

The Politics of Defeat

PRELIMINARY CHAPTERS AND
THE SECRET DIARY
OF FRANCIS THOMAS

edited by
MARGARET THOMAS



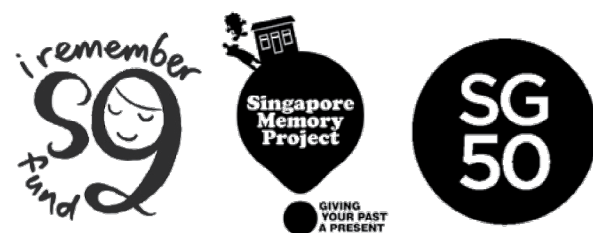
The Politics of Defeat
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INTRODUCTION

BY MARGARET THOMAS

This book was meant to be published in 1978. That was the plan when my father began working on it in early 1977, some months after he was diagnosed with and treated in the United Kingdom for cancer of the hip cartilage. Back in Singapore and largely housebound because of his condition, he looked for something useful to do. There was also some sense of wanting to get his affairs in order, and one task was to deposit what he described as ‘a small car load of documents’ with the University of Singapore’s library.

These documents included his personal correspondence; reports, papers and other material from his days as a teacher and principal at St Andrews School; articles, speeches, sermons and other such writings; and the files he had kept back when in 1960 he gave the university library a pile of Labour Front records and other political documents from his days as a politician and a Cabinet minister.

He retained these files because he felt their content was, in 1960, ‘too hot’ to make public. Among them was a ‘secret diary’ he kept from the middle of 1958 to February 1959 of discussions

he had with fellow Cabinet members, Labour Front colleagues, Lee Kuan Yew and other members of the opposition, and various others about proposed political realignments. It would in 1960 have been much too dangerous to reveal details of the horse trading and other intense political negotiations of the late 1950s.

But by 1977 this was all history. Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party (PAP) was firmly in power, Singaporeans were focused on economic advancement and politics had become predictable. My father felt that an account by him of the behind-the-scenes negotiations of politicians in the late 1950s would be a useful contribution to the records of Singapore's political history.

So he deferred his plan to deposit his documents with the university library and instead wrote, in March 1977, to Lee Kuan Yew to say he wanted to write a book based on the diary he had kept. He enclosed the pages from the diary "referring to what you said to me, or others said about you", and said he would drop the idea of the book if Mr Lee objected to it. A week later someone from Mr Lee's office called to say there were no objections.

My father transcribed his diary, adding comments and background; gathered supporting material from his other files; and began to draft his opening chapters. Initially he thought he would title the book along the lines of 'Twenty years after: What happened in 1958'. By June he had his first two chapters more or less in hand, and had decided to change the title of the book to *The Politics of Defeat*.

In June 1977 he sent these two chapters, together with the expanded transcript of the diary, to the eye surgeon Dr Arthur Lim, his former St Andrews student who had been his assistant in the Labour Front in the late 1950s. He told Dr Lim that "the real interest starts with Chapter Three", and that in the final chapter he wanted to "make a sort of assessment of the results

of PAP's 1959 victory, including the irritation felt against them at times by outstandingly able and nice people. And to make a guess at the long term outlook, where the grassroots leadership will lie, and where it will look when LKYew is gone."

My father was not able to write Chapter Three and the rest of the book. His cancer, which had not been detected when he saw specialists in Singapore in 1975 about the problems he was having with his right hip, had spread. When he wrote in June 1977 to Dr Arthur Lim, he was battling pain, insomnia and depression. Soon after he was in and out of hospital and could not continue with the book. In October 1977 he died. He was just 65.

For several years after his death I could not bring myself to go through his papers. When I eventually did, I deposited his educational documents with the National Archives and kept the rest. I was by then a journalist and aware of the importance of having different accounts of events and of history. I felt I ought to publish at some point at least his two chapters if not also his diary and the related documents.

It has taken 38 years but finally my father's account of the politics of the late 1950s is getting into print. It's taken so long partly because, not being a student of history, I felt inadequate for the task of stitching together his notes into a coherent and useful publication.

Also, over the years I tried several times in vain to interest publishers in re-issuing my father's *Memoirs of a Migrant*, a slim and very readable book published in 1972 and long out of print. If there was no interest in the ready-made and previously well-received autobiography of an Englishman who had become a Singaporean, how could I possibly expect publishers to want to take on his very incomplete book about the dying days of the Labour Front government?

Then in 2011 I met Fong Hoe Fang of Ethos Books. He read *Memoirs of a Migrant*, decided it ought to be brought back into circulation and republished it in 2013. We then talked about *The Politics of Defeat*. Fortunately, Singapore was gearing up to celebrate 50 years of independence. There was a new interest in exploring and recording our history, and getting *The Politics of Defeat* into print began to seem a good idea.

We considered various ways of pulling the material together. Amongst his notes there is one sheet with a list of chapters for his book:

1. Introductory
2. Labour Front branches
3. The Broad-based Possibility
4. The Communists
5. Struggle over Labour Front dissolution
6. The Criminal/Secret Society Background

Had he been able to complete the book, he might have had some other chapters. In his letter to Dr Arthur Lim, for instance, he indicated what he wanted to write about in his last chapter, which is not in this list.

We tried to organise his material along the lines of his planned chapters, filling in gaps where possible with information and insights gleaned from his personal correspondence and other documents. But I was not comfortable with this. There was no way I, or anyone else for that matter, would be able to complete his book. My feeling that we should instead just publish his diary and notes pretty much as they were, with some minor editing, was reinforced when I came across the correspondence he had in February 1970 with a Mr G Sweeney.

