

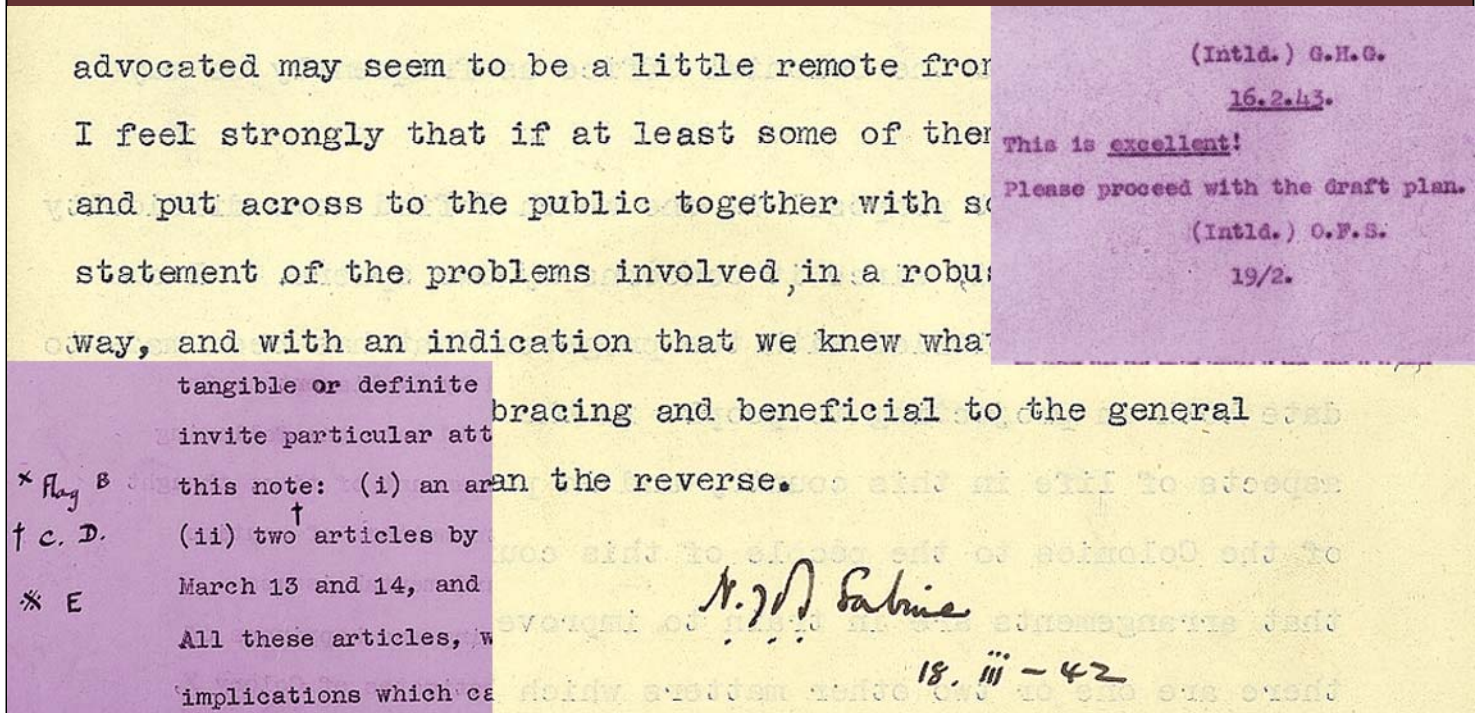


Learning Curve  
Education Service Workshops

AS/A2

# Decolonisation

## Malaya and the Gold Coast, 1940-1960



### Contents

Document 2:  
Memorandum criticising colonial policy after fall of  
Singapore, ref: CO 875/14/9

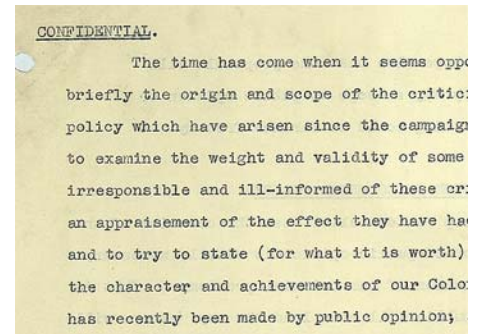
## Document 2: Memorandum criticising colonial policy after fall of Singapore, ref: CO 875/14/9

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#### **CONFIDENTIAL**

The time has come when it seems opportune to record briefly the origin and scope of the criticisms of Colonial policy which have arisen since the campaign in Malaya started: to examine the weight and validity of some of the less irresponsible and ill-informed of these criticisms: to attempt an appraisal of the effect they have had on public opinion: and to try to state (for what it is worth) the estimate of the character and achievements of our Colonial policy which has recently been made by public opinion; and what action seems to be expected by the public - or such sections of the public who have views to register or to express - from those charged with the responsibility for the conduct of Colonial affairs.

