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## An Australian vision: foreign policy challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

JCPML Anniversary Lecture presented by Paul Kelly on 5 July 2004.

It is an honour for me to deliver the annual John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library lecture, not just because of Curtin's unique place in our history but also because of the Australians who have performed this task in the past. Some such as Gough Whitlam, Paul Keating and Kim Beazley shared with Curtin the singular experience of the ALP leadership. All I can share is the modest bond of a fellow journalist. I note, however, Geoffrey Serle's view that Curtin as prime minister had turbulent relations with media proprietors but was rarely disillusioned with the senior political journalists. That suggests an astute tolerance – Curtin is a politician I would have liked very much to have met.

In this lecture I am discussing Australia's role in the world but I want to begin with some observations about Curtin:

John Curtin never thought of himself as a hero and he is a most unlikely hero – a war leader who in many ways was unqualified to lead in wartime. When Curtin became Prime Minister in October 1941 he had had no ministerial experience; he was prone to black moods of depression; his World War One experience as a socialist anti-militarist who was briefly imprisoned was hardly reassuring; he was an anti-conscriptionist in an age of total warfare; and he had no claims as an international statesman when Australia's fate depended upon global strategy.

My point is that Curtin is fascinating for who he was, not just for what he did. His story involved a personal transformation from revolutionary agitator to wartime leader in conditions more demanding than those confronting any other Prime Minister. It is a remarkable odyssey and a very Australian journey. It typifies one of the finest qualities of our democracy – how an ordinary man can achieve

extraordinary things and in the process come to be deemed as extraordinary himself. Geoffrey Serle's assessment of Curtin is surely correct – the justification for his Prime Ministership is that nobody else could have done the job.

However, like all leaders, Curtin is judged by his achievements. He governed during the decisive phase of our first century. The Second World War was the pivotal event in our first hundred years and Curtin's leadership operated at that point. Curtin was both a negotiator of Australia's wartime survival and a socio-economic designer of a new Australia. It is largely to Curtin's credit that Australia, divided and demoralised after World War One, emerged from World War Two with a sense of national strength and resolution, a very different legacy.

The Labor Party owes a great debt to Curtin. When he was elected federal ALP leader by one vote in 1935 the party was divided and weak. It had not recovered from the two convulsions of the previous generation – the 1916 split over conscription when Billy Hughes walked out of the party to form a non-Labor Government, and the disintegration of the Scullin Government during the Great Depression. It was Curtin who proved for the first time that Labor could govern Australia during a crisis and remain a united and effective force. It was Curtin who prevailed where Hughes and Scullin had succumbed in their different ways. It was Curtin who rehabilitated the Labor Party.

Curtin's integrity and moral standing was vital to his wartime success. The more one studies Curtin, the more striking is this quality. His ability to win the trust and respect of colleagues, advisers and opponents was one of his most formidable political assets.

Consider his rise to power. Curtin spent six lonely years as Leader of the Opposition with election defeats in 1937 and 1940 although the latter was a very tight result. While declining to serve in a wartime government of national unity as repeatedly offered by Prime Minister Menzies, Curtin nevertheless resisted the campaign by senior Labor figures to bring down the Menzies Government. Curtin's approach was to assist the war effort through the Advisory War Council on which Labor served and to prepare his own party for office. This tactic was rewarded in October 1941 after

the two independents switched their support to Labor and Curtin became Prime Minister with goodwill and an acceptance that he was the only viable option for the nation. His judgement, patience and timing had been vindicated. He was a leader prepared to take power but not to seize it prematurely, a rare quality.

After Menzies resigned he wrote this letter to Curtin:

“My dear John,

I’ve ceased to be Prime Minister and we shall therefore no longer be opposite numbers at the table. I want to thank you for two years and four months in which my task, always difficult, has frequently been rendered easier and at times rendered more tolerable by your magnanimous and understanding attitude. Your political opposition has been honourable and your personal friendship a pearl of great price,

Yours sincerely,

Bob.”

It is a most unusual tribute by a vanquished Prime Minister of his opponent. It tells us much about Menzies and even more about Curtin.

There is no more extraordinary event in Curtin’s story than how the anti-conscription leader of World War One became the architect of overseas conscription for military service in World War Two. This transition reveals Curtin’s adaptability and judgement.

