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John Curtin: internationalist

Public lecture presented by JCPML Visiting Scholar Professor Marilyn Lake on 9 October 2003.

In this lecture I want to explore the apparent contradiction between John Curtin's international socialism and his commitment to White Australia, by locating his political development in its colonial and post-colonial contexts and its national and international contexts. In examining his political formation within the framework of the formative years of the Commonwealth of Australia, I'll also make some observations about the specifically masculine investments in White Australia, in terms of the policy's assumed importance for the status and self-esteem of white manhood.

I'll look at Curtin's commitment to international forums such as the League of Nations, the International Labor Organisation (ILO) – which Curtin attended as a delegate in 1924 – and the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Congress, which he identified as offering ways of resolving the tension between his rejection of 'racial hatred' ('that poisonous drug' as he called it in 1924) and his support of a racially discriminatory immigration policy. A 'policy of mutual goodwill is the only basis on which our white Australia doctrine can ultimately rest' Curtin cautioned more than once in the pages of the *Westralian Worker*.

Paradoxically, the man who would provide such distinguished national leadership during World War 2, dedicated most of his life to promoting the trans-national idea of the world's common humanity: 'The people of the world have many things in common', he wrote in 1923, at the age of thirty eight, 'economic interests, science, art, ideas, ideals. Ranged against those common interests there are traditions, prejudices, hatreds, national barriers, sectarian differences, language obstacles, and

racial conflicts that have proved so effective in keeping peoples separated. The common interests are the vital means of social advancement, and it is upon them that the emphasis of constructive thinking must be laid in any effort to promote world understanding’.

Curtin was of the Great War generation, who was inspired by US president Woodrow Wilson’s 14 points, as the basis for a new world order, in particular his promise of ‘self-determination’ as a means to prevent future wars. He hailed the advent of the ILO – the spectacle of delegates from 40 countries meeting on a common platform to consider proposals for the humane regulation of industry – as having ‘a moral significance of immense value to civilisation’.

But like many others, he was disillusioned by what occurred at the Versailles conference, and in expressing his misgivings, Curtin became the first Australian political leader to press for ‘the definition and preservation of native land rights’ for Indigenous peoples. The concept of Indigenous ‘land rights’ was a radically new idea and would not be codified in an international convention until the ILO itself did so with its Convention Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Populations in 1957, which in turn inspired Australian advocacy of ‘land rights’ by the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In denouncing the haggling between imperial powers at the Versailles conference, Curtin noted that Australia was fully complicit with the ‘game of grab’: ‘Mr Hughes has ever been a clamant voice for Australian annexation in the Pacific’. And Curtin noted the logical connection between self-determination and de-colonisation in the *Westralian Worker*, in February 1919:

The question of the German Colonies is in itself a sufficient evidence of how lightly the Congress regarded the rights of native populations. We are getting in respect to the problem of colonisation only what the Colonial Offices stand for, and are being put in the position of doing as a World-Congress precisely what Downing Street has done for two centuries. All the argument has been directed as to how the colonies

could be kept from Germany. Not a thought has been given as to how they could be made free of everybody.

And yet that is what self-determination means if it means anything. The rights and interests of the natives rather than the 'safety and security' of European powers should have been the first consideration of the Congress. If the Congress had really sought to realise a world in which democracy could be said to be safe, then the obligation was on it to frame a world-charter of the liberties and rights of primitive peoples equally with those of the allegedly advanced civilisations.

Any such charter would include provisions for the prohibition of forced labour; the definition and preservation of native land rights; complete separation of the administration from all forms of native exploitation; and the maintenance of and respect for tribal authority, laws and customs. This is what Australia should have done in Papua. It is what should have been done by the imperialist powers in regard to colonies peopled by natives the world over.

Significantly, Curtin could not see the implications for Indigenous peoples within Australia for he did not see them as a colonised people. Britain was the imperial power and (white) Australians the colonials. As late as 1923, Curtin lamented that Australia had 'yet to achieve the dignity of nationhood'.

