

# Disguised anti-colonialism: protest against the White Australia Policy in Malaya and Singapore, 1947–1962

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*A manifestation of the anti-colonialist sentiment in Malaya and Singapore during the post-war period of decolonisation was the vociferous protest against the White Australia Policy. Australia's restrictive immigration policy was seen as an offensive colour bar, similar to the various racial restrictions that British authorities placed on their colonial subjects, which symbolised white dominance. By protesting against the White Australia Policy, the colonial subjects of the British in Malaya and Singapore were indirectly attacking white colonial rule in Southeast Asia. Antagonism towards the White Australia Policy became less vocal as Malaya and Singapore proceeded towards self-government and independence, when many of the colonial colour bars were removed. However, low-key resentment against what was seen as a symbol of white colonialism still persisted in relations with Australia.*

## Introduction

During the decolonisation of Southeast Asia, public attention in the newly emerging nation-states of the region was regularly drawn to Australia's attempt to exclude non-white migrants from its shores—the White Australia Policy. Several well-publicised deportations of immigrants from Southeast Asia created a widespread awareness of the White Australia Policy among the peoples of the region.<sup>1</sup> One of the first incidents was the 1947 deportation of 15 seamen from Malaya and Singapore. Most of these seamen had married Australian women, and had children from these marriages. Protest against the White Australia Policy in the late 1940s reached high levels, involving political demonstrations throughout colonial Malaya and Singapore. This contrasted with the low-key resentment in the 1960s, after the process of decolonisation had been largely completed. What were the forces that drove the protests against the White Australia Policy? Why does the antagonism towards the White Australia Policy seem strongest during the early period of decolonisation in Southeast Asia?

A hypothesis can be put forward suggesting that the White Australia Policy was opposed so strongly in Southeast Asia, which was at the time struggling for

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<sup>1</sup> See among other works that document these deportation cases, Varma (1974:21 5–45), Rivett (1975), and Sullivan (1993:98–116).

self-government and independence, because the policy was perceived as a symbol of white colonialism in the region. Thus, criticism of it may well have been disguised anti-colonialism rather than stemming from a desire to have non-discriminatory immigration laws. Many of the countries from which the most vociferous opposition to the White Australia Policy came, such as Malaya and Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines, had their own restrictive immigration policies that excluded certain ethnic groups, particularly Chinese migrants.

For a number of reasons, Malaya and Singapore make good case studies in which to probe the hypothesis that the staunch criticism of the White Australia Policy was disguised anti-colonialism. The representatives of Malaya and Singapore were, at times, the most candid about the reasons why they opposed the White Australia Policy. In May 1972, A. P. Rajah, Singapore High Commissioner to Australia, who had also been a vocal critic of the White Australia Policy in Malaya and Singapore from the 1940s, suggested this hypothesis in a private discussion with Keith Shann, the Deputy Secretary of the Australian External Affairs Department. He raised the recent comments of Arthur Calwell, a former Immigration Minister and the previous Leader of the Opposition, on maintaining the White Australia Policy in order to keep Australia racially homogenous. Officials from the department were anxious to convince Rajah that Calwell's comments only represented a minority of opinion in Australia. In a moment of candour, he agreed. According to Shann, Rajah 'said that he knew that Australians generally were not racials. Our problem was that we were white, that the government of all our neighbours, with the exception of Thailand had been over a very long time in white hands, which was bitterly resented, and that comments like those of Mr Calwell fed the often unconscious prejudices of people in Asia'.<sup>2</sup> Rajah implied that the White Australia Policy had resulted in deep resentment in Southeast Asia because it was seen as a symbol of the white man's dominance in the colonial period, when colonial subjects were told by European administrators that they were inferior and it was their place to be ruled by white colonial officials. The White Australia Policy evoked a strong emotional response because it had overtones of the idea of white dominance from the colonial period of Southeast Asian history.

Another reason for choosing these two countries for studying the reaction to the White Australia Policy in Southeast Asia is that there were two similar deportation incidents before and after decolonisation from which to compare public opinion. In 1947, when Malaya and Singapore were ruled by British colonial authorities, 15 seamen originally from Malaya and Singapore were deported from Australia after a long appeal process that inflamed emotions. In 1961, when the Federation of Malaya had full independence and Singapore had self-government, there arose a threat to deport two Malay pearl divers from Darwin. This incident was also drawn out over several months, but this time the appeal case of the Malay pearl divers was eventually successful. Although they had different outcomes, these incidents offer

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<sup>2</sup> Conversation, H.E. Mr A. P. Rajah, High Commissioner for Singapore, 4 May 1972, Deputy-Secretary K. C. O. Shann, in Singapore—Political—General in the Records of the Australian External Affairs Department A1838 3024/2/1/Part 29 (Australian Archives).

enough similarities to see how the public outrage of the 1940s had gradually become a more subdued form of resentment in the 1960s.

The type of immigration policies that Malaya and Singapore had also provides a reason for examining the protest in these countries against the White Australia Policy. Ironically, during their period of decolonisation, Malaya and Singapore had immigration policies that were becoming more restrictive than Australia's own *Immigration Restriction Act*, which was the legislative basis of the White Australia Policy. In 1933, the British colonial authorities curtailed Chinese male immigration into Malaya and Singapore because of the lack of employment in the depression and the desire not to offend the indigenous people, the Malays, who were fast becoming a minority in their own country because of the importation of Chinese male labour. In 1938, restrictions on the immigration of Chinese females were also introduced. In 1953, all immigrants were prohibited from entering Malaya and Singapore, except under special circumstances. In 1959, after independence and self-government, only highly paid expatriates were allowed into Malaya and Singapore to work at the universities and in multinational companies (Lim 1967:187-90). However, the unrestricted immigration into Malaya and Singapore during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century had already created multi-racial societies. In Malaya, according to the 1947 census, the Malays comprised 49.5 per cent of the population, the Chinese 38.4 per cent, the Indians 10.8 per cent, while the Eurasians and others were only 1.3 per cent. In Singapore, the Malays comprised 12.1 per cent of the population, the Chinese 77.8 per cent, the Indians 7.4 per cent, while the Eurasians and others were 2.8 per cent.

