had to consent to Operation Cold Store, which saw the arrest of the main opposition leaders in Singapore. But most of the negative consequences that British policymakers had warned against did not manifest themselves. There were some protests by BS members, but the protesters were swiftly rounded up. We will now look at how developments between 1964 and 1971 influenced the British perspective on political repression in Singapore.

### The Secession of Singapore from Malaysia

The formation of Malaysia was not a happy marriage. How were the British views on repression of the political opposition and the labour movement in Singapore affected by the struggles over Singapore’s place in the federation before Singapore seceded? To answer this question, it is important to understand what caused the secession and how it was seen by British policymakers. From the very beginning there was conflict between the Tunku and his party UMNO, and Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP. Political conflict led the Tunku to already in late 1963 approach Goh Keng Swee, Lee’s deputy who served, as minister of defence, minister of finance and deputy prime minister at various points, with a proposal to discuss the constitutional arrangement between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.<sup>92</sup>

Antony Head, the British High Commissioner to Malaysia, became aware of the negotiations for the new constitutional arrangement and wrote to London in January 1964.<sup>93</sup> The situation caused concern in London about the prospects of Singapore and the British bases. Saville Garner, permanent secretary at the Commonwealth Relations Office, emphasized that the Federation had to secure the right to intervene to ensure security in Singapore fearing that

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<sup>92</sup> Lau, *A Moment of Anguish*, 65-67, 105 and 108.

<sup>93</sup> Head to Sir Saville Garner, January 1965, PREM 13/429, BNA.

the limited security forces there would not be able to deal with a situation.<sup>94</sup> Fears of a far left government gaining power and shutting down the bases in Singapore resurfaced as minutes from the Foreign Office reveals: “we should probably have to abandon the Singapore base (...) if pressed to do so by a strongly left-wing government in Singapore.”<sup>95</sup> The British had outsourced the responsibility of taking repressive action if necessary in Singapore to the Tunku. If Malaysia lost control over the island there were no longer security forces that could step in if a government that opposed the British presence in Singapore were to gain power.

The conflict between the UMNO and the PAP escalated in the summer of 1965 as Lee put pressure on Kuala Lumpur to agree to discussions on altering the constitution of Malaysia to give Singapore greater autonomy. After holding speeches where he seemed to question the special status of Malays and implicitly talked of a partition of Malaysia, the Tunku started to contemplate detaining Lee.<sup>96</sup> On the first of June Head met with the Tunku and discussed the problem. The Tunku said that he had a duty to defend the Federation, “I know my duty and I shall not hesitate to do it.”<sup>97</sup> This worried The British and Wilson, the new Labour PM, wrote later in his memoirs that “The Tunku was becoming more and more incensed with his lively [Lee Kuan Yew] opposition.” Wilson then described the threat of “a possible coup against Harry Lee and his colleagues.”<sup>98</sup> To discourage the arrest of Lee Wilson told the Tunku that if he chose to detain Lee “it would be unwise for him to show his face at the Commonwealth conference, since a large number of his colleagues – including myself – would feel that such action was totally opposed to all we believed in as a Commonwealth.”<sup>99</sup>

The tables had turned. The British had in 1963 tried to discourage Lee Kuan Yew from detaining his opponents in Singapore. Now they were trying to save him from arrest. This time the British pressure was effective. The Tunku decided not to use repressive measures. He chose to solve the problem by cutting Singapore loose from Malaysia.<sup>100</sup> British agreement to arrest Lee’s political opponents in Singapore had been important in facilitating the Malaysian merger. Now British opposition to arresting Lee contributed to trigger the breakup of Malaysia. Later in the summer of 1965 the Tunku met Goh who agreed that secession from Malaysia was the

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<sup>94</sup> Lau, *A Moment of Anguish*, 222.

<sup>95</sup> Minutes by Joint Malaysia/Indonesia Department, 3 February 1965, FO 371/181454, BNA.

<sup>96</sup> Lau, *A Moment of Anguish*, 240-248 and 251.

<sup>97</sup> Head to Commonwealth Relations Office, 1 June 1965, PREM 13/430, BNA.

<sup>98</sup> Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1979*, (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson and Michael Joseph: 1971), 130-131.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 131.

<sup>100</sup> Turnbull, “Regionalism and Nationalism” in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Volume Two, Part Two, From World War II to the Present*, ed N. Tarling, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1999), 286.

best way to solve the problems caused by the friction between Lee and the Tunku. As the British would be opposed to the separation, they kept their agreement secret. The Tunku then introduced a motion in the Malaysian parliament that sought to expel Singapore from Malaysia.<sup>101</sup> The British opposition to repressive measures against Lee played an important part in this outcome. If the British had dropped Lee, their political ally since 1959, and agreed to his arrest, secession might not have happened. In that case Lee would have become a dissident, with a very strong following in Singapore.

In the “Singapore Story”, a narrative constructed by Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP, the secession from Malaysia takes on a central part in the national narrative. In this story Singapore was kicked out of Malaysia and made vulnerable as a city-state in a world of nation states. This narrative is central in forming a political discourse of vulnerability that Michael Leifer describes in his book on the foreign policy of Singapore. He writes that “The acute sense of vulnerability experienced on separation served to justify a state-led philosophy of ‘survival’ that has never been fully relinquished.”<sup>102</sup> This political discourse is also found in its domestic policy. Gary Rodan writes that:

In the immediate wake of separation from the Federation of Malaysia (...) the PAP exploited the sense of crisis and indeed contributed to it. (...) It employed the ideological apparatus of the state to sponsor a set of values and social attitudes which enhanced the political legitimacy of the PAP’s right to exclusive and unquestionable power to determine the course ahead.<sup>103</sup>

Chan Heng See called this the “politics of survival”.<sup>104</sup> The separation from Malaysia meant that Singapore had to change its industrialization plan from import substitution to an export-oriented model. This necessitated cheap and stable labour to ensure competitiveness.<sup>105</sup> A discourse of vulnerability and survival was needed in order to gain the political legitimacy to introduce the necessary repressive measures to ensure a low cost and disciplined labour force.

But as is evident from the account written by Albert Lau the separation from Malaysia was far from as involuntary as Lee Kuan Yew later described it. The separation was a political accord that both sides agreed to be the best outcome given the difficult political situation. Singapore was not kicked out of Malaysia, it agreed to leave.<sup>106</sup> But just as this narrative served to legitimize repressive measures in Singapore, the way the British saw the separation between Singapore and Malaysia also played a big part in how they viewed repression by Lee and the

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<sup>101</sup> Lau, *A Moment of Anguish*, 257-259 and 263-264.

<sup>102</sup> Michael Leifer, *Singapore’s Foreign Policy Coping with Vulnerability*, (London, Routledge: 2000), 4.

<sup>103</sup> Rodan, *The Political Economy of Singapore’s Industrialization ...*, 1989, 85.

<sup>104</sup> Chan Heng See, *Singapore; The Politics of Survival 1965-1967*, (London, Oxford University Press: 1971) 1.

<sup>105</sup> Rodan, *The Political Economy of Singapore’s Industrialization ...*, 85-86.

<sup>106</sup> Lau, *A Moment of Anguish*, 259.



PAP of political opponents and the labour movement. Did they share the sense of crisis and meant that political repression in Singapore was necessary?

### British Reaction to the Secession of Singapore

The British government got news that the Federation had broken up on the 13th of August 1965. The way Harold Wilson described the event in his memoirs shows that he saw Singapore and Lee Kuan Yew as victims of a secession imposed by the Tunku. He wrote about the events leading up to the separation and how “This had led to Singapore being virtually expelled from the Federation and told to set up on its own account. Lee was in a desperate state, bursting into tears in front of the television and regretting the breakup.” Wilson described the British government as very concerned at this development and he held many emergency meetings with his secretaries of state for the Commonwealth and defence.<sup>107</sup> The British took the situation seriously and shared the sense of crisis that Lee was expressing. How did this affect their judgement on the need for repressive actions?

Singapore remained calm and stable in the months after the break-up. But looking at the fundamentals the British government still worried about the situation in Singapore. A telegram from John Vernon Rob, the new High Commissioner to the independent Singapore, to the Commonwealth Relations Office (who after the merger of Singapore into Malaysia had responsibility Singapore) wrote that “developments increase concern which we have felt for some time about ability of Singaporean Government to cope with any serious internal security situation in coming months.”<sup>108</sup> This also made Lee worried and in the early parts of 1966 he asked Vernon if the British forces stationed in Singapore would back the his government in case of internal unrest or a coup situation.<sup>109</sup>

This development in many ways put the British back to where they had been before the merger of Malaysia. Again, they had to balance their long-term goals and interest in the region against the degree to which they should interfere in the short-term politics of Singapore. But now, with the independence of Singapore, the British position had changed. They no longer had responsibility for Singaporean internal affairs. The ISC no longer existed, and Singapore was a sovereign state. But until 1971 the British had bases in Singapore that were vital for their interests in the region. They therefore had a vested interest in which party controlled the

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<sup>107</sup> Wilson, *The Labour Government ...*, 131.

<sup>108</sup> Vernon to CRO, 25 February 1966, DO 169/495, 33, BNA.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

Singaporean Government and especially its basing policy. Did this affect the British view on the Singaporean Government's repression of political opponents?

