



CURTIN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

John Curtin's legacy

Speech given by Professor David Black, JCPML Historical Consultant, at the launch of JCPML publication [*John Curtin's legacy: A series of public lectures from the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library*](#) on 14 April 2000.

At a dinner I attended recently a historian from one of Perth's other public universities was prepared to concede that the physical layout and appearance of the John Curtin Centre complex had had a dramatic and uplifting effect on what was previously at best a utilitarian campus. As one who spent many years off and on at the Crawley campus of the University of Western Australia I would never underestimate the importance of the physical aspects of any university campus as both a reflection of and potential impetus to knowledge and scholarship in a truly pleasing and stimulating environment.

In my view, it is not stretching the analogy nor overstating the case to suggest that the immediate impact of the cover pages of John Curtin's Legacy is such as to prepare the reader for the genuinely stimulating experience to be found inside the covers of this tastefully presented slim volume. This is a book about a national leader, pictured on the front cover with a group of men, each of whom led their country through one of its most critical and ultimately transforming periods of this or any other century. It is a book in which a number of talented and distinguished Australians present their views about one aspect or other of the life of the very great Australian whose name is a source of inspiration to the Library built in his honour, and the wider university which will carry his name through the twenty-first century, and hopefully beyond.

As I have indicated in my foreword to the book we are launching today, the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, in what is a very short space of time, has built up a

very impressive track record in a variety of areas. To the acquisition of materials which is proceeding apace, the sponsoring of publications by visiting scholars, the development of exhibitions and educational programs, and the staging of the various public lectures which have contributed to the making of this book has to be added the Library's own initiative in putting this material together in such an accessible and remarkably cheap form. In this regard, there is a major omission from the title and imprint pages in that we are given no idea who has actually done the hard work of obtaining the contributions and editing the volume into its final form. It is my understanding that much of the credit should go to Lesley Carman-Brown, the Library's Public Programs Officer, and I would like to take this opportunity here of placing on the public record my regret that her name does not appear in a more prominent form in the book. This is, I might add, the second significant publication in which Lesley has played a major role in the last twelve to eighteen months.

As it happens, I was present at each of the lectures included in this volume but this in no way diminished my interest and pleasure in reading the text. To have such a splendid array of scholars and public figures represented in this relatively small book makes for a very high ratio of quality in proportion to quantity. Undoubtedly, the most moving experience for me was to read Geoffrey Serle's *Glimpses of John Curtin*, a forerunner to *For Australia and Labor*, the book which for Professor Geoffrey Bolton and me, and for Geof Serle's wife, became a real labour of love after Dr Serle was stricken with the illness which eventually led to his death. I was fascinated to recall that Geof Serle during the lecture had proposed the need for a book specifically on Curtin's years in WA (that is, from his arrival as editor of the *Westralian Worker* until his reentry to Federal Parliament in 1934). Later in the article he went on to suggest that it would be fascinating if someone were to map Curtin's movements backwards and forwards across the country during his ten years as ALP leader. There seems in each of these suggestions an opening for future scholars (probably facilitated by the JCPML).

On page 14 of *John Curtin's Legacy*, Serle suggests that arguably '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 . . . about the whole political range . . . he had educated himself about up-to-date economics 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 . . . he could comfortably handle the press. The question was whether he was strong enough to be capable at the highest level, and whether he could keep off the grog, which he did.

Curtin's problems as leader were manifold. One has only to consider the divisions within the party over the Spanish Civil War with the left wing supporting the Spanish government and the Catholic element in the party backing the Vatican in its support for the Franco-led rebels. Yet amidst all this dissension Curtin was able to restore unity to the ALP and this notwithstanding what Geof Serle has described as 'abuse, insults and intimidation from Lang's machinememen and thugs', while all the time patiently reasoning with the NSW wing of the party. All I need say further here is to quote Gough Whitlam's tribute to Serle's own short account of For Australia and Labor. Serle had hoped his work would at least introduce a new generation to a great Australian prime minister. For Gough Whitlam it would achieve that and more for it would introduce a new generation to 'a great Australian historian'.

Six months after the Serle lecture David Day, as the Library's visiting scholar, gave us a foretaste of his then much awaited full-scale biography of Curtin when he spoke about 'Gallipoli, Embezzlement and a Death in the Bush'. Essentially, David was attempting to come to grips with why Curtin in November 1915 abruptly resigned from his post as secretary of the Timber Workers' Union (the same union which May Holman served in Western Australia and which has been the source of some difficulty for Geoff Gallop in more recent times) for reasons that Curtin's previous biographer Lloyd Ross had found 'difficult to understand'. If this was Curtin's version of a mid-life crisis (it was indeed midlife in that it came when he was thirty years old and he died at age sixty) it was severe and profound. Certainly, his capacity to re-emerge with a good job in Western Australia and make what most of us believe was a highly successful marriage is testimony to Curtin's strength of character, racked as he was over the years by self-doubt and growing disillusionment. I will not attempt here to

go into the range of issues raised by David Day in explaining the 1915 resignation except to say that I find an uncanny and eerie parallel between Day's description of the embezzlement from union funds and a similar explanation offered by Professor Martin Webb in his history of the Kalgoorlie goldfields for the suicide of C Y O'Connor. It seems that two of Western Australia's greatest imported sons both suffered deeply because one of their trusted underlings had let them down when it came to money and in each case they took it hard notwithstanding the fact that they had no personal involvement whatever. Both were men of integrity in the fullest sense of that term.

