# The Road to 1955

## The Retreat of Empire

By 1950, the British Empire was in retreat. India, which had for so long been the reservoir of manpower and resources on which Britain built and maintained its Empire, achieved independence in 1948. Once, the vastness of Britain’s empire was a source of prestige, as the “empire on which the son never sets”. World War II has shown, to disastrous effect, that this Empire was too large to defend. The people of the United Kingdom itself – England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland – had suffered through German bombings and wartime military service and wanted peace. There was little appetite to spend the little money they had left in maintaining a needlessly huge empire. Even less was the willingness of Britons to send its sons and husbands to fight wars in defence of far-away colonies. [[1]](#footnote-1) But even more compelling for the British Government was international pressure from the world’s two newly ascended superpowers. The United States and Soviet Union only ever agreed on one thing: that there is no room for European imperialism in the newly emerging Cold War. The United States funded the economic recovery of war-torn United Kingdom, on the sole condition that Britain decolonise. Not even Winston Churchill, the arch-imperialist, found it in himself to defy the Americans.[[2]](#footnote-2)

 ‘We cannot police half the world at our own expense when we have already gone into pawn to the other half.’

* John Maynard Keynes, 1942[[3]](#footnote-3)

 ‘The British Empire seems to be running off almost as fast as the American Loan. The steady and remorseless process of divesting ourselves of what has been gained by so many generations of toil, administration and sacrifice continues. In the case of Burma…this haste is appalling. ‘Scuttle’ is the only word that can be applied.’

* Winston Churchill, 1944[[4]](#footnote-4)

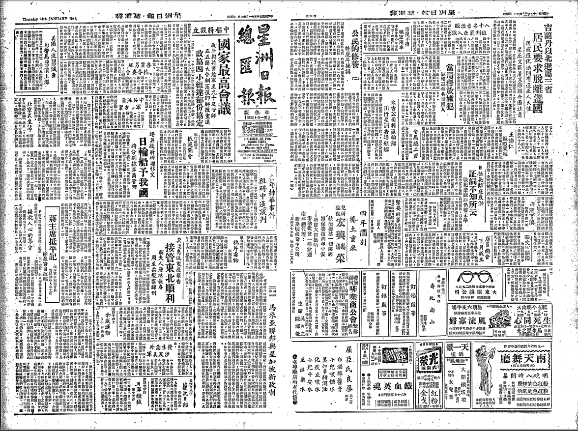
## Singapore’s First Partition

The British planned to retreat from Malaya with dignity. Despite returning to a peninsular riddled with ethnic conflict and lawlessness, the British forged ahead with their plans. In 1946, barely 216 days after the first British warship moored in Singapore harbour to accept the surrender of the Japanese garrison, Lord Mountbatten dissolved the Straits Settlements, of which Singapore was the capital. Singapore found itself separated from its sister cities of Malacca and Penang.

More importantly, however, Singapore’s destiny became unmoored from that of the Malaysian mainland. Barely seven months after liberation, most Singaporeans were preoccupied with day-by-day survival. The few Singaporeans who heard about this momentaneous event met it with a surprised shrug; it is not like they could have done anything about it. Nevertheless, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce echoed most objections by arguing Singapore is “the centre of Malayan economy, politics, and culture”.[[5]](#footnote-5)

马来亚联邦与星加坡新政制临别的加陀政府昨日发表白皮器 , 定布设立星加坡成为统一国家 , 可使马及亚联邦新行政机构 。此为必进收妥张础制度, 而她会成之位为来阳后以新施策, 此效果如何, 似伪全究其既泛水桃制度的初始以来亚人所关注, 吾人站在人民将来福利之自治以外, 并木明订人深皆现马来亚安局, 由于昔日割裂洋与太平洋之歌要的币, 亦为改善, 在行政魏得比物良好, 效率, 故地。而是加坡本身除们常有山则此渴望埃政时路局, 改变一九简说外, 则仙微商场而已, 他们的来职前统治宛民地照成, 切饭股行联合国山亚联邦分离以, 将生加则为以易商心大冰率, 改善马来亚( 民生治, 丁马来亚人民) 马来亚联邦则以立法行政州成, 不同胡的肌出, 认马来亚各民族蹈上自治前程。 监制政策, 其结果必使他成功之处仍然三日美琳说目来扮扎价盘香铁路下之弱小民族, 已由此, 如今日在星加坡所采收之对外贸易政策研计会标次次放尔炮火所恐醒, 所渴望苦, 乃为自由平等。 立场碎块管盟之观点, 而非空白共求之形式也。 马来亚郭新机, 目前马来亚络海峡殖民地之调整, 已由协海峡殖民法案丹尚保有特别地位, 就立客邦火诗如取而你坦疾, 撤白皮料所拟定, 马来亚联邦, 以地理宗教事务。 历妃日加坡, 乃为分纵之行政域, 设有二名不立法例, 此极们是否将阻碍珊同之被性及立法会珠; 虽然类别附对此新组织之合作, 以阻延自治州之个继说, 称系在央皇国外裁判权法令下。 使其疑问。

According to a White Paper released by the Government yesterday, Malaya and Singapore will form different governments - with Singapore becoming its own country.