The High Commissioner drew up a contingency plan for how the British should deal with unrest in Singapore. This contingency plan was internal and not shown to Lee Kuan Yew. Vernon wrote "We do not want British forces to be involved at all in Singapore's internal problems. We therefore should not encourage the Singapore Government to think that we would willingly intervene upon request." He therefore rebuffed Lee's request to plan for support in case of internal unrest. But he continued "Nevertheless, stability is essential to our effective use of the Singapore Base. It is clearly not in the interests of our forces (or their dependents) that rioting should develop near our base installations or housing areas." He was particularly worried "if the Singapore Government were overthrown by the mob and if this gave way either to further violence stirred up by communists and other extremists, or to an openly anti-British regime."<sup>110</sup> The British concern about the situation in Singapore after secession thus reawakened fear of communist subversion in Singapore. His contingency plan therefore opened up for British forces to aid Singaporean security forces especially in case of unrest near British military installations. But this should always be a last resort and always at the behest of the Singaporean Government. The British were afraid that British intervention in the internal affairs of Singapore would turn political opinion against them and thus weaken the position of the PAP.<sup>111</sup> So even though there was a sense of crisis and precariousness around the political situation, the British did not want to intervene with repressive actions as they feared it would turn the Singaporean electorate against the British presence.

Before merger the British had been represented in the ISC which gave them a say in the internal security of Singapore and the right to overturn the constitution if that should be deemed necessary. The British could thus risk allowing the BS to play by the rules of the political process knowing that if things got out of hand they could step in and correct the course. After secession this was no longer possible. The British had no formal say in Singaporean domestic policy and no right to intervene against the will of the Singaporean Government. There was no longer any "safety valve" that the British could turn to in case something happened. The British thus became more dependent on the Singaporean Government being pro-British and accommodating to the British military presence. How did this affect their view on repression of the remnants of the BS and the labour movement?

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<sup>110</sup> "Use of British Forces in Aid of Civil Power in Singapore", 16 December 1966, DO 169/495, 83E, BNA.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

The first test of this came in October 1966, when the BS organised a variety concert in order to protest against US involvement in Vietnam. As security forces tried to inspect the venue where the concert was taking place, violence broke out and the police opened fire. 18 demonstrators were arrested and the day after Ong Chang Sam, the organising secretary of the BS, was detained by Singaporean authorities. The British High Commissioner's report on the incident agreed to the government's handling of the situation.<sup>112</sup> In the days after this event 25 other BS and trade union officials would be arrested. Vernon reported that these arrests had been effective at disorganizing BS attempts to organize protests against a visit by US President Lyndon B. Johnson to Kuala Lumpur on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October. Vernon ended his second report on the issue on the first of November by writing: "Although some further disturbances are possible during the next few weeks, it feels unlikely that the left-wing will be able to maintain a militant attitude for very long in the face of determined counter-measures."<sup>113</sup> Vernon thought it was better to err on the side of caution and support measures to detain and suppress left-wing threats, a contrast to Selkirk, the High Commissioner before merger, who had argued the opposite.

Another test came at the end of 1966 when public utilities workers threatened to strike. Lee again turned to the British for assistance. He asked if British forces could provide trained personnel to cover for the workers on strike. Vernon reported to the CRO and informed them of the request and entertained the idea that British forces could make 51 workers available to fill the positions made vacant by the strike.<sup>114</sup> They replied, the day after that "You should stress the difficulties British ministers would face, both at home and abroad, if they sanctioned use of British troops for apparent strike-breaking purposes in another country." They explained that Britain should only intervene if officially called upon to do so by the Singaporean Government, if there was a severe break-down of public functions, and if this impeded the operations of the British bases. They then wrote "You should not mention figures or trades of men who might be available." At the end they made it clear that if any request came from the Singaporean government that the decision was not for Vernon to make but should be "urgently considered in London".<sup>115</sup> There was thus a slight difference in the position of Vernon and

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<sup>112</sup> He wrote that "The government's policy is to make sure that lawlessness will not be tolerated (...) I understand that a number of arrests of potential troublemakers are to be made over the next 3 to 4 days, with a view to deflate further left-wing disturbances," Vernon to CRO, 26 October DO 169/495, 78, BNA.

<sup>113</sup> Vernon to CRO, 1 November, DO 169/495, 79, BNA.

<sup>114</sup> Vernon to the CRO, 21 December 1966, DO 169/495, BNA.

<sup>115</sup> CRO to British High Commissioner, 22 December 1966, DO 169/495, 91-92, BNA.

policymakers in London, with Vernon leaning more in favour of the Singaporean request while the government in London was sceptical.<sup>116</sup>

Why did the British High Commissioner and the government in London think differently about using British troops to break the strikes? The British government's strong reluctance is explained by the fact that it was a Labour government. Being seen to break strikes abroad would have looked very bad to its domestic voters, who were often part of unions themselves, and the trade unions that were affiliated with the Labour Party. The British High Commissioner on the other hand was probably more receptive to the idea because he was located in Singapore and was more attuned to the precarious position of Singapore after secession. But Vernon also seemed from both of the events described above, to be more concerned about the potential for riots and instability in Singapore than Selkirk, his predecessor. If this was down to personal differences or to the changed circumstances in Singapore after secession is difficult to ascertain from the sources. But it is not unreasonable to assume that the more unsettled state of Singapore in the first year after secession and the lack of any ISC or other means by which the UK could have influence over how events unfolded, played a part. We can therefore say that the sense of crisis that secession imbued British policymakers with made them see repressive measures against the trade unions and political opponents as more legitimate and necessary than before. But they were firmly against taking part in this themselves unless utterly necessary to secure the functions of their military bases. This was due to the new sovereign status of Singapore and because they did not want to alienate Singaporean public opinion against the British presence.

#### The British Decision to Withdraw from 'East of Suez'

The sense of crisis that the British had about the situation in Singapore after secession would increase as a result of financial and political developments in London in 1966-67. When the Labour government of Wilson gained power in 1964, they started to review the cost of British defence policy and thus the British position "East of Suez". The government was clear on the need to cut back on expenditure and make savings in the defence budget due to the severe economic situation in Britain and the precarious position of the sterling. The British government agreed that decreasing the presence in Singapore was a good way to achieve this.<sup>117</sup> They concluded that decreasing British trade in the region and expected calls from the newly decolonized states to remove British presence meant that British military bases were no longer

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<sup>116</sup> Singaporean Government Statement quoted in telegram, 28 December 1966, DO 169/495, 101A, BNA.

<sup>117</sup> P. L. Pham, *Ending East of Suez*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2010), 22.

necessary. This realization, along with pressure on the pound and a rebellion by labour backbenchers made the government put out a *Supplementary Statement on Defence Policy* in 1967 that announced a two-stage withdrawal of British forces in Southeast Asia by 1975. But this was not the end of the story. In late 1967 the pound came under pressure again and in November the government was forced to devalue the pound. The consequent spending cuts that the government introduced to shore up the pound saw Britain accelerate the plan, adopted in 1967 to withdraw from 1975, to pulling out all its forces by 1971.<sup>118</sup> The perception of crisis that Singapore's secession imprinted on British policymakers was made even more acute by this decision.<sup>119</sup> There was widespread pessimism amongst the British in light of this decision. How did this affect the way the British perceived the Singaporean Government's repression of political opponents and the labour movement?

As a response to the accelerated withdrawal plan by the British the Singaporean Government introduced two bills to respond to the expected deterioration in their economy. In the aftermath of secession, the government had introduced some measures to curtail trade union activities, but the withdrawal of the British sped this up. In 1968, after the government won an election that they had brought forward by seven months, they introduced two new laws that would put an end to the power and influence that unions had had in Singapore since the end of the Second World War.<sup>120</sup> The first of these acts was the Employment Act. This significantly reduced the conditions and benefits of Singaporean workers. The standard working week was increased from 39 to 44 hours and yearly holidays decreased from 15 to 11 days. This constituted significant savings for the employers and thus made labour in Singapore a lot cheaper and more productive.<sup>121</sup> The other bill was an amendment to the Industrial Relations Act from 1966. This act transferred significant powers over the right to hire and fire to management. It also barred a whole range of issues from collective bargaining and extended the minimum duration of collective bargains from 18 months to three years.<sup>122</sup> In addition to this it prohibited trade unions from obtaining terms that were superior to the ones described in the Employment Act in sectors that the government had identified as "pioneer industries" where they sought foreign investment. Many trade unionists and PAP members were of course

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<sup>118</sup> Pham, *Ending East of Suez*, 232-233.

<sup>119</sup> The British military bases employed indirectly around 100 000 people in Singapore and constituted around 20% of Singapore's economy. Rodan, *The Political Economy of Singapore's Industrialization ...*, 87.

<sup>120</sup> Loh Kah Seng, "British Military Withdrawal from Singapore...", 205.

<sup>121</sup> Rodan, *The Political Economy of Singapore's Industrialization ...*, 92, and Loh Kah Seng "British Military Withdrawal from Singapore ...", 205.

