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John Curtin's abiding vision

JCPML Anniversary Lecture presented by the Hon Kim Beazley on 5 July 2001.

It is a very great honour for me to be here on this day to mark the life and death of John Curtin.

John Curtin was Australia's most complex Prime Minister, fated to lead us during this country's most interesting and challenging years.

While every Prime Minister of this nation has been obliged to confront the terms and conditions of our national survival, none has been presented with these issues so starkly as John Curtin in the 1940s.

How he tackled these challenges is a product of his own character and his analysis of the nature of his fellow Australians, his understanding of our special strengths and weaknesses.

I have no doubt that the more Australians delve into their past the more they will come to revere and respect John Curtin.

However, many myths and legends have been built up around him over the years. Finding the real John Curtin behind this veil is important for us as a nation: the truth will assist us as we go forward into what may be equally challenging times as those he faced in the war years.

Today I want to peel back some of the layers of the John Curtin story by looking again at some of his more important actions in history. And I want then to talk about how his abiding legacy remains so relevant and important to the Labor Party as it shapes its policies for government in the 21st century.

At this time, as we celebrate the Centenary of Federation, we draw strength from our reflections on those who achieved so much in the building of this country, and the exploration of the circumstances in which they undertook these achievements.

One of the highlights of the Centenary has been the publication of some illuminating works on Curtin and other leaders. I should mention that we are also greatly assisted by the work of those who have contributed to this magnificent library of John Curtin scholarship and memorabilia.

Among the best recent histories of the Curtin period I should highlight the David Day biography of John Curtin, and your own David Black's marvellous book of Curtin's edited letters, *Friendship is a Sheltering Tree*. I should also mention the very valuable John Faulkner and Stuart McIntyre publication on the Federal ALP Caucus, *True Believers*, as well as Michelle Grattan's *Australian Prime Ministers*.

The first thing that I should say about John Curtin, drawing on these sources and others, is that we should not invest him with a sanctity he did not have. I think we do him a disservice to try to turn him into a saint, as some admirers have tried to do.

He did not single-handedly 'save' Australia from invasion – ultimately it was decisions by the Japanese government that were weighted against invasion that contributed to that. A rugged defence by Australian soldiers in Papua and some purposeful work by the US Navy and aviators at the battles of Coral Sea and Midway were equally significant.

Curtin was a man of his time, and his pronouncements on race, and the Japanese race in particular, are jarring to a contemporary ear.

He was a man of deep melancholy whose depression took a grave toll at times of stress. In that, he was curiously similar to Britain's wartime leader Winston Churchill with his 'black dog' of despair. Emerging from a childhood of poverty – Curtin had to leave school in his early teens to support his family — he had some of the weaknesses of those who have travelled far from their origins.

Always prone to pessimism, when this was combined with alcohol, he was heavily handicapped as a leader and a man. To rise above that, as he did when called on at a time of grave national danger, was a magnificent achievement.

Beyond that, Curtin was a very intelligent, well-read and thoughtful man whose life was a testament to the strength of the young Australian democracy. His political rise showed that a humble background was no impediment to those who through hard work and a talent for public speaking and private persuasion, would aspire to the highest political office.

The release of his letters recently, edited so splendidly by Curtin scholar David Black, gives us a real sense of the man: his delight in language, his love of the poets, the struggle to keep believing in socialist ideals through the trials of democratic politics. And we also see there his remarkable ability for friendship, his quick wit and playful affection.

One of the most interesting of the letters was written in 1935 a few months before he was elevated to the leadership of his party in Opposition. In it he says:

For more years than I care to recall I have been endeavouring how best to influence the community on the eternal problem of how to give the world a chance to tackle misery. It was this that impelled me to the Labour Party, and for its principles, as I have understood them, rather than for its policy I have given all that I have and all that I am. It has been a task, a task made exasperatingly difficult by the turmoil of politics, the struggle for wages, reform that hardly alters anything, for peace that exposes one to being called a traitor, and the rest of the hurly burly of the everyday routine. As I look back there looms up the vast record of wasted labour, of the mending of splits, the chasing back to their holes, in the sea of multitudinous red herrings, and so on...