He was right to change his mind on conscription. This time the war was in the Pacific, not just in Europe. United States conscripts were fighting and dying in the Pacific islands so how could Australia reject the same sacrifice? Moreover Curtin faced strong domestic political pressure with his non-Labor opponents agitating for conscription. After he decided in 1942 to seek a change in Labor policy, Curtin acted alone. He accepted the sole responsibility and that meant his prime ministership was put in jeopardy. In the end, he narrowly prevailed at the ALP Federal Conference despite the taunts that he was betraying Labor principles. “Had I failed I alone would have paid the price of failure,” he told the Parliament.

Curtin's reversal on conscription is a template of how the war changed Australia. The conventional wisdoms of 1914-18 could no longer be accepted. Curtin saw that even the most sacred orthodoxies exist to be slain. His timing was superb and he outmanoeuvred his political opponents. Paul Hasluck concluded that Curtin "had come through the criticism of the Opposition with more public credit for his party than the Opposition had gained for itself." This was Curtin's real triumph over Billy Hughes – he introduced conscription for overseas service, kept his Labor Government united, outsmarted his conservative opponents, and won a great election victory in 1943.

In this process Curtin provided an insight into Labor success –that Labor exists not to offer slavish obedience to any position or policy but to adapt to new situations that confront the nation. It has been the hallmark of all the best ALP leaders.

Australia now lives in a time of upheaval in global power, in the nature of threat, and in the rules of the international system. Curtin had to deal with the survival issue in a way that confronted no other Prime Minister. However, the feature of the 21st century is that opportunities have not been as great and nor have the risks been as unpredictably complex. The paradox of our times is the rise of a technology-driven globalisation simultaneously with a trans-regional jihad that denies the democracy and diversity of the modern state.

This situation demands from Australians that they think harder about their role in the world. There is a vacuum in this country about Australia's purpose. Are we Europeans ship-wrecked on the wrong side of earth in a bizarre historical mishap, or are we able to construct a national meaning for ourselves and make a worthwhile contribution to the world? This is a question that one of our great historians Manning Clark confronted but did not answer, I think because he felt that Australians had no answer. Australia likes to think of itself as an independent nation, no longer imprisoned within a colonial mentality. Our national psychology applauds this liberation but it does not comprehend its consequences – the extent of the challenge facing a free-standing Australia.

We need to examine the world as it exists not the world of our dreams. Let us list some of the strategic realities for Australia. First, we have significant problems of scale, a nation of just 20 million in an East Asia that will be defined by China, India, Indonesia, Japan and Korea. The structural trend seems unmistakable – over time our population and our GDP will diminish in relative terms within this region. Anybody who thinks this will not weaken our influence is deluding themselves. We face a major challenge to maintain our standing and influence. The Howard Government's 1997 White Paper was correct when it projected a relative decline of Australia's power within its own region.

Second, unlike the situation facing most other middle powers, there is no political or regional economic union for Australia to join. Australia will not join the European Union, unlike for example, Italy or the Netherlands. It will not become a state of the USA. It will never become merely an extension of the US economy nor share a US land border like Canada. It will not be accepted as a fully fledged Asian member into any subsequently created East Asia union. In short, it will not find safety in numbers by trading away sovereignty to join a regional federation. Australia's destiny will be determined not within a larger unit but as a free standing nation.

Third, we live in a region of the world where dislocation is on the rise. East Asia encompasses unresolved power rivalries fuelled by centuries old antagonisms. The region must manage the rise of China, the division on the Korean peninsula and the internal tensions within Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation. The civil war within Islam is likely to run for decades and the 2002 Bali attack confirms that Australia is entangled in this struggle. The South Pacific is beset by state failure – witness recent crises in Fiji and Solomon Islands, and alarm about systemic decline in Papua New Guinea. The future of East Timor remains problematic. South East Asia will see rising Islamic militancy, weak central governments in Jakarta and Manila and growing secessionist disputes. The Howard Government's 2000 Defence White Paper said that Australia "cannot be secure in an insecure region" yet our own region is becoming more insecure. We are the metropolitan power in the South Pacific and an influential player within South East Asia and these responsibilities will grow not diminish.