<sup>122</sup> Frederic C. Deyo, "Industrial Flexibility, Economic Restructuring and East Asian Labour" in *The Four Asian Tigers Economic Development and the Global Political Economy*, ed Eub Mee Kim, (San Diego, Academic Press: 1998), 187-188, and Rodan, *The Political Economy of Singapore's Industrialization ...*, 92.

highly critical of the draconian new laws, but the perception of crisis made most of them accept the terms.<sup>123</sup>

The British High Commissioner responded to the new piece of legislation by a lengthy and unusually frank dispatch on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October. John Vernon Rob had recently been replaced by Sir Arthur De La Mare, who was a veteran of the Foreign Office and a career diplomat. In his dispatch De La Mare noted that Lee Kuan Yew had started his career defending trade unions and that in those times he and his colleagues would have violently opposed this legislation. He then asked: “What has caused this remarkable reversal?” He answered his own question by writing that “As Singapore’s government is not the first to discover, circumstances alter cases.”<sup>124</sup> He then proceeded to give an outline of Singapore’s post-war history. He explained the origins of the PAP and wrote that “In order to gain power Lee allied himself with people (communists) whose politics were even anathema to him, and once he had gained power he destroyed them.” To that he added “If he had not they would have destroyed him, and at one stage seemed well on the way to doing so.”<sup>125</sup> Here De La Mare clearly did not agree with his predecessor Selkirk who deemed the leftist opposition to be neither communist nor a security threat. De La Mare clearly had a less nuanced view of the BS and held Lee in higher regard than Selkirk. For De La Mare Lee was a heroic figure who was willing to do what was necessary in order to get things done. It is worth quoting another part at length where he writes:

If one accepts that an honourable and worthy objective of political activity is the greatest good for the greatest number, only unreasoning prejudice will deny that that objective is being pursued in Singapore, and that circumstances conducive to its pursuit could almost certainly not have been brought about without the methods which Lee used.

As De La Mare wrote in another part of the report “It is idle, as well as unrealistic, to claim that the aims never justifies the means.”<sup>126</sup> De La Mare thus professed such confidence in the political objectives of Lee that repressing political opponents in order to facilitate the economic development of Singapore was not only necessary, but also commendable.

The laws that the PAP introduced after learning of the accelerated British withdrawal plan was another example used by De La Mare to laud Lee Kuan Yew for his willingness to do what was necessary even though it was hard. He wrote that Lee had correctly identified that what was needed to face this challenge was a “disciplined, orderly and responsible labour force.” De La Mare also emphasized that Lee had not sprung these laws as a surprise upon the trade unions but had given warning in the election campaign and the laws thus had a mandate

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<sup>123</sup> Loh Kah Seng, “British Military Withdrawal from Singapore ...”, 206.

<sup>124</sup> De La Mare to FCO, 15 July 1968, FCO 24/552, BNA.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

from the people. He even said that the laws could be seen as liberating “by greatly reducing the area in which the workers can become the pawns and victims of unscrupulous union agitators.” For De La Mare these new labour laws was not only a way for Lee to face the economic situation, but also a means to restore “the individual worker his sense of self-reliance and of his ability to contribute as a decent citizen to the cause of Singapore.”<sup>127</sup>

In this paragraph it becomes clear that De La Mare’s perspective on the labour laws was not only affected by his consideration of the situation in Singapore, but also by his view of domestic politics in the UK. He wrote that the laws only tried to prune the trade unions in Singapore “of those malpractices which are causing concern in many other industrial communities, including the United Kingdom.” His perspective on the repressive measures that the labour laws constituted was therefore very approving and this was due to the way he saw the situation in Singapore and his general view on trade unions.<sup>128</sup>

In the dispatch he also added an annex where he gave a short background of how the government had handled trade unions since secession. He wrote that a test of strength had taken place in February 1967 when an unlawful strike had been called by the Cleansing Workers Union. The government had responded by deregistering the union, arresting its leaders and firing some of the strikers. De La Mare wrote: “The Government’s firmness on that occasion provided a convincing demonstration of how far it was prepared to go to deal with what it regarded as irresponsibility on the part of the unions,” he then continued by claiming that the “fact that there has been little labour trouble in Singapore in recent months owes much to this.”<sup>129</sup> De La Mare thus showed a great deal of sympathy for the government’s measures to suppress the trade unions. The sense of crisis that this instilled in the British policymakers was a contributing factor in their support for these new laws.

### British Perspectives of Singaporean Repression and the Military Withdrawal

De La Mare welcomed the labour legislation of the PAP partly due to his negative opinion of how trade unions acted in the UK. His understanding of Singaporean politics was influenced by his opinions on British politics. This was not only the case with how Singapore treated the trade unions. For De La Mare the whole of Singaporean society led by Lee represented an

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> “Singapore’s trade union movement was based upon that of Britain. But the Singapore leaders have become increasingly disturbed by the irresponsibility of our trade unions and the manifest defects in the practice of our labour relations, both of which they blame for most of our present ills. (...) I feel great personal sympathy – which perhaps mars the objectivity of my judgement – for the measures which the Singapore Government have now taken to rid the labour movement of some of the abuses which it inherited and to restore to the individual worker a sense of his own value.” De La Mare to FCO, 15 July 1968, FCO 24/552, BNA.

<sup>129</sup> De La Mare to FCO, 15 July 1968, FCO 24/552, BNA.

opposite to the decadence and decline of the British Empire and to Britain itself. For him Lee was “the visionary, but also a very practical man” that led a Singapore that was populated by a disciplined and vigorous people that was able and willing to work hard to ensure their own prosperity.<sup>130</sup> What scholars like Michael Barr has later called the “emasculatation” of for example the trade unions were seen by De La Mare as discipline. Barr has described this period in the history of Singapore as a time when “the press and unions and every other vehicle of political expression were pulled into line using a combination of co-option, coercion, replacement, of personnel replacement of entire institutions, and partisan implementation of regulations.”<sup>131</sup> The flurry of activity, regulation and laws in Singapore that the British accelerated withdrawal caused, which the historian Loh Kah Seng has described as one of the catalysts of the economic development of Singapore, was seen by De La Mare as an example of a people willing to discipline and organise themselves in order to prosper.<sup>132</sup> For him the repression was a sign of the rugged vitality of Singapore.

This point was made clearer in De La Mare’s valedictorian report as he left Singapore in 1970.<sup>133</sup> De La Mare described the Singaporeans (or the Straits Chinese for he did not include the Malays and the Indians in this characterisation) as having “purpose, drive, vision and above all tenacity. (...) Honest labour ennobles them and their very industry commands respect.” For him living in Singapore was “Attractive because of its vigour, industry, bustle and thrust: repellent because every day I am reminded of the shame of 1942.” (when the British were unable to protect Singapore against the Japanese onslaught). For him Singapore thus represented both the decline of the British Empire and with the discipline, hard work and ordered society of the people of Singapore, the glory of the British Empire at its height. He wrote “For, unlike the present rulers of many other former British possessions they have not only maintained the heritage we left them, they have improved upon it.”<sup>134</sup> The repressive actions taken by the PAP at the end of the 1960s was seen against the backdrop of the decline of Britain. And the economic success and ordered society that the repressive measures created were seen as a heritage of British virtues as the imperial tide was receding. The repressive actions were therefore seen as something necessary and celebrated as something positive, as a

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<sup>130</sup> Arthur De La Mare to Commonwealth Office, 20 May 1968, PREM 13/2945, BNA.

<sup>131</sup> Barr, *Singapore A Modern History*, 129.

<sup>132</sup> Loh Kah Seng, “The British Military Withdrawal from Singapore ...” 210.

<sup>133</sup> The valedictorian dispatch was a tradition in the British foreign service. Ambassadors and High Commissioners on their way out were allowed to frankly express their personal views about the state of affairs in Britain and the country they had been stationed in.

<sup>134</sup> Mathew Parris and Andrew Bryson, *Parting Shots*, (London, Penguin Books: 2011), 337.



sign of how healthy Singaporean society was. They were seen as a nostalgic image of the former greatness of Britain and the state of its current decline.

A different, but in some ways similar, perspective affected the way Harold Wilson saw repression by the PAP in Singapore. One might expect that Wilson as head of a Labour government was sceptical of the harsh labour laws that the PAP introduced in 1968. But Wilson was a big admirer of Lee and some of the problems Lee and the PAP attempted to fix with the labour legislation was problems Wilson's government were trying to fix at the same time in Britain, only less successfully. I argue that Wilson's admiration for Lee, the domestic economic woes Wilson grappled with and the sense of crisis that secession and the British withdrawal caused in the capital of the British Commonwealth played a big part in shaping Wilson's perspective on repressive measures taken by Lee and the PAP.