His failure to recognise White Australian colonialism was evident in his denunciation of French imperialism in the Middle East, when he drew attention to a tragedy that had befallen the 'inoffensive inhabitants of Damascus', when in 'a disgusting example of European "culture"', the French 'paraded the dead bodies of twenty-four native rebels through the streets of the town, and afterwards exhibited them in the marketplace as a warning to all Syrians, who might be tempted to object to their country being dominated by foreigners'. In his analysis Curtin identified with the Syrians, but he could not recognise the contemporary violence against Western Australian Aborigines as akin to that perpetrated by the French settlers in the Middle East.

His 1925 commentary nevertheless offered a remarkably contemporary-sounding and prophetic portrait of the Middle East:

Its effect on the native population was just what any normal person would expect; the people were aroused to fury by the sight of their slaughtered countrymen, and their feelings were expressed in ineffective, but understandable mob violence. That expression of outraged sentiment was sufficient for their French masters to pitilessly destroy their homes with artillery shells and aeroplane bombs. It resulted in a big proportion of the ancient town of Damascus being razed to the ground; in many of its men, women and children being killed and injured; and in thousands of innocent people rendered homeless.

The anti-imperial moral of the story was clear:

It is not natural for any nation to have to submit to being governed by foreigners. No matter how benevolent that government, it is a yoke which the governed desire to throw off. The foreigners nearly always try to justify their usurpation of authority by the cry that the country they are administering is subject to internal disorder and is not fitted for self-government. That is the reason given by all nations interfering in China, by France and Spain in Morocco, and by Britain in India. ...If the position in each case, however, is analysed, it will be found that the real reason for the domination of all those countries by outsiders is the fact that the exploitation of their natural resources and cheap labour returns huge profits to the foreign money which always follows the Imperial flag.

The incident at Damascus serves to illustrate the shortcomings of an Imperial policy....Imperialism was never a greater danger to the peace of the world than it is in these days of quick communications. One step too far in the carrying out of the policy by a military maniac like General Sarrail, and white civilisation can be endangered by a fanatical religious war. That danger is too serious to go unrecognised.

But Curtin, like his fellow Australians, did not see White Australia as an occupying colonising power. Aborigines could not be conceptualised as colonised people,

because Britain, 'with its supercilious air of lofty superiority' still treated white Australians as inferiors.

Aborigines in the 1920s were considered neither as colonised peoples nor as subjugated nations, but rather, they were cast in evolutionary terms as a 'dying race' – unlike Blacks in southern Africa. Curtin's father-in-law, Abraham Needham, a poet and a socialist, had migrated to South Africa and worked as a labour organiser in Cape Town from 1896, where he helped establish the Social Democratic Federation and edited its paper the *Cape Socialist*. He had left in the late 1900s and settled in Hobart. On a trip to Tasmania in 1912, Curtin met Needham's daughter Elsie, whom Curtin would later marry. Through the Needhams, Curtin became better acquainted with the complex and racialised politics of South Africa. 'The problem of South Africa concerns its own black man', wrote Curtin in 1924. 'Our blackfellow is, relatively speaking, not a problem at all – he's a moral responsibility, but not a menace'. Australia had been claimed for the 'white man' and his 'moral responsibility' – his obligation – was to ease the Black man's passing.

The same year in which Curtin pondered the condition of 'our blackfellow' – 1924 – an old comrade, Frank Knowles, wrote from England to the general secretary of the state executive of the ALP seeking support from Western Australian labourites for his election to the British House of Commons: perhaps his old friends might send a tribute which could be published in the local paper? Knowles had stood for parliament in Western Australia for the seat of Albany during the Win-the-War election campaign in May 1917, but had since returned to England, where his parents still lived. 'Only those who have lived "with the boys" who have rubbed shoulder to shoulder with the White Man of W.A', he wrote with nostalgia, 'can feel as we feel, no one knows how we miss the Fellowship we had in little Denmark. We feel as strangers still in the land of our birth'. That is, Knowles now felt like a stranger in his home country of England.