This passage very well encapsulates Curtin's inner tensions. Here is an idealist who never lost his idealism, yet a man more aware than most of the huge impediments to the achievement of ideals in the world of politics.

It also reveals the weight on his soul from coping with the utterly unreasonable demands of the lowest common denominator democracy of contemporary labour politics. It is of a piece with the brutal, pessimistic vision of the man walking in 1938 on Cottesloe Beach with his daughter, and telling her his fear of seeing the Japanese battle fleet appear on the horizon.

The essential point about Curtin is that it was a vital thing for this nation that someone as courageous and clear-sighted, however wounded by self-doubt, was available for leadership during the darkest hours of the Pacific War, that came so soon after he assumed the Prime Ministership in 1941.

Curtin's best quality was his clear, strategic vision in looking at the threats to Australia, and finding ways to achieve that vision through his domestic policies. Curtin put great effort into his parliamentary speeches, and his public addresses to make sure the Australian people were fully aware of the crisis they faced, and were aware of the sacrifices they would have to make to get through the war.

Curtin is properly well remembered for standing up for Australian interests when the tradition in this country was for devotion to Imperial Defence on behalf of the British Motherland. To that extent he forged a new path in defining our national interest, separate from Britain. However this story is not always well-understood, and must always be seen in the context of its times.

When he made his landmark statement in a New Year's message published in the Melbourne Herald at the end of 1941, the attack on Pearl Harbour had just happened, and Singapore was soon to fall: He wrote:

Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom. We know the problems that the United Kingdom faces. We know the constant threat of invasion. We know the dangers of dispersal of strength, but we know, too, that Australia can go and Britain can still hold on. We are, therefore determined that Australia shall not go, and we shall exert all our energies towards the shaping of a plan, with the United States as its keystone, which will give to our

country some confidence of being able to hold out until the tide of battle swings against the enemy.

Menzies did not agree with him at all. Churchill was outraged, and Roosevelt at least expressed a view that the sentiment seemed disloyal. Nevertheless Roosevelt showed himself far from hostile to Australia's interests. There is some argument that the Curtin statement enhanced the position of Douglas MacArthur, who was always to the forefront of Roosevelt's thinking when pondering his responsibilities for the war in the Pacific, and his own political future.

It at least registered Australia on Roosevelt's mental strategic map. Hitherto as he had contemplated maritime strategy in the Atlantic and Pacific, Australia had scarcely been noted by him.

In any event, MacArthur arrived three months later in March 1942, to establish his headquarters in Australia, and to the very great relief of John Curtin delivered his public message: "You take care of the rear and I will handle the front."

The reality is Curtin had a clear view of what the object of the front should be. It was closer to MacArthur's views than to the views of the competing Pacific strategists, Admirals King and Nimitz, let alone to those of Roosevelt and Churchill, who were all bent on beating Hitler first. From 1942 to 1944 MacArthur's view of the correct line of advance on Japan, and the priority of the South West Pacific for equipment, constituted the only sensible strategy for Curtin. He was not brought to that point by MacArthur. He was already there.

In a great test of his independence and courage, Curtin went on to withstand huge pressure from Churchill, as well as his political opponents in Australia, when insisting on the return of Australia's two divisions of troops from the Middle East. Churchill insisted they be re-routed to defend Burma, where they would have probably ended in Japanese POW camps.

The problem for Curtin was that both he and Churchill were conceivably strategically correct, although Curtin was correct in both strategic and tactical terms.

It is a potential nightmare confronting any Australian leader that what Australia might regard as essential to its survival could be at odds with a broader allied interest.

In 1942 the allies were confronting a determined German effort to cut through the Middle East to Suez, and there was frantic German advocacy to its Japanese ally to switch its attack from the South Pacific to Burma and the Indian Ocean.