### **Protest over the deportation of Malayan and Singaporean seamen in 1947-8**

During World War II, 6269 non-European refugees fleeing from the Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia, mainly Chinese, Indonesians, and Malays, were given special exemption from Australia's *Immigration Restriction Act*, and allowed entry into Australia on condition that they return to their own countries after the war. Many of these wartime refugees returned home without any prompting by Australian immigration authorities, but others had settled down and found permanent employment in Australia. Some of those who had settled in Australia had married Australians, with whom they had children. By 1947, it had become evident to the Immigration Department under Arthur Calwell, its minister in the Chifley Labor Government, that about 1000 of these non-Europeans who had entered Australia during wartime had no intention of leaving Australia (Andre and Langford 1998:325; Palfreeman 1966).

Calwell in late 1947 began a series of well-publicised deportations of Chinese, Indonesian, Malay, and Filipino wartime refugees. These actions drew public attention in Southeast Asia to the White Australia Policy, which had scarcely been heard of before in the region although it had been in operation since 1901. In

Malaya and Singapore protest over discriminatory immigration policies had previously been focused on the United States' well-known exclusion acts against the Chinese (Sia 1903, 1904). Only in 1947, with the threatened expulsion of 15 seamen from Malaya and Singapore (14 Malays and one Chinese) did public opinion become aware of the White Australia Policy. Henry Keys, the expatriate Australian editor of the main English language newspaper of Singapore, the *Straits Times*, wrote on 2 December 1947 that 'for the first time in modern history, the Malays have become conscious of the "White Australia" policy'. He also noted that 'before this incident the Malays were not interested in the "White Australia" policy, nor were the Chinese and Indian communities in this country'. Dislike for what was seen as an immigration policy based on a colour bar acted as a catalyst for anti-colonialist feelings already present in the colonies. There were unpopular colour bars on many aspects of life in Malaya and Singapore, from the higher grades of the civil service down to recreational clubs. Keys observed in his editorial, which was meant as a warning for the Australian Government, that protest against the White Australia Policy would only bring Australia the long-lasting animosity of anti-colonialist forces already present in a population with emerging nationalist movements. He surmised that 'there are new racial and nationalist forces not only in Malaya but in the wider region of Malaysia, and those forces are going to be far more important in the future than the colonialism which is still in the saddle today'. He concluded that 'it would seem to be only elementary diplomacy for Canberra to avoid antagonising those new forces on colour issues' (*Straits Times*, 2 December 1947).

The White Australia Policy immediately became the subject of anti-colonialist and nationalist speeches that united the otherwise divided ethnic communities of Malaya and Singapore against what appeared to be an obvious manifestation of the racism of European colonialism. Representatives of all the ethnic communities spoke out against the White Australia Policy. 'If we had self-government we could take retaliatory steps against this totally unjustified eviction', declared Eu Chooi Yip, the secretary of the Singapore-based political party, the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU), on 18 November 1947. Eu added that 'this sort of thing we must expect at present when we don't have a government responsible to the people' (*Singapore Free Press*, 19 November 1947). He later 'urged that all Asians in Malaya should join in protest against the Australian Government's decision'. Eu repeated that 'the [colonial] Government had taken no steps to protect the interests of the Malay seamen because it was not a people's government'. He concluded that 'it is up to the people of this country to demonstrate that Malaya will not easily forget this threatened blow to fourteen of her sons' (*Straits Times*, 2 December 1947). The MDU was Singapore's first political party, formed in December 1945 by educated middle-class Chinese, Indians, and Eurasians who wanted a fully elected, all-powerful, united legislature to govern both Malaya and Singapore as one country. The All-Malaya Council of Joint Action (AMCJA), a coalition of political parties led by the MDU, had a similar opinion to the MDU's on the White Australia Policy. In Kuala Lumpur on 12 December 1947, a meeting of the AMCJA of Selangor State and Pusat Tenaga Ra'ayat (PUTERA) passed the

resolution that 'only a government which is responsible to the people can defend the rights and interests of the people'. The party members attending the rally were reported as being 'indignant at the unjust deportation of the Malay seamen and pledged themselves to support and work for the realisation of a democratic self-government in Malaya which is the only sure guarantee against such incidents' (*Malaya Tribune*, 13 December 1947). The AMCJA represented a cross section of Chinese, Indian, and Eurasian opinion, which wanted the political unification of colonial Malaya and Singapore under one single legislature. Citizenship was to be given to all, including the vast number of Chinese migrants, who would swamp the electorate. PUTERA represented a small number of left-wing Malays, who desired the same objectives as the AMCJA.

