

Constitutions and Elections

The 'battle' for independence and
leadership of Singapore

Continuing the story

- People were starting to mobilise themselves to make an impact on Singapore
- Strikes and riots made their voices heard, but rarely achieved sustained progress
- With political parties, we start to see a real shift towards independence



Overview of Topic

In this topic, we are studying how Singapore gradually progressed towards independence from the perspectives of the various political parties and leaders

By the end of this topic, you should be able to:

- Recognise specific political parties and their ideologies
- Know the actions, vision and characteristics of the key personnel of these parties
- Understand the British perspective and their key considerations for merdeka

A Game of Seats

- Battlegrounds turn to control of seats in the Legislative Assembly (or Parliament)
- Fierce competition in three landmark general elections (1948, 1955, 1959)
- Winners of these ‘battles’ get to implement their vision and policies for Singapore

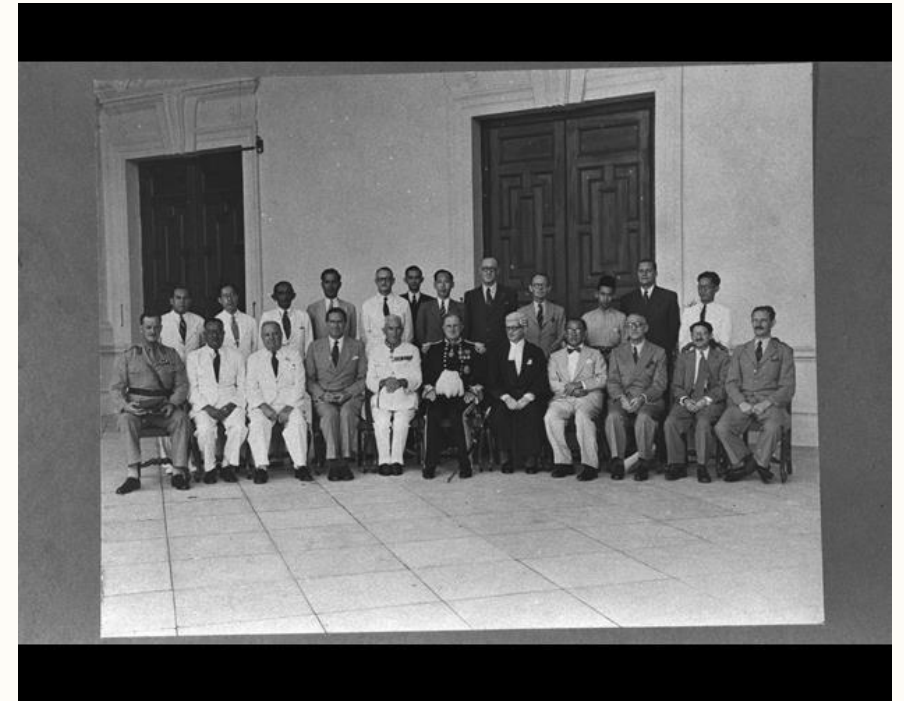


Prologue: A New Vote

A long time ago in a colony not so far
away...

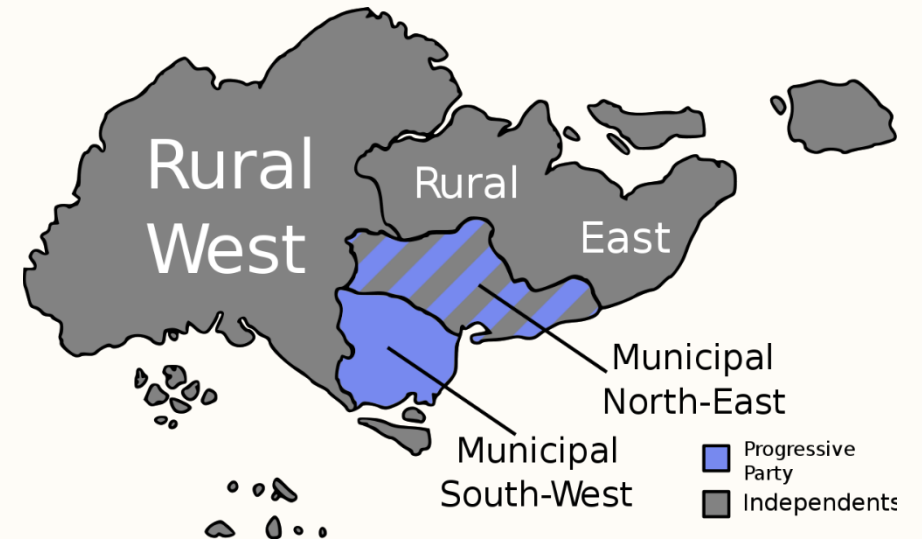
Let (our) people vote

- In 1946, British planned for a new Legislative Assembly with 6 out of 22 officials to open to the 1948 general election
- Singapore's first election!
- Only 200,000 eligible voters as British subjects and only 22,395 actually voted



