

“Flesh and Bone Reunite as One Body”: Singapore’s Chinese-speaking and their Perspectives on Merger

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Abstract

Singapore’s Chinese speakers played the determining role in Singapore’s merger with the Federation. Yet the historiography is silent on their perspectives, values, and assumptions. Using contemporary Chinese-language sources, this article argues that in approaching merger, the Chinese were chiefly concerned with livelihoods, education, and citizenship rights; saw themselves as deserving of an equal place in Malaya; conceived of a new, distinctive, multiethnic Malayan identity; and rejected communist ideology. Meanwhile, the leaders of UMNO were intent on preserving their electoral dominance and the special position of Malays in the Federation. Finally, the leaders of the PAP were desperate to retain power and needed the Federation to remove their political opponents. The interaction of these three factors explains the shape, structure, and timing of merger. This article also sheds light on the ambiguity inherent in the transfer of power and the difficulties of national identity formation in a multiethnic state.

Keywords: Chinese-language politics in Singapore; History of Malaya; the merger of Singapore and the Federation of Malaya; Decolonisation

Introduction

Singapore’s merger with the Federation of Malaya is one of the most pivotal events in the country’s history. This process was determined by the ballot box – two general elections, two by-elections, and a referendum on merger in four years. The centrality of the vote to this process meant that Singapore’s Chinese-speaking¹ residents, as the vast majority of the colony’s residents, played the determining role. Yet the historiography on the subject is largely silent on their perspective. According to the confused and contradictory mainstream narrative of merger, communist-allied left-wing politicians were on the verge of being elected to office. Fortunately, Lee Kuan Yew and his group of English-educated leaders rescued the island by forming their own alliance with the communists, engaging in secret negotiations with foreign leaders, and colluding in the detention without trial of their political opponents.² This narrative broadly portrays the Chinese-speaking as communists, communalists, and chauvinists, prone to manipulation and illegality.³

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¹ Throughout this article, “Chinese” is used as shorthand for the Chinese-speaking people of Singapore. While they are almost entirely ethnic Chinese, this term as used here is not an ethnic category but a linguistic one.

² See C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009); Dennis Bloodworth, *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1986); John Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1984); Edw in Lee, *Singapore: The Unexpected Nation* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008).

³ For an analysis of depictions of the Chinese-speaking in Singapore history, see Sai Siew Min and Huang Jianli, “The ‘Chinese-educated’ political vanguards: Ong Pang Boon, Lee Khoon Choy & Jek Yueng Thong”, in Lam Peng Er and Kevin Y.L. Tan (eds.), *Lee’s Lieutenants* (Singapore: Allen & Unwin, 1999), pp. 132.

This narrative has been limited by an over-reliance on English-language sources, which have served to promote an English-language perspective of events.⁴ British colonial archives, English-language newspapers such as the *Straits Times* (ST), and the recollections of English-speaking British, Malaysian, and Singaporean politicians (in particular, Lee Kuan Yew's *The Singapore Story*) are widely cited; but Chinese-language sources are rarely cited, if ever.⁵ The major work on merger, Tan Tai Yong's excellent *Creating Greater Malaysia: Decolonization and the Politics of Merger* does not cite a single Chinese-language primary source.⁶

The English-language sources are limited to a narrow and partial view of Singapore politics, society and culture in the 1950s and 60s, privileging the institutions introduced by the British and their corresponding laws, policies, and values. The norms, values and idioms inherent in the vernacular Chinese dialects and Mandarin, and the notions of exclusion from elite politics and resistance to Anglophone domination, are excluded and in fact suppressed.

Chinese-language sources are critical to analyses of a population which was approximately 70% Chinese-speaking.⁷ In particular, Chinese-language newspapers and periodicals played a significant role in the social, cultural, and political changes of Singapore's decolonisation period. The *Nanyang Siang Pao* (NYSP) and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (SCJP) were the two most widely read newspapers in Singapore. The NYSP's circulation in 1957 was nearly 75,000, slightly more than the SCJP, which was roughly equal to the circulation of the leading English-language ST.⁸ The ST had been the voice of the colonial residents and British interests in Singapore, but would later come under the tight control of the PAP after Singapore's independence.⁹ There was a greater range of Chinese-language newspapers, representing a wide spectrum of opinion. The *Xin Min Zhu Bao*, *Nan Chiau Jit Poh*, *Sin Pao*, and *Min Pao* on the left of the political spectrum, *Chung Shing Jit Poh* and *Gong Bao* on the right, and the business-oriented, pragmatic, market leaders NYSP, SCJP, and *Nanfang Evening Post* in the centre.¹⁰

By the mid 1950s, Chinese literacy had risen to the point where a clear majority (52%) of Chinese working-age men were literate in Chinese – over twice the percentage literate in English (23.1%).¹¹ At the same time, 84% of Chinese were born in Malaya.¹² This audience thirsted for news. Internal ST studies in the late 1950s showed that each copy of the ST was read by an average of 3.5 readers, whilst NYSP and SCJP had 6 or 7 readers, a reflection of the greater penetration of Chinese newspapers in the Chinese population.¹³ Even illiterate Chinese would gather by the

⁴ See also Carl A. Trocki, "David Marshall and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Singapore", in Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki (eds.), *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), pp. 116-19.

⁵ See, for example, Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005*; Lee, *Singapore: The Unexpected Nation*; Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success*.

⁶ Tan Tai Yong, *Creating "Greater Malaysia": Decolonisation and the Politics of Merger* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008). See also Mohamed Nordin Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1974).

⁷ S.C. Chua, *Report on the Census of Population 1957* (Singapore: Singapore Government Printer, 1964), pp. 167-73.

⁸ Chen Mong Hock, *The Early Chinese Newspapers of Singapore 1881-1912* (Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1967), pp. Appendix; Chui Kw ei Chiang, *Xinjiapo huawen baokan yu baoren* [Singapore Chinese Newspapers and Journalists] (Singapore: Haitianw enlunqiyi, 1993), pp. 155-57.

⁹ Turnbull, C. M., *Dateline Singapore: 150 Years of the Straits Times* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 1995), pp. 384-88. See also George, Cherian, *Freedom from the Press: Journalism and State Power in Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), pp. 23-45; Cheong Yip Seng, *O.B. Markers: My Straits Times Story* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2012), pp. 159-191; and Seow, Francis, *The Media Enthralled: Singapore Revisited* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), pp. 106-139.

¹⁰ Thum Ping Tjin, "Chinese Newspapers in Singapore, 1945-1963 - Mediators of Elite and Popular Tastes in Culture and Politics", *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 83/1 (2010), pp. 55-56.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-59.

¹² Saw Sw ee Hock, *The Population of Singapore* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2006), pp. 63.

¹³ Chin Kah Chong, interview er unknown, Singapore National Archives, Oral History Centre, Accession [Hereafter SNA-OHC] 2954, undated.

Singapore River in the evenings to listen to storytellers who would read out the news of the day for a fee.¹⁴

More than just reporting on events, the newspapers were a public space in which ideas were disseminated and debated, dominating social and cultural life. The choices and content of Chinese-language newspapers' reportage demonstrated the community's priorities and preoccupation. The editorials and commentary throughout the newspapers reflected contemporary Chinese-language opinion. Readers contributed articles which fuelled debates and discussions. The language the journalists used, the cultural constructs they deployed to structure their arguments, and the sources of authority they appealed to in advancing their claims all provide insight into the values and assumptions of the Chinese-speaking in Singapore, and these were far from homogenous. Chinese newspapers are thus a rich and hitherto unmined historical source.¹⁵

The Singapore Chinese conception of Malaya and merger

Until World War II, people could travel unhindered from the Perlis-Siam border to the port of Singapore at the southern-most tip of the Malayan Peninsula. While they were aware that the Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States and the Unfederated Malay States were separate political entities, this fact made little difference to their lives. Chinese families in the rural areas sent their sons to find work in the major towns. In particular, they gravitated to Singapore, the commercial capital of Malaya.¹⁶ Chinese commercial organisations, clan and dialect associations, and secret societies had branches and affiliates throughout Malaya wherever the Chinese gathered.¹⁷ The colonial divisions of British Malaya were largely irrelevant to their daily and commercial lives.¹⁸ This continued to be the case after the colonial authorities made Singapore a crown colony separate from peninsular Malaya in 1946. Linguistically, the "Federation" and "Singapore" were used exclusively for referring to the political entities, while their homeland was always "Malaya" and they were "Malayans".¹⁹

The Japanese Occupation (1942-45) introduced border controls at the causeway connecting Singapore to the mainland. The return of the British in 1945 brought political liberation but not reunification. Singapore's separation from the mainland, however, did not arouse any significant reaction among the population in Singapore at the time. For a post-war population gripped by mass poverty, unemployment, and housing shortages, such concerns seemed distant. Movement across the border was still generally free, even if it required identity papers. However, the eventual reunification of Singapore with the mainland remained a goal of Chinese-speaking politicians on both sides of the political spectrum.

Singapore's Progressive Party (PP), a conservative pro-British party comprised of English-speaking elites, was the first to suggest unification of all of Britain's territories in maritime Southeast Asia.²⁰ It raised the subject in the Legislative Council

¹⁴ Stephen Dobbs, *The Singapore River: A Social History 1819-2002* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), pp. 92-93.

¹⁵ Chui, *Xinjiapo huawen baokan yu baoren*, pp. 156-77; Thum, "Chinese New spapers in Singapore, 1945-1963", pp. 53-75; Wong Hong Teng, *Xinjiapo huawen ribao shelun yanjiu, 1945-59* [Research on Editorials in Singapore's Daily Chinese New spapers] (Singapore: NUS Department of Chinese Studies, 1995), pp. 35-36.

¹⁶ For example, many of Singapore's politicians were born in Malaya outside Singapore and came to live in Singapore. See Lee Khoo Choy, *On The Beat to the Hustings: An Autobiography* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1988), pp. 20; Fong Sw ee Suan, *Fang Shuishuang huiyilu* [The Memoirs of Fong Sw ee Suan] (Johor Bahru: Xinhantaodeshuxianglou, 2007), pp. 1-10, and interviews with Toh Chin Chye, CV Devan Nair, Lee Siew Choh, Goh Keng Sw ee, Ong Pang Boon in Melanie Chew, *Leaders of Singapore* (Singapore: Resource Press, 1996), pp. 22, 42, 74, 84, 100.

¹⁷ Wilfred Blythe, *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Historical Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 284-94.

¹⁸ Noted as well in Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Edition, 1998), pp. 331.

¹⁹ 聯邦, 新加坡, and 馬來亞 respectively.

²⁰ Progressive Party, *Newsletter*, No. 6, July 1952; Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, pp. 128.

debates in 1948 and 1951, as an alternative to merger between Singapore and the Federation.²¹ In 1952, the object of a "Confederation of Malaysia" was formally adopted and incorporated into the programme of the party.²² The PP had two major motivations for this. First, it saw the incorporation of the Borneo territories as a way of preventing Malay political domination which would follow a Singapore-Federation merger. Ironically, this was the same motivation which convinced the Federation Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1961 to bring in the Borneo territories to prevent the Chinese electoral and economic domination that he feared would follow a Singapore-Federation merger. The other motivation was a PP vision of a confederated Malaysia with Singapore at its centre, preserving and boosting the island's identity, prestige and standing. With economic development and constitutional progress within Singapore higher on the agenda, however, the PP's proposals were not pushed forward with any great enthusiasm or urgency.

