

28TH JANUARY 1950

TALK GIVEN TO THE MALAYAN FORUM AT MALAYA

HALL LONDON IN 28 JANUARY 1950 BY LEE KUAN YEW

"THE RETURNED STUDENT"

PLATITUDES AND CONTROVERSY

This is not a learned paper with carefully garnered and marshalled facts, buttressed by an impressive mass of statistics. Rather it is a personal evaluation of the political problems facing us, and a personal interpretation of the lines along which we should act if we are to rise up to the situation instead of waiting passively for events to overtake and overwhelm us. Its purpose is to stimulate rather than to inform. Many of my propositions may be controversial, but where it is a choice between platitudes and personal convictions. I feel it is my duty to state my convictions vigorously, for one great obstacle to a rapid and orderly political development of Malaya, has been and still is the Malayan habit of ignoring unpalatable facts and avoiding unpleasant controversy.

CRUMBS FROM THE TABLE, BRITISH & JAPANESE

The superior social and economic position of the returned student is a fact in Malayan Society. Whether this privileged position enjoyed as a class is justifiable is quite another matter. But it is the inevitable accompaniment of the supremacy of the British in the country. The English in Malaya forms the ruling caste. He has super-imposed on the people, his language, institutions and way of life. His is the model of perfection, and the closer an approximation to his standards, the individual Asiatic attains the better his social and economic position. That is beyond controversy. In the few years the Japanese were the ruling caste, there were already signs that the nearer one was to being a Japanese, the better off one was going to be in a Japanese dominated Malaya. Had they stayed long enough, I have no doubt that those of us who could speak Japanese, who behaved like the Japs., and who had been educated in Japan, would have been the most favoured class of Malayan. For they would have been the most acceptable to the rulers, who because of their economic and military hold on the country could dispense such extra privileges. Many of us will remember the unhappy spectacle of English-speaking, western educated colleagues suddenly changing in their manner of speech, dress and behaviour, making blatant attempts at being good imitation Japs. Indeed some were sent to Japan so as to be better educated to enlighten their ignorant countrymen in Malaya and doubtless also to become the privileged class, second only to the genuine Japanese himself. It is pertinent to note that the Malayan student, returned from Britain ceased under

Japanese domination to occupy that second class status, except in so far as it was impracticable to dispense with his services for the time being.

It is four years now since the British have returned. For them, nothing could be better than to revert to the pleasant orderly society of 1939. Once again the English educated are given their old privileges: and, of this English educated class, the returned student form the uppermost crust.

OUR EMINENT NEIGHBOURS

It is relevant to observe the part this class (the returned student) has played in British dominated India, Dutch dominated Indonesia, and American dominated Philippines. In the brief space of four years, we have seen the emergence of six Asiatic countries to national independence: India, Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon,

Indonesia, Philippines, Malaya now finds herself the only remnant of Colonial imperialism left in South East Asia surrounded by these new Asiatic national states.

The only other fragment of colonialism left in Asia is French Indo China, and at this very moment, we are watching the last desperate French attempts to salvage what little they can from that unhappy country for the French national income.

In all these new Asiatic states, it is the returned students who have led the fight for independence. The Indians, Pakistanis, Ceylonese, and Burmese, returned from England. The Indonesians returned from Holland, the Philippino returned from America, they have formed the spear-head of national movements. We now see as Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawarharlal Nehru, educated at Harrow and Cambridge, as premier of Pakistan, Mohamed Liaquat Ali Khan, educated at Oxford, as premier of Burma, Thakin Nu educated at Cambridge, as premier of Indonesia, Dr. Hatta, educated at Leyden University, Holland, and last but not least, as leader of Viet Minh, Dr. Ho Chi Minh, educated at Paris, where he first joined the Communist party.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

If this should conjure visions of future greatness in any of us, I hasten to add that the pattern of events never quite repeats itself, and there are cogent reasons for believing that this pattern will not do so in Malaya. Had there not been the difficult racial problem in Malaya, had there not been a Chinese community almost as large as Malaya, had the population been six million, all Malays, I venture to suggest that British imperialism in Malaya, would be well on its way out. But the fact being what they are, we must accept British rule for some time, time during which we can attain a sufficient degree of social cohesion, and arouse a sufficient degree of civic and

political consciousness among the various races of Malaya. This time is vital if we are to avoid a political vacuum that may otherwise follow British withdrawal from Malaya.

AND WHAT IS

Returned students in any British colony fall broadly into two classes:-

- (1) the rich man's son.
- (2) the impecunious government scholar.

The first on returning home finds himself better equipped to be a bigger and more efficient capitalist entrepreneur. The second finds himself linked up with the colonial administrative system, given positions second only to the Englishman who must necessarily in a colonial system always be at the top. But, they will be better off than their fellow Asiatics who have not been to England. Hence both groups on returning to Malaya find themselves a part of the vested interests of the country, both, somewhat reluctant to dislodge the system under which they enjoy these advantages.