Finally, as a free standing middle power Australia is exposed to the full force of globalisation. I think this is a good thing but we need to grasp what it means. In the globalised world relative economic power is changing faster than ever. The consequences of nations getting things wrong (for example Thailand and Indonesia in the Asian crisis) are worse than before, and the dividends that flow from getting things right (witness Ireland and Australia itself over the past 15 years) can be immense. Globalisation also demands the management of multifaceted change. There is not much point being a superior hi-tech player if your financial system is broken (witness Japan) or a major resources producer if you are prone to systemic failure (witness Argentina) or being the world's biggest oil producer if you are a dysfunctional society that breeds terrorists (witness Saudi Arabia). One law of the globalised age is that you are only as strong as your weakest link.

Given this overall strategic environment how should Australia see itself? In this lecture I want to offer five benchmarks for our 21st century.

Our core strength lies in what we have created – a tolerant unified multicultural and multiracial democracy. This social vision is the light that we must offer to the world. It is a beacon that will become more important as the secular multicultural state faces lethal challenges from the caves of history, and internal tensions force the disintegration of more nations. The Australian vision is the idea of “unity in diversity” and it can become a model. While we sometimes lapse from this aspiration, I believe that our success overall is remarkable. It is a path between an outdated monoculture and a diversity that degenerates into a nation of tribes. It demands a unifying national ethos that can absorb new entrants. Nations that find this middle path will be the best placed to manage the coming century.

Barriers between foreign and domestic policy will dissolve and this occasions the rise of “soft power”. This term as defined by its inventor, Harvard University's Joseph Nye Jr, refers to how “a country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries want to follow it....it co-opts people rather than coerces them.” The dilemma the US faces with the Muslim world and the answer to the question – “why do they hate us?”- must involve soft power strategies. Perhaps Australia's single greatest soft power dividend has been the provision of university

places for students from Asia. Other recent successes were the hosting of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games and our leadership of the United Nations force in East Timor. However under the Howard Government Australia has largely failed to construct an effective soft power strategy, a legacy of Hansonism, refugee policy and bitter cultural divisions at home that are transmitted abroad.

Australia's most important psychological transition has been the shift from an isolationist to a cosmopolitan mindset. This transition is not complete (indeed, it is never complete) but it is far advanced. The old idea that Australia's uniqueness lay in its purity by separation from the world of its race and its democracy has surrendered to the idea that we must be joined to and benchmarked against the world to succeed. Our 21st century social vision, first and last, is the creation of a pluralistic democracy that is a constructive global citizen.

The second benchmark I nominate is the need for a clearer economic vision for Australia. This vision is implicit in our polity over the last generation but it is not embraced by the people. The logic of our situation means that Australia must become a state of the art exemplar of making globalisation work in our favour. We have no other option. We need to turn the non-availability of membership of a political or economic union into a plus. That means running an open, de-regulated and competitive economy integrated into regional and global markets. The protectionist impulse is wounded but not yet buried. We need our best young people helping us to achieve this goal, not denying its legitimacy. It is precisely because we are not an Italy or a California embedded in a massive free market that we have to work harder at these tasks.

This challenge has many dimensions. It begins with a recognition that our economic interests are global. Looking at our top trading partners, the EU constitutes 18 per cent of our trade, the US 15 per cent and North East Asia 26 per cent. Japan will remain our major trading partner until it is replaced by China. Australia is absorbing a lesson of the globalised age – open economies create networks of global stakeholders. We have global interests and regional priorities. This dictates a trade policy that promotes liberalisation and tries to ensure that markets are not closed against us. The approach of the Howard Government in seeking to operate at

bilateral, regional and multilateral level seems well-based. It is starting to produce dividends – an FTA with the United States, with Singapore and Thailand, the opening of new trade talks with ASEAN, and efforts to secure the Doha multilateral round.

However the economic message is losing traction at home. We must renew the idea that economic progress and a just society go together – this requires policies that spread widely the dividends of growth. This is vital because the limits to our influence in the world will be imposed by our economic performance. We need to build upon the stellar results of the past 20 years since the opening up of our economy. However the case for economic reform is rarely argued today and the power of this idea is at risk – the result of a short-term political focus, differences between the parties, the absence of an articulated agenda, the role of the Senate, pressure from sectional interest groups, and the view that reform is killing Australian egalitarianism. At the same time Australia has failed to realise fully the nexus between productivity and investment in education and innovation. Our “knowledge nation” train travels at half-speed. Australia needs to redefine the economic agenda that has transformed outside perceptions of our country. We cannot succeed in the 21st century without a successful economic vision.