The idea of merger, however, was never far from the minds of Singapore's Chinese. A January 1955 editorial in the NYSP outlined some of the important points which would define the Chinese position on merger. First, that Malaya was one single entity which comprised both the Federation of Malaya and Singapore. The two were seen as "complete and indivisible as a family". Second, while Singapore could undoubtedly survive on its own, an independent Singapore made as much sense as an independent New York, London or Beijing: possible, but pointless. Third, Singapore was the commercial and intellectual capital of Malaya, boasting world-class infrastructure which included the great commercial port, airport, and Malaya's two universities. Such assets were clearly more valuable to both Singapore and Malaya as part of Malaya than on its own. The editorial also hinted at one of the stumbling blocks to merger, namely that "a country not only must maintain sovereignty over its territory, it must maintain the integrity of its education and culture."²³ Chinese fears about the dilution and destruction of their heritage would be one of the key issues surrounding merger.

The editorial also noted that "the current unstable situation has made this a sensitive topic", referring to the continuing political repression that had existed since the Malayan Emergency was imposed in 1948, which had banned or suppressed much independent political activity. Indeed, discussion on merger continued to be sparse over the next few years. But as the Chinese-speaking were enfranchised in greater numbers, support for merger became more important as a political issue. In 1953, PP leader CC Tan felt that, while he supported merger in the future, any form of merger at the current time with a Federation dominated by a Malay-first leadership would only retard political progress in Singapore.²⁴ Labour Party leader Lim Yew Hock, meanwhile, warned that an immediate merger was tantamount to "tying a millstone around [Singapore's] neck" as it would commit Singapore to a difficult political and economic environment in which Singapore's needs might be subordinated to other interests.²⁵ Once they had to campaign for the Chinese vote, however, their tune changed. The 1955 elections were contested under a new constitution that vastly expanded the electorate to include many Chinese-speakers. They now had to emphasise their pro-merger credentials to a far greater degree. Tan declared that before Singapore could expect complete independence, "the question of her relationship with the Federation must first be settled."²⁶ Likewise, Lim, now of the Labour Front (LF), spoke of the necessity of "bringing the two territories into a coherent whole." He argued that independence for Singapore would "automatically follow

²¹ Colony of Singapore, *Singapore Legislative Council Proceedings*, 1948, p. B. 20.

²² Soviee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, pp. 129.

²³ NYSP, 26 January 1955.

²⁴ Yeo Kim Wah and Albert Lau, "From Colonialism to Independence, 1945-65", in Ernest Chew and Edw in Lee (eds.), *A History of Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 124-5.

²⁵ ST, 26 March 1953.

²⁶ ST, 24 January 1955.

merger.”²⁷ While predictions about when merger might occur continued to place it in the medium to long term, the inevitability of merger among all of Singapore’s political leaders was not questioned. By 1955, all major political parties in Singapore were committed to the reunification of Singapore and the Federation.²⁸

Among the Chinese, support for merger was virtually unanimous. One would be hard pressed to find a single dissenting voice to merger in the Chinese press, whether in editorials or in letters. So deep was the belief that merger was necessary that it was never questioned in the mainstream press. Instead, articles focused on convincing Federation leaders of its importance and discussing the process, form, and timing of merger, including whether Singapore should become independent before or through merger.²⁹ The idea that Singapore and the Federation was “one body” was deeply ingrained in the Chinese psyche and referred to as a “moral truth” or “natural law”.³⁰ Numerous emotive phrases were employed to describe the reunification, including that it would be like “the broken mirror becoming whole again”³¹ (which was itself a metaphor for a husband and wife reconciling) or “flesh and bone reuniting as one body”.³² Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) President Tan Cheng Lock, stated that “in terms of geography and administration, Singapore and the Federation of Malaya are a single unit. No power in the world can stop [their] merger.”³³

The Tunku, UMNO Leadership, and Merger

In this, Tan was not completely right. There was one politician in Malaya whose opposition could derail merger: Tunku Abdul Rahman. Given Tunku’s firm control of the Federation, and with the backing of the British, he had an effective veto on any form of merger. Unless the Tunku’s agreement was secured, merger would never be achieved. The Chinese press, well aware of this, closely monitored his comments on merger.

The Tunku and the UMNO leadership were opposed to merger. The single most important reason was “the fear that the incorporation of a million Chinese would immediately threaten and ultimately abolish Malay political dominance and power” in the Federation.³⁴ Domestically, UMNO was resisting demands by the Federation’s minority races for a citizenship based on *jus soli*, equality in the fields of education and land ownership, and restrictions or even the abolition of Malay special privileges. UMNO instead equated Malayan culture and identity with the Malay one, and demanded that the minority races should assimilate to the Malay culture and accept the privileged position of Malays in the Federation.³⁵ They brought this same argument to the debate on merger.

The Tunku publicly considered merger on several occasions. On 26 December 1955, on the eve of departing for London for talks on Federation independence, he suggested that if Singapore felt too small a territory to achieve independence on its own, it might consider joining the Federation as a member state. He also extended this invitation to Sarawak, Brunei, and North Borneo. The Chinese press’ response was prompt and heartfelt. Editorials declared Singapore’s readiness to reunite with the Federation. Many reiterated the main points of the Chinese position. However, merger was regarded as something which would only be achieved in “five or ten years”, not immediately attainable.³⁶

At the same time, the Tunku reiterated the special position of Malays in the Federation, which the integration of Singapore’s Chinese would threaten. “If we create

²⁷ *Straits Echo*, 7 February 1955.

²⁸ Soviee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, pp. 105.

²⁹ See, for example, NYSP and SCJP 2-4 Dec 1959.

³⁰ “星马本属一体·合并天经地义”, SCJP 12 May 1961.

³¹ 破镜重圆

³² 骨肉团聚

³³ NYSP, 26 January 1955.

³⁴ Soviee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, pp. 108.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 108-09.

³⁶ SCJP, 13 Jan 1956.

a single nationality, Malays will lose their special position, which we are committed to uphold and maintain," he declared. The Chinese newspapers felt this was "deeply unfortunate" and they reiterated their loyalty to Malaya.³⁷ Likewise, the ST worried about the "growing division between Singapore and the Federation", noting that "separate resolution of the citizenship and nationality issue will make Federation impossible".³⁸

The Tunku did not publicly bring up merger again for another six months. On 2 June 1956, he announced he would welcome Singapore, Sarawak, Brunei and North Borneo into a "greater Malaya if they themselves come in voluntarily [after] they attain independence," but he also made it clear that he intended his proposal for a distant future.³⁹ Separately, in a statement to the NYSP London correspondent, the Tunku commented that he was prepared to accept Singapore Chief Minister David Marshall's proposals for merger and agreed that Singapore would be proportionally represented in the Federation Legislative Council, based on population size.⁴⁰ He would also allow it to retain a high degree of autonomy. But he repeated that he could not accept Malayan citizenship being granted to all Singaporean citizens. This would grant Federation citizenship to Singapore's large number of foreign-born Chinese citizens.⁴¹ Tunku's views reflected beliefs shared by most leaders of the Federation's main political party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Although the ruling Alliance was based on inter-racial cooperation, the political order was predicated on Malay political dominance. Even if Malay political control was constitutionally guaranteed, Chinese economic predominance might eventually overturn it. This position was the essence of UMNO objections to merger throughout this period.⁴²

In response, the NYSP reiterated Chinese loyalty to Malaya and argued that the Chinese had always coexisted peacefully with other ethnic groups throughout South East Asia. The Chinese had fully cooperated and shared in Malaya's economic development, and that both sides needed to trust each other to succeed. If Malaya would not trust its Chinese, and grant them a clear path to citizenship, then its Chinese had no reason to be loyal to Malaya. The editorial concluded that clear guidelines for the foreign-born to become citizens would remove the citizenship controversy. No more difficulties would then remain in implementing a Singapore-Malaya merger.⁴³

The Chinese self-perception as Malaysians

At the heart of the issue was a radically different view on what it meant to be Malayan. By 1960, patriotism, cultural and economic pride, and their political voice had all grown alongside each other to produce a self-confident Chinese people in Singapore. They possessed a deep conviction that their contribution to Malayan cultural, economic and political life entitled them to an equal place in Malaya. They were fiercely anti-colonial and had fought for Malaya as their own country. This self-confidence enabled them to push for their desired changes in the political arena and bring self-government to Singapore.

The attitude of the Chinese towards merger reflected their perception of their place in Malaya. As befitting a community whose shared purpose was primarily economic, Chinese arguments for merger were first and foremost economic ones. In

³⁷ Chung Shing Jit Pao 28 Dec 1955; SCJP 28 Dec 1955; NYSP 28 Dec 1955.

³⁸ ST 28 Dec 1955.

³⁹ NYSP, 3 June 1956.

⁴⁰ In talks with the British government, Marshall had suggested merger with the Federation as one possible way for Singapore to achieve independence while assuaging British fears of a communist-dominated Singapore by integrating it with the staunchly anti-communist Federation. See Thum, Pingtjin, "Living Buddha: Chinese Perspectives on David Marshall and his Government, 1955-56", *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 39/114 (2011), 245-67.

⁴¹ NYSP, 3 June 1956.

⁴² Brown to Le Bailly, "Malayan Attitudes to 'Grand Design' and Singapore", 13 July 1961, DO 169/10, The National Archives of the UK [Hereafter TNA].

⁴³ NYSP, 3 June 1956; SCJP, 27 July 1960.

their view, Malaya's prosperity was due to Chinese industriousness and investment.⁴⁴ The newspapers focused on the commercial benefits of merger and analysed the difficulties of merger primarily based on technical difficulties of merging the two economies. In particular, they concentrated on resolving the contradiction between the Federation's protective tariffs and Singapore's free port status.⁴⁵ An example of merger that was brought up time and time again was the European Economic Community, which sought to achieve customs union and a common market between the six participating countries.⁴⁶

An important underlying assumption was that merger was being entered into because Singapore was an inalienable part of Malaya, not because Singapore could not survive independently.⁴⁷ Economic analysis was a strength of both major Chinese newspapers, and their editorials laid out a convincing case for Singapore being able to survive as an independent country. To solve the problem of high unemployment and to expand the economy, the government was urged to attract foreign investment, to develop infrastructure, and to industrialise. They argued that Singapore's entrepreneurs had over the course of Singapore's history as a free port built up tremendous experience and demonstrated great motivation, skill and ingenuity. The best way to take advantage of this was to promote industrialisation by attracting local and foreign capital. This was an extension of well-established Chinese business networks.⁴⁸ Lastly, the public had to be involved through active promotion and expanding democratic involvement and public spirit, so that the people of Singapore would have an active stake in the system.⁴⁹ These arguments anticipated many of the key points that Dutch industrial economist Dr. Albert Winsemius would make in his report to the Singapore government in 1961, after he visited Singapore at the invitation of the government as part of the United Nations Technical Assistance Board.⁵⁰ Thus, any idea that Singapore would not be able to survive on her own was dismissed. When the idea was brought up again in the course of the merger debate in 1961, it was with great exasperation that the SCJP criticised an assemblyman for bringing up an argument long disproved. In a wide-ranging editorial, the newspaper compared Singapore to historical models such as Phoenicia, Athens, Venice, and Switzerland, using history, geography and economics to build a case that Singapore could easily survive independently.⁵¹

Historical, cultural and social arguments for merger were made on the assumption that there were no issues to deal with. All five territories shared a common British heritage. They used English as the language of administration. Under the British, all races had lived in harmony, shared business ties, and had long-standing commercial links.⁵² Using language that smacked of triumphalism and self-congratulation, editorials celebrated a lack of ethnic tension in Malaya and described how Malaysia would be founded on a "strong moral principle". Malaya would demonstrate to the rest of the world how to create a country that had people of different ethnic backgrounds and cultures living and cooperating harmoniously.⁵³ If France and Germany, who fought two bitter wars in the space of 30 years, could put aside their differences, look to the future and cooperate for the sake of prosperity and stability, then it should be easier for Malaya, where people already lived in harmony.⁵⁴ "After all,"

⁴⁴ NYSP, 15 Sept 1963.