Protest against the White Australia Policy as a symbol of colonialism was also voiced by organisations that were the political opponents of the MDU and the AMCJA-PUTERA coalition. The various ethnic communities were split over the model of self-government that they wanted. The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the largest and most dominant Malay political organisation, had negotiated with the British an agreement for a Federation of Malaya to come into effect on 1 February 1948, which the AMCJA-PUTERA coalition opposed. The outcome of these Anglo-Malay negotiations of 1946 and early 1947 was that the Malay population would retain its political power, as citizenship would be largely restricted to Malays because they mainly satisfied the strict criteria for being a citizen. Many Chinese migrants could not easily divest themselves of Chinese nationality, and would legally become aliens under the new citizenship requirements. Malay political organisations feared a model of self-government in which political power was taken away from the Malay-ruled states of Malaya and passed to a united assembly of Malaya and Singapore that would be dominated by the representatives of the recent Chinese and Indian immigrants. The AMCJA-PUTERA coalition favoured this very option.<sup>3</sup>

Malay opinion was particularly inflamed by the deportations because most of those deported were Malays. On the same day as the MDU's statement against the White Australia Policy, M. J. Namzie, the secretary of the Singapore Muslim League, representing primarily Indian Muslims but also Muslims of Malay and Indian descent, regretted that Australia having established non-colonialist credentials by helping the Indonesian independence movement in previous months was now behaving as a colonialist power. He said that 'it was a pity that the goodwill Australia has accumulated by the democratic stand she has taken on the Indonesian issue should be frittered away by too rigid a stand on the White Australia policy' (*Singapore Free Press*, 19 November 1947). *Utusan Melayu*, the main Malay newspaper, argued that the political fight by Malays to ensure a Federation of Malaya on Malay terms would mean little unless there was an equally tenacious fight against the deportations. The paper wrote on 28 November 1947 that the slogans of this struggle, such as 'Hidup Melayu', or 'long live the Malays', and

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<sup>3</sup> For detailed studies of politics in Malaya and Singapore at this time see Stockwell (1979), Lau (1991), and Yeo (1973).

'Merdeka', or 'freedom', were 'meaningless unless the Malays actively oppose the action of the Australian government'. The paper urged that the Malay sultans, who nominally ruled the Malay States of Malaya, single out 14 Australians and repatriate them (*Straits Times*, 29 November 1947). On 20 November 1947, *Majlis*, a Malay-language paper, also demanded that reciprocal action be undertaken. However, in the absence of self-government all that the newspaper could suggest was that perhaps 'action could be taken to ask Australians to leave Malaya and for their trade to be stopped and a boycott carried out by the Malays' (*Straits Times*, 20 November 1947). At its Annual General Assembly meeting on the last weekend of December 1947, UMNO, the major political party representing the Malay population, discussed a resolution put forward from its Kampong Bahru Branch in Kuala Lumpur that 'in the future Federation of Malaya, no Government posts should be given to Australians' (*Straits Times*, 23 December 1947). However, it was recognised that without self-government and independence little could be done except verbally protest.

In June 1948, the opportunity for direct protest to the Australian Government arose with the arrival in Kuala Lumpur and then Singapore of the Macmahon Ball Australian Goodwill Mission to Southeast Asia and East Asia. Gary Woodward (1995) has made the point that this Goodwill Mission, in which Ball came with economic aid from Australia, backfired because the furore over the White Australia Policy in Malaya and Singapore at the time 'allowed aid to be identified with an ulterior political motive' of being seen as a bribe to shut up the protestors over the White Australia Policy. For the local population in Malaya and Singapore, the Ball Goodwill Mission provided a focus for its anti-colonialism. Shortly before Ball's arrival, most of the seamen deported from Australia had landed by ship in Malaya and Singapore and their cases had received considerable publicity. Five Malays and 10 Chinese deported from Australia had arrived in Singapore on 21 May 1948, only 2 weeks before Ball's arrival in Kuala Lumpur on 3 June 1948 (*Straits Times*, 22 May 1948). Ball was greeted in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore by thousands of protestors from all ethnic groups. British colonial authorities were concerned that the White Australia Policy focused the anger of the colonial population on the colour bars that were part and parcel of the white colonialism ruling Southeast Asia. Malcolm MacDonald, the British Commissioner General for Southeast Asia, according to a report in the *Singapore Free Press*, told Ball of 'the "irreparable harm" which Australia has done not only to herself, but to all European nations with interests in South East Asia. That is what Canberra should be concerned about; the mischief is much more widespread than Australians suppose' (*Singapore Free Press*, 10 June 1948).

In the time preceding the arrival of the Goodwill Mission, Wee Cheng Seng, one of the seamen deported, had written an open letter to the *Malaya Tribune*, which called upon his countrymen not to put up with the notion of white superiority that was implicit in the White Australia Policy, but to take 'retaliatory steps', such as a trade boycott. His letter reflected the anti-colonialist and nationalist feelings that had emerged in Asian countries at the end of the Japanese Occupation. He pointed out that a significant number of Malaysians and Singapore-

ans had fought against the Japanese. Wee wrote that ‘all thoughtful people of the world knew that the coloured races were not fighting for the liberty and humanity of the people of European origin only’. He added that ‘East and West marched side by side to fight for the common cause of human rights and it should be divided equally among all peoples of the world irrespective of race, colour or creed’ (*Malaya Tribune*, 16 February 1947). Lee Kuan Yew, a future Prime Minister of Singapore, and similar in age to Wee, has noted that he and his contemporaries were from ‘that generation of young men who went through the Second World War and emerged determined that no one—neither the Japanese nor the British—had the right to push and kick us around’ (Kratoska 1998:357). Similar remarks were made by the editor of the *Morning Tribune*, the morning edition of the *Malaya Tribune*, an English-language newspaper run by English-educated middle-class Chinese. Commenting on Wee’s letter, the *Morning Tribune* explained that ‘as a result of the by no means flattering racial attitude adopted by some Europeans towards Asians in the past, fires of resentment are smouldering in the hearts of many Asians’. The newspaper predicted that ‘as Asian people gain greater control over their destinies, they will not tolerate the racial insults flung at them by Australians or any other nations’ (*Morning Tribune*, 18 February 1948). This growing nationalism was not confined to one ethnic group. A letter to the *Malaya Tribune* protesting against the White Australia Policy by a Malay correspondent under the pseudonym, Anak Negri, ‘child of the country’, stated that ‘the Asiatic fought side by side with the whites for the same cause of freedom’. He asked, ‘are we Asiatics just the pawns in the game of chess to be used to the advantage of Kings, Queens their bishops and castles?’ He added another question, ‘where next will this colour bar crop up?’ (*Malaya Tribune*, 4 December 1947).