Wilson was an admirer of Lee. This admiration was partly based upon their similar ideological backgrounds. They both had connections with the Fabian Society, a well-known social democratic institution in Britain.<sup>135</sup> Wilson's perception of Lee and the PAP as social democrats strengthened Wilson's will to support the PAP. This was made apparent in 1966 when Wilson held a speech at a Parliamentary Labour Meeting. Wilson called Lee "as good a left-wing and democratic socialist as any in this room." He continued to explain that Lee had shown tremendous courage in the fight against communism in Singapore and that his social record was as good as that of any developed country. He then said: "The government of Singapore as we understand it, is the only democratic socialist government (...) in Southeast Asia."<sup>136</sup> Wilson also appreciated Lee's intelligence and perspective upon world affairs. In his memoirs Wilson wrote that he was immensely impressed with Lee's speeches at the Commonwealth Conferences in 1966 and 1969. Lee's speech at the Commonwealth Conference in 1969 was described by Wilson as "one of the most remarkable essays in interpretation of the post-imperial world any of us had ever heard." For Wilson Lee described "with brutal realism the economic problems of newly-emancipated countries."<sup>137</sup> Looking at it through this lens the repression of political opponents and trade unions by Lee and the PAP became more legitimate paradoxically because of Wilson's Labour background and their perceived shared ideological convictions. Because Wilson thought of Singapore as the only

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<sup>135</sup> Michael D. Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew's Fabian Phase" in *Australian Journal of Politics and History* Volume 46, Number 1, 2000, 113-114, and Harold Wilson for example wrote pieces for the Fabian Society as an MP, an example being Harold Wilson, *Post-War Economic Policies in Britain Fabian tract, 309*, (London, Fabian Society: 1957).

<sup>136</sup> Harold Wilson quoted in *From Third World to First ...*, 34.

<sup>137</sup> Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1979*, 195 and 598.

social democratic country in the region British support for his government became more important and the repressive measures Lee and the PAP took became more permissible. Lee's ability to convey the sense of economic challenge and crisis that developing countries, and especially Singapore faced, also played an important part.

Another important factor that made Wilson sympathetic to Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP was the economic situation in Britain. An important part of the legislative agenda of Wilson's government was labour legislation. Britain had since the end of the Second World War struggled with unruly industrial relations. Unexpected strikes in key sectors were a common phenomenon that constituted a significant economic problem.<sup>138</sup> For example a strike in the docks in 1967 had been an important contributing factor that forced the Wilson government to devalue the pound.<sup>139</sup> Other problems included wage rises that outpaced productivity growth and decreased the competitiveness of British manufacturers. Like Lee the Wilson government also accused some of the trade unions in Britain of being a communist menace.<sup>140</sup> But due to the strength of the trade unions in Britain and opposition from the Labour Party Wilson was not able to pass the substance of his labour agenda.<sup>141</sup> That Harold Wilson saw the question of repression of especially the trade unions in Singapore through the prism of his domestic agenda is apparent in the meetings between him and Lee in the aftermath of the British announcement of their withdrawal from Singapore in 1971.

In these meetings Lee travelled to London to discuss with British policymakers the withdrawal of British forces and the threat this constituted to Singapore. In many of his discussions with Wilson they talked about the British economic situation. Wilson explained that his government would push through a "vast program of structural change in British industry to which they were committed, despite the knowledge that this would bring them much unpopularity." Wilson explained that they had introduced "drastic economic measures" that were "all necessary." Their discussion then moved on to the internal situation in Singapore where Wilson and Lee agreed that the "present stability and progress was largely dependent on confidence and good morale." They then discussed the trade unions in Singapore and how migrant labour were a "powerful instrument of pressure on the trade unions" since the migrant workers had lesser demands to the employers.<sup>142</sup> This exchange between Wilson and Lee shows that Wilson compared the economic situation in Britain to the one in Singapore and that he

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<sup>138</sup> Keith Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society*, (London, André Deutsch: 1979), 44.

<sup>139</sup> Alec Cairncross and Barry Eichengreen, *Sterling in Decline ...*, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell: 1983), 192-193.

<sup>140</sup> Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society*, 436.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, 440-441.

<sup>142</sup> Record of a Meeting between Harold Wilson and Lee Kuan Yew, May 27 1968, PREM 13/2945, BNA.

looked favourably upon the stability that Lee had created with the repressive measures the PAP had taken and the influx of cheap labour from neighbouring countries. The exchange also shows that Wilson saw trade unions as one of the problems that Britain and Singapore shared, but that Singapore had been more successful in dealing with it. We can conclude that the difficult economic situation in Britain that was to some extent caused by the strength of trade unions and frequent strikes, made Wilson adopt a positive attitude the repressive measures taken by the PAP towards their trade unions in Singapore.

### The End of the Military Withdrawal and Repression in Singapore

The perspective of British policymakers on repression of political opponents and trade unions in Singapore was influenced by several factors. In the main these factors made them see the repressive measures of the PAP as necessary and positive. After 1970 this would change as a new government stepped in and a new British High Commissioner took over in Singapore. The new High Commissioner was Sam Falle who was posted to Singapore from 1970 to 1974. He had served in the Royal Navy during the Second World War and been captured by the Japanese. After the war he became a career diplomat. Falle took a somewhat different approach to what he called the “authoritarian” style of the PAP and Lee Kuan Yew. He did not share De La Mare’s and Wilson’s unbridled enthusiasm for Lee and the PAP. In his autobiography Falle wrote that Lee had an “autocratic style”, but due to the threat from the communists Lee did not have a choice. He described the PAP government as a “benevolent dictatorship” with an “incomplete freedom of the press.” He acknowledged the success Lee and the PAP had encountered, and that this might have justified the repressive measures. But he also wrote that now that the immediate crisis that Singapore had faced was over, the repressive measures were probably no longer necessary.<sup>143</sup> Falle also described Lee’s governing style as very dictatorial with all powers concentrated in his hands.<sup>144</sup>

That Sam Falle had a different perspective on the repression of political opponents than his predecessor is also visible from the dispatches he sent to London. One dispatch mockingly refers to Lee Kuan Yew as “Chairman Lee”, implicitly comparing him with Mao.<sup>145</sup> In another dispatch Falle compared the political system in Singapore to the one-party system in the Soviet Union even though they were different ideologically.<sup>146</sup> So he clearly did not share Wilson’s and De La Mare’s high opinion of Lee. It is therefore clear that as the threat to Singapore

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<sup>143</sup> Sam Falle, *My Lucky Life: in War, Revolution, Peace and Diplomacy*, (Oxford, ISIS Large Print: 1996), 262.

<sup>144</sup> Falle, *My Lucky Life ...*, 264.

<sup>145</sup> “Is Chairman Harry Slipping?”, 17 June 1971, FCO 14/1200, BNA.

<sup>146</sup> “The PAP”, 5 February 1971, FCO 24/1198, BNA.

dissipated and the British got a new High Commissioner to Singapore that the British perspective of political repression changed.

### British Perspectives on Repression and Economic Policy

Now that we have seen how the British view on repression of political opponents and trade unions in Singapore developed from 1963 to 1971, we can ask the question: How did this affect British economic policy towards Singapore? The short answer is that the repressive measures that the PAP took especially towards the trade unions increased British confidence in the PAP government and therefore also their willingness to encourage investment and give aid to offset the British withdrawal and hand over the military facilities free of charge.

A good example of this was De La Mare. He supported Lee Kuan Yew and the repressive measures the Singaporean Government took after secession and the announcement of the British withdrawal. This confidence also made him support of British investment in Singapore, which he lobbied aggressively for in his reports to London. In a report on the 23rd of April 1969 to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office he wrote that “Guarantees against expropriation and nationalisation have been spelled out” and that there was an easy “availability of a disciplined labour force.”<sup>147</sup> These sentences shows that the repressive measures taken by the Singaporean Government contributed to De La Mare’s conviction that Singapore was a place where British investments should be directed. In another report in September 1969, he wrote “In the 20 months that I have been here I have not heard one valid and tenable argument against increased British activity in Singapore.” He also lamented how British commercial interests in Singapore were being supplanted by Japanese and American investment. For De La Mare the only way to halt the British mercantile decline in Singapore was for someone to take the lead in directing renewed investment towards the city-state. “There is no hope of this happening unless someone gives British industry the lead. I Submit that that someone can only be H.M.G.”<sup>148</sup> De La Mare could not but to his frustration acknowledge the lack of such leadership from the British government.<sup>149</sup> In a memo at the FCO David P. Aiers, head of the South Western Pacific Department, irritated by De La Mare’s lobbying, wrote that

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<sup>147</sup> Arthur De La Mare to FCO, 23 April 1969, FCO 24/562, BNA.

<sup>148</sup> In another report De La Mare, who was described by his own deputy to be “terrific prima donna, very able in his way, extremely conflictive and extremely difficult at times,” wrote “I remember from my consular days that when a ship’s captain was dissatisfied with the performance or behaviour of a member of his own crew, but feared to report adversely lest he get into trouble with the man’s union, he simply wrote across the man’s papers: ‘Decline to report’. I likewise have no wish to queer my pitch with the Asia Committee of B.N.E.C., of which I was once a member, or with anyone else who may be dealing with this in London, so I had better write across this episode: “Decline to comment”. De La Mare to FCO, 9 September 1969, FCO 24/562, BNA.

<sup>149</sup> De La Mare to FCO, 12 September 1969, FCO 24/562, BNA.

