

THE POWER AND INFLUENCE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONERS IN COLONIAL POLICY-MAKING IN MALAYA, 1948-1957

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Abstract

This article examines the power and influence of the High Commissioners in British colonial policy-making in Malaya in the post-war period. Colonial policy-making often entailed a tussle between the Secretary of State in London who represented metropolitan interests and the High Commissioners in the territories representing local interests. The influence of three High Commissioners in Malaya in the period 1948-1957 is assessed with reference to major policies introduced. The article begins with an overview of British colonial policy-making process and then examines the role of three high commissioners in Malaya in the post-war period to determine the power and influence wielded by the men on the spot. The concluding section then draws some general conclusions. This paper argues that the High Commissioners in Malaya wielded considerable influence in shaping colonial policy in the post-war Malaya. The rapid pace of political developments and the complexity of the issues that emerged required quick and informed decision-making and the men on the spot were clearly in a better position to do this.

Introduction

British colonial policy-making was a complex multi-layered process that entailed broad consultation and often much wrangling between the Colonial Office in London and the men on the spot in the periphery. The Secretary of State for the Colonies and his lieutenants in

metropolitan London usually had the final word on colonial policies but the high commissioners (and Governors) on the ground were often able to exert enormous influence on the final outcome. Sustaining empire in the more turbulent times of the 20th century necessitated striking a delicate balance between the wisdom of the lieutenants in London and the informed views of field commanders in distant territories.

The Colonial Office mandarins invariably were more intimately acquainted with the national significance and impact of colonial policies but it was the man on the spot who felt the real pulse of the territories and who often held the upper hand with distinct knowledge of local developments. With the tremendous increase in the volume and complexity of the paperwork related to the administration of the territories in the second half of the 20th century, the over-stretched staff at the Colonial Office and frequent ministerial changes, the high commissioners often held the initiative.

The Men On the Spot

Strong, independent-minded and articulate high commissioners (or governors) often influenced colonial policy well beyond their weight. As A.J. Stockwell has observed: 'While it was usual for the secretary of state to choose the menu and the governor to prepare the dishes, the former did not shrink from interfering below stairs and occasionally caused consternation in the kitchen and the cook to flounce out: nor was it unknown for a governor to get above himself and try to dictate his own terms.'¹ Robert Heussler notes that the formulation and implementation of administrative arrangements in British dependencies during the pre-war period were 'mostly left to men on the spot.'² The influence of the metropolitan and the periphery on colonial policies evidently varied according to the pressures and politics in the two epicentres of colonial policy formulation. The nature and complexity of the issues, the urgency and the character of the individuals who manned the metropolitan and the periphery at the relevant times were critical in shaping policy.

Even a cursory glance at the voluminous correspondence between the Colonial Office and the territories in the post-World War Two period indicates inherent tensions in colonial decision-making process. The improved communications in the post-World War II period between London and Kuala Lumpur to an extent contributed to this situation. No serving Secretary of State had visited Malaya between 1874 and 1942 compared to the post-1945 period when three serving Secretaries of State (James Griffith, June 1950; Oliver Lyttelton,

December 1951; and Alan Lennox-Boyd in August 1955) visited Kuala Lumpur.³ In post-war Malaya there was a constant daily barrage of letters and telegrams between the High Commissioner's office in Kuala Lumpur and the Colonial Office on a whole range of issues covering political, economic, social and security issues. Such was the increase in the volume and intricacy of administrative paperwork compared to earlier periods that at times the Colonial Office was simply overwhelmed and relied greatly on the men on the spot. At other times, the officials at the Colonial Office meticulously examined new policy initiatives from the periphery before advising the Secretary of State on an appropriate response. Stockwell has noted that during the Second World War London was able to seize the conduct of affairs from the men on the spot in Malaya.⁴ But this was during the period of British loss of power in Japanese-occupied Malaya.

It is worth asking to what extent the high commissioners in Malaya influenced colonial policy-making in the post-war period. Very little attention has been given to this aspect of the colonial decision-making process in post-war Malaya although some works discuss briefly in passing these elements. Stockwell, for example, discusses briefly the influence of high commissioners and governors on colonial policy-making in the post-war period in his compilation of documents related to the end of empire in Malaya. J.M. Gullick, on the other hand, provides an interesting window into policy making in the early phase of British intervention in Malaya between 1870 and 1920, including the frequent wrangling between the Malay Rulers and the Residents in a somewhat gentler age.⁵ Heussler discusses briefly elements of colonial policy-making in the pre-war and post-war period in two different publications.⁶ Several other scholars of Malaysian history such as Simon Smith, Nicholas White and Tim Harper deal with this theme in passing.⁷ None of these works, however, examine substantively the post-war period when the challenges facing British rule were much greater and varied, and which required more immediate and prudent decision-making. Understanding the intricate web of colonial policy-making thus is essential to appreciating colonial policy and practice in Malaya.

This chapter examines the power and influence of the office of the high commissioner on colonial policy-making with reference to three high commissioners in Malaya between 1948 and 1957. It examines several major issues during their tenure to assess their influence vis-à-vis the Colonial Office in shaping policy. The first part of this essay discusses the general tenor of Colonial Office decision-making process. The following sections then examine the influence of

three post-war high commissioners, Sir Henry Gurney, Sir Gerald Templer and Sir Donald MacGillivray, in shaping colonial policies. The concluding section will draw some general conclusions on the power and influence wielded by high commissioners in the post-war Malaya.

