



“No Federation Please-We Are Bruneians”: Scuttling the Northern Borneo Closer Association Proposals

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Abstract

The reason for Brunei Darussalam’s refusal to join the Malaysia Federation in August 1963 remains an enigma to this date. Scholarly speculations abound pointing to Brunei’s reluctance to share her oil income and the ire of then Brunei Sultan Sir Haji Omar Ali Saifuddin for losing priority in the hierarchy of the Malayan kings and so on. This article sets the historical background of the Sultan’s unyielding resistance in diluting sovereignty of the State by becoming part of any Federation within or without Malaysia. Federalism, a cardinal British imperial policy to unite otherwise fledgling smaller colonial territories, may have worked elsewhere in the dominion, but the promoters in the British Colonial Office hit a blindwall when they tried to promote the same among the three Northern Borneo Territories namely Sarawak, North Borneo (Sabah) and the Sultanate of Brunei. No amount of persuasion, cajoling and even indirect threats could nudge Brunei to accept an ostensible Closer Association Proposals prior to the formation of a larger Federation including Malaysia and Singapore. By focusing on this important but a still-born event, this article highlights complex issues that shaped Brunei’s modern history in which the Sultanate slithered towards neo-traditionalism as well as monarchic absolutism as witnessed today. This article further highlights an ironic coalescence of disparate interests represented by a nascent nationalist movement in the Partai Rakyat Brunei (Brunei People’s party) led by Shaikh Azahari with that of the altruism of British colonial design to achieve the same goal vis-à-vis an obstinate Brunei Ruler who emerged victorious in the end to keep intact the age-old Brunei monarchy while preserving the geographical integrity of a rump State that stood the danger of being obliterated during the period under discussion.

Keywords

Brunei Darussalam; North Borneo Federation proposals; Formation of Malaysia; Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddin III of Brunei; British colonial policy; Tunku Abdul Rahman; Kalimantan Utara; Partai Rakyat Brunei (Brunei People’s Party), Sarawak, Sabah and Malaysia

“No Federation Please-We Are Bruneians”: Scuttling the Northern Borneo Closer Association Proposals¹

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Brunei Darussalam made an historic decision at the eleventh hour to stay out of the Malaysia Federation formed in August 1963. Most historical literature on modern Malaysia and Brunei are content to offer explanations based on the near impossible demands put forward by late Paduka Seri Begawan Sultan of Brunei-- Haji Omar Ali Saifuddin (r.1950-1967)² for political and financial autonomy that could not be accommodated by the Malaysian leaders like Tunku Abdul Rahman, the founder Prime Minister of Malaysia.³ This article seeks to establish the fact that it was not a

¹ The original and a detailed version of this modified article was published as chapter 8 in B. A. Hussainmiya, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III and Britain: The Making of Brunei Darussalam* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995). As this book is now out of print and in view of the contemporary significance of this topic in Malaysian politics, the writers have resurrected the theme for a fresh publication.

² See B. A. Hussainmiya, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III and Britain: The Making of Brunei Darussalam* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³ For an authoritative account from the Malayan point of view see Mohamed Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation: Political Unification in the Malaysia Region 1945-65*, (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit University Malaysia, 1974). From the point of view of the North Borneo see Ongkili, James P., *The Borneo Response to Malaysia 1961-1963*, Singapore: Donald Moore Press Ltd., 1967). From the Singapore point of view see Osborne, Milton, *Singapore and Malaysia, 1964, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y. South-East Asia Program, Data paper No. 53*, and Brackman, A. C., *South-East Asia's Second Front: The Power Struggle in the Malayan Archipelago*, (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1966). Also see Hanna, W. A. *The Formation of Malaysia: New Factor in World Politics*, (New York: American Universities Field Staff, Inc., 1964). Several unpublished theses have also been written. Especially relevant is the semi-autobiographical account of Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, who was one of the important personalities behind the negotiations. Ghazali Shafie, *Memoir on the Formation of Malaysia*, (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia, 1998). For a Brunei point of view see, Harun Abdul Majid, *Rebellion in Brunei: The 1962 Revolt, Imperialism, Confrontation and Oil* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007). For the latest explanation, see Isa bin Ibrahim, *Why Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin refused to join the Federation?*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013). [Forthcoming]

sudden decision by Brunei after all to spurn the Tunku's grand design. As a matter of fact, there is a long historical background to this which the Tunku, consciously or unconsciously had not given heed to, partly due to his blind confidence on his erstwhile colleague Sultan Omar's ostensive desire to become part of the Federation.

The real explanation for Brunei's rejection of Malaysia, however, lies in the Sultanate's relentless stand against the prospects for any form of federalism. Being a miniature State, albeit a protected one, situated in the backwaters of Southeast Asia, it was deemed hard for Brunei to survive as a separate Sultanate in the calculations of policy makers especially from the British, the protecting power. On hindsight it would appear how close to peril the Sultanate came to be obliterated had the scheme been implemented. Since at least 1950, the Brunei monarchic circles led by Sultan Haji Omar, fearless of the outcome, but by using his sovereign prerogatives, kept at bay all coercion by the British to become part of a larger North Borneo Federation designed as a precursor to the Federation of Malaysia. This article is primarily a historical narrative of the origins and the subsequent scuttling of the idea of "the Closer Association Proposals", and secondarily to underscore the tenacity of the precocious Brunei ruling family to ward off imperial pressures for merger proposals long before the grand design of Malaysia was officially announced.

Origins of the Closer Association Proposal

From as early as the eighteenth century, the British colonial policy encouraged federalism as a means to weld disparate smaller territories into viable territorial, economic, administrative or political units. Ensuing political complications notwithstanding, for the subject territories as well as to the colonial power, federalism remained a cardinal policy of the British Government with powers of persuasion, direction, control or even force at its disposal.⁴ The policy was revived

⁴ The British ideas on creating larger units, as independent federations, spread far beyond Borneo. In the late 1930's the East African Governor's Conference was established (with Henry Gurney as its first Chief Secretary). Information courtesy of late J. M. Gullick. Personal communication, 10 January 1995. When the short-lived West Indian Federation of 1956 was developed as a result of the Second World War and during the deliberations for West Indian independence Creech Jones, then Secretary of State for the Colonies, said that 'it was impossible for the colonies as separate units, small and secure, to achieve and maintain full self-government on their own. Federation was a

again in the British Northern Borneo that consisted of Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei since as early as 1890s; for example, in 1931 Cecil Clementi,⁵ who promoted a merger of interests of the Company and the Raj as he campaigned hard for a federation of Labuan, Sarawak, North Borneo, and Brunei. Expressing his views to Bertram Brooke, the Tuan Muda and heir apparent to Raja Vyner Brooke, Clementi wrote⁶

It is clear that... administration of this larger territory from Singapore is inconvenient, and that it would be far better for British Borneo if it became a dependency of the British Empire separate from the Malay Peninsula. It seems almost certain that progress and development throughout British Borneo would be greatly facilitated, if its four component parts could be drawn together in a loosely knit federation. This could be achieved without in any way altering the Constitution of any one of the important parts. It would only be necessary that the four component parts should bind themselves by treaty to constitute a Federal Council...

However, the Colonial Office shunned the idea as 'premature' that stood little chance of success. First, it required changes in the attitude of the colonial officials serving the Sarawak Raj, in the North Borneo Company and even in the Colonial Office.⁷ The Sarawak and North Borneo Governments were not ready to become Crown Colonies. Second, running of these administrations was considered too costly for the British Government. Third, the general backwardness of political development in the territories constituted a stumbling block. The sticking point was that the British bore the overall responsibility for the Borneo territories in international forums, and yet exercised little executive authority (except perhaps in Brunei

essential step to their autonomy'. Simandjuntak, B., *Malayan Federalism 1945-1963*. (Kuala Lumpur/Singapore: OUP, 1969) p. 292.

⁵ Cf. Tarling, N., "Sir Cecil Clementi and the Federation of British Borneo," *JMBRAS*, 44(2)(1971): 1-34. Cecil Clementi became Governor of the Straits Settlements (including Labuan), High Commissioner for the Malay States and for Brunei, and British Agent for Sarawak and North Borneo.

⁶ *Clementi Papers*, Clementi to Tuan Muda, 6 August 1930. Quoted from Tarling, "Sir Cecil Clementi", p. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

under a Residency system).⁸ Moreover, the Colonial Office also felt it absurd to prolong the four separate administrations and tariff systems in British Borneo that had impeded progress of the territories and made it difficult to attract personnel to run the services.⁹

In 1940 another Colonial Office mandarin, (Sir) J.M. Martin, had also advocated an independent British Borneo Government, so that ‘a great and prosperous territory could one day be built in [British] Borneo.... a solid bastion against the southward thrust of Japan’¹⁰ Unlike Clementi, Martin underscored the importance of the Brunei Sultanate in any plan for a unified administration which required the return of Sarawak and North Borneo to Brunei so as to become the focus of a self-governing Borneo. However, to be realistic Martin had to refrain from such a drastic step, since the Kingdom was then under an allegedly weak Ruler (Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin) who was deemed to be ‘hardly an asset’ and one who evoked ‘surprisingly little respect or even interest in the Sarawak Malay’s mind’.¹¹ In any event, further serious consideration of the proposal had to be shelved until when the Pacific War broke out.

In the aftermath of the Great War, the Colonial Office began to see the logic—as Brunei, considered as ‘the mother State of Borneo’, to become the fulcrum of the proposed united administration in Borneo as the equations had changed.¹² Since 1930s Brunei’s economy bolstered by oil income had superseded beyond leaps and bounds when compared with its two neighbours. Comparably both Sarawak and North Borneo suffered worst in infrastructural damages during the war bringing liability to British economic if not strategic interests. As such Britain targeted Brunei’s riches to forge a conditional closer cooperation to develop the three territories. Yet, if Brunei Sultan’s consent was to be obtained, it was necessary to return some of his former territories to him. Thus in 1944 Brigadier C. F. C. Macaskie (formerly in Colonial service in North Borneo, and the Head of the

⁸ Horton, A. V. M.. *The British Residency in Brunei, 1906 – 1959*. (Hull, Centre for South-East Asian Studies. 1984).

⁹ CO 531/29 (File 17) J.M. Martin's Memorandum, 14 February 1940.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The description of Brunei as ‘the mother State of Borneo’ was made by Sir John Martin at a Colonial Office meeting with H.H. the Sultan of Brunei in 1957. CO/1030/460, note of a meeting with H. H. the Sultan of Brunei, 11 September 1957.