1948 General Election

- Only 2% of population voted
- 6 seats distributed across 4 constituencies
- SPP won 3 out of the 6 seats, first political party in Singapore elected into government
- Remaining 3 won by independents



Introducing our first character: Progressive Party

- Formed in 1947
- Conservative party, wanted to cooperate with British for gradual change
- Led by English-educated lawyers John Laycock, C. C. Tan, and Nasir Mallal
- Had support of English-educated professionals

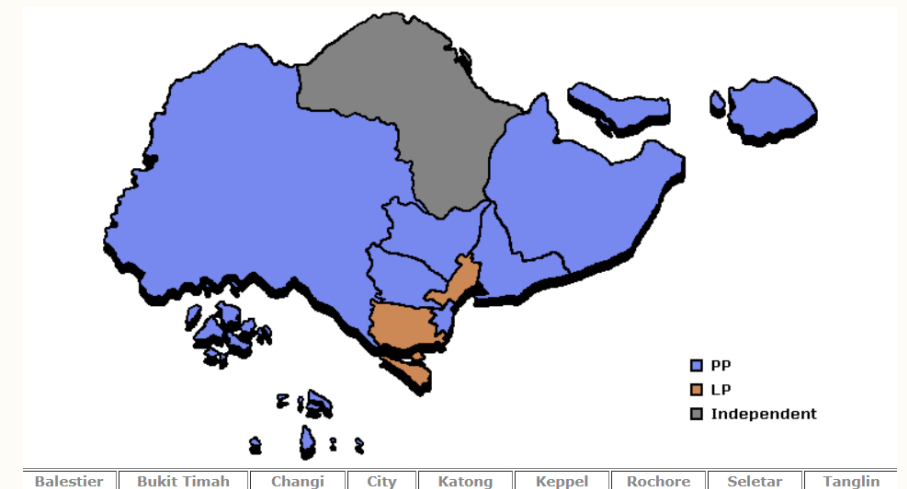


Connect-the-dots: Why did the SPP win?

Is this result representative of the people?

1951 General Election

- Number of seats increased to 9 and 25,065 voted
- New challenger, Labour Party, led by Lim Yew Hock, more radical and left-leaning
- SPP still won a majority of 6 out of 9 seats; LP won 2
- Voters still conservative about independence



Chapter 1: Commission Impossible

Re-writing the constitution

Rendel Commission


- British government wanted to increase local participation
- Set up committee in July 1953 to review constitution
- Led by Sir George Rendel, with representatives of all races
- Aimed to prepare locals for eventual union with Malaya



What's new in the Constitution?

- Legislative Assembly now has 32 members, 25 elected
- Voter eligibility expanded, and automatically registered
- Largest party in the Assembly granted 6 positions in Council of Ministers (or Cabinet)
- Limited self-government: domestic issues except law, finance and security





Footnote: What is a Constitution?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UzKD8rZCc0>

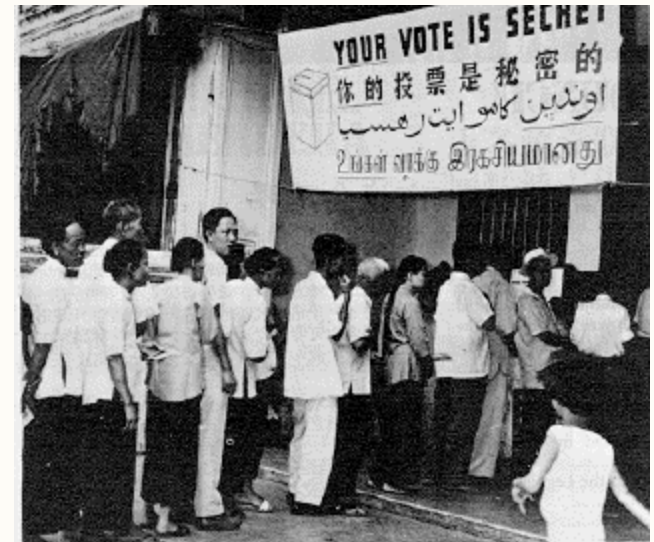


Chapter 2: PUB-GE Battle Royale

‘GE’ for ‘General Election’

