



CURTIN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

The prime minister and the press: a study in intimacy

Speech given by Michelle Grattan at the launch of exhibition *John Curtin: a man of peace, a time of war* on 20 April 1998.

COPYRIGHT: John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, 1998. JCPML00331/1

Looking through a fascinating collection such as the exhibition, John Curtin: A Man of Peace, A Time of War, always makes me feel I'd like to have been reporting politics then—the 'then' depending on what particular bit of history I'm glimpsing—rather than now. This nostalgia for other days is not quite rational journalistically, because those of my generation have witnessed first-hand some of the most riveting events in Australian political history, most notably the Whitlam government's dismissal and the surrounding constitutional crisis. It's just that times past always take on a special glamour and mystery.

But the trauma and the drama of wartime did make the 1940s particularly significant years for those who were journalists in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery then. They do carry a special excitement, albeit with grim overtones.

And the journalists of that era enjoyed one great advantage over those of us there now—they had loads of first-hand prime ministerial time and attention. They were privy to a huge amount of what was in the prime ministerial in-tray and inner thoughts, and were accorded prime ministerial confidence to a degree that is staggering to anyone covering politics today.

There is a recent American book called *Spin Cycle*,⁽¹⁾ which documents the media manipulation by the Clinton White House. It's a story of cynicism (on both sides of the fence—by the administration and by the journalists), of disinformation, game playing and deception. And all accompanied by a lot of sourness and distrust.

The spin cycle might not be quite so formidable and intense here in Australia, but there is something depressingly familiar about the stratagems the book reports.

There is considerable lack of trust of the media by our modern prime ministers, and the media tend to return the feelings. The public looks at both politicians and media with a jaundiced eye.

What we have now, in a nutshell, is an ever-more elaborate media management system, and an increasingly limited amount of direct, regular and in-depth media access to the leader making the decisions.

John Howard has three press secretaries, with their own support staff. The press office monitors and issues transcripts of every word he utters. Yet full-scale press conferences are few and far between, mostly scheduled around some announcement or event. The more usual encounter is the so-called 'door stop'—not a chair in sight and conducive to prime ministerial flight.

Like all modern prime ministers John Howard prefers to talk to the people through selected appearances on TV and radio rather than through the print media. And as for 'background' non-attributable briefings, I recall Howard doing only one in Canberra since he has been prime minister.

For Howard—and he's no different in this from Keating when he was PM—the media in general represent a problem to be handled.

In John Curtin's time the relationship was much simpler. This arose from the nature of the period and the personality of the man.

Firstly, the perils facing the country were so great that politics was galvanised and there was an identifiable and generally accepted 'national interest'. Of course there was trivia but much of the news was literally about life and death matters. The gravity of the times seized the journalists and their proprietors as well as the politicians and, while this should not be exaggerated, it did bind them together. It was notable that press relations became more fractious once the war ended and so

the period of crisis was over; nor did Curtin's successor, Ben Chifley, have such frequent dealings with the Canberra journalists(2).

Curtin also had an ultimate security blanket when talking to journalists—the protection of censorship. So he could feel relatively safe, insofar as the most serious matters were concerned.

Secondly, the press gallery was small and indeed so was Canberra, which still had a feeling of the tiny town about it, giving a special quality to the relationship of those who operated there.

Thirdly, Curtin himself had been a journalist. He liked and identified with journalists—his long-serving press secretary Don Rodgers later described Curtin's relations with them as 'very, very good'. Curtin saw journalists as important to his mission but he also respected their role and enjoyed their company(3). In this he was a great contrast to Menzies, prime minister earlier in the war, who had little regard for the journalists. Rodgers recalled that Curtin 'wore his AJA badge on his coat' and 'like some people who are on the fringe of a profession, they like to be on the inside with the members of that profession', although it was Rodgers' opinion that Curtin could not have earned a living as a journalist. (Curtin's own journalistic career had been as editor with the Labor weekly paper, *Westralian Worker*, from 1917-28.)

In one way, Curtin's dealing with the media was a time-consuming, demanding commitment; in another, it was much less of an intrusive burden than today.

