



Merdeka, a colonial retrospect

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When the menteri besar of several states replaced British Residents, the colonials thought that the locals would not be able to cope. But they were determined to, writes JOHN GULLICK

IN all the turmoil of setting up the Federation of Malaya in 1948, little attention was given to the fact that there was still a central government for the peninsula — a legacy from the Malayan Union and the real beginning of the transfer of power.

Datuk Onn Jaafar had returned to Johor as menteri besar in the confidence that he would have the power that his family, traditional holders of the office, had enjoyed.

As a minor act of administration he decided that a local firm of hauliers should have the licence for which they had applied.

He learnt, however, that the Federal Road Transport Department, which had control of such matters, had refused the application.

The fury of his letter of protest to Kuala Lumpur caused the file on the case to be immediately upgraded from open to top secret.

Another change in 1948 was the appointment of Malay administrators to the post of menteri besar in the former Federated Malay States, where previously the British Resident had been omnipotent.

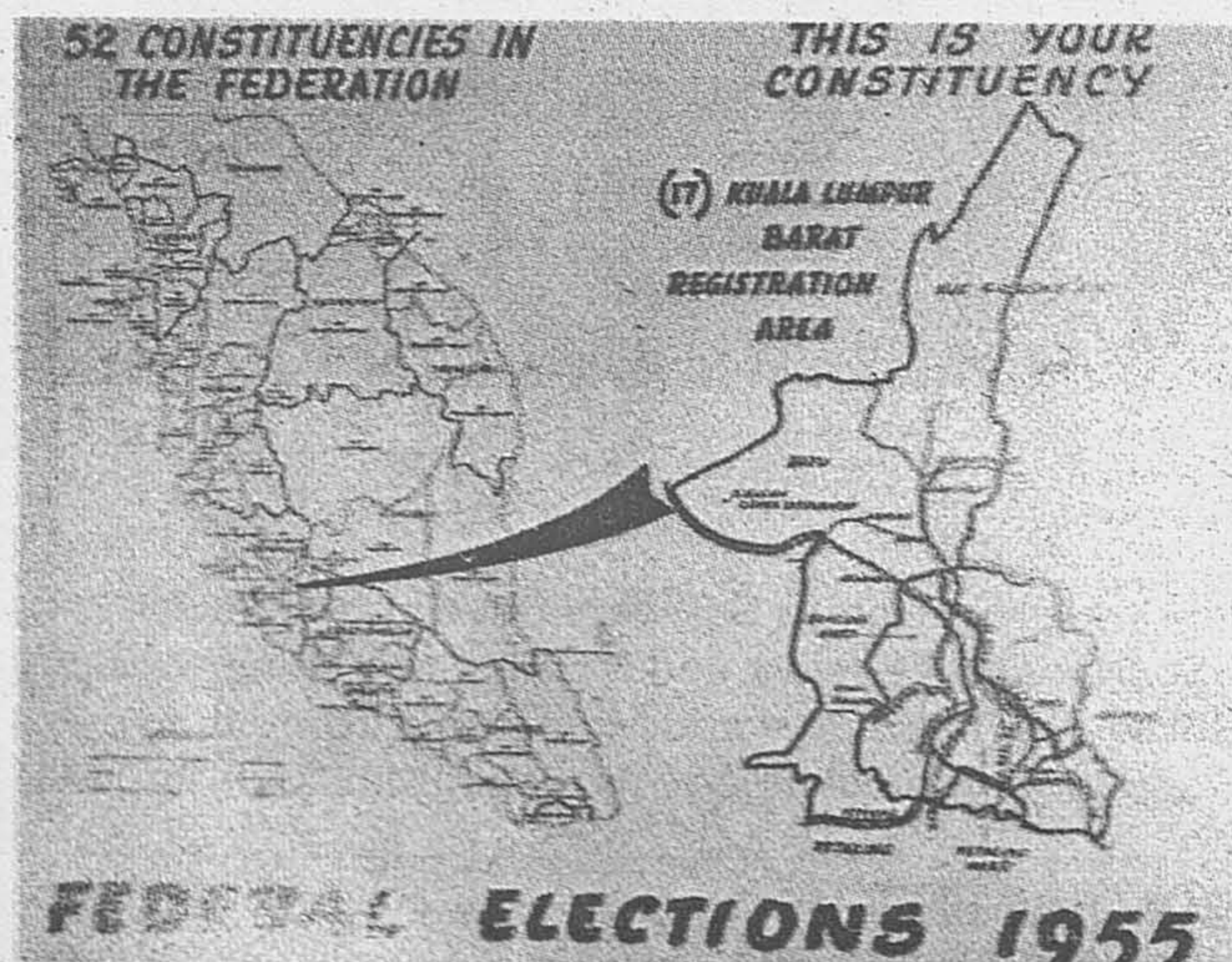
These moguls, transmuted



to be mere British advisers, wrote privately to each other with the encouraging message that: "They'll never be able to cope. Within a month or two it will all be back in our hands."

But it wasn't the case as the Malay menteri were a determined lot. I was the secretary to one of the advisers who no longer received any files on which he could advise, let alone decide. He protested and the menteri besar sent him just one file — the minutes of the state welfare committee.

In the new central government there were unforeseen problems. The wartime planners in London, cut off from



A map showing the 52 constituencies that were contested in the 1955 general elections.



A worker from the electoral commission carrying a board announcing that the general elections will be held on July 27, 1955.

Malaya, failed to anticipate the technical difficulties of bringing 11 states and settlements, with three different administrative systems, into a union or federation.

A small example of this was when I had to introduce a single law for the protection of wild animals (a "federal subject" that the state governments would enforce).

It was necessary to refer the draft ordinance to every state, especially those with strong views. It took a year to elicit 11 replies, and they were to some extent in conflict.

There was a huge inflow of letters to Kuala Lumpur, some raising complex and important issues.

Under the old fashioned "crown colony" system introduced by the Malayan Union and little altered at the centre in 1948, all such papers went ultimately to the chief secretary (CS) for his decision.

