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John Curtin: a Labor life

JCPML Anniversary Lecture presented by the Hon John Faulkner on 5 July 2006.

We set our nation's statesmen above the partisan political fray, and none more so than John Curtin. It's as if when John Curtin became Australian Prime Minister, he was no longer Labor Leader. Curtin's passion, his partisanship, his years as activist, trade unionist and politician: they all vanish into the long shadow cast by his wartime burdens.

But he was not a leader who happened to be a politician. Nor was he a prime minister whose party was incidental to his patriotism. Labor was the cause and the course that set Curtin in the Lodge.

For the whole of Australia's democratic century, the labour movement aimed, in the words of another great Labor leader, to "promote equality, to involve the people of Australia in the decision-making processes of our land, and to liberate the talents and uplift the horizons of the Australian people."

That struggle has played out on the industrial front, in the parliamentary arena, and in the public domain.

John Curtin was foremost in that fight for four decades before he became Prime Minister. The boy-orator on the Yarra Bank at the turn of the century eventually became Party Leader in some of Labor's darkest days. John Curtin lived his life in labour's service.

His purpose was labour's progress.

His devotion was both partisan and patriotic. Curtin believed that the Labor Party was best for Australia because it embodied what was best in Australia. He said:

“I believe the inspiration for change for progress, for all that demonstrates the best in the Australian people lies in the Labour Movement -... it stands for humanity as against material gain and has more resilience, more decency and dignity, and the best of human qualities than any other political movement.”

Curtin felt Labor had a special responsibility as a result: because by expression of “solidarity, unity and selfless devotion to the ideas and ideals upon which the movement is founded the workers can show the world that a better and more decent way of life can be given to all.”

A better and more decent way of life for all – sought through solidarity, unity and devotion, through resilience, dignity and decency.

They are Labor values. They are union values. They are Australian values.

And they were John Curtin’s guiding light.

The best of us was the most of him. What is greatest in us was greatest in him.

And what was greatest in him, that resolute tenacity with which he faced the ordeals of wartime leadership, came not only from his own courage but also from his steadfast belief in the shared values of the labour movement.

It was the tenacity of a brave man resolute in the pursuit of a great and just cause. It was the strength of a leader in the service of a purpose greater than himself. John Curtin – and his senior ministers – found their strength to both wage a war and build a peace in their unwavering confidence that they served Australia by serving the labour cause.

They sought not only to defend democracy, but to make democracy worth defending. To not only defend Australia but to build an Australia worth the cost of lives lost in that defence. Because Curtin knew, as we know, that people are the purpose of government policy, not its instruments.

And John Curtin – and his ministers – knew that Labor’s enduring values were the best and surest guide to reaching the Australia they carried in their hearts and

minds, an Australia where our strengths outshone our shadows. Their policies were shaped by those Labor values; their actions aimed at that Labor outcome.

In Curtin's words:

"This government's policy of full development of resources, full employment of manpower and full provision for social security is a basis not only for Australian reconstruction, but for a stable and peaceful commonwealth of all nations... In banishing want, we shall have gone far to free the world from fear... I give you the Labour government's policy in a phrase – victory in war, victory for the peace. On that we stand inflexible, for a lost peace would be marked by horrors of starvation, unemployment, misery and hardship no less grievous than the devastation of war."

Only a nation united could achieve such a goal. Curtin won national consensus in support of his vision – so strong that it endured for a generation after his death. He did not amend Labor's policies to suit popular opinion. Rather, he persuaded the Australian people of the rightness of Labor's policies.

The Labor Government's policies for post war reconstruction were drawn up in a time of dreadful uncertainty, for an unforeseeable future – but they were nonetheless drafted with vigour and assurance, and stood every test of circumstance. Curtin's times might have been perilous, his nation's future unknown, but his Labor values were unchanging. His faith in Labor was unwavering. His commitment to the Australia he carried in his heart did not falter.

So while the processes of parliament were instrumental in making John Curtin Australia's Prime Minister, the passions of the labour movement were the crucible that made him the nation's leader. In the words of The Worker "The nation buried John Curtin, but it was the Labor movement that gave John Curtin to the nation and to the world."

That is why there have been so many scurrilous attacks on Curtin's character and record from the conservative side of politics.

Even while Curtin was Prime Minister and Australia was at war, Robert Menzies was describing the government as “scum – positive scum” to the US Consul-General in Melbourne. This is during the very years when Curtin was sacrificing his health, his peace of mind, ultimately his life, for the nation – taking on the task Menzies failed.

Even then, the anti-Labor forces could not accept John Curtin’s claim on the nation. But Menzies’s smear has no more credibility than the carping of Menzies’s heirs.