2. It will be agreed, I think, that these matters fall within my province as Public Relations Officer. I propose, however, in this note to go somewhat beyond that, and to put forward one or two suggestions, based on my experience both inside this office and outside it, which I hope may be considered. I am conscious that some or all of them may appear to be far-fetched and perhaps extravagant. I have tried to keep them practical, and I hope that, if it is thought that the leisure which I have enjoyed for the last few days - with its unusual opportunity for detached reflection - has proved altogether too stimulating, judgment will be tempered



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with indulgence. I hope also that the proposals will not be regarded in any way as sops to public opinion or window dressing. Nothing could be farther from my intentions.

#### 3. PUBLIC OPINION ON COLONIAL POLICY.

I have a deep rooted belief that the creation of an interested, well-informed public opinion is vitally necessary to the successful solution of our Colonial problems. That is not to say that the public will ever lead the way: there will not be - and it would be much too much to expect - the necessary detailed and practical knowledge or the necessary freedom from other preoccupations. But I do believe that in attacking the problem, the Secretary of State and his officers - in England and overseas - would be greatly fortified in their task by understanding, sympathy, criticism of the right kind, and encouragement, all of which, I am convinced, the people of this country, with their unique qualities of humanity and common sense, could offer. I believe that now is the time to ask for it, and I will deal with this aspect later in this note.

#### 4. REGENT PUBLICITY POLICY.

The first publicity measures with which I was concerned in the office were those taken when the White Paper

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on the new Colonial Development and Welfare Policy was published in February 1940. For this event, a somewhat complicated directive was prepared, which, on paper and with some necessary modifications, has served since as a model and a guide. This directive laid emphasis on the fact that it was both worthy of notice and of praise that in the midst of war we could take this practical and forward step to meet our Colonial

responsibilities: but any charge of complacency was anticipated by a saving clause to the effect that we were only at the beginning of the problem, and that much remained to be done etc. A reference to the loyalty and support of the Colonial peoples, the financial soundness of the exchequer which could support such a burden (a guarantee of "ultimate and inevitable victory however long and hard the road") and a somewhat (it must be confessed smug comparison of our policy with some of the more revealing passages in "Mein Kampf" completed the picture.

5. The loyalty and support of the Colonial peoples had not then been tested so cruelly as they have been since, and "business as usual" had hardly begun to be discredited. So the press (and the public) were good enough to follow the directive almost as it stood: and there was in the press for a day or two a considerable and unwonted flood of material about Colonial affairs which subsided as quickly

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as it had arisen. In terms of inches of space in the press the campaign had been an unqualified success, and there is no doubt that, in spite of its short life, it did spread abroad the idea that we had embarked upon a new, progressive Colonial policy.

6. Since that time, however, the pace of the war has progressively quickened; its character has changed, the threat has come nearer and clearer, and our reactions too have changed accordingly. In practice, therefore, we have in our publicity policy concentrated on two aspects: the generous support which the Colonies have shown for the war effort in so many ways: and, complementary to that, what we have been able to do for them. There was nothing false or artificial about this treatment; although it did not and could not purport to give the whole of a very complicated picture. But it can be claimed, I think, that a good deal of it got across. Bitter complaints are often made - and with good reason - that children in schools think that Nairobi is in South Africa, describe Canada as a Colony, and have never heard of Uganda. But I fancy that a good many people in this country, of all ages and classes, know that Colonies have bought Spitfires and mobile canteens: and a fair number also know that we have bought Jamaica's bananas, and that we encourage trade unions in Colonies by appointing professional

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unharmonious note; and Fabians and others sometimes referred to the "Colour Bar" and suggested that the provision for Colonial Development should be £50 million a year instead of £5 million. But by and large these were merely ripples in the pool: there was little real public interest and therefore no widespread public curiosity. In such circumstances came the Malayan disaster.

8. MALAYA.

It must be said that everything possible - and it was a great deal - had been done to ensure that if Malaya went seriously wrong the press and the public should be raised to a pitch of record fury. Everyone had an ill-defined and ill-informed contempt for the Japanese as a fighting

trades unionists from this country to posts abroad.

