



CURTIN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Glimpses of John Curtin

Public lecture by JCPML Visiting Scholar Dr Geoffrey Serle AO on 14 August 1997.

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It is an honour to meet you as the first [JCPML Visiting Scholar]. I must briefly indicate what I am doing. There is no very satisfying full biography of Curtin; Lloyd Ross's is the standard work in print, but while he was a distinguished Labor man and there is much to be said for his general treatment of Curtin, he always had difficulty in putting a book together convincingly. Someone should be found sooner or later to tackle another full biography. A book on Curtin's Western Australian years 1917-1934 needs to be done. David Black's [In His Own Words](#), a gathering of excerpts from his writings and speeches, is very useful indeed. My entry in the Dictionary of Biography of 6500 words is necessarily crammed and concise. I suggested to the [John Curtin Prime Ministerial] Library that I build it up to 15,000 words or more to make a largish pamphlet, priced at no more than \$10 which might sell well to the general public and to the Labor Party. A simpler version would probably be necessary for schools. I am here to work on the new material it has gathered, and intend to have my little biography finished by October for production before the formal opening of the Library.

I shall not now give you a routine treatment of Curtin, but rather glimpses of his life including a few points on which I may have novel stresses to make. In two or three aspects especially I do not consider that his distinction has fully been brought out.

Curtin was a product of the Victorian Socialist Party and the Victorian labour movement, a radical socialist internationalist, who while still young won enormous respect and affection from his colleagues, especially for his conduct in 1916 of the national campaign against conscription for military service overseas. But because of

his heavy drinking and imminent marriage, those friends and colleagues arranged for a new start for him in the West. Coming here when 32, Curtin not only found domestic contentment combined with temporary total abstinence, but a most congenial society, something of an Arcadia of a special Australian kind-not just in the labour movement where he was editor of the "Westralian Worker" and close adviser to Premier Collier, but eventually in the hard educative experience of working for a year on the case for Western Australia for presentation to the new Commonwealth Grants Commission.

Sport was always important to Curtin: he had played cricket and football for Brunswick in Melbourne and barracked for Fitzroy in the League, played cricket for a Cottesloe team, went on to umpire grade matches (despite his squint; he probably wasn't as skilled as our first prime minister Toby Barton who used to umpire intercolonial matches), and for many years was a member of the WA Football League's Umpires Advisory Board. Nugget Coombs got to know him in 1938 when watching a football match in Canberra, when they reminisced about matches and footballers they had seen in Perth. Four years later in the great crisis year Curtin and Chifley were to appoint Coombs successively as director of rationing and a member of the Commonwealth Bank Board at a ridiculously early age, then director-general of postwar reconstruction.

Curtin eventually won the federal seat of Fremantle in 1928, lost it in 1931 in the landslide, and regained it in 1934. In 1935 he had an unexpected victory, which he had not sought, over Frank Forde by one vote for the party leadership when Scullin resigned. In the absence of the New South Wales Langites, who had been expelled in 1931, caucus only numbered 20 or 21. It is arguable that no prime minister, before or after, when he entered parliament or became party leader, was better qualified than Curtin. He was phenomenally widely read; as editor of the "Worker" he had thought hard and seriously written-not mere propaganda-about the whole political range: Imperial/foreign/international issues, federal and State politics, Social issues; he had educated himself in up-to-date economics though always sceptical of economists and economic theory; he had run a trade union and been leader of the campaign against conscription; he had hardly missed a meeting of the party's

federal Conference and executive since 1918 and had extensive grassroots experience; he was a famous orator who, sporting his AJA badge on his waistcoat, could comfortably handle the press. The question was whether he was strong enough to be capable at the highest level, and whether he would keep off the grog, which he did. Ultimately there is that story, about the 1944 Commonwealth prime ministers conference in England when, at the reception at Buckingham palace, Churchill insisted that he have a whisky with him, Curtin protesting that he was only a tea-drinker; that great future stateswoman 17-year old Princess Elizabeth, standing by, immediately sent for a pot of tea (a silver teapot of course). There is some authority for this story, though it reads as though invented by the Women's Weekly.