Mr Sweeney appears to have been a researcher of some kind in Britain, perhaps a graduate student working on his thesis. He wrote to my father with a long list of detailed questions about the Singapore Labour Party and the Labour Front – questions

like: “What were the moving forces behind the formation of the Labour Front?”, “Was an approach ever made to the group who subsequently formed the PAP?” and “Were you ever aware of any Secret Society involvement in the Election?”

My father began his reply by saying the questions posed were those he was least qualified to answer because they were the aspects of politics that were of least interest to him. But he did his best to respond to the questions. In his 6-page reply one paragraph caught my eye. He wrote: **“From time to time people doing studies of political developments here have asked me to answer questions or to give them my recollections, and I have always been impressed by the immense gap between academic attempts to describe events and the reality as I experienced it.”**

His diary of 1958-1959 captured key points of the political reality that he was experiencing, indeed that he had a hand in shaping. In 1977 he transcribed the diary and added explanations and comments. Some of this may have been with the benefit of hindsight, but it was his hindsight, his recollection of the reality of Singapore’s politics in the late 1950s. His transcribed and expanded diary has details that may be new to historians, and even for the casual reader there are nuggets of information and observation. For example, consider these paragraphs in his long entry for Saturday 4 October 1958 when he had several meetings, including one with Lee Kuan Yew who came to see him at his ministry office next to the then Parliament House:

“As I recall this scene, I was sitting at my desk and Kuan Yew was on my right. There was a little silence after I had said that the British Governor accepted the PAP would be the next government, but had a doubt about Kuan Yew’s being tough enough.

Kuan Yew left his seat and walked round the conference table which filled my office. From a window there was a view of a car park, some trees and amongst them a metal elephant, presented many years earlier by a visiting King of Siam.

At last he said: 'There will be no PAP exultation on taking office. It will be the soberest day of our lives.'

In an early draft of his opening chapter, my father wrote: "A large part of the value of this book is that it makes public points of view, discussions and decisions which until now were more or less hidden from the public. It can help to answer the question 'Why?' which our historians have to ask."

So I think it's best that I leave it to the historians to find whatever value they want from my father's diary and notes. What I can do, however, is say a little bit about Francis Thomas as I knew him.

I'M ANG MOH BUT NO DEVIL

In September 1948, *The Straits Times* carried a report on the formation of the Labour Party of Singapore with the headline 'Englishman in new Labour Party'. The paper's editors were clearly as surprised by this as the Englishman in question – my father – had been when he found himself asked to join the new party's committee. He had turned up at the meeting called to discuss the formation of the party expecting, as he wrote in *Memoirs of a Migrant*, "to be thrown out of the meeting as a British colonialist". Instead he was warmly welcomed and



The Straits Times 2 September 1948

it was the start of what would be a little over a decade as a politician, with half of that time spent as a Cabinet minister, during a tumultuous period in modern Singaporean history.

Towards the end of his political career, when he contested the Thomson constituency in the 1959



The Straits Times 21 May 1959

Legislative Assembly general election, *The Straits Times* briefly reported on one of his election rallies. The headline was "I'M ANG MOH BUT NO DEVIL – THOMAS". His opponents had called him a European devil, he had told voters at the rally, but the truth was that he had been a schoolmaster in Singapore for more than 25 years and had "worked hard and tried to serve the people".

What was it about this Englishman that led those who were forming the Labour Party to ask him to join them in its leadership? Why did he decide to attend that inaugural meeting when he fully expected to be thrown out?

Perhaps they saw him as an Englishman who, having been a teacher in Singapore since 1934, was sufficiently localised to understand the concerns of ordinary people. Perhaps they were aware that he was about to marry a Peranakan lady who was Matron at St Andrews' boarding house, where my father was the House Master. Or perhaps they simply were impressed with what he said at that inaugural meeting.

My father, just under 6 feet tall, had a rather imposing presence, and with his public school, 'upper class' accent perhaps he came across as being of leader material. He considered himself to be, at the time he joined the Labour Party, a political illiterate. But he was familiar with the ideals of socialism, particularly Fabian Socialism, and he may have seemed to the others to be

someone well equipped to help shape the party and articulate its goals. Indeed, some months after the party was formed he was asked to become its President.

As to why he decided to attend the inaugural meeting, he once told someone it was because “I had seen it announced in *The Straits Times* and I wanted to help”. In *Memoirs* he described joining the Labour Party as “...an experience into which I went reluctantly, but which I could not avoid if I was to remain part of the living society to which I belonged.”

My father was a migrant. Eager to get out of England after getting his degree from Cambridge in 1934, he heard about a teaching position in Singapore, went for the interview, got the job and was soon on a ship making its slow way to Singapore. When it stopped in Penang and he went for a walk in the streets near the pier, he knew he was in a part of the world he wanted to call home.

In the introductory note to *Memoirs*, he wrote: “We are all born into this world as strangers, carrying with us an inescapable inheritance from our family and race. Migration is a kind of second birth, in which we can to some extent choose what parts of our inheritance we will carry forward and use in our new lives. I am proud of much of my inheritance as an Englishman. Especially, that it has been found acceptable and useful by my fellow citizens. But I am more glad to have been able to move on into the freedom of a new kind of life.”

When Singapore gained self-government in 1957 and Singapore citizenship became available to all born in Singapore or Malaya, and to British citizens who had been resident in Singapore for two years, my father became a citizen. He had no intention of ever going back to England other than to visit family and friends. But while he was fully a part of Singapore and played an active and sometimes leading role in the community, he remained very much an Englishman.

For example, while he wore a sarong at home and was happy enough to eat local food, especially if my mother cooked his favourite bamboo shoot curry, when the family gathered for everyday meals of rice and various dishes at our circular dining table, he would more often than not have his own simple western meal. At lunchtime, perhaps home-baked wholemeal bread and ham salad or an omelette washed down with a large pot of plain tea; and for dinner, roast chicken, fish soufflé, or beef stew, with a bottle or can of beer, sometimes two.