Singapore “was expected to become “a sort of District of Columbia”, the headquarters of the British Governor-General for Southeast Asia, with its own local government.” [[6]](#footnote-6) The British wanted to keep Singapore as a military outpost in a region of geopolitical rivalry, in much the same vein as Hong Kong or Gibraltar. Although the colonial administration made every effort to ensure Singaporeans have a constitutional pathway back towards re-joining Malaya, this initial bifurcation would lead Singapore down a very different path from the mainland. Insulated from the Mainland, Singapore will develop its own political institutions and parties.

Correspondingly, Singapore’s political awakening became centred on an issue different from the mainland. While the Mainland struggled and laboured to forge a power-sharing compromise between ethnic groups, Singaporean politics was dominated by a far simpler question: how best can we pressure the British to allow us to re-join Malaya on democratic grounds?

Singapore’s first indigenous political party was the Malayan Democratic Union. The party, made up of English-educated, middle-classed office workers, was moderate in its demands:

At any rate, in the Mainland, this period saw the rapid rise of the United Malays National Organisation – UMNO. UMNO demanded that Singapore be excluded from any new Malayan state on the grounds of

# Planning for Singapore’s first elections

On 21 July 1953, Singapore’s governor John Nicoll appointed Sir George Rendel, a British diplomat, to chair a committee on constitutional changes.

--

The Rendel Report announced that Singapore should be tutored in self-governance before being granted independence. The first step in this plan was to create an elected government of limited powers. Critics, however, were rather sceptical about true British intentions. For many, this was a convenient cover story for the colonialists to delay true medaka. The People’s Action Party, then the most radical pro-medaka political party in Singapore, condemned the Rendel Constitution on five grounds:

1. The legislature was to have 7 unelected members and the government had limited powers.
2. The constitution included emergency powers such as the ability for a government to detain persons without trial
3. The constitution did not provide for a multi-lingual legislature
4. Trade unions were not permitted to set up political funds
5. It allows British Armed Services members extra-territorial rights.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The critics, however, were out of power. In 1954, only 9 of the 22 members on the legislative council were elected; the rest were either appointed, nominated, or government officials.

# Planning for the elections

The Rendel Report was signed into law by Governor John Nicoll on 23 February 1954. In anticipation of the election, Singaporeans hustled to find like-minded minds, rally supporters, and start new political parties. It was during this period when the People’s Action Party and Labour Front was formed.

But as political newcomers hustled and organised, more simple questions needed to be asked: what form will Singapore’s new democracy take?

Some of these fundamental questions of democracy has already been settled. Singapore was to inherit the **Westminster system** of Democracy from the United Kingdom. Each new member of the legislature assembly will be responsible to, and be voted in by, the inhabitants of a pre-defined geographical area. Each geographical area will be represented by only one member, and the representative will be whomever gets the most votes – even if they get less than 50% of the vote. This is known as **First-Past-The-Post**.

## What type of Democracy?

This was not the only form of Democracy Singapore could have chosen. In 1952, Governor Nicoll suggested an electoral system where Singaporeans in **constituencies of race**; the Chinese community will vote for their own representatives, while the Malay community will vote for their own representatives. This idea, however, was unanimously condemned by the Council of Advisors as “Repugnant to all ideas of Democracy”.

Throughout the world, young democracies are experimenting with all sorts of electoral systems. Israel and West Germany has found considerable success with **Proportional Representation**.

Instead of voting for a specific member of parliament, Israelis voted for their preferred political party. Israel’s political parties are allocated seats based on their share of the total vote. The political parties get to choose who will fill their allocated seats.

## Singapore was not a city-state

But back to Singapore; the Rendel Report was extremely concerned about protecting the interests of kampung dwellers in Singapore. In the Singapore of 1954, Singapore was divided between the City Council and Rural Board. With the population rapidly rising due to the post-war boom in birth rates, the urban population is set to increase even more.

A larger urban population means that kampung dwellers may get outvoted in elections. Kampung dwellers may also be evicted from their homes if a land-hungry city kept expanding. This was already evident in two new projects: Paya Lebar Airport and the new housing estates of the Singapore Improvement Trust, the forerunner of HDB.

1. WM. Roger Louis, “The Dissolution of the British Empire,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume IV: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Judith Brown and Wm Roger Louis (Oxford University Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Louis, 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Louis, 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Louis, 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. C. M. Turnbull, *A Modern History of Singapore, 1819-2005* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Turnbull, 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Five Faults with Rendel, Says the PAP,” *The Straits Times*, January 31, 1955. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)