Moderate leaders of political opinion saw the inflaming of strong anti-colonialism as playing into the hands of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), which was the most anti-colonialist party in Malaya and Singapore. By 1947, the MCP exerted considerable influence in the MDU and the AMCJA coalition. In the case of the MDU, that influence was such that the political party wound itself up shortly after the MCP decided to take power by instigating an armed insurrection in early 1948 that led to the declaration of the Malayan Emergency in June of that year. After Australia announced that it would deport 600 Chinese in mid-1948, H. B. Lim wrote to the *Straits Times*, describing how the reaction to the White Australia Policy was evoking strong anti-colonialist feelings that might in the long run contribute to a chaotic downfall of the European colonial rule. He described how the Chinese had ‘laid down their lives in order to keep Australia out of the claws of Japanese tyranny’. Lim warned that ‘the world today is threatened with chaos and unless people like the Australians give up the idea that they are one class higher than the Asiatics I am afraid the safety of all of us will be jeopardised’ (*Straits Times*, 15 May 1947). At one of Ball’s official meetings, Yap Peng Gheck, President of the Singapore Chinese British Association, and Inche Sardon Haji Jubir, President of the Malay Union, drew Ball’s attention to the growing influence of the MCP and they ‘stressed the dangerous effect of the white Australia policy on Asian feeling’ (*Singapore Free Press*, 7 June 1948).

### **The 1949 attempt to ban Australians from Malaya and Singapore**

Moderate leaders such as C. C. Tan, the leader of the Singapore Progressive Party (SPP), in order to mobilise public opinion on the deportations behind their political parties, were vocal in protesting against the White Australia Policy. Tan called the Goodwill Mission's promise of economic aid 'a mockery', an offer of 'thirty pieces of silver'. He added that 'any nation which sows the seeds of ill feeling will one day reap that harvest' (*Singapore Free Press*, 2 June 1948). The SPP was the first political party to benefit from the commencement of elections in Malaya and Singapore during 1948 and it needed to widen its base of electoral support to stay in power in any future elections, which were likely to have a greater cross section of the population than the limited franchise of the first elections for members of the Legislative Council in Singapore. However, for the Malayan Federation, the Legislative Council was not elected but was mostly appointed by the British High Commissioner, although all ethnic groups were represented. In Singapore, there were elections for six seats in a Legislative Council, but the majority of its members were nominated by the British Governor. The SPP, under Tan and A. P. Rajah (later in the 1970s Singapore High Commissioner to Australia), won three of the six seats and it became the largest party in the Legislative Council. The SPP immediately began attempting to remove many of the unpopular colour bars in the civil service.

Acting against these colour bars was a way for Tan and the SPP to capitalise on the anti-colonialist and nationalist feelings that were noticeably present in Malaya and Singapore (*Malaya Tribune*, 1 March 1948). In 1949, Tan attempted to introduce retaliatory legislation in response to Calwell's *Wartime Refugees Removal Act*, which was also seen as a colour bar. Calwell's bill for this act was introduced into the Australian parliament during June 1949 in order to remove wartime refugees who had been in Australia for a long period and had proved difficult to deport under the *Immigration Restriction Act*. On 13 June 1949, Tan described Calwell's Wartime Refugees Bill as 'a fanatical step to purge the Australian continent of all permanent Asian or coloured residents'. He compared Calwell's racism to that of Hitler, adding that 'Mr. Calwell appears to have forgotten the fate of a late European leader who was also imbued with a fanatical desire to preserve the purity of the Aryan Race'. Tan mentioned that he was considering the introduction in Singapore of 'retaliatory legislation on the lines of the proposed Philippines Act' (*Straits Times*, 14 June 1949). Members of the Congress of the Philippines, in response to the Australian deportation of Sergeant Gamboa, a Philippine-born American, had in March 1949 initiated legislation preventing Australians from residing in the Philippines. However, this legislation had lapsed at the end of the sitting of Congress.

Tan's call to pass legislation in the Singapore Legislative Council to prevent Australians from residing in Singapore received popular support, and a number of leaders of other political parties and representatives of the various ethnic groups supported his move, such as P. D. Nair, the General Secretary of the Labour Party



of Singapore. Nair called Calwell's interpretation of the White Australia Policy 'a mad racial ideology'. He thought that 'if Singapore were a self-governing country, we could refer the matter to the United Nations Organisation'. Inche Sardon bin Haji Jubir, President of the Malay Union and also a member of the Singapore Legislative Council, congratulated Tan on his move (*Straits Times*, 15 June 1949). The editor of the *Indian Daily Mail*, a voice of Indian opinion in Malaya and Singapore, described Tan's proposal as a case in which 'Singapore Gives The Lead to Asia'. He saw the colonial order as upholding the White Australia Policy. 'That Malaya and other dependent countries have not taken any retaliatory measures is not at all surprising', he observed, because 'lacking national freedom and independence, they cannot initiate any policy of their own, and all actions done either by themselves or on their behalf by the rulers have necessarily to be primarily in the interests of the ruling power'. The *Indian Daily Mail's* editor concluded that due to 'the ruling power and the Australians being of the same white race, it goes without saying that any action against Australia will be discouraged or prevented' (*Indian Daily Mail*, 16 June 1949).