Every mention of John Curtin’s name reminds our political opponents – in and out of Parliament – that they may aspire to, but will forever fall short of, the national leadership Curtin achieved. They cannot quite understand the fundamental difference between John Curtin’s ambitions and their own.

John Curtin was ambitious for Australia. He aspired to use the best qualities of the Australian character – those values the labour movement embodies – to solve the nation’s problems. He devoted his life to reaching a position where he could employ his talents and abilities to do his best – the best – for Australia.

Some modern minds find the depth of Curtin’s dedication to the labour movement incomprehensible. Pop psychology can conjure motivations that have more to do with the personal than the political. Such explanations misread Curtin’s time and misjudge Curtin himself.

Prodigiously talented but scantily educated, Curtin found the labour movement both chance and charge. Only in Labor, at that time, could a working-class man rise from destitution to the Lodge. And only in Labor at that time could a working-class man strive to end the injustice and inequity that struck so bitterly at Australian families – families like John Curtin’s.

I do not mean to suggest that a man of Curtin’s talents could not have found success in any other time. But his time was most suited to his talents.

And the Australian Labor Party was most suited to his temperament. He was a radical but not a rabble-rouser. He believed in the importance of the rule of law, the umpire, of properly constituted authorities. His faith in electoral process and the

power of reform made him a natural for the ALP – for Labor is a party of reform that does not chafe against the limitations of democracy. Labor does not see reform as second best to revolution and that has always been our unique quality in the Australian political landscape.

John Curtin was a man of, and a man for, the Australian Labor Party.

John Curtin was a man of, and a man for, his times.

Resolute in the prosecution of the greatest war our nation has endured, he planned for the prosperity of a peacetime Australia he never lived to see. His Prime Ministership was shaped by the world and not by himself. John Curtin, wartime Prime Minister, has long been acknowledged a tragic figure, a man meeting a destiny against his inclinations, a man who gave his life for his country as surely as any soldier might.

And that is true. And if that were the whole of John Curtin's story and the whole of the history of our last century, then tragic, martyred John Curtin would be the whole of the truth.

But the great struggle of World War Two was not John Curtin's greatest. He gave his life, every day of his life, to a greater battle, the great battle of the twentieth century: the struggle for the rights of working people against the inherited privilege of the few.

In the course of that battle, he was:

a jailed anti-conscription activist;

a street-corner speaker who could bring crowds to tears;

a union official with "a bullock driver's command of banned adjectives" – and that's Jack Lang saying so!

He was both teacher and lecturer in economics, with knowledge and understanding rivalling any of his peers.

He was an experienced Party operator, one we might describe today as a "hack", with decades of practice forging consensus positions in the teeth of bitter divisions.

And he was a canny and ambitious politician who took calculated risks, such as

refusing office in a coalition government in the belief – justified by events – he could lead Labor to govern alone.

Leader, Prime Minister, activist, unionist, agitator, pacifist – he was all of that and he was the best of us.

The best of us, and one of us – no Labor saint or martyr. A public pose of humility suits many a popular politician, and John Curtin was no exception to that rule. But his achievements did not spring from saintly virtues of meekness and resignation. They were the result of the very human, very Labor, qualities of determination, calculated risk, hard work, and rat cunning.

So he was ours, and we are proud. We are his, and we are prouder.

Ladies and Gentlemen, John Curtin was, not the author of the labour cause, but for a time its mightiest champion and greatest custodian. And we are not Curtin's heirs, but rather, his successors. Curtin's legacy to us is not his achievements but his responsibility.

And Labor cannot chase the admiration John Curtin earned by ignoring the burdens he chose.

He was pre-eminent, as we are most recent, in the multitude of men and women who have laboured for the Labor cause.

What distinguishes us from those who share some of Labor's goals without commitment to Labor's cause is our conviction that economic and industrial rights are as indispensable to a good society as civil and political rights. Working Australians need both freedom from want and freedom to speak to be full and equal citizens. In modern parlance, worker's rights are human rights. Without them, there is no chance that "a better and more decent way of life can be given to all".

Pursuing that goal has seen every Labor government and every Labor opposition charged by our opponents with subservience to the union movement. The conservatives do not understand, or wish to pretend they do not understand, the real nature of the labour movement.

Unions are one expression of the principle that guides our Party: the principle that working people have the right to determine their lives. To negotiate their working conditions and the price of their labour from a position as equals, not supplicants. To vote, to stand for election, to speak freely without fear of jail or the sack.

The Labor Party does not serve the union movement. The Labor Party does serve, with the union movement, our fellow Australians. For we all know that the right to economic liberty, the freedom from want and fear of want, is as much a human right as the right to political freedoms and civil liberties.

When our work is scarce, irregular, and poorly paid, we live in bondage to economic necessity. When we are beggars in our workplaces, depending on grace and favour for conditions of work, our economic liberty and our human dignity depends on another's whim.

