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From Curtin to Beazley: Labor leaders and the American alliance

Public lecture by JCPML Visiting Scholar Professor Peter Edwards on 8 October 2001.

To use a time-honoured phrase, it is both a privilege and a pleasure to be here. It is a privilege to be invited to speak to a distinguished audience at the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, to mark the 60th anniversary of John Curtin's accession to the Prime Ministership of Australia. I thank Curtin University and the staff of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library for that honour, especially the Director Dr Vicki Williamson and the Archivist Ms Kandy-Jane Henderson. It is also a great pleasure to have cause to revisit the State in which I grew up. You may see before you a middle-aged man in a grey suit, but just out of sight is a lad with a mop of sun-bleached hair and a permanently sunburnt nose, who can't wait to get some North Cottesloe sand between his toes.

When Kim Beazley spoke here on 5 July, marking the anniversary of Curtin's death, he said:

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. 1

In that spirit, I wish to look at one of the most important of the 'myths and legends' surrounding Curtin and to lift a portion of that veil. I wish to point to what may appear an uncomfortable truth, not least at the challenging time we face today. But it is a truth of which we need to be aware, not only to understand John Curtin and his

place in Australian history, but also to understand the position in which we find ourselves today.

The legend to which I refer states that Curtin was a principal founder of the Australian-American alliance. There are many variations on the theme, but in its simplest form the legend states that Australia was left exposed to the danger of Japanese invasion by the failure of Britain to defend this part of the Empire. Curtin then turned dramatically to the United States for support. He formed a close alliance with General Douglas MacArthur, which became the basis of a close and cordial relationship of mutual support. The relationship was quickly, almost automatically, embodied in the ANZUS treaty and in the close collaboration of Australians and Americans in later conflicts. We have heard reverberations of this tale in recent weeks. They were in the air on 1 September when the 50th anniversary of the signing of ANZUS was celebrated; and again on 14 September, when ANZUS was formally invoked, for the first time ever, following the horrific events in the United States on the 11th.

I want to draw your attention to one part of this story of which I believe most Australians are not aware. First I must set the scene. Curtin became Prime Minister on 7 October 1941, just two months before Pearl Harbor and the beginning of the Japanese thrust southward through east and south-east Asia. Australia had placed its faith in its membership of the British Empire, but the Empire's Singapore strategy was sunk along with the battleship Prince of Wales and the battle cruiser Repulse. In the most traumatic months of Australia's national history, Singapore fell, thousands of Australian troops became prisoners of war of the Japanese, Darwin and other Australian towns were bombed, and the prospect of enemy invasion came ever closer. Reflecting the widespread Australian feeling that Australia had been left exposed and vulnerable, Curtin and Winston Churchill exchanged telegrams that were often tense and sometimes bitter. In late December Curtin, in what was intended as a routine New Year's statement for a newspaper, made his famous assertion:

'Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.' 2

This shocked Australians, who generally thought of themselves as a British community in the Antipodes. Moreover, it was received just as poorly in Washington as it was in London. President Franklin D. Roosevelt made it clear that he and Churchill would be sticking to their 'beat Hitler first' strategy. The war in the Pacific would be regarded as a holding war, while priority was given to defeating the principal enemy in Europe. Australians wondered whether allied forces in this part of the world were strong enough even for a holding strategy. Many panicked and fled inland.

Relief seemed to be at hand in March 1942, when the American commander in the Philippines, General Douglas MacArthur, was ordered to escape the disaster in that American colony and to proceed to Australia, to become the Commander-in-Chief of the newly formed command known as the South-West Pacific Area. The Australian public received him with rapturous acclaim. Supremely confident in demeanour, looking every inch the masterful commander, MacArthur seemed to personify the figure of whom Australians had long dreamt – the American who would save Australia from the depredations of the Japanese. To all appearances, Curtin and MacArthur quickly formed a close working relationship, which was institutionalized in the Prime Minister's War Conference. This body comprised Curtin, MacArthur, Frederick Shedden – the secretary of both the Defence Department and the War Cabinet – and anyone else Curtin decided to invite. As David Horner has illustrated, this highly unorthodox group – the Prime Minister, a civil servant and a foreign general – became the focus of Australian strategic policy-making, outweighing in importance the Cabinet, the War Cabinet, the Advisory War Council and the other centres of policy-making authority. 3