Borneo Planning Unit during the War years) suggested restoring to Brunei its former districts, including the 5th Division of Sarawak. If placated, the Sultan might agree to a new treaty to grant direct jurisdiction to the British Monarch on the lines of the treaties proposed for Malaya.¹³ By distributing the oil riches from Brunei to benefit more people, the new state could become ‘a compact territorial unit with a well-balanced economy’.¹⁴ A strong indigenous dynasty could become a bulwark against the growing local Chinese element then demanding greater political power in Borneo.¹⁵ But the proposals again ran aground because in the opinion of the British the Brunei royal family (Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin) had ‘shown no qualities which would justify an extension of its territories’.¹⁶

The British Planning for Post-War Borneo

Towards the end of the War Britain made careful plans to re-introduce civil administration in Malaya and the Borneo territories. The War Cabinet came up with a plan to scrap the pre-war arrangements in the Borneo territories and Malaya.¹⁷ Her Majesty’s Government was to take over the administration in North Borneo and seek the cession to the British Crown of full jurisdiction over Brunei and Sarawak. In view of an increased awareness of racial or other communal differences in the territories, the previous concept of a ‘United Borneo’ did not receive much emphasis. Instead the idea was to subordinate the three administrations to a Singapore-based Governor General for Malaya and Borneo. When Sarawak and North Borneo became Crown Colonies in 1946, Brunei’s future hung in the balance. The Colonial Office definitely hoped, though it did not overtly declare, that the two Crown Colonies and Brunei would in due course be brought under some sort of unified

¹³ CO 825/42, (File 55104/3/1943-44, item 37) Macaskie to Wodeman, (Secret) Memorandum, 4 December 1944.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ As Tarling said ‘the impact of the development and of Chinese immigration since 1946 on those neighbours (Sarawak and North Borneo)...meant that federation might increase internal tension and even risk domestic stability’. as Tarling, N., *Fall of Imperial Britain in South-East Asia*, (Singapore: OUP, 1993), p. 200.

¹⁶ CO 825/42 (File 55104/3/1943-44, item A) Memorandum for Constitutional Reconstruction in the Far East, 20 March 1943. Cited by A.V.M. Horton, *The Development of Brunei during the British Residential Era, 1906-1959: A Sultanate Regenerated*, Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Hull, 1985, p. 454.

¹⁷ CO 825/43 (File 55104/15, item 22) Draft Report of War Cabinet Committee on Malaya and Borneo, 24 April 1944. Cited by Horton, *The Development of Brunei*, p. 455.

administration. 'A public declaration at that time would have had a bad effect on public opinion in Sarawak, and would have played into the hands of the anti-secessionists'.¹⁸

Brunei, nonetheless, survived by retaining her sovereignty due to fortuitous circumstances. Sir Harold MacMichael, who compelled the Malayan Sultans to surrender their jurisdiction to the British Crown and hurriedly introduced the controversial Malayan Union in 1946, was recalled to go to Malta on another mission before he reached Brunei.¹⁹ Thereupon the Brunei question was shelved until a Governor General (of the Malayan Union and the new Colony of Singapore) was appointed and was expected to consider and advise 'the possibility of the union of Brunei with the other Borneo territories'.²⁰

The British Government's stand, as noted earlier, had always been to uphold the sovereignty of the Brunei Sultan. The idea of ceding the Kingdom to the British monarch or of turning it into a Crown Colony was abandoned, because the British believed that they could achieve practically all they desired under the existing treaty with Brunei. Moreover, a sudden and unexpected surge of Malay nationalism in Malaya, against the imposition of the Malayan Union plan, may have cautioned the British against repeating the experiment in Brunei.²¹ Malcolm MacDonald, the governor-general, warned of such a possibility: amendment of the 1905-6 Anglo-Brunei Treaty was undesirable 'since this might tend to arouse an opposition party to our proposals and perhaps defeat our proposals altogether'.²² Furthermore, it was deemed impractical to spend colonial effort to administer 'too small a state'. Consequently MacDonald devised a plan whereby Brunei would be 'joined for administrative and any other necessary purposes with a neighbouring colony,

¹⁸ CO 1022/61, A Colonial Office Paper "Political Objectives in British Territories of South-East Asia," Secret, 10 March 1953, p. 157. As early as 1946 it had been intended (though overtly not declared) 'that the two newly created colonies of North Borneo and Sarawak and the State of Brunei should in due course be brought under some form of unified administration.' CO 1022/61(item 24), memorandum (n.d. unsigned). The anti-secessionist movement in Sarawak is well described in R.H.W. Reece, *The Name of Brooke: The End of White Rajah Rule in Sarawak* (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1982). Pp.246-277.

¹⁹ For MacMichaels' mission in Malaya see Albert Lau, *Malayan Union Controversy:1942 1948* (Singapore:OUP,1991)109-122.

²⁰ CO 537/2244 (Item 23), Memorandum by Secretary of State for Colonies, 24 December 1947.

²¹ For details, see Albert Lau, *op.cit.*

²² CO 537/2244 (item 14,) Para 2, Telegram, Secret, Governor- General to CO, 23 October 1947.

without any derogation in theory from the former's present Constitutional position'.²³ Brunei was then placed under the Governor of the British Colony of Sarawak who became the High Commissioner for Brunei, an arrangement that came into effect from 1 May 1948.²⁴ The High Commissioner seated in Kuching was to direct general policy and administration in both territories. The Resident in Brunei was placed under the authority of the High Commissioner. Also replacing the Malayan Civil Servants were the Sarawak-based officers seconded for service in Brunei.²⁵ Advocates of this scheme no doubt had in mind the ultimate fusion of the three Borneo territories either on a unitary or federal basis, but public endorsement of such a plan was wisely eschewed, in view of the animated opposition from the Sarawak anti-secessionists and the Brunei Malays. It was this administrative union that awkwardly spelt disaster in blighting all subsequent efforts by the British Government to bring Brunei into any federal plan with the rest of the Borneo territories.

By the late 1950s the 'disparate territories of British Borneo'²⁶ as Nicholas Tarling styled them, had little chance of success once the original federation idea broadened to form a larger Malaysia. Since 1946, the British policy had been to promote close cooperation among its dependent States in South-East Asia with Singapore as a fulcrum. Collaboration between the territories gathered momentum especially after the creation in 1948 of the Singapore-based post of a Commissioner General for the United Kingdom in South-East Asia, replacing the earlier Governor-General (Malaya).²⁷ A main function of the Commissioner-General was to promote and coordinate policy and administration between the Governments under his authority. This involved the 'organisation of...defence, the development of sea and air

²³ CO 537/2244, (item 5), Secret, Governor-General to CO, 16 May 1947.

²⁴ Hussainmiya, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III and Britain*, p. 52

²⁵ The following official cadres of the Sarawak Establishment were seconded for service in Brunei: British Resident; Assistant Resident, Controller of Customs & State Treasurer; State Engineer and Officer-in-Charge, Electrical Department; State Medical Officer; Chief Police Officer; State Forest Officer; State Education Officer; Senior Assistant Resident; O.C.P.D. Kuala Belait; Assistant State Engineer; 2 Nursing Sisters; Medical Officer; Grade II Matron; Health Sister; State Surveyor; Immigration Officer; Police Officer, O.C.P.D. Brunei; Health Sister; Marine Officer; Deputy Legal Adviser. BA/1258/83, (SUK Series 5, Box 97), annexed Schedule II to Sarawak Brunei Agreement, 17/22 April 1948.

²⁶ Tarling "Sir Cecil Clementi and the Federation of British Borneo," p. 33.

²⁷ The Sarawak Gazette, 1 May 1948, p. 100. One author traces the Malaysia idea to this event; see Simandjuntak, *op.cit.*, p. 118.

communications, [and] planning to ensure that the more backward parts of the territories share equally in the programmes for social, economic and political advancement...'. He was also to seek 'closer political cooperation between the territories and to advise the Secretary of State for Colonies from time to time'.²⁸

Malcolm MacDonald's Vision for Northern Borneo

The first Commissioner-General, Malcolm MacDonald plunged into his task with missionary zeal. In keeping with the new colonial policy, he marshalled the efforts of the Borneo Governors to promote the long-term aim of 'self-governing Dominion of all these territories (the Federation of Malaya, the colonies of Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo and the protectorate of Brunei) within the Commonwealth'.²⁹ He also made a measured public pronouncement that 'whether this can develop into a political federation of Borneo territories, leading ultimately to the creation with Malaya, of a Southeast Asian Dominion Government, is another matter, but Bornean federation is both logical and achievable in the not distant future'.³⁰ The Commissioner General was in a position to realise that aim, because he also functioned as Chairman of the Joint Cooperation Committee between Singapore and the Federation of Malaya and also as Chairman of the Borneo Governors' Conference. No doubt, as Simandjuntak has pointed out, during his tenure of office MacDonald was largely responsible for having 'aroused in the Borneo territories a consciousness of their common destiny...'.³¹

The British plan to establish a 'British South-East Asia dominion' was designed ostensibly to protect British Borneo from a 'potentially acquisitive Indonesia' as well as to level social and economic developments in the territories concerned.³² In

²⁸ Secretary of State for Colonies to Governor General, 12 November 1949. Reported in *Straits Times*, 28 November 1949. For a genesis of MacDonald's views on his ultimate mission to form a greater Malaysia Federation see BA/0132/83 (SUK Series 4, Box 11) Malcolm MacDonald to Secretary of State, Confidential, No. 6, 24 November 1948, Item 1 para 5.

²⁹ CO 1022/63, the UK Commissioner General in S.E. Asia to CO, 10 June 1952.

³⁰ *Straits Times*, 24 April 1953.

³¹ Simandjuntak, op.cit., p. 119.

³² CO 1022/61, item 19, J. D. Higham's Memorandum, 20 January, 1953, para 6. A British parliamentarian, Sir Robert Boothby, one of the five members of a visiting Commonwealth parliamentary team, in 1954 suggested that 'a confederation of these territories within the

Commonwealth was 'absolutely essential' for economic and strategic reasons, and even Burma could

1953 Mr. J. D. Higham, Head of the South-East Asia Department at the Colonial Office, saw little future for British Borneo alone as, ‘the Federation and Singapore themselves are, in all conscience, small enough in size and population when compared with their neighbours’.³³ Some politicians in Singapore, especially from the Chinese community, also favoured the idea.³⁴ However, the UK Commissioner General adopted caution about pushing the idea all at once before gauging Malay opinion in the Federation of Malaya. The newly formed branches of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in South-East Asia launched in 1951 were to be turned into a useful platform to promote the Federation idea, to which some visiting British parliamentarians were also committed.³⁵

The Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei Conference

In place of a Council of the Governors of North Borneo and Sarawak, which had been meeting under the guidance of the Commissioner-General since 1949, another Council was formed in 1953 this time extending its jurisdiction to Brunei as well. It came to be known as ‘the Sarawak-North Borneo and Brunei Conference’ (referred also as the Inter-Territorial Conference). Created ostensibly to promote co-ordination of policy and administration between the three territories, the British officials hoped that, if and when the ‘atmosphere’ of the discussions on the Council made it possible, the question of federation between the three territories could be considered.³⁶

The conference was useful in so far as common administrative problems affecting the three territories could be discussed and resolved. Being comparatively underdeveloped, Brunei needed much assistance in the areas of administration and social services. By sharing services between the three Governments, duplication of expenditure could be avoided. From as early as 1947 a joint Labour Adviser had been appointed, and in 1951 a combined judiciary was established for the three territories.

be asked to enter it at a later stage.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., Savingram No 73, Secret, the UK Commissioner-General in S.E. Asia to CO, 10 June, 1952, para 5.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., Savingram No. 52. the UK Commissioner-General in S.E. Asia to Governor, North Borneo, 10 February 1953, para 2.

