Decolonisation in Malaya in the post-Second World War period posed many new challenges to the emerging nation-state as it lay to rest long-standing ones. Creating a national consciousness and constructing a national identity for the post-colonial state were among the major immediate challenges. The notion of a national identity was highly contested. The population of Malaya on the eve of independence from Britain comprised three major communities with distinct cultures, traditions and norms, and a highly developed sense of cultural identity. This polyglot nation was an outgrowth of a colonial experiment. Large-scale immigration was encouraged into Malaya in the late 19th and early 20th centuries from India and China to work the colonial economy built around the rubber and tin industries. The result was the emergence of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious populace that lived together but led separate lives. At independence in 1957, the domiciled Chinese and Indians made up half the population of the federation while the Malays made up the other half.

As Britain withdrew, it left behind a modern fledgling democratic state based on Westminster-style parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarchy with a well-developed administrative system and modern economy but with little in the way of a national consciousness or national identity. The creation of a common federal citizenship, a national education system and introduction of electoral reforms were intended to create a Malayan identity but nationalist pressure hastened independence, leaving this process unfulfilled. Britain had hoped that a centrist non-communal party would emerge to lead the nationalist movement but in reality an inter-communal coalition based on communal foundations, called the Alliance Party, emerged victorious in the local and federal elections. With an imminent transfer of power following the Alliance's win in the first federal elections in 1955, it was left to the Alliance Party, comprising three communal parties, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), which assumed the mantle of power, to create a sense of national consciousness among the diverse ethnic groups.