“Sir Arthur is crying for the moon”, and explained that for the British government to start lobbying British firms to specifically invest in Singapore would “involve changing the present policy on overseas investment.”<sup>150</sup>

The confidence that the repressive measures of the Singaporean Government convinced British policymakers like De La Mare to increase British investment on the island. Though he was disappointed in the British government’s response there was interest in the problem at the highest levels of the British government. Earlier in 1969 Lee had visited London and held meetings with the British President of the Board of Trade and the Treasury. Harold Wilson did not take part in the meetings himself, but read the transcripts from them enthusiastically, if we are to judge from his active underlining of passages and scribbling in the margins. In a passage that explained how the British withdrawal of military forces made British businesses reluctant to invest in Singapore due to political risk Wilson wrote “Typically!” In another part Wilson underlined approvingly of a suggestion of a British guarantee of British investment in Singapore using Singaporean assets in London as collateral.<sup>151</sup> In the transcript from the meeting between the President of the Board of Trade and Lee Wilson scribbled “Good!” next to a paragraph where Lee announced the opening of a Singaporean Investment Office in London.<sup>152</sup> Wilson also underlined a paragraph in which the President of the Board of Trade suggested appointing two consultants from the City of London to go to Singapore to produce a report on investment opportunities for British industry. We can therefore establish that Wilson was eager to see British investment in Singapore. In a letter from 13th of December from the PM’s office he expressed concern about the decline of British investment in Singapore and ordered the Board of Trade and the Ministry of Overseas Development to make sure that they followed up with relevant British firms in relation to the recent delegation of British industry that had visited Singapore.<sup>153</sup>

The question then becomes: Was any of this positive attitude to investment in Singapore due to the perspective Wilson had on repressive measures in Singapore? It is of course hard to find evidence for this as it is something that it is unlikely that a PM would spell out. But I argue there are at least two things that suggests Wilson’s perspective on repression of trade unions and political opponents in Singapore affected his view on British investment in Singapore. The first is that as we have already shown, Wilson looked positively on the PAP’s ability to

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<sup>150</sup> David Aiers to Mr. Finngland, 26 September 1969, FCO 24/562, BNA.

<sup>151</sup> “Note of A Meeting in the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s room”, 16 of January 1969, PREM 13/2984, BNA.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Memo from 10 Downing Street, 13 December 1968, PREM 13/2984, BNA.

“discipline” their trade unions, something he was unable to achieve himself in Britain. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the positive view of Singapore that these measures gave Wilson contributed to his positive attitude to British investment in Singapore. The second point is that as we saw a reason that British industry were reluctant to invest in Singapore after the British announcement of withdrawal was due to the fear of political risk. Wilson’s somewhat sarcastic scribble “Typically!” suggests he did not share their fear of the political risk and saw Singapore as politically stable. And this political stability was of course partially caused by the repressive measures that the PAP had taken. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that Wilson’s orders to try to increase British investment in Singapore were partially informed by his perspective of repressive actions taken by the PAP. That this was also a view shared by many other British investors and policymakers is evident from the report on Singapore that the consultants from the City of London produced. It cited “Relative political stability,” “strong and able leadership” and “a disciplined and industrious work force.”<sup>154</sup> Showing clearly that British industry favoured the political and economic situation the PAP had created to a large degree by different repressive measures towards the trade unions and political opponents.

Before wrapping up we must note that the political confidence that the repressive measures of the PAP instilled in British policymakers also played an important role in the substantial levels of aid that Britain gave to Singapore as it withdrew its forces and handed over its military facilities.<sup>155</sup> A cabinet paper on the special economic aid that was disbursed to Singapore said the objective of the aid was to ensure “political stability in the area, and to ensure a viable economy in Singapore” as well as to maintain “good relations and cooperation in matters of trade, investment and finance.”<sup>156</sup> The aid was therefore clearly to support the PAP government and British-Singaporean relations. The economic aid amounted to 50 million pounds.<sup>157</sup> It is not likely that the British government would have been willing to dispense similar levels of aid unless the PAP had shown its anti-communist credentials by amongst other actions, its repressive measures.

#### Conclusion:

The British perspective on political repression in Singapore between 1964 to 1971 played an important part in shaping British policy towards the island. We have seen that British

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<sup>154</sup> “Report of a Mission to the Asian Development Bank and Singapore”, March 1969, FCO 24/562, 14, BNA.

<sup>155</sup> The aid and orderly handover of military bases and equipment to Singaporean authorities played an important role in furthering the industrialisation of Singapore. Cheng Siok Hwa, “Economic Change in Singapore, 1945-1977” in *The Southeast Asia Journal of Social Science*, 1979, Vol. 7, No. 1/2 (1979), 94.

<sup>156</sup> “Special Aid to Malaysia and Singapore”, 18 August 1970, CAB 130/473, BNA.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

opposition to the Tunku's plan to arrest Lee Kuan Yew was a contributing factor to the Tunku's decision that secession of Singapore was the only solution. After secession we can say that the British perspective on political repression was greatly affected by the sense of crisis that the secession in 1965 created. The same was the case with the British decision later to withdraw militarily from Singapore by 1971. The sense of crisis on these occasions made the British think that extraordinary measures were needed to avoid an economic and political backlash in Singapore. Still, even though the British were positive to the repressive measures of the PAP they were reluctant to take part in the repressive actions themselves since Singapore was now an independent nation. In 1965 the British did not want to turn public opinion against their military presence, and in 1968-71, as they pulled out their military forces, they wanted to shore up the PAP Government.

The British perspective on repression was also affected by the economic problems in Britain. We saw that this motivated the pro-PAP attitude of Harold Wilson and Arthur De La Mare. The unruly strikes in Britain made them look favourably on the "disciplined" society that the repressive measures in Singapore produced. For De La Mare the "disciplined" society of Singapore also represented a nostalgic view of the British Empire at its best. The confidence that the repressive measures imbued British policymakers with made them more positive to economic investment in Singapore. At the end of this chapter, we saw how the sense of crisis faded as the British presence in Singapore weakened. The perspective on the PAP's continuous repression now became less favourable.

The British perspectives on repression in Singapore was shaped by a set of factors including Singapore's relations with Malaya, the Singaporean Government's eagerness to promote economic development, the dire economic situation in Britain, the personal opinions of Lee and the PAP, and a nostalgic longing for the days of the British Empire. As the Americans took over much of the British influence in Singapore, it became more of a foreign country from the British perspective. This allowed Britain to take a more critical but also less consequential view of Lee Kuan Yew's authoritarian ways.

### Chapter 3: Asian Values, Human Rights, and Economic Development, 1972-1980

In this chapter I will explore how developments in the 1970s affected the British view on political repression in Singapore. We shall also discuss how British views on repression affected the British government's economic policy towards Singapore.

In 1970 the Conservatives won the election in Britain and a new government was formed by Edward Heath. Heath made some changes to the Wilson government's decision to withdraw from Singapore. He agreed to the formation of a "Five Power Defence" alliance between Britain, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand. This was an agreement that in case of an attack on any of the members the participants agreed to consult with each other on how to react. Under the auspices of this agreement the Heath government decided to keep some military elements in Singapore under the command of an Australian Admiral in a joint ANZUK force (Australia, New Zealand and UK).<sup>158</sup> Other than that Britain withdrew most of its military presence and had thus mostly left the region.<sup>159</sup> From here and onwards Britain took a smaller part in the political and economic developments of Singapore. At the same time Singapore's economic growth accelerated thus causing its confidence to rise. In contrast to the Singaporean success Britain's economic woes continued as the world went through the 1973 oil shock and Britain experienced strikes and high inflation. The question is then how did this development affect British views on repression in Singapore?

Before we start it is necessary to give an overview of how repressive measures in Singapore developed in the 1970s. In 1969 the PAP used a combination of detentions without trials and exile of the opposition, and effective political campaigning to secure all the seats in the Singaporean Parliament. The PAP used this preponderance of political power to increase political repression in Singapore in the 1970s. In the political sphere they made it harder for political parties to campaign against the PAP. For example, they constrained the campaign period to only nine days before elections, whereas the PAP being in power could campaign year-round.<sup>160</sup> The free press was curtailed with two events in 1971 and 1974. In 1971 the Singaporean authorities detained four executives of the Chinese language newspaper *Nanyang Siang pau*, thus signalling its willingness to crack down on media that went against the government. The same year the government revoked the license of the English language *Singapore Herald*. In 1974 the government introduced legislation that changed media ownership rules. The laws made all news organisations publicly listed companies and made it

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<sup>158</sup> Record Meeting between Carrington and Lee Kuan Yew, 11 December 1972, PREM 15/1209, 2, BNA.

<sup>159</sup> Edward Heath, *The Course of My Life, My Autobiography*, (London, Hodder and Stoughton: 1998), 481.

<sup>160</sup> Barr, *Singapore a Modern History*, 119-120.



illegal for any one entity to own more than 12% of the shares of these organisations. By spreading ownership thinly, it made the PAP able to control key appointments and thus make the media loyal to the Singaporean Government.<sup>161</sup>

The independent Labour movement had been subdued in Operation Cold Store and in the new labour legislation in 1968. But government control was strengthened by the formation of the National Wage Council in 1972, an uneven tripartite council where the government dominated.<sup>162</sup> Aggregated these repressive measures further increased the PAP's control of Singapore. In Michael D. Barr's words: "Throughout this critical period the biggest constraint on the effective imposition of the government's will was not political opposition, but administrative incapacity."<sup>163</sup>

### Increased Singaporean Cultural Confidence

To understand the British perspective on political repression in Singapore after 1971 it is important to understand the changes that took place in the political, economic and cultural discourse of the PAP. In the early 1970s Singaporean leaders in many ways flipped the traditional orientalism of the former colonial power. Europeans had seen "the Orient" as soft and decadent and "the West" as dynamic and incorrupt.<sup>164</sup> In the 1970s this would turn around when the PAP leadership with Lee Kuan Yew at the helm began to see Western countries as soft and decadent while countries such as Singapore were rugged, dynamic and disciplined. For him the welfare state became a symbol of Western decline.<sup>165</sup> That this was not empty rhetoric is apparent in the fact that similar language of declining social values was used in secret cabinet papers by the Singaporean Government.<sup>166</sup>

This development is important to our investigation because it led to certain political initiatives that changed British perspectives on the use of repressive measures towards political opponents in Singapore. A good example of such a political initiative was what British diplomats in Singapore parodically called "Operation Snip Snip". This was a campaign by the Singaporean Government to get every man in Singapore to cut their hair short. Long hair was associated with "hippies, layabouts, drug takers and all other undesirable aspects." A British

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<sup>161</sup> Cherian George and Gayathry Venkiteswaran, *Media and Power in Southeast Asia*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2019), 22-24.

