

TRANSCRIPT OF AN INTERVIEW OF MR. LEE KUAN YEW WITH A  
STAFF MEMBER OF ABC, ALAN ASHBOLT RECORDED IN CANBERRA  
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Narrator: In a special programme for ABC National Television, the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, is interviewed now by Alan Ashbolt.

Ashbolt: Singapore is a place of memories for many Australians with rather bitter memories of World War Two; but today Singapore is a very busy island of nearly two million people, a flourishing centre of trade and a volatile centre of politics. And perhaps no politician in Singapore is more volatile than its Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. Mr. Prime Minister, welcome to Australia. And may I say that your reputation for frank and honest speaking has preceded you. What I would like to do in this interview is not so much ask you questions which call for conjectural answers about what the future might be not so much that, as to try to find out something about the attitudes and beliefs which have brought you to this very important position at a very early age. Now, when the Japanese captured Singapore in 1942, you would have been about 19?

Mr. Lee: Yes.

Ashbolt: What were you doing during those years of the Japanese occupation?

Mr. Lee: Well, I was a student at Raffles College, now the University of Singapore, doing English literature. Mathematics and Economics. And the Japanese came, knocked us about, and the three-and-a-half years was really a nightmare. I'm not quite sure whether it was worse to have been in a Japanese prisoner of war camp, or worse to have been a member of their Co-Prosperity Sphere outside their prisoner of war camps, working for their prosperity.

Ashbolt: What did this period teach you about the nature of colonialism, because this gained you experience of both British and Japanese colonialism?

Mr. Lee: Well it was a traumatic experience. One day, you had the British there in all the big houses and all the big cars, and occupying all

the big shops and streets in town, and we believed, or were led to believe, that the British were there because they were superior. They knew how to govern our people with innate greater ability. And, if we wanted to govern ourselves, it might take a few hundred years and we might then learn how to do it about as well as the British, or nearly as well. In about two weeks of fighting - there wasn't much fighting, either, there was a lot of running - we discovered that this superiority was really the capacity to use guns and to frighten the other chap. And, in a matter of days, Japanese officers were installed in all the big desks where the British officers were. And the first lesson we learned was that if we wanted to look after our own affairs and run it for the benefit of our own people, then we should begin to organise and assert our own collective self.

Ashbolt: Do you think there is a sense in which the Japanese could be said to have liberated Asia from European colonialism?

Mr. Lee: Well, yes, in a way they accelerated the process. They made it very difficult for either the British, the Dutch or the French to drag the process out over decades. Once you've broken the spell it's very difficult to re-establish your dominance, and three-quarters of the technique of colonial government is the spell you cast over subject peoples. You make the slave not only behave like a slave by force, but you are supreme and the slave thinks he is a slave - you know, that he is inferior, that he ought to serve, he ought to find some accommodation under his master's aegis.

Ashbolt: Now, after the war you went to England for university education, to Cambridge. In fact, like so many other anti-colonial leaders from Asia and Africa. Did your English experience at the University serve to confirm your anti-colonial attitudes?

Mr. Lee: Well, I would say yes; but the important thing had already happened when the Japanese came in. Three and a half years of that. We decided, we discovered then that however well-meaning you can get a British administrator or a British Government to be, in the last analysis a colonial government must act in accordance with the interests of the metropolitan power. If Singapore is not worth holding, or Malaysia is not worth holding, we can't expect the British to bleed themselves to death for our freedom. And what Britain in my four years there did for me was to confirm certain beliefs that perhaps, since the British are the people most likely to

gracefully withdraw from an already untenable position, our job then became that much easier in that we need not have to go through the whole gruesome process of revolution, but just to create an untenable position.

Ashbolt: Well of course, during the years you were in Britain, Britain was in fact giving up many of her overseas colonies. But in 1950 - this was the year you returned to Singapore you made a speech to the Malayan Forum in which you said that Malaya was the only remnant of colonial imperialism left in Asia, surrounded by new Asian national States. Why do you think this was so? Why do you think that the British left Malaya to the last, as it were? Was it because of the Communist emergency, this is the common excuse, or was it because Britain regarded Malaya as the key to her commercial interests in Asia?

Mr. Lee: I don't think it was Malaya, really. It was more Singapore, isn't it? This was the last foot-hold for a British presence in Asia. The other countries had become independent - India, Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon. The British had bases in Ceylon, In Trincomalee. Malaya, I think the British were reasonably resigned to giving up. But in 1945 and 1946, when they returned with the British Military Administration, they served Singapore from the rest of Malaya. And that was not done by accident. And Singapore, as island 212 square miles, economically and geographically linked with Malaya, being served politically, couldn't have been for unimportant reasons. And therefore we came to the conclusion that whatever Britain intended to do with Malaya, she would like to stay on in Singapore for as long as she could. I think that assumption was reasonably correct.

Ashbolt: Well, this leads me to another question. You know that you hear often expressed in the West that Malaysia is fundamentally a British conception. Now, you know better than I do the nature of British imperialism, and you know that when the British are withdrawing from a colony, you know the manner in which they do it. They try often partition, as they did in India, or they create an artificial State like the Rhodesian Federation - something of that sort. To what extent were the British responsible for the concept of Malaysia?

