The postwar colony and the politics of decolonisation

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A separate Crown colony

The Straits Settlements, whose constitution as a Crown colony Chapter I of Part B described, did not survive the Second World War. When civil government returned after the Japanese occupation and the period of British military administration, examined in Chapter I of this part, London reorganised its possessions in the region. On 1 April 1946 the Straits Settlements were dissolved. Singapore became a Crown colony of its own, with a civil administration headed by a Governor and separated from peninsular Malaya.[1]

The separation reflected British priorities on the peninsula, where London was reorganising the Malay states, and the special position of Singapore as naval base and free port. For the merchants of Singapore, the immediate consequence was an administrative frontier between the port and the hinterland that supplied its tin and rubber, although trade, currency and banking remained integrated. The colony and the Malayan territories continued to share a currency issued by a common currency board, as the following sections show.

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The postwar economy recovered unevenly. Strikes in 1947 caused major stoppages in public transport and other services, while the economy began to recover late in that year with the demand for tin and rubber.[2] Chapter IV of Part B has shown how closely the prosperity of the port depended on these two commodities. The dependence continued after the war and explains why every political plan for Singapore in the following two decades had to answer the question of access to the Malayan hinterland.

The first elections and the Emergency

Political change began slowly. The Legislative Council Election Ordinance of 1946 provided for the first elections in the colony's history, in which voters would elect six of the thirteen unofficial members of the Legislative Council. The first election took place on 20 March 1948, with the vote restricted to adult British subjects. Because registration was voluntary, only about 22,300 voters registered, of whom 14,126 voted on polling day.[3] The Elections Department puts the number of potential voters at about 200,000 and the number registered at 22,395.[4]

The election took place in the shadow of insurgency. In June 1948, about three months later, the Malayan Emergency began, an armed insurgency led by communist groups on the peninsula. The colonial government introduced emergency powers of detention that would shape Singapore's security law for decades.[5] The Emergency also hardened the British view that self-government had to be kept away from the radical left, a concern that runs through every later stage of decolonisation.

A second election in 1951 enlarged the number of elected seats to nine. In the same year King George VI conferred city status on Singapore.[6] The Progressive Party, which drew its support from English-educated professionals and merchants, dominated these early contests. Its narrow base reflected an electorate that was still small and largely English-speaking.

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The Rendel Constitution and the election of 1955

In 1953 the government appointed a commission under Sir George Rendel to study constitutional reform. Its proposals created a Legislative Assembly of 32 seats, of which 25 were elected, and introduced the automatic registration of voters.[7] Automatic registration transformed politics. The electorate grew more than sixfold to about 300,000 in 1955, with some 158,000 voters going to the polls, a turnout of 52.66 per cent.[8] According to the Elections Department, the reform raised the number of voters from about 76,000 to 300,299.[9]

The election of 2 April 1955 brought the first political shock. The Progressive Party won only four seats. The Labour Front under David Marshall won ten and formed a coalition government with the UMNO–MCA alliance, which had won three, while the new People's Action Party also won three seats. Marshall became Chief Minister on 7 April 1955.[10]

The new government faced labour militancy from its first weeks. On 12 May 1955 the strike at the Hock Lee bus company turned into riots in which four people died, among them a police constable and an American press correspondent, while thirty-one others were injured.[11] For investors the riots raised the question whether an elected government could keep order in a port whose trade depended on reliable labour and transport. For the British they confirmed that internal security could not yet be handed over.

The Merdeka talks and the State of Singapore Act 1958

Marshall led an all-party delegation to London in 1956 to demand independence. The talks opened on 23 April 1956 and broke down on 15 May, after the Colonial Secretary had rejected a date for independence in April 1957 and Britain had refused to transfer control of internal security. Marshall had pledged to resign if the mission failed, which he did on 7 June 1956.[12]

His successor, Lim Yew Hock, took a firmer line against the left. After the Chinese middle school riots of 1956 his government made about 900 arrests, which reassured London about the capacity of a local government to maintain order. New talks

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began on 11 March 1957 and concluded on 11 April with agreement on a State of Singapore. The Singapore Citizenship Ordinance 1957 came into force on 1 November 1957 and created a local citizenship for the first time.[13]