In addition to co-ordination of police and shipping matters, the Council initiated joint health and education projects. British Borneo pooled its resources in areas of geological survey, archaeology and fishing. Although administrative subservience to Sarawak created feelings of resentment among the Brunei Malays, this arrangement benefited and indeed helped the development efforts which the Protectorate underwent in the early 1950s. Because of Brunei sensitivities, the Sarawak administration carefully avoided soliciting financial aid from Brunei to support such services.³⁷

The first Sarawak-North-Borneo-Brunei Conference was held in Kuching on 21 February 1953. Brunei was represented by His Highness Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin, the British Resident Mr. J. C. Barcroft and the Sultan's Secretary, Pehin Dato Perdana Menteri Haji Ibrahim Jahfar. The High Commissioner Anthony Abell and Malcolm MacDonald's personal diplomacy coaxed the Sultan to participate, to ensure the success and legitimacy of the Conference. In his opening speech the Chairman, Malcolm MacDonald, the Commissioner General announced the Conference's three purposes.³⁸

- a. to study the existing means of consultation and co-operation between the three territories in matters of common concern.
- b. to consider whether these covered the whole field in which joint consultation was desirable, and whether they were effective.
- c. to promote any improvements in the methods or range of consultation which were agreed to be feasible.

The Chairman proposed three principal methods to achieve these objectives: by establishing joint departments, by regular consultative meetings or conferences between Government officers and unofficials and by exchanges of officers between territories.³⁹ The Conference stimulated much speculation in outside circles. For

³⁷ For instance, during the Sarawak-North Borneo Governors' meeting held in Singapore on 28 November 1951, Anthony Abell, the Sarawak Governor/High Commissioner for Brunei, conscious of the political complications it would bring, declined to seek Brunei money to meet the construction expenses of an international airfield on Labuan. CO 1022/294, Minutes of the Governors of North Borneo and Sarawak, 28 November 1951, item 3.

³⁸ Ibid., Minutes of the first meeting of the Sarawak-North Borneo-Brunei Conference, 21 April 1953 para 1.

³⁹ Ibid., para 3., The following areas were chosen for applying these joint ventures: Civil Aviation, Posts and Telecommunications, Marine, Museums, Survey, Medical, Customs, Immigration and Agriculture.

instance, *The Straits Budget* of 30 April 1953 perceptively remarked that ‘it is possible to see in this conference the embryo of a Federation’. *The Straits Budget* went on to say that ‘cooperation between the territories plainly is essential. Whether this can develop into political federation of the Bornean territories, leading ultimately to the creation, with Malaya, of a South-East Dominion Government, is another matter, but Bornean federation is both logical and achievable in the not distant future’. These speculations were deliberately fed to the journalists by Malcolm MacDonald as a measure to gauge public reaction in the territories. As he himself wrote, ‘I shall keep judicious contact with [the Journalists] on this subject, and hope that the newspapers will give helpful support to the project when that becomes timely’.⁴⁰ The sensitive Brunei Sultan, SOAS III, quickly issued a statement denying the existence of any such suggestion at the Kuching Conference.⁴¹ The officials dared not contradict the Sultan, for the Colonial Office had forewarned the conference promoters to respect Brunei's sensitivities. Taking note of MacDonald's proposition that ‘some sort of Confederation’ is envisaged for all the British territories in South-East Asia,⁴² the Secretary of State insisted that the closer association of the three Borneo territories should precede considerations of any plan for a wider association between those territories and the Federation of Malaya and Singapore.⁴³ Even so the Commissioner-General was advised ‘to proceed slowly in these matters and to give the Brunei Government ample time to settle down’.⁴⁴ After all, ‘there could be no question of a federation of the Borneo territories being imposed on the people of Brunei from without’.⁴⁵

Brunei's refusal to join the two neighbours in closer association was discussed in a British Governors' conference in Kuching in October 1954. The North Borneo Governor Roland Turnbull insisted that before merging with Singapore and the Federation, nothing short of a single Government that eliminated the geographical

⁴⁰ CO 1022/63, Savingram, No. 73, the UK Commissioner-General in S.E. Asia, 10 June 1952, para 6.

⁴¹ *Sunday Mail*, 18 May 1953.

⁴² CO 1030/164, Secret, No. 77, Alan Lennox Boyd (The Secretary of State for Colonies) to the Commissioner-General for the UK in S.E. Asia, 25 March 1955, para 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, para 9.

⁴⁵ BA/0475/83 (SUK Series 4, Box 27), Annex in Item 46, J. O. Gilbert to H. H. the Sultan of Brunei, 13 August 1955.

identities of the three Borneo territories would be satisfactory. Anthony Abell, who spoke for Brunei, strongly disagreed and warned that 'Brunei would regard it as a device to get a share of its wealth', that it would be necessary "to use troops" to eliminate the existing boundaries between the Bornean territories, and that unless care was taken there was a risk of shoving 'Brunei into somebody else's arms'.⁴⁶

Why did the Brunei Sultan come to oppose a British-Borneo Federation? The most important reason was indeed Brunei's reluctance to share their burgeoning oil wealth with her neighbours. On the other hand, without the oil Sultanate, there would be no Borneo Federation. By pooling resources, particularly human resources, Sarawak and North Borneo offered to develop Brunei administratively; in return, Brunei was expected to share its wealth for 'physical' development of the territories. However, since Brunei jealously guarded its wealth, the British avoided mentioning the subject in their public pronouncements.

Another reason was Brunei's intense distrust of anything and everything connected with Sarawak. All key branches of Brunei administration had come under the power of seconded officers from Sarawak controlled by the High Commissioner. This stirred a great deal of indignation--by creating an inferiority complex in Brunei--that made it virtually impossible to promote any common understanding with the Sarawak administration. The Sultan felt it as an affront to his dignity. The Bruneians genuinely feared that a common Borneo Federation would eliminate their status as an independent sovereign Islamic Sultanate which in the course of time might become a British Colony.⁴⁷ Also the Sultan feared a possible demotion of his own status, despite assurances from the British Government. The memories of Sarawak becoming a colony in 1946, snatched from the rule of the White Rajahs even in the face of vociferous anti-secessionist activity, were still fresh in Bruneian minds. Brunei wanted no recurrence of that scenario and hence resisted all ideas of federation with the British Bornean colonies. Another important factor was also because Brunei was reluctant to open the flood gates of foreign immigrants swamping the Malay population of the Sultanate.

⁴⁶ CO 1030/164, Note of meeting held at Kuching to discuss the 'closer association' of Borneo territories, 28 October 1954.

⁴⁷ Ibid., Dispatch No. 1., Secret, the UK Commissioner-General in S.E. Asia to CO, 4 February 1955, para 4(a).

The emergence of the PRB in 1956 contributed a great deal to changes in the perspectives of the colonial administrators on the one hand and the Sultan on the other. The PRB's struggle to come to power lay in its ability to unite the three territories under a North Kalimantan State, *Negara Kesatuan Kalimantan Utara* (or NKKU) with the Sultan as its Constitutional Ruler. Unwittingly British and PRB interests coalesced on this issue. Nothing would have caused more consternation in British circles than the prospects of being lumped together with a party that became anathema to H.H. Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddin, whose favour the British Government valued most. Moreover the oil interests in Brunei consistently opposed Azahari's scheme, including his Kalimantan Utara idea.⁴⁸ The Oil Company was deeply worried that if Azahari was to gain power in such a large territory, its interests would be affected. Referring to PRB activism in early 1957 the UK Commissioner General Robert Scott laid out his worries:⁴⁹

In Brunei the danger lies in extreme Malay nationalism. This already exists and is being encouraged by left wing elements both inside and outside the country. If unchecked it will develop into a rabid opposition to the Monarchy and the British connection, and it could bring about the overthrow of the Sultanate, with grave prejudice to the whole stability of the State including the security of the oil field...

In order to coax the Brunei Sultan to accept the Borneo Federation idea, Anthony Abell urged the Colonial Office to make certain concessions to Brunei in exchange for its cooperation. Firstly, to sever the links between the Sarawak and Brunei administrations. Secondly, to place Labuan under the Brunei Government for 'administrative purposes' whilst retaining its status as a British territory. Thirdly, to transfer the fifth Division of Sarawak to Brunei as this would have the effect of restoring the Limbang territory, that had been illegally annexed by Rajah Charles

⁴⁸ 'For unhindered production of oil, it was far preferable to maintain the *status quo*, the rule of a single Sultan over the small enclave of Brunei under British protection'. Poulgrain, G. J., *Genesis of Konfrontasi: Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia*, (London: C.Hurst and Company, 1998), Chap. 4.

⁴⁹ CO 1030/556, Memorandum by the UK Commissioner General in S.E. Asia and the Governors of Sarawak and North Borneo on 'The future of the Borneo Territories', 25 January 1957.

Brooke and which had bifurcated the Sultanate to the great inconvenience of its inhabitants. Another suggestion was to make the Sultan the head of the Islamic faith in all the three territories under discussion.⁵⁰ But there were no such difficulties with his much-respected successor, SOAS III.

By proposing to return Labuan and the Fifth Division of Sarawak (i.e. Limbang and Lawas) to their rightful owner--Brunei--some British administrators were in fact trying to clear their conscience. Referring to the question of Labuan, a British official acknowledged that 'the cession of Labuan in December 1846 was obtained under duress; its return would "right" an old "wrong"'.⁵¹ Moreover, 'the people of Labuan look to Brunei politically, commercially and culturally'. By returning these territories to Brunei, it was highlighted that the Sultan's Government could 'spend its wealth to useful purposes' in the additional territory since Brunei's 'financial resources are far in excess of those required for the full development of its present small area'.⁵²

Abell also suggested important changes to the administrative structure of the three territories by placing them under a Governor General who would represent Her Majesty's Government in North Borneo and Sarawak and as High Commissioner in Brunei.⁵³ The Governor General was to preside over a Borneo Council which would make policy decisions on defence, external relations and any other subjects to be agreed upon by the three territories concerned. Having his secretariat either in Labuan or Muara in Brunei, the Governor General would thus take over the responsibilities for the Commissioner-General (based in Singapore) for co-

⁵⁰ The third item on that list had been suggested nearly a decade earlier, but the Colonial Office turned it down because of difficulties with Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin. CO 1030/164, Anthony Abell to CO, No1. 4 February, 1955. Such ideas had been thrashed out among the colonial planners since late 1954. See Ibid., 'Note of Meeting held in Kuching on 28 October, 1954'. Among the participants were Malcolm MacDonald, Anthony Abell, R. E. Turnbull, John Martin (of the Colonial Office), and R. W. Jakeman (Assistant UK Commissioner General).

⁵¹ Ibid., Secret, Aide Memoir on the Proposal that the Island of Labuan should be restored to the State of Brunei. n.d. and unsigned. Possibly an enclosure in a despatch by Anthony Abell to CO in 1956? It may be recalled from Chapter two that the Japanese restored Labuan to Brunei administration during the War.