The CS, who should have known better, called his office the "graveyard" as it held at all times 800 files awaiting his consideration. It was utterly unworkable.

Then came the "member system" by which unofficial members of the executive council more or less became ministers responsible for portfolios allotted to them.

When the 1955 election swept the Alliance to power, Tunku Abdul Rahman became chief minister and his colleagues shared the responsibilities for all matters except for some subjects reserved for



John Gullick was impressed by the way Malayan officials in senior ranks handled difficult tasks

a handful of British officials.

Thus, began the transfer of power to Malayan hands.

Some members, including Tunku and Tun Abdul Razak, had administrative experience, but others discovered that being part of the government was the art of the possible, fraught with pitfalls.

Each member had an administrator as his secretary and we developed a "Yes, Minister" culture.

I was secretary to Onn Jaafar, when he was Member for Home Affairs and Chairman of the Rural Industry Development Authority (now Majlis Amanah Rakyat).

It was fascinating to watch a talented man and a patriot, perhaps distracted by these responsibilities, lose touch with the political world outside.

But in my opinion this power sharing greatly helped in the transfer of power in 1957.

As the negotiations slowly progressed towards Merdeka, the expatriate officials had to face the fact that they were on the way out.

They were also disposed to underrate the abilities of the Alliance leaders. A visiting Colonial Office official went so far as to describe them, in a report to London, as "ragtag and bobtail".

I would not claim too much for the wiser perceptions of the younger men (I was one) who had only experienced post-war Malaya.

But it was an opportunity to get to know the men who would rule Malaya when we were gone.

In my final year, I was, among other things, secretary to a ministerial committee, chaired by the Tunku, that worked out a programme for replacing expatriates with Malayan officials in the senior ranks. To see them buckle down to a difficult task was fascinating — and impressive.

I felt that I stood in the wings, off stage, watching history, taking its course under the spotlights. I would not have missed it for anything. — MPS

■ Gullick is a former Malayan Civil Service officer who served the Federation Establishment Office from 1955 to 1967. He is 92 and lives in retirement in Essex, England.

Having lived and worked overseas for several years, I feel that Malaysia is truly a unique country and I am proud to call it home. I was glad to be posted back here recently. Our 50 years of independence has been a good one. We need to work more towards creating an integrated nation — one that synergistically combines the strength of the different races.

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engineer,
from Kuala Lumpur