As Gerhard Weinberg has pointed out, hardly a meeting between the German and Japanese representatives in Tokyo or Berlin took place that year without that issue dominating the agenda. Knowledge of that fact was in the hands of the Allied intelligence. The German aim was to cut the supply to its principle enemy at that point, Russia. Russia was being supplied through Iran. With a northern supply route at times denied the Allies in 1942, the bulk of supplies reaching Russia (sometimes the only supplies) went through the Indian Ocean and Iran. These problems dominated the thinking in the European theatre.

Curtin however faced a likely attack on his nation. The Japanese were moving up the front path to Australia's strategic front door. He found himself in a uniquely lonely situation in seeming to put his own isolated nation's defences before those of the broader Allied war effort.

Yet, it is worth noting that the 'free of any pangs' speech did not break Australian/British ties. Far from it. The history of Australian/British relations for the rest of the war were cordial, and often close. Curtin was hosted very hospitably in Britain when he travelled there in April 1944. In a speech to the House of Commons he re-stated Australia's blood ties to the Motherland. He told them: "We carry on out there a British community in the South Seas and we regard ourselves as trustees for the British way of life."

But Curtin had made a decisive break in one way. He had made it clear to the Australian people that the time had come to abandon illusions about the possibilities that the Empire could or would steam to their rescue. It was time to face up to what were the requirements upon its people if the nation was to survive.

His encouragement of Evatt's internationalism and regional alignments expanded options for Australia. He oversaw a massive expansion in Australian military capability, and he did not expect this just to disappear when the war concluded. He is in this regard the real founder of the US/Australia alliance, but he saw it operating within a framework of optimal self reliance.

As Prime Minister, Curtin had to make all these alignments and re-alignments within the constraints of his always difficult political party. He had to re-make the ALP as a governing party. Its two previous periods in office had seen it collapse in splits and disillusion. He had to use the party to control the party. He had to deal with a fractious Caucus by using his prestige as a war leader to control it from above, and by using his skills at the party conference to direct it from below.

Curtin faced severe internal ALP tensions all through his time as leader. NSW MP Les Haylen described the Caucus of the time as "as sabre-toothed tiger", and Curtin frequently felt its bite. The Caucus wanted control over the Cabinet, and Curtin was just as determined to ensure that leaders were able to lead in the wartime emergency.

Caucus infighting had destroyed the Scullin Government and kept Labor out of Government for well over a decade, and Curtin well knew how high the stakes were. You don't wonder that this man was prone to depression when you look at some of the difficulties he laboured under with the structure of the ALP at the time, and the legacy of the bitter splits within the NSW branch.

When asked once what was the best thing about being Prime Minister he said, only half facetiously, it was that he never had to attend 'another bloody unity conference in NSW'.

There was constant sniping from Arthur Calwell and others about his loyalty to a singular Labor Government. "The way you are going you will finish up on the other side leading a National Government," Calwell once said to him in the Caucus room, leading Curtin to walk out in fury. Before he left, he penned a letter of resignation and said he would be back within the hour to sign it. The Caucus metaphorically flogged

Calwell into submission. The Caucus would not tolerate the public undermining of a wartime leader, although that did not stop some bitter behind-doors disagreements.

Conscription was the major battleground. The NSW champion of invective, Eddie Ward, stung Curtin almost to tears when he chipped him about his anti-conscription views in the First World War, during a Caucus debate in 1942. He said to Curtin: "You are putting young men into the slaughterhouse. Thirty years ago you wouldn't go yourself."

The conscription issue finally could only be resolved by a special meeting of the party conference, and Curtin invested a great deal of his fast-waning health and energy into achieving a victory there.

This achievement tends to be somewhat demeaned by war historians, focusing on its limited area of application for the use of conscripts, rather than the actual outcome of Curtin's political skills. This victory of Curtin's was a very big one for the Labor Party, which traditionally had been the side of politics most sceptical of defence policy and the military. The conduct of the war by a Labor Government put defending the nation at the core of Labor philosophy rather than at its periphery.