When in Canberra Curtin often gave twice-daily background briefings to senior correspondents, clearly quite a chunk out of working hours. Rodgers, who worked for Curtin from 1937 until his death, recalled decades later that it was 'a tremendous strain on the Prime Minister to see the Press twice a day, which he did, week in, month in, year out, for a long, long time. It was a moveable feast, round 1 o'clock and then between 5 and 6 o'clock, five days a week and sometimes weekends in Canberra, Melbourne or wherever we were.' Rodgers said that because of the strain on Curtin he (Rodgers) reduced the number of press conferences later in his prime ministership.(4)

But these were pre-television times. There was radio but it was much more limited than now. The PM of the day did not face the barrage of electronic media demands that hits the modern leader or minister who finds himself in the middle of a crisis.

In the most critical phases of the war, morale was a vital concern. Curtin actively used the media to build public confidence. He also believed, as a matter of principle, that the public should be kept informed on progress in the war to the maximum extent consistent with national security.

His belief in how much clout the press could have had been spelled out as early as 1922 when, as both editor of the *Westralian Worker* and the president of the Western Australian District of the Australian Journalists' Association, he wrote: 'The power of the press is greater than that of the Caesars of the school books or the statesmen of our existing legislatures. It shapes and moulds the thought of millions, even as the potter shapes the clay spinning on the wheel.'⁽⁵⁾

While Curtin liked chatting with the journalists his sessions were actually directed as much or more to their bosses—the editors and proprietors.

In their book *Backroom Briefings*—containing transcripts of Curtin's briefings from notes taken by journalist Fred Smith—Clem Lloyd and Richard Hall observe that according to Smith, Don Rodgers 'latched onto the notion of providing top-secret briefings to senior members of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery.' They 'could pass the confidential information provided by Curtin on to their editors who determined content of their newspapers, and to their proprietors who dictated overall editorial policy. Thus, the Prime Minister could establish direct conduits of information to shape news content [and] editorial opinion... By keeping the upper echelons of the press "in the know"; about war strategy and conduct of war at the highest level, the government could ensure the preservation of national security information...'⁽⁶⁾

Lloyd and Hall note that today this would be stigmatised as media management, but that Curtin's media manipulation had the great virtue of being 'indisputably' in the national interest.

A modern PM might not envy Curtin having to carry the awesome and awful burden of a nation at war. But he would envy him his relationship with the media. Just as the 90s journalist cannot but envy the ease with which the 40s reporter got inside that prime ministerial door.

From the PM's vantage point, what luxury to have only a few journalists to deal with, and them personally well-known to him. A media far less insatiable than in the 90s. Not, admittedly, offering the opportunities that TV provides—but not the hazards of it either. Not too much worry about appearances: the nature of one's teeth, hair, glasses, height. Most importantly, the opportunity to put a point of view, or give information, in the pretty certain knowledge that confidences would be kept. And all this with only one press secretary!

Curtin went for 'spin' (helped by his press secretary) just as much as any modern counterpart. But he applied it himself, and relied on his force of personality and argument to carry the case. He also was playing the tactic of 'trading'—the provision of information was an inducement, direct and indirect, to get editorial support.

His biographer Lloyd Ross wrote: 'Press conferences were like a consultative council. The press gallery was transformed...[in]to front-line participants in Australia's struggle'.(7)

There is an interesting parallel between Curtin and the American wartime leader Franklin Roosevelt, who was also successful in conveying his line in a direct, personal manner.

Of course in Curtin's time there were sometimes breaches of confidence (but nothing highly serious) and Curtin was like any other PM in complaining when he felt badly done by.

In his Parliament and the Press, Clem Lloyd says Curtin was 'goaded to anger mainly by occasional abuse of the ground rules'. Lloyd recounts that 'some newspaper editors sought to get around the briefing conventions and publish confidential information. Knowing from one briefing that the Ninth Division was returning from the Middle East, the Daily Telegraph printed an editorial pleading fervently for its

recall, then indulged in perspicacious self-praise when Curtin formally announced that the Ninth was on the way home'.(8)

Ross reports that when the press annoyed him, Curtin would attack the newspapers as profit-making concerns.(9) Two decades before, when he was editor of the Westralian Worker, Curtin had written: '...A press must be founded free from the ownership of those who would operate it for profit. It is idle to deny that the Australian daily press serves in its editorials the industrial interests with which the proprietors are associated. They are not to be impugned on this head. But at least the fact should be made plain because it reveals the purpose the press accomplishes.'(10)