Overview: British policy making in Malaya in the Post-war Period

British policy making in Malaya in the post-war period was a complex process that involved a process of initiation and evaluation at different levels. Major policies initiated at the periphery by the high commissioners required the approval of the Secretary of State and, if necessary, the British Prime Minister and his Cabinet. At times the Colonial Office itself initiated policy changes as, for example, when the Secretary of State, Oliver Lyttelton, visited Malaya in December 1951 and initiated a radical overhaul of the anti-insurgency campaign. The new anti-insurgency policies had the handprint of the Secretary of State all over it. The Colonial Office decision-making was in general a collective consensual effort that went through a fairly rigorous process of consultation and evaluation. Senior officials at the Colonial Office provided their views on issues proposed by the high commissioner before drafting a response which is reviewed by the senior officers again, and which is then submitted to the Secretary of State for a final decision.

The Colonial Office and the Secretary of State, subject to the approval of the British Prime Minister on major issues, usually had the final word on policies concerning the territories. The high commissioners, as an extension of the Colonial Office and yet at the same time reflecting local opinion and interests, nevertheless played an influential role in the chain of decision-making, often initiating major policies because of their local knowledge. Unlike the early phase of British intervention in Malaya when the Residents, in view of the slower mode of communication between London and Kuala Lumpur, could dictate the pace, the modern communications available in the second half of the 20th century meant that London could be informed almost instantly by telegraph of developments on the ground. This is evident by the substantial increase in the volume of correspondence between the high commissioner's office in Kuala Lumpur and the Colonial Office in London.⁸ This also meant that there was more detailed discussion of policies.

Much of the initiative for colonial policies came from the periphery and the men on the ground who understood and appreciated better

the conditions in the territories. The officials at the Colonial Office, however, were no pushovers. They were well-informed of conditions in Malaya, better acquainted with the overall strategy of British colonial policy and acted as the gatekeepers in the formulation and implementation of colonial policies. With a mass of information on the territories collected over a long period of time at their disposal and a high degree of continuity among the senior mandarins in the Colonial Office in terms of service and a certain ethos in 'governing empire', these mandarins also acted as a check and balance to sometimes over-ambitious and domineering colonial administrators. As Stockwell has rightly observed, 'whereas the secretary of state had the dual function of presenting British requirements to Malaya and Malayan needs to Cabinet, so the high commissioner was both the agent of British policy and the defender of Malayan interests.'⁹

British colonial policy in Malaya in the post-war period was in a constant state of flux; responding and adjusting to the changes and situation on the ground, and in particular to the challenge from the nationalist movements. The international environment, too, had altered considerably and a strong veneer of anti-imperialism was widely prevalent. The legitimacy of empire had eroded after World War II and it seemed only a matter of time before the colonial territories regained their freedom. In these uncertain conditions, there were frequent 'power struggles' between London and the high commissioners in determining colonial policies in attempting to meet the objectives of the metropolitan and the new challenges from the periphery.

In addition to these channels of policy-making, the Colonial Office also set up commissions and sent experts to examine and assess colonial policies and practices related to political development, economy, security, education, administration, activities of nationalist movements and trade unions and other matters from time to time. This threw up new challenges to the administrators at both ends in attempting to implement the recommendation of these experts. The Colonial Office took very seriously the recommendations of these commissions which were deemed independent and impartial and working in tandem with the administrators in the territories tried to implement these recommendations. (For example, the Carr-Saunders Commission on University Education in Malaya.)

On some issues which were deemed to have major implications on colonial policy, the decision-making often went-up to the office of the Prime Minister. Policies related to the Emergency in Malaya, for example, were scrutinised carefully by advisors in the Prime Minister's office and ultimately by the Prime Minister himself. But the broader

areas of colonial policy making were largely determined by the Colonial Office and the high commissioners. And this often resulted in much wrangling between the Colonial Office seemingly representing Britain's national interest, and the high commissioners often defending Malayan interests. Malayan high commissioners in the post-war period in Malaya were an independent-minded and combative lot and certainly no lame ducks. The section below will examine the power and influence of three administrations in Malaya in the post-war period to provide a deeper insight into the nature of colonial policy making and the power and influence of high commissioners.

The Gurney Administration, 1948-1952

Sir Henry Gurney was appointed to Malaya barely four months after the declaration of the Emergency in June 1948. He replaced Sir Edward Gent who died in a plane crash in London in August 1948 while on a trip back for consultations with the Colonial Office. Gurney was an experienced administrator with 26 years of service when he arrived in Malaya on 6 October 1948, the preceding one and a half years being served in Palestine. He was thus not a newcomer to difficult terrains. But he was not the preferred choice of the Malayan leaders. The Malay Rulers and the Mentris Besar had sought the appointment of someone who had served in Malaya and who was more familiar with the socio-economic and political conditions in Malaya.¹⁰ The Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia Malcolm MacDonald himself objected to Gurney's appointment because it was felt he had not held a governorship before and did not have Malayan experience.¹¹ But the Secretary of State for Colonies Arthur Creech-Jones thought otherwise and Gurney was duly appointed.