By the end of May Australia's position remained delicate. Japan's naval attack had been blunted in the battle of the Coral Sea, but the naval battle that would prove to be truly decisive in the Pacific – Midway – was still a few days away. The Japanese thrust through New Guinea, leading to crucial battles on the Kokoda Track and elsewhere, were still to come. To underline Australia's vulnerability, on the last day in May three midget submarines entered Sydney Harbour, missing their principal targets but causing some loss of life.

This was the position when the Prime Minister's War Conference met in Melbourne on the morning of 1 June 1942. The minutes of the meeting, held at the National Archives of Australia with copies here in the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, show that those present were Curtin, MacArthur, Shedden, and MacArthur's chief of staff, Major General Sutherland. After discussing whether there should be a public statement on the midget submarine raid, the meeting turned to what was evidently a long monologue by MacArthur on the strategic position. The summary in the minutes (presumably prepared by Shedden) cover three and a half pages, with no evidence of any intervention or response by Curtin. MacArthur was shown Australian telegrams to and from the Minister for External Affairs, Dr H.V. Evatt, who was in London seeking reinforcements from the British. The cables showed that Evatt was having little success.

I should like now to read you the next two paragraphs of the minutes of the meeting. They make, I believe, a most important point. Nevertheless, as far as I know, this passage has not been quoted in any history of Australian strategy, nor in any study of Australian-American relations, nor in any biography of Curtin or MacArthur or Shedden. ⁴ MacArthur is always referred to as 'the Commander-in-Chief'. The passage reads:

' The Commander-in-Chief desired to point out the distinctions between the United States and the United Kingdom in their relations and responsibilities to Australia. Australia was part of the British Empire and it was related to Britain and the other Dominions by ties of blood, sentiment and allegiance to the Crown. The United States was an ally whose aim was to win the war, and it had no sovereign interest in the integrity of Australia. Its interest in Australia was from the strategical aspect of the utility of Australia as a base from which to attack and defeat the Japanese. As the British Empire was a Commonwealth of Nations, he presumed that one of its principal purposes was jointly to protect any part that might be threatened. The failure of the United Kingdom and U.S.A. Governments to support Australia therefore had to be viewed from different angles.' ⁵

The Commander-in-Chief added that, though the American people were animated by a warm friendship for Australia, their purpose in building up forces in the

Commonwealth was not so much from an interest in Australia but rather from its utility as a base from which to hit Japan. In view of the strategical importance of Australia in a war with Japan, this course of military action would probably be followed irrespective of the American relationship to the people who might be occupying Australia.

We should think long and hard about the implications of this passage. We have always known that President Roosevelt did not welcome Curtin's statement that 'Australia looks to America', which he thought smacked of panic. We have known that military planners in Washington, including a rising general named Dwight D. Eisenhower, saw Australia principally as a convenient base. But Australians have not been told that Curtin's appeal was so categorically rejected by MacArthur himself, the very man who worked so closely with the Australian Prime Minister that Curtin was accused of surrendering Australian sovereignty to the American general. 6

Curtin's statement about looking to America gave voice to a strand in Australian official and public thought that goes back at least as far as 1908, when Alfred Deakin risked the wrath of British imperial authorities by inviting President Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet to visit Australia. That fleet visit attracted huge crowds, whose enthusiasm was encapsulated in a song called 'Big Brother', written by a Western Australian newspaperman while the fleet was anchored off Albany. The chorus went:

' We've got a big brother in America,
Uncle Sam, Uncle Sam!
The same old blood, the same old speech,
The same old songs are good enough for each,
We'll all stand together, boys,
If the foes want a flutter or a fuss,
And we're hanging out the sign
From the Leeuwin to the Line
This bit o' the world belongs to us!' 7

For the next three decades Australians looked anxiously for evidence that Americans saw Australia not just as a friend but as kith and kin, another predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, English-speaking, Judaeo-Christian civilization, a younger brother who deserved to be saved from an oriental enemy.