It was, I think, partly his preference for the less complex tastes of western meals and partly because my mother, who like many of her generation was a bit of an Anglophile, felt he ought to have western food. He was happy to leave all these details to her. In *Memoirs*, he said that marrying her gave his life ‘a completeness and sanity which it could not have had without her’. She brought into his life her extended Peranakan family and our home was often teeming with people, especially on Sundays when the adults would be at a table, sometimes two, of mah-jong while we children entertained ourselves with hide-and-seek and other such games, this being well before the time of cable TV and other digital devices.

It was a household and family life very different from his when he was growing up in the Cotswolds in England. His father was an Anglican priest and the family lived in a house next to a little church in the village of Westcote. It was a very rural life. Water had to be pumped by hand from a well, the house was lit by oil lamps, and the closest shop was four miles away. In a note he wrote in 1976, my father said: “My childhood was in a lonely rectory with almost nil contacts outside my parents, sister, brothers, a governess and a servant. We were taught self-denial and my father made me feel that any sign of aggression, loss of temper, was deeply wrong.”

While he welcomed having my mother's Peranakan family around him and was always ready to lend any of them a sympathetic ear and a helping hand, he was usually on the periphery of what was going on. He did not play mah-jong or lotto, which was another regular family activity, nor did he ever venture into the kitchen to offer a hand when my mother, supported by a small army of relatives and friends, was cooking up a storm of a Peranakan *tok panjang* for our occasional large dinner parties.

He was usually in his study working on something, often typing away on his ancient and battered Imperial (and later a more modern Adler) typewriter. Emerging now and then to stretch his legs, he would stop by the mah-jong table and smile warmly at the players and then leave them to their game, or when everyone was busy preparing some massive meal, he might watch a while in admiration and gratitude and then amble off to the corner of the garden where he was digging a ditch or otherwise rearranging the soil and plants for some exercise.

The position or role he had in the household had some parallels with the position, as he once described it, that he felt he had in local politics – “that of a passenger who is not part of the machine”. He was describing not so much his actual role as his attitude.

At home, while he was very much a part of the family and was respected and loved by all, his workload as well as his interests and, I suppose, his Englishness, meant he was a little detached from the full ebb and flow of our very local family life.

In politics, he saw his role as temporary. Writing in August 1959 to John Hatch of the British Labour Party's Commonwealth Bureau, a contact with whom he regularly corresponded when he was in politics, my father wrote: “After 11 years in Singapore politics I have arrived at a position of minor importance, based partly on a reputation for honesty and partly on having more

political sense than some others, but I have never thought that I was more than a stopgap, perhaps necessary for a period, but to be replaced as soon as someone was ready.”

In *Memoirs*, he expanded on this:

“I never regarded myself as in any way a political leader. My usefulness was in giving a kind of respectability to the party, in being quite detached about the intra-party squabbles that went on, and in providing a certain amount of common sense in discussions about what ought to be done.

“I do not think there is much meaning in the saying about Asian solutions for Asian problems; problems are problems, Asian or not. But I felt strongly that there must be Asian leadership for Asian voters, and the last thing I would have wanted was to try to build myself a constituency of English-speaking voters.”

This was why, when he decided to contest the 1959 General Election as a Labour Front candidate, he chose to stay on in his rural and Chinese-speaking Thomson constituency rather than consider, as suggested by Lee Kuan Yew, a safer, more middle-class seat. He knew he was unlikely to win the seat but felt he would be betraying his party workers and other supporters in Thomson if he were to move on to a ward that might be easier for him to win. He knew too that sentimentality was not a quality helpful in politics, but that was the man he was.

A year or so after my father and a couple of others unsuccessfully contested the 1959 General Election as Labour Front candidates, the Labour Front died a natural death. My father, who had returned to teaching in early 1959 when he resigned from his position as Minister for Communications and Works, refocused his energy on his teaching career, and was soon also getting involved in various community activities. In 1970 he

was appointed a permanent member of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights.

Over the years he was asked several times by people to return to politics. He was never tempted to do so. In *Memoirs* he said that often the political ideas of these people seemed to him to be ill-advised, and he added: "But even the best political prospects would have had little attraction to me. I am better suited to work on a smaller scale."

While my father felt no desire to return to politics, he continued to have a keen interest in what was happening in Singapore politically. In the early years of the Labour Front, when it was preparing for the 1955 Legislative Assembly elections, party leaders had tried to interest the newly-formed People's Action Party (PAP) in joining them. "We had some discussions," he wrote in *Memoirs*, "but it soon became clear that they had a very low opinion of us. We found them offensive; Lee Kuan Yew in particular."

But my father's opinion of Mr Lee was to change. "During 1958 I developed immense respect and affection for Lee Kuan Yew. It was partly that he was clearly the man who might keep Singapore safe among so many dangers; but more important to me was his personal quality. He was a man capable of dedicating himself to the hardest kind of service to his fellow men, the almost intolerable burden of top level leadership," he said in *Memoirs*.

Forming the government after the 1959 general election, the PAP strengthened its base of support as it put in place the policies and schemes that led to rapid economic development for Singapore and considerable material progress for Singaporeans. Meanwhile, the political landscape changed. When the leading opposition party, Barisan Socialis, decided to boycott the 1968 Parliamentary general election, the PAP had a clean sweep at the polls. And again in the 1972 and the 1976 general elections.

Much as my father admired Mr Lee and welcomed the many positive changes brought about by the PAP government, he was concerned about the lack of a viable opposition in Singapore. I remember sitting with him in front of the TV waiting for the announcements of the 1976 election results. As PAP win after PAP win was announced his disappointment was palpable, almost becoming despair.