Geoffrey Serle describes Curtin's relationship with press magnates such as Keith Murdoch and Frank Packer as one of 'enmity', in particular after attacks in the 1943 election.(11) Jack Fingleton, who joined the Canberra press gallery in 1944 for Radio Australia, describes a Curtin press conference outburst against 'Rags' Henderson, general manager of the Sydney Morning Herald: 'Ross Gollan, then the SMH political rep, summoned up his dignity and office patriotism. "Mr Prime Minister," he said, "if you speak like that about Mr Henderson, I will be forced to withdraw from this conference and take the other members of the SMH with me"; "Mr Gollan," said Mr Curtin, "you are at liberty to withdraw from my conference any time you like, and take your staff with you. But I tell you this, Mr Gollan. If you and your staff withdraw, neither you nor your staff will ever come again to one of my conferences";' Gollan stayed.(12)

Although most accounts put an overall very positive gloss on Curtin's relationship with the press, Paul Hasluck in his war history asserts that Curtin became 'sadly disillusioned' about the press, which he thought unfair. Hasluck wrote that Curtin gave too much attention to what was written, and so 'tortured himself'.(13)

Curtin kept a close eye on the way the press was presenting events and debates that had a bearing on the war effort and the public's perceptions. A daily resume, called Digest of Press Opinion, was prepared for him and other members of the War Cabinet each morning. It summarised leading articles, and indicated trends in the writings

about the war, related matters, and general politics. The summary was done in Canberra in the Department of Information, with the Sydney and Melbourne papers arriving about 8.30 a.m. and checks being made by telephone with other capitals. The digest would be on the PM's Canberra desk by 10.45 a.m. and sent by the teleprinter to him when he was elsewhere in the country. A weekly roundup of press material was also prepared.

The modern equivalent of the daily digest has photocopies of all relevant material. If travelling abroad, the 90s prime minister gets an immediate playback, in a wad of faxes, of what's being reported at home, both happenings there and accounts of his trip.

Curtin was very anxious to project the Australian point of view internationally. He always wanted to know what the leading overseas papers were saying about the war in the Pacific so he could, if necessary, counter particular lines. Summaries of relevant articles were sent from posts in Britain and the United States.(14)

One irony when we view the closeness of Curtin's relations with the media is that, during his time, there were spectacular battles between the newspapers and his government over the issue of censorship. And Curtin's Information Minister, Arthur Calwell, had no time for the press. In the stoushes, Curtin had to be the moderating influence. Curtin accepted censorship as a necessary part of a war situation; Calwell, one gets the feeling, relished it. As R.M. Younger, who observed the two men at the time from the Information Department, puts it: 'Curtin took the view you worked with the press; Calwell took the view you told the press what to do'.(15)

It's fascinating to speculate on whether any modern prime minister could have the sort of relationship with the media that Curtin had, and on how Curtin would have fared in the world of the modern media.

I think the answer to the first question is simple. No Australian PM today could share secrets or even thoughts in the way Curtin did.

Consider this incident, related by Ross. '";I'm not certain that I should tell you. I don't know. I think perhaps I ought to.'"; With that hesitant beginning, Curtin

revealed, three weeks beforehand, the attack at Guadalcanal. He explained why. The action was so important, and it would be so disastrous if the news leaked out—an odd reference or a hint might get into an editorial and escape the censor—so he decided to let the reporters know, and ask them to get in touch with their editors so that special precautions could be taken'.(16) This was just a spectacular example of the extremely sensitive information Curtin regularly gave the reporters.

Even leaving the war context aside (including its censorship), today's politicians and the media simply do not and could not operate on such a basis of shared confidences given and kept. It's a much more arms' length process, even though the modern media give such a great sense of intimacy.

Contemporary journalistic competition and greater transparency mean that leaders are seldom tempted to provide material 'off the record'. If they do, say, to influence columnists or plant stories against their opponents, it would be done on a one-on-one basis and often through a staffer.

Any attempt at more general off-the-record briefings would quickly be put 'on the record', certainly by people not invited, but also by those present, because they would be used to working in what has become a much less closed-shop information environment.

