The world after John Curtin: Geopolitics and the planet

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The statement for which John Curtin is most renowned came early in his prime ministership, at the end of 1941. It is recalled now almost as a sacred text. As news from Malaya worsened and the Japanese forces swiftly advanced south, Curtin readied Australians for war in their own hemisphere. The war against Japan, he explained, was 'a new war'. 'The Pacific struggle' was distinct; this war in Australia's own region, he implied, was equal in gravity to the war against Germany. In late December, Curtin made his famous statement – and I will quote it because it is meet and right so to do. The prime minister said: 'Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with Britain.'

With those carefully chosen words – 'inhibitions', 'pangs' and 'kinship' – Curtin acknowledged that this geopolitical pivot carried an emotional cost for Australians. The population was still overwhelmingly of British descent and 'home' was Britain, even for many of those born here. Curtin's words therefore implied a national coming of age, a relinquishment of childhood dependence, a step into maturity. A British dominion was asserting an independent foreign policy. Australia, facing peril, was insisting on a direct, unmediated relationship with the United States of America.

When we think of Curtin, it is so often this declaration that comes to mind for it represents a cool Australian assessment of geopolitical realities at a moment of existential threat for the nation. My predecessors as lecturers in this series have often revisited this declaration too. They have analysed the geopolitical world of Curtin and its transformation through the decades that followed: superpower rivalry and the Cold War, the reconstruction of postwar society, the strengthening American alliance, the rise of China, empire and decolonisation, the reckoning with a settler nation's colonial past, Australia's defence and security in a globalised world. These are all extrapolations of the world Curtin knew; he either played a part in bringing them about or might reasonably have foreseen them. His words echo down the years with enduring meaning.

But there is a dimension of the future that he could not possibly see or even imagine. Indeed, it has blind-sided us all. That is my subject tonight.

When John Curtin died in office in 1945, his legendary status was confirmed and his words gained even more weight. The year of his death became another turning point: the loss of a revered prime minister, the end of the second world war, a new era of social reconstruction in which Curtin had invested, the beginning of a long economic boom such as Australia had not known since the 1880s, and the unleashing of the atomic bomb. Eleven days after Curtin's death, the atomic era was born. On 16 July, the world's first nuclear device was exploded at

the Trinity test site in New Mexico. Stratigraphers identify geological eras by residues in rocks, and 1945 is marked in sediment by the abrupt global geological signature of nuclear fallout.

Curtin was acutely conscious of Australia's place in the world. 'World-mindedness' was a common phrase in the 1940s, expressing an aspiration for peace and understanding after decades of war. Curtin also thought globally, for he was a citizen of an empire that spanned the Earth, a pacifist, and a politician keenly aware of the international labour movement. He was conscious that a southern land at the bottom of the globe could not isolate itself from an increasingly connected world. He revived and extended immigration and joined international negotiations leading to global institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. His colleague, Dr Evatt, would later serve as president of the United Nations General Assembly. So there was world-mindedness and there were global social and political perspectives, but did Curtin ever think in terms of the planet, a living, breathing, vulnerable Earth? Probably not. This requires environmental thinking in deep time and deep space, a consciousness that has evolved in our own lifetimes. It's a perspective and an understanding that Curtin and his contemporary leaders could not have foreseen or even imagined.

John Edwards writes beautifully in the first volume of his book, *John Curtin's War*, of Curtin's sense of time and space.[1] Edwards reconstructs Curtin's regular commute across the Nullarbor – his crossing of the vast treeless plain by train from Perth to Canberra, a journey that took him five nights and four days on six different trains with five changes of gauge. He describes Curtin and his fellow passengers smelling 'the faint dry fragrance' of saltbush and mallee scrub 'as it had been for millions of years.' When stretching their legs during the stops, they walked the bed of an ancient sea and 'crunched fossils of sea creatures underfoot.' Edwards reminds us that 'In its entire length the Trans-Australian track did not cross a single permanent stream of water.' What a path to the parliament! There were five hundred kilometres of 'precisely straight track' surrounded by desert where Curtin 'could see the circle of the plain around him from horizon to horizon.' At night through the right-hand windows he could pick out the points of the Southern Cross. He preferred not to fly, and anyway, the air services were neither frequent nor comfortable. But later during wartime, when he was forced to fly the Atlantic, Curtin told his secretary that he placed his hopes of making the crossing in the skill of the pilot, the rotation of the earth, and God Almighty.[2] That is, human ingenuity, the steady old reliable planet, and God.