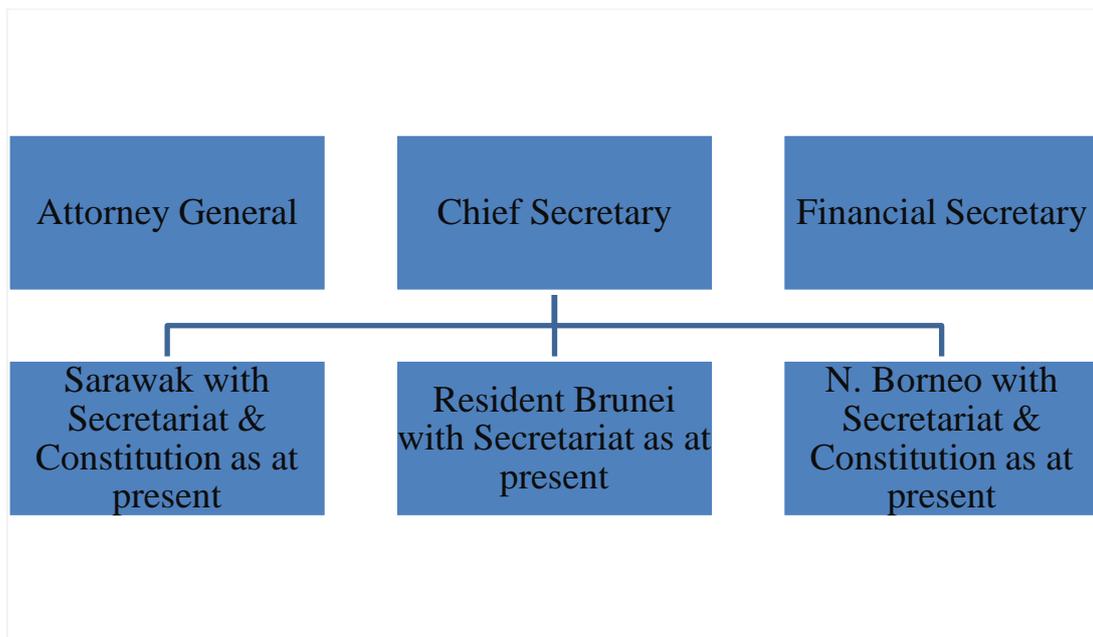
Syair Rakis- A contemporary Brunei literary composition in poetry attributed to Pengiran Shahabandar Sharmayuddha in the mid-19th century, laments the loss of the strategic Brunei territory under duress. Mohd. Jamil al Sufri, *Syair Rakis*, (ed.) (Bandar Seri Begawan: 1983).

⁵² Ibid., para 12(c).

⁵³ Ibid., Anthony Abell's ideas are summarised in G. C. Whiteley's Minute to J. B. Johnston, 23 May 1956.

ordination of policy in the three territories. The proposed Joint Council would have executive, but no legislative powers. The following diagram (as understood by a Colonial official) represents the scheme.⁵⁴ (The idea of placing a Commissioner General at the top was to alleviate Sarawak's and North Borneo's worries that their Governors would disappear.)

**Governor of Sarawak & N. Borneo High Commissioner for Brunei
with Secretariat located at Muara**



However, the Sarawak Governor's grand scheme contained the seeds of its own destruction. How could the Brunei Sultan agree to serve under a colonial authority at a time when there was a mounting opposition to the Resident's Rule in Brunei? The public announcement of the scheme in February 1958 naturally raised the Sultan's ire.

The whole issue of resurrecting Brunei's old glory through British altruism was caught up in an internal squabble among its promoters, an interesting example of how a colonial policy could be undermined by a friction between two Governors who pulled in opposite directions, not only in closed-door discussions, but also in the implementation of their policies. For example, a jealous North Borneo Governor, Roland Turnbull, who disliked his colleague Abell, may have surreptitiously

⁵⁴ Ibid., G. C. Whiteley's Minute to J. B. Johnston, 23 May 1956.

torpedoed the proposal. Possibly he was spurred by his belief that Abell was feathering his own nest to become a kind of super-Governor based in Labuan. He loathed Abell's idea of developing Labuan as a free port, with Brunei's money.⁵⁵

Turnbull fearing the lowering of the status of the North Borneo Government and who cultivated a different approach to Brunei and its Sultan supported the move to separate Brunei from Sarawak administratively. He also canvassed the appointment of an independent but full-fledged High Commissioner for Brunei. In contrast, Abell insisted on continuing with a British Resident in Brunei, to serve under a High Commissioner who might not necessarily be stationed in Sarawak as before.⁵⁶ A one-time Resident himself in Brunei between 1934 until 1937, Turnbull claimed that he knew the mind of the Sultan better than Abell did. Turnbull had known the Sultan as the then Pengiran Muda Tengah intimately, and claimed to have nursed him along against his brother, Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin.⁵⁷ Turnbull boasted in 1959 to one of his Colonial Office colleagues that the Sultan came to regard him as 'his father'.⁵⁸ Apart from influencing the Colonial Office thinking,⁵⁹ there is reason to conjecture that Turnbull may have engaged in intrigues with the Brunei Sultan by reinforcing the latter's suspicion of the motives of Anthony Abell.⁶⁰ Even after quitting his post as Governor in 1959, he had attempted to scapegoat Abell who continued as a Governor. In a semi-official letter to the Colonial Office, Turnbull wrote that the separation of Sarawak administration from Brunei had given the Sultan, who never

⁵⁵ Abell hoped 'that Labuan should revert to Brunei and be developed as a free port for the Borneo Territories under the sovereignty of Brunei...'. Ibid., Anthony Abell to J. B. Johnston, Secret, 15 October 1956.

⁵⁶ Ibid., Roland Turnbull's top secret letter to J. B. Johnston, 1 September 1956 refuted the rationale put forward by Anthony Abell, and ruined Anthony Abell's prospects to become the Head of Borneo Administration based in Labuan.

⁵⁷ CO 1030/462, R. E. Turnbull to W. I. J. Wallace (CO), Confidential, 15 December 1959.

⁵⁸ Ibid., Before Turnbull gave up his post as the Governor of North Borneo in 1959, he paid an unofficial farewell visit to Sultan Omar without even obtaining prior approval from the Colonial Office. Turnbull described his intimate talks with the Sultan as 'an exhausting marathon' as the Sultan kept on talking to him throughout the night.

⁵⁹ Turnbull tried to convince the Colonial Office that the Sultan's reservations about a closer association was more due to his dislike of things connected with Sarawak (including its Governor Abell) than to any dislike of the North Borneo Government that he headed. Ibid.

⁶⁰ Abell had complained to the Colonial Office that unauthorised sources leaked information to the Sultan even before firm decisions among themselves had been finalised. He said that 'the Sultan would certainly be still further ill-disposed to the project' if he were to learn from sources other than the High Commissioner that the Colonial Office was contemplating closer association. CO 1030/556, Item 22, Anthony Abell to CO, No. 483, 18 July 1957. Was he hinting at Turnbull?

showed goodwill towards Sarawak, a deep satisfaction. But as ‘for North Borneo, [the Sultan] showed a lot of interest and something approaching vicarious pride and pleasure in its advance’.⁶¹ These considerations make it clear why Turnbull had warned that ‘the attitude of the Sultan precludes the vesting of greater authority in a High Commissioner for the three territories’.⁶²

Exasperated, the Colonial Office rejected any proposal aiming to appease the Sultan just for the sake of getting his consent for the closer association idea. An annoyed official in the Colonial Office asked why the political future of the Borneo territories always had to be tied to the satisfaction of the Sultan of Brunei.⁶³ Nonetheless, the failure to convince the Colonial Office of his proposed scheme to transfer Labuan and the Fifth division of Sarawak to Brunei widened the hiatus between Anthony Abell and the Sultan.⁶⁴ One wonders if the Sultan ever took Abell’s proposal seriously.⁶⁵ Holding on to Abell’s promise, it now became easier for the Sultan to cold-shoulder further proposals for closer cooperation. Subsequently, Abell had a tough time not only to reconcile with the Sultan but also with the Colonial Office. Abell's desperation manifested itself in a despatch to the Colonial Office in 1956:

I believe it was also agreed that I should tell [the Sultan] without committing anyone [Colonial Office] what my personal views were about closer association generally. Since then I am afraid I have had

⁶¹ CO 1030/462, R. E. Turnbull to W. J. Wallace (CO), Confidential, 15 December 1959.

⁶² Elaborating his view Turnbull wrote:

“It has long been recognised that the separation of the administration of Brunei and Sarawak is a desirable, possibly essential, preliminary to closer association of the three territories. [Abell’s] proposal would go a long way to achieve that separation, but they would do very little more, and in my view the promise they hold for the future is altogether too slight to justify paying what I believe would be the political cost in North Borneo”.

CO 1030/164, R. E. Turnbull to J. B. Johnston (CO), Top Secret, 1 September 1956.

⁶³ Ibid., Ian Watt's Minute of 5 June 1956, para (ii). Sir Robert Scott, the UK Commissioner General in S.E. Asia felt otherwise. ‘We are going to lose control over the biggest single source of dollars in the sterling area, and the grave effects of this on the United Kingdom will be felt in the years to come’. Ibid., Sir Robert Scott to Secretary of State, 18 February 1956.

⁶⁴ It is likely that not only Abell, but Malcolm MacDonald too may have held out promises to the Sultan that Britain would arrange to return the 5th Division of Sarawak to Brunei’s rule.

⁶⁵ Did Abell try to outsmart the Colonial Office or did he, out of enthusiasm, prematurely discuss with the Sultan the surrender of Labuan to Brunei sovereignty when the Secretary of State had already expressed reservations on the subject and had told the Commissioner General’s Office not to raise the subject with the Sultan until it was certain the idea would be favourably received in Brunei?

CO 1030/164, The Secretary of State to the UK Commissioner General in S.E. Asia, Secret 77, 25 March 1955, para 6.

second thoughts and I do not feel I can go to His Highness who expects advice from me and discuss a matter of such vital importance before we have even made up our minds how we wish matters to develop. For instance one of his first questions is bound to concern the future of Labuan and he would ask my personal and candid opinion on that subject much to my embarrassment.⁶⁶

It was in this context that the Sultan's emphatic denial came in 1956 that he and his Government 'have never contemplated or wished to unite or federate the State of Brunei with any other state'.⁶⁷ Neither the Colonial Office nor the British Officials on the spot could give the Sultan any further assurances to seek his compliance to the closer association proposal. Meanwhile, other important political developments were taking place both in the neighbouring Federation of Malaya as well as in Brunei.

A shift in British thinking regarding the larger Federation idea was discernible after Malcolm MacDonald's term of office as Commissioner General (which ended in mid 1955) and after the sudden advance made by Malaya towards independence. To repeat, MacDonald's original vision was to see the setting up of a larger Federation inclusive of Malaya, Singapore, but only after the successful functioning of the closer association among the three Bornean territories.⁶⁸ The massive Alliance Party victory in the Federal Elections of 1955, and Malaya's race towards independence far sooner than the British had time to implement their wider plan of a larger federation, changed the British perspective on South-East Asia altogether. As the Malayan independence grew nearer, a new British worry surfaced because of

⁶⁶ CO 1030/164, Secret, Anthony Abell to Sir Robert Scott, 15 October, 1956.

⁶⁷ *Sunday Times*, 11 March 1956.

⁶⁸ Malcolm MacDonald, a colourful personality with liberal ideas, occupying the influential position of the UK Commissioner General in South-East Asia and having good rapport with the local leaders, worked hard to bring a closer association of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore and the three Borneo territories before the end of 1955. Having extended his term of office once in 1954, the Colonial Office after much consideration declined to recommend his term of office beyond mid-1955, after which he became High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in India. Papers related to this transfer are in file CO 1030/193.