Lead-up to the 1955 election

- New constitution generated more public interest
- Eligible voters increased to 300,000
- 8 parties took part in election, 6 of them for the first time
- Arguably the most closely-fought election in our history



Dramatis Personae



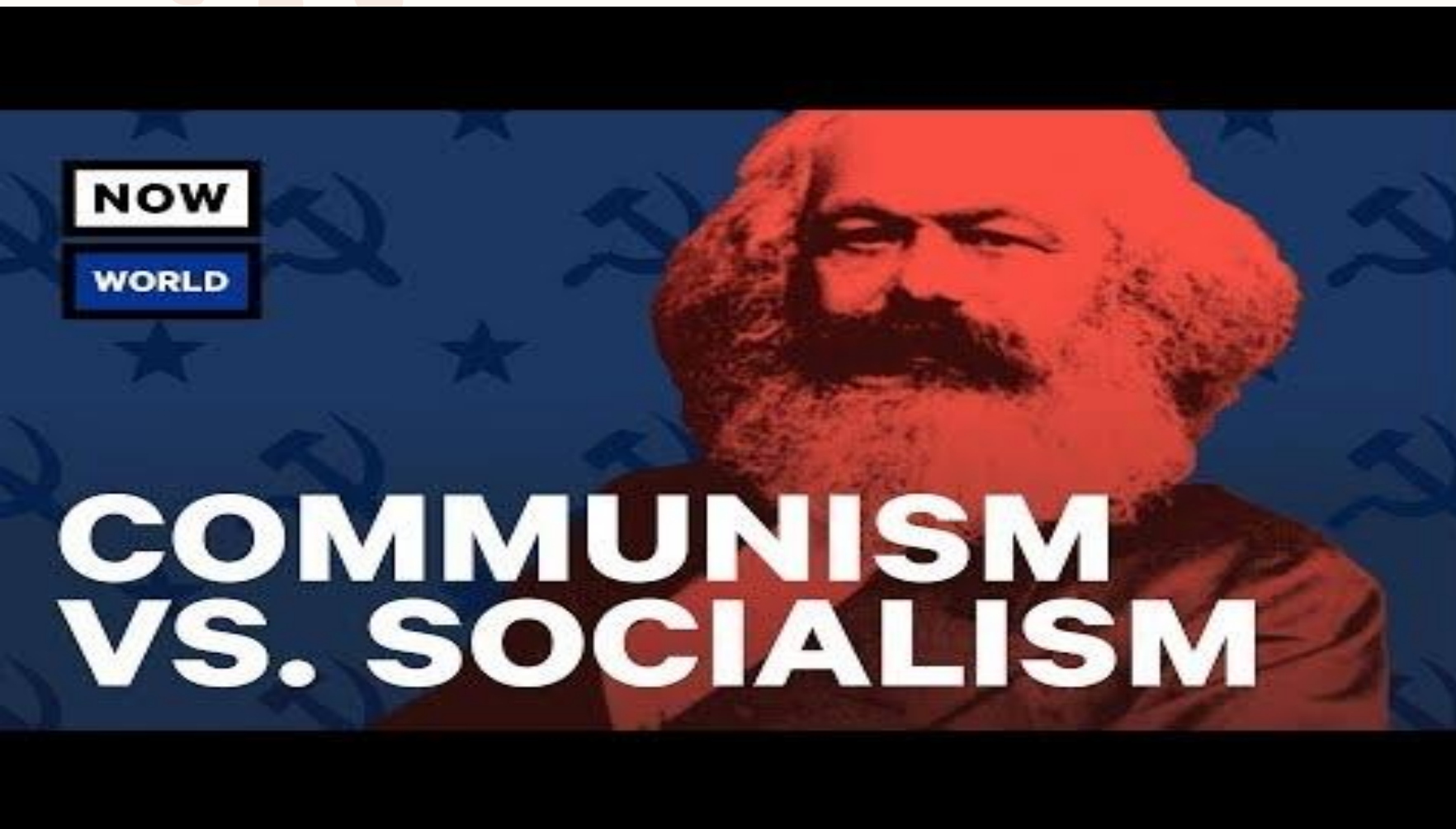
Singapore
Progressive Party
was the
incumbent leader



