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Curtin's first war

Public lecture presented by Professor Deborah Gare on 24 November 2014.

Gethsemane, 1916

I wonder if you could imagine a moment in time with me. John Curtin, the legendary war-time prime minister of Australia, was facing not his most famous war, but his first war. He was at this time a young man, only 31 years old. Yet he was already famous as an idealist, a socialist and sometimes even a Marxist. Curtin had already proved himself an inspiring orator, an effective campaigner, a union activist and a labour leader. Indeed, he had already been labelled by some as the future of the Australian Labor Party.

In this moment in time that I would like you to cast your mind to, Curtin was facing what was yet the most profound challenge of his life. Around him, the ideals of Labor and socialism were under assault. The attack came not just from Conservative Australia, as you would expect, but from a Labor government itself.

It was then November 1916. Australia's apocryphal moment has passed: the nation had entered its polling booths and voted 'no' to conscription. But though the vote was over, the war of ideology continued at home. In the preceding months Curtin had been one of the most public anti-conscription campaigners in the country. The government now intended to punish him severely for his flagrant displays of resistance. He had, after all, knowingly defied the obligations placed upon him by government. As a consequence, Curtin was now being persecuted by the press, he was pursued by the law, and he was decried by politicians. In this moment, he was facing the inevitable likelihood that he will be arrested and imprisoned.

Like Christ who escaped to the olive grove at Gethsemane to find solace and courage, Curtin also ran. He went to Tasmania where he found Elsie Needham, the young woman he married before the war's end, and he held her, confessing that by doing so, he sought enough courage to return and to face his inevitable punishment. In one of his most powerful love letters to Elsie, he drew on Biblical language to paint this picture (speaking of himself in the third person):

And he thought there was only one thing [that] could fortify him for the ordeal and that was to rush across the sea at whatever hazard to see a certain angel...and to look into her eyes and hold her, if only for a moment, in his arms, so he might strengthen in resolution and fear no foe. And lo and behold he did do this looking into her eyes and did hold her in his arms and swore there was then nothing on earth or out of hell that could hurt him even a little.

Having been restored in his resolution, Curtin returned to his home in Melbourne where he was arrested and thrown into gaol.

It was not just any prison to which Curtin was delivered, but the notorious Melbourne Gaol on Russell Street, where serious criminals, petty offenders, political prisoners, the homeless and the insane were all thrown together into archaic and crowded conditions. It was here that Ned Kelly was hanged not long before Curtin was born, and here that 132 others were also hanged between 1842 and 1929.

How, we might ask, did it come to this? How might Australia's prime minister of World War Two have found himself acting against the government, and in prison, in World War One?

The truth is that where 1942 saw the darkest hours of Curtin's Second World War, 1916 saw those darkest moments of his First. It was in this year that the Labor government, led by Billy Hughes, divided Australia and sundered the Labor Party when it introduced its campaign for compulsory military service. Curtin was then a labour activist and journalist. He was appointed the official organiser of the national 'No' campaign run by the Trades Unions. In this role he became a vehement and of

his own government. They, in turn, responded with prosecution, manipulation, lies and sabotage.

The contest between Curtin and the Labor government in 1916 raises profound issues for scholars and other observers. His fight against conscription in the First World War is most commonly compared by historians to his own introduction of compulsory military service in 1943.⁴ Some, particularly at the time, accused him of hypocrisy; others, more fairly, compare the two wars to indicate just how perilous events of the Pacific War were in 1942 and 1943—in other words, they argue, things must have been bad, if Curtin himself had introduced conscription.

Yet the differences between 1916 and 1942 are self-evident. Of new importance, I think, is the comparison which can be made between the abuse of executive power that Curtin resisted in 1916, and similar abuses of executive power in modern Australia during times of 'crisis'. Militarism, imperialism, secrecy, the surveillance of citizens, summary arrests, government aggression, intimidation, and censorship of the press, are all themes common to Australia's history of the First World War and to the modern age which followed 9/11.

This is where, I think, Curtin's ongoing relevance within modern Australia can be found. I'd like, now, to share with you that story.