It is that view of the steady old reliable planet, the unchanging Earth, that has been disrupted in our lifetimes. How has our understanding of the world – the planet – changed since John Curtin's death?

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In the first decades of the twenty-first century we are living in 'uncanny times' for they are weird, strange and unsettling in ways that question nature and culture and even the possibility of distinguishing between them. The modern history of the Western world – the Renaissance, the expansion of European peoples across the globe, the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the dawning of the Enlightenment, the Industrial

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1 John Edwards, *John Curtin's War*, volume 1, Viking, 2007, pp. 9-10.
2 Edwards, *John Curtin's War*, volume 1, p. 1.

Revolution – these are chiefly stories of the separation of culture from nature; indeed, they are stories of the mastery of culture over nature. Now in our own time we find nature and culture collapsing into one another all around us. No wonder it feels uncanny.

The Bengali writer, Amitav Ghosh, uses the term 'uncanny' in his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*.[3] For him, the word 'uncanny' captures our experience of what he calls 'the urgent proximity of non-human presences'. He's referring to other creatures, insects, animals, plants, biota, the very elements themselves – water, earth, air, fire – and our renewed and long-forgotten sense of dependence upon them. The planet is alive, says Ghosh, and only for the last three centuries have we forgotten that. We have been suffering from 'the Great Derangement', a disturbing condition of wilful and systematic blindness to the consequences of our own actions, when we are knowingly killing the planetary systems that support the survival of our species. That's what's uncanny about our times: that we are half-aware of this predicament yet also paralysed by it, caught between horror and hubris.

We inhabit a critical moment in the history of the Earth and of life on this planet, and a most unusual one in terms of our own human history. To understand the implications of the present, we have to learn to think in deep time. It's very hard for us humans to comprehend or even imagine deep time. If you think of Earth's history as the old measure of the English yard, that is, the distance from the King's nose to the tip of his outstretched hand, then one stroke of a nail file on his middle finger erases all of human history. The discussion of deep time is full of these sorts of metaphors – human history as the last inch of the cosmic mile, the last few seconds before midnight, the skin of paint atop the Eiffel Tower. Metaphor is possibly the only level on which we can comprehend such immensities of time. If we stretched a timeline across this room representing the history of the universe from the Big Bang to the present, then all of human history, from the time of our evolution as a species, would be represented by the film of dust on that wall. I'm delighted to find that the new galleries at the WA Museum Boola Bardip do a wonderful job of conjuring deep time in the telling of natural and human histories.

In the last couple of decades we have developed three powerful historical metaphors for making sense of the ecological crisis we inhabit. One is that we live in the Sixth Extinction. Humans have wiped out about two-thirds of the world's wildlife in just the last half-century. Let that sentence sink in. It has happened in less than a human lifetime. This is an extinction rate a hundred to a thousand times higher than was normal in nature. There have been other such catastrophic collapses in the diversity of life on Earth: five of them, sudden shocking falls in the graph of biodiversity separated by tens of millions of years, the last one in the immediate aftermath of the asteroid impact that ended the age of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. We now have to ask ourselves: are we inhabiting – and causing – the Sixth Extinction? In 2014 the American journalist Elizabeth Kolbert wrote an influential book called *The Sixth Extinction*, and she subtitled it *An Unnatural History*.[4] It is unnatural because the Sixth Extinction involves, to some extent, our consciousness and intent.