It was in Western Australia, paradoxically, that the White Man really felt at home. Being a 'white man' was central, too, to John Curtin's identity, which is not to say he was a racist – as we have seen Curtin was an advocate of self-determination for colonised peoples and he was at pains to condemn racial prejudice. Rather, it is to

say that 'race thinking' shaped his and his contemporaries' understanding of the world and also, crucially, their sense of self. Curtin's political understanding of racial oppression was shaped by international socialism.

John Curtin left school early, but schooled himself in the literature of socialism and focussed especially on historical writings, reading Marx, JA Hobson and Edward Morel. The earlier works in the Curtin family library include books by Robert Blatchford, Hegel, Henry George, Herbert Spencer, JS Mill, Kier Hardie, Karl Kautsky and Bernard Shaw. From such writings Curtin came to understand imperial capitalism as a dynamic global force that fed on the exploitation of labour and resources world wide and thus brought into being an international proletariat. It was capitalism that called forth the 'bogey of racial animosity and human superstition' and 'given economic antagonism as an incubator of hostility, racial distrust easily becomes a national sentiment for war'.

Curtin was encouraged in his thinking by the avowed 'cosmopolitanism' of his mentor, Tom Mann, who arrived in Melbourne from England in 1902 and became secretary of the newly formed Socialist Party of Victoria. Socialism, according to Curtin, needed to be a world-wide movement, challenging national barriers and boundaries. At the height of Australian nationalism, in the first decade of the Commonwealth of Australia, Curtin encouraged workers to identify not with fellow Australians, but with fellow workers across the globe: 'Every nation and every continent tells the tale – Europe, America, Africa, in each and all to relatively the same extent – republic and monarchy, limited or absolute – protectionist, high or low, freetrade, real or supposed – it makes not one iota of difference what the form of government or the nature of fiscalism in operation, the dominant characteristic is everywhere the same – an accumulation of wealth, contemporaneous with an increasing degree of extensive and intensive impoverishment and suffering'.

Socialism was relevant where ever there was class domination: ' And it is this fundamental difference of Community versus Class which makes the extension of the principles of Social Action one that has no concern for race or frontier, but gives it the wide world for its field to operate in, and all men and all nations to serve and benefit'.

'No concern for race or frontier': this was for Curtin the meaning of international socialism.

To promote these ideas, the Victorian Socialist Party established a Cosmopolitan Committee, which encouraged contributions from speakers from non-British backgrounds. Bertha Walker remembered an 'International Night at which there were about twenty different nationalities'. Tom Mann introduced each one on the platform and 'there was huge applause for an African who worked as a bootblack in Bourke Street'. Mann advocated 'cosmopolitanism' in the pages of the *Socialist*:

No narrow nationalism can satisfy our people. Nothing short of Cosmopolitanism can really satisfy a world citizen. 'The world is my country!' is the declaration of every Socialist. It is our mission then to speed the day when racial antipathies shall be completely obliterated, when national boundaries will exist only as indicating that certain areas were the cradles of certain peoples.

In 1908 in a letter to his young friend Jessie Gunn about the Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott, Curtin noted that Scott was 'a pronounced Nationalist' who loved his country; but it was 'better to love humanity'.

Meanwhile the Labor party had written the preservation of racial purity into its platform. At its interstate conference in 1905, the ALP had adopted an objective that combined support for 'racial purity' with nationalism; in 1908 the conference re-confirmed their objective: 'The cultivation of an Australian sentiment based upon the maintenance of racial purity, and the development in Australia of an enlightened and self-reliant community'. In the new post-Boer war South Africa, the white men who came into self-government passed legislation excluding Blacks and Coloureds from political rights.