Triumphalism, 1914

Australians were itching for a fight when war broke out in 1914. In Melbourne's Collins Street, hundreds of people gathered on 5 August at the doors of The Argus, one of the city's leading newspapers, where they clamoured urgently for news of events in Europe. The paper itself reported the chaos as follows:

By half-past 12 a dense mass of people waiting for the issue of the extraordinary edition extended from the footpath to the tram-track outside 'The Argus' office. ... With arms locked, several policemen on the steps made heroic efforts to stem the tide, but it was not until reinforcements arrived that the people were drive back off the pavement. There was no rowdyism—only an intense desire to learn the latest news of the situation. The minutes dragged by, and the excitement of the crowd grew

almost feverish. 'What's the news?' 'Tell us the news,' shouted an impatient man at the back of the crowd, and a hundred other voices took up the call. At last the signal was given to admit the eager mob, and an extraordinary scene ensued. ...

In an incredibly short time ... everyone in the street seemed to have heard the news of the declaration of war. Some were enthusiastic, some evidently gratified; some seemed overweighted by the import of the news, some were openly pessimistic. But the general feeling was one of relief....

It was in the opening months of the war that the state capitalised on this enthusiasm and first experimented successfully with the use of propaganda through popular media. Whereas one hundred years later governments now make extensive use of online technologies, in 1914 and 1915 available tools included film, newsreels, lantern slides, public theatre and musical recordings. Reams of sheet music were available for sale across Australia, enabling families to rally round the cause from the comfort of their own pianos. One of the most famous war-time patriotic songs was 'Australia Will Be There!', which was recorded in 1915 by such artists as Stanley Kirkby, Stanley Read and Harrison Latimer:

There are lots and lots of arguments going on today
As to whether dear old England should be brought into the fray
But all right-thinking people, know well we had to fight,
For the Kaiser's funny business, it wants some putting right.

Chorus

Rally round the banner of your country,
Take the field with brothers o'er the foam.
On land or sea, wherever you may be;
Keep your eye on Germany,
But England home and beauty
Have no cause to fear.
Should all acquaintance be forgot?
No, no, no, no, no!
Australia will be there,

Australia will be there.

You've heard about the Emdenship, was cruising all around.

She was sinking British merchant men where 'ere they could be found

Till one fine morning early, the Sydney hove in sight

She trained her guns upon them and the Germans said 'good night'.

Curtin's response to propaganda such as this was predictable. He had long been a critic of militarism, arguing as early as 1908 in a prominent Socialist article that conflict was a direct outcome of a capitalist economy, and that industry controlled both the nation and its War department. When he was preselected to represent Labor in the 1914 federal election, which was held just weeks after the outbreak of war, he therefore ran on an anti-militarist platform. He was remarkably successful. He entered the contest in Melbourne's safely conservative seat of Balaclava, campaigning against the prominent candidate Billy Watt, who had resigned as the Victorian premier in order to run for a seat in federal parliament. Curtin proved himself a powerful orator in the campaign, however, and voters were convinced. He achieved a swing of 6.6%, increasing Labor's primary vote in the seat from 35% to 41.6%.

Yet the young activist was struggling in his private life. In 1914 or 1915 Curtin volunteered for enlistment with the AIF—a fact which to this day surprises many, but which he later confirmed in a dramatic showdown with the Minister for Defence in 1917. He was ejected as unfit, due to his vision, and must have known this to be a likely outcome when he reported for duty. He continued his union work, instead, though found it challenging. Increasingly he fell into alcoholism, while his letters hinted at depression.

These problems intensified in 1915 and in the first half of 1916 to the point where Curtin's friends feared for his future. In July 1916 he entered a convalescent home in which he attempted to sober up. Frank Anstey, the federal MP for Bourke, encouraged him to find redemption, to emerge 'reborn' from rehab, and to re-enter the contest of

politics and reform. Which is precisely what he did, just as events in federal politics started to become sinister.

Compulsion, 1916

Billy Hughes, then Australia's prime minister, visited Australia's troops on the western front in June 1916. The experience was a powerful one. Within days of his departure the AIF's 5th Division was thrown into battle at Fromelles. In one day alone the Division suffered 5000 casualties. The scale of such loss was unprecedented. (By point of comparison, Australia's total losses in the Boer War were 598). Three weeks later the AIF experienced a catastrophe at Pozieres, which achieved a staggering 23,000 casualties over the course of 42 days—a sum comparable to the entire losses of the Gallipoli campaign. The official war historian, Charles Bean, later recorded that Pozieres 'is more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth'.