BRITISH DILEMMA

It is significant that Colonial Office policy since the war has been to increase the number of scholars sent to England. This is no doubt, in part a sincere attempt to carry out Labour's election programme of 1945, when they promised that the colonial peoples should be helped to self-government. But, I think there is equally no doubt that this policy is also intended, to a large extent, to ally the potential leaders of a potential Malayan nationalist movement, with the existence of British rule in Malaya. These men and women, if left frustrated and under privileges in Malaya, would turn their energies to the overthrow of a system where they are not given the opportunity to attain what they feel is their rightful due from Society. So it is that empires exist, that one nation by economic and military supremacy is able to dominate another and to continue to keep it subject for a long time afterwards, although there is no intrinsic superiority in individuals of the master over individuals of the subject race. But no matter how enlightened a colonial policy, it must finally end. That is the British dilemma. To quote from a learned treatise by a Professor of Anthropology at London University who was in Malaya before the war, and whose book "Malay Fisherman" was published before the British re-occupation, at page 306:-

"Quite apart from any disorganisation resulting from the war, and from any conservatism, apathy and suspicion that may be met, there are two major political and economic issues that have to be faced. One is the question of the kind of relations which should exist between Chinese

and Malays in Malaya; the other is the question of the place which the British wish to occupy. With post-war reconstruction should certainly come a more positive policy for Chinese-Malay relations in the Malay States, giving more definite political opportunities to the Chinese and more enlarged economic assistance to the Malays. It does seem evident that the old Colonial system, with a comparatively small group of Europeans as the dominant power, is a temporary historical phase; that with the advance of modern technology and education there is almost bound to be ultimately a transfer of responsibility to the major groups resident in the country."

THE SUN MUST SET

Empires never last for ever. Either, the master and subject races finally merge into one unified society, as in Britain, where the Welsh and Scots, once English dominated now form part of one political society, enjoying equal rights with the English. Or, the Empire ends with the subject races violently resisting and finally emerging as a separate national and political entity as in the case of the Irish Republic, India, Pakistan and Indonesia. The indefinite continuance of the subjugation of one race over another is only possible where the subject race is inherently, both mentally and physically inferior. Anthropologists, are unable to prove any innate superiority of one race over another. This scientific fact, and the

historical fact that no empire has been able to last more than a thousand years is I think, no mere coincidence.

We in Malaya are now seeing British domination after over a hundred years enter its last phase. Colonial imperialism in South East Asia is dead except in Malaya, and our generation will see it out.

No sane man whether he be English, Malay, Indian, Eurasian, or Chinese, can honestly study the situation in that part of the world, and not come to the conclusion that either with or without the opposition of the Western educated intelligentsia in Malaya, British imperialism will end. The two things, we the returned students can help to decide are: firstly, how soon and orderly the change will be, and secondly, whether we shall find a place at all in the new Malaya. At the moment it is clear that the only party organised to force the British to leave, and to run the country, is the Communist Party. They are not merely so many bandits, shooting and being shot at in the jungle, and creating terror for the sake of terror. Theirs is a tightly knit organisation making their bid for power.

A GREATER EVIL

It is this element of International Communism which I fear will make the pattern of development that has unfolded in India, Burma, Ceylon, etc., unlikely in Malaya. In all these countries the leaders from the educated classes, the returned students, had time to organise and were already organised, like the Indian Congress Party, before International communism became a force in the political life of these countries. But this does not mean that Communism is not a force in these countries. It is, right now, the biggest threat to the newly established national governments of Asia. How far these governments can counter the appeal and force of Communism will depend on how far they are bold enough to carry out social reforms in the teeth of their own vested interest. That is another feature in the political development of our neighbours: the active support of native capitalists in the national aspirations of their fellow countrymen. But it is abundantly clear to Malayan vested interests, and that would include Chinese and Indian commercial interests, the Malay royal families, and the professional classes, that with the disappearance of the British Raj, must also disappear the great inequality in wealth of the peoples of Malaya. For any independent Malayan Government to exist, it must win popular support and to gain any popular support it must promise, and do social justice. Indeed, and this is a fact important enough to warrant repetition, the continued existence of the new Asiatic states depends upon whether they are able to carry out long overdue reforms; whether they can, without the Communist religion, do all that a Communist state can do for the masses.

THE LESSER EVIL

We, the returned students, would be the type of leaders that the British would find relatively the more acceptable. For if the choice lies, as in fact it does, between a Communist republic of Malaya, and a Malayan within the British Commonwealth, led by the people who despite their opposition to imperialism still share certain ideals in common with the Commonwealth, there is little doubt which alternative the British will find the lesser evil.

Despite the general political apathy that exists in Malaya there are many who are awakening to the critical position Malaya is in, both internally, and in relation to the rest of South East Asia. If we who can become the most privileged part of the local population under British rule, openly declare that British imperialism must go, the effect would be immediate.

But if we do not give leadership, it will come from the other ranks of society, and if these leaders attain power, as they will with the support of the masses, we shall find that we, as a class, have merely changed masters. The difference between the British, Japs and the new masters who will arise if we remain unorganised, will be a difference only of degree and not of kind.