Mr. Lee: The concept of Malaysia, the idea of the Borneo territories together with Singapore and the Peninsula Malaya, coming together; well, many people have talked about it. Malcolm MacDonald, for one, former Governor-General. But I do not think the British set out to create this as part of a definite objective of policy to implement Malaysia. They had secondary ideas like having a Borneo Federation of Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei. And the whole idea, to my mind, looking back over these years, was that they would have Malaya, a Federation, Borneo, another Federation, and Singapore indefinitely a self-governing dominion with sovereignty and the British bases there as of right, helping to look after peace and stability in the area.

Ashbolt: How long do you think the British bases will be in Singapore?

Mr. Lee: As of now, from now?

Ashbolt: Yes.

Mr. Lee: It's very difficult to... Well, you told me at the beginning that you were not going to ask me any speculative questions. But this is a bit of speculation.

Ashbolt: Well, let's put it in another way. You would like I presume to get rid of the British bases, and get rid of British influence in Singapore and in Malaysia.

Mr. Lee: I don't think it's a simple question of wanting to get rid of the British bases and influence in Malaysia. May I put it in a more personal way. First, as a Malaysian, I would like to be able to live my own life, in my own country, build my own prosperity to the best of my people's ability, and by myself. I don't want to be absorbed by Indonesia, let alone domination or conquered by her. I don't want to get involved in big power conflicts which will bring Indian or Chinese armies into Malaysia. We just want to be ourselves. We believe, not without good reason, that we can have a reasonably happy and contented society doing quite well. Now, if British bases interfered with that objective, then we would find all the reasons why the British bases should go. Unfortunately, with the formations of Malaysia, we discovered that our neighbours had very unattractive designs as to what their neighbours should be. And the problem now is, how do we ensure our own independent

existence in our own way without interference from our neighbour. And the British bases help. And for as long as British bases in the region, a British presence in the region, enables us to carry on being ourselves, it's all right with us.

Ashbolt: You're speaking now of your own independent Malaysian existence.

Mr. Lee: Yes.

Ashbolt: And the phrase you used a few moments ago was "speaking as a Malaysian".

Mr. Lee: Yes.

Ashbolt: Now, you are in fact Chinese. What does it mean to you to be Chinese?

Mr. Lee: I am not in fact Chinese. I am in fact a Malaysian. I am by race Chinese. I am no more Chinese than you are an Englishman. Were you born here?

Ashbolt: Yes, I was.

Mr. Lee: Well then, you can't be an Englishman, No, I can't deny my ancestry. I am not ashamed of it. But I've never been to China. I don't believe my cousins or distant relatives of whom there must be many and none of whom I know; would be thinking and feeling completely different from me. I've been brought up in a different milieu. I've gone through a different experience. I am concerned with the future of Malaysia, because that concerns the future of my children. They are going to live, I hope happily, in Malaysia, and I would like to make some contribution to ensure that Malaysia would offer people like my children a chance for fulfilment and constructive endeavour.

Ashbolt: Now, one of the difficulties about Malaysia, or the whole concept of Malaysia, is of course this problem of cultural amalgamation. Is there any historical basis for cultural or ethnic amalgamation in Malaysia? On the face of it there just doesn't seem to be, but you may have different ideas on this.

Mr. Lee: I'm sorry, but the word "amalgamation" is quite new to me. I think there are instances in history of a fusion of two peoples, two cultures, either by conquest of one over the other, conquest leading to subjugation or leading to absorption as had happened so often in Chinese history. Or, for that matter, in British history. I don't think the Englishman today is the same Englishman of King Alfred. He's gone through many different experiences, the Normans and the Danes and the Scots and the Welsh and the Irish, and now the Hungarians and the Poles and the French. He has taken in all these influences. So, I would say historically there are many instances of peoples who've come together to live in one territory and ultimately form a common milieu. And getting fused, and their culture and racial origins become more mixed. Well, I would say I'd agree with you that the problem in Malaysia is very different. Here you've got 40 per cent more or less Malays, who are Muslims, who don't eat pork and who don't marry heathens; 40 percent Chinese who eat pork, and who are not Muslims, and who will marry quite freely as they do in Bangkok and Saigon and in Rangoon, but who will not normally be converted to Islam just for the purpose of getting married. So, your racial fusion is that much more difficult. It took place during the earlier days when the first Chinese settlers came without their womenfolk, and they formed unions with local Malay women and brought up mixed off-spring, sometimes as Malays, sometimes as Chinese, sometimes as something special, the Baba Chinese, some of whom have Malay blood. But the bigger problem is this: the cultural problem. One is a product of a civilisation which has gone through all its ups downs, of floods and famine and pestilence, breeding a people with very intense culture, with a belief in high performance, in sustained effort, in thrift and by nature with warm sunshine and bananas and coconuts, and therefore not with the same need to strive so hard. Now, these two societies really move at two different speeds. It's like the difference between a high-revolution engine and a low-revolution engine. I'm not saying that one is better or less good than the other. But I'm just stating a fact that one was the product of another environment, another history, another civilisation, and the other is a product of another different climate, different history.

