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The secret life of Elsie Curtin

Public Lecture presented by JCPML Visiting Scholar Associate Professor Bobbie Oliver on 17 October 2012.

Vice Chancellor, distinguished guests, members of the Curtin family, colleagues, friends.

It is a great honour to give the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library's lecture as their 2012 Visiting Scholar. I thank Lesley Wallace, Deanne Barrett and all the staff of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, firstly for their invitation to me last year to be the 2012 Visiting Scholar, and for their willing and courteous assistance throughout this year as I researched Elsie Curtin's life. You will soon be able to see the full results on the web site.

I dedicate this lecture to the late Professor Tom Stannage, a fine historian, who sadly and most unexpectedly passed away on 4 October. Many of you knew Tom as Executive Dean of Humanities from 1999 to 2005, but some years prior to that, he was my colleague, mentor, friend and Ph.D. supervisor in the History Department at UWA. Working with Tom inspired an enthusiasm for Australian history that I had not previously known, and through him, I discovered John Curtin – and then Elsie Curtin, whose story is the subject of my lecture today.

Elsie Needham was born at Ballarat, Victoria, on 4 October 1890 – the third child of Abraham Needham, a sign writer and painter, and his wife, Annie. She had two older brothers, William and Leslie. From 1898 until 1908, Elsie lived with her family in Cape Town, South Africa, where her father had established the signwriting firm of Needham and Bennett.

As a 'pioneer socialist', a gifted writer and fluent orator, Needham was a familiar sight at Van Riebeeck's statue, a spot that was Cape Town's equivalent to Hyde Park Speakers' Corner in London. In 1904, he was a foundation member of the Social Democratic Federation, and served for some years as its Chair. He used his sign writing skills to paint banners bearing slogans such as 'Socialism – the Hope of the Age'. Some of his banners were used to welcome the British labour leader Keir Hardie on his visit to Cape Town in March 1908. Needham's radicalism landed him and a Socialist colleague a few days in jail in 1906 when they were arrested for taking part in a demonstration in support of unemployed workers. The trial was called off.

Abraham Needham also edited a newspaper, the Cape Socialist, and wrote poetry. Elsie recalled him 'sitting up late, night after night, burning the midnight oil, while he studied, read, or wrote articles for his paper and poems'. Needham was also a preacher in the Methodist Church and often equated the values of Socialism and Christianity. The family were great readers of classics, poetry, history and biography as well as politics. Consequently, Elsie and her brothers were brought up in a well-educated, progressive household where ideas of equality – of the sexes and of classes – were fostered, and independent thought was encouraged, but also a household of strict morals, where drinking and dancing were regarded as evils.

Of the three children, Elsie was closest to her father, sharing his political ideals. She was a financial member of the Social Democratic Federation in Cape Town before she was 17 years of age. After leaving school, she did the accounts in Needham's sign writing business.

The Needhams returned to Australia in 1908 and settled in the Hobart suburb of Bellerive, where Elsie's political education was continued by her father's decision to stand for election to the State Parliament as a Labor candidate in 1912, albeit unsuccessfully. It was this connection that would bring Elsie into contact with her future husband, John Curtin. Curtin was then Secretary of the Victorian Timber workers' Union; he had gone to Tasmania to recruit members and in an attempt to establish a national federation of timber workers. Needham was one of the Labor men whose support Curtin sought in this venture.

There are conflicting accounts about where Elsie and John first met. According to Dame Enid Lyons, it was at a political rally where Curtin shared a platform with Joe Lyons – who was an ALP member before he changed his political allegiance. Enid said, 'As Curtin stepped down from the box which had been their unpretentious rostrum, he had seen a girl called Elsie Needham, and fallen in love at first sight'. But it is more likely that they met at the Needham's home where Curtin had been invited for afternoon tea, and where he became a frequent visitor during the month he spent in Hobart. Elsie was 21 and John was 27 years of age; their courtship would last for five years.

It is worth pausing to note that, despite later depictions in the media of Elsie as a 'homebody' and someone who was rather ordinary and unimaginative, the young woman who met the future prime minister in Hobart in April 1912 was an activist in her own right with well defined political views, as well as being widely read and a talented singer and pianist. Apart from her physical appearance, Curtin was no doubt attracted to her mind and would have recognised her as 'a comrade in arms'. David Day's exhaustive research into Curtin's early life shows that all his close female friends were members of the Socialist movement, and also that Curtin's letters of that period include one exhorting a young female friend to persevere with her education. Curtin appreciated intelligence and had great faith in the power of education.