Main Lead: Labour Front

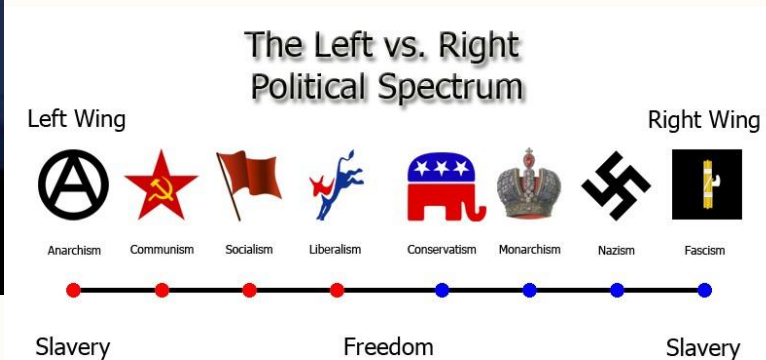
- Labour Party reformed in 1955 as Labour Front
- Led by Lim Yew Hock, David Marshall, and Francis Thomas
- Inspired by British Labour Party and saw themselves as socialists (left-wing)
- Opposed to Communist methods (too left-wing)





Socialism?
Communism?
What's the
difference?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrtDZ-LOXFw>

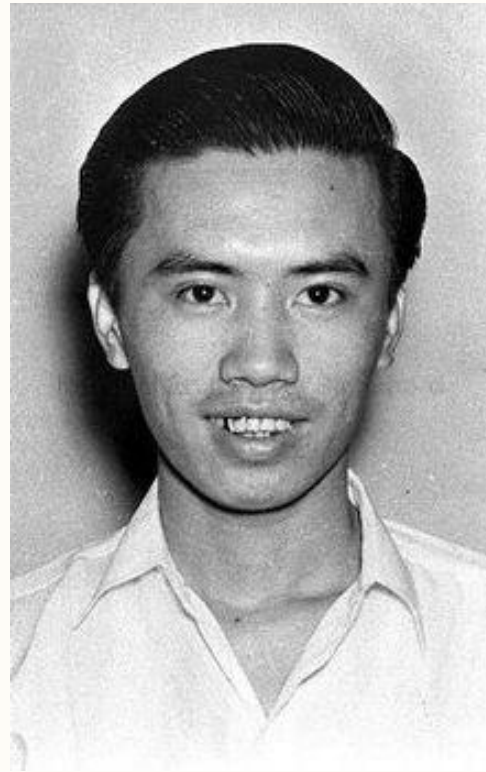


Second Lead: People's Action Party

- Established in 1954 by moderates led by Lee Kuan Yew and radical leftists led by Lim Chin Siong
- Lee had support of English-educated intellectuals but not Chinese working-class
- Lim was influential trade unionist, popular with Chinese-educated population



Lim Chin Siong – A remarkable career forgotten by history



- As 18 year old Chinese High student, organised boycott of school examinations to protest lack of education opportunities, was expelled
- Skilled orator, especially in Hokkien, trade union leader at 21
- At 22, elected as MP for Bukit Timah in 1955

Calefare: Democratic Party (1955 edition)

- Supported by Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce
- Led by rubber tycoon, Tan Eng Joo
- Sponsored by wealthy businessmen, nicknamed “The Millionaires’ Party”
- Wanted Chinese education, culture, and citizenship rights



Calefare: The Alliance

- Comprised United Malays National Organisation, Malayan Chinese Association, and Malay Union
- Aimed to extend the communal politics of Malaya to Singapore
- Malay Union sought to protect the rights of the Malays



Activity: 1955 Election

- Page 86 of the textbook, Source 15 shows policies and ideologies of each party
- Pick a party you would represent in 1955 election
- **What is your party's core message?**
- **Who amongst the population would be your target audience? Why?**