WHAT WE MUST DO

The first problem we face is that of racial harmony between Chinese and Malays. The second is the development of a united political front that will be strong enough without resorting to armed force, to demand a transfer of power. To both these problems, we the Malayan students in England, whatever our race and creed can make a substantial contribution. If we who are thought of as the intelligentsia of Malaya cannot make a sincere start right now towards a solution of these problems, the future is grim. No class in Malaya is better equipped to lead a Malayan nationalist movement. The common man in Malaya, rightly or wrongly associates intelligence and ability with an education in England, perhaps for the reason that such an education makes possible a greater and more rapid acquisition of wealth in a British Malaya.

National Archives of Singapore

We have already seen the birth of Malay Nationalism, we are seeing the first movements of a Malayan Chinese nationalism. There is no doubt that the other racial groups will also organise themselves. This may be a prelude to a pan-Malayan movement, or it may be the beginning of serious dissensions and communalism that may end in another Palestine. The pre-requisite of Malayan independence is the existence of a Malayan society, not Malay, not Malayan Chinese, not Malayan

Indian, not Malayan Eurasian, but Malayan, one that embraces the various races already in the country. Were it possible to eliminate the non-Malay population by deporting them to their country of origin, there would be no danger of another Palestine. But even the most extreme Malay nationalist will concede that the Chinese, Indian and Eurasian population already in the country cannot be excluded by this simple process. Irresponsible communal leadership will bring disaster. Since therefore, the non-Malay communities must be accepted as part of the present and future Malaya, it follows that unity must be attained.

We can study with profit, the solution Switzerland has found for her racial problems. Here is a national state, with three large racial groups French, German and Italian and a fourth small group, the Romansch, able to maintain its unity and independence through all the strain and stress of two world wars, when French Germans and Italians were fighting on different sides. Whether we have the Palestinian or Swiss pattern emerging in Malaya is still in the balance.

A CHALLENGE

The present political situation is rapidly changing. Colonialism with its fantastic discrepancies in wealth and power will end whether or not we do anything. It is not a question of our fighting for independence in the way the Indian Congress

Party fought for theirs. It is whether we are to play any part at all in the political life of the country. There is still time for us to organise ourselves into a force in the country. But the final question is what each individual returned student will do when he goes back to Malaya, for in the last eventuality, any party, any society, any body politic, consists of individuals.

There can be no leaders without a body to lead. There can be no body to lead if there be no cohesion. As single individuals, any Malayan nationalist who attempts to propagate ideas that would lead to the end of British Malaya would be considered undesirable by the British authorities. Their main interest is to prolong British control of our country. For them Malaya means dollars losing Malaya would mean a big widening of the dollar gap with consequent loss of essential imports to Britain and resulting unemployment. We must be prepared to see that whatever the political label of the British Government in Britain, be it Conservative, Labour, or even Communist, British colonial policy in Malaya may remain unchanged in its fundamentals. A British Labour Government may sincerely believe in socialist, egalitarian principles, but no British government can of its own free will give independence to Malaya, and face the British electorate unabashed when the British cost of living index has gone up by some twenty points.

OUR OPPORTUNITY

But our trump-card is that responsible British leaders realize that independence must and will come to Malaya and that therefore, it will be better to hand Malaya to leaders sympathetic to the British mode of life, willing to be a member of the British Commonwealth, and what is most important, willing to remain in the sterling area. For the alternative is military suppression, a policy which another imperialist power has found impossible in Indonesia. We may take heart in the knowledge that no one can concede more graciously an already untenable position than the English. Our duty is clear: to help to bring about social cohesion, and to bring home to even the most die-hard imperialist that his is an untenable position.

What actual steps we take when we get back will depend on the political temper at that time. Whether we can openly advocate and propagate our views or whether we should be more discreet and less vociferous is something that can be answered only when the time comes. Only if a spirit of co-operation and political independence be infused among our fellow Malaysians can pan-Malayan political parties really exist, and Malayan leadership emerge. We must break the soporific Malayan atmosphere and bring home the urgency of the problems facing us. We must break down the belief that we are inferior and will always remain inferior to the Europeans. If every returned student makes known his convictions to his own immediate circle, the cumulative effect will be tremendous. A small pebble dropped

in a pond can cause extensive ripples. Without the countless unnamed Indian patriots who did their share in awakening a sense of national pride and dignity and independence, there could have been no Congress party, no Gandhi, no Nehru and no Indian Republic.

ORDER OR CHAOS?

If we fail to fulfil our duty, the change that still will come must be a violent one, for whatever the rights and wrongs of Communism, no one can deny its tremendous appeal to the masses. Whatever our political complexion from deep blue Tory to bright red Communist, we must all remember that we are not indispensable in this struggle for freedom. But we can affect the speed and orderliness of the change.

What the individual returning home chooses to do is a question of personal inclination, economic circumstances, and political convictions. But if the majority to

us choose to do nothing, choose to believe that Malaya can be insulated from the Nationalist revolts that have swept the European powers from Asia then we may find that there is no place for us in the Malaya that is to be after the British have departed.

LEE KUAN YEW

28th January, 1950.