Many difficulties beset any prospect of developing a lasting relationship, however. As a strict Methodist, Elsie had signed the pledge neither drank nor danced; Curtin was a heavy drinker who would shortly become an alcoholic, and dancing was one of his favourite pastimes. But, far more important than either of these differences was that Curtin's religion was Roman Catholic, although he did not adhere to religious practice. Day suggests that Curtin's mother, in particular, would have opposed his marriage to a non-Catholic.

And there was the fact of physical separation. In an age before commercial flights, the journey from Melbourne to Hobart was lengthy and expensive for a person of limited means. Over the next two years, Elsie and John corresponded irregularly but within a year, he was addressing letters to 'Elsie Dear'. The few visits that he made,

having saved up the five pounds for a return ticket steerage to Hobart and 'ten shillings to spend on entertainment', were largely spent 'sitting under a tree', presumably just getting to know each other.

In the winter of 1914, Elsie came to Melbourne to board a steamer for South Africa where she planned an extended stay with her brother, Leslie. Elsie may even have instigated Curtin's hesitant marriage proposal, made just before she boarded the boat. Elsie recalled: 'I would have given anything to have been able to grab my baggage from the hold and run down the gang-plank again'. Instead, she went to South Africa, carrying Curtin's photo, which she proudly showed to friends and family. She didn't return to Melbourne until November 1915. And it would be another 18 months before they could marry.

At the end of 1916, Curtin secured a position as editor of the *Westralian Worker*, the paper of the labour movement in Perth. Elsie followed him west and they were married in a registry office in Leederville on 21 April 1917.

Elsie's commitment to their shared life as Labor activists is evident from her wedding day. No romantic evening of wining and dining followed by a honeymoon. After tea and cakes with the only two witnesses at their wedding, Elsie and John spent the evening at a political meeting in Midland. The drive in an open car gave Elsie laryngitis.

Elsie was active in the labour movement from the time she arrived in Western Australia, firstly joining the Perth Branch of the Labor Women's Organisation. Through this network she got to know Jean Beadle – who like both Elsie and John also hailed from the Victorian goldfields, and with whom she formed a lifelong friendship – and other campaigners for women's rights.

Elsie soon took over the family finances. Under her careful stewardship, they purchased a house in Napier Street, Cottesloe, for themselves and their two children, Elsie (born 30 December 1917) and John (born 31 January 1921), as well as providing a home for Elsie's parents from 1919 – the Needhams probably provided some of the purchase price from the sale of their house and business in Hobart.

In 1923, the Curtins purchased land in Jarrad Street and built the house that they lived in for the rest of their lives.

After the Curtins moved to Cottesloe, Elsie played an active role in the Fremantle Branch of the Labor Women's Organisation, including holding the office of Treasurer. She was also active in the wider community. By 1935, she was Vice President of the Cottesloe Infant Health Welfare Centre. She also found time to join a choir in Fremantle and took part in a performance of *The Messiah* at Christmas 1935, in which she sang a contralto part.

During the six years that Curtin was ALP Leader and Leader of the Opposition in the Federal Government, Elsie Curtin gave a number of interviews, in which she reiterated that 'home duties' kept her from being very active in public life, yet as we have seen, she was active in the labour movement and in other groups in the community.

Her loyalty prevented her from saying that John required more than average wifely support. In 1919, after he failed to be elected to the Federal seat of Perth, coupled with personal grief at losing his father and his closest friend, Frank Hyett, John suffered a nervous breakdown. Fortunately, Abraham Needham was able to shoulder some of the burden of John's work, writing polemical editorials for the *Worker*. Elsie had always been close to her father and no doubt depended on him for support during this very difficult time early in her marriage.

Elsie's recollection of this crisis, years later was surprisingly frank:

He veered between moods of high optimism and deep melancholy, as inexplicable as they were irregular. He would wake up in the morning at peace with the world and I'd start my household chores with a light heart. By lunchtime I would be treating him with a blend of sympathy and 'Come, now, things aren't as black as that', which I learned through long months was the best mixture.

Although that crisis passed, John's bouts of depression and his battles to overcome alcoholism continued until he finally swore off the drink in 1935 as a condition of colleagues supporting him as Leader of the ALP.' Abraham Needham died of a heart

attack in 1922, aged only 62 years. A tragedy for all of the family, it was perhaps a particularly devastating blow for Elsie. Yet no words survive to record her grief.