In 1909, these developments were discussed in Melbourne in an article in the *Socialist* called 'White Socialism'. It reported a discussion about the new military defence scheme and the White Australia policy, in the Socialist Party Hall in Elizabeth Street. 'Without just here entering these questions, we will say that no Socialist can demand socialism for whites only, or a White World, so to speak. The

Party, as organised in Germany, France, England, America, Australia, Japan, India, etc is on Tom Paine's basis, 'The World is my Country'. The paper reported further on the organisation of a Congress of all non-white men to claim Socialistic justice 'and we are for that every time...See the beastly tyranny just accomplished in the South African federation. No man of any colour but white, of European descent, can sit in the Parliament. The population is one million white, five million coloured, and their own country too!'

In Australia, the Labor party had endorsed the federal government's scheme for compulsory military training. Curtin denounced it and tried to counter the racial and nationalist feelings that encouraged a military mentality. 'Racial feeling', he wrote, 'function[ed] to the advantage of existing despots'. And there was surely no need for racial antagonisms in Australia. After all Japan was Britain's ally. 'And it is also true that the coloured population of the world is mostly subject to British sovereignty, and hence are our fellow subjects, our brothers and sisters of the "Imperial Family"'. As editor of the *Timber Worker*, Curtin denounced the outbreak of war in 1914 ('Back to the Abyss') as the outcome of imperialist rivalries that would set back the cause of international solidarity. It was his opposition to conscription in World War 1 that led to Curtin's brief period of imprisonment in 1916, before he abruptly departed Melbourne to take up the editorship of the *Westralian Worker* newspaper in Perth.

Back in Melbourne in June 1919, as the Versailles Peace Conference proceeded in Paris, an historic meeting was called by Vida Goldstein's Women's Political Association to debate the White Australia policy. In Paris, Australian Prime Minister WM Hughes was fighting a last ditch battle to defeat a Japanese proposal to have a racial equality clause written into the Covenant of the League of Nations. In Melbourne, speakers at the Convention called by the Women's Political Association recognised 'the hiatus between the ideals of working class fraternity and a policy of shut-out of the brother of the "sable livery" of the skin' and wondered whether in light of the new spirit of cosmopolitanism, the time had not come to abandon the White Australia policy. With the entry of Japan into world affairs, a 'change had taken place in the racial aspect of the question'.

In the ensuing discussion, there seemed to be a gendered division of opinion, with women advocating an open door policy and men reminding the audience of the crucial link between restrictive immigration and the (white) male standard of living. 'No-one learns by isolation', said Mrs Griffin, 'Australia is large enough for all'. 'Is our Internationalism only a word', said Miss Fullerton, 'or is it a fact'. Japan convoyed the Australian troops to England without one disaster...now Mr Hughes insults her in Paris'. 'Does not Australia pride herself on being the land of experiments?' asked Miss Weekes. 'Why fear the experiment of admitting Asiatics?' The strongest support for the White Australia policy came from former editor of the *Socialist*, Bob Ross, who observed, 'we must face facts rather than heed ideals and ... they would use the coloured man to break down our strikes'.

Curtin, too, saw the White Australia policy as necessary to uphold the white worker's standard of living – and the white worker's self-esteem and status as a man depended on his white standard of living. As Gail Bedermann has argued, in the early twentieth century, manliness and whiteness were defined in terms of each other: race became crucial to white men's gender identity. Curtin admired manly men: he paid tribute to his mentor Tom Mann as 'a MAN, a truly dynamic man'. His close friend Frank Hyett 'lived the life of a man'. The labour movement had secured working men's status as men and influenced by Frank Anstey, Curtin saw this achievement as a distinctively national achievement. Increasingly, his nationalism and his internationalism seemed to come into conflict.

