British attitude towards Malayan self-government and independence in the post-war period was always ambiguous. This was despite Britain’s public commitment to self-determination for the colonies under the Atlantic Charter signed by Churchill during the war in 1941. There was hardly much difference between the Conservative Party and Labour Party governments’ policies in this regard. The Labour Party despite a strong veneer of anti-colonial leanings among its members “sacrificed its socialist principles for metropolitan self-interest between 1945 and 1951.”¹ The Conservative Party which came to power in 1951 also remained vague and uncommitted until the London conference of 1956 where it made a last-ditch attempt to restrict the terms of reference of the constitutional commission to the more modest goal of “full self-government.” Economics, the importance of Malaya as a dollar earner for the sterling area, played an important part in the policies of the British government in the immediate post-war period.² But other political and strategic considerations also featured prominently in British policy-making.

In the main, there was a belief among the colonial administrators that Malaya would not be ready for independence for quite some time after the end of the war. One senior colonial administrator, Malcolm MacDonald, the British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, said in 1950 that Malaya would not be ready for independence for 25 years. He, however, quickly revised this to 15 years following the exchange in the position held by the leading Malay politician of the time, Dato Onn Jaafar. Various reasons were cited at different periods...
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