In 1928, John was elected to the Federal seat of Fremantle. It was Elsie who encouraged him to stand again, telling him, 'You were meant for Parliament'. Yet his first term on the backbench was not happy, and Elsie again rallied to his support, spending three months in Canberra in 1929. When Curtin lost his seat in the 1931 election, after only one term in Parliament, Elsie again encouraged her despondent husband to look ahead: 'Never mind,' she said, 'this means nothing. You'll be back in parliament again.' She told him to stick to politics because that was 'where his heart was'. And of course he did.

Consequently, Elsie might have added 'counsellor', if not 'prophet', to her more widely acknowledged skills as wife, mother and homemaker.

When the media 'discovered' Elsie in 1935 at the time of her husband's election to leadership of the ALP, she was invariably announced as a woman who 'likes home life', 'home loving' and 'a silent partner'. Sometimes her interest in politics was mentioned but almost never her commitment to the Western Australian Labor movement.

Certainly, Elsie saw her primary duty as maintaining a home for her two teenage children. The first time she left home, daughter Elsie was only 18 and son John, 15. This trip, in 1936, involved a tour of several weeks' duration with John to Melbourne, Hobart and Launceston. Even after the children had entered the workforce, their mother felt this same sense of duty. When John joined the RAAF at the beginning of World War II, the home in Cottesloe was a place to which he could return on leave from his station in Geraldton. Annie Needham, now in her 80s, also still lived with the Curtins, and presumably was too elderly to manage the house on her own – although this was never mentioned as a reason for Elsie remaining in Perth. The lengthy journey by train or sea between Perth and Melbourne, and a further rail journey to Canberra, added weeks to any stay in the eastern states.

Elsie's role as wife of the Leader of the Federal Opposition brought with it many social obligations. As just one example, in May 1937, decked out in 'parchment lace touched with gold' – with John – she attended a Ball at Government House, in honour of the coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth.

In October 1941, Elsie became 'Mrs John Curtin ...wife of Western Australia's first Prime Minister', whom 'women in all parts of Australia are anxious to know something about'. A visiting Western Mail reporter depicted Elsie, somewhat flustered, at home in the midst of flowers, cables and telephone calls from well-wishers.

The WA Branch of the ALP was holding its triennial congress. Elsie arrived in the hall to cheers, and was present when the congress passed a resolution congratulating Curtin. Two weeks later, the Labor Women's Central Executive farewelled Elsie before she departed for Canberra by train, with lunch at Boans Department Store. Prior to her departure for the east, Elsie had been 'burning the midnight oil' answering floods of messages and telegrams.

Elsie spent her first day in Canberra familiarising herself with her new home at the Lodge, lunching at Government House with Lord and Lady Gowrie, and listening to Ben Chifley delivering the Budget speech. No wonder she confessed to feeling 'sleepy' by the end of it. The press reported her comments on her 'sadness' at 'breaking up' the family home in Cottesloe, and her intention to return west for Christmas, hopefully with John. She was feeling quite ambivalent about living in Canberra for any length of time.

But consider this – in the space of a few weeks, Elsie, who had managed to keep a low profile even after John's elevation to Leader of the ALP and of the Parliamentary Opposition, was suddenly plummeted into the media spotlight. She was required to give interviews, conduct phone calls and mix socially with the likes of the Governor General, including hosting dignitaries at the Lodge (a home that she was unfamiliar with) and manage a staff of servants. By all accounts, Elsie took it in her stride. There is no evidence of her being embarrassed by or an embarrassment to her new role –

perhaps, because, like John, she had a capacity to relate to anyone at any level of society, be they a chauffeur or a lord – or lady.

Japan's entry to the war on 7 December 1941 put paid to any hope of John being home in Cottesloe for Christmas. The Daily Telegraph reported emotively on 'PM's first lonely Xmas'. Yet, the PM's 'loneliness' was partly self-imposed. Just prior to Christmas, he had placed a ban on employers limiting their employees' leave to a maximum of three days over the holiday period, which meant that his daughter had to cancel plans to spend Christmas with him. John finally took a few days leave to visit Perth in mid January. Even this brief respite attracted criticism from major papers such as the Courier Mail, and the Sydney Morning Herald. But when the BBC commented that he was 'holidaying' in Western Australia while the nation was in crisis, Curtin attacked it for being 'too garrulous, and ...very ignorant. Its presumption in broadcasting my whereabouts while I am engaged on essential national work is no service to security.' Indeed, the program of the Prime Minister's engagements while in Perth suggested very little of leisure. Elsie's private reaction to this carping criticism can be imagined, given her reputation for 'bluntness'.