‘the threat of being eaten up by Malaya will seem to the Borneo territories even greater...’.⁶⁹

The Waning of the Proposals

The new Commissioner General, Sir Robert Scott,(1955-60) did not share the same urgency to push his predecessor’s idea of a Greater Federation. For Scott there were other pressing issues, such as the unsettled political conditions in the region, especially his base in Singapore. Realising that Singapore was not yet ready for self-government, Scott spoke rather vaguely of the city-state later joining a ‘condominium with some Commonwealth countries perhaps including Malaya’.⁷⁰

Whereas the liberal-minded MacDonald empathised with the Asian nationalist leaders’ quest for self-government, Scott stood for the perpetuation of ‘the British and Commonwealth economic and defence interests’ in the region. He exercised caution in granting self-government sooner, as in Singapore where he didn’t want to see British interests ‘whittled away and finally lost’.⁷¹ More importantly and apprehensive of Malayan intentions of political dominance in the territories, he had his own plan regarding the future status of North Borneo. Anticipating political difficulties of continuing with military establishments in Malaya and Singapore, he argued that Britain should look elsewhere to meet its defence needs.⁷² This called for a much more vigorous policy of not only uniting the Borneo territories, but also of expediting political progress among the territories before Malaya took the initiative to absorb them into its fold. In his first despatch to the Colonial Office Scott announced that ‘‘The Governors of Sarawak and North Borneo and I have not yet sorted out our ideas on closer Constitutional association of these colonies and Brunei’.⁷³ The British came to believe that Malaya’s political advance might stimulate a greater desire in the Borneo territories to obtain a political status that would permit them to associate with the Federation of Malaya on better terms.⁷⁴ In

⁶⁹ CO 1030/164, Minute by Ian Watt, 5 June 1956.

⁷⁰ CO 1030/197, Secret, Sir Robert Scott to Secretary of State, 18 February 1956, para 18.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., para 6-8, Scott thought that Sandakan and Labuan had excellent prospects as airfields.

‘Surely the time has come to think about the potentialities of the Labuan and Sandakan areas, the first as a United Kingdom responsibility and the second by Australia’.

⁷³ Ibid., para 4.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

the event, rather than creating a Greater Federation, it became politic to forge closer cooperation between the Borneo states in which case Brunei's concurrence with the scheme remained all the more urgent.

Closer association proposals thus gathered momentum in 1957. Of course, the Governors of Sarawak and North Borneo were in a position to manipulate public opinion in their favour, but not in Brunei which remained a thorn on the side. Even the launching of the first Brunei Constitution suffered setbacks on that account.⁷⁵ It may be recalled that the Colonial Office gave equal weightage to closer cooperation proposal when they goaded the Sultan to visit London to discuss a draft Constitution for Brunei in September 1957. The Sultan cleverly shifted away from the Secretary of State's direct advances to open immediate talks with the Sarawak and North Borneo Governors. A non-committal Sultan got away from London to refer the idea of closer cooperation back to his own people for ratification. The Sultan walked a tightrope, unable to fathom what further pressure the British would exert on him. At the meeting with the Sultan on 30 September 1957, the Secretary of State left the issue open,⁷⁶ who assured the Sultan that the British would not force advice upon the Sultan and agreeing with him that such a proposal could become a reality only if the people themselves supported it.⁷⁷

Sultan Omar Ali used the Secretary of State's magnanimity to his own advantage by prevaricating on the Federation proposal. Having returned to Brunei, he informed the Secretary of State about his inability 'to commit himself or his people on the proposal not knowing the exact details of its form or nature, other than the question of external defence and internal security which in fact, has already been provided in

⁷⁵ These events are described in depth in Hussainmiya, B.A., *The Brunei Constitution: An Inside History* Bandar Seri Begawan: (Brunei Press (Sdn) Berhad: 2000).

⁷⁶ CO 1030/460, Minutes of the Meeting between the Secretary of State and H.H. the Sultan of Brunei held at the Colonial Office, 30 September 1957, para 5.

⁷⁷ "Her Majesty's Government was determined that nothing should be proposed which would in any way depress the status of Brunei as a Malay Islamic Sultanate. It should, however, not be difficult to demonstrate that closer association with the other two territories would strengthen the Islamic State of Brunei. There must be discussion of form on that association and nobody was committed--or would be committed in further exploratory discussion--to a particular form of association." Ibid. (Emphasis is mine)

the existing Agreement or Treaty'⁷⁸, and that the Sultan would not participate in any talks on that issue with the Governors of North Borneo and Sarawak.

In spite of warning by the Colonial Office to comply or even face the prospect of the eclipse of personal power, the Sultan saw in the publicised scheme a demotion in his status and a loss of his de facto sovereignty which made him more adamant. The Commissioner General's office sent a note, short of an ultimatum, to the Sultan. The note was described 'as very forthright' and not 'the acme of diplomacy'.⁷⁹ It raised the spectre of Azahari, and of Brunei's economic vulnerability because its only source of income was depleting. It implored the Sultan to join hands with the other two territories to ensure the future prosperity of his Kingdom.⁸⁰

Backed by the Brunei State Council,⁸¹ the Sultan decided to stay put whereas according to Ranjit Singh, a modern historian of Brunei, it would have been more appropriate to have offered the Sultan of Brunei the position of paramount Ruler.⁸² In fact the PRB, in its bid to form a North Kalimantan State did just that by offering the Sri Mahkota Negara or the paramount Ruler's position to the Sultan but he remained averse. Even the cordial atmosphere of an inter-territorial conference, the ninth of which was held in early 1958 in Brunei Town, failed to convince the Sultan or his subjects who were reminded in the Sultan's 1958 Hari Raya message that it was important 'to preserve the country's position with patience and determination in order to steer the State towards further progress'.⁸³

⁷⁸ CO 1030/461, Confidential, H.H. Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin to the Secretary of State, 30 January 1958.

⁷⁹ CO 1030/556, See Holloway's Minute (on item 58,) 31 October 1957.

⁸⁰ According to a senior official at the Colonial Office 'If His Highness persists in refusing to give his support to the concept he will find himself in the highly embarrassing position of isolated opposition to a general consensus of opinion...[It] would be most unfortunate if closer association could...be pursued only at the cost of an open defeat for His Highness's policies'. Ibid., Sir John Martin's minute (on item 58), 1 November 1957.

⁸¹ *The Borneo Bulletin*, 18 February 1958 reported that 'its informants close to the Government revealed that the State Council almost to a man was opposed to any form of federation with the other territories'.

⁸² Ranjit Singh, *Brunei 1839-1983*, p 139.

⁸³ Ibid., 140.

The Malayan Independence and the Closer Association Proposals

As Malaya gained independence on 31 August 1957, the closer association proposal suffered a further setback. Brunei's subservience to Sarawak, albeit administratively, hurt the Sultan's pride when his fellow Malayan Sultans, were free of such colonial control. The Sultan did indeed rely upon British support for preserving the Kingdom. However, the Sultan felt more comfortable in being associated with an independent nation rather than with the former British colonies. As might be expected, he tended to lean toward Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of independent Malaya, who the Sultan believed would help Brunei to overcome Colonial Office pressure to submerge his kingdom into a Bornean entity. This created complications as much for Britain's immediate plan for the region as for the Sultan himself in the long run.

Another critical development was the Partai Rakyat Brunei's (Brunei People's Party) rising fortune in the political arena of Brunei. The PRB and the British colonial administration became strange bed fellows in the promotion of this idea. As an ideological replacement for British colonial rule, support for Kalimantan Utara was drawing together an incipient 'Borneo' nationalism. In fact, until late 1957 the Colonial Office had restrained from open pursuit of the Borneo-Federation idea, because the PRB had already proposed it in their manifesto of 1956. The Governors' radio broadcast of 7 February 1958 had boosted the leader Azahari's own call for a Northern Kalimantan State, a nationalistic version of the colonial nomenclature. The more the Colonial Office promoted the concept of 'closer association', the greater the popular support enjoyed by the PRB. However, events moved so quickly after Malayan independence that the time was running out for an early realisation of the proposal based on the Borneo people's concurrence. Did the British actually hope to benefit by Azahari's politics to further pressurise the Sultan? During the September 1957 talks in London, the Secretary of State candidly reminded the Sultan that 'the PRB had pronounced in favour of closer association and no one wanted them to get all the credit'.⁸⁴ An astute American diplomat made a perceptive remark to say that 'the British strategy for overcoming the Sultan's opposition to federation appears to lie in building such pressures for federation as exist in Brunei. In the implementation

⁸⁴ CO 1030/460, Note of Meeting between the Secretary of State and H.H. the Sultan of Brunei at Colonial Office, 30 September 1957, para 10.

of the strategy, they have a ready ally in the PRB whose interest in this respect narrowly coincides with that of the British'.⁸⁵

Meanwhile the growing rapport between Malaya and Brunei upset the British plan of seeing a strong union of the British Borneo to seek better terms should a Federation with Malaya was to be formed. If Brunei was allowed to get out of step, the other two territories could be left out in political progress and become a financial liability to the British Government. More importantly, the colony of Singapore, had be tagged on to Malaya one day in a larger plan for a super Federation. An important question at this stage was whether the Sultan was serious about merging his State with Malaya as an alternative to enter a Borneo federation. No doubt that the apprehensive Sultan was thwarting the British intentions before the proposed Constitution came into force. From the outset he shielded himself from the British pressure to closely cooperate with Sarawak and North Borneo. How well and for how long could he hold out? The PRB, too, was waiting in the wings to achieve its irredentist vision of a United North Borneo State. The meeting of minds between the British and the PRB had to be reckoned with. The Sultan's interest in post-independent Malaya and his keenness to cultivate friendship with its leader Tunku Abdul Rahman after 1958 must be seen in this light. The British Government could do nothing to prevent this rapprochement between two Malay Islamic States, nor dare to risk the displeasure of an independent-minded Tunku by openly placing any hurdles in the wake of this new fraternity. Nor could Britain risk alienating the self-willed Sultan.

The emerging rapport between Malaya and Brunei also threatened to undermine the spirit of the Protectorate Treaty of 1888 that stipulated that Britain would be responsible for the conduct of Brunei's foreign relations. When the Brunei State Council approved a \$100 million loan to Malaya in 1958 following a personal approach by the Tunku to the Sultan of Brunei, the British Government was clearly upset. Strictly speaking, the subject should have been notified to the Colonial Secretary since Brunei could not conduct direct dealings with foreign States under the Treaty.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, Britain chose to turn a blind eye and accepted the loan as

⁸⁵ ANA/RG/59 746.h. 03/4-158, American Consular Dispatches from Singapore, No. 475 to The State Department, Washington, 1 April 1958, p. 3.

⁸⁶ Asked to comment, a Colonial Office legal expert minuted that 'Article III of the Treaty of 1888 appears to be relevant in this connection....If the Sultan is to enter into an exchange of letters with the

a fait accompli. The Tunku made an impressive speech over the radio expressing his appreciation of the grand gesture by the Sultan and his country in approving such a massive loan to his newly-independent nation. He said, '[O]ne thing...struck me very much in Brunei. Over there, they talk of [the Federation of] Malaya as a country to which they look for guidance. They speak of Malaya with affection and pride as if it were almost their homeland'.⁸⁷ The Malayan Government was obliged to show its appreciation to Brunei by undertaking to assist it in several ways. This Malaya-Brunei rapprochement jeopardised the Colonial Office planning to establish the Borneo Federation.