There were efforts later by the conservatives to demonise the ALP as a party always against the national defence. Curtin's efforts to change this outlook, backed by the party conference, was a touchstone Labor leaders returned to in later times.

This was not something the Caucus on its own could deliver – it required the entirety of the party to be involved, and an authoritative leader, not in conflict with the party but working within it, as one of his essential national responsibilities.

Curtin was initially put into power by two conservative Independents as a man who could control a government dedicated to national defence, who could mobilise the national economy to defend the country and expand the war effort. While in their eyes his approach to government might be too dirigiste and socialist, he was the only one capable of ensuring national mobilisation.

But he was capable of much more than that, and I am indebted to economist and Keating biographer John Edwards for his analysis, in a paper written for this library, of Curtin's economic skills, and his interest in banking and taxation matters.

As Edwards points out, it is often thought that Curtin fought the war, while Chifley looked after the economy. But Edwards shows that Curtin took a central part in establishing the mechanisms for creating an economy in a fit shape to fight a desperate war.

Curtin had always taken an interest in economic theory, and had written several treatises on the causes of the Depression during the 1930s. He had learnt from the experiences of governments during that time.

When elevated to Prime Minister, he was closely involved in the actual nitty-gritty of putting the country on a war footing, in the pegging of wages and profits, the closing of non essential industries and the directing of manpower to essential tasks. Later he was involved in the move to increase the power of the Commonwealth Bank over the trading banks, and the move to exclude the States from income tax. These were two of the central planks of the post war development of this country.

Curtin took such a strong interest in planning for Post War Reconstruction that he personally interviewed Nugget Coombs in 1942 for his eventual role in overseeing that vast project.

On that point I should mention Curtin's plan for the regional development of Australia, as outlined by Nugget Coombs in a speech in his John Curtin Memorial Lecture of 1984. Coombs said the idea was sparked in Curtin's mind by the grievous transport and supply problems for the military that occurred due to the isolated nature of the Australian settlements.

Curtin was influenced by ideas in the USA that culminated in the Tennessee Valley experiment and the New Deal developments. In the Murray Valley, in the Hunter, in New England, in the Southern Tablelands and in North Queensland organisations of citizens set themselves up to work for regional autonomy and regional loyalty. Curtin was sympathetic to their aims.

Curtin persuaded the States to take part in talks on how the system of regionalism could be coordinated under the constitution, providing diversity of opportunity for employment. These ideas lingered into the Chifley Government and were influential in the development of the Snowy River Hydro-electricity scheme, although the enthusiasm for a broader regional movement faded somewhat after Curtin's death.

In a broader sense, it is worth noting that most of the negotiations over Australia's entry to the IMF, the World Bank and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade were undertaken during Curtin's reign, as were details of the post war immigration policy.

As Edwards says: "Curtin was Prime Minister for less than four years, yet those four years rank I think as the most important in the history of our Commonwealth not only in organising for war, in insisting on the return of Australia's divisions, in steadying the nation at a time of peril, but also in determining the shape of Australia's politics and economy over the last five decades."

I agree with Edwards on that, but I think this aspect of his political leadership reveals another side of the complex man: the practical politician, someone who was prepared to try to change his party's ideas and processes to get the best practical outcome for Australia. It reconciles the two sides of Curtin: the starry-eyed idealist on his soap-box, and the practical tradesman who began working life as a printer's estimator.

What emerges from any study of Curtin is a picture of a man with a deep faith in his fellow humans – he believed the country and the party could do better, and he knew the practical means of persuasion, how to move opinion.

Ladies and Gentlemen

This historical perspective leads me to the second part of my task today: to lay before you what I think are the terms and conditions of national survival from our current viewpoint – 56 years to the day after John Curtin's death.