Hughes was haunted by his visit to the western front on the eve of battle. He returned to Australia convinced of the urgent need to raise reinforcements. But voluntary enlistment was not keeping up with the rate of losses in France. In a secret letter to the Colonial Office in London, Australia's Governor General noted that monthly recruitment figures had been as follows:

- June, 6375;
- July, 6170; and
- August, 4144 (to 23 August).

He noted also, however, that casualty rates had exceeded 6700 in the past 11 days alone. Enlistments, he noted, had dropped to less than a third of what was necessary to replace those Australians who had fallen.

Hughes gave the country an ultimatum on 31 August. They must raise a total of 32,500 voluntary recruits by quotas in September or face the introduction of compulsory military service. Faced with an uncertain outcome in parliament, he declared that the matter of conscription would be taken to the people to decide. 'But this is a country where the people rule,' he said loftily, disguising the pragmatism of

his proposed referendum, for he believed that the civilian population would say yes, even if parliament might say no, 'and in this crisis—in which their future is concerned—their voice must be heard.'

Using the sweeping powers of the War Precautions Act and the Defence Act, the government instituted a brutal, manipulative and intimidating program of suppression of those who would speak against them. Within a day Hansard recorded that arrests were under way in Melbourne of those who spoke out against conscription. Anti-conscription meetings across the country were raided and violently broken up. In Broken Hill, a meeting of peaceful men and women was raided by 40 armed-police. Women were bludgeoned, and several men were knocked senseless and others imprisoned. Similarly, aggressive soldiers gate-crashed a Brisbane meeting, attempting to shout down opposition to conscription and nearly forcing the Queensland premier from his stage after.

Surveillance and censorship were tightened. In September the government prohibited civilians to speak in any foreign language while in private conversation on the telephone, admitting that all telephone conversations were under surveillance by Postal Department employees who were checking for illegal activity. Activities, publications or conversation that might interfere with recruitment were prohibited, and government censors were given unlimited power to enter a premise suspected of printing illegal materials. Newspapers were closely scrutinised before publication and strict limits were applied to what they could print by way of text or illustrations. Joan Beaumont and Kevin Fewster have concluded that censorship was used by the Hughes government in 1916 to 'muzzle any opposition to conscription' and to prohibit the press from reporting stories that were 'embarrassing or threatening' to the government. It was an attempt for complete control over the state.

Curtin struggled under the terms of censorship and repression. By then he had abandoned his job with the Timber Workers' Union and had been appointed the Organising Secretary of the Anti-Conscription Trades Unions' Congress. He complained of government repression to Elsie and confessed to taking desperate and unlawful measures to win the 'No' campaign:

We are fighting this battle with our hands tied and our mouths gagged. Every newspaper opposed to us can say what it likes:-all the papers on our side are censored out of existence. We cannot get a poster passed [by the censors], an article unaltered. So it is a case of desperate remedies. From Monday we will—in addition to the paper activity—circulate vast quantities of leaflets which will not be submitted [to the censors]. It is a work of supreme difficulty. There are only four men who know the nature of the leaflets and only one knows where they are printed.

Curtin realised that his liberty was at risk. He took evasive action to prevent his own arrest, sleeping each night at a different house and avoiding his home in Brunswick so that he could 'keep out of gaol in order to keep in the effort'.

The Labor government, after all, was fighting its side of the battle with every weapon that executive power made available. It acted immorally and, arguably, illegally. In September 1916 Hughes declared that the country had fallen well short of the voluntary quota of men required to reinforce the AIF. Rather than raising 32,500 recruits that month, the army had received less than 7000. Yet the Commonwealth statistician estimated that there were around 170,000 eligible men for service in the country. The story of the conscription referendum which followed at the end of October, and its outcome, is well known. (It was a bitter campaign which divided the country, and which was ultimately unsuccessful). A fact that is less well known is that Hughes, in anticipation of a positive outcome at the referendum, adjourned parliament and, using a proclamation, introduced conscription at the beginning of October anyway.

196,000 Australian men were pulled from their jobs, removed from the economy, and conscripted to the civilian militia in October 1916. They were provided with unbadged uniforms until the successful referendum which Hughes predicted, at which point they were to be transferred to the Australian Imperial Force. After their numbers were used up, the Governor General revealed in his secret letter to London, the government expected to extend compulsory military service to others:

It is not intended until the supply of single men without dependents is exhausted, to apply compulsion to married men, youths under twenty-one, single men with

dependents, or to the remaining sons of families in which one or more of the members have already volunteered.