This disappointment or despair led him in January 1977 to write a short paper titled 'A Government, no Opposition, and the Future'. It was a paper he said he wanted to send to a very limited number of people to get their reactions. It made some good points, the key one being this: "We have a government which must be amongst the best governments in the world by any reasonable standard; we have no opposition; and we hope to have a future. We need to start now to prepare for that future. We need to build among our citizens a reasonable understanding and interest for the abstract concepts which will be needed for national unity. We need to put flesh and blood onto them by being much better informed about affairs both within Singapore and in the world around. Above all, we need to know each other."

The PAP government, he said, had been carrying on a revolution and they had been open and specific about it. But, he added:

"I do not think that the shape and size of their revolutionary aims are appreciated by even a tiny fraction of the people. The day to day policies are noted, by some with irritation, by others with support, by almost none with an understanding of where they may lead. The abstract concepts remain in the minds of the leadership and take shape as practical policies among an electorate that might as well be so many

giraffes or hippopotami for all their intellectual reaction to what is going on.

“There are probably more giraffes and hippopotami among the highly educated electorate than among the lower paid strata, to whom the policies are of immediate importance. The high-income groups are insulated from political reality by their cash.

“Looking ahead, we see fairly clearly the day when we no longer have the present political leadership; we do not see their successors. This does not tell us that there will be no competent successors. Those whose memories go back to the 1950s will recall when Lee Kuan Yew looked more like a candidate for Changi Jail than for the Prime Minister’s hot seat.”

His idea was that if there were enough people who shared his concern a meeting, or a series of meetings, could be held and possibly arrangements made for groups to be formed to discuss and think about various issues – education, the financial sector, regional relations, and so on. He said:

“The common factor would be their wish to build a vocabulary and a set of common concepts that could be useful for the future national unity of our state. Their wish to know their fellow citizens and to exchange ideas on the vital affairs of their future.

“It is conceivable that a movement like this might well arouse fears in the present political leadership, who know well enough how fragile is the foundation on which they have been able to raise their structure of national prosperity. Yet we cannot surrender the future entirely to the contingency planning of the backroom bureaucracy. If the leadership showed that they did not intend to allow such a movement to develop, that

would itself be a factor of great importance for the future and for the possibilities of opposition. We should have to consider it if it arose.”

The aim of the effort he was proposing should be:

“...to show that a loyal opposition is in agreement with the government over a very wide range of policy, and on a great deal more is willing to work bi-partisan policies to keep things stable. But it would also have real differences of intelligent opinion and be able to make a real change in the conditions of life without wrecking the state. At present too many of us are like the giraffes or hippopotami in our Zoo, or the birds in the Bird Park; our needs are foreseen and provided for, we can be the admiration of visitors from less happy lands; but we lack the ability and scope to plan for ourselves. We have not been robbed of that scope; we have failed to develop it through our own weakness of mind and spirit. Supported within the strong framework of our present leadership, perhaps we can find at this time more strength of mind and spirit. Then the Future will be brighter.”

My father gave me a copy of his paper and asked for my comments. But I have no idea if he ever sent it to anyone else. Perhaps he showed it to one or two people, and their advice was to drop the idea. Or he thought again about it and decided not to proceed, perhaps because he had started to focus on *The Politics of Defeat*. Or perhaps he thought he would leave it on the back burner until his book was done. Whichever it was, Francis Thomas the ang moh, the Englishman, the migrant was, till the last, wanting to help build for his community a brighter future, wanting to do his best for the place he called home.

“When for the first time in the Assembly I sat in opposition facing Lim Yew Hock, I recollected his many services to Singapore. I have never seen him look more exhausted and worn out than after the speech he made that day. He has been under very heavy stress of work for a very long time; he has faced and faces great difficulties; he has few left willing to help him; he has been under great pressure and exposed to foolish and bad advice. He has made mistakes which may be serious for Singapore and which cannot be forgotten. But we have no angels in politics. All can and all do make mistakes. Lim Yew Hock’s good qualities and good services deserve to be remembered. Those who have not suffered the same tests as he cannot easily judge what he has gone through.”

– Report to the General Council of the Labour Front
Francis Thomas
Secretary General, Labour Front
March 1959

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“During 1958 I developed immense respect and affection for Lee Kuan Yew. It was partly that he was clearly the man who might keep Singapore safe among so many dangers; but more important to me was his personal quality. He was a man capable of dedicating himself to the hardest kind of service to his fellow men, the almost intolerable burden of top level leadership.”

– *Memoirs of a Migrant* (1972)
by Francis Thomas

NOTE

BY FRANCIS THOMAS

On 22 September 1961, in a broadcast, Mr Lee Kuan Yew said:

In 1959, it was quite clear to everybody, including the Communists, that the PAP was in for a landslide victory. Because of the corruption and stupidities of the people then in power, we were the obvious choice of the people.

–*The Battle for Merger*, p.29

Well, yes. They got 43 seats and the whole varied opposition only 8. This set the pattern for PAP landslides which we have seen ever since, marred only by some setbacks in the early 1960s. We have to agree, it was a landslide.

Over the whole of Singapore, the PAP had 8% more votes than the whole varied opposition. But they had quite narrow majorities in some constituencies; a majority of only 5 votes in River Valley, and only 125 in Upper Serangoon. Elsewhere, only a few hundreds. It was a landslide, but an unusual one.

It takes two hands to make a clap. The PAP had the leadership and political skill to win the elections, but they needed the corruption and stupidities of the people then in power to get their landslide. The result of the elections might have given the Opposition 21 seats to 30 for PAP.

We have seen plenty of the politics of PAP victory in the last twenty years. Now, for the first time, I offer an inside story of the Politics of Defeat in 1958-9.