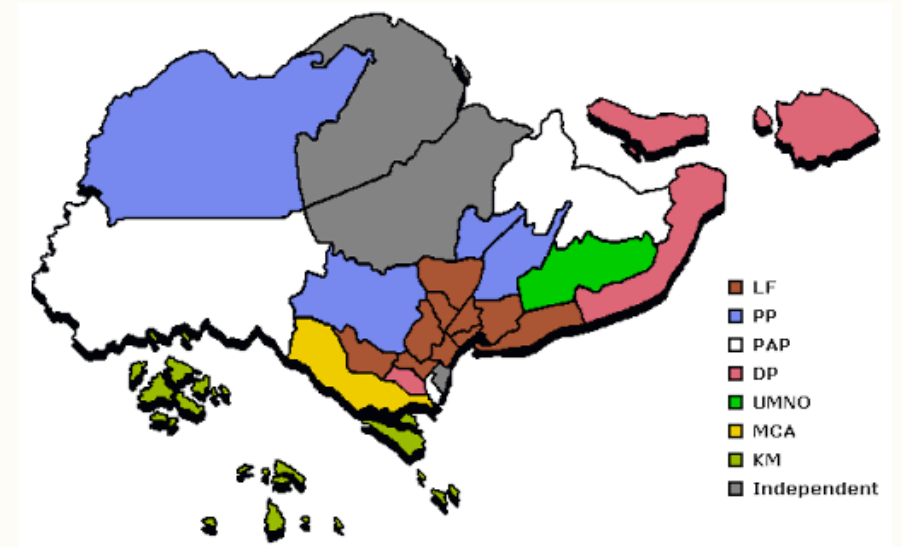


The Result

*“The votes cast in Singapore counted for...
are conclusive of the results...”*

1955 Election Result

- 158,075 voters participated
- Labour Front won highest number of seats: 10 out of 25
- Progressive Party: 4 seats
- People's Action Party: 3 seats
- Three Alliance parties won 1 seat each
- **How should the government be formed?**



Coalition Government

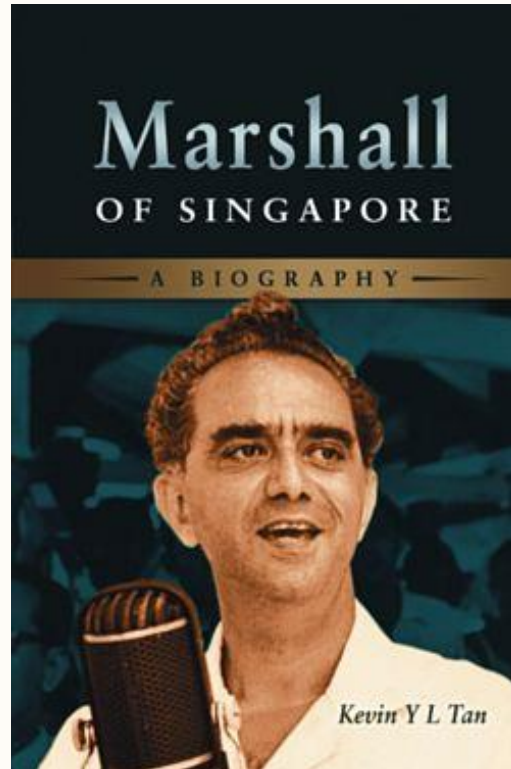
- A government formed by two or more parties
- LF struck a deal with Alliance parties, offered a minister position for their support
- Had 13 seats combined, a bare majority
- **How strong was their mandate™? What challenges do you anticipate?**



Chapter 3: David and Goliaths

Time for some Marshall arts

David Marshall



- A lawyer of Jewish heritage
- Volunteered to fight the Japanese, survived as a POW
- Known for his eloquence in trials and speeches
- Had a knack for theatricality and media-friendly sound-bites

The Task Ahead

- LF came to power based on key campaign promises
- Marshall needed to achieve them as soon as possible in order to maintain legitimacy
- While dealing with a precarious majority and vocal opposition from Lee Kuan Yew and Lim Chin Siong



Labour Front's Promises




- Creation of a Singapore citizenship
- Repeal Emergency regulations
- Increased social welfare
- **KEY:** Immediate self-government

Challenge #1 – Social Unrests

- Hock Lee Bus Riot was Marshall's first test
- Torn between his sympathy for the workers and students and the need for order
- Refused governor's instruction to send in troops, pursued talks
- Eventually negotiated a compromise





When Chinese middle school students joined the protests, Marshall did not take stern measures as he sympathised with their grievances regarding vernacular education


“Our son is as one who is ill. He lies stricken with chicken pox, his body a mass of red spots... This is not the time for the whip or the knife.”

He officially recognised the Chinese Middle School Students' Union and announced a committee to address their concerns

Mr Nice Guy?

What do these actions tell us about him?






When the British government accused the PAP in the Assembly of being a front for the communists and instigating the unrests, Marshall did not take advantage of this but actually defended them as being 'decent men'

This was despite PAP's Lim Chin Siong and Fong Swee Suan relentless criticism of Marshall's government and the British in speeches that stirred up the workers and students

Mr Nice Guy?

**What do these actions
tell us about him?**






Lee Kuan Yew wrote that union leaders “now had the full measure of Marshall”:


“They knew they had a swing door to push. The way in which the SBWU had fought and won now gave all trade unions – workers and leaders, communists and non-communists – confidence that they had much to gain if they, too, showed fight”

Response to
Marshall’s
handling

**Did Marshall make a big
mistake?**

**Is there a right way to
govern Singapore?**





Businessmen, European expatriates and conservative English-educated community were furious


Straits Times headlines declared it an “unconditional surrender”

From early April until December 1955, Singapore witnessed 260 labour protests, more than one for every working day in the year

Response to Marshall's handling

Did Marshall make a big mistake?


