

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 at 14 when he began to supplement the family 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 instrumental in introducing a Workers' Compensation Act in Victoria. On a working trip to Tasmania in 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 term was cut short when the Australian Labor Party 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 Depression. He managed to bring all the disparate factions within Labor together to form an effective and unified party. By the time of the 1940 elections Labor was in a strong position, both within the party room and as an effective opposition party in parliament. When the coalition government lost majority support in parliament 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 wartime 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.

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).

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**THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE**



CREATING AN INDEPENDENT AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY





**WARTIME RELATIONS: CURTIN, CHURCHILL & ROOSEVELT**

British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill and American President Franklin Roosevelt were strong leaders from two of the world's most powerful countries. Australian prime ministers had traditionally relied on being part of the British Empire for their voice in world affairs. Whilst still acknowledging the strong links to Britain, Prime Minister John Curtin fought to have Australia's interests recognised and that increased tensions between the three leaders.

In the weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbour and the sinking of the British battleships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, Curtin expressed growing concern about Australia's reliance on Britain and the British naval base at Singapore. With the capture of Singapore and the increasing threat of Japanese invasion, Curtin requested the return of troops to protect Australia. By the middle of February 1942 he was in the midst of a heated exchange of cables with Churchill, centred on proposals for the return of the Australian Divisions from the Middle East. Curtin was pressured by both Churchill and Roosevelt to agree to their demands to deploy Australian troops to Burma. However, Curtin put Australia's needs ahead of these requests.

Realising that Australia would not be able to rely for its defence on Great Britain, which was heavily involved in the European war, Curtin broke from the traditional view that Australian foreign policy was best served by participating in Imperial foreign policy when he wrote:

*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 Herald*, 27 December 1941]

While Curtin still intended to conduct aspects of Australia's foreign policy through the British Empire, his message foreshadowed Australia's increasing reliance on the United States as an ally.



**THE FIRST STEPS:**

**Foreign Policy under Menzies**

Up until the late 1930s, Australia's diplomatic relations were channelled almost exclusively through the British Government with Australia obtaining all its information about world affairs either directly or indirectly from Britain. In 1935 an Australian 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 first four decades of the 20th century 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, leader of the United Australia Party, 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 that 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 in March that year.

**THE STRUGGLE TO BE HEARD:**

**Increasing Australian Independence**

World War Two was the catalyst for creating an Australian perspective in foreign policy. As the Japanese threat of invasion increased, Australia had two major preoccupations:

- The government felt that Australia's concerns were being overlooked by Britain and the United States.
- Australia wanted a greater say in the direction of the war.

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.

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 established Australia as an independent state able to form its own foreign policy and defence free from British control. 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 showed that Australia was prepared to put Australian interests forward on postwar settlement issues. As Australian 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.'  
[*Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 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 and 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 a politically difficult but important achievement in preparing Australia for its place in the postwar world of international trade and economics.

The prime purpose of the conference was to discuss the establishment of an International Monetary Fund which would:

- promote international monetary cooperation;
- facilitate the expansion and balanced growth of international trade;
- influence countries to correct maladjustments in their balance of payments and fulfil their obligations under the fund.

The agreement was finally ratified under the succeeding Chifley Government in 1947.

**A NEW WORLD ORDER**

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.

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 21st century Australia is still seeking its own active role as a small to middle power 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 decisions of the Curtin Government between 1941 and 1945 changed in important respects the way those problems are dealt with today.

**AUSTRALIA'S WARTIME PRIME MINISTERS**

Five prime ministers served Australia during the war years (3 September 1939 – 14 August 1945).

On 25 April 1939, Robert Menzies was sworn in as the 12th Prime Minister of Australia, after he had been elected leader of the United Australia Party (UAP). When Britain declared war in September 1939, Australia followed automatically. When the UAP lost confidence in Menzies, Arthur Fadden, leader of the Country Party, became prime minister on 29 August 1941 at the head of a coalition government. When his government lost majority support in the House of Representatives, John Curtin, leader of the Australian Labor Party, became prime minister on 7 October 1941. After the bombing of Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941 Curtin declared war on Japan, independently of Great Britain. Following Curtin's death on 5 July 1945, the Deputy Prime Minister, Frank Forde, acted as prime minister until the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party elected Ben Chifley as its new leader. Chifley was sworn in as prime minister on 13 July 1945 and remained in power until December 1949.

**THE SCULPTURES**

The three 30 cm high bronze figures of Prime Minister John Curtin were sculpted by Canberra-based Peter Latona. Peter is a well-known Australian sculptor who has previously completed pieces for The Australian Ballet, the Australian War Memorial, the Sydney Opera House, Royal Australian Mint and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. The bronzes capture John Curtin in three typical poses – giving a public speech; reading over his notes; and in a relaxed pose at the end of a hard day. These sculptures were commissioned by the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library in 2003 and completed in 2004.