This was all long ago, before the memories of the younger generation. I therefore give two introductory chapters before coming to the events of 1958-9. One chapter summarises the kind of information and ideas I had in mind in taking my decisions in those days, the centres of political decision making and the sort of groups involved, with a short Who's Who based mainly on a contemporary publication, with my comments and omissions.

My second chapter runs over such information as I have around me in my various files about Labour Front organisation, HQ and Branches in those years. No-one I think could now drag back from the mists of time a full account of our Party structure and membership, but what I can offer will probably do well enough to recover the amateur and lethargic flavour of those years.

'If we tried to go on the offensive when the masses are not yet awakened, that would be adventurism.'

—Mao Tse-tung, 2 April 1948

CHAPTER ONE

THE SOURCES

In writing *The Politics of Defeat*, I have used a secret diary which I kept from 29 June 1958 to the later part of February 1959. This was written on the rough paper used in my office, mostly backs of sheets of the Electoral Register for Kampong Kapor 1956. They were put into a file and they provide a consecutive record of what I wanted to have available for argument or other use. They are not a complete record. My office diary shows meetings which did not get into this Diary, presumably because I thought them not worth writing down or because I was tired, or perhaps I mislaid that sheet.

For example, my office diary has an entry for 2.30 on Tuesday, 17 March 1959: 'LKY re LYH resign and CSKee/Ipoh...'. This must mean meeting Lee Kuan Yew about the possible resignation of Lim Yew Hock and about the activities of Chew Swee Kee at Ipoh, perhaps with his iron mine. But neither in the Diary nor anywhere else can I find any record whether this meeting took place, and if so what was said or done. My mind is a blank about it.

Other sources are files of correspondence, especially:

- i) Letters to Chief Minister: 1958/9: that is, to Lim Yew Hock. I wrote much more to him than he did to me.
- ii) Letters to our Ministers: these are mostly government business, but a few are relevant to The Politics of Defeat.
- iii) Letters to London, to the Commonwealth Officer, British Labour Party; to the Fabian Commonwealth Bureau; and to the Editor of Socialist Commentary, Dr Rita Hinden. These London contacts were worth keeping up in those semi-colonial days, since they gave at least a possibility that what I wrote might reach men at the top and help them to come to what I thought would be the right decisions.
- iv) Other minor files with documents about the formation of the Singapore People's Alliance; with Oddities of Labour Front leadership; or with later letters to my London correspondents.
- v) Office diaries showing some, but not all engagements in my Ministry office, and almost blank for the Labour Front Office except for two or three useful entries similar to the main rough-paper Diary.

WHAT VALUE HAS THESE SOURCES?

They are genuine historical documents, written at the time of the events record. I kept them back as Secret when I gave the University of Singapore a pile of other Labour Front files in 1960. From then on, they remained at the back of a locked steel filing cabinet, almost forgotten until unwelcome but unavoidable idleness in 1977 made me look at them again.

“The study of history is the study of causes. The historian...continuously asks the question Why?” (*What is History* by Professor E H Carr).

The documents I am making public reveal points of view, discussions and decisions which until now were more or less hidden, although intelligent guesswork or unofficial leaks gave journalists and others some idea of what was going on. They put some meaning into Lee Kuan Yew's words 'corruption and stupidities'. They tell you 'why', at least in part...

BREACH OF CONFIDENCE

Part of politics must always be carried on out of the sight of the public. It is a very great fault in a politician to reveal prematurely what has been said in confidence. In fact, I finally withdrew my support from Lim Yew Hock in 1959 not because he sacked me from my Ministry, but because he claimed to be making public things said or done in confidence.

But confidence is not eternal. Richard Crossman published diaries of his time in the British government, and it was generally agreed, I think, that he had done no wrong. The Radcliffe committee, appointed to consider how long things need to be kept confidential, fixed 15 years for the opinions and attitudes of one's colleagues. I have kept this material back for twenty years, and that is long enough.

Moreover, many of those who appear in my pages are still alive, though not as far as I know any longer politically active. By publishing now, I give them the chance to answer what I say, to correct me or to make known additional material.

A WORD OF WARNING

The search for historical truth is slow and uncertain. The 'facts' of today may look quite different when seen in the light some new information provides. You will be most unwise if you take what I recount here as the final and complete truth. It is as true as I can make it, but I can set down only what was known to me. A great deal was not known to me. I may guess about it, but it remains uncertain as far as this book is concerned.

THE MANY CENTRES OF 1958/9

The most important centre of decision making was certainly Lee Kuan Yew's moderate PAP leadership. They had the landslide victory and they have carried us through the years to what we have today. I had no part there.

Another important centre was the top Communist detainees at Changi jail camp, where Lee Kuan Yew was a regular visitor and – as he has told us in *The Battle for Merger* – vital decisions were made. I had no part there either. Devan Nair was my old friend and I used to visit him, but it was quite unpolitical.

Then there was the Malayan Communist Party, the Plen, and all that, faced with the failure of armed revolt in Malaya and trying to see what could be done by a Right, almost revisionary, approach.

There was the Tengku and Kuala Lumpur UMNO (United Malay National Organisation), who ultimately displaced Hamid Jumat as leader of UMNO Singapore. I knew nothing directly about their discussions, nor about discussions under Jumat in UMNO Singapore.

There was Lim Yew Hock's meetings with elements of Liberal Socialist leadership, with presumably millionaires, with secret society and gangster elements and who knows whom else, the Plen or his equivalent during his 'Communist' period.

There was the small, compact group of senior British officials who had the tough task of getting Singapore launched as a democratic state and somehow holding a balance between Whitehall policy and the realities of life here. My being British may have given me a little more understanding of how their minds worked, but they told me no secrets.