It was Curtin's tragedy that in the last ten years of his life, firstly as Opposition leader, he had to reunite Labor and make it fit to take office, and then, as a pacifist, to conduct a war as prime minister, thus rarely being able to attempt to carry out his policies of reform.

His immediate task was to build unity, especially in New South Wales where Lang, the great demagogue, still kept his grip on Labor voters; the official party led by Chifley was getting little support. Curtin and the federal executive readmitted the Lang party in 1936, in the belief that Lang was bound soon to destroy himself. In the next few years, Curtin in Sydney had to endure abuse, insults and intimidation from Lang's machinememen and thugs, while patiently reasoning. "New South Wales," Curtin once snorted "I only go there for unity conferences." Lang was overthrown in 1939, McKell became leader and his government in cooperation with Canberra was a leading force in the eventual war effort. Meanwhile Curtin had to struggle to find compromise policies among the isolationists, pacifists, socialists, communists, Catholics, and opportunists who made up the labour movement, over the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and the Spanish civil war. Isolationism continued to prevail. On defence, however, Curtin allied himself with the few Army dissidents who knew that the impregnability of Singapore was a myth. He carried his party on a policy of self-sufficiency, based especially on development of air power (which had been a talking point of his since 1913), combined for the moment with isolationism until Nazi

aggression in 1938-39 revealed the full danger. But in Curtin's mind Japan was the main danger.

He had restored the ALP to electability and very nearly won the 1940 election when the party was reinforced by Chifley, Evatt and Calwell (the next three long-term leaders). When the Menzies war government, which had not been entirely incapable, collapsed into a rabble, Curtin took office in October 1941. He had held out against Evatt and Eddie Ward who had been seeking immediate power, delayed to choose the right moment when the two Independent members gave Labor a majority, was conscious of his destiny. When it seemed for a few days the year before that Curtin had lost Fremantle, Evatt had had the cheek to put himself forward as possible immediate leader, and then was soon casting round as a potential leader of a national government. Curtin was now the only possible prime minister and he surprised many by the capacity and assuredness he immediately displayed before and after Pearl Harbor.

In his Cabinet Forde as deputy leader was totally loyal to Curtin as of course was the brotherly Chifley, an ally of many years standing in the battle against Lang, as Hasluck says "the sort of emotional sheet-anchor he required"; quite by chance Curtin and Chifley, new members in 1928, had sat together as backbenchers. Evatt was difficult but had his virtues; Beasley the Langite buckled down admirably. These four ranked 2 to 5 in seniority throughout Curtin's time.

One aspect of the Curtin ministries and of his core support was the prominence of the elderly. (Another aspect was that most of the ministers were teetotallers). Curtin himself was prime minister between [the ages of] 56 and 60. The Victorian ministers Jack Holloway, Arthur Drakeford and Don Cameron were in their mid to late 60s as was Scullin who, while in good health, was Curtin's chief tactical adviser with an office between Curtin's and Chifley's. Jack Dedman and Reg Pollard, a Chifley minister who almost defeated Calwell for the leadership in 1960, were a few years younger than Curtin, as were Perc Clarey and Albert Monk, both of them president and secretary of the ACTU over many years. Then there was the elderly Dinny McNamara, longtime federal secretary of the party, for whom Jack Curtin had stood as best man. How that association must have helped over the years. All these

Victorians, some of them old mates of Curtin from the Socialist Party days were men of integrity and total Labor faith (allow me to say in contrast to some New South Wales equivalents) who were a crucial solid backup to Curtin as prime minister. (It is no credit to Labor historians in Victoria that these men have been so neglected and are now little known; there's a good book to be written on them. Unfortunately, soon after the war, these senior members of the party in Victoria were rolled by Santamaria and the Movement.)

