



CONFIDENTIAL

“I HASTEN TO BEG YOUR INDULGENCE...”

When Declassifying Can Also Mean Decoding

When the National Archives embarked on the declassification initiative to unlock documents previously labelled as “secret” and “confidential” for public access, it also had to decipher what was actually written says **K.U. Menon**.

“Those who control the present,
control the past and those who
control the past control the future.”

– George Orwell

George Orwell’s famous line from his dystopic novel *1984* is a sobering reminder of how important it is to be aware of the origins and sources of information we receive.

It is also a warning about the mutability of information. Through much of

history, warring nations have plundered or destroyed the archives of other nations in their bid to expunge the identity of the vanquished. In World War II Europe, the Nazis looted not only art and historical treasures from the countries they invaded but also their precious manuscripts.

Singapore Policy History Project

These were some of the underlying concerns that led to the establishment of the Singapore Policy History Project (SPHP). Initiated by the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) just prior to Singapore’s 50th anniversary of independence in 2015, the SPHP

proposed a framework for the systematic declassification of public records under the care of the National Archives of Singapore (NAS).

The intention is to gradually release information that will enhance Singaporeans’ understanding of the rationale behind certain government policies and how they have evolved. It is also about setting the record straight: declassifying previously inaccessible public records – including those categorised as “secret” or “confidential” – will provide people with factual information on the political and historical development of Singapore.

In short, the declassification initiative will open up aspects of our history that were previously locked up and placed beyond the reach of the ordinary man in the street.

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Many key decisions made in government today, for example, in relations with other countries and dealings with multilateral agencies, are based on assessments of personalities and precedents that go back many decades. For instance, in 2014, many Singaporeans did not grasp the gravity of the situation when Indonesia named two warships after the men who bombed MacDonald House in March 1965 until the historical context was made clear from archival records for all to see. In March 2015, there was a sense that many younger Singaporeans who stood in long queues to pay their respects to the late former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew were probably unaware of the extent of his contributions to the nation.

Citizens, researchers and academics, especially historians, have long been lobbying for greater access to our public records. Archival research is primary research based on substantive evidence from original archival records. It is a methodology used by researchers to collect data directly from the sources, rather than depending on data gleaned from previously published research.

Recognising the rights of citizens to access their own history, a National Museum exhibition in 2015 featured the very important declassified secret document known as the “Albatross File”. Belonging to one of Singapore’s founding fathers Dr Goh Keng Swee, the secret file offered insights into the negotiations leading up to separation from Malaysia in 1965. It was a defining moment in our history, and the exhibition included, among other things, handwritten notes of meetings with Malaysian leaders.

In an interview in 1980, Dr Goh admitted that the Albatross referred to Malaysia. He said: “By that time, the great expectation that we foolishly had – that Malaysia would bring prosperity, common market, peace, harmony, all that – we were quickly disillusioned. And it became an albatross round our necks”. This is the first time in history that the existence of the file was revealed to the public.

The MCI began the pilot phase of declassifying files under its purview in late 2013 with a team of researchers, including retired senior public officers, in the first-ever systematic declassification project undertaken in Singapore.

Interestingly, one of the things that struck the team while trawling through old documents from the late colonial and



Malaysian Finance Minister Tun Tan Siew Sin (fourth from left) visiting Jurong Industrial Estate with his Singapore counterpart, Dr Goh Keng Swee (fifth from left), in 1964. Goh’s vision of Singapore and Malaysia having a common market was blocked by Tan. The two men clashed on this and over several key economic issues, convincing Goh that the only way Singapore could survive was to break away completely from Malaysia. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

postcolonial period of our history was how the use of language in the civil service has evolved over the years. They were struck by the archaic and formal language, often liberally peppered with humour or sarcasm – and sometimes a blend of the two – employed by civil servants.

Language as a Weapon

For Britain, close to two centuries of colonial rule did not rest entirely on the might of its military forces. Britain also wielded power through other means, and language was a powerful weapon. Extending the use of the English language to the seemingly underdeveloped and backward colonies of Asia was seen as a way of bringing order, political unity and discipline to its colonies.

The British viewed its rule as a form of “autocratic nationalism”, and mandating English as the official language enabled it to monopolise public discourse and to impose arbitrary definitions on terms that framed British policy.¹ As one scholar aptly observed, “colonial structures depended on native scaffolding”.²

One offshoot of that native scaffolding was Babu (or Baboo) English – a particularly florid, sometimes pompous and unidiomatic version of English incorporating extreme formality and politeness that was widely employed by

administrators, clerks and lawyers in India. “Babu” or “Baboo” came to be a term of derision used by the British to refer to impertinent “natives” who had the temerity to imitate traits which perhaps only God and ethnology had assigned exclusively to the English gentleman.