⁴⁵ NYSP, 26 Jan 1955, 24 July 1961, 4 Aug 1961; SCJP, 27 July 1960, 21 June 1961, 28 June 1961; among others.

⁴⁶ NYSP, 4 August 1961; SCJP 28 June 1961, 12 July 1961, 28 July 1961.

⁴⁷ NYSP, 13 Oct 1960; SCJP, 14 Oct 1960.

⁴⁸ SCJP, 28 July 1961.

⁴⁹ SCJP, 5 July 1960, 28 July 1961, 9 Aug 1961.

⁵⁰ Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success*, pp. 250-52.

⁵¹ SCJP, 5 Dec 1961.

⁵² NYSP, 17 Dec 1961, 8 Sept 1963; SCJP, 27 July 1960, 30 May 1961, 22 July 1961, 28 July 1961, 19 Aug 1961.

⁵³ SCJP, 19 Aug 1961, 30 May 1961.

⁵⁴ SCJP, 28 July 1961; NYSP, 17 Dec 1961.

another editorial concluded, "with mutual respect, even Hu and Yue may become as close as brothers; why not then, these five territories, which have weathered so many hardships together?"⁵⁵

However, the peace and harmony that Malayan peoples lived under did not extend as far as the assimilation of Chinese to Malay society and culture. As the UMNO leadership frequently repeated, this included acceptance of the special status of Malays and their dominance of the Federation. The Chinese point of view, however, envisioned the growth of a new, distinctive Malayan culture that merged the best aspects of Chinese, Malay and other cultures, and with equality for all. Instead of Malay predominance, the Malay, Chinese, and other races would all be supplanted by a new Malayan race.⁵⁶

While the Malay leaders of the Federation saw politics as the chief obstacle to merger, Singapore's Chinese felt that politics merited the least consideration. As long as the peoples of the five territories were consulted and could participate freely in the democratic process, it was presumed that political developments would be the least of the concerns.⁵⁷ "The temporary political separation for expediency cannot oppose the reality of existence," wrote the SCJP.⁵⁸

Thus, the Chinese looked to merger as confident, equal partners, not as salvation from ruin. They saw themselves as the most significant contributors to the Malayan economy and Malayan multiculturalism, and were full of conviction that they had a rightful place on Malayan soil.⁵⁹ The centrality of commerce and industry to the Chinese way of life, their dominance of Singapore island, and the security they had enjoyed under the British, dulled their senses to the implications of Malay rule and the suspicions of many Malay leaders. UMNO leaders feared the Chinese would never assimilate and so never accept Malay predominance. They were wrong about the cause and right about the symptom. The Chinese had assimilated to Malaya, but on their own terms. They were staunchly loyal to their place of birth, proud of Malaya as an independent, non-aligned country, and regarded themselves as equal to the other races. They thus would never accept anything but an equal place under the Malayan sun.

The Road to Merger, 1956- 1959

In essence, the contours of the merger debate were already well established by 1956. Singapore's Chinese wanted equality for their culture and education, protection for Singapore's free trade status, and at minimum a clear and equitable path to achieving citizenship for Singapore citizens. The Tunku and UMNO leadership wanted to deny citizenship to foreign-born Chinese in Singapore so that they would not be enfranchised to vote in the Federation, and to limit Singapore's activities in the Federation so that it would not upset the Alliance's electoral balance. The British, for their part, favoured merger from as early as 1942, but they had to make sure the process of merger and its final terms and conditions would not jeopardise political conditions in Singapore or the Federation and thereby hurt British interests in the region. Thus their policy was to wait until local politicians became favourable towards the idea, then support the process, but not lead it.⁶⁰

In Singapore, merger became a major prism through which events were interpreted. Amidst the anger at the repression of October 1956, for example, the use of Federation troops as part of the planned anti-riot operations was seen as evidence of close cooperation by the two governments, demonstrating how both territories were

⁵⁵ A Chinese literary reference which refers to a well known phrase meaning that when enemies face the same problem they can learn to cooperate and get along with each other, NYSP, 17 Dec 1961.

⁵⁶ NYSP, 9 Sept 1963, 15 Sept 1963.

⁵⁷ SCJP, 28 July 1961, 19 Aug 1961, 3 Sept 1961, 3 Dec 1961.

⁵⁸ SCJP, 10 Dec 1956.

⁵⁹ NYSP, 8 Sept 1963.

⁶⁰ Tan, *Creating "Greater Malaysia"*, pp. 13-28.

one family.⁶¹ The presence of both Chief Ministers in London in December 1956 raised the possibility that merger would be discussed.⁶² Such hopes were then dashed when Lim Yew Hock gave a speech attacking Chinese subversion in Singapore to an audience that included the Tunku. The Chinese press pointed out critically that Lim's speech would undoubtedly discourage the Tunku from considering merger.⁶³ The Internal Security Council (ISC) created at the 1957 constitutional talks was, for all its drawbacks, seen as an avenue for closer Singapore-Federation cooperation.⁶⁴ The subsequent establishment of a quarterly Conference of Ministers between the two governments "was very important as a precursor to merger".⁶⁵ More generally, mainstream Chinese newspapers supported any initiative that led to the closer association of Singapore and the Federation politically, economically, socially, or culturally as contributing to the eventual reunification of the two territories.⁶⁶ This included discussions about a Malayan common market and economic co-operation, numerous discussions on the creation of a Malayan identity and culture, and enthusiastic support for Malayan Language Week/Month.⁶⁷

The Tunku himself would again make public reference to merger on 24 September 1957 and in early 1959. In each instance he held out the possibility of Singapore and the Borneo states eventually joining an independent Malaya, to an enthusiastic response from the Chinese press, before backing away from them a few months later.⁶⁸ The newspapers reiterated the belief that Singapore and the Federation of Malaya were inseparable, "originally two parts of a single, complete organism", that the divide between the two was "artificial," and "unreasonable"⁶⁹ and that merger should happen as soon as possible. Still, the Tunku had kept his remarks abstract and general to ensure that he could back away from his commitment with no loss of face.⁷⁰

The Road to Merger, 1959-1961

In June 1959, the People's Action Party won the elections under Singapore's new self-governing constitution. The PAP had pledged in its election manifesto to achieve merger within its term of office, and immediately opened negotiations with the Federation government for merger. It also attempted to create suitable conditions for merger via the promotion of Malayan culture and identity. PAP leaders argued that communal fears about Singapore would vanish if Singapore also developed a Malayan society. Thus, they declared their commitment to the creation of a Malayan culture and took steps to Malayanise Singaporeans by creating a Malayan consciousness and promoting the National Language. They also privately argued to the Federation leaders that if merger did not happen, then Singapore would likely become independent. If that happened, Singapore would likely become a Chinese chauvinist and communist state. It would act as a vector for infecting the Federation with these ideologies, with disastrous consequences for racial harmony.⁷¹

These fears were exacerbated by Singapore's domestic politics during the PAP's first fifteen months in office. While initially popular, the PAP leadership continued to behave as it had in opposition. It demanded absolute loyalty and unquestioning obedience, rejecting the need for consensus building and soliciting alternative

⁶¹ SCJP, 30 Oct 1956.

⁶² CSJP, 10 Dec 1956; SCJP, 10 Dec 1956.

⁶³ SCJP, 28 Dec 1956.

⁶⁴ SCJP, 29 Dec 1956.

⁶⁵ NYSP, 5 May 1957.

⁶⁶ See NYSP, 10 June 1959, 30 Jan 1961; SCJP, 13 June 1959, 27 July 1960, 19 Aug 1960, 26 Sept 1960, 30 Jan 1961, 2 Feb 1961.

⁶⁷ SCJP, 25 Aug 1959, 18 Nov 1959, 28 Nov 1959, 18 Mar 1960, 19 Mar 1960, 16 Jan 1961, 20 Jan 1961, 28 Jan 1961, 30 Jan 1961, 15 May 1961; NYSP, 5 Aug 1959, 3 Sept 1959, 12 Sept 1959, 19 Nov 1959, 16 Dec 1959, 2 Feb 1961, 6 Apr 1961, 8 May 1961.

⁶⁸ Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, pp. 127-35.

⁶⁹ NYSP, 3 Mar 1956.

⁷⁰ Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, p. 141.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 116-9.

viewpoints even from within their own party. They sought to neutralise the Chinese anti-colonial movement led by Lim Chin Siong by replacing its institutional bases with government-controlled alternatives and marginalising their leaders within government. Government was restructured to centralize control. The national government took over the City Council and Rural Board's functions, ended the independence of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, and reorganised the Singapore Harbour Board into the Port of Singapore Authority under complete government control.

This cementing of power was accompanied by a decline in democracy within the upper echelons of government. Decision making was concentrated in the hands of a trusted "inner cabinet", who felt no compunction at seeking advice from elsewhere.⁷² Cadre membership was already denied to anyone the PAP leadership distrusted.

This enabled fast, efficient decision-making and administration. However, it also meant decisions were imposed with a lack of consultation. A pattern developed of decisions made in haste and regretted at leisure. Some decisions led to U-turns and embarrassing reversals, most notably over the cut to civil service pay,⁷³ the Women's Charter,⁷⁴ and the Pawnbrokers (Amendment) Bill.⁷⁵ The last caused the pawnbrokers to temporarily shut down their shops and cut Singapore's working class off from their major source of credit.

In other decisions, the government refused to back down in the face of popular opposition. Most controversially, government decided to convert Chinese schools from a six-year secondary programme to four years, bringing them in line with English schools as a precursor to a single unified educational system. While the Chinese community did not oppose the principle of the reforms, the changes were made without consultation from the educational community, and the speed of its implementation drew criticism. Schools were told to alter their syllabi immediately, with the first Secondary IV examination scheduled for the same year (1961). Schools were thrown into chaos and many students were caught in the transition. Worse, the plans did not adequately address the need for post-secondary education. A new "Upper Secondary" school system would start in 1962, but it could only take 25% of the students from Secondary IV. The only other option was the Polytechnic, which did not have enough places. Schools had to drastically restructure, take on new teachers, and figure out the new syllabus on the fly. There was tremendous unhappiness in the Chinese community.⁷⁶

Within the PAP, discontent grew over the leadership's authoritarianism, and the lack of consultation and internal party democracy. Many members objected to the government's policies regarding political detainees, Chinese education, the trade union movement, citizenship, the Internal Security Council, and anti-colonialism.⁷⁷

Looking back, then-PAP Chairman Toh Chin Chye was to admit that the critics were right.⁷⁸ However, at the time, the PAP leadership showed no desire to listen. The Party leadership responded by vilifying its members. S Rajaratnam branded them "opportunists and turncoats" who were upset by the rapid changes introduced by the government, and called on them to accept the challenge of the times and support the government.⁷⁹ Similarly, Lee Kuan Yew warned against a "lunatic fringe" of the party, with their own personal political ambitions, who used smear and intimidation in pursuit of their aims. "Bits of scum now and again come up to the top," he warned, adding that the Party would deal firmly with them.⁸⁰

⁷² Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success*, pp. 223. The inner circle of Lee Kuan Yew, Toh Chin Chye, Goh Keng Sw ee, S. Rajaratnam, and Ong Pang Boon would be permanent fixtures in the cabinet for the next 20 years.