Another of Elsie's important, but largely unnoticed, roles during John's frequent absences, was as 'electorate officer' for her husband. John realized his wife's value as a morale booster for Western Australians during the anxious days of the Pacific War, when the North West coast was under attack from enemy planes – and this was one reason why she spent so much time away from The Lodge in 1942 and 1943.

Possibly because of her public (and reiterated) insistence that, 'Some women are equipped for public life, while others are best suited for a domestic role. I'm one of those women who belongs in the home,' however, Elsie's role seems to have been little understood at the time or afterwards. She was criticised for not moving permanently into the Lodge. A decade after her death, her daughter defended her:

My father was determined to retain the Cottesloe home as the family residence, and he considered that by my mother returning to Cottesloe for various periods it reassured the people of Perth, who at that time were living in real fear of a Japanese invasion. During the four-year period of my father's Prime Ministership my mother

not only helped him to entertain a host of visitors involved with the war and parliamentary business, but she also held fund raising functions at The Lodge to benefit the Red Cross Society and the National Shilling drive for women in the services.

Elsie was back in Melbourne in April 1942 to celebrate her 25th wedding anniversary with John at the Victoria Coffee Palace – a journey that she undertook with an injured foot. On this visit, she spent time in Canberra, launched a navy vessel in Sydney, and remained in the Eastern States until the end of May. In August, she returned to Canberra and then travelled with John to Brisbane, where she launched the navy corvette Fremantle.

Elsie celebrated her 52nd birthday at The Lodge on 4 October 1942, before returning to Perth. So in the first year of Curtin's Prime Ministership, Elsie had spent over five months either travelling with John or living with him at The Lodge. Curtin was back in Perth for a short break in late October.

He returned to Perth for several weeks at Easter 1943, and Elsie did not go to Canberra until mid September. On this trip, she had a flight over Canberra in a Lancaster bomber. It was her first flight and she enjoyed it hugely. After viewing the Lodge and other Canberra landmarks from the air, she proudly disembarked with an unused sick bag, which Air Minister Drakeford, who had persuaded her to take the flight, inscribed, 'not required on voyage'.

Curtin was home for his 59th birthday on 8 January 1944. In keeping with the austerity drive, Elsie gave him no presents – not even a cake. Curtin spent the day quietly at Cottesloe, rising early to potter in the garden, before dealing with some official matters, and spending the afternoon walking on the beach. Throughout the day, the doorbell and telephone rang repeatedly as friends and family sent birthday wishes. No doubt Elsie dealt with most or all of these callers.

In 1944, the Curtins were overseas from April to June. In America, they met President and Mrs Roosevelt.

In Washington, Elsie gave her first press conference to 20 women journalists. She

talked about life in Australia, including wartime rationing; American cooking; the difficulty of eating using only a fork and high prices. She expressed concern that many Australian war brides would be very homesick, and would encounter 'a rude awakening'. The comments about the war brides and her observation that 'twiddling the food around with a fork makes it go all over the place' and in future she would eat with both a knife and fork, are examples of Elsie's somewhat blunt style. But she also commented that she hoped women would have a greater share of public life after the war, including at the peace negotiations. And she advocated a uniform Federal divorce law and 'stricter laws to control marriages'. It was 'easy to get in' to marriage but 'hard to get out'.

It was not by Elsie's choice that she was forced to remain in the US while John travelled by bomber to England. She was reportedly very upset by being 'left behind'. After they returned to Australia, Elsie remained in Canberra until the beginning of August, during which time she entertained dinner guests with a 'racy' account of her trip to America. She spoke confidently and without notes – quite an achievement for the woman who reportedly had first spoken in public at her husband's farewell from the Westralian Worker in 1928.

Late in 1944, Curtin suffered several bouts of illness. In early December 1944, he was hospitalised in Melbourne and unable to attend his son's wedding to Catherine Neill on 9 December. Daughter Elsie travelled back with him by car to Canberra and stayed to celebrate his sixtieth birthday at the Lodge on 8 January. Wife Elsie arrived in Canberra on 14 January and was present in Parliament House for the swearing in of the new Governor General, the Duke of Gloucester. She also hosted what was described as an 'informal' reception at Parliament House, which reportedly involved 'plenty of bowing and curtseying'.