7. So it may be said that until the last month or so it was generally accepted that the Colonies were loyal and happy under our rule and helping us to the limit of their resources: that our policy was enlightened, humane, and reasonably progressive: and that our Colonial Service was, in the best traditions of our Services, worthy of approval and even pride. There was - rightly and justly - least questioning of the last assertion. On the first two, awkward questions about Bustamente and Uriah Butler, labour conditions in British Guiana, and strikes on the Copper Belt struck from time to time an occasional unharmonious note; and Fabians and others sometimes referred

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fighting force, based on the long drawn out, still unresolved conflict with China, and no one could believe that she would go to war with America, ourselves, the Netherlands, and possibly Russia. They had been told of the defences of Singapore (described quite inaccurately as an impregnable fortress); and during the month of tension before December, they had been lulled into a sense of security by talk of reinforcements of men and equipment pouring into Singapore. No doubt there was good reason for all this but it is not easy to explain.

9. It did not get any easier, as with every day that passed, it was evident that things in Malaya were going very badly wrong. Added to that, public irritation was continuously and progressively aggravated by the complacencies of military spokesmen, difficulties of censorship, reports of internal quarrels and inefficiency - everything, in fact - that could have been devised by the most malignant fate, as the tragedy ran its course, true to its early form, from Khota Bahru to Fort Canning.

10. It is not always easy to foresee the reaction of the British people to any given event but it is always safe to say that they will react positively and energetically to adversity. It had proved the case during the days of Dunkirk, when nearly everybody could find some opportunity for strenuous

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service - in civil defence, in the factory, in the Home Guard: and it proved the case now - but with this difference, that there was very little anyone could do about it. So the energy found its outlet in furious, and not too well balanced or well informed criticism. The first target was the C.-in-C. Far East: then it appeared that not only had he been relieved of his command, but that this step had in fact been taken before the campaign started. With a certain feeling of baffled rage, the press and the public looked for another scapegoat: and at this convenient juncture the Editor of the "Straits Times", a newspaper in Singapore, saw fit to make a violent attack on the alleged deficiencies of the Malayan Civil Service. This was telegraphed home and, since any attack on any Civil Service is a popular and well tried gambit, it was taken up: not very violently, however, and not with any great confidence, except by some of the more disreputable Sunday papers. It is pleasant to record that many papers kept clear of it, and that at least one not only took a strong line against ill-informed criticism, but even telegraphed in full at its own expense the text of an article and an excellent leader to the press in Malaya, Ceylon and parts of the West Indies.

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11. In quite a short time the campaign had subsided,

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and the Malayan campaign fell once more into perspective as a first class military disaster.

12. During the earlier part of the controversy "The Times", apart from one or two casual and acid references to rubber planters, had kept aloof from it. But on February 18 it published, an article<sup>1</sup> from a correspondent in Batavia which analysed the causes of the fall of Malaya. The article was written as all "Times" articles are, in a sober and moderate style and was accurate in certain, though not all, particulars. In general it ascribed the fall of Malaya to military factors but it contained one very significant phrase. It described the Government of Malaya as "having no roots in the life of the people of the country."

13. The effect of this article in this country and abroad was immediate and striking. By the use of this significant - and to many - damning phrase, it called into question the whole spirit and, basis of our Colonial policy in a way that the previous, more personal and more limited attacks could never have done. It could not be countered by showing that in Malaya we were advisers, not rulers, or by questioning our moral right to invite peaceful Malaya to fling themselves unarmed in front of the Japanese tanks to stem for a few minutes the advance on Singapore. It did in fact contain the substance

<sup>1</sup> - Flagged A.

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of a reasoned and fundamental criticism which was instinctively recognised, appreciated and given weight, by public opinion.

It was of course taken up in the House of Commons and several members read out extracts from the article. In his reply, the Lord Privy Seal in referring to these comments confined himself to a bare statement that there was a new Colonial Secretary and that he would no doubt review Colonial policy and administration.

14. The position has thus been created in which it is widely recognised that while our Colonial policy, reflecting as it does the virtues and defects of our whole political system, has achieved much that is good, a revision and

review of our existing principles and administration is urgently called for. There has been a good deal of comment in the press and elsewhere but naturally enough, nothing tangible or definite has emerged. I would, however, invite particular attention to the articles attaches to this note: (i) an article<sup>1</sup> in the "Economist" of March 7 and (ii) two<sup>2</sup> articles by Miss Margery Perham in "The Times" of March 13 and 14, and a "Times" leader<sup>3</sup> of the latter date. All these articles, while they contain statements and implications which can be seriously challenged, are written

<sup>1</sup> – Flag B

<sup>2</sup> - C. D.