⁷³ SCJP, 14 Sept 1959.

⁷⁴ Seow Peck Leng, Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates [Hereafter LAD], 6 Apr 1960, C444-451; SCJP, 5 Mar 1960, 8 Apr 1960; NYSP, 5 Mar 1960, 7 Mar 1960.

⁷⁵ SCJP, 24 Mar 1960; 27 Mar 1960; NYSP, 27 Mar 1960; ST, 29 Mar 1960.

⁷⁶ SCJP, 6 Mar 1961; NYSP, 10 Apr 1961.

⁷⁷ Pang Cheng Lian, *Singapore's People's Action Party* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 11.

⁷⁸ Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, pp. 90.

⁷⁹ NYSP, 14 Sept 1959.

⁸⁰ Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success*, pp. 234.

Ong Eng Guan, the popular Minister for National Development and former Mayor, sought to build his own power base in the party. The PAP leaders loyal to Lee responded by expelling Ong, but this brought the PAP's internal tensions into the open, where it dominated the news for months. Two PAP Legislative Assemblymen followed Ong into a new United People's Party (UPP), and Ong subsequently won a by-election against the PAP in his Hong Lim constituency by 7,747 votes to 2,820, a margin of nearly 50%.

Many in the public still had faith in the PAP's plans, but there was also widespread concern about the government's behaviour and the lack of effective opposition in the Legislative Assembly to check its steamroller behaviour.⁸¹ The NYSP was supportive of what the PAP had achieved thus far, but made no secret of its disapproval of the PAP leadership's unwillingness to accept debate and criticism:

Using the collective intelligence of groups to govern is the trend of the times... Less worrisome than a mistake itself is a lack of self-examination and willingness to accept criticism. If [the government] frequently engages in self examination and is receptive to criticism, then more experience will translate into more confidence, more frustrations will result in greater efforts; confidence and effort are the only way to success.⁸²

SCJP called the Ong Eng Guan affair "an advanced lesson in politics" for the Singapore electorate, and the by-election an "advanced test". There were no easy answers, no obvious choices. Instead, it warned, the election was about the political, economic, and social choices that the people wanted their government and country to take, and the direction they wanted to go.⁸³ It hoped the government would listen. Sadly, they were disappointed.

Before Hong Lim, Lee Kuan Yew had secretly struck a deal with the illegal Malayan Communist Party (MCP) for their support. The MCP had been firmly behind Lee, and sent instructions to its cadres through its underground network that "the Party should support the PAP and it is necessary for the Party to spread propaganda among the masses with a view to exposing the true opportunistic features of Ong Eng Guan." After Lee publicly speculated about collusion between Ong and the MCP, local MCP chief Fong Chong Pik (later dubbed by Lee as the "Plenipotentiary" or "Plen" for short) wrote him a letter assuring him that the MCP was fully behind Lee.⁸⁴

After the loss at Hong Lim, Lee Kuan Yew realised just how tenuous his grip on power was. He needed his party's Chinese-speaking leaders to win support from the Chinese public, but he did not want to share power with them. When they were detained by Lim Yew Hock in 1956, Lee had been able to draw freely on their legitimacy without worrying about their views. One of the key electoral pledges that Lee made in the 1959 election was to release them. Now being free to speak but ignored within government, they were increasingly taking their criticism public, and this was steadily undermining his popularity. Lee had counted on the MCP to provide an alternative base of support but it had proven to be a paper tiger. To stay in power, he needed his left-wing PAP colleagues neutralised, but could not order them arrested without destroying his own popular legitimacy. The British would not intervene as long as left-wing leaders adhered to legal, constitutional practices. That left the Federation government as the only party that the PAP could pass responsibility for domestic repression to. To keep himself in power, Lee threw everything he had into merger with the Federation.

As defeat loomed at Hong Lim, Lee told British High-Commissioner Selkirk that a PAP defeat would likely end with Lee strung from a lamppost. Only merger, he

⁸¹ SCJP, 13 March 1961, 29 April 1961.

⁸² NYSP, 12 March 1961.

⁸³ SCJP, 13 Mar 1961, 15 Mar 1961.

⁸⁴ LAD, 10 Aug 1960, p. 542-543; 11 Aug 1960, p. 568, 589, 591-598; Lee Ting Hui, *The Open United Front: The Communist Struggle in Singapore 1954-1966* (Singapore: South Seas Society, 1996), pp. 196-7.

Thum Ping Tjin, "Flesh and Bone Reunite as One Body"

argued, could save the PAP from losing power to the communists. With the desperation of a dying man, he told Selkirk he would accept any form of merger, "anything... but he had to show that the Chinese were not being sold out."⁸⁵ A week before polling day, Lee travelled to Kuala Lumpur to plead with the Tunku, where he argued that only the promise of merger in the near future could save his government from falling into communist control.⁸⁶

The critical issue remained that the Tunku doubted Singapore's Chinese were capable of assimilating into UMNO's vision of a Malaya where the Malays retained their special position. Sir Geofroy Tory (British High Commissioner to the Federation 1957-63) reported that the Tunku said "we could prove to him as often as we liked that Malaya should assume responsibility for Singapore, but the fact remained that the bulk of the Chinese in Singapore were incapable of adopting a truly Malayan viewpoint and therefore of being assimilated safely into the Federation."⁸⁷ But Lee's arguments about communism were also beginning to have an impact. In February 1961, the Tunku publicly declared that "certain elements among the Chinese are China-minded...if all people were real Singaporeans then the merger would be no problem at all."⁸⁸ Just three weeks before the by-election, he commented: "...merger is possible only when the people of Singapore are completely loyal to Malaya, otherwise, there is no need to make a request for merger."⁸⁹ Each time, the Chinese press reiterated Chinese loyalty to Malaya and argued he was misunderstanding the Chinese.

Lee Kuan Yew again went to Kuala Lumpur to talk to him in the week after the election. He pressed his case for merger by playing on the Tunku's fears, telling him how the election result showed the growing strength of Chinese communists, that Singapore was more dangerous as a communist base outside of the Federation than as a threat to Malay privileges inside it.⁹⁰ Ong's overwhelming victory appears to have clinched this argument. At an UMNO rally on 6 May, the Tunku declared, "There is a section of the Chinese in Singapore who do not want a good government which works for the good of the people. What they want is communist government or a communist-oriented government."⁹¹ By 26 May, the Tunku had made up his mind. The Federation could no longer insulate itself from Singapore, and it had to absorb Singapore to prevent it from undermining the Federation. Greater Malaysia was the best route. The electoral issue would be addressed by the inclusion of the Borneo territories to counterbalance Singapore's Chinese population, ensuring that Malay primacy in the Federation would not be lost.⁹²

The Tunku arrived in Singapore and reiterated to the press that merger could only be considered when the Chinese population in Singapore was sufficiently Malayan-conscious as to make Malaya the sole object of their loyalty. His statement drew the usual exasperated reply in the Chinese press.⁹³ The next day, 27 May, the Tunku addressed the Foreign Correspondents' Association. In attendance, forewarned, was the entire Singapore Cabinet as well.⁹⁴ Amidst a speech that concentrated on elaborating his Chinese loyalty theme, the Tunku declared, "Sooner or later Malaya should have an understanding with Britain and the peoples of Singapore, North Borneo, Brunei and Sarawak. ... it is inevitable that we should look ahead to this

⁸⁵ Record of Conversation between Lee Kuan Yew and Selkirk, 4 Apr 1961, FO 1091/104, TNA.

⁸⁶ Record of Conversation between Lee Kuan Yew and Selkirk, 4 April 1961, FO 1091/104, TNA; Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in Southeast Asia, 1961-1965: Britain, the United States and the Creation of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 65.

⁸⁷ Tory to Sir Neil Pritchard (CRO), 18 April 1961, DO 169/10, TNA.

⁸⁸ NYSP, 2 Feb 1961.

⁸⁹ NYSP, 8 May 1961.

⁹⁰ Record of Conversation between Lee Kuan Yew and Philip Moore, 28 Apr 1961, DO 169/25, TNA.

⁹¹ Arnold C. Brackman, *Southeast Asia's Second Front: The Power Struggle in the Malay Archipelago* (New York: Praeger, 1966), pp. 34.

⁹² Kuala Lumpur to CRO, no. 382, 26 May 1961, DO 169/25, TNA.

⁹³ SCJP, 27 May 1961.

⁹⁴ Sophe, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, pp. 140 n. 79.

objective and think of a plan whereby these territories could be brought closer together in political and economic cooperation.”⁹⁵

To the British and PAP leadership, it was a bombshell; but to the wider public, the comments made barely a stir. English and Chinese-language newspapers reported the remarks with no more or less excitement than they had any of the Tunku's previous pronouncements that merger would be a “good idea”.⁹⁶ Indeed, his words were almost identical to previous pronouncements. Instead, the immediate impact of his comments were seen as focusing on strengthening economic and cultural co-operation, rather than merger.⁹⁷ His plan for “greater Malaysia”, comprising the Borneo territories as well, was new but something that, the SCJP commented, would take “10 or 20 years to realise”, but for now was merely an “ideal” that the states would aim for.⁹⁸ The newspapers continued to report the Tunku's comments as before, stressing the need for unity, harmony, and a Malayan loyalty.⁹⁹ His comments were also overshadowed by continuing coverage of the massive Bukit Ho Swee fire, which occurred two days before, where four people were killed, 85 injured, and more than 16,000 people made homeless.¹⁰⁰

The Anson by-election

The Tunku might still have, once again, backed away from his comments. But events in Singapore progressed more quickly than anticipated. Nine days before the Hong Lim polling date, the PAP Assemblyman for Anson, Baharuddin bin Mohamed Ariff, died of a sudden heart attack. His death triggered another by-election, to be held on 15 July.

The PAP doubled down on its Hong Lim performance by turning Anson into a referendum on its record. It continued to argue that losing the by-election would imply a rejection of the PAP's policies, leading to instability, causing political chaos and making investors lose faith in Singapore. The Chinese press rejected this argument, noting that sensible governments adjusted policies in response to changing circumstances.¹⁰¹

Instead of moderating its rhetoric, the PAP ratcheted it up by describing apocalyptic scenarios if it lost, and vilifying its opponents. But the impact of Hong Lim was telling. The PAP chose Mahmud Awang, a left-wing trade union leader (as was the deceased assemblyman), to stand in a constituency which had a large segment of trade union members. With a total of five candidates, Anson was intensively contested. Rallies were held every night to large crowds.¹⁰²

Knowing that merger was imminent, the PAP leadership played the card for all it was worth. Toh Chin Chye at a rally on 9 June hammered away at the merger issue, reiterating the government's determination to pursue merger with vigour. The government, he said, would demand “complete independence through merger with the Federation, or merger with a larger Federation”, and would ensure that “our socialist and Malayan approach to labour and educational programmes are not jeopardised.”¹⁰³ The statements were designed specifically to appeal to the Chinese.¹⁰⁴

Merger Leaps into Public Consciousness

At the end of June, British actions caught the attention of a surprised public and signalled that the process of merger was already under way. British Prime Minister Macmillan publicly commented that the Tunku's 27 May announcement was a “striking

⁹⁵ ST, 28 May 1961.

⁹⁶ ST, 28 May 1961; NYSP, 28 May 1961; SCJP, 30 May 1961. See also Lim Chin Siong's account in Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, pp. 118.

⁹⁷ NYSP, 29 May 1961.

⁹⁸ SCJP, 30 May 1961, 21 June 1961.

⁹⁹ SCJP, 1 June 1961, 10 June 1961.