Gurney was an astute planner, an able administrator and a pragmatist. He had his hands full trying to address the insurgency compared to administrators in the pre-war period. He, however, had to wage a constant battle with the Colonial Office in initiating and implementing new policies. He also had to contend with the intrusions of the British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia Malcolm MacDonald who was based in Singapore. Gurney's administration thus provides an interesting insight into the intricacies of colonial policy-making in the post-war period.

Addressing the communist insurgency was one of Gurney's main concerns when he began his term on 6 October 1948. Gurney felt that the Emergency should be tackled not only on the military front but also from the social, economic and political fronts. He suggested the need to encourage 'local-born and locally settled Chinese of intelligence

and initiative' to come forward as leaders of the community and to promote good relations with the Malays; 'They would have the strongest motives for doing this as their personal interests are vitally connected with the defeat of Communism.'¹² Three weeks after his arrival, Gurney urged the Colonial Office to address the problem of Chinese squatters if the insurgency was to be effectively tackled.¹³

These squatters served as a source of food supply, information and recruits for the Malayan Communist Party and Gurney felt that these links should be arrested immediately. He took a tough line and called for the repatriation to China of the more extreme elements among the Chinese community following concerted complaints from the business community. 'I and my advisers are satisfied that the only answer to this problem is to require dangerous alien elements to leave the Federation.'¹⁴ Gurney proposed an Emergency Regulation empowering the High Commissioner to banish a detained person. He planned to place the draft of the new legislation before the Executive Council in early November 1948: '... I trust that action I propose will receive your full support. I have considered all possible objections to this that occurred to me and am convinced that action on these lines is in future essential.'¹⁵ This initiative was distinct from the Banishment Ordinance which was already in existence and which required a more cumbersome legal procedure.

The Colonial Office was a little cautious about the implications of some of the measures suggested by Gurney on civil liberties and urged a rethink.¹⁶ There was a fear that Gurney's suggestions might cause some injustice to the Chinese in Malaya. Gurney, however, felt that a 'carrot and stick' approach was necessary although admitting that it may at times seem anti-Chinese in character. Gurney argued that there was no short-term answer to the insurgency problem: '... one of my objects in writing you this letter is to show you that if in the course of our efforts to defeat the bandits quickly we are accused of being harsh to the Chinese we are also trying to help forward any movement among the Chinese themselves which would hold promise of any reasonable alternative to Communism and attach them more closely to the Government and the Malays.'¹⁷ Gurney however did not get his way completely and had to settle for an amendment to the Banishment Ordinance as a compromise which gave the High Commissioner more leverage in repatriating to China persons deemed a security threat. Previously the High Commissioner had to consult the Malay Rulers before he could act.¹⁸

Gurney was also involved in a tussle with the Colonial Office over the financing of the anti-insurgency campaign to bring to Emergency to an end. In 1949, Gurney asked the British government

for additional financial assistance of 7.5 million sterling pounds for internal security as expenditures had increased significantly following the outbreak of the insurgency. The Treasury, however, decided 4.5 million pounds would be adequate, arguing that internal security expenditure were usually the responsibility of local authorities. The Third Secretary of the Treasury, J.I.C. Crombie, minuted:

Internal security measures are normally a responsibility of the local Government ... The question of financial assistance from HMG should, therefore, be determined in the light of a Colony's general financial position and its ability to pay its way from its own resources ... It should be noted, however, that the distinction between internal security and external security has become somewhat blurred in the case of Malaya by the fact that internal troubles are to a considerable extent Communist-inspired ... Malaya's estimates for 1949 have been carefully examined here and, though, we feel that in general they have been framed on a reasonable basis, we consider (and the Colonial Office agree) that the estimated expenditure might be somewhat reduced and revenue somewhat increased. The net result of our examination is that we think that Malaya's claim for help in 1949 might be reasonably reduced from 7.5 million pounds to 4.5 million pounds.¹⁹

This was a classic example of the tussle between the Colonial Office and the governors of the British-controlled territories over control of public expenditure. The mandarins at the Colonial Office were meticulously detailed in evaluating such claims. Gurney, however, persuaded the British Government to raise this to a maximum of 6 million pounds.²⁰ This was a typical case of the High Commissioner seeking to represent Malayan interests and coming off better.

This struggle between the High Commissioner and the Colonial Office is also evident on the question of British plans in Malaya following the grant of independence to India and Burma. Gurney wrote to the Colonial Office on 24 February 1949 stating that there was a 'local feeling of insecurity' in Malaya as to whether the British would withdraw at short notice. He urged that Her Majesty's Government (HMG) should take the opportunity to state unequivocally that 'they have no intentions of relinquishing their responsibilities in Malaya until their task there is completed.'²¹ The Colonial Office was a little apprehensive of the need for the statement. One official minuted: 'Does it mean that we have in some way been negligent at this end in refusing to make a statement by HMG such as

Sir H. Gurney suggests, and has the latter in fact asked for such a declaration and it has been refused.²²

Gurney received a slight rebuke over rumours in the media on British intentions in Malaya and was asked to be careful not to give the impression that 'the Government are being in any way laggard in this matter.'²³ The British Prime Minister Attlee eventually issued a statement on 13 April 1949 stating that Britain had no intention of quitting Malaya until their job was done: 'His Majesty's Government have no intention of relinquishing their responsibilities in Malaya until their task is completed. The purpose of our policy is simple. We are working, in cooperation with the citizens of the Federation of Malaya and Singapore, to guide them to responsible self-government within the Commonwealth. We have no intention of jeopardising the security, well-being and liberty of these peoples, for whom Britain has responsibilities, by a premature withdrawal.'²⁴ The Colonial Office conceded to Gurney's demand, acknowledging the importance of such a statement for economic activities, but not without some reluctance.