Two things will determine our survival in the new century, and the new millennium, and although the landscape is vastly different from Curtin's day I think he would have recognised the truth and urgency of these aims.

Firstly, we must waste no time in engaging with, and firmly committing ourselves to, the region in which we find ourselves.

The second imperative is Labor's plan to maximise every element of our capacity for inventiveness as a nation, in this new era of technological change and globalised capital. This is what we mean by creating the Knowledge Nation.

Turning to the first point, the great lesson Curtin taught us in foreign policy—that still resonates today — that it is an illusion to clutch onto alliances with the great and powerful as if they were a child's security blanket.

As we celebrate this year the 50th anniversary of the ANZUS alliance, it is useful to re-state what I think should be the major elements of Australia's national security, and these are:

- a defence strategy of self-reliance;
- an alliance with the United States which does not require unrealistic levels of military commitment to our direct defence by the US;
- and a regional strategy of engagement with Asia as a means of ensuring our security with our regional neighbours.

The difference between Labor and the Coalition over the ANZUS alliance does not lie in the degree of our commitment to it. It lies in the broader ambitions Labor has for Australia itself.

It lies in Labor's firm conviction that one of the most useful contributions Australia can make to our alliance is to develop our own strong – and independent – relationships with our neighbours in Asia.

And by generating ideas, as we did with APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum, that will help to ensure that the Asia Pacific navigates the uncertain period ahead with peace preserved and prosperity developing.

And it certainly lies in our conviction that at all times we best serve our ally and friend by speaking our mind openly, frankly and truthfully with the boldness of vision pioneered by John Curtin all those years ago.

Turning to the second point, I think a man of Curtin's intelligence would be very much a convert to our concept of the Knowledge Nation. Curtin was always interested in education, and the dissemination of knowledge.

Indeed, in Curtin's view education even had a moral aspect, as he told the audience at the opening of the University of WA's Hackett Buildings in 1932:

The pursuit of knowledge is far more important than even knowledge itself. It involves discipline and training, which in turn are moulders of character. That is why the Labour movement has always striven, even passionately, for educative opportunities for all.

As we enter a new millennium, we find that educative opportunities are essential for everyone in a small country like ours if we are to continue to be a prosperous nation in this rapidly changing world of technology and globalisation.

Many of Curtin's far-sighted policies put us in a good position to prosper in the 1940s and 50s, to emerge from the wartime austerities into a prosperous era of plenty.

But the world has been changing fast since those halcyon years of high growth and full employment, and a leader of the calibre of a John Curtin, if he were with us today, would be determined to put into place the building blocks of a knowledge economy, not waiting until the world left us behind.

The terms and conditions of national survival have changed, but the urgency has not. Labor is needed as never before in national government, because it is the Labor ideals of egalitarianism, and education for all that will set this country on the road to the future.

We are a nation of only 19 million people.

Our domestic market is too small to sustain the living standards we want for the 21st century from our domestic economy alone. We have to be a great trading nation and a nation at the forefront of new ideas and new discoveries. Many of the reforms of the last Labor Government set us on that right track.

But we need more now. We need to mend the fractures in our community, the jigsaw fault lines that divide wealthy regions from poor ones, the bush from regional centres, outer suburbs from inner suburbs. We need that because we need to harness the skills of everyone, not just the lucky few, in this country if we are to succeed in the difficult task of creating the Knowledge Nation.

As we did in wartime in the past, we must have an absolute commitment to all of our fellow citizens.

The greatest division that is occurring in our society right now — and one that will open up more widely if we don't act — is that between the skills-rich and the skills-poor. And it is going to take nothing less than a ten-year plan to remedy that.

You will remember that last year I set up a Taskforce under Barry Jones to develop a blueprint for Labor's Knowledge Nation. That report was presented to me on Monday, and I am spending a lot of my time discussing its results around this country.

