

## **Australia and the Formation of Malaysia 1961-1966: Documents on Australian Foreign Policy**

Edited by MOREEN DEE

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Malaysia was formed in September 1963 as a result of the merger of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak. During the next three years it survived, though was partly reshaped by, armed Confrontation with Indonesia and the secession of Singapore. Australia was a bystander in the developments to September 1963, and less than one third of these documents relate to this period. When, however, it became clear that the new state would aggravate rather than alleviate regional instability, Australia could no longer remain on the sidelines. Since, as Keith Waller put it, 'all our strategy... is based on our forward position in South East Asia' (document 39), the cause of Malaysia became the cause of Australia.

Australia's 'forward position' had grown since the coming of Cold War to Asia in the late 1940s. It had joined New Zealand in ANZAM in 1949, engaged in counter-insurgency operations during the Malayan Emergency, concluded the ANZUS agreement in 1951, become a member of SEATO in 1954, joined Britain's Far East Strategic Reserve in 1955 and subscribed to the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement of 1957. Any attempt in 1963 to pull out of Malayan commitments would have damaged its ties with Britain and risked exclusion from American defence planning. Nevertheless, Australia, Britain and the United States did not always see eye to eye with respect to the protection of Malaysia. Although the government of Robert Menzies (prime minister, 1949-66) instinctively supported the British, it was wary of their obduracy towards Indonesia. While it insisted that Malaysia's security was primarily the responsibility of the United Kingdom, it was alarmed equally by British belligerency in the first year of Confrontation and by British plans for defence cuts as that conflict ended. Reluctant to expand its own contribution to a British-led operation, the Australian government made any increase conditional upon consultation with the United States (236). Even so, Canberra did not

fully share Washington's priorities in the region. Like the British, Australian diplomats felt that Americans persisted too long in their sympathy for the Indonesian cause and entertained misgivings about Robert Kennedy's mission to mediate between Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur in 1964 (169-172). In addition to participating in Confrontation, Australia was drawn into the Vietnam war and, as they struggled to ride British and American horses simultaneously, ministers realised that their 'obligations in the South East Asia area [were] tending to run in two directions' (237).

The central theme in this collection is the challenge of managing 'forward defence' without alienating either Malaysia or Indonesia. Canberra took care to disassociate Australia from 'imperialist or neo-colonialist' objectives and to justify its support for Malaysia in the neutral terms of assistance to 'a sister (and Asian) Commonwealth country'. Such pronouncements fell far short of endorsing 'Asia for the Asians', since espousal of these ideas would have denied Australia an interest in the security and development of the region (124 and 157). When the Department of External Affairs sought a suitable formula to explain Australia's support for Malaysia without antagonising Indonesia, the high commissioner in Kuala Lumpur recommended 'the phrase "good neighbour" as an approach most likely to find a common appeal in both Malaysia and Indonesia' (86). Yet Tunku Abdul Rahman (Malaysian prime minister) and Dr Subandrio (Indonesian foreign minister) appeared impervious to notions of neighbourly coexistence. Although Canberra exercised greater leverage in Kuala Lumpur than in Jakarta, it became frustrated with the Tunku's impetuous conduct in international affairs. Officials urged the Tunku not to 'lightly embark on the luxury of quarrelling with large and powerful neighbours' and argued that the 'problem [of] how to make Indonesia behave ... will not be served by seeking to condemn her' or by pushing Sukarno 'into a corner where he has no choice other than humiliation or intensified military pressure.' (24, 190 and 219) Moreover, the 'good neighbour' approach did little to ingratiate Australia with an 'aggressive and angry' Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore who said that Garfield Barwick (minister for External Affairs) had been 'bloody foolish' to intervene on the Tunku's behalf in the constitutional talks of 1963. Lee told Australia to 'keep its nose out of Singapore-Federation politics' and, when secession loomed two years later, he warned against any complicity with Kuala Lumpur in the military suppression of

Singapore (89, 281 and 285). Clearly Australians found it difficult to please all their neighbours all the time. In any case, sitting on the fence was not Menzies' natural style and at a press conference in July 1965 he abandoned the balancing act by stating categorically that Australia was at war with Indonesia in the same way that it was fighting in Vietnam. (283)

When the Bangkok Agreement of August 1966 ended 'the distressing conflict' between Indonesia and Malaysia, Paul Hasluck (minister of external affairs, 1964-69) was 'deeply thankful' (377), but there is no evidence here that Australia was instrumental in this reconciliation. On the contrary, Malaysians 'made it very clear that they regard [the] quarrel as theirs and that it is for them to make it up in their own way' (367). Similarly, twelve months earlier the Tunku had deliberately refrained from confiding in either the British or the Australians about the other principal drama in this collection, Singapore's separation from Malaysia. Thomas Critchley (high commissioner in Kuala Lumpur) heard of this decision from Lord Head (British high commissioner) who found out only by gate-crashing a private party attended by the Tunku on the eve of its public announcement (290). Although, Malaysian ministers frequently kept Australian representatives in the dark about their intentions, they probably found them less inhibiting than the British, as is suggested by hints in despatches to Canberra of lingering local resentment towards the former colonial power. Resentment of the British did not, however, ensure respect for Australians. Lee Kuan Yew, for one, had little confidence in their diplomatic skills: 'I do not like the British but you have to give it to them. They have the experience and they know what they are doing'. Australians, on the other hand, 'did not really know enough about the economic issues involved to interfere and did not appreciate Singapore's separate importance and special interests' (89).

This is an invaluable collection of documents on the part played by Australia in Malaysia's formative years and Moreen Dee has been meticulous in ensuring that the reader makes best use of it. She sets out the principal strategic issues in the introduction; summarises events in a chronology; provides information on an international cast of over 170 *dramatis personae*; and supports the documents themselves with ten link-passages, precise annotation and an appendix on the archives. At the same time she avoids editorial intrusion, allowing the documents to speak for themselves. Thus, the correspondence

between the Department of External Affairs and missions in the region establishes the perspectives of Australians in Canberra, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Jakarta. Differences between diplomats overseas and the government at home also surface from time to time, but there is little sense of policy debate in Canberra, or of any shift in emphasis when Paul Hasluk succeeded Garfield Barwick as minister for External Affairs in April 1964, or of any break in continuity when James Plimsoll took over from Arthur Tange as the Department's secretary a year later.

A.J. STOCKWELL

*Royal Holloway, University of London*