Gurney was also involved in a struggle with the Colonial Office over his plans to introduce local elections and a quasi-ministerial 'Member System' modelled along the practice in Kenya which he felt was important to the anti-insurgency campaign. He proposed to pass legislation for local elections by September 1950 and to hold municipal elections in Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Malacca in 1951.²⁵ Gurney wrote to the Colonial Office: '... apart from municipal elections in Penang and Kuala Lumpur in 1950 and 1951, the conversion of antiquated things like Town Boards into municipal authorities, and preparations for elections to State Councils, it may be that the next step forward in the Federal field should be the appointment of Members (on the Kenya model) ... There is much to be said for the appointment of local citizens of the calibre of Onn to "portfolios" in displacement of some of these Department Heads, with a view at the same time to reorganising Executive Council on a basis that looks something like a cabinet of persons holding ministerial responsibility.'²⁶ Gurney argued that political advance should be viewed not only as part of progress towards self-government but also 'to satisfy public demands for democratic as opposed to communist methods.'²⁷

The Colonial Office while supportive of Gurney's proposal urged caution in the appointment of 'Members' outside the federal constitution as suggested by Gurney: 'Eventually the selection of unofficial Members ought to be made after consultation with the Legislature or with leading political personages who are members of the Legislature, and although you wish at present to retain the power

of appointment in your own hands you may think it well to start working towards the future by consulting whomsoever you think most suitable before you exercise that power ... Your despatch is being studied in the light of recent developments of Membership systems, or other similar arrangements, elsewhere ...²⁸ The issue was discussed at the 15th Commissioner-General's Conference on 7 June 1950 and with the exception of the Singapore Governor, F. Gimson, who felt it might send a wrong message in terms of transition to self-government, the idea was generally supported.²⁹ The Member system was introduced on 9 April 1951 following further representations made by Gurney to the Colonial Office.³⁰

Gurney was slightly ahead of the Colonial Office who had wanted to examine the method of electing the 'Members' before making the announcement. The Secretary of State James Griffiths in a report on the situation in Malaya for the Cabinet Defence Committee noted: 'Without waiting for the introduction of the electoral principle the High Commissioner, with my full agreement, has announced his intention of inviting a number of "unofficials" to accept office as "Members."³¹

Gurney's power of influence over colonial policies was also contested by the powers of Malcolm MacDonald, the Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia. The Colonial Office at times consulted MacDonald over the head of Gurney. And Gurney's anger is discernible in the despatches between Kuala Lumpur and London. Stockwell notes: 'As Malayan government was scrutinised by so many departments in addition to the Colonial Office, one senses that Gurney resented the fact that he was not given a chance to defend his corner but that it was MacDonald who was consulted at the highest level.'³²

MacDonald, Stockwell notes, although not directly responsible for Malaya's internal affairs, became involved particularly between 1946 and 1952 and 'his views carried immense authority locally and commanded the respect of the Colonial Office and of ministers.'³³ In March 1951 when criticisms were made by some Ministers in London on the 'slow' progress of the anti-insurgency campaign, Gurney hit back and offered to resign. He criticised the Colonial Office for relying merely on reports from the commanders to assess the security situation, arguing that these reports were often inadequate and inaccurate. He wrote to the Colonial Office:

When officers are invited by Ministers to criticise my conduct of affairs, for which I am responsible, it seems right that I should be informed as to what takes place. From the fact of such consultations and from the absence of any information from London about them,

I must be forgiven if I feel that there is in certain quarters a lack of confidence in myself. The situation here is a delicate one politically. To keep all the various elements including the Services moving forward smoothly and to maintain progress in the political, economic and social fields are a fairly difficult operation, which leaves me little time to keep others informed of what is happening. Perhaps I am at fault in this respect and it is as much my fault as anyone else's that when an appreciation of the 'situation in Malaya' is required, the request for it is sent to the B.D.C.C. [British Defence Coordinating Committee, Far East] or anybody but myself. Such appreciations are written by people sitting in offices in Singapore or perhaps written by General Briggs and transmitted through Service channels to London, and they have seldom appeared to me to be either complete or accurate. It is also a little discouraging to have such complete silence from the C.O. on certain matters which are important here. I sent a despatch on the Member system six weeks ago and have had no reply to it nor any sign of interest.³⁴

The Colonial Office, however, told Gurney to ignore the criticisms 'as long as the Secretary of State of the day retains complete confidence,' in him.³⁵ Gurney's tenure as high commissioner clearly was quite turbulent given the difficult conditions in Malaya at the time. He was involved in several other drawn-out 'battles' with the Colonial Office in initiating new policies and programs which had generally to be cleared by the Colonial Office. Nevertheless, Gurney, evidently, was able to shape colonial policy substantively as he had a better grasp of the constantly changing situation on the ground.