Now, with the most feared oriental foe on Australia's doorstep, Curtin had made his appeal, and MacArthur was spelling out America's rejection of it with brutal clarity. To borrow a phrase from a later period of Australian-American relations, Australia was seen as nothing more than 'a suitable piece of real estate', conveniently placed to be the base for the counter-attack against the Japanese. From what MacArthur said, it would not have mattered whether Australians had brown or black or purple skins; whether they were Muslim or pagan or Zoroastrian by religion; or whether they spoke thirty-eight different languages, all incomprehensible to American ears. The Australian landmass offered a geographically convenient base for American forces, and that was all that mattered to American policy-makers.

All too clearly, MacArthur was throwing Curtin's reference to 'traditional links [and] kinship with the United Kingdom' back in the Prime Minister's face. He was asserting that it was precisely to those links and that kinship that Australia should look for its security. Curtin and MacArthur were equally frustrated by the reluctance of either Britain or America to give greater support to the South-West Pacific Area, but MacArthur was drawing a moral distinction between Britain and America. According to MacArthur, if Britain provided too little military support for Australia, it was failing in its moral duty, its fundamental obligation to a fellow member of the British Empire and Commonwealth. By contrast, he argued, Washington was perfectly entitled to make cold-blooded decisions about the deployment of American forces in the light of its global strategy, without the slightest sense of obligation to Australia for its own sake. The implication was that, when the Americans no longer needed to use Australia as a convenient base, the American forces would move on, without a backward glance at the subsequent fate of the Australian people.

We know that Curtin was a sensitive man who felt deeply the responsibilities of wartime leadership. We can only guess at how keenly he must have been hurt by this uncompromising rejection of his appeal to the United States. Nevertheless, he kept

resolutely quiet about it, as did that epitome of the discreet bureaucrat, Frederick Shedden. They probably did themselves, the government, the Labor Party and the nation a service by so doing. It would have been much more difficult in later years to establish, and then to maintain over half a century, an alliance which governments of all persuasions have seen as vital, if Australians generally had known that MacArthur had told Curtin that the United States saw no interest in preserving Australia's territorial integrity and that Americans had no special regard for the Australian people.

What MacArthur said to Curtin helps to explain many things, both in the tragically short remainder of Curtin's life and in subsequent decades. For example, the National Library in 1997 published a collection of notes on the off-the-record briefings given by Curtin to a group of reporters. The editors, Clem Lloyd and Richard Hall, claim that these briefings present a picture, not of 'a man struggling with illness and crushed by the burdens of wartime leadership' but rather of 'a Prime Minister acute in analysis, vigorous in language and confident of his decisions'. But they note that Curtin said remarkably little about MacArthur in these off-the-record briefings, and that he was 'mostly negative about the American war leaders and their policies'. He showed, they say, not 'the veneration and gratitude of an Australian Prime Minister for a great and powerful friend' but 'a sort of wearied resignation about what must be ∞ [or] a sardonic emphasis on motivations and outcomes that borders on contempt'. [8](#) Perhaps now we can better understand that attitude.

We can also understand why Curtin turned so emphatically to praise Australia's 'traditional links [and] kinship with the United Kingdom' in the next couple of years. For the rest of the war, and especially during the election campaign of 1943, he identified himself whole-heartedly with British race patriotism. He became the only Australian Prime Minister to appoint as Governor-General, not a mere minor aristocrat, but a royal duke. In 1944 he took to the Prime Ministers' Conference in London a proposal to coordinate even more closely the foreign policies of the member nations of the British Empire. Historians have sometimes puzzled over this shift in Curtin's supposed leanings. We can now assume that he 'wrapped himself in the Union Jack', as some commentators described it, precisely because MacArthur

had told him so bluntly that Australia had no other choice. It should certainly not look to Uncle Sam as a protective big brother.