The third benchmark that I want to highlight is the strategic decision we face about whether Australia becomes a growing or shrinking nation. There is probably no more important decision facing developed nations. The ANU’s Professor Ross Garnaut argues that in the 21st century the rich nations will divide into two camps – most with declining and ageing populations facing the risk of economic stagnation and a small number led by the United States that take the path of population growth and immigration. For Australia it is between the option of staying relatively young and the European twilight of decline.

A band of false prophets has arisen who preach, literally, an environmental doomsday. They invoke science but are best seen as religious fundamentals – they demand that we convert and act according to their credo of salvation and hell. Prominent environmentalist, Tim Flannery who once spoke of reducing this country to a population of between six and 12 million, now warns of a crisis with no apparent solution. Let me stress that I am not denying serious problems and I am not opposed



to environmentally sustainable policies. This is exactly what I support – an environmental response to our environmental problems – not shrinking our population with all its consequences. In his recent Quarterly Essay, Flannery tried to justify the morality of a reduced population by saying that Australia could instead increase its foreign aid! The reason this sounds tortuous is because it has no moral justification. A growing Australia is the sound moral option and the self-interested option. This is a situation where morality and self-interest coincide. We need to beware the coalition between the populist Hansonite right and the pro-environmentalist left that is determined to reverse the past 60 years of history and see Australia onto a trajectory of zero or declining population growth.

A stronger Australia will be a stronger force for good in the world. One of our leading economists, Max Corden, says: “I have no doubt that Australia’s influence, whether in the region or in the world, would increase if it were a substantially larger economy able to provide more funds in aid, in contributions to international organisations or in joint international action.....there are many ways in which other countries can benefit or harm us and also many ways in which we can do some good in the world – if that is our desire.” It sounds like the best Labor position – wanting a more influential Australia that is a greater force for good.

There is also a strategic argument for this outcome. The political reality would seem to be obvious – we are going to be more involved as a metropolitan power (whether in Solomon Islands or Papua New Guinea); we will face essential regional involvements (witness our UN roles in Cambodia and East Timor); and from time to time, we will fight with US-led coalitions outside our region (witness the first Gulf War, Afghanistan and Iraq – the first two being bipartisan and the latter a disputed commitment). The world is changing in ways that mean greater demands will be placed upon Australia in the discharge of its national interest. These demands will not be reduced for our convenience. But a stronger Australia will be better placed to discharge them.

The fourth benchmark is that our engagement with Asia should become a permanent national project – a project that transcends the detail of foreign policy. Our engagement with Asia is a condition of national existence. It is about bringing our

history and our geography into harmony given our non-indigenous origins as a European nation on the rim of East Asia. This is a great enterprise. The word “engagement” is crucial. Engagement implies a dynamic process; a relationship leading to mutual obligation and growing intimacy. Engagement, of course, cannot succeed without reciprocity.

Within Australia the policy of Asian engagement is bipartisan, the objective of Liberal and Labor Governments. While Labor attacks the Howard Government for weakening our position in Asia, Foreign Minister Downer argues the reverse – that our engagement with Asia has actually grown, notably in trade, security and diplomatic terms. The point is that both sides accept the test of engagement.

There has, however, been a counter-productive culture war reflected in the Howard and Keating schools about the meaning of engagement. Paul Keating said that engagement was not just an expression of what Australia did – but of what Australia is. He argued that engagement was dependent upon Australia escaping its past; that the more we embraced Aboriginal Reconciliation, a Republic and multiculturalism, the more we would succeed in Asia. John Howard, by contrast, was not interested in cultural adaptation. He dismissed any notion that Australia had to change itself further to succeed in Asia. He said that Australia would succeed in Asia by being itself and not by pretending to be somebody else. When Howard first travelled to Jakarta he surprised his hosts by saying that Australia was not Asian (they hardly needed a reminder).

I believe it is a mistake for Australia to impose as conditions of our engagement major reforms that do not relate directly to Asia. After all, in Asia there are monarchies and there are societies that do not accept our multiculturalism. It was Paul Keating who did remind us: we can only go to Asia as we are. On the other hand, we cannot engage the region without a credible commitment to the study of its culture, languages and history and to embark seriously on this commitment is to change ourselves – it has already and it will further do so.

We need to recognise that engagement will have its bad days as well as its good days. It transcends both economic miracles and regional financial crises. Its essence

lies in a shared neighbourhood and we are in that neighbourhood forever. The region over time will come to understand the depth of Australia's commitment. We should approach Asia neither as a supplicant seeking entry nor as an outsider without valid claims. We should also realise that the policy differences between Keating and Howard in relation to the region have been much exaggerated, a perception that will become clear over time.