Is there a right way to govern Singapore?



Challenge #2 – British Reluctance


- Marshall's key campaign promise was full self-government from the British
- Had to convince the British that Singapore was stable and ready to govern itself
- **What does stability mean to the British in the Cold War context?**






In his own words

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2MmHqRh9Y8>






To try and convince Britain of Singapore's readiness, Marshall planned a Merdeka Week in March 1956 to welcome visiting British Members of Parliament


Marshall organised a rally at Kallang Airport where he intended to present a signed petition demanding self-government to the British

However, a huge crowd of PAP supporters joined the rally, singing communist songs and waving communist placards

The Merdeka Week Fiasco

What impression do you think the British MPs took away from this?






Despite the efforts of Marshall and other politicians to calm them down, the crowd turned violent and attacked the police

The British MPs hid inside the airport, but bricks started flying through the windows as the violence worsened

Eventually, the police had to quickly escort the MPs away to safety

The Merdeka Week Fiasco

What impression do you think the British MPs took away from this?





“We want a Malayan merdeka! And we will get it!”


– Marshall’s promise shortly before the all-party delegation left for London

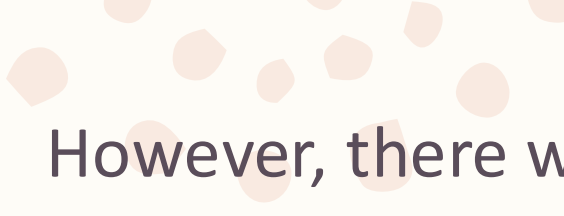
Marshall staked his reputation on successfully negotiating full self-government from the British

The talks commenced on 23 April 1956 and lasted for three weeks

Merdeka Conference

What was the British’s fear if they were to grant Singapore more independence?





However, there was not much goodwill between the two sides


The British saw Marshall as a demagogue, “vaguely socialistic and violently anti-colonial” and did not want to make big concessions

Marshall described Britain’s offer of limited self-government as “Christmas pudding with arsenic”

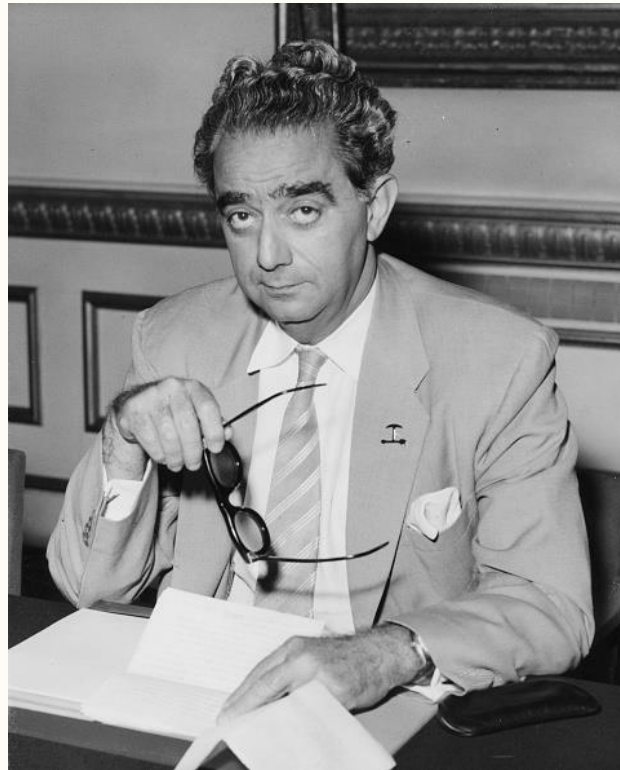
The talks broke down and Marshall, having failed his promise, stepped down as Chief Minister on his return from London, replaced by Lim Yew Hock

Merdeka Conference

What was the British’s fear if they were to grant Singapore more independence?



His Reflections



"I got the impression they were not confident that I could hold my ground against the communists. And any independence they gave me would merely seep through to strengthen the communist position in Singapore."