The Taskforce paints a bleak picture of Australia's relative place in the world. We are slipping behind in key measures of education, research and innovation. We face a great challenge to boost our productivity, and living standards, for the future. And without prompt action our success in the world will only come at the cost of a more divided society.

In 1995 Australia invested 1.18 percent of GDP in university education, today it is only 1.09 percent of GDP. In 1995 combined public and private investment in tertiary education was 1.67 percent, today it has dropped back to 1.5 percent.

Between March 1996 and March 1999, we enjoyed an excellent labour productivity performance, courtesy of the reforms of the 1980s and 90s. Average growth over this 3 year period was just under 1% every quarter.

The recent March quarter national accounts, which were such a relief for all Australians in showing the GST had not pushed us into recession, nevertheless had a troubling story to tell about our recent productivity performance. I recently had prepared for me a graph with a four quarter moving average of labour productivity growth over the last five years. With quarter to quarter volatility smoothed out of the series, it shows an unmistakable picture — productivity growth rising from around half a percent per quarter to peak just above 1% a quarter in late 1997.

But from that peak of around 1% a quarter, we have been sliding ever since. Our current four quarter moving average for productivity growth is about a tenth of one percent.

To my mind the cause of this is the savage cuts to innovation incentives, education, training and labour market programs made in the Howard government's early budgets.

Well, our Knowledge Nation plans are aimed squarely at tackling these problems. Perhaps the most interesting element for those in this room is the Taskforce's recommendation to double Australia's overall Research and Development levels as a percentage of GDP by 2010. Reaching this target will make Australia the world leader in R&D investment, just passing Finland. Australia must try to achieve it.

The Taskforce has also recommended that we direct this extra effort to knowledge industries through a national investment strategy that targets the commercial drivers of new companies.

Where in the past, all the argument was for or against "picking winners", the Report tells us to help the winners pick themselves – investing in the drivers of competitive businesses such as innovation, workplace skills, and commercialisation.

This more intelligent, market-driven approach will ensure that Australia has more high quality basic research, a skilled workforce and incentives to commercialise potential growth industries. ep Doubling R&D will enable us not only to create new industries but also to revitalise our existing mining and manufacturing base. The Taskforce has also called for the establishment of an Institute for Manufacturing to

ensure that existing industries are able to embed new knowledge-based ideas and techniques in their products and processes.

The Taskforce has outlined a further set of ambitious goals for Australia:

- to lead the world in biotechnology by building on Australia's existing strengths in medical research;
- to become one of the first countries to provide universal access to affordable high-bandwidth services;
- to foster a large-scale environmental management industry to create thousands of future jobs, tackle Australia's and the world's environmental crisis, and provide a future for our regions; and
- to gain a head start over the world in emerging services industries, including medical services and online education, creating thousands of jobs for our talented young academics, teachers, doctors, nurses and IT specialists.

To those who say we can't afford to meet the challenge laid down by this report, I say this:

Imagine the courage it took – not only for Curtin, but for all Australians – to face up to the imperatives of changing traditional alliances, and enforcing self-reliance, during Australia's greatest national emergency.

What I am asking for today – in the face of a more long-term challenge — is for each Australian to re-affirm faith in the creativity and talents of this country's people.

My political opponents have tried to re-frame this debate in terms of accountancy – the language with which they feel most comfortable.

For the rest of us, the task must be to shrug off this poverty of national aspiration, and set ourselves to the task.

For my part, I commit the Australian Labor Party to the long-term agenda of this Taskforce Report, and I pledge all my energies and my every working day to achieving it.

These are the issues on which I will stake my future as a political leader. I do so in the strong tradition of John Curtin who knew how to turn ideals into practical solutions. And as did Curtin, I truly believe that the Australian people have it within them to win through on this vision.

But leaders themselves must first show the commitment. As John Curtin once famously wrote to his mentor, Frank Anstey:

You have no right to lay down your arms while life moves in you ...we are standard bearers in a holy war and we must go on to the end and not yield while life is left to us.

Thank you