GRAND OPENINGS

Much of the formal correspondence between civil servants and the public during the late colonial and immediate postcolonial period in Singaporean history invariably begins as follows:

“I am directed to inform you that...”

“I am directed to acknowledge receipt of your letter of...”

“I have pleasure in sending you herewith...”

“Honoured and much respected Sir, with due respect and humble submission, I beg to bring to your kind notice”

“With regards to... I am directed to state that...”

“I beg of you to dispatch to me at your earliest convenience...”

“I hasten to beg your indulgence...”

Postwar Singapore

Here are two samples of correspondence that illustrate the delightful use of Babu English in colonial Singapore.

1 A letter addressed to the Government Printer (a British official responsible for the Government Printing Office) during the reign of King George VI, from the President of a Singapore trade union organisation. This mis-sive was sent just before Christmas.

2 A letter from the President of the Singapore Government Printing Office Employees Union to the Colonial Secretary complaining about the infringement of the rights of non-pensionable employees.

December 1950

The Government Printer

“The consecrated reverence associated with ever succeeding nativity anniversaries of the LORD is again about to be revived on the 25th instant for the one thousand nine hundred and fiftieth occasion, and in view of this auspicious day, I, on behalf of the Union offer you and through you to the other senior officers our heartiest wishes . . .

I also pray that HIS most gracious and Divine Majesty who has been infinitely merciful to us all the years of our life, would be pleased to accept our most unfeigned thanks for HIS innumerable blessings to all of us, graciously pardoning the manifold sins and Infirmities of our life past and bountifully bestowing upon all of us all those graces and virtues which may render us acceptable to HIM,

We also pray that HIS holy image may be again renewed within everyone of us, and by contemplating HIS glorious perfections, we may all feel daily improved within us that Divine similitude the perfection whereof we all hope will at last make us forever happy in that full and beatific vision we all aspire after.

In conclusion it is their fervent prayer that the Omnipotent Providence would grant your Excellency that strength and fortitude, wherewith to carry out the manifold responsibilities of your Excellency’s high office.

I am, Sir,

Your Excellency’s most obedient and humble servant

Dec 1952

*The Honourable
The Colonial Secretary
Singapore
Sir,*

I am directed to acknowledge receipt of your letter jPC. C4S2/50/19 of the 12th instant, clarifying the issue pertinent to the justification of the above salaries structure by hypothetical deduction, and to observe that the assumption created by the above exposition is one of invidious distinction between the non-pensionable and pensionable offices.

As this issue was raised specifically to improve the lot of those who, at the moment of their promotion were in the non-pensionable status, the subsequent declaration set out in your letter under review, to the effect that there is overlapping, but, that itself, is not contributory to any loss, is therefore untenable.

The committee is also greatly perturbed over the policy which imposed a res’iliarity of promotion based on a definitely retrograde step, and in the circumstances it urges the government to consider the indemnifying of those who, before their emplacement into the pensionable establishment were promoted to the post of assistant Composing Room Foreman.

The committee is further of the opinion that under whatever form of policy this administration may have been guided in the past, with regard to its civil service, it nevertheless has left behind that heritage of a permanent and disparaging mark of its indubitable character upon the successive fortunes of the holders of this office, which it is our sincere hope that those concerned would be adequately recompensed, even at this distance of time.

I am further enjoined to submit that, even as all obnoxious and iniquitous laws of every civilised countries are repealed and substituted from time to time by a more judicious and equitable form of statutes to meet varying circumstances of justifiable cases, it would therefore seem obvious in similar circumstances to introduce regulations befitting this particular case, which assuredly calls for an immediate substitution of the existing regulations.

I am, Sir

Your obedient servant

Pre-independent Singapore

The team found many letters written in elegant English, as seen in these two examples here, while researching the files of the final years leading to independence.

1961

"At a state function where a Minister is the host, no special precedence is accorded to the Parliamentary, Political and Permanent Secretaries of his Ministry. I would even say that it is not quite correct to imply that the Minister himself takes precedence over all guests on such an occasion. He takes a seat which would enable him to discharge his duty as the host to attend on the guest of honour; it should not be taken to mean that the Minister is arrogating to himself precedence over all the guests, some of whom may rank above him in the Table of Precedence.

You realize, no doubt, that there can be no departure from strict protocol at a state function without the express approval of his Excellency The Yang di-Pertuan Negara. There may, of course, be occasions when certain individuals voluntarily waive their rightful precedence. I would suggest, for instance, that when your Minister is the host, his Parliamentary, Political and Permanent Secretaries may consider it a gracious gesture to seat themselves immediately below all other Parliamentary, Political and Permanent Secretaries respectively. Your suggestion that they should be given precedence over all the other guests is, if I may say so, not only wrong but churlish."

Here is a well-crafted reply from the Secretary to Prime Minister to the Permanent Secretary (Culture) on the correct protocol with regard to the seating of senior civil servants at state functions.

