WHO WAS JOHN CURTIN?

John Curtin was born in Creswick, Victoria on 8 January, 1885, the oldest of four children born to Irish immigrants, Kate and John Curtin. Curtin's much interrupted education ended when he was 15 when his family was forced to move to New South Wales where his family could supplement their income with a variety of jobs. In 1903 he took on the job of an estimates clerk with Titan Manufacturing Company.

In 1911 he left Titan to become Secretary of the Timber Workers Union. Within two years Curtin had coordinated a loose association into a tight and effective union and was elected as its first secretary-general. By 1912, Curtin met Elsie Needham and the couple formed a lasting friendship, corresponding regularly over the next few years.

The outbreak of war in 1914 brought the controversy of conscription and in 1916 Curtin became secretary of the National Executive of the Anti-Conscription Campaign. In 1917 he moved to Perth, Western Australia, to become editor of the Westralian Worker newspaper, marrying Elsie Needham and starting a new life.

After a period of stability and domestic contentment, in 1928 Curtin was elected to the House of Representatives as a member for the seat of Fremantle, Western Australia. His political career was interrupted only twice, firstly by a period of opposition to the Labor government of James Scullin and the Labor Party which was defeated in 1931 but he regained Fremantle in 1934. A year later he was elected leader of the Australian Labor Party.

As Labor leader Curtin faced several major difficulties and his immediate task was to unite the party which had been split since 1931 by disagreements on how to tackle the problems of the 1930s depression. When the Labor Party was defeated in the 1934 election Curtin became Leader of the Opposition and remained in that role until Labor won the 1940 election and collapsed, John Curtin became prime minister on 7 October 1941. He remained in office until his death on 5 July 1945.

THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE
CREATING AN INDEPENDENT AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY
An exhibition from the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, Curtin University of Technology

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 Curtin's leadership Australia became a more significant player on the world stage. 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.
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 body was developed during the Second World War, and in 1945 the charter was signed in San Francisco. Evatt was instrumental in ensuring that Australia would have a strong voice in the new organisation, and he helped to establish Australia's position as a major player in international affairs.

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 a significant achievement in preparing Australia for its role in the postwar world of international trade and economics. The prime purpose of the conference was to discuss the promotion of international monetary cooperation; international trade; and the establishment of a system of payments and fulfil their obligations under the fund.

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.

The Evolution of Australian Foreign Policy

In the weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbour and the sinking of the British battleships and , Curtin expressed growing concern about Australia's reliance on Britain and the British naval base at Singapore. With the capture of Singapore, the British were no longer in a position to provide the protection that Australia had relied on for so many years. Curtin was determined to ensure that Australia would be able to stand on its own two feet and that it would not be dependent on Britain for its defence.

The government felt that Australia's concerns were being ignored, and that Australia's interests were not being properly represented in international affairs. In response to this, 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, Australia's increasing involvement in world affairs, and Australia's growing sense of its own identity and self-determination.

The ratification of the Statute of Westminster in 1942 was a major step forward in establishing Australia's legal identity in the international arena. The Statute of Westminster was a treaty between the Commonwealth of Australia and the United Kingdom, which guaranteed that Australia would be able to exercise its own authority and make its own laws, without the need for the approval of the British Parliament.

Throughout the remaining five decades of the 20th century, Australia endeavoured to enhance and expand the degree of independence achieved during the war years. At the beginning of the Curtin Government between 1941 and 1945 changed in important respects the way those problems are dealt with today.