The great issue in the crisis days of early 1942, when invasion seemed almost certain, was recalling the AIF from the Middle East. That Curtin insisted on the immediate return of the 6th and 7th Divisions, while his political opponents wanted to follow Imperial orders, is something of a landmark in Australian history. When Curtin had made his well-known statement on 27 December 1941, calling on America for support, the leaders of the United Australia and Country parties publicly expressed their outrage at disloyalty to Britain. By agreement the 6th and 7th Divisions AIF were then sent to the Far East sector and were making for Java and Sumatra. But Rabaul had fallen to the Japanese, and Singapore on 15 February and the 8th Division was imprisoned. Darwin was bombed to bits on the 19th. General Sturdee, chief of the General Staff, forcefully advised Curtin to bring the divisions home and to the War Cabinet threatened resignation if his advice was not followed. Curtin's chief public service adviser Frederick Shedden firmly agreed. Backed unanimously by War Cabinet and caucus, Curtin followed the formal advice-he had no doubts-and days and nights of bitter cable exchanges with Churchill followed. President Roosevelt was also bringing pressure to bear. Parliament met twice in secret session. The last straw was Churchill ordering the 7th Division to turn north for Burma, but he had to give way after no fewer than four staunch Australian protests. Curtin and the War Cabinet were shocked and enraged. (If 7th Division had got to Rangoon, it would have been a near thing-either walking straight into the cage or starting to march to India, especially as they would have had no air support and the troops were not carrying their weapons which were in ships lagging behind. Imagine if half the AIF had been lost in a fortnight. As it was some 3000 had got to Java and were doomed.) Under the strain, Curtin was prostrated for several days.

The point is not only that Menzies privately implored Curtin to obey Churchill; and that Bruce as High Commissioner and Earle Page, still Australian representative in the War Cabinet in London, advised following Churchill against the decision of the Australian government but that all the non-Labor members of the Advisory War Council-Menzies, Hughes, Fadden, McEwen, Spender-advised similarly. Later generations of Australians may well be amazed. They were not playing party politics, but as colonials were following their long-conditioned belief that the Imperial interest should be supported against the Australian interest or their frequent assumption that there could be no such thing as a separate Australian interest. Following Henry Lawson and Manning Clark the old dead tree and the young tree green. It is as well that nothing got into the press-none of us in the Army (except a couple of generals perhaps) had any idea of what was going on-there might have been a terrible division in the country in the days of our greatest crisis. It would be interesting to know the degree to which it did ever get out in parliament or in the 1943 election campaign. It's odd how many historians have overlooked the significance of this incident-Russel Ward was I think the first to notice it thirty years ago after an article by Dedman.

With regard to the agony Curtin suffered when most of the 6th and 7th Divisions were sailing home late in February, pacing round Canberra night after night feeling a terrible responsibility for their safe arrival, a fear worsened by the delay and greater exposure caused by Churchill: this is usually referred to only with regard to the 6th and 7th who actually returned in two or three convoys over several weeks. I am almost certain that it applies as much to the return after Alamein, of the celebrated 9th Division early in 1943 in one convoy, with as inadequate naval protection as the others.

The strain on Curtin progressively increased: neuritis, gastritis, skin trouble, exhaustion, depression. Everlasting travel by train and car to Melbourne and Sydney, apart from long trips over the Nullarbor. He would not fly; remember three leading members of the Menzies ministry had died in [1940] in the Canberra crash. Someone should map his movements 1935-45. And loneliness, though during the war, the children having grown up, his wife Elsie spent long periods in Canberra. There is not the slightest doubt that it had been a good marriage. Early in 1942 he wrote to her:

“The war goes very badly & I have a cable fight with Churchill almost daily ... But enough, I love you & that is all there is to say.” Dad and Nippy, they called each other. The governor-general Lord Gowrie and his wife provided a haven, especially in the weekends, a rather uncommon function of governors general. We might brood on Curtin’s determination in the last ten years of his life and on what inspired it, in those intolerable living conditions for a Western Australian especially. Dismissing self-pity as a sin, controlling his temper, he remained cool and collected apart from being terribly sensitive to criticism.