In the Legislative Council of the Malayan Federation, the prospect of a similar retaliatory bill being mooted was also a possibility. A worried Claude Massey, the Australian Commissioner for Singapore and Malaya, privately informed the External Affairs Department Secretary that this possible outcome had only narrowly been averted through the efforts of Malcolm MacDonald, the British Commissioner General for Southeast Asia. Massey reported on 15 June 1949 that Dato Onn bin Ja'afar, the Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of Johore, and more importantly head of UMNO, had 'talked privately since the beginning of the year of introducing a discriminatory Bill in the Legislative Council of the Federation', but 'MacDonald has succeeded in dissuading him from this, and when questioned yesterday on the subject Dato Onn hedged, on the ground that he had not had time to study the implications of the Australian legislation'. Massey added that, regarding Tan's bill in the Singapore Legislative Council, the British governor and colonial authorities had 'promised considerable unofficial support in opposing the proposed measure'.<sup>4</sup>

Australian influence over the British colonial authorities did indeed result in the withdrawal of Tan's Immigration Bill that was aimed at stopping Australians from residing in Singapore, but not before Tan had made his point. On 19 October 1949, he introduced his Immigration Bill into the Legislative Council. He stated that the bill was designed to prevent the entry of people from countries that had a colour bar in their immigration programs similar to the White Australia Policy. However, on 15 November 1949, Tan withdrew the bill under the pretext that a comprehensive review of immigration policy was already under way.<sup>5</sup> Criticism of the White Australia Policy, according to Massey, had to be seen in the context of the local

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<sup>4</sup> Departmental Despatch no. 20/47, 15 June 1949. Australian Commissioner for Malaya to the Secretary Department of External Affairs Canberra, Reaction in Singapore to Australia's Immigration Legislation in Colony of Singapore Government and Administration in the Records of the Australian External Affairs Department, A1838/278 413/2/5/1 Part 1 (Australian Archives).

<sup>5</sup> *Proceedings of the First Legislative Council, Colony of Singapore, 2nd Session*, 15 November 1949, pp. 440 and 475.

politics of Malaya and Singapore as disguised anger at the colour bars against the colonial subjects. He believed that Tan's actions were part of his broader political platform in which he had 'espoused the cause of the locally domiciled against Colonial Rule and European monopoly of power in office'.<sup>6</sup> The Australian Commissioner reported to Canberra that 'the significance of Mr. Tan's move, as the Government of Singapore was quick to appreciate, lay in it being an indirect attack on the general European position here'.<sup>7</sup>

Massey, in his reports to Canberra, contextualised the protest against the White Australia Policy in terms of the anti-colonialist atmosphere of the times. He argued that 'the basis of agitation in such countries as Malaya and Singapore against the Australian immigration policy is the impression among Asians that it causes them to lose face'. Massey observed that 'the various races of this country are united on practically no grounds except common opposition to the monopoly of political power and social prestige by Europeans'. He added that 'a term which has recently become common is "local-born", which seems to mean anyone who is not European, and for the local born incessant pressure is applied in all questions of promotion in the Public Services, the granting of contracts and the like'. Attacking the White Australia Policy was an indirect way of criticising the colour bars against the 'local-born'. Massey concluded that attacking the White Australia Policy 'provides an easy way of attacking the local variant of White Ascendancy to fan any fires of racial resentment against Australia, the home country of very many of Malaya's Europeans. This is soft-spot political tactics in the general political warfare against Colonial rule'.<sup>8</sup>

### **Sporadic attacks on the white Australia Policy in the 1950s**

Resentment of the White Australia Policy remained throughout the 1950s but became more low-key as self-government and independence were gradually conceded by the British colonial authorities. Other factors were also at work in changing attitudes in Malaya and Singapore towards the White Australia Policy. On 31 January 1951, over a year after Tan's attempt to pass his bill to exclude Australians from Singapore, L. R. McIntyre, the Acting Australian Commissioner in Singapore, reported to Canberra on public feeling towards Australia. He noted that the morning editorial in the *Straits Times* for 31 January was 'the first public mention of Australia's immigration policy that we have had for many months', and

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<sup>6</sup> Australian Commissioner to the Department of External Affairs, 14 February 1950, Tan Chi Chung in BTSEA Malaya and Singapore Economic and General in the Records of the Australian External Affairs Department, A1838/278 413/4/1/1/1 Part 2 (Australian Archives).

<sup>7</sup> Australian Commissioner For Malaya to Secretary the Department of External Affairs, Annual Report on Malaya and Singapore for the Year 1949, 24 February 1950, Departmental Despatch No.3/50 in the Records of the Australian External Affairs Department, A1838/278 411/1/2/1 Part 1 (Australian Archives).

<sup>8</sup> Departmental Despatch no. 20/47 15 June 1949, Australian Commissioner for Malaya to the Secretary Department of External Affairs Canberra, Reaction in Singapore to Australia's Immigration Legislation in Colony of Singapore Government and Administration in the Records of the Australian External Affairs Department, A1838/278 413/2/5/1 Part 1 (Australian Archives).

provided evidence for his opinion that ‘public feeling towards Australia is at present friendly’. The editor of the *Straits Times* had written that tensions had eased because of the more relaxed attitude of the recently elected Menzies-led Liberal Government to the deportation cases and the good experiences of students from Malaya and Singapore studying in Australia, which were reported in the press. However, the Acting Commissioner cautioned that ‘it has to be borne in mind, however, that sensitive feelings on the question of our immigration policy lie not far from the surface, and could quickly be stirred into active and articulate resentment’.<sup>9</sup> The 1950s provide proof of the Acting Australian Commissioner’s assessment that resentment against the White Australia Policy remained ‘not far from the surface’.