If we are servants at work, how can we be citizens in the streets – or on the hustings?

As individuals, working men and women cannot bargain as equals with corporations and companies. But in unity is strength.

It is the strength that working men and women find in union solidarity that enables them to win political and civil rights. Only when working men and women have industrial rights and economic security can they exercise civil and political rights without fear. In unity is strength; in strength is liberty. If workers' rights are human rights, so too human rights are workers' rights.

John Howard's government is one in a long line of anti-Labor governments determined to cripple the strength that working men and women find in unity and unions, and determined to curtail the civil rights and political freedoms that economic strength and security bring. The Howard Government's WorkChoices legislation is aimed directly at the economic security of working Australians. It attacks pay and conditions and deprives working men and women of the protection of their unions.

John Curtin's government was part of the long line of Labor governments who knew that a better Australia, an Australia of fulfilled and not wasted potential, the Australia that we know in our hearts can be reached: that Australia could only be built on the foundation of economic and political rights and freedoms for all.

The Curtin Government's agenda was simple – and radical. John Curtin and his ministers sought to do away with want and hardship in Australia. They believed that government actions could do so. They believed that the national government could and should take responsibility for the well-being of the nation's citizens – economic, physical and intellectual.

The main and most important commitment the Curtin Government made to giving Australians economic liberty – freedom from want – was full employment. John Curtin had experienced irregular and casual employment as a teenager in sole support of his family. I dare say he would have had a thing or two to contribute to contemporary debates on 'workforce flexibility'! He knew that for working Australians, unemployment was a devastating financial blow.

It is important to any understanding of the Curtin Government's policies and John Curtin's values to realise how comprehensive the government's post-war plan really was. It was comprehensive in scope, but also comprehensive in grasp. Post-war reconstruction would touch every aspect of Australian life – and include every Australian.

Labor knows, we know, that a right enjoyed only by some is a right guaranteed truly to none.

No one can or should deny that there have been times when Labor policy has fallen into the error of thinking that the rights of some can be protected by excluding others. Our support for the bipartisan White Australia Policy is perhaps the greatest of those errors. No one can or should forget, however, that the labour movement's successes come when we recognise that those who are not exactly like us have every right to stand with us – and expect us to stand with them.

For if unity is strength, diversity is wealth. Labor has aimed to gain the first without losing the second. We know it is possible to stand together without having to be the same. Our labour movement's greatest successes have come when we have done so. John Curtin's government was no different. The Curtin Government's extension of social security, which would underpin post-war full-employment, included an easing of restrictions on indigenous Australians' eligibility for certain allowances. For a right granted only to some is not truly a right.

One vote, one value has been a Labor platform plank since the beginning. Chris Watson's Labor supported women's suffrage. John Curtin's Labor extended the vote to military personnel who served overseas, even if they were under 21. Gough Whitlam's Labor extended the franchise to all Australians over the age of 18. In direct contrast to Labor's long history of working to involve all Australians in elections, giving all Australians a say in the nation's course, John Howard's government has just passed legislation that will make it harder for young Australians, Indigenous Australians, and others vulnerable and marginalised, to enrol and to vote. And easier for big corporations and the very wealthy to donate – in secret.

John Howard wants to limit participation. The Labor Party knows that democracy demands the broadest possible participation. Our policies on electoral reform have always had that goal. Limited and partial participation reduces the vote from a right to a privilege.

Like the vote, industrial dignity and freedom from want are privileges that can be withdrawn unless they are universal. Just as Labor understands that a nation is only as rich as its poorest citizen, so too working Australians are only as secure as the most vulnerable.

All Australians deserve a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. And John Curtin knew that applied equally to women. For workers' rights are also women's rights – and women's rights are workers' rights as well.

In 1942 Curtin told the Australian Parliament:

“We must keep faith with the women of this country, and ensure that if they are capable of doing as much war work as men, they shall be paid as if they were men.”

And he did not mean such sentiments to apply only during the exigencies of the war years. A year later, in an interview with the Australian Woman’s Weekly, Curtin said:

“The world has been profoundly changed in the last four or five years. Woman has been able to assert a degree of economic independence never previously attained. The home remains her citadel but the factory and workshop have become her arena. I have done my best in the face of an age old law to have women paid on their merits. I see no reason why a woman should be paid less than a man for the same work... I see no reason at all why women should accept marriage as a method of breadwinning... If a girl feels that if she doesn’t marry she may have to continue in poorly paid work, she may substitute economic conditions for the natural promptings of love.”

Those sentiments may seem improbably feminist coming from a working-class Labor politician sixty years ago. It suits some, both within and without the labour movement, to believe women’s rights a recent and middle-class addition to Labor’s priorities. But Labor’s first federal platform included women’s suffrage.