The Templer Administration, 1952-54

The appointment of Sir Gerald Templer as High Commissioner was a little unusual in the context of conventional British colonial policy. It was dictated largely by the deteriorating security conditions in Malaya and aimed at restoring confidence in government. After Gurney was killed in a communist ambush on 6 October 1951, the general mood in Malaya was one of uncertainty, insecurity and depression. There was a general feeling that Malaya needed a strongman to improve the deteriorating conditions and to win the battle against the insurgents. The British government decided to take the unusual step of appointing a military man as high commissioner with powers to control both civilian affairs and the military campaign. They felt this would provide better coordination in the anti-insurgency campaign. The instructions given to Templer were clear that in assisting the peoples of Malaya to become a fully self-governing nation, he should 'promote such political progress of the country as will, without prejudicing the campaign

against the terrorists ...³⁶ Securing law and order hence was a top priority for the incoming high commissioner.

Templer had direct access to the Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs and in a sense had greater leverage in shaping policy in Malaya compared to his predecessor.³⁷ With the advantage of his military background and local knowledge of the pattern of the insurgency, he was able to reorganise the anti-insurgency campaign without much opposition from the officials at the Colonial Office. One of the principal reorganisation initiatives he undertook was the merging of the functions of the Federal War Council with those of the Federal Executive Council to ensure uniform federal government policy.³⁸ Previously, there was little coordination between these two bodies and this affected the implementation of anti-insurgency measures.

Templer decided to bring all the main policymakers under a single body to coordinate the decision-making process. He felt that the civil administration could not operate in isolation from the military operations. Richard Stubbs notes that Templer was most insistent that all departments, no matter how far removed from the guerrilla war should realise that the Emergency was their first concern.³⁹ His battle for the 'hearts and minds' of the people was a key strategy that contributed significantly to the success of the anti-insurgency campaign.⁴⁰ Templer's infamous 'food denial operations', for example, were quietly anointed by the Colonial Office.⁴¹ One of Templer's critics, Victor Purcell, a Cambridge academic and an advisor to the British government on Chinese Affairs, noted that the Emergency regulations had 'suspended basic civil rights'⁴² and there were allegations that Malaya was a police state.

Templer and the Colonial Office had significant differences over the devolution of political power in Malaya. The general felt that the government's priority should be the ending of the Emergency and all efforts should be focused on this object. He did not think that the time was appropriate for consideration of greater devolution of political power. Thus Templer delayed Gurney's plans for the introduction of local elections very much against the thinking in the Colonial Office. A little over a month after his arrival in Malaya, Templer wrote to the Secretary of State of his revised plans: '... I am a firm believer in first things first. Or to put it another way, it is politically unsound and structurally impossible to put the roof on the building until the foundations of it are well and truly firmly fixed. I believe it right to ensure that truly responsible local government at Rural community and Municipal Council levels is firmly established and as quickly as possible ... That is the firm foundation on which political progress must be based.'⁴³ This did not go down well with senior officials at

the Colonial Official. One Colonial Office official minuted that HMG's policy in Malaya should be to press on with state elections regardless of the difficulties and 'I do not myself entirely accept the theory that one must work upwards gradually from the "parish level."'⁴⁴

Templer disregarded the advice of the Colonial Office to amend his maiden speech in the Federal Legislative Council to take a more positive line on the holding of state elections.⁴⁵ The General felt that the insurgency should be brought to an end before greater devolution of political power to the local elites could be seriously considered. His defiance was in part due to the fact that he had the quiet confidence of the Secretary of State who also preferred a gradual introduction of local elections.

When the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP) leaders Dato' Onn Jaafar and Dato' E.E.C. Thuraisingham suggested in July 1952 that an Asian committee should be set up to consider the question of self-government, Templer balked at the idea although some in the Colonial Office were more receptive to the idea of expediting elections at the higher level with a view to giving local leaders a taste of democratic politics. Writing to Lyttelton, Templer said: 'I need hardly say that I give no support to this proposal, and consider that Onn and Thuraisingham should be ridden off it, if they attempt to pursue it. The divergence of energy and thought at this time to what could only be largely theoretical discussions about future constitutional changes would inevitably detract from the emergency effort, and this detraction would not be counterbalanced by any resulting expansion of anti-communist feeling.'⁴⁶

The Colonial Office, however, noted that there was some justification in expediting state elections as there would otherwise be no incentive for local political leaders. One senior official minuted: 'But it is arguable that it is useless to expect political leaders in a country like Malaya to devote their efforts to elections at these lower levels, if only because they could not rally permanent support among the people for clearly defined and separate policies in local government. Can reasonably coherent and solid political parties develop of themselves without being directly harnessed to representative institutions at least at the State or Settlement level?'⁴⁷ Clearly, there was much disagreement in the Colonial Office on Templer's plans for the pace of local elections as well as the question of self-government. But the officials at the Colonial Office seemed a little awed by Templer's personality and style of decision-making and the high commissioner appears to have got his own way on most issues.⁴⁸

Templer often ignored the advice of MacDonald and dealt directly with the Colonial Office. Compared to his predecessor Gurney,

Templer was a more forceful character and given a strong mandate to address the security situation, he was determined to push through his policies on major issues with little visible resistance from the gatekeepers at the Colonial Office. MacDonald's influence diminished greatly during Templer's tenure. As Stockwell notes: 'The commissioner-general's functions in Malayan defence were reduced and Whitehall came to value the office more and more for the role it played in British foreign rather than colonial policy in the region.'⁴⁹ Templer maintained a separate and direct line of correspondence with the Secretary of State Lyttelton⁵⁰ which gave him more powers than his predecessors.