Another metaphor for the extraordinary character of our times is the idea of the Anthropocene. This is the insight that we have entered a new geological epoch in the history of the Earth and have now left behind the 12,000 years of the relatively stable epoch known as the Holocene, the period since the last great ice age. The new epoch of the Anthropocene

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3 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Univ. of Chicago Press, 2016.

4 Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, Henry Holt and Co., 2014.

recognises the power of humans in changing the nature of the planet, its atmosphere, oceans, climate, biodiversity, even its rocks and stratigraphy. It places humans on a par with other geophysical forces such as variations in the earth's orbit, glaciers, volcanoes and asteroid strikes.

There is debate about exactly when the Anthropocene began, but one definition is that we were first jolted into the new epoch by the industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century, when we began digging up and burning fossil fuels. That brilliant and profligate exploitation of a finite, buried resource underpinned population growth and economic expansion – and it also unleashed carbon on a massive and accelerating scale and began changing the atmosphere of the planet.

Another date given for the beginning of the Anthropocene is around 1945, the year of Curtin's death. It was, as we've seen, the beginning of the atomic era. It also initiated an exponential shift in the impact of humans on the planet. In the mid-twentieth century, the human enterprise exploded dramatically in population and energy use and rapidly began to outstrip its planetary support systems. Look at the repetitive pattern in the graphs! World population, water use, tropical forest loss and so on, all soaring after 1950. This turning point is known as the Great Acceleration.[5]

So I've talked about the Sixth Extinction and the Anthropocene. And there is a third potent metaphor for the moment we inhabit. It concerns the history and future of fire. It suggests that we are entering not just the Anthropocene but also a Fire Age, which we call the Pyrocene. The planet is heating due to human greenhouse gas emissions and it is heating so quickly that it threatens to tip Earth into an escalating cycle of fire. In other words, we are entering an extended fire age that is comparable to past ice ages.[6]

Let's take a moment to think about those ice ages.

2.6 million years ago, the Earth entered a period of rhythmical ice ages – a geological epoch called the Pleistocene – and during this epoch average global temperatures dropped six to ten degrees Celsius and ice sheets at the poles extended dramatically across Eurasia and North America. These repetitive glaciations were harsh and demanded innovation and versatility; they were a selective pressure on evolution and promoted the emergence of humanity on Earth. Throughout the Pleistocene, the ice ages were punctuated by brief warmer periods known as interglacials, which generally lasted about 10,000 years. We are living in an interglacial right now; geologists have separated it off from the Pleistocene and called it the Holocene, which means 'recent'. But it is really part of the same rhythmic pattern that has prevailed since we evolved. We humans are creatures of the ice. The Pyrocene – the Fire Age – is something we've never seen before. The Pyrocene threatens to knock Earth out of the steady planetary rhythm that has seen the birth of our own species.

How do we know about these ancient rhythmic ice ages? By reading the rocks, of course, but now also by studying the ice itself. I'm fortunate to have visited both of Earth's ice caps, and the most awesome one is definitely ours, the southern one, Antarctica.[7] I twice voyaged south with the Australian Antarctic Division, on the second occasion at the invitation of the

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5 John McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An environmental history of the Anthropocene since 1945*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016.

6 Stephen J Pyne, *The Pyrocene*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2021.

7 Tom Griffiths, *Slicing the Silence: Voyaging to Antarctica*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007.

Australian government to mark the centenary of Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1911-14. After a long wait for a break in the weather, we held a ceremony on the ice at the historic huts, the place Mawson called 'The home of the blizzard'. Through the years of Curtin's political life, Antarctica was becoming a primary site for Australia's world-mindedness, and in 1959 our nation was one of the original twelve signatories to the Antarctic Treaty, which was effectively the first disarmament treaty of the nuclear age.