That point alone suggests the government was prepared to lose an entire generation of young men in the war; that point alone reveals the insanity of the scheme, and of the war policy more broadly. Yet Hughes waged his war on the home front with increasing desperation and autocracy. He exploited the conscripts to manipulate civilian emotion, parading them through major cities on the eve of the referendum, hoping to sway the vote. Indeed, had people within the crowds in Melbourne and Perth been asked to vote at the moment they witnessed the parading troops, *The Age* noted, the result would have been a ‘thunderous “Yes”’.

About 7000 men refused to report for duty under the terms of the Proclamation. Many were arrested, and reports of their imprisonment eventually surfaced in November, though sparingly. Curtin was one of those who failed to report for duty with the citizen forces. It would have been inconceivable, as the head of the ‘No’ campaign, for him to have done so. Hughes tried to disenfranchise Curtin and the anti-conscriptionists, proclaiming the night before the election that their votes would be put aside at the polling booth and that the government would later consider whether they should be counted. The prime minister had already worked hard to stifle the ‘No’ campaign, including ongoing censorship of their campaign literature. An act of apparent sabotage of Curtin’s campaign headquarters on the day before the vote cut him off from communication with the rest of the world.

Curtin didn’t pause in the weeks which followed the successful vote. Instead, he lobbied tirelessly for the release of the Australian conscripts and of those who had been imprisoned as conscientious objectors. Hughes, however, steadfastly refused to release conscripts or free the prisoners until nearly four weeks after the referendum had been decided. On the day that the government declared the release of the conscripts and the prisoners, in an apparent act of revenge, Curtin himself was prosecuted.

Summoned to the Brunswick Court, Curtin was charged with failing to report for duty under the terms of the military service proclamation. But he was in Sydney

when the summons arrived and did not appear in court. The trial was a sham: the summons was issued just days before the trial itself and, without hearing defence evidence, the magistrate passed judgement and declared sentencing. Curtin received a term of three months imprisonment. He then spent the next few weeks evading arrest. At last, seeking courage, he experienced his Gethsemane moment, fleeing to Tasmania to draw comfort from Elsie. On his return shortly afterwards to Melbourne, Curtin was arrested and thrown into gaol.

This War Never Ends: Security and the state in times of crisis

As I said at the outset, while Curtin's First World War has often been compared to his Second—and for obvious reasons—it strikes me that there is much we can learn by comparing the circumstances of 1916 to those of modern Australia as it faces security challenges. German soldiers have been replaced by international terrorists as the enemy. Technologies have changed, bringing the war closer to the home front, but the themes of risk, conflict, surveillance, secrecy, autocracy and censorship are just as evident. It doesn't take much to recognise the surprising commonalities between now and then. If I was in a fighting mood, I'd argue too that the abuse of executive power that was evident in 1916 is just as frequently evident today.

Let me give you some examples.

The first is one of general context. You may remember earlier this year that the prime minister, Tony Abbott, came under fire for using the expression 'team Australia'. He did so to justify plans for the introduction of new anti-terrorism legislation. Unapologetic, Abbott continued to use the expression for several weeks. His message was clear: you're either one the team or not, for us or against us—the very same message which Hughes and his apostles of conscription delivered between 1916 and 1918 when they ruled by proclamation, manipulation and intimidation. By dividing the population into 'us' and 'them', those who are in opposition to government policy—as Curtin was in 1916—are accused of working against the interest of the nation.

You may recall, for instance, a dispute of this kind in 2013, when the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) revealed that the Australian government had spied on the Indonesian president and his wife in 2009. The news was revealed in material released by Edward Snowden, the American whistle-blower. Abbott responded furiously that a national broadcaster should act only in the national—by which he meant the government’s—interest. It was considered even worse that the ABC had not just reported the story, but that it had in fact led its discovery. It is a problem, Abbott concluded, that the ABC would broadcast allegations made by a ‘traitor’; further, he complained that the broadcaster takes everyone’s side, but Australia’s. Now the ABC has been punished. Despite pre-election promises that it would lose no funding under a Coalition government, the national broadcaster has this week been informed that its budget will be cut by \$250 million. And, further, it has been warned to avoid self-indulgence by reporting on the matter. In other words, to self-censor the story.