A closer examination of files containing Templer's correspondence with the Colonial Office reveals a certain inhibition among the officials at the Colonial Office when it came to dealing with the military man. His strong armed tactics in dealing with the insurgency, including a 22-hour curfew and reduced rations imposed on the residents of Tanjong Malim following the killing of the assistant district officer and 12 others in early April 1952, while criticised in the media in Britain and Malaya, hardly elicited a reprimand from the Colonial Office.⁵¹ Templer enjoyed greater powers and trust than his predecessors and invariably, according to Lyttelton, 'dominated the scene.'⁵² Stockwell, for example, notes: 'The power which Templer commanded locally was matched ... by the trust placed in him by the secretary of state, something which neither Gent or Gurney had enjoyed to the same degree.'⁵³ The changing tide in the battle against the Malayan Communist Party following Templer's arrival to an extent enabled him to stamp his authority in Malaya and in his dealings with the Colonial Office.

The MacGillivray Administration, 1954-1957

Sir Donald MacGillivray, on the other hand, was very different in temperament and character compared to Templer. He was softer, diplomatic and more articulate in his approach to dealing with the Colonial Office but was nonetheless politically shrewd. Having worked as Templer's deputy from 1952 and in many instances drafting the formal despatches⁵⁴ to the Colonial Office for the high commissioner, he was vastly experienced in the art of dealing with the Colonial Office by the time he took over from Templer, and was very persuasive in his arguments presented to London

The Emergency was at a tail end but the challenges that he faced as the chief executive in the period leading to independence was no less difficult. One of the biggest challenges that MacGillivray faced

when he took over as high commissioner from Templer on 1 June 1954 was the Alliance Party's threat to withdraw their representatives from the town, municipal, state councils as well as the federal legislative council following the Secretary of State's rejection of their demands that federal elections be held in 1954 with a three-fifths elected majority. MacGillivray urged the Secretary of State to remain firm in his decision not to accede to the Alliance's demands:

I agree entirely with the view expressed by Martin in the second paragraph that we should now go ahead with the elections on the basis already agreed. Not to do so would be interpreted to mean that we accepted that there was substance in the Alliance's contention that arrangements proposed are unworkable and would encourage the Alliance in their present intransigent attitude and lead them on to demand further concessions; and we would undoubtedly run into difficulties at the same time with the Rulers and the Party Negara.⁵⁵

The High Commissioner felt that the Alliance would not obtain much support for their planned course of action and subtle threats. Subsequently, when the Alliance organised demonstrations and met some of the Rulers to explain their position and to solicit support, MacGillivray was annoyed. He complained that the Alliance was bent on being disruptive and uncooperative. Writing to the Colonial Office on 25 June 1954, three weeks later, he labelled their actions as being dictatorial:

All these recent acts of the Alliance leaders have strengthened my suspicion that some of them have never been desirous of a settlement and have for some time been intent on a trial of strength and are certainly ready to put party advantage before the best interests of the country ... The methods which the Alliance have been using of late savour somewhat of dictatorship, and could hardly be described as methods worthy of persons whose ostensible aim is democratic self-government; they are a sad augury for the future if the Alliance should sweep to power.⁵⁶

In a sense, MacGillivray saw himself as being more representative of the wider interests of Malaya and the Alliance as a bunch of rebel rousers. MacGillivray was initially reluctant to agree to suggestions from the Colonial Office that he consider the potential compromise to the deadlock offered by the Alliance by agreeing to consult the majority party in filling the five reserved seats normally appointed by the high commissioner. Wrote MacGillivray: 'I am certainly not satisfied that

this would have been so. It is true that H.S. Lee is now anxious to reach a settlement on these lines, but it is by no means certain that he can carry Tunku Abdul Rahman with him and it is very possible that, if the card had been played in that way by the Secretary of State, it would have been taken by the Alliance, that it would not have satisfied Rahman and that the game would have gone on.⁵⁷ The High Commissioner felt that he would use the proposal only when he was certain that the Alliance would agree to cooperate: '... I will not give this undertaking until I am certain that, in return for this statement both sides of the Alliance will undertake to cooperate with the constitutional arrangements ...'⁵⁸ The Colonial Office and the Secretary of State in particular agreed with MacGillivray's strategy.

When the atmosphere became tense in Malaya following the Alliance's nationwide demonstrations and withdrawal of the representatives from the legislative bodies and councils, the High Commissioner shifted his position and decided to accept the Alliance's proposals that the majority party be consulted in the appointment of the members to the five reserve seats in the federal legislative council. MacGillivray agreed to this after he met the Alliance leaders on 2 July 1954 on board *HMS Alert* of the coast of Johore state, shortly before he embarked on a tour of the east coast states.⁵⁹ In this instance, the high commissioner being more in touch with the day to day developments on the ground, was able to hold the initiative on the acceptance of the Alliance's proposal over the reserved seats which helped to resolve the deadlock over the federal elections. The Colonial Office was simply in no position to dictate terms: it agreed with his decision not to give-in to the Alliance earlier and, at a later stage, again accepted his decision to compromise.