¹⁰⁰ All Chinese daily newspapers [Hereafter ALL], 26 May 1961-3 June 1961; SCJP, 8 June 1961, 24 June 1961; NYSP, 13 June 1961, 15 June 1961, 8 July 1961.

¹⁰¹ NYSP, 25 May 1961; SCJP, 11 June 1961, 13 June 1961.

¹⁰² NYSP, 22 June 1961

¹⁰³ NYSP, 10 June 1961.

¹⁰⁴ Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success*, pp. 265.

suggestion".¹⁰⁵ On 26 June, Selkirk convened a round-table conference of governors and officials in Singapore to discuss the Tunku's new pro-merger position, and at the end of the three-day conference Governor of North Borneo William Goode (Governor of Singapore 1957-59) spoke of "the need to seize the right moment to push through Tunku Abdul Rahman's "Greater Malaysia" plan to ensure its success."¹⁰⁶ The next day, Selkirk flew to London to brief the Prime Minister.

Public opinion across Singapore and the Borneo territories erupted in surprise, shock, and fear.¹⁰⁷ The impression given by the actions and public comments of the British made "Greater Malaysia" seem like a done deal. The British and the Federation would impose the plan upon Singapore and the Borneo territories, who would exchange one colonial master for another. The Singapore branch of Party Rakyat issued a press statement describing the plan as "a very dangerous intrigue of the reactionary rightwing movement in conjunction with the British colonialists."¹⁰⁸ A.M. Azahari, President of the Brunei Party Rakyat, the territory's main opposition, declared his country should first attain independence "before considering Tunku Abdul Rahman's "Greater Malaysia" proposal."¹⁰⁹ On 9 July, Azahari, Ong Kee Hui (chairman of the Sarawak United People's Party) and Donald Stephens¹¹⁰ (leader of North Borneo's sizeable non-Muslim native Kadazan community) issued a joint statement expressing their opposition to any merger of the Borneo territories with Malaya along the lines of Tunku's plan. Closer links could only be contemplated when the Borneo territories had become self-governing and they could talk "as equals, not vassals."¹¹¹

In Singapore, this development completely altered the tone of the Anson by-election. Before Macmillan's comments, the newspapers had still been discussing merger as "a long way away" and recommending the growth of democracy, social justice and economic development as the best way to progress forward towards a shared Malayan identity and consciousness, which would then naturally result in merger.¹¹² Unlike the Hong Lim by-election, which was seen as a matter of internal PAP conflict, a virtual referendum on PAP rule, and a personality-driven contest, the Anson by-election was a contest with five distinctive candidates who were expected to debate and distinguish themselves on important issues.¹¹³ The electorate was less interested in theoretical debates about democracy, idealism and socialism, than the economy, education, and merger.¹¹⁴ If not for the actions of the British, the complicated arguments between the PAP leadership and its membership might have been dismissed as irrelevant or too theoretical. However, debate now shifted abruptly.¹¹⁵ The process of merger, as well as its final form, came under intense scrutiny as the central issue of the by-election.¹¹⁶

Within the PAP, shock was compounded by revelations that Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Keng Swee had been secretly discussing with the Federation and the British a plan somewhat ominously called the "Grand Design"- a merger of the five territories- since April.¹¹⁷ Lee had even prepared a paper for the British analysing alternatives for the constitutional future of the five territories.¹¹⁸ PAP backbenchers and members

¹⁰⁵ NYSP, 21 June 1961; SCJP, 21 June 1961.

¹⁰⁶ NYSP, 29 June 1961; SCJP, 29 June 1961.

¹⁰⁷ SCJP, 12 July 1961; NYSP, 24 July 1961.

¹⁰⁸ NYSP, 4 July 1961.

¹⁰⁹ NYSP, 7 July 1961.

¹¹⁰ Stephens would later form the first political party in North Borneo, the United National Kadazan Organisation, in August 1961.

¹¹¹ NYSP, 10 July 1961.

¹¹² SCJP, 10 June 1961.

¹¹³ SCJP, 11 June 1961.

¹¹⁴ SCJP, 27 June 1961.

¹¹⁵ ALL 27-30 June 1961.

¹¹⁶ SCJP, 11-12 July 1961, 15 July 1961.

¹¹⁷ Low Por Tuck, interview with Robert Chew, 7 Jan 1980, Accession 14, SNA-OHC; See also Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, pp. 135-6; Tan, *Creating "Greater Malaysia"*, pp. 44-47.

¹¹⁸ Paper on the future of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo Territories by Lee Kuan Yew, CO 1030/979, TNA.

demanded to know why the PAP leadership had left everyone else completely in the dark, and feared that the leadership was selling out Singapore to neo-colonial Federation rule. One week before polling day (8 July), six trade union leaders (and PAP members) including Lim Chin Siong criticised the PAP leadership for not having the courtesy to discuss the merger issue with rest of the party. They called on the PAP leadership to disclose the intended form and substance of merger, declaring: "Anyone who allows the colonial power to control us through the right-wing forces [in Kuala Lumpur] must be exposed."¹¹⁹ Eight of the PAP's backbenchers wrote a letter to Toh Chin Chye, declaring their support for the platform established by the six leaders and calling for a conference of the party's 51 branches to examine its current role in the present political situation. Their continued frustration with the lack of intra-party democracy and consultation, and of any information boiled over into the public sphere as they pushed the PAP leadership to disclose what they knew, or risk losing the Anson by-election.¹²⁰

Letters flew back and forth in the press between the PAP leaders and its dissident members, culminating in Lee Kuan Yew demanding the resignation of three Political Secretaries, Lim Chin Siong, S. Woodhull and Fong Swee Suan. Despite their avowed support of merger in principle, Lee spun their protests as opposition to any form of merger, saying, "What is clear is that in order to stop merger the six trade unionists are prepared to go to any lengths- even to destroying the Party with which they are ostensibly associated."¹²¹ Meanwhile, Toh tried to link merger to the economy, declaring that the PAP was only interested in what merger meant "to the workers who have work today but may not have work tomorrow, to the unemployed, to the 20,000 who come out every year to look for jobs, to the people of Singapore as a whole."¹²²

On polling day, dissatisfaction with the PAP government proved decisive. The people wanted a stronger opposition voice in the Legislative Assembly, and chose David Marshall, the "biggest cannon in the available arsenal".¹²³ Campaigning on a pro-labour, pro-merger, pro-independence platform that emphasised effective opposition to the PAP, Marshall won with 3,598 (43.3%) to Mahmud's 3,052 (36.7%). 1,482 voters (17.8%) showed their frustration with the PAP by voting for the Singapore Alliance. In short, two thirds of the voters on 97.5% turnout voted against the PAP candidate, a swing of 24% from the 1959 general election.

SCJP interpreted the result as a correction. The first past the post system had enabled the PAP to win over 80% of the seats with just 54% of the vote in 1959. The public, desiring more effective opposition, voted for Marshall, who would undoubtedly be a constructive opposition politician and hold the government to account. Their concern "is not to stop the PAP, but to have more effective debate and opposition in the Legislative Assembly, as the PAP has been steamrolling the opposition and passing its bills unhindered".¹²⁴ It noted that party unity was falling apart over the PAP leadership's behaviour.¹²⁵ However, the NYSP observed hopefully that the dissident politicians remained loyal to the party, so that a way to resolve the internal dissent could be found.¹²⁶ The newspapers hoped that the Legislative Assembly could debate productively on the issue of merger.¹²⁷

In a letter to PAP Chairman Toh, Lee Kuan Yew again offered to resign, as he had lost two by-elections in a row and come under severe attack within the party.¹²⁸ Marshall had also challenged Lee to resign if he lost the election.¹²⁹ However, an

¹¹⁹ NYSP, 9 July 1961.

¹²⁰ NYSP, 14 July 1961.

¹²¹ NYSP, 15 July 1961.

¹²² ST, 10 July 1961.

¹²³ SCJP, 27 July 1961.

¹²⁴ SCJP, 16-18 July 1961; NYSP, 20 July 1961.

¹²⁵ SCJP, 16 July 1961.

¹²⁶ SCJP, 17-18 July 1961, NYSP, 20 July 1961.

¹²⁷ SCJP, 17-18 July 1961, NYSP, 20 July 1961.

¹²⁸ ST, 19 July 1961; NYSP, 20 July 1961.

¹²⁹ SCJP, 18 July 1961.

emergency meeting of the Party Central Executive Committee (CEC) rejected Lee's offer. Toh noted that suggestions had been made that he should be Prime Minister in Lee's place but that Lee had the full confidence of the CEC.¹³⁰ However, there was clearly a substantial faction in the party which disapproved of Lee's leadership.

Lee's letter of resignation described the dispute as "another test of strength between the non-Communist Left and the Communist Left", which the SCJP rubbished as "exaggeration":

It is customary for aliens in Singapore to use such terms as "pro-Communist" and "Communist" to describe the political storms in Singapore. It is but a cheap stunt to use such simple inference indiscriminately to deal with all voices against the Government. It will only bring about blind destruction and persecution and is definitely not beneficial to political reality.... The internal trouble of the PAP... does not represent the entire political situation in Singapore.¹³¹

The party's mass base, however, anticipated that it would make no difference if it were Lee or Toh who was Prime Minister. Under their direction the party was clearly losing public confidence and when the Lee Kuan Yew group fell, the backbenchers would have to replace them. However, it was uncertain if the British colonial government would allow the PAP left, led by former detainees, to take power through the parliamentary process. Accordingly, Lim Chin Siong, S. Woodhull, Fong Swee Suan and James Puthucheariy visited British High Commissioner Selkirk on 18 July. They asked whether the British would intervene militarily to maintain control if Lee Kuan Yew's government fell. Selkirk gave a cautious and non-committal response, stating that as long as they adhered to the constitution the British would not intervene.¹³²

Meanwhile, Lee, aware of the power of the merger issue, was determined to have full control over his party's approach to it. "Merger," Lee later wrote, "was the perfect issue on which to break" with his dissenters in the party.¹³³ He also wanted to identify his opponents in the party in order to remove them. He assembled all the PAP Assemblymen and demanded that they sign a pledge that they had full confidence in him and would unreservedly accept the terms of merger that he negotiated. The eight Assemblymen who had already objected to PAP policies in the course of the Anson by-election refused to sign the blank cheque, as with five others.¹³⁴

When Special Branch informed Lee of the Eden Hall visit, he seized the opportunity to move against the PAP dissidents.¹³⁵ In the Legislative Assembly, he accused them of participating in an imperialist plot and tabled a motion of confidence. The debate lasted from 2.30pm on 20 July to 3.40am the next morning. Merger was the PAP leadership's panacea. They hammered relentlessly and shamelessly on the point that anyone who disagreed with them was against merger. When Lee Siew Choh reminded the House of the PAP's unfulfilled pledge to free all political detainees and called upon the PAP leadership to do so, Toh responded by tabling an ISC paper labelled "Top Secret" which showed that such an action would offend the Federation and thus jeopardise merger.¹³⁶

¹³⁰ ST, 19 July 1961; Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, pp. 91.

¹³¹ SCJP, 20 July 1961.

¹³² The "Eden Hall Tea Party" is described in detail in Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success*, pp. 275-278 and Bloodworth, *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse*, pp. 234-6.

¹³³ Lee, *The Singapore Story*, pp. 373.

¹³⁴ Low Por Tuck, interview with Chew, 7 Jan 1980; Ong Chang Sam, interview by Goh Choon Kang, 26 July 1980, Accession 10, SNA-OHC; Lee Khoon Choy, interview by Audrey Lee, 21 Jan 1987, Accession 22, SNA-OHC; Bloodworth, *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse*, pp. 236.