As John Curtin said in 1943, economic freedom is a precondition of every other sort of freedom – emotional as well as civil and political.

When Australian women take the brunt of the insecurity and uncertainty in the economy – as they always have – women’s industrial rights are fundamental to women’s equal citizenship. And correspondingly, fundamental to the freedom and security of all Australians. Part of Labor’s full employment pledge was to “every man and woman of the forces who, on discharge, is in need of employment”.

Curtin and his ministers knew also that the availability of jobs was not a perfect and complete guarantee against hardship. Post-war full employment was to be supplemented and supported by widow’s pensions and unemployment benefits.

In 1938, John Curtin told the Federal Parliament:

“considerations of humanity and concern for those whose circumstances evoke sympathy, are more than a national ideal. They constitute a vibrant principle in the national character. ... Despite our boasted prosperity, far too large a proportion of our families experience conditions definitely prejudicial to their welfare... Poverty is still with us. Sickness – preventable sickness – ravages too gravely our physical fitness as a people. The individual struggle for existence is becoming increasingly intense. Far too many may be described as victims of the system; and too large a proportion of our people have incomes so low as to make them absolutely deficient in the resources essential to decency and good living.”

From old-age pensions and child endowment to Austudy and income support, the Labor Party has always believed that every Australian is entitled to “the resources essential to decency and good living.” And we believe that the government must take responsibility for the wellbeing and welfare of everyone in the country, not leave it up to the vagaries of the market.

We believe that our financial and economic institutions ought to operate in the interest of the whole Australian community. The 1945 Banking Act that gave the Commonwealth Treasurer the power to regulate private banking can be seen to be part of a continuum from the Fisher Government’s Commonwealth Bank Act to the reforms of the Hawke and Keating Governments. Labor Governments’ financial and economic policies change according to changing circumstances, but the principle behind them – the benefit of the Australian people – never alters.

The Curtin Government’s plans for a comprehensive health system for all Australians – including free medicine, and a system of free hospitals throughout Australia – was stymied by the resistance and legal challenges of some in the medical profession. The principle and ideas behind the Curtin Government plans for free health care later found expression in the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, Medicare and public hospitals. Just as no-one should be beggared if illness prevents them working, so none should be ruined by medical expenses.

Under John Curtin, the national government moved directly into education for the first time with the development of the Australian National University. Curtin and his

ministers saw no reason Australians should have to leave their country if they wanted to pursue intellectual endeavours at the highest level. Much of Australia's subsequent success in research – where we truly punch above our weight – stems from that decision. Australian's access to higher education is a Labor priority. Reforms by the Whitlam Government and the Hawke and Keating Governments increased access and expanded places. Compare the record of the conservatives: the Howard Government's main education policy has been fees-for-degrees!

John Curtin knew that talent and ability were spread equally across the population, not concentrated in the homes of the wealthy. The education policies, that Curtin did not live to see the Chifley Government implement, had the goal of allowing all Australians to use their talents and abilities fully.

John Curtin knew that for working Australians, there's no more important right than the right to a job. He knew that men and women work to earn a living. He knew that too often, that living is not very good. The policies of the Curtin Government had the goal of securing the economic wellbeing of all working Australians.

He – and his ministers – knew that illness or unemployment were hard enough on a family without accompanying financial devastation. The Curtin Government's social security reforms and attempted development of the medical system had the goal of seeing all Australians protected from the depredations of mischance.

And he and his ministers knew – as every Labor leader and every Labor caucus and every member of the labour movement knows – that the ultimate measure of our nation's prosperity is a fair day's pay for a fair day's work for all Australians.

A better and more decent way of life for all – sought through solidarity, unity and devotion, through resilience, dignity and decency.

They are Australian values. They are union values. They are Labor values.

These values have been expressed in different ways and pursued through different policies over the long Australian century.

We are, as our predecessors were, creatures of our ever-changing times. But our commitment to the shared values of the labour movement is unchanging. Our commitment to Labor's values is beyond the fashions of the moment or the figments of imagination which, at one time or another, pass for common sense and common knowledge.

Times change, but some things are timeless.

Fashions fade, but values endure.

Times can be hard, but Labor abides.

Our abiding belief in the equal value of all Australians gives us, of Curtin's Party, the tenacity to fight on in even the toughest times.

We have a purpose greater than pursuit of power. We must answer to the multitude of men and women who serve and have served the labour cause.

We pursue, as Curtin pursued, a better Australia.

An Australia brighter than even our darkest shadows.

An Australia where no potential is wasted, where no family is "deficient in the resources essential to decency"; a truly prosperous Australia where want, and fear of want, haunt no-one.

The Australia John Curtin believed in, the Australia we believe in, the Australia we carry in our hearts.

The Australia we know we can make, we must make, of our values, by our labours, for we are, as John Curtin was, servants of that nation of the heart.