<sup>162</sup> W. G. Huff, *The economic growth of Singapore: Trade and development in the twentieth century*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1994), 328-329.

<sup>163</sup> Barr, *Singapore a Modern History*, 129.

<sup>164</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism Western Conceptions of the Orient*, (London, Penguin Books: 1991), 208.

<sup>165</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First*, 104.

<sup>166</sup> Michael D. Barr, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man*, (Richmond, Curzon: 2000), 68-71, and Cabinet Paper Wage Council" by Ministry of Labour, MMC 9-24-72 National Wages Council – Correspondence 1972, 232, NAS.

diplomat wrote of the campaign that the Singaporean authorities were determined to keep out “what they regard as degenerate influences.”<sup>167</sup>

The forcible cutting of Singaporeans’ and some foreigners’ hair was one example of how the recent development in Lee’s and the PAP’s thought on political and social discourse had concrete consequences. Another more severe example was put forth by Lee in a speech to the Press Club on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November. He set out his vision for the media in Singapore, claiming that “the mass media have immense power to shape the society in which they operate, yet those who are engaged in them require no special qualifications and too often acknowledge no responsibility.” He then continued to explain that “the selection of what to publish or broadcast cannot be left to journalists” but could only be made by “the elected representatives of the people.”<sup>168</sup> In other words by PAP MPs since at this point they were the only party represented in the Singaporean Parliament. Lee worried that the perceived decadence he saw in the West could spread to Singapore through the media and thought this justified government control of the media.<sup>169</sup> This made it harder for opposition parties to make their views known and easier for the PAP to stay in control. This was probably one of the motives for the measures. How did the British perceive these acts of political repression by the Singaporean Government?

They perceived the repression of certain political liberties on the grounds of fear of Western decadence to be quite pointless. Whereas they had previously taken Singaporean acts of political repression quite seriously and usually agreed that they were called for, now the word they used was “silly”. This is seen for example with the PAP campaign to cut long hair. The dispatch sent home to London was called “Operation Snip Snip,” giving a strong hint of what they thought about the campaign. The campaign was described by the British diplomat John Watts as “rather silly ... it may seem ridiculous to us as it does to many Singaporeans”.<sup>170</sup> Sam Falle also referred to the whole situation as a “silly situation” though he stressed that as a sovereign nation Singapore was within its right to do this and that any complaints or attempts to change the policy from the British government’s side would be fiercely opposed.<sup>171</sup>

The repressive measures that the PAP introduced in the early 1970s, and the new way to legitimise them caused a slide in the favourable perspective the British had had of Singapore in the late 1960s. The measures were seen as anti-democratic, meaningless posturing by an increasingly authoritarian Lee Kuan Yew. Lee and Singapore were no longer referred to as an

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<sup>167</sup> “Operation Snip Snip”, 14 January 1972, FCO 24/1486, BNA.

<sup>168</sup> “The Prime Minister at the Press Club”, 21 November 1972, FCO 24/1486, BNA.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> “Operation Snip Snip”, 14 January 1972, FCO 24/1486, BNA.

<sup>171</sup> Sam Falle to FCO, 22 February 1972, FCO 24/1486, BNA.

embodiment of social democratic values or a remnant of the British Empire at its height, but rather as an eccentric post-colonial ruler. The new British PM Edward Heath did not share Harold Wilson's favourable opinion of Lee. For Heath Lee was an eccentric character. In a passage in his memoir, he described Lee as "a friend, though he certainly has different views from my own on a number of matters, both political and economic."<sup>172</sup>

It is clear that Singapore's self-confidence, its economic success, the woes of the West, and the continued political and social repression in Singapore caused a deterioration of the British perspective on Singapore. British descriptions of Lee started to look more and more like descriptions of irrational autocrats. The acts of repression and their legitimisation in notions of Western decadence and cultural degeneration reduced the British admiration for Lee and made him more of a figure of ridicule.

### Human Rights

The British perspective on political repression in Singapore would also be affected by international developments. In 1970s human rights exploded onto the international arena. Samuel Moyn, a historian who has written on the history of human rights, wrote that "The triumph of human rights activism thus depended upon a decline in elite sympathies for once-romantic anti-colonial nationalism."<sup>173</sup> In other words international public opinion, which had previously been quite favourable to independence and anti-colonial movements like the PAP, went from focusing on self-determination to focusing on the human rights of individuals. Moyn wrote that "By the late 1970s self-determination, like other transformative political utopias, had lost its appeal to Western observers, especially because of its frequently violent outcomes."<sup>174</sup> As national anti-colonial movements often resulted in war and less than perfect democracies Western sympathy for them declined. This general trend can be seen in criticism against the PAP's domination of Singapore.

One expression of this was that British MPs increasingly sent questions about repression in Singapore to their Government.<sup>175</sup> An example of increased scrutiny from MPs was a question that Labour MP Chris Price, supported by three other MPs, asked the government of James Callaghan in 1977 about the human rights situation in Singapore and demanded that this be something that the British government raise with Singaporean

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<sup>172</sup> Edward Heath, *The Course of My Life: My Autobiography*, 243 and 477.

<sup>173</sup> Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia Human Rights in History*, (Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 2010), 173.

<sup>174</sup> Moyn, *The Last Utopia ...*, 173.

<sup>175</sup> "Parliamentary Question", 7 March 1972, FCO 24/1486, BNA.

authorities.<sup>176</sup> Civil society also began to pressure the British government to act. For example, in 1973 a letter was posted in *The Guardian* about the situation of political prisoners in Singapore. In the article the political prisons in Singapore were compared to prisons in apartheid South Africa.<sup>177</sup> It is therefore clear that as human rights became an important factor in British public opinion in the 1970s, that this had an adverse effect upon British public opinion towards Singapore. But did the less favourable public opinion in Britain of political repression in Singapore result in a change in the views of British policymakers?

The simple answer to this question is no, as is evident from the reply that the FCO drafted on behalf of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in Callaghan's cabinet. The letter said that the leaders of Singapore "are well aware of our views on these questions." It furthermore agreed to the importance of human rights in international affairs. But then the FCO went on to say that Singapore was faced with a "well-organised, communist inspired, terrorist movement" and that "strong measures were necessary to defend themselves against it."<sup>178</sup> The letter also said that compared to other developing countries Singapore's record on human rights was not so bad. But as we have seen in previous chapters British officials had never described the communist threat in Singapore in this way, not even in the early 1960s when Selkirk was High Commissioner. Referring to the threat from communism was therefore a way for the British government to avoid dealing with British public opinion's unfavourable view on Singapore's human rights record.

But the questions from the British MPs also caused the FCO to ask for a more thorough report on the issue of human rights in Singapore. The report was penned by the British High Commissioner Peter Tripp, who was stationed in Singapore from 1974 to 1978. In the report he divided the question of human rights into three categories and evaluated Singapore's performance on each. The categories were "freedom", "material rights" and "liberties". Tripp described how press regulation, unfair election campaign rules, detentions without trials, banishments and other factors made Singapore score poorly on the first and third category. On material rights Tripp commended the Singaporean Government for its achievements. Tripp acknowledged that Singapore's human rights record was not good, but he cited a number of ameliorating factors. Amongst them the economic success of Singapore, the high degree of political legitimacy of the PAP, and the threat of communism. He also explained that the

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<sup>176</sup> "Parliamentary Question for oral answer by Prime Minister", 14 July 1977, FCO 58/1179, BNA.

<sup>177</sup> "Ordeal and Irony of Protest in Singapore", 5 February 1973, FCO 24/1780, BNA.

<sup>178</sup> Draft Reply to Parliamentary Question, 9 June 1977, FCO 58/1157, BNA.

Singaporean Government were quite sceptical about being lectured by Western officials and that British attempts to do so could make things worse.<sup>179</sup>

Another factor he mentioned was the idea that Singapore as an Asian country should not be judged by Western standards. Tripp wrote:

Singapore should be seen in its Asian context and not as a product of British constitutional and Parliamentary institutions. (...) the Chinese and other Asian races traditionally expect the Government to provide stability and security and accept that this involves limits on individual freedom which might not be acceptable in the West.<sup>180</sup>

In other words that principles of democratic and constitutional government and concepts of human rights were Western phenomena that should not be seen as universal and applicable in Asian societies. When it came to British views on political repression in Singapore this was something new in the 1970s. As we saw in the first chapter British decision makers were opposed to unconstitutional measures such as political detentions while in the second chapter they were agreed to on the ground of a perceived situation of crisis. That there was a fundamental difference of political culture between Singapore and the West that made repressive measures more acceptable in the former did not appear until the 1970s, at least not in the documents I have seen in the British archives.