Brunei's magnanimity towards Malaya made the Governors of Sarawak and North Borneo peevisish as they did not enjoy the munificence of the Sultan's largesse.⁸⁸ In a long personal meeting with the Sultan in late 1958, his long-time friend Malcolm MacDonald, pleaded diplomatically with the Sultan to exhibit a similarly charitable attitude to his immediate neighbours, i.e., to provide a generous loan.⁸⁹ Disillusioned, the Governors abandoned their long nurtured hopes for closer cooperation with Brunei. Instead the two territories were content to develop closer links between each other, hoping that Brunei would eventually come their way.

The Tunku raised his sights further and asked the British whether he could participate, on Brunei's behalf, in the Brunei Constitutional talks scheduled for early 1959 in London.⁹⁰ The Brunei Sultan had himself sought the Tunku's presence

Federation about this loan he should, strictly speaking,...only do so with the authority of Her Majesty's Government. It would be desirable to give this authority expressly rather than rely on it being implied from the fact that Her Majesty's Government can be taken to know of the proposal and have raised no objection...' DO 35/9950 contains details of correspondence between various authorities on the Brunei loan of \$100 million to the Malayan Federation. See Minute by D. G. Gordon Smith, 28 November 1958.

⁸⁷ Ibid. and text of a radio broadcast made by the Tunku on 10 November 1958, p. 3.

⁸⁸ In 1959 the North Borneo Government requested a development loan of \$8 million from Brunei, which the Sultan turned down. The loan was raised by the North Borneo Government and was underwritten by the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. BA/2102/1983 (SUK Series 3, Box 165) Minute by H. H. the Sultan of Brunei to the Private Secretary to the Sultan, 30 December 1959.

⁸⁹ CO 1030/608, Malcolm Macdonald's note of conversation with H.H. the Sultan of Brunei, 30 September 1958.

The Tunku made this suggestion, among others, during his intimate discussion with Malcolm MacDonald in December 1958. Apparently much dissatisfaction emerged in British circles regarding this conversation between the two. MacDonald was faulted for having given certain erroneous impressions to the Tunku, including his idea of a Super Federation between Malaya, Singapore and the three Borneo territories. MacDonald had to provide long explanations to the

during the London talks as a counter balance to thwart the British decision to federate with Sarawak and North Borneo which would be discussed during the constitutional talks. For the Sultan the Tunku was in a position to save Brunei from being hauled into an unwanted political union. Britain politely turned down the request. Malayan representation during the UK-Brunei talks would send wrong signals to the other two territories. First and foremost it could be interpreted as a sign of official British blessings for a separate union between Brunei and Malaya. Second, undue anxiety among the populace in other territories might ruin plans for a political settlement there, particularly for the proposed Borneo Federation.

Meanwhile Brunei was strongly locked in Malaya or rather the Tunku's embrace. A spate of official visits took place between the two countries. The grand official opening of the ten million dollar Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque in Brunei town in late September 1958 became a gala occasion for a gathering of several Malayan State dignitaries, including the Sultans of Selangor, Kelantan and Kedah.⁹¹ Much seemed to have transpired between the Brunei Sultan and the Malay Rulers, focusing on closer political cooperation between Malaya and Brunei. The British resented that their representatives were kept in the dark about these developments. It was the Sultan of Selangor, a relative of the Brunei Sultan, who publicly proposed on 6 November 1958 a Brunei-Federation merger.⁹² The regional newspapers picked it up from there and stated that 'since the recent visit by Malayan VIPs, the bonds between [Brunei] and Malaya have undoubtedly been strengthened to the extent where Brunei would like to make a public show of her desire for closer union with the Federation of Malaya'.⁹³

The Governors of both Sarawak and North Borneo finally realised that hopes for a Federation with Brunei as a counterpoise to Malayan dominance had faded and thereafter decided to cooperate with the inevitable--to leave Brunei out. This would perpetuate, however, the British Government continued tutelage over North Borneo

Colonial Office. See CO 1030/608, Secret, Telegram Nos. 210 and 237, Secretary of State to the Governors of North Borneo and Sarawak, for a Colonial Office understanding of the controversial conversation between the Tunku and MacDonald.

⁹¹ BA /2083/83 (SUK Series 3, Box 159), A list of State dignitaries is contained in the Secretary to Resident to Setia Usaha (Secretary), Pembukaan Masjid Baru, Brunei (New Mosque Opening), 2 June 1958.

⁹² Mohamed Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*. p. 133.

⁹³ *North Borneo and Sabah Times*, 10 November 1958.

and Sarawak for a longer period to come.⁹⁴ Several reasons were adduced. First, the old argument that the territories were under-developed and not yet ready for self-government. Second, the natives themselves were not keen to gain independence. In the case of North Borneo, for instance, it was argued that the Chinese population, preoccupied with pursuing their economic concerns, were less inclined to wield political power, while the indigenous population was nervous of their fate if the Chinese did gain predominance in politics. Therefore if independence was forced, it would breed communal tensions and impede orderly progress. More important perhaps was the desire to continue British economic and strategic interests. As noted earlier, from the very outset Sir Robert Scott highlighted the military advantages provided by Sandakan and Labuan for Britain, while Roland Turnbull argued that 'ultimately... ..Borneo...will prove to be the meeting place of British, American and Australian strategic interests in South-East Asia'.⁹⁵ Above all there appeared to be no enthusiasm in Sarawak and North Borneo for a union with Malaya.⁹⁶ Yet, the Colonial Office was in a dilemma to indefinitely continue their hegemony over the Borneo territories. They did not want to create another 'never ever' situation in Borneo or elsewhere.⁹⁷ As Eugene Melville of the Colonial Office argued, the main problem was to guarantee internal development in all fields, achieved 'at a pace and on a scale matching the desires and capacities of the people so that they would be ready to give up their hold'.⁹⁸

The Tunku's plans for Borneo were made clear to the Colonial Office after Malcolm MacDonald met him in December 1958.⁹⁹ Apprehensive of a Philippines claim to North Borneo and possible Indonesian design on Brunei and Sarawak, the Tunku suggested that Singapore and the Borneo territories should join his Federation. He was perhaps right to tell the British that they ought to clear their own minds about what sort of future that would be best for them as well as the Common-

⁹⁴ The North Borneo Governor argued that 'in her own interest and those of the people of this country [North Borneo], H. M. G. must be prepared to tolerate the stigmas of "colonialism" for many years...'.
CO 1030/608, Secret, R. E. Turnbull to E. Melville, 7 March 1959 para 5.

⁹⁵ Ibid., para 4(viii).

⁹⁶ Ibid., H. Nield's Minute, para 4.

⁹⁷ Ibid., E. Melville's Minute to Sir John Martin, 2 March 1959.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., Malcolm MacDonald's note of conversation with the Tunku, 30 December 1958.

wealth. As for the British suggestion of merging Singapore with the Federation, the Tunku resisted partly because that would create an imbalance in the population ratio in favour of the Chinese.¹⁰⁰ That provided a rationale to include the three Borneo territories in his plan.

The British cautiously avoided giving the impression that the Tunku had mooted the idea of a 'super federation', since this would stir up a hornet's nest in the Borneo territories. Hence the British advised the Tunku against prematurely 'ventilating his ambitions'¹⁰¹ and to 'say it is none of your business'.¹⁰² Bent on promoting a separate Sarawak and North Borneo Federation, the Colonial officials in South-East Asia, including Sir Robert Scott, discouraged the Home Government to countenance the Tunku's initiative. Despite outward appearances of Brunei getting closer to Malaya, some officials knew that the Bruneians shunned the idea to federate with Malaya. Anticipating that soon the romance would be over and Brunei might then decide to join its Borneo neighbours, the British officials in Malaya agreed to 'sit back and await developments with regard to Brunei and the Federation without interfering in any way'.¹⁰³ Meanwhile D. C. White, the British High Commissioner in Brunei, was discouraged by the Colonial Office from accepting an invitation from Tun Razak, the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaya, and similarly the High Commissioner in Malaya, Sir Geofroy Tory, was cautioned against visiting Brunei in early 1960.¹⁰⁴ Otherwise it would have been interpreted as tacit approval of the British to a Malaya-Brunei merger.¹⁰⁵

Regardless of global and regional political developments, the Sultan's main concern was to see the end of Sarawak domination. So he would rather close ranks with his kin in Malaya rather than be part of a larger Borneo entity. The Inter-Territorial conferences held biannually since 1953 and designed to promote closer

¹⁰⁰ For an analysis of this 'racial argument' and spread of population in the territories, see Simandjuntak, *Malayan Federalism*, pp. 130-133.

¹⁰¹ CO 1030/608, Geofroy Tory to D. W. S. Hunt (CRO), Secret, 14 October 1959, para 3.

¹⁰² Ibid., W. I. J. Wallace's Minute to E. Melville, 30 December 1958.

¹⁰³ DO 35/10035, Confidential, Sir Geofroy Tory to Sir Alexander Clutterbuck, 23 February 1960.

¹⁰⁴ The CRO's view was that 'it would be particularly unfortunate if either Federation Government or Sultan were themselves to represent (Sir Geofroy Tory's) visit to (Brunei) as having meaning referred to above'. Ibid., Para 4.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., Confidential Telegram, No 141, CRO to the UK High Commissioner, Malaya, 26 February 1960.

co-ordination between the three territories did in no way convinced the Sultan about the benefits of a Borneo merger.

Since Brunei was a Malay Islamic Sultanate, a fact acknowledged by the British, there was a greater need to ensure the special privileges of the Malays and other indigenous subjects of the Sultan. Closer association with Sarawak, it was feared, would open the floodgates of population movement, especially Chinese, into the Kingdom, to the detriment of the population balance. The Malayan counterparts of the Sultan kept reminding him of this looming menace and of the lesson from Malaya where political circumstances and expediency forced acceptance of more Chinese than the Malays could possibly wish to accommodate. The British administration in Brunei on several occasions highlighted the increasing antipathy felt in Brunei towards the Chinese. Referring to Tunku Abdul Rahman's visit to Brunei in late 1958, Anthony Abell, revealed that the latter in his presence told the Sultan that 'the Chinese could not be trusted [and] that it was impossible to integrate them'.¹⁰⁶ In Brunei's case the Malays had long cultivated a fear of becoming an 'inferior minority' and hence resisted British moves to extend the citizenship rights to the recent immigrants. They worried that a closer federation with the other two Borneo states would see domination by the Chinese community.¹⁰⁷

It is conceivable therefore why the Sultan decided to strengthen the bond with the Malayan Federation and why he received encouragement from its Malayan leaders. As Sopheer argues, the Malay advocates of Malaysia probably aimed at the security of Malays of Northern Borneo, 'a factor not unconnected with a sense of Malay brotherhood'.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, 'constant use of the terms "Greater Malaya and Greater Federation"' suggests also that the idea of expansion was an attractive one to as many Malay nationalists on the mainland as Tunku Abdul Rahman'.¹⁰⁹

Did the Sultan, if he really did entertain any idea of merging with the Malayan Federation, look into the prospects that Singapore and the other Borneo territories might also follow his footsteps? Possibly the Sultan had not been thinking that far. The Tunku's reserved approach to accepting Singapore in the Federation, ostensibly on the grounds of its Communist background and his dislike of the P.A.P.

