



CURTIN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

John Curtin Medal ceremony

Speech given by Associate Professor David Black, JCPML Historical Consultant at the Inaugural John Curtin Medal ceremony on 29 October 1998.

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Many years ago when I was still in the early stages of my tertiary studies in history my supervisor told me that what distinguished a good historian was first and foremost the ability to ask the right questions. I subsequently came to appreciate that the right questions were invariably those to which there was no clear cut answer but in the investigation of which one came to understand more deeply and fully the events of the day and the people involved in them.

For the historian endeavouring to understand and explain just who John Curtin was and his place in Australian history one central question is why a man who is frequently described as 'flawed' and 'ordinary' should have come to occupy such a honoured and revered place in Australian history? From the outset the answers to this question require a constant need to resolve contradictions and reconcile ambiguities. Curtin's very place in history falls into this category. For as Professor Geoffrey Bolton has suggested:

Fifty years after his death, John Curtin is not well remembered by the Australian people, even though he led the country during its gravest wartime crisis. [Yet neither] is he totally forgotten. When the Australian Bicentennial Authority sought advice from a wide cross section of the public in nominating the 200 Australians [with a cut off date of 1970] who had contributed most to their country, Curtin was named more often than any other politician.

Professor Bolton went on to comment:

Australians are not comfortable with impeccable heroes of the Washington or Lincoln variety. Our style prefers the flawed or fallible individual who in a moment of crisis lifts his or her performance to make an essential and lasting contribution ... We were lucky to have Curtin as our prime minister in 1942.

Leaving aside the occasional mean-spirited comment (in which category some might include Paul Keating's judgment that Curtin was 'just a trier') it is fair to say that:

Curtin was a reluctant wartime leader.

His formal education was limited and intermittent.

In the words of one his Labor colleagues (and admirers) 'A peculiar bloke Jack: you never knew him. You couldn't get close to him'.

He was at times very sensitive to criticism.

He was allegedly subservient almost obsequious to MacArthur during the war.

His political career marked a series of compromises to the point where one senior academic claimed 'Curtin would have made a timid and mediocre prime minister in peace time'.

As will become clear I disagree totally with that last assessment. And to put it in context, the same historian also wrote that in war Curtin 'assumed duties no one else could discharge'.

In any case the real question remains-

Where are the mainsprings of Curtin's greatness to be found?

Quite simply his greatness stems from the fact that because of the kind of person he was, he was uniquely placed to perform the task he did at the gravest point of our history since the commencement of European settlement 210 years ago. I concur completely with the words used by the reviewer of my own book in the West Australian:

'[Curtin's] failings and his innate humility ensured that he was always a man of the people, a reluctant leader who never lost sight of his origins or his duty and who, as prime minister, agonised over the implications of the grave decisions he had to make.

To some critics Mr Curtin's discomfort with the burdensome duties of office is a sign of his weakness and proof that the job was too much for a man of his modest abilities.

But it can also be said with countervailing force that the continuing struggle with his personal demons and his capacity to galvanise Australians to meet the threat of invasion by Japan during World War II are the stuff of real heroism — of ordinary people doing extraordinary things in the face of adversity.'

In short, Curtin was a man of great courage in the fullest sense of that word, a man who triumphed over personal adversity and a man who ultimately sacrificed himself in the service of his country.

Curtin was also deeply motivated by his concern for others. In 1942 the secretary of the Defence Department, Sir Frederick Shedden, was waiting for a response to a critical cable from Winston Churchill informing the Australian Government that he had ordered the diversion to Burma of the fleet carrying Australian troops returning from the Middle East. In Shedden's words:

'We were trying to find Curtin because a decision had to be taken and a reply had to go back to Churchill. We even put messages on the screens in Canberra theatres searching for him. In he came about midnight.

He had been walking around Mount Ainslie. He knew that he had to make the decision, that he was not going to get support from anyone.

[Having asked for a stenographer] he dictated the telegram to Churchill saying that if anyone was lost as a result of the fleet being diverted Churchill would be held responsible.'

His concern for others caused him great anguish but it never prevented him from making the great decisions which had to be made and taking full responsibility for them.

Sometimes he needed a confidante. At one stage each Sunday afternoon for months he would sit in the study of the then Governor-General, Lord Gowrie, and smoking 'his

interminable cigarettes' seeking Gowrie's advice on how to announce the loss of [HMAS] Sydney in a manner which would soften the blow for the relatives and friends of the crew.

An 'ordinary man' Curtin may have been but he was a genuine visionary as evidenced by:

his early recognition of the potency of air power;

his realisation even in 1919 that the treaty of Versailles at the end of World War One would make another war an inevitable consequence;

his acceptance that, committed as he was to the British connection (and to his dying day he still saw Australia as an inseparable part of the British Empire), we had to turn to the United States for help and that he had to stand up to Churchill when Australia's very survival was at stake;

the fact that it was his government which created the foundation of Australia's welfare state.

As wartime prime minister Curtin over and over again had to make pragmatic compromises as with his decision as a lifelong pacifist to accept a measure of military conscription in 1943 or his demand notwithstanding his lifetime union background that the New South Wales coal miners should give up their struggle for improved working conditions and return to digging coal for the war effort.

But

' he was humble, decent and dutiful to a fault. His political career marked a series of compromises and [yet] still there remained an essential integrity which commanded respect.'

Curtin never forgot his origins nor his sense of duty which he passionately believed should always take precedence over personal aggrandisement. As he told the nation on the death of Prime Minister Lyons in 1939:

' The greatness and honour of the office of prime minister might well be suspect if after a short period of its occupancy any man was able to say that he was richer after he left office than he was when he first came to it.'

Curtin was always fundamentally a man of the people and a passionate Australian (a 'natural Australian' as Professor Geoffrey Serle once described him). In the words of his epitaph:

'His country was his pride; His brother man his cause'

From my personal memories, young as I was in 1945, and from what I have since been told there is no doubt that Curtin inspired respect from cynical Australians as few prime ministers have (and are ever likely to do). When the ALP campaigned in the 1943 election it told the electors 'if you want to vote for Curtin then you have to vote for Labor. This message went over in the electorate of Fremantle to the point where his majority of 600 votes in 1940 was turned into a majority of 20,000 votes.

Let me conclude with three short testaments, the first an extract from the verdict of official Labor historian Ross McMullin:

'Talented, unpretentious and utterly dedicated, Curtin was a revelation as prime minister. In a manner that was beyond his predecessors he conveyed a genuine concern for the nation and its people, and a willingness to ensure that with Australia threatened, his government would take the drastic measures that were necessary. The transformation from diffident opposition leader to accomplished prime minister was as swift as it was profound.'

Then in the words of Dame Mary Gilmore, the poet:

'I never heard of him falling out with anybody, I never heard any vindictive remarks about him, I never heard any criticism of him as a man who wanted his own way, or was hard to deal with never anything like that ... and yet when the time came that was the most dangerous to Australia, he was the one man who seemed to fill the gap. It was an extraordinary thing. He was like the keystone in an archway, he kept the arch together, kept it from falling.'

And to answer that question: 'what kind of peacetime prime minister would Curtin have made?' let me turn to the new patron of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, Gough Whitlam:

' If ever a man was born to lead this nation into time of peace and in the paths of peace it was John Curtin. If ever a man was born to apply his vision of what Australia at peace could be, his vision of what Australia at peace should become in his time, he was John Curtin.'

It was Curtin's tragedy and ours that he never had that chance.