For all the intriguing pull of the Curtin briefings, many modern journalists would feel a little uneasy at a system of such systematic closeness as the one that bound prime minister and press in Curtin's time.

They would believe that it was all too cosy. Perhaps it was appropriate to that war, but not to more ordinary times (or indeed, to a time when Australia was part of a modern war).

But here we are back to the contradiction. We live in this information age when, after the struggle to get on top of the welter of paper that pours daily through the Canberra press boxes, we can fly to the Internet for still more data.

Yet we are less well informed about the thinking of the prime minister than that small group of men who gathered more than half a century ago in that modest office in what is now Old Parliament House, taking Curtin's wisdom down in notes and shorthand—because this was not just the age before television, it even pre-dated the tape recorder.

The fact that the flow of information is less than full and frank in our information-soaked era not infrequently leads to a quite ill-informed media. It also contributes to (though it doesn't cause) the diminished interest in policy that we see in current reporting.

As for the other question I posed: how would Curtin have fared in the modern media world?

At the superficial level, it's hard to tell.

In Curtin's day, the fashions and methods of political communication were very different. There's no way of being definitive about the way his personal presentation would have translated and adapted to the end of the twentieth century. In any case, a leader's style is so much a product of his times that maybe it's not a meaningful question.

Ross notes that Curtin 'occasionally expressed nostalgia for the street corner meetings' of his youth—another era again. But, according to Ross: 'he recognised that such personal methods had to be subordinated to new, expensive and possibly superficial methods of broadcasting and newspaper advertising'.(17)

At a deeper level, however, a possible answer to that question of how Curtin would have performed today is perhaps found in Howard Gardner's *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*. Gardner argues: 'Leaders achieve their effectiveness chiefly through the stories they relate'—and, he adds, leaders must embody their 'story'.(18)

Referring to leading figures of this century whom he studied—and 'the score of others from this century whose names could have readily been substituted for them' (and here we might insert Curtin's name) Gardner concludes: 'They told stories...about

themselves and their groups, about where they were coming from and where they were headed, about what was to be feared, struggled against, and dreamed about'.(19)

Curtin had the 'story' Australia needed, and Australians recognised, in deeply troubled wartime. His own earlier anti-war background goes to highlight the extent of his achievement in rising to the crisis. Given such strong leadership qualities Curtin, if pitched forward as a traveller in time, would surely have identified the 'story' appropriate to a modern world and displayed the skill needed to convince another audience, using the available mediums for the message.

The last question is, how would modern journalists respond to a modern John Curtin? As their 40s forebears did, recognising the quality of leadership, or with a shrug of dismissal for just another politician? I leave you, and us journalists, to ponder on that one.

Notes

(1) Howard Kurtz, *Spin Cycle: Inside the Clinton Propaganda Machine*, the Free Press, New York 1998

(2) D. K. Rodgers, Press Secretary to Curtin, oral history transcript, 29 April 1972, National Library of Australia, TRC 121/14 pp.38-39

(3) Rodgers, p.38

(4) Rodgers, p.38

(5) *Westralian Worker*, 17 March 1922, quoted in David Black, ed, *In His Own Words: John Curtin's Speeches and Writings*, Paradigm Books Curtin University, Bentley, 1995, p.45

(6) Clem Lloyd and Richard Hall, eds, *Backroom Briefings: John Curtin's War*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1997, pp.3-4

(7) Lloyd Ross, *John Curtin: A Biography*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1977, p.349

(8) C.J. Lloyd, *Parliament and the Press*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1988, p.132

(9) Ross, p.349

(10) Black, p.46.

(11) Geoffrey Serle, *For Australia and Labor: Prime Minister John Curtin*, John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, Perth, 1998

(12) Jack Fingleton, *Batting from Memory: An Autobiography*, Collins, London and Sydney, 1981, p.165

(13) Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People: 1942-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1970, p.634

(14) Information from R.M. Younger, who worked in the wartime Department of Information, and was involved in compiling the digests

(15) Personal conversation between Younger and the author, April 1998

(16) Ross, p.349

(17) Ross, p.153

(18) Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*, HarperCollins, London, 1997 [first published 1996], p.9

(19) Gardner, p.14