It is best to remember some rules – Asia is diverse and doesn't think with one mind. Engagement doesn't exclude Australia from taking decisions that might upset the region. However we need to think of ourselves as a partner with the responsibility that being a partner involves. Our ability to relate to the region will be a national interest test for every Prime Minister. For Australia, engagement is a project with no end. It demands patience and resolution. It exists to be interpreted and re-interpreted by each generation.

My final benchmark is the most contentious and an issue close to Curtin's career, the US alliance.

I believe that the alliance is entering a new phase as a result of the changed position of America in the international order. For most of its history the Australia-US relationship was shaped by Second World War and the Cold War. The current phase is defined by epic new developments. The US is now an unrivalled global hegemon enjoying what is called the "unipolar moment". Being allied to a global hegemon is very different from being allied to the US in the Pacific War and the Cold War. There are advantages in being associated with US power but there are risks because a hegemon is bound to be disliked and its status will provoke coalitions to be organised against it.

More important, however, is the "war against terrorism" on which the US has embarked after 11 September 2001. This attack on the US has inaugurated a new semi-permanent asymmetrical warfare with an elusive enemy of global Islamic militants, inspired by a religious fanaticism and pledged to political revolution within the Islamic nations, a campaign against Christians and Jews, and vanquishing American power. September 11 violated America's soul in a way that is not

comprehended in this country. Australians who saw the ANZUS treaty as a means to win America's help in our time of need suddenly saw the treaty invoked for the first time as a result of an attack upon the United States. President Bush announced that the war would be waged in the light and in the shadows by a coalition of intelligence, military, diplomatic and police forces. Bush says this is not a clash of civilisations or a war against Islam, but this is what Osama bin Laden and his followers want and the more their interpretation is accepted within Islam the greater will be their victory.

This conflict, sure to be long and unpredictable, will outlast Bush and bin Laden. A fundamental and unanswered question for Australia is whether the war on terrorism unites the interests of Australia and the US to the same extent that our interests were united in World War Two and the Cold War. I imagine the answer to this question will be "yes" but it is still not clear.

The US alliance must operate as a positive element for Australia in South East Asia. Any sense that the alliance was a liability for Australia within its own region would be very damaging. The lesson of the 2002 Bali bombing is that Australians at home and abroad are targets of the collaboration between Al-Qaeda and regional groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah. This is a change in our situation: we now have a security crisis on our doorstep. It has dictated a new range of security co-operation between Australia and South East Asian nations, in particular with Indonesia. The assistance of the US, notably its intelligence, has been vital in combating regional terrorism. But Australia needs to ensure that its US ties are an overall positive in this task.

This means we cannot let the impression develop that we are merely a regional agent for the US or a deputy sheriff. One of the Howard Government's worst mistakes was to give currency to the notion. It is not only a liability within Asia but unacceptable within Australia. It will not be easy for Australia to intensify its counter-terrorism agenda within the region yet simultaneously offer military support for the US global war on terrorism outside the region. This constitutes a new long-term challenge for our US alliance.

However, the single greatest strain on our US relations arises from President Bush's embrace of a radical, perhaps revolutionary, strategic doctrine that now bears his

name. The Bush Doctrine envisages that the US, if necessary, will act on a unilateral and pre-emptive basis against terrorists, nations that harbour them and rogue states that seek to develop a WMD capacity. Iraq was presented as the test case.

This reveals an America in a strange mindset of invincibility and vulnerability. Within its government, the fear of the WMD attack is pervasive. The “bottom line” of the security seminars I attended at Harvard University two years ago is that America faces a serious risk – more than a 50 per cent chance of a WMD attack on a major city within 8-10 years. The significance of September 11 is to reduce America’s threshold of threat tolerance. This is a permanent change and will endure under future Republican or Democrat Administrations. There is no return to the pre-September 11 world, and it is a mistake for Australians to think post-Bush that this could happen. One sign was President Clinton’s recent statement that while he thinks the UN inspectors should have been given more time in Iraq he would have been prepared, if the inspections were not satisfactory, to launch military action with or without UN authorisation.