There was the Chinese Chamber of Commerce... and most of all, there were the newly enfranchised masses, the electorate many of whom would go to the polls for the first time in 1959. Lenin said: 'Politics begin where the masses are; not where

there are thousands but where there are millions, that is where serious politics begins.' Work in Hylam Sua and the rest of my constituency had taught me how complex and rich in potential this new electorate was; but I think only the PAP and the Communists had the beginnings of an idea how to reach these masses and win their votes.

ELEMENTS OF THE 1958/9 POLITICS

THE ENGLISH

The English were intelligent and serious about government. They had proud traditions of politics running back through the centuries. They had done a remarkable job in opening up and developing dead-end places like Malaya and Singapore. They had impressive quality among their senior officials and also in their business community. They wanted to make a good job of the final stage of colonialism, the handing over of power to local democratic leadership.

But they had serious limitations. They lived too much as a separate, privileged 'upper class', not open to share the life of the people. Very few spoke Chinese adequately. Public opinion could not reach them directly. It was filtered to them through their various agencies. They were not ultimately committed to Singapore, but looked forward to retirement when their time here was up and they could go 'home'.

Britain was closing down its Empire. To officials this meant some loss of career prospects. To businessmen, it meant anxiety about how a new political situation might affect profits and the routine of their work.

It was obvious in 1955 as it is today that an independent Singapore must be a very small fish in a pond with many much bigger. We had, and have, little margin to make mistakes in. Relatively rich, we are a temptation to robbers. Strategically

placed, we are a potentially useful unit in any new power system that replaces the dead European Empires.

Things like these seemed to me far more important than the exact date or form of independence. We had to maintain and expand trade and attract capital to develop factories and employment. We needed our own, reliable, defence forces. We needed nationality in place of our deep divisions of race and class and education.

Public agitation for early independence seemed to me in those days liable to be counter-productive. It might be politically necessary, but the Communists could out-play us at that game if they wanted to.

We lost the initiative to the Communists early in 1955 with student agitation, labour unrest and the Hock Lee Bus riots. Without the English officials and the solidity of the old colonial system we should have been in great difficulty. As it was David Marshall had room for manoeuvre and did so skilfully. He has been much criticised, but given the situations he had to deal with, I doubt anyone could have done better.

Thereafter, it seemed necessary to keep the Merdeka agitation going in one form or another and to give proof of sincerity with policies like Malayanisation. At the time my Diary starts all that was water under the bridge, but it is right to say that until the 1959 landslide, the English were a factor of stability in often dangerously unstable situations. This should be remembered when the English come into some episodes of the Diary.

THE MALAYS

A few notes on the Malays in Singapore in the 1950s are worth setting down. Although they were a small minority of voters, they had to be taken into account because the constituencies

were drawn to give the Malays three sure seats – Southern Islands, Geylang Serai and Kampong Kembangan.

They were also politically important because their UMNO was part of the Malayan UMNO. With most leaders convinced that Singapore ought to merge with Malaya, Singapore UMNO had special value as a link with Kuala Lumpur.

Singapore Malays were generally workers, not employers or professionals. Dr Goh Keng Swee's 1953-4 *Social Survey* found:

'Malays and Indonesians have the least percentage of people living in the higher income brackets. Only 6 per cent of the Malay urban population is found in the wealthier households excluded from our Survey, as compared with 17 per cent, the general average.

The weak economic position of the Malay community is, of course, a well known fact. They hardly participate in the commercial life of the city as businessmen, and those who are well-off are mainly professional workers of one kind or another. As will be shown in a later chapter, however, it cannot be inferred from the above figures that the whole Malay community stands, as has sometimes been suggested, on the verge of ruin. Within occupations and income groups covered by the Survey, the local born Malay is shown to have held his own against the other communities. (p.19/20)... the Malay community shows slightly better than average figures. Their average household income is, in fact, larger than that of the immigrant Chinese, who are supposed to be the most successful and enterprising section of Malaya's population. The figures given in Table 5.1 further show that the average income per worker of the local born Malay is slightly above the average, and larger than that of the immigrant Chinese.'

The Malays of Singapore were thus potentially voters for the moderate Left. But looking to royalty in Kuala Lumpur for national leadership, and being Muslim in religion, they were to some extent open to conservative influences.

In the 1950s, the police included a high proportion of Malays, perhaps recruited from a village background in Malaya. This meant that they might not like to act vigorously against lawbreakers of their own race and religion, and if they acted vigorously against Chinese lawbreakers, there might be racial bitterness.

THE CHINESE

Politically, to talk of 'the Chinese' in Singapore is an oversimplification. In his 1953-4 Social Survey Dr Goh Keng Swee found it necessary to use six categories for the Chinese: Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainanese and other Chinese. There were and are wide differences between them in attitudes and outlook, and in economic success.

The Chinese in the 1950s were still very far from the social alienation and isolation reported from many urban areas of the modern world. They maintained among themselves a rich variety of voluntary associations covering every kind of interest and activity with mutual benefit especially important.

Politically, this means that, if they wanted, they could produce a grassroots leadership which would determine how the voting went in an election.

In the 1940s and 1950s the Singapore Chinese were divided into English-educated, to whom excellent careers might be open, and Chinese-educated or uneducated, often of high ability, who felt themselves shut out and their career aspirations frustrated. Parents wanted their children to have better education, but they

were naturally not very good judges of what, for their purposes, would constitute good education.

There was a powerful propaganda in favour of education in Chinese for Chinese, especially from Chinese teachers who could not teach anything else. Chinese parents have taken a generation to grasp fully that for practical – that is, Chinese – purposes, a good education must include enough English to do business with Australia or USA, and for many, the technological skills of the modern world.

Neglect of the Chinese schools by the colonial authorities over many years had allowed them to develop strong anti-colonial attitudes, originally Kuomintang led, later used by the Communists.