Antarctica is where nine-tenths of the world's land ice resides. 70% of Earth's fresh water is locked up in that ice cap. That's a discovery humans made in my lifetime. Antarctica is not only the coldest and windiest continent; it is also paradoxically the driest – and it is the highest. It has the highest average height of any continent because it is a great dome of ice four or five kilometres thick that has built up over millions of years. In the 1950s we discovered that the driest of all continents is actually a vast elevated plateau of frozen water. The implications of that discovery are immense: it means that world sea levels are principally controlled by the state of the Antarctic ice sheet. If the southern ice cap melted, oceans would rise by more than 60 metres.

As we enter the Pyrocene, Antarctica is vulnerable and fragile, more brittle than we expected. This year the expanse of winter sea ice around Antarctica diminished dramatically below its average by the size of Western Australia. The continent of ice is a precious glistening jewel that holds the key to our future and to our past. It's a giant white fossil, a luminous relic, a clue to lost ages: it enables us to travel through time to the Pleistocene Earth. The ice is an amazing archive. Embedded in an ice-cap are tiny air bubbles from hundreds of thousands of years ago. When you drill into an ice-cap kilometres thick, you can extract a core that is layered year by year, a precious archive of deep time. I think of ice cores as the holy scripts, the sacred scrolls of our age.

The deepest Antarctic cores currently retrieve eight hundred thousand years of climate history. Right now, the search is on for the first million-year ice core, and Australia is involved in the quest.

In the 1990s, a long 400,000-year Antarctic ice core was extracted from the inland ice sheet. Here is what was distilled from it: a rhythmic, sawtooth graph of past ice ages. This is the heartbeat of the planet. The brief peaks are warmer interglacials; the extended troughs are the cold ice ages. The ice core charted four full cycles of glacial and interglacial periods and established that the carbon dioxide and methane concentrations in the atmosphere moved in lockstep with the ice sheets and the temperature. This is the barometer of the planet's health – a graph of its nervous system – through hundreds of thousands of years.

Ice cores also revealed that present-day levels of greenhouse gases are unprecedented during the past eight hundred thousand years. The level of carbon dioxide in the historic air bubbles has leapt since the industrial revolution, and especially since 1950. So before Antarctica was even seen by humans, it was recording our impact. And it was this glimpse of the deep past as revealed in the archive of ice that shocked people into a real sense of urgency about the climate crisis.

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These three metaphors – the Sixth Extinction, the Anthropocene and the Pyrocene – are historical concepts that require us to travel in geological and biological time across hundreds of millions of years and then to arrive back at the present with a sense not of continuity but of *dis*continuity, of profound rupture in our own time. That's what Earth system science has revealed: it's now too late to go back to the Holocene. It may even be too late to hang onto the Pleistocene, the long epoch that birthed our species. We've irrevocably changed the Earth system and unwittingly steered the planet into an uncertain future; now we can't take our hand off the tiller. We have to use our awesome power wisely.

The metaphors of deep time that we've been considering have some visual counterparts in deep space that have also emerged in the last half-century. In 1968, the historic Apollo 8 mission launched humans beyond Earth's orbit for the first time, out and across the void and into the gravitational power of another heavenly body. For three lunar orbits, the three astronauts studied the strange, desolate, cratered surface below them and then, as they came out from the dark side of the Moon for the fourth time, they looked up and gasped:

Frank Borman: *Oh my God! Look at that picture over there! Here's the Earth coming up. Wow, that is pretty!*
Bill Anders: *Hey, don't take that, it's not scheduled.*

They *did* take the unscheduled photo, excitedly, and it became famous, perhaps the most famous photograph of the twentieth century, the blue planet floating alone, finite and vulnerable in space above a dead lunar landscape. Frank Borman said: 'It was the most beautiful, heart-catching sight of my life'. And Bill Anders declared: 'We came all this way to explore the Moon, and the most important thing is that we discovered the Earth.'