Throughout the 1950s in Singapore, there was a succession of increasingly anti-colonialist governments, and members of these governments strongly criticised the White Australia Policy as a symbol of colonialism. In 1955, the SPP was thrown out of office at the elections, and the Labour Front with David Marshall as leader came to power in a new Legislative Assembly. Under the 1955 constitution, there were now more elected members than nominated members in the chamber. David Marshall became Chief Minister of Singapore’s first elected government. However, the British Governor remained all-powerful because he could veto any legislation in the Assembly. Marshall and the Labour Front wanted real self-government much sooner than the SPP’s conservative and gradualist approach allowed. In April 1956, Marshall led a delegation to London to ask for full self-government. He resigned in June 1956 after the British refused. Colonial officials in London feared that Singapore upon independence would become a communist state in Southeast Asia because of the strength of the communists in the city. The perception was widely held in Singapore that Australia was playing a key role in preventing the British authorities from granting full self-government because the Menzies Government wanted the British colonial presence in Southeast Asia to remain strong for Australia’s own defence and security.

In their attacks on Australia for denying them self-government, both David Marshall, as leader of the Labour Front, and Lee Kuan Yew, leader of the People’s Action Party (PAP) of Singapore, evoked the White Australia Policy as a symbol of the hated colonial order. On 7 February 1956, Marshall publicly said that he had ‘hoped Australia would help Singapore to get further away from the present colonial status’, but he noted that, ‘Australia, our nearest white neighbour, has maintained the superiority of the European races over the Asian people’. Marshall made it clear that ‘it would be appropriate that she take the lead in helping us. It is time that all countries recognized the equality of humanity’ (*Straits Budget*, 9 February 1956). The Australian Commissioner in Singapore reported back to Canberra on Marshall’s outburst. He commented that Marshall’s criticism of Australia’s racial policies and the White Australia Policy was an indirect target in

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<sup>9</sup> Mem. No.76 L. R. McIntyre, Acting Australian Commissioner to the Secretary Department of External Affairs Canberra, Reaction in Singapore to Australia’s Immigration Legislation, 31 January 1951, in Colony of Singapore Government and Administration in the Records of the Australian External Affairs Department, A1838/278 411/1/2/ 1 Part 1 (Australian Archives).

his attack on the colonial order and what Marshall perceived as Australian intentions to uphold the colonial system in Singapore.<sup>10</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, as head of the more staunchly anti-colonialist PAP, around the same time described Australian interest in the plans for Singapore self-government as an attempt 'to share in the colonial tutelage of this country'. He added that 'they are not our masters and we will have none of them' (Lee 1956:1731–32). During November 1955, Australian diplomatic representatives had one of their earliest encounters with Lee. According to the Australian Deputy Commissioner, he displayed open contempt for Australians based upon his past knowledge of them, which included Australian troops fleeing the crumbling colonial order at the fall of Singapore to the Japanese and the 1940s deportations of Malaysians and Singaporeans from Australia.<sup>11</sup>

In June 1959, the PAP assumed power under Lee Kuan Yew after securing a huge majority at the first fully democratic elections in Singapore. The new Government possessed only partial powers of self-government. The British still controlled defence, foreign policy, and even the internal security of the colony. Many in the PAP blamed Australia for this hamstrung constitution and saw it as a colonial power.<sup>12</sup> The uneasy relationship between the PAP Government and Australia marked the early years of self-government in Singapore. The Australian High Commissioner informed Canberra that Lee, as Prime Minister of Singapore, was 'suspicious of our general role in Asia'.<sup>13</sup> PAP leaders were wary of Australia behaving as a colonial power, and they articulated their fears by attacking the White Australia Policy. On 11 November 1959 in Jogjakarta, Toh Chin Chye, the Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore, attacked the White Australia Policy at a gathering of Colombo Plan aid recipients who were discussing, under the watchful eye of President Sukarno of Indonesia, the evils of colonialism. Toh remarked that Singapore was not happy about receiving aid from Australia under the Colombo Plan because 'politically, there is the stigma of the White Australia policy which grates on our people when they do not treat Asians with equality'. Toh announced that Singapore becoming a full member of the Colombo Plan countries was 'confirmation that Singapore has passed from colonial status into the ranks of independent countries'. He told Sukarno that developing countries sought aid from many countries because 'they do not want to be inveigled into any other form of

<sup>10</sup> Australian Commissioner to the Secretary Department of External Affairs Canberra, 29 February 1956 in Colony of Singapore Political General in the Records of the Australian External Affairs Department, A1838/2 3204/10/1/1 Part 1 (Australian Archives).

<sup>11</sup> Deputy High Commissioner to Minister, Department of External Affairs, 8 November 1955 in The Colony of Singapore—Political General in the Records of the Australian External Affairs Department, A1838/280 3024/2/1 Part 3 (Australian Archives).

<sup>12</sup> To the Secretary Department of External Affairs Canberra, from Gordon Jockel, interview with left-wing personalities, conversation with James Puthuchearry at University of Malaya on Wednesday 20 September 1961, p. 4 in Singapore Political General in the Records of the Australian External Affairs Department, A1838/280 3204/2/1 Part 10 (Australian Archives); and Report of High Commissioner's Lunch with T. T. Rajah and Ong Eng Guan of the PAP, 21 February 1957, in Colony of Singapore Political General in the Records of the Australian External Affairs Department, A1838/280 3204/2/1 Part 4 (Australian Archives).