For US allies, the crucial issue is America’s conduct in this new era of uncertainty. Australia’s interests are clear – we want a strong America that displays prudence, wisdom and sound judgment. The trauma of Iraq will provoke a re-think within the US about its approach and this re-think has begun. It should be welcomed by Australia. My view is that Iraq is the end of a 20 year chapter of US history and not the start of the new chapter of US military interventions. Australia’s interest is to see an America that understands the limits to its power; an America that recognises it must work in partnership with its allies and with Islamic nations to achieve its security objectives; and an America that supports the global institutions such as the United Nations. If the US walks away from the global institutions then they will be crippled, but such US action would be counter-productive to its own interests anyway.

Australia needs a United States that limits or abandons its dreams of re-making the international order and launching a democratic crusade across the Middle East. However we also need an America that operates as a constructive global leader to improve economic and social conditions, and when it resorts to military force, as it

will and as it must, that it seeks to maximise the legitimacy of such action. Our interest is an America that stays engaged in the world rather than retreats into a sullen introspection if Iraq collapses. An isolationist America is an invitation for global disorder, even anarchy.

The debate in Australia since 11 September has been flawed. It has fluctuated between an uncritical acceptance of Bush's policies and a virulent irrational anti-Americanism. This is a time when we need to think deeply and carefully about these complex global events and draw firm conclusions. In outlining my own conclusions I would invoke Curtin.

He knew that alliances are essential to Australia's life as a middle power. He saw no conflict between being an authentic Australian nationalist and being a champion of close ties with the US. He was interested in results not appearances and he believed that personal relationships did matter, witness his bonding with General Douglas MacArthur. He was never deluded into thinking our link with America was a relationship of equals, but he demanded a relationship based upon respect. He would have dismissed as frivolous any notion that Australia did not need great allies. He knew the task of Australian statecraft was to extract the best concessions for Australia from Washington and London. He was realistic about America and never fooled himself into thinking it was defending Australia out of altruism. Curtin knew the test, the only test to be applied, was the Australian national interest. We know this because when the time came, he famously defied our oldest ally and stared down Winston Churchill who had sought to divert the 7th Division to Burma, a move that would have denied its service for the defence of Australia. This should stand as an example for all our Prime Ministers.

The case against America's involvement in Iraq was persuasive last year before the war and the strategic case against the war only looks stronger now. But Iraq will fade into history and the alliance will move onto new agendas. The greatest of these for Australia will be to harmonise our ties with the US and our growing links with China. Our national interest in Iraq was marginal; our national interest in China is immense.

Australia must aspire to influence the strategic atmosphere in East Asia and relations between Beijing and Washington. This is our greatest long-range diplomatic task. A strong US role is essential for a regional balance and this is accepted within Asia. However, a constructive US will tolerate and not resist the rise of China. The worst outcome from Australia's perspective is that America interprets its Asian mission as being a strict containment of China. This would imply the attempted recruitment of America's regional allies such as Australia into a containment strategy threatening the region with a wider US-China tension or conflict. The nightmare scenario for Australia is being forced to choose between the US or China, particularly if responsibility for any conflict was seen to rest mainly with Washington. This could constitute an alliance breaking event.

This underlines the need for management of alliance expectations. There is no disposition within Australia for a military role against China. The US needs to know this and know this in relation to Taiwan. Australia's bipartisan view is that Taiwan enjoys a democratic autonomy. There is no reason why any Australian should die to convert its de facto independence into de jure independence. Australia's view is that China should seek a non-military solution to the Taiwan issue and that the US and Taiwan should avoid provocation in the near term to achieve a managed solution in the long-term.

It is a welcome sign of Australia's belated consciousness of its own history that the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library exists as an archive to encourage awareness of Curtin and our political past.

My message to the library and its dedicated staff is that they are swimming with the tide. Australians have an abiding interest in their own history, their ancestral stories and their nation's evolution. This interest is greater than recognised by our educational institutions and our media. I know this from personal experience because during the 1990s as Editor-in-Chief of The Australian I devoted considerable resources to a series of historical specials – they included war anniversaries such as Kododa, our immigration program, a retrospective on the Beatles' trip to Australia and a special on the 50th anniversary of Curtin's death. The message I gave our

management was that “history works” and the reason it works is because it connects people and offers a frame of reference to understand their present.

Only a blinkered pessimist could see Australian history as dull. That would misjudge the epic experiment underway on this continent. Curtin was central to our experiment and I have enjoyed this chance to reflect upon him and our current challenges.