¹³⁵ Lee, *The Singapore Story*, pp. 373.

¹³⁶ LAD, 20 July 1961, C1680-3; Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success*, pp. 281-2; Bloodworth, *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse*, pp. 230-1.

The public, however, were not unduly worried. Even as the debate was going on, the NYSP noted the loyalty of the dissident faction within the PAP and their unwillingness to split the party and deliberately cause trouble. Ong Eng Guan, for example, had continued to vote with the PAP on crucial issues though he had been expelled from the party. It was likely that the dissident politicians would similarly act as a loyal opposition, voting according to the merit of issues rather than aiming to overthrow the government: "Cold war may be inevitable in today's Assembly meeting, but we can almost predict that no crisis will be precipitated."¹³⁷ The SCJP pointed out that even if all 13 assemblymen who had expressed unhappiness with the Lee Kuan Yew leadership and all opposition members voted against the government, the government would still win easily. In any case, the public mood was against a new election. The public had merely wanted the government to moderate its behaviour and resolve the question of merger, not squabble and bicker.¹³⁸

Twenty-six PAP Assemblymen voted for the motion; the thirteen who had refused to give Lee Kuan Yew *carte blanche* abstained. The motion passed with a total of twenty-seven votes for, eight against, and sixteen abstentions. The thirteen PAP assemblymen were accordingly expelled, along with other PAP members who supported them. The majority of the party left with them. By some estimates, two-thirds of the party membership, including nineteen of the twenty-three organising secretaries, left.¹³⁹

This split has come to be depicted as the defining political moment of modern Singapore in most accounts.¹⁴⁰ Yet the Chinese public barely blinked. Singapore politics had, after all, gone through a good number of political realignments in the last six years, including three elections, five turbulent by-elections and numerous political party mergers and splits, including within the PAP itself just a few months before. The response to another split and yet more political turbulence was initially a collective sigh and shrug.¹⁴¹

The SCJP opined hopefully that "This debate [over the motion of confidence] is not extraordinary for a democracy... fierce debate is a sign of real effectiveness."¹⁴² Nor did opinion in the Chinese-language press believe in the PAP's declarations that this was a break between the non-communists and communists. The SCJP declared, "...in this atmosphere of suspicion and fear, there are people who are constantly haunted by unnecessary fears in their hearts. Superficial debaters and inattentive editorialists habitually explain Singapore's current political situation using this as a "one size fits all" explanation."¹⁴³

The newspaper condemned various "simplistic explanations" and "sweeping generalisations" on Singapore's political situation, including from the PAP, from the opposition Labour Front, and from diverse foreign media including most notably *The Economist*.¹⁴⁴ The problem, it argued, was that while the issues Singaporeans faced were numerous and complex, all foreigners cared about was what impact Singapore's politics would have on the world situation. Therefore they were only interested in whether Singapore was leaning "left" or "right". "The comments made by the foreigners have little to do with the feelings of the local people... we cannot jump to the

¹³⁷ SCJP, 20 July 1961.

¹³⁸ NYSP, 21 July 1961; SCJP 21 July 1961.

¹³⁹ Lee, *The Open United Front: The Communist Struggle in Singapore 1954-1966*.

¹⁴⁰ The split is the pivotal moment in the accounts of Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005*, pp. 278; Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success*, pp. 258-60; Bloodworth, *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse*, pp. 225; Yeo and Lau, "From Colonialism to Independence, 1945-65"; Lee, *The Singapore Story*, pp. 365; Fong, *Fang Shuishuang huiyilu*, pp. 144. See also Low Por Tuck, interview with Chew, 7 Jan 1980; Ong Chang Sam, interview by Goh, 26 July 1980; Lee Khoo Choy, interview by Lee, 21 Jan 1987; Interview with Toh Chin Chye in Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, pp. 90-1.

¹⁴¹ SCJP, 21 July 1961, 3 Aug 1961; NYSP, 21 July 1961, 28 July 1961.

¹⁴² SCJP, 22 July 1961.

¹⁴³ SCJP, 27 July 1961.

¹⁴⁴ *The Economist*, 22 - 28 July 1961.

conclusion that the internal strife of P.A.P. represents the entire political situation in Singapore".¹⁴⁵

The NYSP took a similar tack. The split was merely internal party strife which had spilled into the public arena. It hoped that the PAP would find a way of "settling the questions of party strife, political struggle and trade-union movement and not let the various disputes get involved together" so that the government could go back to governing.¹⁴⁶

To the mainstream Chinese-language press, the split was "not the real heart of the matter." The important question in their minds was merger.¹⁴⁷ Coverage of merger outweighed that of the PAP split, with the newspapers focusing on the 21 July opening of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Conference, convened in Singapore and including representatives from the five territories. The Conference issued a communiqué declaring "the necessity and inevitability of the united states of Malaysia."¹⁴⁸ The Conference formed a Malaysia Solidarity Consultative Committee to carry on discussions on the final form and shape of the Malaysian state.¹⁴⁹ The Tunku invited Lee Kuan Yew to Kuala Lumpur to discuss merger. The Chinese-language newspapers reported these developments with close interest, but the ST continued to focus on the PAP split and its aftermath.¹⁵⁰ One major topic debated by the Chinese press was the shape and form of the much-desired common market that would be formed as a precursor to merger.¹⁵¹

The newspapers urged its readers to maintain calm and patience, but they emphasised that no matter what the result of negotiations was, input from the peoples of Singapore, the Federation and North Borneo was extremely important. Every single editorial discussing merger from July 1961 to the referendum in September 1962 in all the major Chinese-language dailies emphasised the massive stake the people had in the outcome. They underlined the importance of public consultation and the necessity that public opinion be represented in the process.¹⁵² The speed at which merger seemed to be proceeding caused concern.¹⁵³

In August, the expelled PAP members formed a new party, the Barisan Sosialis, with Lee Siew Choh as chairman and Lim Chin Siong as secretary-general. Delays in processing its registration, plus a rumour that the PAP would use internal security laws to detain Barisan leaders, led the NYSP to obliquely comment on the necessity of freedom of speech and respect for public opinion in the creation of a nation.¹⁵⁴ The delay in receiving approval for its registration was due to the Barisan's constitution being virtually identical to the PAP's, which underlined how their differences were really an outcome of the leadership struggle. The newspapers, meanwhile, welcomed the creation of the Barisan as bringing the political differences out into the open for discussion.¹⁵⁵

Merger and Chinese self-interest

At a rally at the Happy World stadium on 13 August to celebrate the founding of the Barisan Sosialis, Lim Chin Siong gave the keynote speech in Malay and Hokkien, which laid out the issues surrounding merger which Singapore would face in the

¹⁴⁵ SCJP, 25 July 1961, 1 Aug 1961, 3 Aug 1961.

¹⁴⁶ NYSP, 22 July 1961, 28 July 1961.

¹⁴⁷ SCJP, 27 July 1961.

¹⁴⁸ Lee, *The Singapore Story*, pp. 400.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ SCJP, 21 July 1961, 24 July 1961, 27-28 July 1961; NYSP, 21 July 1961, 24 July 1961, 26-27 July 1961; ST 21-23 July 1961.

¹⁵¹ SCJP, 4 Aug 1961.

¹⁵² e.g. SCJP, 21 July 1961, 27-28 July 1961, 19 August 1961, 26 August 1961, 28 Sept 1961, 3 September 1961, 3 December 1961, 5 December 1961; NYSP, 26 July 1961, 26 Aug 1961.

¹⁵³ SCJP, 19 Aug 1961.

¹⁵⁴ NYSP, 13 Aug 1961.

¹⁵⁵ SCJP, 13 Aug 1961.

months and years ahead and which managed to anticipate the issues which would cause Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965.¹⁵⁶

The methods and tactics that the PAP leadership were using to deal with merger, he argued, would sow the seeds of its failure even before merger occurred. The Federation's right-wing Malay leadership was suspicious of a left-wing Chinese Singapore, and that was "fully understandable." They would have to be reassured and satisfied on this score before they would accept merger. However, the PAP leadership, rather than trying to show the Federation it had nothing to fear, was playing up Chinese chauvinism and communism among the Chinese in Singapore.

Lim and the Barisan were against making calculations based on the demographics of ethnic groups in the country instead of dealing with the fundamental challenge that the inclusion of a largely Chinese dominated state posed to the communally organised and racially weighted political system in the Federation. Rather, the basic assumption that Singapore's Chinese had to be suppressed and controlled would only entrench mistrust and eventually cause conflict.

Nor did the argument that merger was urgent as Singapore could not survive on her own hold any water where the Barisan was concerned. Singapore, Lim pointed out, had survived very well in the past through the industry of its people, not because of hand-outs from the colonial government. "Merger or no merger, Singapore's economic pattern will remain the same," he declared. Going a-begging to the Federation, "portraying oneself as pathetic and pitiful, the right to live or die resting entirely in the hands of the noble other side", would only make the latter feel like they were doing a big favour to a supplicant.

Expressing bewilderment as to why the PAP was adopting such an approach, Lim argued that the PAP leadership needed to allow debate and solicit the views of a broad range of people. Its refusal to do so resulted in the loss of the people's confidence, which the party leaders dealt with by expelling those members who refused to give them unquestioned personal loyalty.

The way forward, Lim argued, was for Singapore to continue to struggle against colonialism and achieve complete internal self-government. That would allow a fully democratic Singapore to demonstrate to the Federation that there was no threat from communism or Chinese chauvinism. Singapore could then have a proper democratic debate on merger and then merge with the Federation as a welcome partner, to be embraced and trusted. Accusations that an independent Singapore would not merge with the Federation were ridiculous, as the public recognised the strong historical, cultural and economic grounds for it. Merger, Lim concluded, was inevitable. There was no hurry. The important thing was to do it openly, honestly, and democratically. He urged the public to pay close attention to the merger proposals, which were currently being negotiated in secret, when they were eventually presented to Singaporeans. Concluding that "Something which must be kept secret from you cannot be a good thing", he urged Singaporeans to "be vigilant, be aware!"¹⁵⁷

Rather than answer the call for inclusiveness, Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP leadership chose to rely on the Tunku to grant ostensible concessions to assuage the concerns the public had, and at the same time heighten their anxieties with disastrous scenarios if the Tunku turned hostile. As Lee explained to Acting UK High Commissioner Philip Moore, the Chinese feared their hard-won rights would be lost to the Federation government in the event of a complete merger. Chinese schools would become Malay language schools; labour unions would be suppressed by the government; traders would be devastated by the Federation's tariff barriers; businessmen would have to pay higher tax rates; and most of all, they would lose their citizenship and voting rights. He therefore set out to craft a merger agreement that

¹⁵⁶ For discussion on Singapore in Malaysia and the separation, see Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998).