<sup>3</sup> – E.

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with considerable knowledge and care and certain constructive ideas: they are in effect, however, (and are probably intended to be) designed to stimulate questioning rather than to supply any of the answers. And we are left with the situation I have described: in which recognition is given to our approach to the problem and to our considerable achievements, but in which has emerged an ill-defined feeling of malaise and a vague demand for urgent and dynamic remedial action. Is any such action called for? If so, what is it to be.

### 15. SOME GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

It would be neither fitting nor profitable if I were to attempt in this note to generalize about the principles underlying our Colonial policy: but before putting forward certain specific suggestions I should like to refer briefly to two aspects of our administration which have in fact been in my mind for some time.

16. The first concerns the administration by the Colonial Office of the Colonial policy formulated by Parliament. On this, with the greatest diffidence, I would make the following comment: that a wholly disproportionate amount of time, thought and energy appears to me to be devoted to matters of routine as compared with that given to wider, fundamental issues ultimately affecting the personal wellbeing and happiness of millions of people. Thus, the annual estimates of Colony X,

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an application for funds for a hospital, proposals for new taxation, proposals to promote various officers will be examined with the greatest care. I do not for a moment put forward the suggestion that this is not essential (although I believe some of the matters which are the subject of decisions in the Colonial Office might be better left for decision locally): but I cannot help seeing, at the same time that bigger questions, such as: Why is Colony X, with its accounts in good order, its constitution and public services working efficiently, in reality a most unhappy little state with no real harmony between Governors and governed, are not even asked, let alone answered. I am fully aware of the difficulty of raising these general questions and aware of the argument that

they are matters for the Governor. One explanation may be that the lack of statesmanship and vision which has characterised the conduct, on the highest plane, of our affairs for a good many years now has resulted in an imperfect and unrealistic definition of policies and principles, which makes it fruitless and of no avail to raise questions which, in the absence of a completely worked out policy, cannot in the nature of things be answered. I know that in certain spheres e.g. the economic sphere, the sphere of social services, the sphere of education, and in connexion with the organization of the

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Colonial Service, a great deal of wide and bold planning has been done and beneficial action has been taken. But even so, I cannot resist the conclusion, and I feel it my duty to state it, that for whatever reason it may be, routine matters receive an amount of attention disproportionate to that given to the consideration of larger issues.

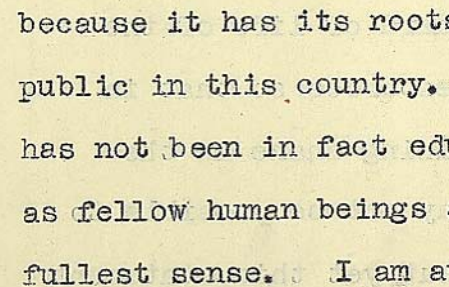
17. The second concerns the basis of our relations with what we call "the Colonial people." There is in this country very little indication of any realization that the British Empire is very largely a coloured Empire and that this applies particularly to the Colonial Empire. The colour question has never been squarely faced by the public of this country, with all its implications for the future: and the result is the kind of question which is crystallised in the following passage from the second of Miss Perham's articles in "The Times".

"Many an officer works and overworks with the utmost devotion for the group in his charge, while, in their clubs and in European residential quarters, he and his wife may live wholly insulated from the real life of the people and the country. Why are the stimulating and friendly relations possible in this country between ourselves and coloured visitors and students almost wholly barred in

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some of our colonies? Is the answer, which has to do with official and racial prestige, sufficient to justify this numbing of personal relationships? No impossible alternative need be presented. Differences of race, colour, language and customs are barriers; backwardness is a dividing fact. But there is a level of education and of potential common interests upon which we are held back only by our prejudices from co-operation and friendship. Yet, without these, imperial rule cannot change into the working partnership which the coming age demands"

The attitude characterised in the passage is, I think, fairly general in the Colonies. It may be right or wrong; it is certainly in existing circumstances inevitable because it has its roots and origin in the attitude of the public in this country. The truth is that the public here has not been in fact educated into regarding coloured people as fellow human beings and potential fellow citizens in the fullest sense. I am aware that a great deal of careful thought has been given to this subject and that any process of education must be a long one. But although the establishment of a Welfare Department was a considerable advance, the subject has not been fully ventilated in public; and I consider that it is so closely bound up with fundamental



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issues in our Colonial policy that it should be brought more formally and explicitly to the notice of the public as an urgent, pressing and delicate problem, than it has been hitherto.