In a booklet written with Anstey after Curtin's move to Perth, called *The Heritage*, Australian workers' 'heritage' of advanced industrial and social legislation is attributed to the pioneers of the Australian Labor movement, who battled in the late nineteenth century against the forces of privilege and property, and notably against the 'Black Slave trappers' who brought Pacific Islanders to work in the sugar plantations of northern Queensland. 'It was not until the Laborites of Queensland could be given the actual legislative and political backing of the Laborites of the rest of the Commonwealth that the black stain was removed from Australia's escutcheon'. Australia, Curtin would later write, needed to defend its 'white soul', but it must do so by treating 'excluded peoples' such as Chinese and Japanese as

civilised nations. The Chinese and Japanese were 'different', but they should be treated with respect. Australia should be wary of British attempts to cast Japan 'as a probable invader'.

Curtin argued that the White Australia policy was not racially discriminatory because other countries could themselves – especially if freed from imperialism – determine their own immigration policies. Imperial powers should get out of Asia and the Middle East. But he also believed that Australia's exclusive immigration policy could only be justified if socialists and labour activists simultaneously engaged in international action and networking to raise the standard of living of workers around the world. Thus Curtin applauded the establishment of the ILO – the International Labor Organisation – as a branch of the League of Nations and was pleased to attend its meeting in 1924 as one of Australia's three delegates. It was in his commitment to the work of international organisations such as the League of Nations and the ILO, that Curtin sought to resolve the apparent contradiction between his nationalist commitment to racially discriminatory immigration policies and his support for workers world-wide, with 'no concern for race or frontier'.

Curtin left Fremantle in May, 1924, travelling by boat to Marseilles and on by train to Geneva, where he was introduced to the lavish world of international diplomacy. He wrote to his wife, 'his beloved', from the Hotel de la Paix, of having to ask for a less expensive room:

It appears the city is crowded out, it being summer time, & I have had to stay at the place reserved for me by the High Commissioner. They gave me a swell room & my meals added would run me to 8 pound ten shillings a week. I told the manager 'too bloody high' & he knew the meaning of the second word & said he would take me to another room...I have marked my room with a cross. It commands a magnificent view & is fit for a king. The other room was fit for five kings. The staircase is marble & the whole place carpeted. They go for luxury here.

The ILO agenda was crowded and Curtin was elected to two Committees: the first dealing with night work in bakeries and the second with the risk of workers' infection with anthrax, from handling animal products such as wool, bones, skin, hair, horns

and hoofs. He was hampered in his work by the lack of advisers and data (and would later complain about this to the Bruce government, urging that it make available greater support for its important work). Curtin also criticised Australian governments for failing to ratify the conventions and recommendations adopted by previous conferences.

On the issue of anthrax infection, Curtin decided to oppose a proposal for a Draft Convention on compulsory disinfection of wool, because it could harm the Australian wool trade. He was keen, on the other hand, to subject nightwork in bakeries to strict regulation. The Committee met fifteen times and Curtin joined those pushing for tighter controls, because the issue did not simply affect market competition, as employer representatives argued.

One of the primary duties of the Committee, he said, 'was to lay down principles of legislation which would establish equitable conditions of work, fit to serve as a model and a stimulus to countries which had not yet adopted legislation in this sphere'. Curtin pointed to the poor conditions of work associated with night work in bakeries: 'The continuous character of night work in bakeries, and the grave hygienic, moral and social disadvantages attached to it, rendered it in the highest degree prejudicial to the workers engaged in the industry, and the removal of these disadvantages should be authorised by an International Convention'.

Another forum for international exchange was the Pan-Pacific Labor Congress, which had first been mooted at a meeting of the all-Australian Congress of Unions in 1921. Two years later, Curtin wrote: 'Labor must hurry on the Pan-Pacific Labor Congress'. When the meeting finally occurred in Shanghai in 1928 with Australian representation, Curtin was forced to defend it following suggestions from the Bruce government that such meetings undermined the White Australia policy. Earlier Curtin had welcomed the proposal for a Pan-Pacific Labor Congress as a vehicle for disarmament: 'On the success of Labor depends the peace of the Pacific and the peace of the world'. In 1928, he further emphasised:

The meeting held at Shanghai has had a good deal of criticism aimed at it already because an Australian delegate sat in conference with Chinese, Japanese and

Filipinos. The Australian was not the only white man present, and even if he had been, it is not easy to see what that has got to do with 'throwing the White Australia policy into the wastepaper basket' as Bruce accused the Labor party of doing in another part of his speech.