A few years later, in 1972, a photo taken by the Apollo 17 mission and known as the 'Blue Marble' became one of the most reproduced pictures in the world, showing the Earth as a luminous breathing garden in the dark void. 'Earth-rise' and the 'Blue Marble' had a profound impact on environmental politics and sensibilities. Within a few years, the American scientists Lynn Margulis and James Lovelock put forward 'the Gaia hypothesis': that the Earth is a single, self-regulating organism. In the year of the Apollo 8 mission, Paul Ehrlich published his book, *The Population Bomb*, an urgent appraisal of a finite Earth. During the years of the Moon missions, British economist Barbara Ward wrote *Spaceship Earth* and *Only One Earth*, revealing how economics failed to account for environmental damage and degradation, and arguing that exponential growth could not continue forever. Earth Day was established in 1970, a day to honour the planet as a whole, a total environment needing protection. In 1972, the Club of Rome released its controversial and enormously influential report *The Limits to Growth*, which sold over 13 million copies and went into over 30 translations. In their report, Donella Meadows and Dennis Meadows wrestled with the contradiction of trying to force infinite material growth on a finite planet. The cover of their book depicted a whole Earth, a shrinking Earth.

Two decades later, on Valentine's Day 1990, the Voyager spacecraft was tracking beyond Saturn, six billion kilometres away, when it unexpectedly glanced over its shoulder. Again, Voyager was not programmed to look behind as it journeyed into the unknown, but scientists decided to take a risk and commanded the spacecraft to look back. And so we have a picture of Earth as a mere speck of dust in space, an image that astronomer Carl Sagan called the Pale Blue Dot. 'Look again at that dot', wrote Sagan. 'That's here. That's home. That's us.'

These images from outer space of the unity, finiteness and loneliness of the Earth helped escalate planetary thinking. From a colossal integration of Earth Systems data came a keen understanding of planetary boundaries – thresholds in planetary ecology – and the extent to which the human enterprise is threatening or exceeding them. Three identified thresholds have already been crossed: changes in climate, biodiversity and the nitrogen cycle. At least we now understand our predicament even if we are perilously slow to act. The fossil fuels that got humans to the Moon now endanger our civilisation.

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Now let's bring this story back home to our place on this Earth. Australia is uniquely exposed to the grim, rough edges of these new world narratives. Shockingly, we are leading the world into the Sixth Extinction. Modern Australian history is like a giant experiment in ecological crisis and management. Ecologists working in Australia today often feel like they are ambulance drivers arriving at the scene of an accident. The south-west of Western Australia, for example, is one of the world's biodiversity hotspots and it is experiencing an exceptional loss of habitat. It is the site of what has been called a 'radical disappearance', 'an extinction event on a grand scale'.[8]

And we inhabit the continent of fire, the driest inhabited continent, a land of drought and flooding rains that is held in the grip of the El Niño Southern Oscillation, which means that Australia is on the frontline of the Pyrocene. South-west WA, with its sudden 30% decline in rainfall since the 1970s, is one of the first places to experience the climatic shift expected with global warming.[9] The Black Summer fires – when around a million hectares of the Great Western Woodlands burnt – were a symptom of our condition and became a planetary event. Smoke from those fires encircled the globe.[10]

Furthermore, our modern history is a by-product of the Anthropocene. The British invasion of Australia was part of the age of empire and took place as the industrial revolution gathered momentum in England. Thus ancient Australia's transformation into a colony coincided with the start of the fossil-fuel era. The *Endeavour* was a repurposed coal ship. The new nation became highly dependent on fossil-fuels, especially on coal, and in recent decades it drew world attention by persisting with the political denial of climate change. Modern Australia, we have to remember, was built on denial: the denial of Aboriginal sovereignty and cultural sophistication, the denial of frontier violence and warfare. Earlier this month, at the referendum about the Voice, we witnessed a further national expression of denial.

But we have many opportunities here too. Our robust democracy, our active citizenship, our capacity for creativity and innovation, our impressive community leaders (many of them young, most of them women), our unique and inspiring environment, our destiny as a

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8 Tony Hughes d'Aeth, *Like Nothing on This Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt*, Perth: UWA Press, 2017, Preface.