¹⁵⁷ Malaixiya lishi de lingyimian bianji w eiyuanhui [Another aspect of Malaysian history editorial committee], *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)* [Lim Chin Siong and his Times, vol. 1] (Kuala Lumpur: INSAN and Wasasa Enterprise, 2002), pp. 104-13; NYSP 14 Aug 1961; SCJP 14 Aug 1961; ST 14 Aug 1961.

gave Singapore autonomy precisely in those areas, which would force the Barisan to either oppose them and lose, or support them and let the PAP win.¹⁵⁸

After negotiation between the two governments, a communiqué announcing that agreement had been reached in principle on merger was issued on 24 August. The basic agreement met all these conditions by giving Singapore autonomy on the critical areas of commerce, labour, and education.¹⁵⁹ The exception was citizenship. Due to the continued reservations that the Tunku harboured about Singapore's Chinese, he insisted that the exercise of their political rights be confined to Singapore. A compromise was worked out. Citizens of both territories would retain their separate citizenships while enjoying equal rights as Federation Nationals bearing the same passports. However, Singapore citizens could only vote in Singapore, and Federation citizens could only vote in the Federation. This satisfied Lee's need to give the Chinese equal rights, as well as the Tunku's need to keep the Singapore electorate from participation in Federation politics. Publicly, Lee argued that this scheme was necessary as Singaporean citizens would not necessarily qualify for Federation citizenship, which had more stringent residency and language conditions for the foreign-born.¹⁶⁰ In exchange for these concessions, Singapore would only have 15 representatives in the Federal House of Representatives, instead of the 24 that its population size entitled it to.

The Barisan seized upon the citizenship issue. It released a statement outlining their position on merger: Either a full and complete merger, where Singapore joined the Federation as a constituent state, like Penang or Malacca (which were previously part of the Straits Settlements with Singapore, and had joined the Federation in 1948); or an autonomous unit within a confederation, with the Borneo territories coming in when ready. All Singapore citizens should automatically become Federation citizens, with proportional representation in Parliament. Finally, it demanded a general election so that the government would have a mandate for merger.¹⁶¹

The PAP struck back. At a radio forum on 21 September between party leaders on the merger question, Goh Keng Swee pointed out not all of those in Penang and Malacca who were foreign-born were automatically granted Federation citizenship. They had to apply for citizenship and meet residency and language requirements. If Singapore's 650,000 citizens had to meet the same test, only around 325,000 would qualify.¹⁶² The Barisan then stopped making reference to Penang or Malacca and instead asked for a straight conversion of Singapore citizenship to Federation citizenship.

In many respects, Lee's plan worked. The Chinese press spoke approvingly of Lee's securing of autonomy for education and labour from the Tunku.¹⁶³ He was also aided by events across the causeway. Throughout 1961, the Federation government had been pressuring Chinese secondary schools to join the national system. In August, Lim Lian Geok, one of the most strident critics of conversion, was stripped of his citizenship. Cowed, many schools agreed to switch.¹⁶⁴ It spelt the end of publicly-funded Chinese language education. Singapore Chinese watched this unfold with horror and were determined not to meet the same fate.¹⁶⁵ However, the Barisan's argument also struck a chord with the Chinese, who worried about Singaporeans becoming "second-class citizens" in the new Malaysia.¹⁶⁶

¹⁵⁸ Telegram 363, Moore to Macleod, 1 Sept 1961, CO 1030/982, TNA.

¹⁵⁹ Memorandum setting out Heads of Agreement for a Merger between the Federation of Malaya and Singapore, Singapore Legislative Assembly, Command Paper no. 33 of 1961.

¹⁶⁰ ALL, 16 Oct 1961.

¹⁶¹ Barisan Sosialis, *Stand of the Barisan Sosialis on our constitutional future* (Singapore: Barisan Sosialis, 1961), pp. 7-10.

¹⁶² ALL, 22 Sept 1961.

¹⁶³ ALL, 25-26 Aug 1961, 16 Nov 1961.

¹⁶⁴ Tan Liok Ee, *The Politics of Chinese Education in Malaya, 1945-61* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁶⁵ ALL, 12 Aug 1961, 20 Aug 1961.

¹⁶⁶ LAD, 20 Jan 1962, C971-2.

At the founding of the Barisan's Tanjong Pagar branch on 26 October, Lim Chin Siong further elaborated on the inherent contradictions in the PAP's proposed merger scheme that would eventually cause it to fail. At the heart of the matter was that citizens of Singapore and the Federation would be treated very differently. "Simply put, a political unification refers to the fact that the people in the two regions enjoy the same political rights and live the same political life. How can we make people of two different regions enjoy the same political rights and live the same political life? There can be only one answer: they have the same citizenship. So there can be only one principle: different citizenship, no merger."¹⁶⁷ The agreement was also completely silent on whether Singapore citizens would enjoy rights currently limited to Malayan citizens.¹⁶⁸ He pointed out that Article 22 of the Federation constitution gave Parliament latitude to decide who qualified for citizenship. This power made all legal arguments about who qualified for citizenship irrelevant.¹⁶⁹ Lim attacked Singapore's reduced representation in the Malaysian Parliament, and noted that Lee had surrendered responsibility for internal security. He predicted that it was designed to allow Lee to escape responsibility for any repressive actions taken.

The White Paper on merger was presented to the Legislative Assembly on 20 November. After a long stormy thirteen-day debate, the PAP used parliamentary procedure to force a vote. The Barisan, UPP, and WP members walked out, whereupon the White Paper was approved by the PAP, UMNO, and SPA members. On 30 January 1962, the Assembly subsequently voted thirty-five (PAP, UMNO, SPA, UPP) to thirteen (Barisan) to endorse the plan that the Tunku had proposed for "the establishment of the Federation of Malaysia comprising the eleven states of Malaya, the states of Singapore and Brunei, and the territories of Sarawak and North Borneo".¹⁷⁰

In May 1962, Lee was privately shown the recommendations of the Cobbold Commission on Federation citizenship for the Borneo territories. It not only recommended a straight conversion of citizenship, but also gave them a considerable degree of autonomy in Malaysia. The territories thus would achieve full Federation citizenship and autonomy without having to make the concessions that Lee had made for Singapore.¹⁷¹ Lee felt it would be impossible for him to explain why Borneo had gained what was being denied to Singapore.¹⁷² This, he feared, "would not go down well with the Chinese in Singapore." Singapore would have a "separate and diminished status" in the Federation.¹⁷³ He needed a way to make the Chinese feel that they were not being discriminated against.

However, UMNO leaders were reluctant to make even superficial changes to the agreement, for fear it would lead to demands for more substantive ones.¹⁷⁴ Lee submitted an aide-memoire to the Tunku outlining the issue. He was convinced that a change in nomenclature would solve the problem, and proposed dropping the term "Malaysian nationals" and instead using "Malaysian citizens" as a common term for all citizens of Malaysia, including Singapore, with assurances of similar rights and privileges, apart from voting. It was crucial that the Singapore Chinese be convinced,

¹⁶⁷ Malaixiya lishi de lingyimian bianji w eiyuanhui [Another aspect of Malaysian history editorial committee], *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (shangce)* [Lim Chin Siong and his Times, vol. 2] (Kuala Lumpur: INSAN and Wasasa Enterprise, 2002), pp. 114-22.

¹⁶⁸ See also Colonial Office note, "Citizenship Arrangements for Singapore within the Proposed Federation of Malaysia, undated, CO 1030/998, TNA.

¹⁶⁹ Article 22: If any new territory is admitted to the Federation after Independence Day in pursuance of Article 2, parliament may by law determine what persons are to be citizens by reason of their connection with that territory and the date or dates from which such persons are to be citizens.

¹⁷⁰ SCJP, 3 Dec 1961.

¹⁷¹ "Malaysia: Singapore Situation". Note of United Kingdom Delegation Meeting, 26 July 1962, CO 1030/1158, TNA.

¹⁷² Moore to Wallace, 15 May 1962, DO 169/250, TNA.

¹⁷³ "Note for Record: Lee Kuan Yew's meeting with Duncan Sandys, Secretary of State, Colonies", 15 May 1962, DO 169/250, TNA.

¹⁷⁴ Tan, *Creating "Greater Malaysia"*, pp. 103-5.

and he believed this would convince them.¹⁷⁵ With the aid of the British, the Tunku and the UMNO leadership agreed to the change. This was announced on 30 July, just two days before the Cobbold Report was officially released.

Lee returned to Singapore in triumph. On 14 August, he made a radio broadcast declaring that "instead of a common nationality there will be a common citizenship... All citizens of Singapore will automatically become citizens of Malaysia."¹⁷⁶ The following day, he underlined the fact that he was responding to public opinion: "my job is to get what my people want. And if they want citizenship, I get them citizenship."¹⁷⁷ Pressing home his advantage, he declared the referendum would be held almost immediately, on 1 September 1962. He hoped that the mere two weeks would not give people enough time to see through the illusion.¹⁷⁸

Lee's words implied that there would be complete equality other than in voting location, which was not the case. Citizens of the Federation and the Borneo states could exercise their citizenship rights anywhere in Malaysia, except in Singapore. Singapore's citizens, however, only had citizenship rights in Singapore. If they wished to migrate to anywhere else in Malaysia, they had to effectively change their citizenship and cut themselves off from Singapore. Otherwise, once they crossed the causeway, they would have fewer rights than their Federation and Bornean counterparts. This also effectively isolated Singapore as a separate and distinct entity within the enlarged Malaysia, making a mockery of the idea of merger.

The Federation leaders privately expressed their irritation at Lee.¹⁷⁹ The Barisan immediately released a statement pointing out that the change was in name only.¹⁸⁰ However, Lee continued to insist that the people of Singapore would have equal rights in all respects except voting location, even as Federation leaders were privately saying they would not. The Chinese press thus believed that the situation had been favourably resolved.¹⁸¹

Referendum

From the beginning of the process, the government claimed that it was committed to public consultation.¹⁸² It decided to hold a referendum on the form of merger; the Barisan wanted a general election. Alongside the White Paper on merger, the government introduced a bill for a National Referendum. The three choices presented were labelled Alternatives A, B, and C. "A" was the government's proposal. "B" was ostensibly the Barisan's. Even though the Barisan had long repudiated its reference to Penang and Malacca in its position on merger, the government held the Barisan to its original wording.¹⁸³ "C" stated that Singapore should not join on terms less favourable than those granted to the Borneo territories.¹⁸⁴ At this time, however, it was still not known what terms the Borneo territories would obtain. Lee Siew Choh, Ong Eng Guan, and David Marshall argued that the referendum should be a yes or no vote on the White Paper proposals, but the PAP defeated this amendment. After a lengthy debate, the proposal to hold a referendum was passed in July.

Left without an option that it could back, the Barisan advocated casting blank votes. However, the PAP then added a clause to the bill which stipulated that blank votes meant that voters were unable to make a decision, in which case the government

¹⁷⁵ Aide-Memoire on "Citizenship" by Lee Kuan Yew, undated, DO 169/250, TNA.

¹⁷⁶ Lee Kuan Yew's talk over the Radio, 14 Aug 1962, PREM 11/3868, TNA.

¹⁷⁷ Tan, *Creating "Greater Malaysia"*, pp. 107.

¹⁷⁸ Lee, *The Singapore Story*, pp. 429.

¹⁷⁹ TK Critchley, to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 17 Aug 1962, A 1838/280, Australian National Archives; Telegram No. 555, Moore to Commonwealth Relations Office, 15 Aug 1962, DO 169/250, TNA;

Tan, *Creating "Greater Malaysia"*, pp. 108-11.

¹⁸⁰ ALL, 15 Aug 1962.

¹⁸¹ ALL, 15-16 Aug 1962, 19-20 Aug 1962, 25-26 Aug 1962.

¹⁸² SCJP, 24 Sept 1961, 8 Dec 1961.

¹⁸³ Lee, *The Open United Front*, pp. 237.