Two months later in April 1998 noted journalist Michelle Grattan came to the Library to launch the major exhibition John Curtin: A Man of Peace. A Time of War, to the development of which I feel proud to say I was able to make a small contribution. Michelle would be one of a very small group of working journalists, who have had numerous opportunities over the years to observe at first hand how Australian prime ministers handle the press and seek in this way to get their message across to the nation at large. It was fascinating to read again her attempts to analyse the nature and efficacy of Curtin's involvement with the press, not the least because Curtin prided himself throughout his life on his involvement with the journalistic profession. Those of us who have watched Western Australian politics over the years might reflect also on the enormous success of another journalist turned politician Brian Burke, at least while he was Premier, which makes us wonder perhaps why more of their colleagues have not made the same step (as Alan Carpenter for one has done). At the same time, times have changed; in Michelle's own words looking back on Curtin's times:- 'today's politicians and the media simply do not and could not operate' on the same basis of 'shared confidences given and kept. It is a much more arms' length process, even though the modern media give such a great sense of intimacy.' I cannot help but wonder either what someone like Curtin would have made of talk-back radio as we know it today. Michelle's conclusion is that political leaders who succeed do so because they tell the stories the nation wants and needs to hear (Ronald Reagan perhaps was one of these) - 'about where they were headed, about what was to be feared, struggled against and dreamed about'.

Then we come to the last two articles in the book, the inaugural and second Anniversary lectures respectively, delivered in July 1998 by the JCPML's Foundation Patron, Gough Whitlam, and in 1999 by Hazel Hawke who marked the occasion by donating to the Library her research papers covering her eight years at the Lodge in Canberra. The Anniversary lecture held each year on the anniversary of John Curtin's death in 1945 was designed to, and has become, the most prestigious event on the JCPML calendar.

At the time he delivered this lecture Gough Whitlam was six days short of his eighty-second birthday. So much do we take his energy and enthusiasm for granted that it is worth emphasising how remarkable it is that at such an age Gough was (and is) still so concerned with the future and what yet remains to be achieved. In the course of his address, reproduced in full in these pages, he dealt with the need for fixed four year parliamentary terms, the long-lasting running sore (in his view) of malapportionment or vote weighting in the Western Australian parliamentary system, the need for an Australian republic, federal finances, and Australia's international obligations towards the Aboriginal people. In this regard he saw in Curtin a leader who was prepared to challenge the most cherished articles of faith including his own, those of his party and those of his nation, and an inspiration to those who realise the need to confront the demons which still form part of the Australian achievement.

Similarly, Hazel Hawke's address delivered in July 1999, subtitled 'What kind of country do we want Australia to be?' provides a fitting and triumphant conclusion to this book with her clarion call about the Australia she wants to see in the twenty-first century and at a time when such terms as 'acceptable levels of unemployment', 'zero tolerance' and 'the undeserving poor' are (to use her phrase) 'creeping into public debate'. The 'Light on the Hill' may have been a term used by Curtin's successor Ben Chifley during his unsuccessful 1949 election campaign but it is a term that Hazel Hawke has come to associate as much with Curtin as with Chifley. In her address reproduced in these pages she ponders on the image of Curtin looking out from the lodge towards the beacon of the light tower on the top of the surrounding hills and carrying the burdens and responsibilities 'that weighed so heavily upon him'.

Perhaps I can best sum up her words with this extract from page 74 of the book I am launching today:

' We must look forward, we must seek, we must hope; but we must do this in a spirit of compassion, and with a sense of inclusion. It must be a journey not only for the bold and the brave, the healthy and the strong. The whole of this nation, in all its diversity, must be on board.'

Our publication is entitled John Curtin's Legacy. The legacy is apparent in the words of each of those whose speeches and addresses have been reproduced between these attractive covers. But as a small added bonus Lesley has included some words from Curtin himself: from the editorials he wrote in the Westralian Worker all those years ago. They deal with nation building and Australia's international standing; with Curtin's vision for peace at the end of the first of the two world-wide conflicts which have bedevilled the twentieth century; with the need for democracy which has yet to arrive in its fullest form; on royalty, rights and republics; on the power of the press; and perhaps most fitting on the pursuit of knowledge, the ultimate objective of the JCPML.

I have much pleasure in launching yet another fine achievement by the JCPML and by the University itself.