Politically, this meant that a candidate who had won the support of the Chinese students could rely on them to do a great deal of very active and vigorous canvassing for him and to help in other ways to form public opinion favourable to him.

In 1958, as we began to prepare for the 1959 General Elections, a major question was which to rely on and use: the grass-roots leadership of the men who led the voluntary associations or the radical, Communist-inspired students?

Or – magical possibility, could one have both?

Lee Kuan Yew has told us in *The Battle for Merger* something about how he disarmed the Communists. We can look more closely at that under the next heading.

The 1959 PAP landslide means that Lim Yew Hock had lost both the grassroots leaders and the radical students.

GANGS & SECRET SOCIETIES

Voluntary associations, trade unions for example, may at times need strong-arm men who will enforce the authority of the leadership, put a bit of drive behind the collection of funds, or in

other ways help to keep the machine running.

Whilst there are a fair number of loners among criminals anywhere there are always some who like to feel they belong to a definite gang, to which they may give real loyalty because it saves them from social isolation.

The Chinese of Singapore had also their secret societies from their earliest days, originally with a strong mutual benefit side, but also with more or less criminal methods of raising funds and controlling members.

The Labour Front, with its very casual and amateur approach to the realities of politics, always had some gang and secret society members. By 1958, these were fairly strong in some areas, branches apparently being created for them by Chew Swee Kee.

These notes are offered rough and unpolished because I do not want to claim to write as an expert. I had very little information about the gangster elements in the Labour Front, and did not try to enlarge it. It was enough to keep my own Branch honest.

THE COMMUNISTS

I have used the word Communists loosely throughout this book, because that is the most convenient thing to do. It means the whole radical, anti-colonial, Communist-inspired revolutionary movement as it affected our politics. Now for a little while I will be more precise, before going on with the Lim Yew Hock story.

Real Communists are few. You do not get to be a Communist by singing 'O how beautiful' and sitting in the shade. I do not know how many full Communists we had in Singapore in 1958 but I am sure it was a tiny number compared with the masses they manipulated.

On the way to become a Communist, you would be an Anti-British League cadre in 1958. I don't know what the same level

of training would be called today, but entry to the ABL or its equivalent would not be quick or easy.

Behind the ABL, there would be a body of organised supporters, who might be in a student union, or a trade union committee, or an Old Students Association, or even a harmonica society. Others might work in an informal group, like some of the characters shown on Television Singapore in early 1977. Or someone might be a 'sleeper' completely concealing his Party interests and building himself into a position where he could move effectively to help the Party when the revolutionary moment arose.

Finally, there would be as many miscellaneous contacts and supporters as possible, a union with 10,000 or 20,000 members; the students of a school with an enrolment of 2,500 boys. Wherever the state system concentrated people conveniently, the Party would see its opportunity to interpose its hidden leaders between the masses and the authorities.

CLASS STRUGGLE & THE PARTY

Marx taught that the wage-earner will, as his class consciousness is raised, take over economic power from the capitalist. But he did not show that the worker was qualified for, or even interested in, his task. Lenin made Communism viable politically by shifting the emphasis from class to Party, which has among its tasks the raising of class consciousness among the workers.

Thus the (1961) Rules of the Russian Communists started by saying: 'The Communist Party of the Soviet Union is the tried and tested militant vanguard of the Soviet people... Founded by VI Lenin as the vanguard of the working class, the Communist Party...directs the great creative activity of the Soviet people, and imparts an organised, planned, and scientifically-based character to their struggle...'

Similarly, Mao Tse-tung's Quotations (1967) starts: 'The force at the core leading our cause forward is the Chinese Communist Party (1954)... Without a revolutionary party,... it is impossible to lead the working class and the broad masses of the people... (1948). Without the efforts of the Chinese Communist Party,... China can never achieve independence and liberation, or industrialisation and the modernisation of her agriculture...' (1945)

In short – Communists tend not to be short, I have cut a lot of flah-flah out – Lenin created Career Communism. The Party is in effect the owner and manager of the national assets. The faithful and successful party member can rise to high posts as men do in capitalist AT&T or IBM. One can understand the attraction of the anti-colonial struggle for young men in the Chinese stream of education in the days of Lim Yew Hock. It offered them the romance of rebellion to be followed by managerial authority. After Maoist success in China, it was quite possible to believe that the Communist Party understood the secrets of the politics of success.

REVISIONISM V DOGMATISM AND ADVENTURISM

Each Communist party has to decide how far to go in relations with the non-Communists around it. Should it be quietly friendly, lulling their suspicions? Should it go further and actively co-operate on an agreed programme. If it decides to operate through compromise, conciliation and negotiation, it is said to have applied the Right strategy.

It will then quite soon become the target for attacks that it has gone in for revisionism. The hawks of Communism will not easily be satisfied with dove policies.

The alternative is a Left strategy of violence or the threat of violence. Realists will not want to threaten or use violence unless they see it ending clearly in victory. That is what Mao means in the quotation placed at the head of this chapter.

An excessive Left strategy is very wasteful of limited Communist resources, and it will be condemned as dogmatism, which is acting on theory without looking carefully at the facts of the case. Adventurism describes the practical aspect of dogmatism.

In 1957 Mao Tse-tung condemned both dogmatism and revisionism because they run counter to Marxism. It is dogmatism to regard Marxism as something rigid, he said: it must develop along with development of practice. But at that time, in China, he found revisionism the greater danger, advocating in fact not the socialist line but the capitalist line.

THE PLEN & LEE KUAN YEW

The Malayan Communist Party had tried a vigorous Left strategy of violence in what was called the Emergency in Malaya. By 1958 this was an obvious error of dogmatism and adventurism, and in March 1958 Lee Kuan Yew met the senior Communist leader they called The Plen, who wanted to switch to a Right strategy of co-operation in the united anti-colonial front with the PAP.