3

- 4 A terse letter from the Director of Information Services (Culture) to the Permanent Secretary (Home Affairs) on why a printing permit should not be granted to a certain individual.

June 1959

D. I. S. (for PS Culture) to PS (Home affairs)

Reference your minute CSO.267/53 of 15.6.59. On the ground that every man is free to make a fool of himself this permit could be granted. The editor is of no standing and appears to use the paper to indulge his political whims and personal feuds. It exhibits the kind of irresponsibility that might lead it to become an instrument of others who are less innocent in their political activities.

2. *I would have thought that the breach of the previous permit in transferring the printing press from Singapore to India was serious enough to justify a refusal of any further permit. Moreover the content seems to indicate that the editor is more concerned with the affairs of Southern India and those whom he considers Southern Indian expatriates than with any essential Singapore purpose.*

The documents submitted with your minute are returned herewith.

Independent Singapore

- 5 A spirited riposte from a senior staffer of a local publication to the Parliamentary Secretary (Culture). The context of this episode is perhaps better understood from subsequent developments. The publication's top three executives were detained under the Internal Security Act in 1971 and the publication ceased operations two years later. The government statement made clear that the publication "... has made a sustained effort to instil admiration for the communist system as free from blemishes and endorsing its policies..."³

- 6 And finally, this crisp, pointed note from the Assistant Director of the Ministry of Culture to the editor of a Chinese newspaper. Never mind the flawed grammar. Its genius lies in its brevity.

December 1979

Dear Sir

It is noted that your paper has been publishing news sensationalizing robbery, rape, sex and murder etc. Such news are unhealthy. If you persist in reporting news of this nature, we will seriously consider revoking your permit.

Yours faithfully

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The Death of Writing

To be sure, the abundance of jargon and obfuscation that can accompany the use of English in the civil service is nothing new. It is something that was first raised by Singapore's first-generation leaders, Mr Lee Kuan Yew and Dr Goh Keng Swee in particular, in the early 1980s.

But is the problem worse today, given the pervasiveness of the internet, social media and mobile phone messaging? How has technology impacted the way we use the English language? In a world where instantaneous responses have become the

Sept 1970

Parliamentary Secretary

"My personal representative has given me an account of the meeting held in your office The account given, and I have no reason to doubt its veracity is most distressing . . .

Instead of putting across your objections in a reasoned manner, it would appear that yours was mainly a diatribe and tirade against this newspaper. Specifically, you objected to our having published part of the text in its original English version. I cannot fathom your rationale here. To accuse us of a lack of character in so doing is uncalled for and indefensible, not to mention that your charge is, in fact, a non sequitur.

So long as the contents do not contravene the laws of this country, it is not for us to dictate to our clients in what manner and in what language their paid advertisements should take. You must have followed Chinese papers enough to know that using English in parts is not unknown, but this is merely an incidental point.

It is ironic that at other times we are accused by Authority of being chauvinistic in our language emphasis. I rather suspect therefore the cause of your displeasure lies elsewhere. Could it be that we did not seek prior permission from your office to accept such advertisements, as was intimated?

We cannot accept authoritarianism in which all thinking and decision making must be done on our behalf. Are we to turn ourselves into mindless regimented rigid digits? Can any authority lay claim to absolute fallibility? Indeed, can any bureaucratic authority have the time, the energy, the wisdom to rule on myriad questions if they are all to be brought before its august presence?

. . . With due respect Sir, I have often wondered why those in authority could not simply develop and exercise a little empathy for those whose goodwill is, though not essential, helpful in the aggregate. Is it not easier all round to go about things in a pleasant rather than nasty way?

Co-operation you can have, willing or begrudging, depending upon the tone you set for the conduct of our relationship. You could resort to dictation, of course, as we are often reminded, but then wouldn't it mean too hefty a weapon for the target in view; too high a price to pay in terms of democratic ideals for the gain in mind?

Yours Faithfully

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norm, proper conversations and carefully thought out and crafted communications seem to have taken a back seat.

Sadly, one of the causes of the loss of clarity in writing today must surely be the demise of letter writing. As email replaces snail mail, the price of speed is the slide of composition into truncated note. In this age of ephemerality, words appear to be designed to be short-lived. And so it is – given the short screen life of electronic mail, one might well ask, where are the gems of elegant writing to be found today? ♦

NOTES

- 1 Ferguson, N. (2003). *Empire: How Britain made the modern world*. London: Allen Lane. (Call no.: RCLOS 909.0971241 FER-[USB])
- 2 Al-Jubouri, F.A.J. (2014). *Milestones on the road to dystopia: Interpreting George Orwell's self-division in an era of 'Force & Fraud'*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. (Not available in NLB holdings)
- 3 Three newsmen held. (1971, May 3). *The Straits Times*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.



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