<sup>13</sup> High Commissioner to Minister, Department of External Affairs, 30 June 1959 in Singapore—Economic Relations With Australia in the Records of the Australian External Affairs Department, A1838 751/1 Part 1 (Australian Archives).

colonialism, such as economic colonialism, and Singapore fully sympathises'. Toh described as 'first class words' Sukarno's description of Western aid 'as an attempt to redeem the evils of the past by cash payment in the present while hoping for a further dividend' (*Straits Times*, 12 November 1959). Upon returning to Singapore, Toh reiterated his remarks about the White Australia Policy, adding that 'no amount of economic aid can win the goodwill of Asians towards countries which practise racial discrimination' (*Straits Times*, 13 November 1959). Interestingly, David Marshall, now an opposition member, in a letter to the *Straits Times*, rebuked Toh. Marshall lamented that Toh's remarks were actually aimed at pandering to anti-colonialist sentiment in Singapore, and were 'appeals to emotions of the local voters' (*Straits Times*, 23 November 1959). Australian diplomats in Singapore, likewise, saw the Deputy Prime Minister's remarks attacking the White Australia Policy as indirect criticism of white colonialism in Southeast Asia.<sup>14</sup>

### **The threat to deport two Malay pearl divers in Darwin, 1961-2**

In the Federation of Malaya during the 1950s there was no outburst of resentment against the White Australia Policy. The leadership of the country was under Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman (a Malay prince) who led a conservative-minded alliance of traditional Malay leaders who ruled UMNO, Chinese businessmen who controlled the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), and Indian businessmen whose political party was the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). This alliance had won almost all the parliamentary seats at the first elections in 1955 and assumed full powers at independence in 1957. The socially conservative leadership of Malaya contrasted strongly with the leftist Singapore governments of the 1950s, and thus it engaged in very little anti-colonialist rhetoric. The Tunku valued Australia's help in economically assisting the Federation and helping fight the MCP during the Malayan Emergency. Also, the Tunku never publicly commented upon the White Australia Policy in the 1950s because no public deportations of citizens of Malaya occurred. However, in 1961, such an incident arose when the Australian Government issued orders to deport two Malay pearl divers back to the Federation of Malaya. The pearl industry, which had been exempt from the White Australia Policy, collapsed, and the two divers, who had resided in Australia for 12 and 7 years, respectively, were to be returned to Malaya. On 22 September 1961, Alexander Downer, the Immigration Minister, signed the deportation order for Sainal bin Hashim and Daris bin Saris despite protests from Darwin municipal authorities and citizens. Over 1100 of Darwin's 12,000 residents had signed a petition requesting that the Australian Government let the two men stay (Riddett 1995). The reaction of members of the public and political parties in Malaya and

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<sup>14</sup> D. W. McNicol, Commissioner, to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, Singapore (Draft Notes for Prime Minister's Brief) 25 March 1960 in Singapore—Political General in the Records of the Australian External Affairs Department, A1838/280 3024/2/1 Part 8 (Australian Archives).

Singapore to these deportations of their fellow citizens contrasted with that of the deportation of the seamen in 1947.

In the early 1960s, the Tunku both publicly and privately had said that he did not condemn the White Australia Policy (Rivett 1975). He continued this approach when, in October 1961, a question was raised in the parliament of the Malayan Federation asking if there was to be 'any action taken by the Malayan Government to help the two Malaysians in Darwin who have been ordered by the Australian Government to leave the country'. The Tunku merely replied that the pearl divers' terms of contract as indentured labourers had specifically stated that they were only allowed to work in Australia as pearl divers, whose working permits were renewed annually. He added that 'from this it is obvious that this is an internal matter of the Australian Government pertaining to its immigration policy and regulations and therefore the Federation Government is not in a position to interfere with the internal administration of another country'.<sup>15</sup> Although Malaya, as independent country, could have introduced retaliatory legislation against the White Australia Policy there were no proposals for such action, unlike in the 1940s.

The English-language newspapers and the ethnic press of Malaya and Singapore gave extensive coverage to the threat to deport the Malay pearl divers. However, there was only limited editorial comment on the issue compared to when the seamen were deported more than a decade before. The main Malay papers throughout both Malaya and Singapore, *Utusan Melayu* and the *Berita Harian*, devoted no significant editorial space to the issue. Oddly, the Indian Press had the most editorial space on the proposed deportations. In September 1961, the *Tamil Murasu*, rather than espousing strong anti-colonialist rhetoric, only urged a 'more humanitarian attitude' from the Australian Government (*Daily Digest of Chinese, Malay, and Tamil Press*, 29 September 1961). The perception of the White Australia Policy as a remnant of colonialism that prevented Australia from being warmly embraced as a neighbour by the countries of Southeast Asia was present in remarks on the proposed deportations. In October 1961, the *Tamil Murasu* argued that having the word 'White affixed to this policy' does nothing but 'injure the feeling of self-respect among Asians' (*Daily Digest of Chinese, Malay, and Tamil Press*, 2 October 1961).

In May 1962, the Australian Government eventually reversed its decision to deport the Malayan divers in response to the mass demonstrations against the deportations in Darwin. The *Tamil Murasu* noted that 'this wise decision is a turning point in the "White Australia" policy', which will 'pave the way to improve the good relations and co-operation between Australia and S.E. Asian countries, particularly Malaya and Indonesia' (*Daily Digest of Chinese, Malay, and Tamil Press*, 7 May 1962). The *Straits Times* also wrote that the decision was 'a turning point in the "White Australia Policy"', but cautioned that it 'does not remove the whole affront to Asian feeling by any means' (*Straits Times*, 3 May 1962).

