



THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE: CREATING AN INDEPENDENT AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY

The Art of the Possible explores Australia's growing independence in the realm of foreign policy from 1935 to 1950.

Any analysis of Australia's foreign relations in the 20th century must include a focus on Australia's progression from 'dependence' to 'independence'. Under Prime Minister John Curtin's skilled and pragmatic leadership, Australia's refusal to see itself as a colonial outpost serving only British interests created the possibility of a new direction in foreign policy. The central problems faced by Curtin during World War Two are essentially the same problems Australia faces today:

- the need to resolve its geographic position in Asia in relation to its European background; and
- the need for security by a small to middle power.

SEPARATE DIPLOMATIC REPRESENTATION

In the first four decades after Federation, Australian governments made consistent attempts to pursue their foreign policy objectives within the framework of the British Empire.

In 1935 a Department of External Affairs was established under its own permanent head and in 1937 an Australian Counsellor was attached to the staff of the British Ambassador in Washington to provide some direct feedback. However, the main assumption underlying Australian foreign policy during the 1930s was that Australia's role was to formulate suggestions and forward these to the British Government.

In 1939, with war looming, Prime Minister Robert Menzies made a reassessment of Australia's foreign policy. In a broadcast to the Australian people, he said:

*What Great Britain calls the Far East is to us the near north. Little given as I am to encouraging the exaggerated ideas of Dominion independence and separatism which exist in some minds, I have become convinced that in the Pacific Australia must regard herself as a principal providing herself with her own information and maintaining her own diplomatic contact with foreign powers. [Watt, *The Evolution of Australian Foreign Policy*, p. 24]*

While Menzies did qualify this statement by asserting that Australia should not act in the Pacific as if it were 'a completely separate power' but rather as 'an integral part of the British Empire', it was a step towards recognising Australia's interests could differ from those of Great Britain.

By 1940 Menzies was under pressure to establish a Legation in Washington and Richard Casey was appointed Australia's first overseas ambassador.

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The John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library (JCPML)

As Australia's first prime ministerial library the JCPML honours the contribution of wartime Prime Minister John Curtin, works towards the advancement of knowledge and the enrichment of culture, and provides a gateway for the community to learn about its past in order to build a better future. It aims to fulfil this purpose by developing a unique research collection and a varied outreach program for the educational sector and general community. It has been established at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Western Australia. The JCPML has digitised material in its own collection and dispersed John Curtin-related materials held around the world and now provides electronic access and linking to these items through the JCPML Electronic Research Archive (ERA).

Curtin
University of Technology



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THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE



CREATING AN INDEPENDENT AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY

John Curtin



INCREASING AUSTRALIAN INDEPENDENCE

The ratification of the Statute of Westminster in 1942 was a major step forward in establishing Australia's legal identity in the international arena. Less than two years later Australia, for the first time, entered into an international agreement to which Britain was not a party when it instigated the Anzac Agreement with New Zealand. The Anzac Agreement foreshadowed the fact that Australia was prepared to put Australian interests forward on postwar settlement issues. As Minister for External Affairs, Dr Evatt, said in 1944: 'it is necessary to get rid once and for all of the idea that Australia's international status is not a reality and that we were to remain adolescent forever.' [CPD, Vol 179, 19 July 1944, p.229]

Evatt played a prominent role at the April 1945 San Francisco meeting for the establishment of the United Nations. The idea of the United Nations as an international peace-keeping organisation was first mooted in late 1941 and was initially based on the broad principles established by the Atlantic Charter. Australia had pledged its support of these principles in early 1942. During the 1945 conference Evatt worked to secure better representation for small to middle powers and generally established Australia's position in an international context.

The Bretton Woods Agreement developed from the United Nations Monetary and Finance Conference held in July 1944. Securing Australia's ratification of the Agreement was one of the most politically difficult but important achievements of the Curtin and Chifley Governments in preparing Australia for its place in the postwar world of international trade and economics. After a long and tense set of negotiations within the Australian Labor Party parliamentary acceptance of the Bretton Woods Agreement was finally secured in March 1947.



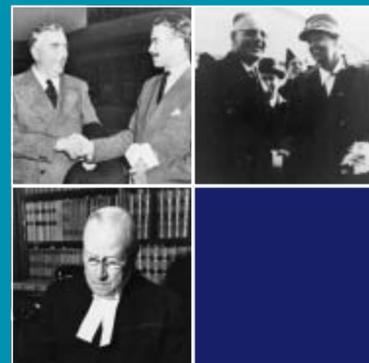
THE STRUGGLE TO BE HEARD

In many respects, Australia's fear of being sidelined in decision-making during the war was the major factor determining Australian foreign policy until the end of 1945. While Dr H V Evatt, as Minister for External Affairs, was a key figure in Australia's moves towards an independent foreign policy, it was Curtin himself who set the scene with his famous newspaper article published in the Melbourne *Herald* on 27 December 1941:

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 the United Kingdom. We know the problems that the United Kingdom faces . . . But we know that Australia can go and Britain can still hold on.

Historically, Curtin's message is seen as one of the most important turning points in Australia's relations with the world. His message did not end Australian endeavours of conducting aspects of its foreign policy through the British Commonwealth, but it did foreshadow the increasing reliance on the United States as Australia's most important ally and Australia's determination to play a leading role in territory it regarded as its prime responsibility.

Australia's growing independence was evidenced by a number of wartime developments under Curtin's leadership: the 'turn to America' away from the traditional reliance on Britain, the ratification of the Statute of Westminster, Australia's participation in the United Nations, and the signing of the Anzac and Bretton Woods Agreements. These continue to be important in the context of a rapidly changing and complex postwar world.



A NEW WORLD ORDER

The Curtin Government placed great emphasis on self-determination for nations in the wording of the Atlantic Charter and in the aims and objectives of the United Nations. By 1947 this had translated into Australia viewing Asian nationalism realistically and with understanding. Economically, too, Australians came to see the importance of trading ties with their Asian neighbours.

Between 1941 and 1945 Australia took the first decisive steps towards a more independent world view, moving away from total reliance on Britain for its foreign policy and defence. After the Pacific war Australians were only too aware of the extent to which their future security would depend on the direction of developments in south-east Asia and of the importance of continuing involvement by Britain and the United States.

In the remaining five decades of the 20th century Australia has endeavoured to enhance and expand the degree of independence achieved during the war years. As a small to middle power Australia is still seeking its own active role in an often unstable regional and international context. The complications of its historical and cultural links to Europe and the western hemisphere have to be set against its geographical location.

While the same problems still exist in one form or another, the events of 1941 to 1945 in many important respects changed forever the way those problems are dealt with today.