Mr Lee was in the happy position that the Plen needed him more than he needed the Plen. He did not have to commit himself to anything, and in the elections of 1959 he got a nominal Party Rakyat Communist attack in four constituencies, so feebly pushed that the Communist men came at or near the bottom of the poll in all four contests. Elsewhere, the MCP was neutral or at best supported the PAP.

This has taken us some distance into the politics of victory, and I leave it there. I hope that the frequent references to communism in the Diary will be better understood by the ordinary reader who knows what dogmatism and revisionism are and how the Communist Party exercised its influence.

'Ideological education is the key link to be grasped in uniting the whole Party for great political struggles. Unless this is done, the Party cannot accomplish any of its political tasks.'

– Mao Tse-tung on Coalition Government, 1945

CHAPTER TWO

THE LABOUR FRONT AS A PARTY: HQ AND BRANCHES

FORMING BRANCHES

Ideological education was something the Labour front never got down to seriously. It was content on the whole to leave people's ideologies alone except in public statements in general terms. Our humbler aim was to get some Branches running through which our name could reach the masses, and where Assembly members could hold Meet The People sessions.

I see in my 1955 Office Diary engagements like these:

Wed, 7th Sept: 5.30pm Open LF

Mon, 12th: 4.00 pm to Ponggol – Labour Front

Sat, 17th : 5.00 pm Opening Labour Front 249 Thomson Road

Sun, 18th : Nee Soon & Havelock

Thurs, 29th : 5.00pm: Open LF at Eye Hospital

Mon, 3rd Oct: Labour Front Branch Committee re: Conference

Sun, 9th Opening Labour Front Geylang Branch; and so on.

BIOGRAPHY OF FRANCIS THOMAS

He came to Singapore in 1934 as a stranger, a young expatriate, a member of the white elite of the Colony. Englishman Francis Thomas found in Singapore a new identity as a citizen, an educator, a politician, and a community leader. As a politician, he helped to shape Singapore's early political development. As an educator and social worker, he helped to shape the lives of many young Singaporeans. In all these spheres, he was respected as a man of sincerity and integrity.

Graduating from Cambridge in 1934, Thomas came to Singapore to teach at St. Andrews School. During World War II he served in the bomb disposal unit. As a prisoner of war, he was put to work first on the Siam-Burma Railway and then in a factory in Japan. He returned to St Andrews in 1947 as Housemaster at the boarding house, where he met Catherine Lee Eng Neo, who was the Matron. In 1948 they married.

That year, he also attended the inaugural meeting of the Singapore Labour Party and, to his surprise, was asked to join its leadership. The Singapore Labour Party merged with the

Singapore Socialist Party in 1953 to become the Labour Front, and in 1955 it won enough seats in the general election to form the government. Thomas was not a candidate in the elections, but was persuaded to accept nomination as Minister for Communications and Works.

In 1959, increasingly unhappy with Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock's stance, Thomas resigned from the Cabinet but stayed on as a Labour Front backbencher. Lee Kuan Yew was then in the opposition, and when he pressed Lim to investigate alleged corrupt practices in government, Thomas crossed the floor to sit with the opposition. He then returned to his teaching career at St Andrews, where he was Principal of the secondary school from 1963 to 1974.

Apart from his work as an educator and politician, Thomas was active in community and charity work and sat on many committees in the non-profit sector. His heart was for the underdog, the forgotten and the misunderstood. He was frustrated by faceless bureaucracy and alert to the dangers of an over-emphasis on meritocracy. In his book he writes: 'We must not close our minds and hearts to the needs of those who do not neatly fit the schemes of our changing society. The schemes change rapidly; what we reject today may be the keystone of the next thing we have to build.'

Thomas was appointed a permanent member of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights in 1970, and received the Public Service Star in 1971. He retired from teaching at the end of 1975. Shortly after that he was diagnosed with cancer, and died in October 1977 at the age of 65.

FT'S POLITICAL HISTORY

(as he detailed it in a brief biography he prepared when he was a Minister)

- Worked as a registration officer 1947-48 enrolling voters for the first Singapore elections
- Member of the Executive Committee, Singapore Teachers' Union 1948
- Founder member Labour Party of Singapore 1948
- President Labour Party Singapore 1949 and thereafter continuous service on the LPS Executive Committee
- 1953-4 : Assisted in the formation of Singapore Socialist Party following a split in the LPS
- 1954 : Chairman Singapore Socialist Party and later member of the three-man Executive Committee of the Labour Front formed by a reunion of the Socialist Party and Labour Party and new political elements.
- 1955 : Assisted in the organisation of the Labour Front election campaign in which the Labour Front secured 10 seats out of 25 in the new Legislative Assembly and as the largest single party formed the Government in coalition with the UMNO/MCA/Malay Union Alliance
- April 1955 : Nominated to the Legislative Assembly and appointed Minister for Communications and Works
- October 1955 : Elected First Vice-President of the Labour Front by the Labour Front Annual Conference
- 1957: Re-elected 1st VP

THE AMATEUR POLITICIAN AND RELUCTANT MINISTER

BY MARGARET THOMAS

In 1978, a year after Francis Thomas died, Sir William Goode, who was Governor of Singapore from 1957 to 1959, was asked for his thoughts about Francis. He said:

“I shall always remember Francis Thomas with affection and admiration: affection for his unassuming friendship and admiration for his sincerity and integrity. I remember him as a prisoner of war in Thailand. He survived that and being torpedoed on the way to Japan. After the war he returned to Singapore and to St. Andrew's and devoted the rest of his life to the service of Singapore.

“He became deeply and irrevocably attached to Singapore and in consequence anxious to serve Singapore in any way he could, without thought of self-advancement. He identified himself with the ordinary people. He sought to understand their