Curtin resisted the efforts of conservatives ('Anglofied Australians') in the 1920s to lock Australia back into the imperial embrace: 'The supercilious contempt with which England has always treated her colonies or dominions is historical. It provoked the American rebellion nearly 150 years ago.' America was 'an example for Australia to follow'.

Interestingly, it was in the context of the arrival of Italian migrants in the 1920s, following the American implementation of discriminatory policies against 'undesirable' types of European immigrants, that Curtin came closest to racist scare-mongering. Clearly, he was influenced by arguments put forward by the American labour movement. In the American Federation of Labor newsletter, *Labor Information*, to which the Western Australian ALP subscribed, Sam Gompers defended the new immigration restrictions on three grounds: protection of American living standards, preventing an influx of persons incapable of citizenship and protecting American institutions from immigrant masses hostile or indifferent to them. In the 1928 election campaign, Curtin accused the Bruce government of allowing migrants from southern Europe 'to dilute our racial homogeneity'. As Matt Jacobs has pointed out in his account of developments in the United States, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, in the race conscious world of the 1920s, not all Europeans qualified as 'white'. Perhaps Curtin thought it less dangerous for Australians to offend Italians than Chinese or Japanese.

Curtin's strong support for the work of the ILO was recognised by its director Albert Thomas, whom Curtin had met in 1924 and who wrote to Curtin in 1930, applauding his speech in parliament urging the Australian government to take its work more seriously. This was especially gratifying from one who could 'speak with the authority which you possess on both national and international aspects of social and industrial legislation'.

I am highly gratified at the tributes which you paid to the work of the Office and the emphasis which you laid on the importance and potential value to Australia of the machinery afforded by the International Labor Conference for the raising of industrial standards throughout the world. I consider that you made out a very good case for the Organisation, both from the point of view of Australia herself, as providing a means of enabling her to maintain her present industrial standards, menaced by the existence of inferior standards in other countries which are or may become her industrial competitors, and from the general point of view of world peace...

And Curtin received a further letter of congratulations on his election as leader of the Labor party in 1935 from the new Director of the ILO, Harold Butler, whom he had also met in 1924 and who paid tribute to Curtin as 'a good friend to the cause for which the International Labour Organisation was established'. 'It is an encouragement to us to persevere', he wrote, 'when we feel we can count on the support of one in your position who can speak with authority and from personal knowledge of our work'.

John Curtin became intellectually and politically committed to the cause of internationalism while living as a young man in Melbourne before the war. But as a trade union organiser and Labor advocate, he was also convinced of the importance of the White Australia policy as the necessary underpinning of the white male worker's standard of living and self-esteem. Recognising the seeming contradiction between his rejection of race prejudice and his embrace of a racially discriminatory immigration policy, he became an active participant in and supporter of the new international organisations established in the 1920s that might bring workers throughout the world up to the Australian standard.

It was a profound historic irony, and tragedy, that Curtin, who had warned of the consequences of a 'vengeful peace' and 'racial distrust' and called for disarmament in the Pacific would be Prime Minister when the worst prophecies came true and Japan attacked Pearl Harbour, Singapore, Darwin and New Guinea in the early 1940s. Japan's military aggression had the effect of re-enforcing Curtin's commitment to White Australia at a time when the rest of the world was preparing to incorporate the principle of non-discrimination on the grounds of race into the new Universal

Declaration of Human Rights. This subsequent history should not, however, obscure Curtin's distinction as an early advocate of de-colonisation, Indigenous land rights and an international solidarity with workers with 'no concern for race or frontier'.