¹⁰⁶ CO 1030/462, Anthony Abell to E. Melville (CO), 6 October 1958, para 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Borneo Bulletin*, 14 March 1959.

¹⁰⁸ Mohamed Sopheer, op.cit., p. 133.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Government,¹¹⁰ may have lulled the Sultan's thinking; Brunei trusted the Malay leaders' assurance that Singapore would 'continue for a considerable period as a [British] colony like Hong Kong'.¹¹¹

The Sultan probably received some sort of understanding from the Malay leaders that only he would be welcome to join the Federation of Malaya. British officials in Malaya got the impression that Brunei would soon become 'a component state in the Malay Federation'.¹¹² Sir Geofroy Tory, who only a few months earlier found it 'difficult to comment on the Sultan's motives',¹¹³ now citing well-placed Federation civil servants, said that the Tunku would like to see the Sultan of Brunei become the Yang di-Pertuan Agong of the Federation (the ailing Yang di-Pertuan Agong of Malaya, who was not expected to live much longer died in 1960). The UK Government was advised to consider this possibility and make up their minds what attitude to adopt.¹¹⁴ On the other hand, Sir Roland Turnbull, who was on intimate terms with the Sultan and who visited his Istana in late 1959, said the Sultan was 'determined to be friendly with the federation of Malaya, *but there was not the slightest indication that he had in mind any form of actual political association with it*'.¹¹⁵ (Emphasis mine)

Soon after launching the 1959 Constitution, the Sultan became 'very self-assured' and became euphoric and confidently courted the Malayan leader. As noted, plans were afoot to replace British officers holding key posts with Malayan civil servants. In 1960 the Sultan decided to send the Crown Prince Pengiran Muda Hassanal Bolkiah and his brother Prince Mohammed Bolkiah to continue their education in Malaya, deviating from his earlier plan to send them to study in England.¹¹⁶ He

¹¹⁰ DO 35/10035, Confidential, Sir Geofroy Tory to Sir Alexander Clutterbuck, 23 February 1960. Sir Geofroy Tory further added that 'He [the Tunku] had shown lately very clearly that he believed that we were wrong in allowing the P. A. P. Government to carry out its policy of trying to absorb and contain the Communist elements in Singapore, that the situation was bound to deteriorate...In the meanwhile the Federation would have nothing whatever to do with Singapore.'

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² CO 1030/608, Secret, Sir Geofroy Tory to D. W. C. Hunt(CRO), 14 October 1959.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ DO 35/10035, Confidential, Sir Geofroy Tory to Sir Alexander Clutterbuck (CRO), 23 February 1960.

¹¹⁵ CO 1030/462, Confidential, R. E. Turnbull to W. I. J. Wallace, (CO), 15 December 1959.

¹¹⁶ Although the British officials in Malaya and Brunei at the time tended to believe that sending the royal children to study in Malaya was another sign of the Sultan's keenness to be close to Malaya, the decision was taken by SOAS III to appease his wife, who wished to stay close to her children if they had to be sent abroad. Encouraged by Malcolm MacDonald, the Sultan initially proposed to admit his

hurriedly built himself a residence (Rumah Alak Betatar) in Kuala Lumpur, partly because of his family's wish to be close to the royal children being educated there, and partly because he knew that his presence, perhaps for a longer period, might soon be required at the Federation capital.¹¹⁷ The Malayan leaders, especially the Tunku, seemed to have almost taken it for granted that Brunei would join the Federation. But the Tunku's confidence was soon to be proved an illusion.

By 1960 a new force towards a larger Federation to include Malaya, Singapore and three Borneo territories gathered momentum.¹¹⁸ Again the Tunku took the initiative, and Britain had to be careful about the repercussions in their dependent territories of Borneo, especially Brunei. After visiting the Northern Borneo territories in early 1960, the Tunku concluded that they were a long way off from the stage of self-determination and that if matters were left to take their own course, i.e. the prospect of North Borneo and Sarawak joining the Federation through normal constitutional developments would be only a remote possibility.¹¹⁹ By mid 1960 'the Tunku was very much more interested in getting some or all the Borneo territories into the Federation than in a five-territory Federation including Singapore'.¹²⁰ The new UK Commissioner General Lord Selkirk favoured the same view point of a previous incumbent of the post, Sir Malcolm MacDonald. Lord Selkirk came to the

children, including the daughters Pengiran Anak Puteri Masna and Pengiran Anak Puteri Nor'ain, to MacDonald's alma mater, Bedales School in Sussex, England. The Sultan planned to stay with his wife in England from August 1960 until about June 1961 while the children were schooling. BA/1617/1983, (SUK Series 4) Part 3, Item 6, D. C. White to Hector Jacks, Headmaster, Bedales School, 23 December 1958. However, the Principal of Bedales school was unable to admit the daughters of the Sultan as they were under-aged. Ibid., Item 12, Hector Jacks to D. C. White, 22 September 1959. The Raja Isteri was behind the Sultan's decision to cancel plans for the children's schooling in England. Ibid., Item 14, D. C. White to Hector Jacks, 2 November 1959. Hence, the princes were admitted to the Jalan Gurney School in Kuala Lumpur. Ibid., Item 20, Tun Abdul Razak to Wan Ahmad (State Secretary, Brunei), 4 December, 1959.

¹¹⁷ The Sultan built a home (Rumah Alak Betatar, completed in July 1960) and a hostel for Brunei school children, where the royal children were boarded.

¹¹⁸ The Tunku poured out his feelings regarding the proposed super- federation idea when he met Lord Perth on 10 June 1960, the State Minister for Colonial Affairs. At that stage the Tunku was appealing to the good will of the British Government and was even offering various concessions to Britain to retain its military and economic interests in North Borneo. It appeared to Lord Perth that the Tunku was offering a deal- 'H. M. G. to hang on to North Borneo, he to take over Brunei and Sarawak'. CO 1030/1126, Lord Perth's Note of his talk with Tunku Abdul Rahman on 10 June 1960, Enclosed in Perth to Secretary for Commonwealth Relations, 13 June 1960.

¹¹⁹ DO 35/10035, Confidential, Sir Geofroy Tory to Sir Alexander Clutterbuck (CRO), 23 February 1960.

¹²⁰ CO 1030/1126, A. H. Poynton to Sir Norman Brook, Secret, 30 June 1960.

conclusion that the Tunku's interest 'in the possibility of an association, perhaps amounting to federation, between the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei...can give a measure of stability to the area...[and the idea] ...would be much more easily dealt with by a Government from Kuala Lumpur than from London'.¹²¹ From among the British officialdom it was Lord Selkirk who saw the urgency to implement the Tunku's proposal.

"The Tunku has still some years to run as Prime Minister but a succeeding Government might not be so willing to take any step to bring the five territories closer together, politically or economically. The forces dividing the territories are likely to become stronger as time passes at the same time as the cohesive factor-the imprint of British rule-becomes less marked.(Time is not on our side)."¹²² (Brackets as in original)

The Tunku's Faux Pas

Certainly time was premature for the Tunku to go public with an idea which was still being debated among the colonial authorities. While having canvassed the idea of a super-federation while in London attending the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' meeting in early June 1960, the Tunku braced himself for 'a great number of headaches'. For instance, he still had not sold the idea to the Brunei Sultan who was already nervous about merging with Malaya. Lord Perth quoting his interview with the Tunku said on 10 June, 'I would gather from this that the Tunku has in fact at some time pressed him [the Brunei Sultan] quite hard to be a member of the Federation and that the Sultan has held back, even though there was held in front of him the possibility of his one being Yang di-Pertuan Agong'.¹²³ Yet the Tunku's remarks made at an informal tea party organised in his honour by some Malayan students in London, where he also met a few Brunei students, created a storm in Brunei. His informal discussion with the latter was reported in the *Borneo Bulletin* of 25 June 1960, which highlighted his comments on the need for Brunei to become an integral part of the Federation. The Tunku, as usual spoke his mind freely, referring to an implicit understanding reached during all these months between the

¹²¹ Ibid. Lord Selkirk's Confidential Memorandum to Selwyn Lloyd, 17 June 1960.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., Lord Perth's Note of his talk with Tunku Abdul Rahman on 10 June 1960.

Federation and Brunei.¹²⁴ During a previous radio speech in November 1958 the Tunku had said much the same: 'Brunei is anxious to develop itself as a progressive State along the lines of Malaya.... Theirs is a happy country, as I stated, and they look to Malaya as their pattern of good Government'.¹²⁵ The Bruneian side was chiming in too. For instance, Duli Pengiran Pemancha, the second Wazir of Brunei, was reported to have declared in mid-1959 that 'the ties of friendship which exist among our peoples [Malaya and Brunei] will without doubt become stronger and greater and will become permanent'.¹²⁶ Comparably, however, the Tunku's London speech was more specific, indicating that the day was not far off for a merger between his country and Brunei. Revealing his intention to hold talks with the Colonial Office about making Brunei a full partner in the Federation, he added that Brunei was too small a state to be independent or a member-state in the Commonwealth. Moreover, he painted the customary picture of a bleak economic future for Brunei because oil--the mainstay of its economy--was soon going to dry out.

The Tunku's remarks could not have come at a worse time. The PRB, after its popularity had plummeted (in 1958/59) was looking for a potent cause to revive its political fortune. Its annual rally held in January 1959 attracted only about 800 people. By contrast, since the official opening of the stately Omar Ali Saifuddin mosque at the Brunei Town in September 1958, the Sultan's popularity had soared. The Sultan was seen to have grabbed the initiative for political reform set in motion through the constitution machinery to broaden the people's participation, albeit on a limited scale. The PRB had to plan its next move carefully so as not to appear to jeopardise the people's interest. In the meanwhile Azahari strove hard to remain on friendly terms with the Sultan.

From the early months of 1960 the PRB began to show signs of political revival. An ubiquitous presence of newly arrived Malay Federation employees began to have an adverse effect. It was the Sultan's desire to free his country from dependence on British personnel, and to replace them with Malay Civil Servants until locals could

¹²⁴ *Straits Times*, 1 July 1960.

¹²⁵ DO 35/9950, Text of a broadcast made by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister of the Malayan Federation on 10 November 1958, Annex in a Confidential letter, Sir Geofroy Tory to A. W. Snelling (CRO), 18 November 1958.

¹²⁶ *North Borneo & Sabah Times*, 10 July 1959.

become eligible. The PRB used resentment against seconded Malayan officers to whip up popular sentiment. Initially, the Sultan was unconcerned by news of an undercurrent of hostility at key administrative appointments that he considered imperative before Brunei could stand on its own feet. But PRB propaganda gave the entire affair a new twist, as though it were a neo-colonialist move by Malaya to impose its hegemony over Brunei. Many aspiring Bruneians came to think that the Malayan Malays grabbed away their opportunities for career advancement. Azahari himself was said to have been frustrated when his ambition to become the first Chief Minister (Mentri Besar) was thwarted. The important post of State Secretary under the first Brunei Constitution went to a Malayan--Wan Ahmad (whose competence to hold that position consisted of being a junior officer in the Malayan Civil service cadre, which upset the British administrators as well). Apart from creating envy, the appointment of Malaysians to the key posts also corroborated signals of a possible Brunei-Malayan merger.