Curtin’s second major crisis late in 1942 was over extending the area-not very far, broadly only as far as the Equator-in which the conscripted militia could fight beyond New Guinea. He had little choice. To have two armies was absurd; it was humiliating to have hundreds of thousands of American conscripts protecting us; industrial conscription had already been introduced; public opinion and the press demanded action; so did MacArthur and there is evidence to indicate that the US government was on the point of taking it up. But how change party policy? The consequences of 1916 still dominated, it was a matter of high principle that no one should be forced to fight overseas. Curtin took it on largely as a one-man campaign, protecting colleagues as much as possible, for he knew that if he failed he might have to resign. It is not generally known how close the verdict was. The 24/12 vote of the party federal conference reads like an easy victory-but the six States’ six delegates each had to vote en bloc-the Tasmanian executive decided by only one vote. If it had been 18 all, the policy would have remained unchanged. As John Hirst has remarked, “only the leader of the tribe could break the taboo and live”. In the end it made little difference for most of the militia swarmed to join the AIF. But after the event Calwell abused Curtin in caucus, Curtin offered his resignation and walked out. Calwell apologised and, although many in caucus were upset by the policy, Curtin was unanimously (we should probably say *nem con*) confirmed in the leadership. It was possibly on this occasion that Eddie Ward, angrily emerging from a caucus meeting was heard to say, “He’s done it again, the old humbug.” Nothing better illustrates his remarkable command over the party. Coercion of the party to his will over the years was an amazing achievement.

1942 and 1943 are generally agreed to be years of successful government. Improvised economic organisation was surprisingly effective in direction of manpower and industrial achievement. Curtin's intimate association with MacArthur worked well: although the Australian government had minimal success in influencing war strategy, MacArthur was the channel through which American support grew. When he moved his headquarters to Brisbane and later Hollandia, their close personal association was replaced by long-distance communication. The prospect of Japanese invasion was realistically over by mid to late 1942, but Curtin would not admit it publicly for several months. Some Australian commentators' regret at the loss of Australian sovereignty in submitting to American control of our armed forces and that Curtin was too compliant is naive in the assumption that it could have been otherwise, in the circumstances, in the dealings of a major power with a very minor one. The counter-offensive mainly of Australian troops and American airmen over a period of 12 months or so in 1942-3 was effective from Milne Bay and Kokoda (Japan's first defeats), BunaGona, to Salamaua, Lae and Finschhafen. Curtin took full responsibility for grave decisions and made no major blunders.

Historians have noticed in the last two years of the war a loss of grip by the government, centring on confusion about the best use of military and civil manpower, how best to balance military needs, war industry and production of food and supplies for Britain and the American troops. But MacArthur was confusing in his stated intentions of using the Australian troops who eventually were largely confined to minor clean-up campaigns, and then the British planning for taking a major part in attacks on Japan from Australia came to nothing and added to the confusion. Curtin's declining health in the last year of his life, even before but especially after his major heart attack in November 1944, greatly reduced his effectiveness.

To the extent that Curtin was a good prime minister, it was his outstanding ability to work with people and to get on with them personally which stands out. Note how often it had previously been remarked how awkward he could be when meeting people. I have indicated how extraordinarily loyal his ministers were to him with two or three exceptions. To be sure, there was a war to be won and the usual passions of rivals were toned down. To go up a notch, Curtin and Menzies got on very well, were

on Bob and Jack terms, but Curtin once remarked "Poor Bob, it's very sad; he would rather make a point than make a friend." And there is the case of Artie Fadden, his predecessor as prime minister, who in his memoirs made the most fulsome tribute of all: "the best and fairest I ever opposed in politics ... one of the greatest Australians ever ... He gave me his mateship." Some of this derives from sitting together on the Advisory War Council and also from Curtin's refusal, in parliament and out, to sink to personal attacks. Up another notch. The Curtin-MacArthur alliance was crucial—certainly they had mutual interests but for two years they were hand in hand. And General Blamey—of all people the one with whom Curtin had little in common—but that association worked well, Curtin managed to keep him on terms with MacArthur for two years anyway and, though he sometimes disciplined Blamey, defended him to his colleagues. Behind these associations was Frederick Shedden and that was totally harmonious. Then when Curtin eventually met Roosevelt on his world trip in 1944 they got on famously, and their wives did too, and on the same trip Churchill: the evidence is slight but they met and appreciated each other. Both these statesmen may have sympathised with Curtin on Evatt's exploits. I could go on to mention again the harmony with McKell and his government; or the collaboration with Titans like Theodore of the Allied Works Council or Wallace Wurth of the manpower directorate; or the friendly relationship with the mystery man Alf Conlon. Then there were the political journalists who so revered Curtin for taking, or seeming to take, them into his confidence, but who as an old journo enjoyed the daily association. Et cetera. There seem to have been no important enemies except for some press proprietors to whom he would not bend: the names of Packer and Murdoch are familiar. He did once threaten Murdoch that he would sue for defamation. Note how Curtin and Whitlam, unlike future prime ministers, would never grovel to the press proprietors.