The transfer of power was almost imminent during MacGillivray's tenure and in a sense as challenging as Templer's tenure. His dealings in the constitutional talks reflects an able and articulate administrator who was at the same time pragmatic. He had to constantly balance the demands of the Colonial Office and the Alliance government. When the Colonial Office, for example, proposed that the settlements of Malacca and Penang should come under a kind of dual sovereignty, MacGillivray, being more closely attuned to the mood in Malaya, immediately rejected the idea. He argued that this would go against the agreements reached with the Alliance and would mean that Britain would be going back on its word.⁶⁰ In fact on the appointment of the constitutional commission to draft a new constitution for independent Malaya, the Colonial Office accepted MacGillivray's advice that the British government should agree to the Alliance proposal that the

commission comprise a wholly non-Malayan panel of legal experts from Commonwealth countries. The Alliance had argued that such a commission would be able to draft the constitution impartially.

On issues related to the formulation of the constitution, the Colonial Office was largely dependent on the advice of MacGillivray, especially in the Working Party discussions which he chaired in Kuala Lumpur in mid-1957. The decisions of the Working Party largely remained unaltered when the draft constitution was sent for debate to the federal legislature in Kuala Lumpur and to the British parliament.

MacGillivray while clearly more influential on the formulation of British policy vis-à-vis the Colonial Office nevertheless had to come to terms with the increasing power of the Alliance Party. The Alliance was able to gain most of its demands in the later stages when the British position in Malaya after the 1955 election was considerably weakened. But the process of decision-making had become so complex and enormous that the Colonial Office became increasingly reliant on the man on the spot. The mandarins at the Colonial Office were simply out of depth with the complex and varied nature of the issues and challenges that their administrators had to manage during the process of decolonisation in Malaya.

Conclusion

British colonial policy in Malaya was shaped by many minds - the mandarins in the Colonial Office in London, the various government departments, the Prime Minister's office and the man on the spot in Malaya. The degree of influence of the metropolitan and the periphery varied according to the nature of the issues and pressures of the particular period. If London had seized the initiative in the conduct of affairs during the Second World War, the post-war period differed significantly. The high commissioners in Malaya often led the initiative in policy formulation. The pressures of the post-war period and the complexity and varied nature of the issues required an intimate understanding of local developments. Invariably, the men on the spot had a better feel of things on the ground. At times the rapid development of events simply meant that the high commissioners were in the best position to deal adequately and effectively with the issues and challenges. At other times, the Colonial Office influenced to a greater extent the policy formulation process. In a sense there was a constant tussle with the man on the spot who often viewed himself as being more representative of Malaya's interest than the Colonial Office.

The discussion above has shown that the High Commissioners in Malaya wielded enormous power and influence on colonial policy in the post-war period because of the increased complexity and varied nature of the issues dealt with and the rapid pace of political developments. The High Commissioners had a better feel of the pulse of the territories and were able to persuade the Colonial Office to accept the wisdom of their 'informed' policies. Templer, clearly, was the most dominant of the high commissioners in Malaya in the post-war period. His close personal association with the Secretary of State gave him greater leverage and he faced less resistance from the officials in the Colonial Office. Gurney and MacGillivray nonetheless were also highly influential in shaping of colonial policy in Malaya. During the Emergency under the Gurney administration, the Colonial Office held the upper hand in decision making although on certain issues, such as the introduction of the Member system and local elections, Gurney was able to impose his influence. But Gurney had to contend with MacDonald whose opinion was much-sought after in the Colonial Office and often the latter's views prevailed over the former.

On the other hand, Templer, in view of his close relationship with the Secretary of State, wielded significantly greater influence in shaping colonial policies. He had enormous powers as military and civilian supremo unlike the administrators before him. His forceful personality also often determined much of the outcome. He often ignored Malcolm MacDonald, the Commissioner-General who had a more prominent role during Gurney's tenure. The Colonial Office showed greater deference, and at times appeared inhibited by Templer's personal style. MacGillivray was quite influential on colonial policy formulation but the tide had turned somewhat during his tenure and he had to contend with a stronger nationalist movement. While he had the upper hand in relations with the Colonial Office on many issues because of the political fluidity in Malaya during this transition period, his power in a sense was circumscribed by the growing power of the Alliance Party. He had his back to the wall in attempting to defend Colonial Office policy. High Commissioners in Malaya thus evidently wielded enormous influence on colonial policy-making in the post-war period.

Notes

- ¹ A.J. Stockwell, *Malaya*, Series B, Vol. 3 Part I, London: HMSO, p. xlix.
- ² Robert Heussler, *British Rule in Malaya*, Oxford: Clío Press, 1981, p. 227.
- ³ Stockwell, *Malaya*, p. xlix.
- ⁴ Stockwell, *Malaya*, p. 1.