In February, she gave her first Australian press conference – which the Argus dismissed as 'an informal chat' with women journals; in fact that paper reported that she 'chattered' to the women of the Press. The description of the event, however, suggests that Elsie gave a wide-ranging interview in which she revealed previously little-known details about her family background; her impressions life in Canberra, and her work in the labour women's movement. She was President of the Labor

Women's Central Executive in 1945, and presided over their national conference in Adelaide two weeks later. At the end of February, back in Canberra, Elsie hosted a reception in honour of the Duchess of Gloucester at Parliament House.

Despite later accusations that she remained away from Canberra during John's final illness, Elsie did not leave the Lodge again until after his death. She was at John's bedside when he died in the pre-dawn hours of 5 July 1945. She demonstrated decisiveness and fortitude in assisting with arrangements for his lying-in-state at Parliament House and the return to Perth for the funeral.

Elsie spent her last night in the Lodge, packing her husband's personal effects and papers, before departing from Fairbairn at 7am the next morning in the Duke of Gloucester's plane, to fly back to Perth for the funeral. Despite a sleepless night, she did not retire on the long flight, although the plane had sleeping facilities. She kept her composure until greeting daughter Elsie at the Perth airport, after which the family was hurriedly whisked away by car to Cottesloe.

Elsie bore herself with grace and dignity through the largest funeral that Perth has ever seen. An estimated 100,000 people, or one-third of the population of Perth, lined the five-mile long funeral route, with some 25,000 gathering at the gates or attending at the graveside in Karrakatta Cemetery. Mrs Curtin reportedly remained 'remarkably calm', although 'deeply moved' when her son placed the family wreath on the coffin and saluted his father's body.

So what did Elsie do with the remainder of her life?

She continued her association with the Labor Women's Organisation, including serving a further year (1945-46) as President of the Labor Women's Central Executive, and then in 1947 remained on the Committee as Past President, before finally stepping down from the Executive. She introduced her husband's successor as Labor candidate for Fremantle, Kim Beazley Senior, to a meeting of the Labor women.

In 1949, she visited New Zealand at the invitation of the New Zealand High Commissioner, whom she had met in Canberra when attending the laying of the foundation stone for the John Curtin Medical School. She also spoke on behalf of H.V.

Evatt at Kogarah during the 1949 election campaign, speaking without a microphone. She kept in contact with brother Leslie, who was choir master and organist at the Anglican Church in Albury during the latter part of his life. Leslie died in March 1952, after a long illness.

Elsie maintained an extensive correspondence, including with the former Japanese ambassador to Australia, Tatsuo Kawai, who had left Canberra at the beginning of the Pacific war. After the war, Kawai wrote to Elsie and the two corresponded for a decade before meeting in Perth in 1959, when he returned to Australia to represent the Japanese Government at an International Trade Fair in Melbourne.

A letter to an acquaintance in 1954 suggests that, if anything, her life just got busier and busier. She spoke of opening fetes, meeting the Queen and Prince Philip during the 1954 Royal Visit, attending the laying of the foundation stone for the John Curtin High School, continuing as a delegate of the Fremantle LWO at conferences, and adjudicating a choir contest. She also held the office of Justice of the Peace. And she took much delight in being a grandmother.

She continued to live in the house in Jarrad Street with daughter Elsie and son in law Stan McLeod. In April 1970, she was awarded a Commander of the British Empire, for her services to the community, including her work with prison inmates and as Justice of the Peace. But the citation also mentioned the encouragement she gave to her husband and her interest in 'his' political party.

Interviewed just before her 80th birthday, Elsie said that 'lots of other people have done more than I have' and she did not intend to write her memoirs. 'I don't think anyone would be interested in reading a book about me'.

How wrong she was! Those memoirs would have been of immense value to understanding her perspective and shedding light on her life.

Even at that late stage of her life, she still was a member of seven organisations, and regularly attended meetings. An avid communicator, she said that she would be happy to spend her whole day writing letters.

By March 1974, at the age of 83, Elsie refused an invitation to fly to Canberra and lay the foundation stone for John Curtin House, the new national headquarters of the ALP. She commented, 'I'm a bit old to be flying across Australia. I'd like to go but I'm afraid I must miss the occasion'.

She died on 24 June 1975, aged 84, and is buried beside John in Karrakatta Cemetery. Her epitaph: 'A loving wife and mother' is probably the one she would have wanted, but her husband's epitaph is just as appropriate for her:

Her country was her pride
Her fellow man her cause.