- David Marshall (1984)

Legacy

Significant contributions to SG:

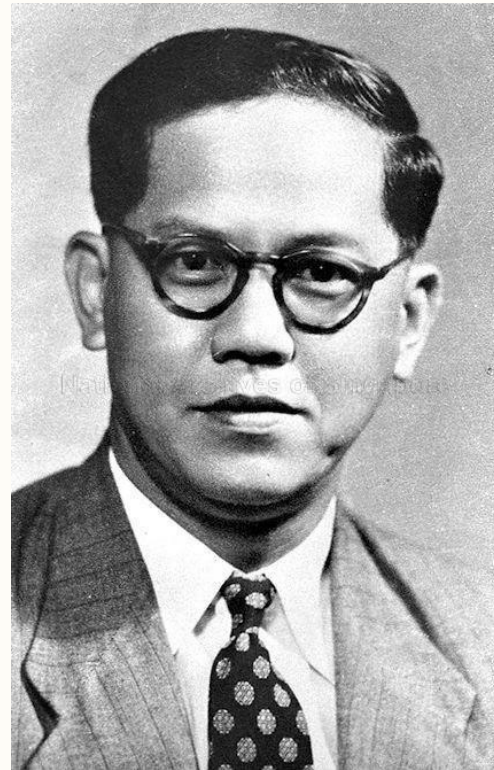
- Made British recognise his authority as Chief Minister
- Appointed a committee to address Chinese education
- Drew up proposals for a single Singapore citizenship
- Passed a Labour Ordinance to restrict working hours



Chapter 4: Yew can do it

Second time's the charm

Lim Yew Hock, Singapore's Second Chief Minister



- Studied at Raffles Institution
- Founding member of the Labour Front
- Succeeded Marshall as Chief Minister when he resigned
- Became a Malaysian citizen after separation and was Malaysia's High Commissioner in Australia

No More Mr Nice Guy

“My encounter with [the communists] was a battle of wits as well as nerves.”

- Lim’s government was even shakier as two Labour Front MPs defected
- Only controlled 11 out of 25 seats, a minority government
- Needed a show of strength to legitimise his authority



The Purge

- Banned several alleged communist organisations and unions, like the SCMSSU
- Triggered counter protests
- Instead of backing down, Lim Yew Hock sent in the police with tear gas
- 13 people died, 123 injured, and 300 were detained or banished



How You Like That

- His efforts greatly impressed the British, who felt Lim's government could protect Britain's strategic interests
- Second all-party delegation to London in March 1957 succeeded
- Obtained full self-government with joint authority on internal security



The Double-Edged Sword

- Lim's harsh stance on the unions angered the Chinese-educated and the workers
- This made him unpopular and he was accused of being a "fascist" and a "running dog of the British"
- This set the stage for the 1959 elections with a new constitution...

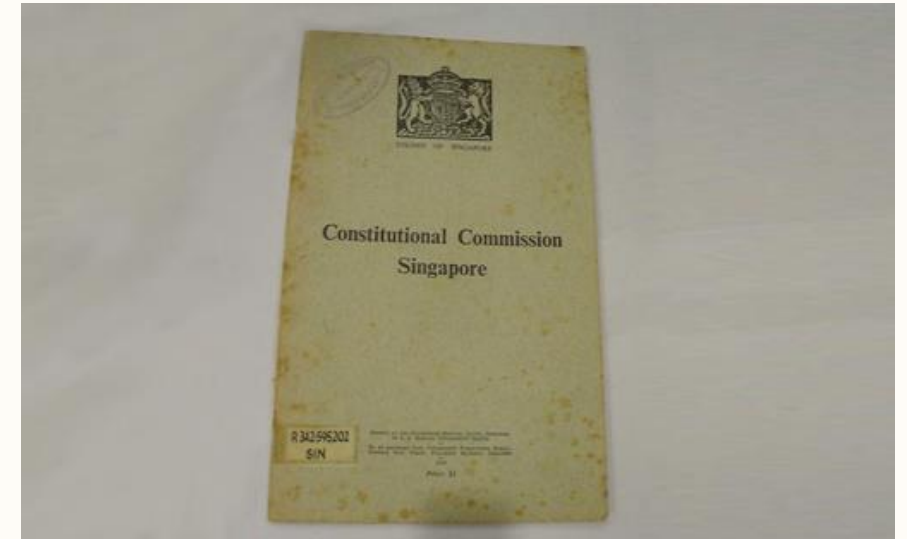


Chapter 5: Thunderbolts and Lightning

Singaporean Rhapsody

Another Election, Another Constitution

- Fully elected Legislative Assembly with 51 seats
- British Governor replaced by the Yang di-Pertuan Negara as the head of state
- Internal security will be managed by a council of representatives from Singapore, UK and Malaya