We also need to reassess, in the light of this new evidence, the history of the Australian-American alliance from the 1940s to the present day. This is not the time or place to attempt a full-scale reassessment. I would like only to make a few comments on how it affects the way we might look at the management of Australia's relations with the United States by those who succeeded Curtin as leaders of the Labor party. For a start, the message MacArthur gave Curtin helps to explain why his successor, Ben Chifley, and Dr Evatt found it impossible to persuade the Americans to maintain, in the post-war era, the wartime base at Manus Island.

MacArthur's blunt description of American strategic interests make it all the more remarkable that a Liberal Minister for External Affairs, Percy Spender, was able to seize a brief opportunity during the Korean War to get American agreement to a security treaty which clearly implied that the United States did see an interest in protecting Australian territorial integrity. In subsequent years coalition governments boasted of their achievement, implying that only they and not the Labor Party could be trusted to maintain the alliance and thus the American security guarantee. All too often the Labor Party, under the leadership of H.V. Evatt and Arthur Calwell, were unable to counter this argument. Neither Evatt nor Calwell was in any real sense 'anti-American', but the Labor party that they led was deeply divided over the wisdom of close association with the United States. By the mid 1950s that association took the form not only of ANZUS but also of the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). When the Labor party came to power in 1972, after twenty-three years in Opposition, its leader, Gough Whitlam, had taken a decision which proved wise, to abandon SEATO but to maintain ANZUS. It was Whitlam's misfortune that his government was elected in the same month as the so-called 'Christmas bombing' of Hanoi and Haiphong in the last stages of the Vietnam war. It was not easy to maintain the ANZUS alliance when some of the newly elected ministers in the Whitlam Government were publicly describing President Nixon and his advisers as thugs and maniacs, and their actions as the morally bankrupt product of corrupt men. Whitlam and those close to him had to undertake a skilful rearguard action to

keep the ANZUS alliance alive, when Nixon was known to be furious with the Australian government. This rearguard action may have been more significant than was understood at the time, in making the alliance a truly bi-partisan commitment.

The Labor government which probably deserves the greatest credit for management of the alliance was led by a great admirer of John Curtin, Bob Hawke. In the early and mid 1980s the alliance came under severe strain. Cold War tensions were extremely high, with the Soviet Union deploying a new range of missiles in Europe and President Reagan responding in ways which, as we now know, eventually bankrupted the Soviet Union. In this situation, the Left of the Labor party saw the joint Australian-American defence facilities as making Australia a potential nuclear target. After the Vietnam war, the Left was strong enough to raise these issues even at the risk of embarrassing, and potentially bringing down, a Labor government. The Hawke government closely supervised the work of a former Labor leader, Bill Hayden, as Foreign Minister and a future leader, Kim Beazley, as Defence Minister. Over several years they took a number of steps to maintain the alliance, and especially the joint facilities which had come to be central to the relationship, while making them more acceptable to the Left. The joint facilities were made more genuinely joint in operation as well as in name. To disarm the disarmers, the Government appointed an Ambassador for Disarmament, who spent much of his time telling Labor Party branches of the government's achievements in this field; it established a Peace Research Centre at the Australian National University; and it publicized the importance of the facilities in monitoring international arms control agreements. This determined exercise ensured that the whole party backed the continuation of the alliance and the maintenance of the joint facilities. At one point Hawke's personal relations with Secretary of State George Shultz were crucial in saving the Prime Minister from a caucus revolt over Australian assistance to an American missile test.