In Malaya and Singapore, spokesmen of several major political parties and organisations also saw the Australian Government's decision to back down in the

<sup>15</sup> *Parliamentary Debates Dewan Ra'ayat (House of Representatives) Official Report*, Vol. 3, No. 16, 16 October 1961, pp. 1674-75.

face of public protest in Australia as a sign that Australia was turning away from attitudes that were relics of colonialism and moving towards seeing its newly independent neighbours as equals. Inche Hussein Nordin, the Secretary-General of UMNO and a Member of the Malayan Parliament, said that 'the decision augurs well for the future relationship of Australia with Asian countries'. Inche Ahmad Boestamam, leader of the Socialist Front and a Member of the Malayan Parliament, said that the decision was 'a good signpost to Australia's future relationship with its Asian neighbours'. He added that 'whether the decision will be taken as a precedent to similar cases in future remains to be seen, but one thing stands out—Australia is now willing to relax its rigid attitude towards Asian immigrants' (*Straits Times*, 4 May 1962).

The low-key nature of the protest over the threaten deportation of the two Malay divers was evidenced by the little that Australian diplomats wrote about it in their communications with Canberra.<sup>16</sup> There was not the large volume of dispatches with extensive comment that occurred over the deported seamen in 1947. Public opinion in post-independence Malaya and Singapore, although still containing much anti-colonialist sentiment, was not as vehement in its condemnation of the White Australia Policy as its pre-independence feelings had been. Criticism of the White Australia Policy was at times couched in the rhetoric of anti-colonialism, yet this language did not possess the intensity of the 1940s. As early as November 1959, Lee Kuan Yew, when asked whether the White Australia Policy was 'an insult to Asia' by an Australian foreign correspondent, commented that he had 'ceased to be concerned about these things, as we have more pressing things to attend to. But I suppose it is a bit outmoded in this world'.<sup>17</sup> The reversal of the deportation orders in May 1962 was even seen by many observers in Malaya and Singapore as a 'turning point', which would usher in a more equal relationship between Australia and its Southeast Asian neighbours rather than one based on colonialism that the White Australia Policy seemed to symbolise.

Independence for Malaya and self-government for Singapore did not mean the end of resentment against the White Australia Policy. The racist stereotype of Australia in Malaya (later Malaysia) and Singapore persisted well after the liberalisation of the White Australia Policy in 1966 and its dismantlement in 1973 (Blackburn 1999a). Criticism of the image of Australia as a 'white bastion' in the South Pacific, growing in population because of a whites-only immigration policy, remained common among educated opinion in Singapore (Blackburn 1999b). Lee, according to Australian diplomatic personnel in Singapore in the early 1960s, believed in the stereotype of Australia as a 'white bastion', which excluded non-whites while assisting and encouraging European immigrants.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Sav. 25, 20 October 1961, from the High Commissioner, Kuala Lumpur, Political Development in Malaya in the fortnight ending 20th 1961, in Federation of Malaya—Political General in The Records of the Australian External Affairs Department, A1838 3026/2/1 Part 7 (Australian Archives).

<sup>17</sup> Sav. 11, Bruce Grant Interview with Lee Kuan Yew sent 9 November 1959, in Singapore Colony—Political General in The Records of the Australian External Affairs Department, A1838/280 3024/2/1 Part 8 (Australian Archives).

<sup>18</sup> A. Jockel, Informal Record of Meeting with Singapore Authorities, November 1960, in Singapore Colony—Political General in The Records of the Australian External Affairs Department, A1838/280 3024/2/1 Part 8 (Australian Archives).

However, there was undoubtedly a softening of attitudes in Southeast Asia towards the White Australia Policy from the 1940s to the 1960s. This process has been commented upon by historians and political scientists. The traditional explanations for this change in attitudes have included the hardening political climate during the Cold War, which made Australia seem a friend in the face of a belligerent and communist China after 1949. The financial and military assistance given by Australia during the Malayan Emergency and Indonesian Confrontation in the 1950s and 1960s reinforced this image of Australia as a friend (Meaney 1995). The more relaxed handling of deportation cases under the Menzies Government has also usually been viewed as an important reason for the less vocal antagonism towards Australia's immigration policy (Viviani 1992). Other crucial factors that have been singled out as being responsible for reducing the intensity of criticism of the White Australia Policy include the appreciation felt by many Southeast Asian countries for the assistance given under the Colombo Plan and the good will generated by the considerable number of students from Southeast Asia studying in Australia (Tregonning 1961). The impact of the decolonisation of Southeast Asia on perceptions of the White Australia Policy has tended to be somewhat overlooked as a factor in reducing the intensity of criticism of the White Australia Policy. The comments of many prominent Malaysians and Singaporeans suggest that before decolonisation, the White Australia Policy was hated as a symbol of the prevailing colonial order that was based on white racial dominance, while after decolonisation, it was seen as 'outmoded' in the changed political context of newly independent countries that had once been colonies.

The history of protest and resentment of the White Australia Policy in Malaya and Singapore from the late 1940s to the early 1960s tends to bear out the explanation offered by A. P. Rajah, Singapore's High Commissioner in Canberra, to his Australian diplomatic counterparts in 1972. Public opinion in Southeast Asia, according to Rajah, had historically viewed the policy as a symbol of colonialism, and by criticising it the people of these countries were indirectly attacking colonialism. Protest against the White Australia Policy was more intense when the people of Malaya and Singapore were ruled by the British and their lives affected by the many colour bars imposed by the colonial authorities. After independence and self-government, these colour bars were dismantled, and in the 1960s the people of Malaya and Singapore were no longer dominated by white colonialism as they had been in the 1940s. Thus, in the new post-colonial period, public opinion in Malaya and Singapore was less outraged by the White Australia Policy, although the people still resented it as a relic of colonialism.

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