When I was writing my ADB entry on Curtin about seven years ago, I found the late Sir Paul Hasluck to be far and away the best living witness on Curtin. We had a great correspondence. (Recently Gough Whitlam tagged Hasluck as "the most Liberal of the literati and the most literate of the Liberals".) The young Hasluck had been a member of the district council of the AJA which Curtin chaired. Early in 1941 Curtin, still leader of the Opposition, ran into him in St Georges Terrace and there and then

recruited him for the infant Department of External Affairs. Hasluck may not have been a very close friend but he revered Curtin who always talked to him “with the frankness of a friend”; though his scrupulousness as an historian made him tilt over backwards to make some mild criticisms of Curtin as prime minister in the official war history. He eventually wrote that whether or not Curtin was a great prime minister, he was certainly a really great man.

Clyde Cameron, one of the last surviving exponents of traditional Labor proprieties, writes in his diaries:

Australians will not tolerate a one-man dictatorship ... [Curtin and Chifley] were humble men who were able to command the love and respect of their followers, without bluff, bluster or bullying. Both found it possible to govern better by taking Caucus and Cabinet into their confidence ... At no time did either of them display the slightest evidence of vanity or egocentricity.

Cameron was writing in 1977 with Whitlam in mind, but I have not the slightest doubt that he deplores even more the vanity and egocentricity of later Labor prime ministers.

In his late years Curtin grew in wisdom and character. It all comes back to character, as Hasluck and Cameron attest. Curtin did rally the nation to the war effort to a considerable extent, probably more so than anyone else could have done (though this should not be exaggerated, for there were pockets whom no one could have rallied). But to the extent that he did, it was because he inspired cynical Australians with respect for his unassuming dignity, simplicity, straightforwardness and patriotism. “Men and Women of Australia,” he began his broadcasts (Whitlam followed this) and concluded, “God Bless you.”

He was gregarious round the fire at the Hotel Kurrajong in Canberra and at the football. He was always good for a yarn, talking books and history not politics. He conversed naturally with waiters, waitresses, maids, liftmen, tram conductors; the staff at the Victoria Coffee Palace, Melbourne, where he often stayed, were devoted to him. American soldiers were amazed that he had no bodyguard. He loved vaudeville,

musical comedy and films, was addicted to bridge, billiards and crossword puzzles. Plebeian tastes, intellect, considerateness and good manners made an attractive combination.

The tributes to him were heartfelt. Gowrie: "one of the most selfless men I have ever met". Bruce: "extraordinarily receptive and perceptive ... I'd never desire to work under a better man." Menzies: "his great personal relations". I have referred to Fadden. Read Percy Spender's autobiography on the subject of Curtin. Holloway: "such a mate in the fight for the underdog." Ray Tracey, his driver: "that good man ... who considered everybody".

The Australia-wide remark when he died, confirmed by posterity, was "He did a good job". The inscription on his memorial grave at Karrakatta reads (and I'd be grateful if someone could tell me who composed it or whether it is a quotation):

HIS COUNTRY WAS HIS PRIDE
HIS BROTHER MAN HIS CAUSE

To conclude, however, a couple of days ago, I ran across the summing up by Frank Davidson, a Perth journo, an old mate, who died last year: "a great bloke and the nation will always remember him". That may well be so if the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library fulfils its objectives.

Dr Geoffrey Serle, AO

Dr Serle was a distinguished scholar and John Curtin biographer. His contribution on Curtin in the Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB) is highly regarded.

Dr Serle was general editor of the ADB between 1975 and 1988. He is also a well-known author and his work has won several prestigious awards including the Ernest Scott prize, the National Book Council Banjo award and the *Age* Book of the Year. His published books include:

- *The Melbourne Scene 1803-1956*

- *The Golden Age*
- *The Rush to be Rich*
- *From Deserts the Prophets Come*
- *John Monash: A Biography*
- *Sir John Medley*
- *For Australia and Labor: Prime Minister John Curtin*

Dr Serle died in 1998.