And, speaking of press censorship, parliament passed wide-ranging new rules barely a month ago regarding privacy, security, surveillance and unfettered use of executive powers on its civilian population, while the opposition barely murmured in response. ‘Unimaginable things’ can now happen in Australia, wrote the freelance journalist Alison Bevege:

Now officials can break the law with immunity.... They can act in total secrecy. They will decide what they do and to whom and when. They do not have to ask permission. They will choose when to interfere in your life and when they won't. They can dip into your most private communications and they don't need a warrant to do so.

To keep such matters silent, where possible, the government has added severe penalties for those who would report them. Where Hughes used the War Precautions Act and the Defence Act to introduce wide-sweeping surveillance and censorship, citing war-time conditions and a national security crisis as his justification for doing so, the current Attorney General, George Brandis, has added such powers to the government’s arsenal by amendments to the National Security Act (and with the same justification).

This time, at least, News Corp has also joined the fight, likening the measures which now censor the press, and the conditions we find ourselves in, to those of the First World War. Lachlan Murdoch is the co-chairman of News Corp and the grandson of Sir Keith Murdoch, the First World War journalist whose resistance of censorship helped bring about the end of the Gallipoli campaign. Lachlan Murdoch recently spoke out against Brandis' censorship of the media. 'Trust us, we're the government, seems to be a common theme when attempting to censor the media,' he complained. In response to the recent legislation, he added:

We certainly do not need further laws to jail journalists who responsibly learn and accurately tell. ... Censorship should be resisted in all its insidious forms. We should be vigilant of the gradual erosion of our freedom to know, to be informed, and to make reasoned decisions in our society and in our democracy.

Like Curtin, the journalist and activist, Murdoch called on all Australians to have the 'courage to act when those freedoms are threatened'.

Bill Gammage summarises the contest between patriotism and dissent in 1916 as follows:

Patriots, convinced of their rightness and fearful for their country, reacted strongly. They made disaffection treason, doubt disloyalty, hesitancy cowardice, pacifism stupidity [and] opposition a crime...

It is not hard to imagine how the same lines might be used to describe patriotism and dissent in modern Australia. And here lies the value of those First World War stories that belong to people like John Curtin and Keith Murdoch. Like them, we must act so that our freedoms are not threatened.

Postscript, 1917

I'd like to finish the story, if I could, with a brief postscript.

John Curtin was held as a political prisoner for 3 days in December 1916. It was meant to be 3 months, but as the government had already been compelled to release all other men convicted under the terms of the conscription proclamation, Curtin's

friends and allies lobbied Senator Pearce, the Defence Minister, for his swift release. Euphoric, Curtin wrote a passionate and relieved letter to Elsie:

Yes my sweet innocent angel who singeth in the village choir your lover has herded with desperate criminals and has had his pockets examined by someone who was not his wife and is so exceedingly desperate and dangerous that each afternoon at 4:30pm he would be locked up on his lonesome in a cell with thick walls and measuring 12x8x10 ft high and there he would have to stay until 7:30 next morning. So you see sweet maid the terrible character of the man who presumes to softly speak your name when the warders have gone away and who kind of says it as tho' 'twere a prayer he would offer up. Just think now what your Fate will be allied to such a villain!

In the weeks which followed his release, Curtin was offered the position of editor of the Westralian Worker. His friends hoped it would provide him an opportunity to find rest, recovery and stability, enabling him to defeat his alcoholism.

And so it is here, in the West, that his story continues. 'I am to win the West for Labor if I can!' he wrote to Elsie upon his departure, 'It is a destiny, sweetheart, worth having'. She joined him shortly after, and they were married, but his war continued. In December 1917, when Hughes again asked the nation to approve conscription, Curtin was charged with causing disaffection to His Majesty the King when he spoke out against compulsion and militarism. He dared to mention the 'R' words—Russia and revolution—which appears enough to have sealed his fate. He was convicted and heavily fined (though he later won a High Court appeal to overturn the ruling).

In the years which followed, Curtin attempted to enter parliament several times—first in Perth, and then in Fremantle. He was successful in 1928 for the first time, and from there on, beat a more-or-less steady path towards his prime ministership and his second war.