

The Perak State Council

In the Malay States, the notion of an official body to “advise” British “advisers” first appeared in 1875 when Governor William Jervois proposed that Perak should be governed directly by the British, albeit “in the name of” the Sultan. But after the first British Resident, James Birch, was assassinated later that year, the new Sultan himself was a British appointee – and so, the role of the proposed “advisory” body had to be scaled up accordingly: to legitimize the British conquest, and to placate the Malay chiefs Birch had angered, said chiefs had to be given a little more visibility than Jervois had intended.

Birch was killed in late 1875. In the ensuing mayhem, two years elapsed before an actual advisory body was formed: the Perak State Council was announced in mid-1877 and met for the first time in September. All its members were chosen by Hugh Low, the Resident. Among them were: Raja Muda Yusuf, the British-designated Regent (or Administrator); William Maxwell, the Assistant Resident; Raja Dris, nominally of Kampar, who would later become Sultan Idris; the Tengku Temenggong, a man who could neither read nor write but who, by sheer ability, had risen to the rank of senior Malay chief; Che Karim, an immigrant Sumatran businessman who held a valuable government concession in Selama; Tan Ah Yam, leader of the Ghee Hin gangs in Larut; and Chung Keng Kwee, chief of the Hai San gangs and father of Chung Thye Phin.

While Low insisted on including the locals, some in the Colonial Office in London had mixed feelings about the presence of the two formidable Chinese gangsters: “[It] is utterly at variance with the old Perak Constitution & traditions, & ... might be likely to give offence to Some of the Malay Chiefs, if we have not successfully rid ourselves of all the troublesome ones; but I suppose we are admittedly

1 Before British Residents in the Malay States were installed and officially referred to as British Residents, they were sometimes provisionally called “Queen’s Commissioners” or “British Commissioners.”

2 As Hugh Low intimated to Governor William Robinson, he understood that he was to be seen as an advisor to the Perak government, but he also understood that his first task was to *create* said government.

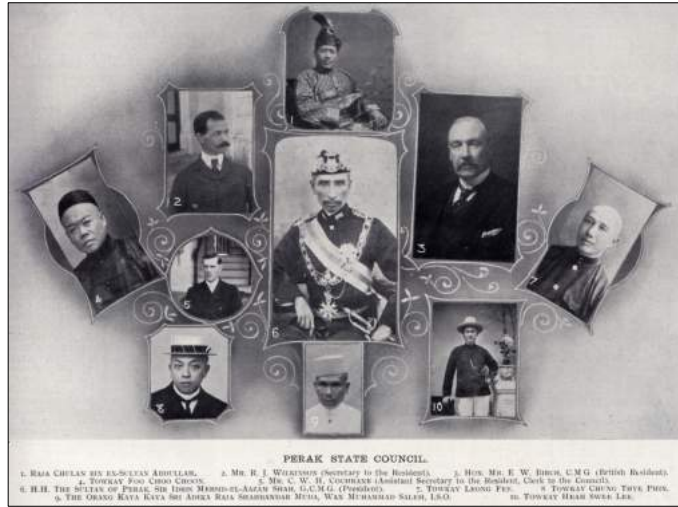
3 In his book *British Malaya* (1906), Frank Swettenham referred to the early Perak State Council as “a great safety-valve,” a mechanism that allowed the Resident to side-step the continuing disputes among rival Malay chiefs. Swettenham also suggested that the Perak State Council was created before the one in Selangor, but in this he was mistaken: Selangor’s was the first such body, created with seven members in early 1877.

4 The credit for the creation and early successes of the Perak State Council is often – and correctly – given to Hugh Low, the third British Resident, who was markedly more capable than his contemporaries in Selangor.

5 Even in its critical early days the Perak State Council met no more than ten times a year. It was not a sitting legislature but it did perform legislative and other functions. At one meeting in 1881, for example, the Resident suggested that the new town being constructed in Lower Perak be named Teluk Anson – and the Council approved. But as for how much real leeway the state councils had: it was very little, indeed. Most important decisions, especially financial ones, were made by the Residents and the Governor in Singapore; the state councils provided their approval as a matter of ritual.

6 Traditionally the Sultan appointed local *Datohs* and *Penghulus* to help govern the realm. After the Birch saga and the ensuing war, it was the State Council that made these appointments but, as late as 1883, Low found the system still inadequate. More British administrators were sent out.

7 The montage, created for Wright & Cartwright's *Twentieth-Century Impressions of British Malaya*, shows ten members of the Perak State Council in 1907. A few biographical sketches are provided below. Among members absent from the image are Laxamana Hussein of Ipoh and Teluk Anson; Abdul Shukor of Kuala Kangsar; and Raja Ngah Abu Bakar of Lenggong.



8 Richard Wilkinson, having already served in India for a few years, entered the Malayan civil service in 1889. In 1907, as Secretary to the Resident, Perak, he was the *de facto* Assistant British Resident. Soon he was promoted to be British Resident in Negeri Sembilan; and Colonial Secretary in Singapore. Ultimately he served as Governor of Sierra Leone, from which position he retired from the civil service during the First War. He died in Turkey during the Second War. A prominent scholar, Richard is often credited with founding the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar. Although there is a Wilkinson Road in Ipoh, it was not named after him.

9 Raja Chulan was a son of Sultan Abdullah. As a baby, he was (literally) dandled on the knee of James Birch. After Birch's assassination, Abdullah was exiled – and in 1909 London went so far as to quietly remove his sons from the line of the Perak succession. Young Chulan, however, had been adopted (informally) by the Residency in Kuala Kangsar, where he became friends with his British contemporaries such as Hugh Clifford. Joining the civil service, he retired from it in 1910. Eventually, a movement emerged to reinstate him to the line of succession, but opponents, including Richard Wilkinson, prevailed.

10 Charles “Cocky” Cochrane came down from Oxford in 1899. After serving in Kuala Kangsar as District Magistrate, Assistant Secretary to the British Resident, and Clerk to the State Council, he was promoted out of Perak, returning in the late 1920s to act as British Resident. It was during one of his terms in this latter office that the government finally declared its intention to make Ipoh the state capital. Soon, Cocky became Chief Secretary, FMS. When the dam at Chenderoh was opened as part of the Perak River hydro-electric scheme, one of its three turbines was named after him. Retiring to London, he died there a few years later.

governing Perak now with English or perhaps 'international' ideas ...” (Soon, not only the Chinese but other “races” were represented by quota.)

For two decades the separate state councils carried on – until federation took effect in 1896, at which point the FMS government and its (also-unelected) Federal Council took precedence. Thus began the draining of Perak – Kinta in particular – to meet the demands of other constituencies. Meanwhile, in the *Unfederated* Malay States, the state councils retained more of their powers. In the 1920s, a “decentralisation” campaign was advanced by sitting and former officials, including George Maxwell. This campaign did to some small extent revive the old state councils, but in all cases the Residents remained firmly in control.

After the Second World War, democratic expectations rose. By the 1950s, Federal Councillors were no longer appointed; they were elected. By the time of *merdeka* in 1957, Perak had introduced a new practice: a majority of its State Council was chosen by election. Soon, all state governments were elected. The same thing happened on a smaller scale as well: In Ipoh, for example, by the early 1960s the Municipal Council was an elected body.