9 Viki Cramer, *The Memory of Trees*, Port Melbourne: Thames & Hudson, 2023, p. 14.

10 Tom Griffiths, 'Season of reckoning', *Australian Book Review*, no. 419, March 2020: https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/current-issue/758-commentary/6243-season-of-reckoning-by-tom-griffiths; see also 'Dispatches from a firestorm', *Inside Story*, 16 December 2021: https://insidestory.org.au/dispatches-from-a-firestorm/

renewable energy superpower. And the continent's deep Indigenous human history. In just a generation we have turned upside-down the way we understand the history of Australia.[11]

When I was in primary school, the history of this country was told as a footnote to the story of the British empire. In my classroom, the book we used was *A Short History of Australia* written in 1916 by Professor Ernest Scott and it began with what he declared was 'a blank space on the map' and it ended with 'a new name on the map' – that of *Anzac*. So the story of Australia climaxed with a national sacrifice on a beach on the other side of the world. Australia at that time was seen as a new, transplanted society with a short and derivative history, a planned, peaceful and successful offshoot of imperial Britain. Aboriginal peoples, depicted as non-literate, non-agricultural, non-urban and non-national, could have no 'history' and did not constitute a 'civilisation' – thus they could find no place in the national polity or the national story or even as citizens of the Commonwealth.

But in the half-century that followed, Australians realised that the New World they thought they'd discovered was actually the Old, and that the true 'nomads' were themselves, the colonisers who had come in ships. From the early 1960s, archaeologists confirmed what Aboriginal people had always known: that Australia's human history went back aeons, into the Pleistocene, well into the last ice age, earlier than Europe's. The timescale of Australia's human history increased tenfold in just thirty years and the journey to the other side of the frontier became a journey back into deep time. We now recognise the first Australians as the most adventurous of all humans, pioneer sea-voyagers who, over 60,000 years ago saw the beckoning, burning continent of eucalypts glowing over the horizon of the ocean. The island continent girt by sea was transformed into a complex jigsaw of beloved and inhabited Aboriginal Countries and ecologies. Aboriginal societies were – and are – diverse, innovative and adaptive; over 300 languages flourished here. Now our histories of Australia strive, as the Uluru Statement puts it, to let 'this ancient sovereignty … shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.' This challenge is not going away, no matter how many toddler tantrums the nation has. Reckoning with our colonial history is a daily responsibility of living on this continent.

Therefore we can now see more clearly that, on Australian beaches in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there took place one of the greatest ecological and cultural encounters of all time. Peoples with immensely long and intimate histories of habitation encountered the furthest-flung representatives of the world's first industrialising nation. The circle of migration out of Africa more than 80,000 years earlier finally closed.

This is a land of a radically different ecology, where climatic variation and uncertainty have long been the norm – and now those extremes are intensifying. Australia's long human history spans great climatic change and also offers a parable of cultural resilience. The history of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia takes humans back, if not into the ice, then certainly into the ice age, into the depths of the last glacial maximum of 20,000 years ago and beyond, into and through periods of average temperature change of 5˚C and more, such as those we might now face. When Europeans and North Americans look for cultural beginnings, they are often prompted to tell you that humans and their civilisations are products of the Holocene and that we are all children of this recent spring of cultural creativity over the last 10,000 years. By contrast, an Australian history of the world takes us back to humanity's first deep sea navigators and to the experience of people surviving cold

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[11] Tom Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel: Historians and their craft*, Melbourne: Black Inc., 2016.

ice-age droughts even in the central Australian deserts. It brings us visions of people living along fast-retreating coastlines as they cope with the dramatic rising of the seas. Human civilisation here was sustained in the face of massive climate change. This is a story that modern Australians have only just discovered, and now perhaps it offers a parable for the world. The continent of fire will lead the world into the new age of fire. But it also carries human wisdom and experience from beyond the last ice age.