- ⁵ J.M. Gullick, *Rulers and Residents*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- ⁶ Heussler, *British Rule in Malaya*, pp. 227-254. See also Robert Heussler, *Completing a Stewardship*, London: Greenwood Press, 1983.
- ⁷ Simon Smith, *British Relations with the Malay Rulers from Decentralization to Malayan Independence, 1930-1957*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995; Nicholas White, *Business, Government, and the End of Empire, 1942-1957*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996; and Tim Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- ⁸ See, for examples, the files in the CO 537, CO 1022 and CO 1030 series related to Malaya.
- ⁹ Stockwell, *Malaya*, p. xlix.
- ¹⁰ MacDonald to Creech Jones, 31 Aug. 1948, CO 537/3687 (51).
- ¹¹ A.J. Stockwell, 'Decolonization in Malaya,' *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Oct. 1984, p. 75.
- ¹² Gurney to Lloyd, 8 Oct. 1948, CO 537/3758 (19).
- ¹³ Gurney to Creech Jones, 25 Oct. 1948, CO 717/167 (1326), cited in A.J. Stockwell, *Malaya*, Series B, Vol. 3, Part II, London: HMSO, 1995, pp. 77-78.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.79.
- ¹⁶ Gimson to Lloyd, 8 Dec. 1948, CO 537/3758 (23), cited in Stockwell, *Malaya*, pp. 79-88..
- ¹⁷ Gurney to Lloyd, 20 Dec. 1948, CO 537/3758 (25), Stockwell, *Malaya*, pp. 89-91.
- ¹⁸ See Federal Legislative Council (FLC) Proceedings, 22 Nov. 1951, pp. 445-446. See also FLC, 6-7 July 1948, pp. b307-b309.
- ¹⁹ Minute by J.I.C. Crombie, 28 Feb. 1949, Stockwell, *Malaya*, pp. 110-111.
- ²⁰ Stockwell, *Malaya*, Part II, pp. 102-112.
- ²¹ Gurney to Lloyd, 24 Feb. 1949, CO 537/4741 (16).
- ²² Minute by N.D.W., 23 March 1949, CO 825/76/2 (7), Stockwell, *Malaya*, Part II, p. 123.
- ²³ Lloyd to Gurney, 2 April 1949, CO 537/4741 (27).
- ²⁴ Minute by Attlee, 2 April 1949, CO 537/4751 (68), Stockwell, *Malaya*, Part II, p. 127.
- ²⁵ Gurney to Griffiths, 9 April 1950.
- ²⁶ Gurney to Paskin, 31 Dec. 1949, CO 537/4741 (83). See also Gurney to Griffiths, 9 April 1950, CO 537/6026 (10).
- ²⁷ Gurney to Secretary of State, 1 March 1950, CO 537/6026 (2).
- ²⁸ Lloyd to Gurney, 31 May 1950, CO 537/6026 (19).
- ²⁹ Minutes of 15th Commissioner-General's Conference at Bukit Serene, Johore Bahru, 7 June 1950, CO 537/5961 (25).
- ³⁰ Gurney to Higham, 28 April 1951, CO 537/7262 (51).
- ³¹ Memorandum by Griffiths for Cabinet Defence Committee, 15 Nov 1950, PREM 8/1406/2, cited in Stockwell, *Malaya*, p. 263.
- ³² Stockwell, *Malaya*, p. xlviii.

- ³³ Stockwell, *Malaya*, p. xlviii.
- ³⁴ Gurney to Lloyd, 19 March 1951, CO 967/145.
- ³⁵ Lloyd to Gurney, 5 April 1951, CO 967/145.
- ³⁶ Templer's Terms of Reference, 4 Feb. 1952, CO 1022/84 (2).
- ³⁷ See Lord Chandos, *The Memoirs of Lord Chandos*, London: Bodley Head, 1962, p. 364.
- ³⁸ Templer to Lyttelton, 28 Feb. 1952, CO 1022/60 (3).
- ³⁹ Richard Stubbs, *Heart and Minds in Guerilla Warfare*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 147.
- ⁴⁰ Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds*, pp. 155-191.
- ⁴¹ See Anthony Short, *The Pursuit of Mountain Rats*, Singapore: Cultured Lotus 2000, pp. 376. Under the food denial operations the supply and stocking of rice was strictly controlled throughout the country in order to deny the MCP access to food supplies. This was strictly enforced despite the hardship it caused to the ordinary people.
- ⁴² Anthony Short, *The Pursuit of Mountain Rats*, p. 380.
- ⁴³ Templer to Lyttelton, 12 March 1952, CO 1022/100 (6).
- ⁴⁴ Minute by T.C. Jerrom, 15 March 1952, CO 1022/298.
- ⁴⁵ Secretary of State to Templer, 17 March 1952, CO 1022/100 (8) and Templer to Secretary of State, 23 March 1952, CO 1022/100 (10).
- ⁴⁶ Templer to Lyttelton, 27 July 1952, CO 1022/81 (24).
- ⁴⁷ Minute by T.C. Jerrom, 28 July 1952, CO 1022/81.
- ⁴⁸ Minutes of Colonial Office's political talk with Templer in London, 3 December 1952, CO 1022/86 (3).
- ⁴⁹ Stockwell, *Malaya*, p. xlix.
- ⁵⁰ Stockwell, *Malaya*, p. xxxv.
- ⁵¹ Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds*, p. 165.
- ⁵² Stockwell, *Malaya*, p. l.
- ⁵³ Stockwell, *Malaya*, p. xlviii.
- ⁵⁴ Stockwell, *Malaya*, p. xxxv.
- ⁵⁵ MacGillivray to Lyttelton, 2 June 1954, CO1030/310 (80).
- ⁵⁶ MacGillivray to J. Martin, 25 June 1954, CO 1030/311 (123).
- ⁵⁷ MacGillivray to Martin, 2 July 1954, CO 1030/65 (3).
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ MacGillivray to Lyttelton, 3 July 1954, CO 1030/311 (125).
- ⁶⁰ MacGillivray to Lyttelton, 19 July 1956, CO 1030/135 (2).