Both Lee Kuan Yew and his Foreign Minister Sinnathamby Rajaratnam took issue with what they called the “Western interpretation of human rights.”<sup>181</sup> It is evident that the Singaporean Government used this as a defence against criticism of its own human rights record and that some British policymakers agreed and were convinced by it.<sup>182</sup>

The important role that human rights came to play in international discourse in the 1970s turned much of British public opinion against the Singaporean Government’s political repression. But this development had less of an influence on British policymakers, both diplomats in Singapore and government politicians in London. They compared Singapore favourably to other developing countries, insisted that Singapore had to be judged in its Asian context where another historical and cultural background informed its political culture, and that Singapore’s struggle against communism justified harsh measures.

The British government saw the increasing scrutiny from Parliament and Civil Society as endangering the relationship between Britain and Singapore and sought to defend the relationship from being harmed by the British public’s focus on human rights. A good example

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<sup>179</sup> “Human Rights in Singapore” by Peter Tripp, 15 August 1977, FCO 58/1157, BNA.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First*, 490-491.

of this is the Borthwick case in 1973. Alfred Brian Borthwick was a British expert on explosive materials who was arrested by Singaporean authorities for taking part in a conspiracy to assassinate Ferdinand Marcos, the dictator of the Philippines. The Singaporean authorities put Borthwick in jail without trial and held him there until 1975, when he was banished from Singapore. As a British citizen his detention without trial became an issue in the relationship between Britain and Singapore, and Heath's government worried that this would catch the attention of Parliament and thus oblige the Government to do something. In a brief before a meeting between Heath and Lee Kuan Yew, the FCO wrote to Heath that Borthwick's "detention without trial is likely to attract wasteful, increasing and possibly embarrassing parliamentary interest which, in the interests of Anglo/Singapore relations, we should like to avoid."<sup>183</sup> The sentence clearly shows that the British government was aware of the political repression in Singapore, but that the Government considered the preservation of a good relationship with Singapore to be more important. The main worry was not about the repression itself, but rather the risk that it might be picked up by Parliament.

#### British Perspective on Political Repression and Economic Policy

We have seen that as the sense of crisis over British withdrawal receded the British policymakers saw political repression as less necessary. We also saw that increased awareness of Singaporean human rights issues in Britain put increased political pressure on British authorities to raise the issue with the Singaporean Government, but that the British government avoided this in order to preserve good bilateral relations. The question then arises, why did the British government view the bilateral relationship with a tiny city-state on the other side of the world as so important for British foreign policy?

The answer can be found in the strategic economic role that Singapore obtained during the 1970s. Singapore not only became a centre for industrial manufacturing that started to climb up the value-chain. It also became an economic hub for the entire region. British policymakers' efforts to expand commercially in Southeast Asia thus became linked to Singapore. This hitched British commercial and political interests in the region to the success of the PAP-ruled Singapore. Whatever protected the PAP and its economic plans for Singapore thus indirectly protected British interests. As Roger Carrick, a diplomat at the British High Commission, would write in 1972 on repression of freedom of the press: "You may like him [Lee Kuan Yew], you may not, but he is not exactly ordinary and he makes this place hum."<sup>184</sup> Thus

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<sup>183</sup> "Borthwick Brief by Foreign and Commonwealth Office" by FCO, 13 June 1974, CAB 133/445, BNA.

<sup>184</sup> "The Prime Minister at the Press Club", 21 November 1972, FCO 24/1486, BNA.

indicating that Lee's and the PAP's means might be unpalatable, but they were effective in economically developing Singapore.

A similar sentiment was expressed in 1974 by Peter Tripp at the end of his first year in Singapore. After the oil crisis in 1973 and the withdrawal of the British forces he wrote "Mr. Lee is not a man to give up, or to accept that an intelligent and disciplined approach to Singapore's troubles will not succeed in overcoming them. He may be proved wrong, but I think his nerve will hold. It is in our interest that it should."<sup>185</sup> Tripp was therefore clearly identifying it as in British interest that Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP's vision for Singapore be realized. Tripp emphasized that "More than many other countries, Singapore requires stability and confidence to weather the storms ahead."<sup>186</sup> The reason for why Tripp thought political stability under the PAP in Singapore was so important was because "as a spring-board for our exploitation of the South-East Asian market, an area of vast resources (including oil) only now being developed, Singapore is unrivalled and likely to have the edge over its competitors for several years to come." Tripp added that "We should plan now for the time when we have overcome our own difficulties, so that we are well-placed to take advantage of the expansion of trade in South-East Asia which will inevitably follow the present world economic downturn."<sup>187</sup> It is therefore evident that British officials in Singapore were quite clear-eyed about the political repression in Singapore but that the political stability and economic development that it caused were seen as more important.

An article written in 1973 by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry Peter Walker suggests that this view was shared by the British Cabinet. After a visit to the Far East he wrote an article in *The Daily Express* that "Hong Kong and Singapore are the two great financial and commercial centres of the Far East." He also wrote that "the Far East as a whole is one of the great growth areas of the world. The opportunities for Britain are immense. With drive and imagination we could have it all." Walker clearly saw the Far East as a huge opportunity for commercial expansion and Singapore as one of the most important centres to realize this. The purpose of the article was to galvanize British industry into expanding their operations there. He therefore ended the article by saying "Go East Young Man."<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Tripp also wrote: "Mr. Lee is likely to want to ride Singapore on an even tighter rein as difficulties increase. His nerve should hold (and it is in our interest that it should)." "Changes Facing Singapore" by Peter Tripp, 14 December 1974, FCO 160/164, BNA.

<sup>186</sup> "Changes Facing Singapore" by Peter Tripp, 14 December 1974, FCO 160/164, BNA.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> "Text of Article for the Daily Express", 11 April 1973, FCO 160/15, BNA.

### Conclusion:

As the Government of Singapore increased its political power in the 1970s, after the political and economic situation had stabilized, British policymakers' and the British public's perspective of the PAP's political repression changed. In the late 1960s it had been seen as necessary and commendable, now it was seen as increasingly unnecessary and despotic. This was especially the case with British public opinion where some MPs demanded action from their government. Policymakers in the British government now took a less favourable view of the political repression in Singapore than before. This is apparent from reports written by diplomats like Sam Falle. There are exceptions, as we saw with Peter Tripp, who wrote that the repressive measures of the PAP were in Britain's interest. But no one in government argued that this was something for the British government to interfere with. Some argued that different cultural values ("Asian values") and the struggle with communism excused the repression. More importantly, they were cognizant of Singapore's important economic role in Southeast Asia and that British commercial and economic interests in the region were well served by the political and economic stability that the PAP government was able to guarantee. In the 1970s there was therefore an element of inconsistency in British policymakers' perspective on political repression in Singapore. On one hand they mocked the Singaporean Government as oppressive and dictatorial, and on the other hand they saw that their policies served British interests.

It is fitting to end the chapter with a song written by the British diplomats in Singapore in 1980. The Singaporean Government held a competition to compose a national anthem. Jokingly the diplomats made a parody which they sent to London. They reassured the FCO that they did "not intend to submit it to the judges as an entry."

The PAP's the party for a happy Singapore  
We'll vote it back to Parliament both now and evermore  
With Harry Lee and Goh Keng Swee its leaders as before  
Their word shall be our law.  
Glory, glory Rajarat – nam  
Glory, glory Rajarat – nam  
Glory, glory Rajarat – nam  
Their word shall be our law.

He has bundled all the Communists into detention camps  
He has stamped upon corrupting plots and all protection ramps  
His handicap when playing golf puts him among the champs  
So does his Mandarin.  
Glory, glory Rajarat – nam  
Glory, glory Rajarat – nam  
Glory, glory Rajarat – nam  
So does his Mandarin.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> British High Commissioner to FCO, 21 July 1980, FCO 15/2673, BNA.



#### Chapter Four: Conclusion:

Now that we have seen how the British view on political repression in Singapore developed between 1959 and 1980, we can conclude by firstly looking at what drove these changes, then seeing how this thesis adds to the existing historiography of British views on political repression in Singapore and then finally connect the findings to the overall theoretical framework we sketched out in the introduction.

From the analysis we can point to at least three factors that have been important in shaping the British perspective on political repression in Singapore between 1959 and 1980. The first of these is the perception of a communist threat. Fear that communism would spread was crucial in shaping the British perspective on political repression, which was considered more or less acceptable if it contributed to stemming communist advance. In the early 1960s the communist threat was seen as relatively concrete. The British made case by case threat assessments of persons and organizations in the ISC. The threat was seen as tangible and handled thus. If the British identified a threat, they were willing to use or tolerate the use of repressive measures against it. If the threat was not deemed to be a security risk, they would not support repressive means. After Singapore became independent and the British lost their say in its internal affairs, communism became a more abstract and overriding fear. As the left had been mostly wiped out in Operation Cold Store there was not much to fear locally. The British now used the more general threat of communism to justify political repression by the PAP. In the 1970s it became a convenient excuse that British authorities used to counter criticism from British MPs and civil society of the Singaporean Government's authoritarian actions. For British policymakers the communist threat went from being the key factor in determining their perspective on the need for political repression, to becoming an excuse allowing them to pursue their commercial interests in Singapore without dealing with the more unpalatable sides of the Singaporean Government's internal security policies. Interestingly this would also determine how the British saw Operation Cold Store. As we have seen Selkirk (1959- 1963) was opposed to it and the British government only agreed in order to achieve the merger of Singapore and Malaya in the new Federation of Malaysia. Selkirk for example saw the operation as a power grab by the PAP under the cover of a communist threat. But this understanding of the operation was ignored or forgotten by later British High Commissioners. Arthur De La Mare (1968-1970), Sam Falle (1970-74) and Peter Tripp (1974-1978) saw the operation as a necessary act to fight the communist threat, thus buying into the PAP version of events.