During this exercise, Bob Hawke made skilful use of the Labor myth – that John Curtin had created the Australian-American alliance – to gain party support for his actions. Hawke's frequent references to Curtin would have been much less effective if the country had known what we now know about Curtin and MacArthur. We can now see that the alliance which Hawke and his colleagues so resolutely defended had not

been created by John Curtin. His appeal for American strategic support had been categorically rejected. Hawke was actually defending an alliance that had been secured by the other side of politics, but which had been maintained and developed by both coalition and Labor governments for several decades. His use of Curtin to gain historical depth for his policies was politically astute, but it went beyond what the historical record will now support. In some ways this makes the Hawke Government's achievement the greater. (I realize that this may make me the first historian or commentator ever to accuse Bob Hawke of undue modesty in describing his government's achievements.)

Hawke's successor as Labor leader, Paul Keating, placed great emphasis on Australian engagement with Asia, but he did not define Asia narrowly. He and his Ministers, especially Gareth Evans, liked to speak of 'the Asia-Pacific', deliberately incorporating the United States as well as Northeast and Southeast Asia into their definition of Australia's region.

As Minister for Defence in the Hawke Government, Kim Beazley was deeply involved in the work of that government to maintain the alliance. If he were to win the forthcoming election, he would probably have the best credentials of any incoming Australian Prime Minister as a manager of the Australian-American alliance. It is not just that he has written on the topic as an academic; it is not just that he has been closely involved in operating the alliance and that he knows many of the key players. From Washington's point of view, he was a principal member of a team who fought to maintain the alliance, and to shape it for the post-Vietnam era, when it faced major challenges. There would today be no fears in Washington for the future of the alliance if Labor were to win this election, and that is a great change from the position in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

Our Prime Minister for the next three years, whether Kim Beazley or John Howard, will face immense challenges in managing the alliance. How will Australia cope with the rise of China as a potential strategic rival to the United States? Can it secure a trade agreement with the United States, which advances our economic interests without cutting across the strategic relationship? Can Australia keep up the cost of defence equipment necessary to be able to operate jointly with the Americans? How

can we assist in the international effort to fight terrorism without unduly exposing ourselves to disproportionate risk? Nevertheless, we can be reasonably sure of one thing. No future Australian Prime Minister is likely to hear a senior American say bluntly that the United States sees no strategic interest in maintaining Australia's territorial integrity, and does not greatly care who occupies this continental landmass. Thanks to Curtin's discreet silence, and the efforts of many people not least his successors as Labor leaders, we have come a long way from the harsh message that was delivered to John Curtin on 1 June 1942.

Endnotes:

1. Kim Beazley, 'John Curtin's Abiding Vision', lecture at the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, 5 July 2001.
2. Norman Harper (ed.), *Australia and the United States*, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1971, pp. 135-9, includes the full text and a reproduction of the Melbourne Herald article of 27 December 1941.
3. David Horner first drew attention to this body in *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy 1939-1945* (George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1982), and reiterated it in *Inside the War Cabinet: Directing Australia's War Effort 1939-1945* (Allen & Unwin, St Leonards NSW, 1996) and *Defence Supremo: Sir Frederick Shedden and the Making of Australian Defence Policy* (Allen & Unwin, St Leonards NSW, 2000).
4. The one exception of which I am aware is David Day, *The Great Betrayal: Britain, Australia & the Onset of the Pacific War 1939-42* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney and London, 1988), pp. 338-9, which quotes a couple of phrases from this passage, but does not discuss its significance in Australian-American relations.
5. Minutes of Prime Minister's War Conference, Melbourne, 1 June 1942, p. 2: JCPML.
6. See the discussion in Peter Edwards, 'Curtin, MacArthur and the "surrender of sovereignty": a historiographical assessment', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 55, no. 2, July 2001, pp. 175-85.

7. 'Dryblower' Murphy's song, quoted in Neville Meaney, *The Search for Security in the Pacific 1901-1914* (Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1976), p. 169
8. Clem Lloyd and Richard Hall (eds.), *Backroom Briefings: John Curtin's War* (National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1997), pp. 13-14, 31-5