Exploiting these issues, the PRB sprang back. A mass PRB annual rally in January 1960 attracted about 3,000 people.¹²⁷ It went on the offensive by targeting the newly announced Constitution as ‘an instrument to lower the prestige of the Sultan in the eyes of the people through its disregard of ordinary democratic principles’.¹²⁸ The Government did not wish to give the Party further ammunition. Aware of PRB’s stand on the Malayan Federation issue, the Brunei Government treaded carefully in declaring overt support for the merger idea.

Ecstatic Tunku cared less for the PRB antics since he was sure of being able to manipulate the support of the Brunei ruling elite for his enlarged Federation plan. But he forgot that premature revelation of the idea was fraught with danger. The Sultan, as one who knew his people well, had been more than cautious in his public utterances. That is why the Tunku's remarks earned contradiction from the Sultan himself, who had not spoken his mind until then on an issue of such importance for his Kingdom. The State media prominently carried his denial of having had any discussions with Tunku on the subject of Brunei's joining the Malayan Federation. The Sultan denied having held talks with the Tunku in Kuala Lumpur on his way to England on 15 January. He said that ‘the Tunku has never discussed such a plan for

¹²⁷ Ibid., 23 January, 1960.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

merger with me'.¹²⁹ The Brunei Mentri Besar added that Brunei would apply to become a member of the Commonwealth if and when it becomes fully independent.¹³⁰ The Attorney General (a Malayan official) in Brunei, having described the Sultan's recent visit as made on private grounds, denied any proposals for a merger.¹³¹ In his view it was too early to think of such a political arrangement because the country's first Constitution had just come into operation. Taken aback by Brunei's vehement denials, the Tunku himself later retracted his statement publicly that 'I did not have any formal discussions in London and I did not talk on the matter with the Sultan of Brunei when I came back to Kuala Lumpur'.¹³²

Politically sagacious, the Sultan of Brunei acted with the true demeanour of a King. During the critical stages of the constitutional discussions since 1956 he adopted a stance of reticence, so that even the cleverest of the British public servants failed to read his mind. For instance, when the issue of an appointment of the first Brunei Mentri Besar became crucial to British policy making, the Colonial Office had tried its best to find out in advance the nominee the Sultan had in mind. But until the moment the Sultan announced the name of Pehin Dato Perdana Mentri Ibrahim bin Jahfar, everyone was kept guessing. Had it been revealed earlier, there was a danger that the introduction of the Constitution itself would face further setbacks. The infighting among the potential contenders, including some of the Sultan's close associates, could have been exploited by the PRB to its advantage, while the British might have succeeded in retaining a more powerful British Adviser/Resident, as was desired by people like Anthony Abell.

In light of the cautious, if not circuitous approach, of the Sultan, it indeed came as an embarrassment when the Tunku unguardedly spilled the beans before the Brunei Sultan himself could prepare his State for such a historic change if any. In fact the British Government had warned Tunku on several occasions hitherto not to make such statements for fear of stirring up mass unrest not only in Brunei, but also in the

¹²⁹ *Pelita Brunei*, 6 July 1960.

¹³⁰ *Borneo Bulletin*, 2 July 1960.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 10 July 1960.

¹³² *Straits Times*, 1 July 1960. The Tunku returned to Kuala Lumpur on the evening of the 15th and the Sultan, who was on a private visit there, returned in the afternoon of the following day. Pengiran Mohammed Yusuf, the State Information Officer of Brunei, reading the Sultan's message on the State radio, said that the Sultan and the Tunku met only briefly during a dinner on that evening and that on the following day in the Kuala Lumpur Airport the Tunku came to see the Sultan off. *Pelita Brunei*, 6 July 1960.

adjacent territories. The British policy had been consistent--that any idea for the merger must come from the people themselves. This is precisely what upset the Sultan of Brunei who needed time and diplomacy to seek the consent of his people. Although Ranjit Singh has remarked that it was Brunei's concern or pride with its identity and political status that caused resentment at high levels of Brunei society against the Tunku's comments,¹³³ this view fails to convey the reality of the political situation in Brunei. However intertwined their relations in the past may have been, owing to common bonds of religion and race, the Sultan felt slighted when the Tunku had snatched the initiative from him. As in the case of the Constitution, it was the Sultan's prerogative to proclaim such a far-reaching decision to his people. Therefore the Sultan publicly repudiated the Tunku's remarks. More importantly, the Sultan henceforward, was forced to become circumspect in his relationship with the Federation and its leaders.

The outburst from Brunei indeed pleasantly surprised the British administration. For them, the lingering Singapore question needed to be settled first. The island Colony of Singapore, tainted by Communism, had been perceived as a real threat to the stability of the newly-independent Federation of Malaya. As Mohamed Noordin Sopiee has noted, the British 'in effect told Kuala Lumpur: "you can't have Borneo without Singapore."¹³⁴

At the time Britain came under mounting international pressure to de-colonize. London engaged in talks at high political levels to find a concrete solution for granting independence as much to the Borneo territories as Singapore. Whitehall favoured a speedy de-colonization process. Time had run out for the Borneo territories to become politically viable and mature on their own. Granting instant independence within the framework of a new 'Malaysian Federation' was seen as the best possible solution to the dilemma. Great Britain no longer possessed the will to resist the tide of Asian nationalism, nor did it wish to risk the enforced loss of its colonial possessions. The voice of Afro-Asian solidarity against colonialism rang loud and clear in international forums. Particularly significant was a historic resolution passed by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1960 urging 'the necessity of bringing to a speedy and unconditional end colonialism in

¹³³ Ranjit Singh, *Brunei 1893-1983*, h 142.

¹³⁴ Mohamed Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, p 133.

all its forms and manifestations'.¹³⁵ As a major colonial power, Great Britain was singled out for criticism. Thus the new attitude in Britain favoured a policy of appeasement to leave her colonies gracefully and to retain the long-term goodwill and friendship of their peoples.

In the circumstances, de-colonising Singapore was a prime consideration. By 1963, Singapore was to become independent, and Great Britain would have an important stake in its defence and economic well-being. The British Government under Harold Macmillan wished to guarantee its security edge by retaining the British military base as part of the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) defence pact. In a related plan for containing the threat of Communism, particularly in Singapore and Sarawak, it was felt that the anti-Communist Government in Malaya could do better than a colonial power. The fate of the British Borneo territories was thus determined to a large extent by the Imperial considerations of Great Britain, where its goals converged with that of the newly-independent Malaya Federation. Once consensus was reached at the apex, it remained only to mould public opinion in the Borneo territories. Tunku Abdul Rahman proceeded with a carefree confidence that it would be fairly easy to win the Borneo nationalists to his cause. It was not to be so. While he succeeded in convincing many local leaders of the benefits of a common Federation, his proposal and especially his condescending attitude towards the Borneo territories, ignited a tinder box of political passions. Brunei, under the influence of the PRB, the oldest political party, challenged the Tunku's proposal which created a chain reaction of virulent Northern Borneo nationalism. In the end, the wily Sultan Omar was the final winner in the game who not only kept at bay the closer association proposals, but more importantly pulled the plug very cleverly but calculatedly at the very last moment to slip out of the Malaysia Federation cordon.

¹³⁵ The resolution passed with a vote of 89 countries in favour, none against and 9 abstaining (Britain included). the UN General Assembly 15th Regular Session. *Commonwealth Survey*, 7(11), 23 May 1961, p. 508.

A Post-Script

The story did not actually end with the formation of Malaysia. The Malaysian leaders were still coveting Brunei under the perception that the isolated Sultanate would not survive for long because of its weak economic and political infrastructure. Having failed in his first bid, interestingly Malcolm MacDonald, the ardent advocate of the proposal, again tried to revive the idea after almost after one decade. Thus trying his luck in promoting a fresh rapport between Brunei and Malaysia, in 1968 MacDonald invented a fresh package deal for the consideration of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. According to the deal the new Federation of the three Northern Borneo territories should be headed by the Sultan of Brunei as a titular head of state.¹³⁶ MacDonald resubmitted the proposals again in 1974 assuring the authorities that little change would be effected to the existing borders between Brunei and its neighbouring state of Sarawak that had remained as a big bone of contention, and moreover the Sultan would be relinquishing all claims to Limbang. If the scheme eventuates, Brunei could then in turn either be joined to Peninsular Malaysia in the form of a confederation or form ties with Singapore that had already exited the Malaysia Federation in 1965!¹³⁷ However, other British officials, especially, J. K. Hickman, the British High Commissioner to Malaysia scoffed at the deal as being unrealistic since the Malaysian government would consider it to be totally unacceptable and an interference in their internal affairs.¹³⁸ D. Gordon of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in his telegram to Hickman also agreed that 'if it were to come to the Malaysians' ears that MacDonald was talking about the possible attractions of a North Borneo Federation, particularly with a possible link with Singapore, we should be in trouble'.¹³⁹ Sultan Haji Omar, on the other hand, predictably stood his ground during the Brunei Defence Council meeting held on 8 March 1974 when he objected to Brunei entering a grouping of the three Northern Borneo states.¹⁴⁰

In the context of the irrevocability of what had taken place as regards the formation of Malaysia, MacDonald's wishful thinking indeed sounded hollow. By supporting

¹³⁶ FCO 24/236, MacDonald to Thomson, 14 March to 1968.

¹³⁷ FCO 24/1962, Record of meeting between Lord Goronwy-Roberts and Malcolm MacDonald in the House of Lords, 16 July 1974.

¹³⁸ FC024/1962, Hickman to Galsworthy, 18 July 1974.

¹³⁹ FC024/1962, Gordon to Hickman, 9 August 1974.

¹⁴⁰ FC024/1962, Cited by Wilford to Lord Goronwy-Roberts, 27 July 1974.

the creation of a wider but a newer and looser federation than what had been already accomplished¹⁴¹ he may have been particularly mindful of the benefit for Brunei because he did not wish to see Brunei suffering the same fate under an allegedly strong Malaysian hegemony over the sovereign states of Sarawak and North Borneo. In fact, as mentioned earlier, he had told his successor Robert Scott in 1965 not to force the Malaysia idea onto Brunei. His British colleagues, on the other hand, did not want to let the genie out of a bottle by promoting a second attempt at Brunei-Malaysia merger. They agreed that this was a matter best left to Brunei when Britain grants her independence sooner or later. Since Brunei gained independence in 1984, further attempts to bring Brunei into the fold of a Federation with Malaysia has scarcely been raised in any circles, officially or unofficially. The formation of ASEAN in 1967 that brought together Malaysia and Brunei under one umbrella as equal partners provided an antidote to all what had taken place in the region under colonial stimulus.

¹⁴¹ FC024/236, MacDonald to Thomson, 14 March 1968, FC024/236, A. R. Adair to J. Johnston, 11 March 1968 & FC024/222, Adair to Robin, 29 February 1968.

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