Living on a precipice of deep time has become, I think, an exhilarating dimension of what it means to be Australian. We can now see that the modern Australian story, in parallel with other colonial cataclysms, was a forerunner of the planetary crisis. Indigenous management was overwhelmed, forests cleared, wildlife annihilated, waters polluted and abused, the climate unhinged. Across the globe, imperial peoples used land and its creatures as commodities, as if Earth were inert. They forgot that the planet is alive.

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In the third decade of the twenty-first century, it is clear that Australia is facing a new existential threat, quite different to that which Curtin addressed in 1941. We are embroiled in a climate emergency and biodiversity crisis that threaten to destroy our security and way of life. It's not just a threat; it's actually going to happen unless we act swiftly and decisively. It is a planetary event, but Australia and its region are especially vulnerable to its effects. National security assessments and reports from Australian defence chiefs have acknowledged our predicament, identifying the climate crisis as 'this clear and present danger', 'the greatest threat to the security and future of Australians' and 'the Hundred Year War' for which we are seriously unprepared.[12] To meet the challenge, we will need to recognise that we do indeed face a crisis, an *emergency*, and that we will be required to mobilise with a grave sense of urgency as if in a war.

In that December 1941 address to the people, Curtin sought to wean Australians off a sub-conscious cultural reflex to trust to luck, isolation and Britain. 'I demand', he said, 'that Australians everywhere realise that Australia is now inside the firing lines.' He spoke of the need to shake citizens out of false assumptions of security; he talked of awakening 'the somewhat lackadaisical Australian mind' and of the 'reshaping, in fact revolutionising, of the Australian way of life until a war footing is attained quickly, efficiently and without question.' 'We can and we will', he promised.

What would a brave but realistic geopolitical pivot look like in our own time? What would constitute a Curtinesque act of visionary leadership now?

I think it would entail a recognition that, because of our extreme ecological and economic vulnerability in this escalating crisis, Australia needs to lead the world into the energy transition. Not to drag its feet, not to wait for other nations, but actually demonstrate the

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[12] *Implications of climate change for Australia's national security*, Final Report, Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, The Senate, 17 May 2018, Commonwealth of Australia 2018; Honorary Professor Admiral Chris Barrie AC RAN, Submission to the Senate Inquiry; Australian Security Leaders Climate Group (ASLCG), An Open Letter to Australia's Political Leaders, March 2022: https://www.aslcg.org/open-letter/; Robert Sturrock and Peter Ferguson, *The Longest Conflict: Australia's Climate Security Challenge*, Centre for Policy Development, 2015; Cheryl Durrant, Simon Bradshaw and Alix Pearce, *Rising to the Challenge: Addressing Climate and Security in our Region*, Climate Council of Australia, 2021.

pathway to zero emissions. Provide global direction and inspiration. And to do so out of intelligent national self-interest as well as out of 'world-mindedness'. Australia needs to grasp its opportunity as a renewable energy superpower. It needs to wean itself swiftly off its fossil fuel dependency, not cling to old, polluting forms of power and vested interests. A Western Australian like John Curtin would have to take on that challenge in the mining state, reminding constituents of the long-term significance of minerals in the renewable future. Of course it will be difficult and fraught. But that is what leadership is about: stepping wisely into the future that is coming for you.

Yes, it will be difficult but it is also simple. The physics of the planet are simple and we know what we have to do and what will happen if we don't. The enemies of action are either ignorant and short-sighted or selfish and greedy. The pathway to electrification has been laid down clearly.[13] The technologies are there or fast developing, as is the business momentum. But the free market can't move fast enough and government must lead. Even funding for the transition is readily available in the form of massive government fossil-fuel subsidies that can to be diverted, and windfall profits to the oil and gas industry that demand to be taxed. The economic, social and environmental benefits to the nation will be immense. I believe that the people are ahead of government on this and that they will welcome bold leadership. To paraphrase John Curtin, we should step into that future now, quite clearly, without any inhibitions of any kind, and free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with coal, oil, gas, Murdoch and Rinehart.

[13] Saul Griffith, *The Big Switch: Australia's Electric Future*, Black Inc., 2022.