Ashbolt: Well, each can learn from the other.

Mr. Lee: I think so. I think it is the only way. I mean, mind you, theoretically I expect it should be possible that we could try and

run two societies, like Dr. Malan in South Africa is trying to do – the whites with the Asian civilization in the towns and Africans coming to the towns to help them in the daytime and going back to sleep in their African Bantuland at night - I don't think that's possible or desirable in Malaysia.

Ashbolt: Well let me say that I accept completely this thesis of racial and cultural fusion. I think it's an admirable aim. But isn't your basic difficulty in Malaysia, the oft-expressed fear of the Malays, of Chinese domination?

Mr. Lee: It's not possible in Malaysia. They often say that they are afraid of the Chinese dominating the Malays. Some of them say this -- some of the leaders say this for a calculated political purpose. When you say "Ah, beware, we are in danger", then people rally around you. You know, it's the sort of thing that the Indonesian President says from time to time to his own 103 million people. He says, "Ah, the Malaysians are surrounding us, ten million of them!" And so, they all rally to the President. Similarly, some Malay leaders do this at frequent intervals just to make sure that the flock is with them. But can it really happen? There are 40 per cent - well, 42 per cent - Chinese, 58 per cent are non-Chinese in Malaysia. If the Chinese tried to dominate in Malaysia, they will have a solid majority against them. That's to start with. Secondly, the 42 percent Chinese themselves are not one homogeneous solid group. There are first generation immigrants, people who are born and bred in China, about 20 percent of them, a dying, declining section of the population. Then there is the other, more important group, people born in the country who have never known China, being brought up in a Malaysian milieu, sharing a common experience with Indians and Malays, Dayaks, Dusuns, Kadasans, Ibans and others, a common destiny. Sharing common trials and tribulations. When the Japanese came, the Malays suffered as much as the Chinese, the Indians, or anybody else. We went through a common experience as one people. And so the Chinese are not just one homogeneous group. Mind you, even amongst those who are born and bred in the country are those who are infected by theories of working-class revolution, the example of the Great Communist Millennium as China has shown it is possible, and their thoughts wander along other paths. But I believe the majority want to seek a common salvation in a multi-racial Malaysia.

Ashbolt: Well do you think the racial riots in Singapore last year augured well for the future of the Federation because you've said yourself these riots were probably inspired by the ultras in Malaysia agitating in Singapore, how do you think you're going to overcome that problem?

Mr. Lee: Yes it's probable the biggest set-back Malaysia suffered, and if it is repeated either the next or the time after that is might spread throughout the whole of Malaysia, not just Singapore. And then I think it would be very difficult to put the bits and pieces together again. Because once you've got a people through an agonising experience like that, and reason and compassion and humanity disappear, and people act like animals and the brown ants try and eat up the yellow ants and the yellow ants try and beat off the brown ants, well then you don't quite so easily get back to where you were. I think the hope lies in the fact that we are not the only people conscious of the danger. I mean it is not just the leadership in Singapore, but I think the leadership in Malaya, in Sabah, in Sarawak, are all equally anxious as to the dangers inherent in this. And the answers, really, is to try and find common ground against our common enemy who are trying to exploit these cultural and racial and linguistic difference which exist. What we require really is a lot of patience and a great deal of tolerance and time can heal a lot of things and produce a climate in which such things can never be allowed to happen again.

Ashbolt: I wonder if we could turn for just the last few moments to your own Government in Singapore, which you describe I think as non-Communist rather than anti-Communist. Is this deliberate?

Mr. Lee: Oh yes, it's more than deliberate, I hope it conveys something. You know, the tendency in the West is to classify the people into two groups; the European and Communist groups. To emerge in Singapore, as they were able to find in Malaya, I think we wouldn't have emerged in Singapore quite frankly; not that they chose us to emerge, but there was no choice. They had to fight one evil at one time, and the evil then was the danger of a Communist take-over. So any other group which didn't share beliefs in a Communist dictatorship was better to them than the Communists. Therefore they allowed free play amongst the other, and so we emerged. But we are non-Communist in a very fundamental way, and as



fundamental to the Communists as to the West. You see, when we say "non-Communist" the West are not satisfied. They say, "Ah, equivocation, fellow traveller". Well, maybe. I don't think so. The communists know what non-communism means. It means no communism. That's why it's non. No communism in Singapore, in Malaysia; which means they've got to fight them. But in fighting them we don't necessarily have to become British or American stooges. We are fighting for ourselves, not for America and not for the free world; but in so far as America and the free world or Australia or New Zealand or Britain help us to find fulfilment for our own people separately as not only non-communist but non-Indonesian, non-Chinese and non-Indian, as a Malaysian nation, then we make friends.

Ashbolt: Mr. Prime Minister, I said at the beginning that your reputation for frank and honest speaking had preceded you. I would like to thank you very, very much for talking with me tonight, and to say finally that your answers were no less frank and honest than we expected. Thank you very much.

Mr Lee: Thank you for the opportunity.

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