The second factor that influenced the British perspectives on political repression was the personality of its key decisionmakers. As we have seen the different British High Commissioners and Prime Ministers varied greatly in their approach. For Selkirk faithful application of the democratic constitution was important. In a way he embodied Macmillan's admonition to Lee Kuan Yew in 1959 that the best means to fight communism was a free government. Ironically it was Macmillan's government that ordered Selkirk to vote in favour of Operation Cold Store. Selkirk differed from the other High Commissioners in that he was not a career diplomat but a politician, who had served in Macmillan's cabinet before being sent to Singapore. This probably gave him more authority and independence to follow his own instincts than the later High Commissioners. For Arthur De La Mare the discipline and order he saw in Singapore became a symbol of the nostalgic picture of the British Empire; a small but significant corner of the world where it still sparkled. For Harold Wilson Singapore was an example of Fabian social democracy in a region dominated by either communism or anti-socialist dictatorship. He also greatly appreciated Lee's perspective on the world. Paradoxically this made him receptive to the repressive measures undertaken by Lee's government against Singapore's Labour movement. That he shared similar economic predicaments also contributed to this.

In the 1970s, for Sam Falle and Edward Heath, Singapore was less of a special case. They were relatively clear eyed about the political repression in Singapore and did not officially support it. But at this point Singapore was an independent country and the British influence had become negligible. Increasingly their chief interest in Singapore was commercial. Hence, the PAP's authoritarianism became a nuisance they only addressed when forced to do so by civil society and critical members of the British parliament.

The third factor was the overall structure of the relationship between the UK and Singapore. In the years 1959-1963 the British played an important role in Singapore's internal affairs. They had to be pragmatic, well knowing that they could be blamed for acts of political repression. As we saw in the early years of the 1960s nobody wanted to get their hands dirty with repressive acts. Lee Kuan Yew tried to get the British or the Tunku Abdul Rahman to shoulder responsibility for any arrests, while the whole project of Malaysia was in a sense a British attempt to put the Tunku in charge for internal security in the whole Federation, including Singapore. The Tunku did not want that job and preferred the British and Lee to do the dirty work. As long as the British were partly responsible for internal security, they were reluctant to agree to radical repressive measures because they knew it could backfire on them if the acts of political repression led to riots or if it attracted negative attention internationally.

But when Singapore became independent in 1965 Britain was no longer responsible for internal security and would therefore no longer be blamed. Britain could therefore benefit from the political and economic stability that political repression brought but did not have to worry about the political fallout. As commercial interests became more important in the relationship the need for political stability increasingly trumped democratic concerns. In other words, the British tended to be more approving of acts of political repression that they did not have to order and implement themselves. There are exceptions to this pattern. One being in the beginning of the PAP government in 1959-1960 when the British were in favour of a more repressive policy even though this would have to be approved by the ISC. Another exception was in 1965 when the British opposed a potential arrest of Lee by the Malaysian government, because they saw it as a breach of Malaysia's democracy and because they feared the communal violence it could cause and the threat this could pose to British bases. But in general, the British became more supportive of acts of political repression in Singapore the less they could be blamed for it and as long as it served their interests. This was especially the case in the late 1960s, but also in the 1970s when the British often opposed the PAP's acts of repression but supported the results they produced.

Now that we have sketched the main developments and seen some of the key factors that determined the British perspective on political repression in Singapore, we can turn to how our findings relate to the historiography of British views on repression in Singapore. As we saw in the introduction the historiography is limited, but in general there are two schools of thought. Both revolve around the British role in Operation Cold Store. Our findings support the revisionist argument that the British opposed the operation and did not think it was necessary on security grounds. British politicians in London begrudgingly agreed to it while Selkirk saw it more as a power grab by Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP. But in addition to this the thesis has provided two new findings that enlarge the historiography.

The first is that the British did not at the outset fear the authoritarian tendencies of the PAP. Though Goode (Governor of Singapore and Commissioner, 1957-1959) warned that the cadre organization of the PAP could usher in an authoritarian system of government (a statement that would prove prescient). His first dispatch on the new PAP Government in 1959 shows that the British feared PAP leniency towards the political left more than its authoritarian ways. This would change as Lee and the PAP became increasingly ruthless in their treatment of left-wing political opposition, especially after the split of the BS in 1961. Our second finding is that the British became more favourable towards acts of political repression in Singapore after Singapore became independent from Malaysia in 1965. The thesis has shown that the

British perspective on political repression was not static, but evolved as British personnel and interests changed, and the overall structure of the relationship between Singapore and the UK evolved. This gives a good picture of how British perspectives developed between 1959 and 1980 and which factors played key roles in changing them. It also opens up new questions for inquiry. For example, more detailed research into what shaped the perspectives and opinions of the British High Commissioners and their influence in shaping policy vis-à-vis the government in London.

How do these findings relate to the theoretic framework presented in the introduction? My study set out to investigate how the relationship between Britain and Singapore, in the context of decolonization and the Cold War, affected the economic and political development of Singapore. The introduction held out a promise that an investigation of British perspectives on political repression in Singapore would be a fruitful approach to discerning such effects. From our analysis we can point to at least four important ways that British perspectives on political repression helped shape Singapore's development. The first is the fact that the British kept the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance (which served the same purpose and would be replaced by the Internal Security Act in 1963) in the 1959 constitution. This decision was made before 1959, and we therefore did not touch upon it in our narrative,<sup>190</sup> but it is worth mentioning since it was motivated by the spirit, we described in chapter one where the British thought political repression of the left was necessary and did not fully trust that the Singaporean authorities would do what they thought was required. This law made it legally a lot easier for Singaporean authorities after 1959 to arrest political opponents, and thus played an important role in allowing the PAP to assert its political dominance.

The second decisive factor was Britain's acquiescence to Operation Cold Store. The operation played a key role in allowing the PAP to establish its political dominance at a moment when it was particularly vulnerable since its popular support in Singapore was waning. If the British had refused to agree to the operation, the leftist opposition in Singapore could have survived and Singapore's merger with Malaya in 1963 might never have happened. How exactly that would have influenced the political and economic development of Singapore is impossible to know, but it is reasonable to assume that it would have played out quite differently. In this case British willingness to compromise on its opposition to political repression played a key part in securing the position of Lee Kuan Yew, the PAP and hence Singapore's merger with and later expulsion from the Malaysian Federation.

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<sup>190</sup> Memo from E Melville to Sir John Martin, 29 September 1960, CO 1030/1166, 32, BNA.

The third factor we have seen, which strengthens the argument just made, was the firm pressure the British put on the Tunku in 1964 and 1965 to refrain from arresting Lee Kuan Yew. This happened at the highest level with PM Harold Wilson sending a personal message to the Tunku and warning him that he would be excluded from the Commonwealth Conference if he chose to detain Lee. Other factors like the fear of communal violence also played a role in the Tunku's decision, but it is reasonable to assume that the clear message from the British was decisive. The British were still engaged in fighting the communist insurgents in Malaya and the Tunku would need British military help if the situation escalated again. The British thus had leverage and influence on him. If the Tunku had arrested Lee and imposed a different government on Singapore it is possible that it would not have been able to apply the focused Export Oriented Industrialization strategy that proved so successful in attracting international capital and expertise over the following decades.

The final factor was the huge amounts of economic assistance in the form of capital, equipment and infrastructure that the British provided to Singapore free of charge when they pulled out their military forces in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This generosity was motivated by British support for the PAP government. As we saw this political support was in turn to a large part conditioned on the British perception that the PAP government was willing to introduce the necessary repressive measures to fight the Communist threat. Kah Seng Loh, a historian at University of Western Australia, wrote that the British pull-out served as a catalyst for the economic development of Singapore, and this was in a big part due to the generosity of the British and their willingness to cooperate with Singaporean authorities. This was not a given. For example, when the US pulled out of Subic Bay in the Philippines in 1991, they took everything with them.

We can conclude that the British perspective on political repression in Singapore played a key part in shaping British policy and thus the political and economic development of the world's most successful city-state. Our aim in saying this is not to claim that the "Singaporean miracle" was masterminded by the British or to take away any credit from the PAP for its achievements. It is rather to demonstrate that the causes of the "East Asian Economic Miracle" are not just to be found in policy debates but may be due to deeper geo-political economic factors, to use Jim Glassman's term,<sup>191</sup> that assembled the political and economic conditions allowing explosive economic growth to take place.

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<sup>191</sup> Glassman, *Drums of War ...*, 25.

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