¹⁸⁴ LAD, 27 June 1962-6 July 1962, C33-144, 180-282, 296-422, 425-542, 545-666, 669-792, 795-914, 924-1022.

which they had elected would decide on their behalf. When the popularity of Alternative A became evident, the Barisan declared that voters should cast blank votes, since such votes would be counted for Alternative A. The PAP countered by declaring that blank votes might not be taken to mean Alternative A, but rather Alternative B.¹⁸⁵

The PAP strained its campaign to the legal limit, freely using public money and government facilities to promote Alternative A. It deluged the island with radio broadcasts, pamphlets, posters, and advertising jingles, including 200,000 copies of a brochure, *Battle for Merger*, promoting their version of events.¹⁸⁶ It mobilised the People's Association and Works Brigade to canvass voters and distribute campaign material.¹⁸⁷ On the ballot paper, the Singapore flag was placed next to Alternative A, while the Penang flag was placed next to Alternative B. On information posters, the drawing of the voter's hand was one putting a cross next to Alternative A. On polling day itself, the Singapore flag was hoisted outside the centres. Election officers used Alternative A as the example when instructing voters on how to mark their ballots. Rumours flew that, through the use of serial numbers on the ballots, voters who cast blank votes would be identified and lose their citizenship. The government did not deny those rumours. Goh Keng Swee sent out some 40 trucks fitted with loudspeakers to warn people that blank votes would be considered Alternative B, which would cause Singaporeans to lose their citizenship.¹⁸⁸

The government was also heavily aided by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (SCCC), which came out strongly in favour of the PAP's proposals for merger due to the concessions obtained in the fields of commerce, education, and labour. The Chamber took out full-page advertisements in the newspapers urging people to vote for Alternative A, emphasising that it would preserve Chinese business, culture, and jobs. SCCC Chairman Ko Teck Kin stressed that the Tunku had assured him that Singaporeans would enjoy Malaysian citizenship and equal status after merger.¹⁸⁹ The Chinese press, while not explicitly endorsing Alternative A, made no secret of their belief that it was the best deal Singapore could get.¹⁹⁰

The propaganda efforts paid off. On referendum day, 71.1% of voters chose Alternative A and 25.8% cast blank ballots. Lee Kuan Yew, aware that the SCCC had done him a massive favour, made sure his first post-referendum action was to thank it publicly.¹⁹¹

Aftermath

With merger sealed, the Singapore and Federation governments were free to act against their opponents. In December, a left-wing nationalist rebellion broke out in Brunei, seeking independence for the Borneo territories. Once the rebellion was quelled, it became an open secret in Singapore and the Federation that it would be used as a pretext to arrest and detain opposition politicians and activists. A January 1963 NYSF editorial all but openly pleaded with the government not to use a clearly unrelated incident as a pretext for arbitrary arrests.¹⁹² In February, Operation Coldstore detained over a hundred opposition leaders and activists for participating in a communist conspiracy. Ironically, because the arrests were so widely anticipated, the

¹⁸⁵ Lee, *The Open United Front*, pp. 237.

¹⁸⁶ LAD, 15 Mar 1962, C129-30; Sonny Yap, Richard Lim, and Leong Weng Kam, *Men In White: The Untold Story of Singapore's Ruling Political Party* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 2009), pp. 237.

¹⁸⁷ Yap, Lim, and Leong, *Men In White*, pp. 237.

¹⁸⁸ Soviee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, pp. 160; Bloodworth, *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse*, pp. 261.

¹⁸⁹ Sikko Visscher, *The Business of Politics and Ethnicity: A History of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), pp. 148-51.

¹⁹⁰ NYSF, 31 Aug 1962.

¹⁹¹ ST, 6 Sept 1962.

¹⁹² NYSF, 23 Jan 1963.

MCP had already withdrawn virtually all their remaining Party members in Singapore to Indonesia, leaving only non-Communist activists to be arrested.¹⁹³

The arrests, however, were overshadowed by the fear of war. Indonesian President Sukarno and Philippines President Macapagal had both condemned Malaysia as a neo-colonial construct, while Indonesian Foreign Minister Subandrio announced military support for Brunei's rebels and threatened armed conflict with Malaysia.¹⁹⁴ Coldstore was spun as a response to these threats, muting public response. Additionally, the arrests had been widely anticipated for some time, and after 15 years of repeated rounds of arrests and detentions, such incidents were no longer a novelty, and the people simply took the mass arrests in their stride.¹⁹⁵ At the same time, the arrests removed all the key leaders of Singapore's opposition, forestalling the possibility of an effective protest campaign being launched. Finally, it was expected that, as before, the detainees would be well treated and released unharmed at an appropriate time.

The removal of these activists and politicians from Malaysian politics eased the security issue in the minds of the Tunku and the UMNO leadership. As Lim Chin Siong had predicted, now there was no longer any reason for the Tunku to go through with merger. Sukarno's condemnation of Malaysia as a neo-colonial construct and his threat of confrontation also made the Federation government hesitate. The date of merger was postponed to 16 September. To force the issue, Lee Kuan Yew unilaterally declared Singapore independent on 31 August and threatened to fight the impending election on a platform of complete impotence.¹⁹⁶ After much stressful behind-the-scenes negotiation, Malaysia came into being on 16 September.

With their opponents behind bars, the PAP called a snap election on 3 September. There would only be nine days between nomination day and polling day, the minimum legally permitted time. Over the past year, the PAP had used the state's legal apparatus to systemically harass the Barisan. Many of its leaders were involved in a trial for rioting, which only concluded on 29 August, less than two weeks before nomination day. Barisan grassroots organisations had also been deregistered and their funds frozen. On nomination day itself, Special Branch detained a number of Barisan politicians and held them the entire day, making them unable to file their papers in person as legally required.¹⁹⁷ Sites and permits for rallies were hard to come by and printing facilities for opposition parties almost unobtainable.¹⁹⁸ The PAP, meanwhile, had already been campaigning since the previous May via Lee Kuan Yew's ongoing tour of Singapore, which ended on the eve of nomination day, 12 September.¹⁹⁹ Finally, the PAP made strident appeals for national loyalty and solidarity in the face of the Indonesian Konfrontasi.

On 21 September, the PAP squeaked home. It won only 46.9% of the vote, and a number of leaders, including Kenny Byrne, Tan Kia Gan, and Lee Khoo Choy, lost their seats. Others won by the narrowest of margins, including Toh Chin Chye by 89 votes, Rajaratnam by 220 votes and Ong Pang Boon by 403 votes. Thanks to the first-past-the-post system, however, it won 37 seats. The splitting of the anti-PAP vote saved it, as the PAP won only 19 seats outright. The Barisan won 33.2% of vote but only 13 seats. It lost at least eight seats due to the UPP splitting the vote. In a sign of how far the PAP's position in Singapore politics had changed, it won every single seat it had lost in 1959 – all the middle class and Malay dominated constituencies voted solidly for the PAP. Rural residents voted for the Barisan – nine of the Barisan's 13

¹⁹³ C. C. Chin (ed.), *Langjianshumeng: Yu Zhuyue koushu lishi dang'an* [Dreams on Waves : Eu Chooi Yip's Oral History Archives] (Selangor: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2006), pp. 40.

¹⁹⁴ ALL, 22-23 Jan 1963, 13-14 Feb 1963.

¹⁹⁵ ALL, 3-5 Feb 1963.

¹⁹⁶ Lee, *The Singapore Story*, pp. 498-505.

¹⁹⁷ Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement*, pp. 31.

¹⁹⁸ James Minchin, *No Man Is An Island: A Portrait of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew* (North Sydney, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1990), pp. 130.

¹⁹⁹ Lee, *The Singapore Story*, pp. 484-92.

seats were rural constituencies. The critical votes lay in the urban working class. The PAP won enough of their votes to take twenty-six out of thirty-two urban seats, thirteen of them outright.

Conclusion

The perspective of Singapore's Chinese towards merger was rooted in a concern for pragmatic issues of jobs, education, and their citizenship rights. As manifested in the press, the debates that dominated the Chinese community throughout this period, and more importantly their voting record, clearly illustrate how these concerns were paramount. Lee Kuan Yew recognised this. Thus when he negotiated Singapore's position in the Federation of Malaysia specifically to appeal to the Chinese, he ensured that Singapore was granted specific exceptions in education, labour, and commerce, and ostensibly equal citizenship rights. The PAP's single-minded harping on the danger of communism, which it claimed was behind every move of the Barisan Sosialis, was however treated with scepticism. The Chinese press raised the issue for the sole purpose of dismissing it, usually in exasperation when English-speaking politicians and journalists characterised the Chinese community as communist-inclined.

The Chinese political movement also explicitly articulated and was committed to a Malayan identity which transcended ethnic ones, based on a fusion of Malaya's component cultures. However, despite their commitment to multiculturalism and inclusiveness, the Chinese left-wing political leaders were unable to forge an understanding with the Federation leaders. The multiethnic policy formulated by the former did not take cognisance of the latter's point of view. Their argument for a theoretical multiethnic Malayan identity was based upon principles of equality and democracy, and presented in opposition to British discrimination and colonial social policy. However, these arguments did not appear to take seriously the concerns of the Malay leadership in the Federation about Chinese economic preponderance leading to domination of independent Malaya. Chinese writers dismissed these concerns as political manoeuvring that could be resolved through negotiation. It is likely that the Chinese were too optimistic and too secure in their own benevolence, believing that they would give way on their own interests in independent Malaya, overestimating the ability and confidence of the Malay community to negotiate as equals. At the same time, the UMNO leaders also did not appear to have made any special effort to understand the Chinese. It was in their political interest to conflate arguments about justice and equality with communism and a threat to Malay society. Their vision of a Malayan identity was not one based upon multiple cultures but where all cultures assimilated into their own, preserving the privileged position of Malays at the apex of the Federation society.

Ultimately, the Chinese could not accept that there were serious Malay reservations about their vision of a multi-ethnic Malaya without undermining their own arguments that a Malayan identity based upon equality and shared consciousness was a practical and even inevitable outcome. This contributed to the Malay leadership's rejection of what should have been a natural alliance between colonised peoples against British imperialism.

These failures underscored the depth of the challenge of multiculturalism. Mutual incomprehensibility and ambiguity were embedded into the nature of colonial society, particularly between the English and Chinese-speaking as a result of their linguistic, cultural, and social differences. Chinese arguments about the nature of their identity, language and culture as Malaysians, and their role in nation-building, were thus swept aside as cultural chauvinism and disloyalty. Those who spoke up against repressive legislation and its use were castigated for encouraging or indulging in subversion, and imprisoned without trial. Votes for popular politicians with well-established track records of delivering concrete benefits and positive changes, in particular to the working class and the poor, were dismissed as an outcome of orders from shadowy masters. An insightful analysis of the merger process and Singapore's

future relationship with the Federation was conflated with an international, anti-national ideology aimed at overthrowing the state.

In this ambiguous environment, the politicians who eventually triumphed were those who were able to insert themselves successfully as intermediaries between opposing forces. Lee Kuan Yew won power by working between the colonial power and the electorate, and between the English-speaking and Chinese-speaking population. He was able to retain power by doing the same with the Federation leadership and the Chinese. Once the Chinese left-wing leadership was arrested, however, he no longer had two sides to play against each other. As Lim Chin Siong predicted, without this bogeyman Lee had to either leave power or take Singapore out of Malaysia. He chose the latter. Post-separation, Lee and the PAP ensured their primacy by removing the basis for any political organisation by Singapore's Chinese-speaking community.

This multilateral dynamic vastly complicates the task of the historian, who must navigate a multipolar colonial political environment to discern the motivations and thoughts of ambitious politicians who have every incentive to remain opportunistic and ready to change tack in accordance with shifting dynamics in order to straddle constituencies which they identified as being critical to the maintaining of their power. These outcomes also make clear the immense difficulty of nation-building and the creation of a single national identity out of a multi-ethnic state.

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