### 18. SOME SUGGESTIONS.

Arising out of the matters discussed in this note, I would submit the following suggestions.

(1) That the question of making some pronouncement defining our Colonial policy should be considered as a matter of urgency.

At the present time, the position is perhaps necessarily not altogether clear. The stock definition of our Colonial policy which I state, subject to correction, is something on the following lines, "By means of education in its widest sense, to raise the standard of life of the Colonial people and to develop their resources so that in due course they may take an ever increasing share in the ordering of their own affairs." It may not be possible to go beyond a statement on these lines, but yet this statement leaves a number of questions and implications unanswered. It is at the same time sometimes assumed and stated in public, though not with any official backing, that we have promised full self-government to Colonies. This again begs all kinds of questions. The effect of a satisfactory

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not enough time in the office to think about really fundamental issues. It has occurred to me that it be possible to devise machinery in the form of a small committee composed of a nucleus of members of the office with power to co-opt from time to time other persons outside the office who are interested and knowledgeable about Colonial affairs. I will not burden this note with any further suggestions about the composition of this committee merely say that I would visualise a body which would in some sense correspond with the Hailey Committee, except that it would be dealing with current problems instead of the

pronouncement, if it could be produced, would be two-fold; it would produce useful and, I hope, fruitful discussion in this country; and it would, I am sure, have a good effect in many of the Colonies. It would be necessary, of course, to consult Governors on the terms of the pronouncement.

(2) I have referred above to an impression which I have, which may be right or wrong, that there is in general not enough time in the office to think about really fundamental issues. It has occurred to me that it might be possible to devise machinery in the form of a small working committee composed of a nucleus of members of the office with power to co-opt from time to time other persons outside the office who are interested and knowledgeable about Colonial affairs. I will not burden this note with any farther suggestions about the composition of this committee, but I merely say that I would visualise a body which would in some sense correspond with the Hailey Committee, except that it would be dealing with current problems instead of the problems of the future in so far as these can be separated. It would add greatly to the usefulness of this committee if individual members of it could at times find it possible to make short visits to Colonies which were the subject of any particular enquiry. It would be necessary to take Governors with us on this proposal also.

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(3) The third proposal I would make arises from the experience I had recently of hearing a two day debate in the House of Commons at which Colonial questions were discussed with a lamentable lack of knowledge and appreciation of the issues which lay behind them. I wondered whether it would be possible for the Parliamentary Under Secretary to sound a few members of all parties and try to get them interested in Colonial matters. This would be quite informal and there would be no suggestion of creating a small caucus to defend the Colonial Office in the House of Commons. That would have to be made clear.

(4) I would recommend that immediate consideration be given to the publication of some statement about the colour question. Something has already been said by the late Secretary of State on this subject, but it has not been fully ventilated. I would visualise a short straightforward statement of our views on this important matter together with urgent action, in consultation with other Departments concerned, to try to remove some of the disabilities under which Colonial people at present find themselves in this country. I am fully aware of the difficulties attendant on both these courses of action but one thing can be done immediately as ground work and that is to keep up and expand as much as possible the practice started by Mr. Hall when he was Under secretary here, of inviting Colonial visitors to this country and residents

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in this country to the Colonial Office as frequently as may be practicable.

(5) The last proposal is one which I find some difficulty in putting forward, since it concerns my own sphere. I am very far from satisfied with the progress that has been made to date both in projecting to people in the

Colonies certain aspects of life in this country and in projecting the problem of the Colonies to the people of this country. I am aware that arrangements are in train to improve the position but there are one or two other matters which I should like to raise at a convenient opportunity.

19. I have tried to show in this minute that the members of the public are expecting some kind of reaction from the office to the recent comments and criticisms. I have tried to indicate for consideration some of the steps which might be taken, but it is clear to me that some action must be taken, whether it is positive, i.e. certain changes, or whether it is negative, i.e. a full statement about what is being done already, and the reasons why it is impracticable or unnecessary to make any change. The question of the publicity measures to be taken in either case is one which must, I think, wait until some decision has been reached.

20. There is only one further point which I should like to put. That is that while some of the measures I have

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advocated may seem to be a little remote from the war I feel strongly that if at least some of them could be taken and put across to the public together with some further statement of the problems involved in a robust and realistic way, and with an indication that we knew what we were doing the result would be bracing and beneficial to the general war effort rather than the reverse.

N. J. B. Sabine  
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