The British Parliament gave the agreement legal effect through the State of Singapore Act, which was passed on 24 July 1958 and received royal assent on 1 August 1958. A Yang di-Pertuan Negara would replace the Governor as representative of the Queen, who remained the titular head of state. Defence and foreign affairs stayed with London. Internal security was entrusted to an Internal Security Council of three British members, three members from Singapore, including the Prime Minister, and one from the Federation of Malaya. The Malayan seat gave Kuala Lumpur a voice in Singapore's security, an early sign that the political future of the island was bound up with that of the peninsula.[14]

Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Crown Colony of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): on 1 April 1946 the Straits Settlements were dissolved and "Singapore became a Crown Colony with a civil administration headed by a Governor and separated from peninsular Malaya". ↩
2. Wikipedia, "Crown Colony of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): strikes in 1947 caused major stoppages in public transport and other services; the economy began to recover in late 1947, helped by demand for tin and rubber. ↩
3. Wikipedia, "Crown Colony of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): election of March 1948, "The right to vote was restricted to adult British subjects"; Wikipedia, "1948 Singaporean general election" (accessed November 2026): polling on 20 March 1948; six elected seats; 22,334 registered voters; 14,126 ballots cast. ↩
4. Elections Department Singapore, "70 Years of Elections: Milestones" (eld.gov.sg): Legislative Council Election Ordinance 1946, six of the 13

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unofficial members elected; about 200,000 potential voters, 22,395 registered, 14,126 voted. ↩

5. Wikipedia, "Crown Colony of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): the Malayan Emergency began about three months after the March 1948 election, "an armed insurgency by communist groups in Malaya"; internal security legislation was introduced at this time. ↩
6. Wikipedia, "Crown Colony of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): the 1951 Legislative Council election had nine elected seats, of which the Singapore Progressive Party won six; city status was conferred by King George VI on 22 September 1951. ↩
7. Wikipedia, "Crown Colony of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): in 1953 the government appointed a commission headed by Sir George Rendel "to study the possibility of self-government for Singapore". Wikipedia, "1959 Singaporean general election" (accessed November 2026): the Rendel Constitution of 1955 provided for 32 Legislative Assembly seats, of which 25 were elected and 7 appointed. ↩
8. Wikipedia, "1955 Singaporean general election" (accessed November 2026): "more than 300,000 registered voters" (results table: 300,199); the electorate "had expanded more than sixfold compared to previous elections"; 158,075 votes cast, of which 156,324 valid; turnout 52.66 per cent. ↩
9. Elections Department Singapore, "70 Years of Elections: Milestones" (eld.gov.sg): automatic registration recommended by the Rendel Commission "immediately raised the number of voters from about 76,000 to 300,299 in 1955". The figure differs slightly from the 300,199 in the Wikipedia results table. ↩
10. Wikipedia, "Crown Colony of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): election of 2 April 1955; Progressive Party four seats, Labour Front ten, UMNO–MCA–MU alliance three, People's Action Party three. Wikipedia, "David Marshall (Singaporean politician)" (accessed November 2026): Chief Minister from 7 April 1955. ↩

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11. Wikipedia, “Hock Lee bus riots” (accessed November 2026): riots of 12 May 1955; four dead, including Constable Andrew Teo and the American correspondent Gene D. Symonds; thirty-one injured. ↩
12. Wikipedia, “David Marshall (Singaporean politician)” (accessed November 2026): the talks opened on 23 April 1956; Lennox-Boyd rejected the proposed April 1957 independence date on 25 April; the talks broke down on 15 May 1956; Wikipedia, “Merdeka Talks” (accessed November 2026): the talks broke down when the British refused to hand over internal security. Wikipedia, “David Marshall (Singaporean politician)” (accessed November 2026): resigned as Chief Minister on 7 June 1956. ↩
13. Wikipedia, “Merdeka Talks” (accessed November 2026): Lim Yew Hock succeeded Marshall as Chief Minister in 1956; the Chinese middle schools riots led to about 900 arrests. Wikipedia, “Self-governance of Singapore” (accessed November 2026): talks began on 11 March 1957 and concluded on 11 April; the Singapore Citizenship Ordinance 1957 “commenced on 1 November 1957”. ↩
14. Wikipedia, “Self-governance of Singapore” (accessed November 2026): the State of Singapore Act was “given royal assent after having been passed by the Parliament on 24 July” 1958, with assent on 1 August 1958. Wikipedia, “Self-governance of Singapore” (accessed November 2026): the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was “to represent Queen Elizabeth II, who remained titular head of state”; the Internal Security Council comprised three members from the United Kingdom, “three from Singapore (including the Prime Minister) and one from the Federation of Malaya”. ↩

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