Lee Kuan Yew



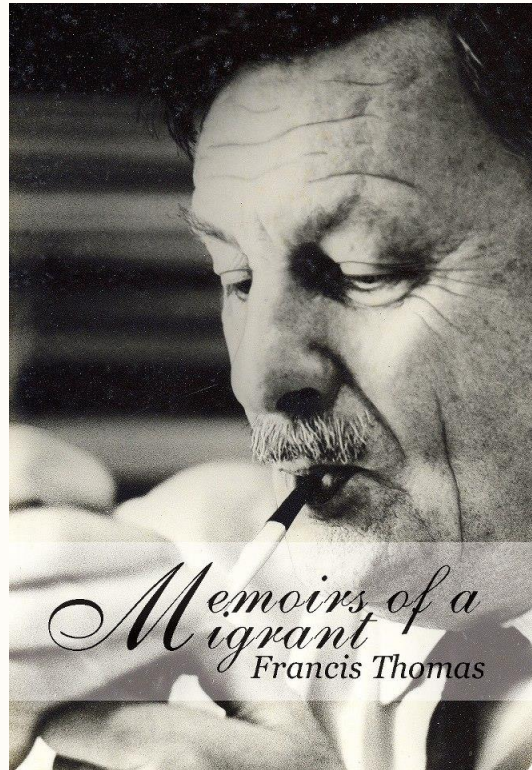
- Studied in Raffles Institution
- Met many radicals as legal advisor for unions, which led to the founding of PAP
- Shrewd politician, excelled in debates, a constant thorn in Marshall and Lim's sides
- Singapore's first and longest serving Prime Minister at 31.5 years

The PAP on the Offensive

- Lee's PAP was ready to exploit Lim Yew Hock's unpopularity
- Started a pre-election campaign with weekly mass rallies
- Had comprehensive political, economic and social policies
- Accused the LF of corruption and misuse of funds



A PAP Smear?



- The allegations piled on the pressure on already-weak minority government
- An LF cabinet minister switched sides and supported LKY's calls for a committee to investigate
- The Labour Front government collapsed and the party split

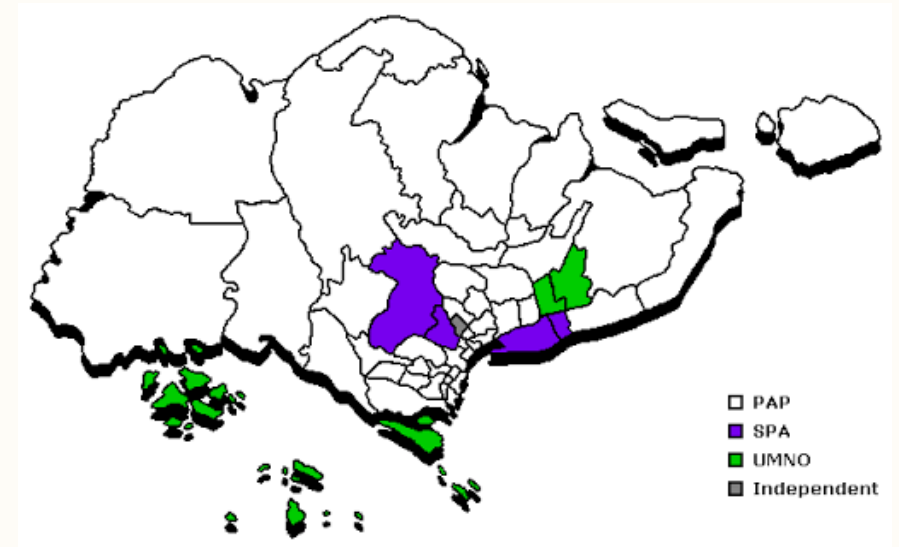
Men In White

- Inquiry hearings held weeks before the 1959 elections
- The disclosures and rumours completely discredited the existing government
- In contrast, PAP campaigned in all-white uniform, symbolising incorruptibility
- **How would this sway voters?**



The 1959 General Election

- 528,000 voters participated out of 586,000 eligible voters
- Lim Yew Hock's rebranded Singapore People's Alliance won 4 seats
- However, LKY's PAP, supported by Chinese majority, won by a landslide, securing 43 of 51 seats



The Final Irony



I guide others to a treasure I cannot possess.

- David Marshall fought to extend citizenship and voting rights to the Chinese
- Lim Yew Hock's harsh methods sacrificed the support of the Chinese to get British approval for self-rule
- PAP reaped the rewards to form first government under full internal self-governance