

## Introducing John Joseph Curtin, Australian war time prime minister

It is my pleasure and privilege today to introduce you to the life of John Joseph Curtin-known more fully as John Joseph Ambrose Curtin but more usually as simply John Curtin.<sup>1</sup> From my perspective there has always been a fascination in the United States with the image of a person born in a log cabin and becoming president in the White House and many years ago I remember clearly writing a biography of Abraham Lincoln with just that image to help make the story meaningful even to Australian school children. Lincoln, I seem to recall, was born in a one room log cabin in Kentucky and moved first to Indiana and then to Illinois from where his political career spiralled. Curtin was not actually born in a single room log cabin but in a small but adequate weather board home with a shingles roof in a mining town (Creswick) in Victoria. If Lincoln will always be remembered for leading his country during the American Civil War Curtin will always be remembered for leading his country when for the first and only time in its history since European settlement in 1788 there were bombing raids from the air and sea and when the threat of invasion by a hostile force was very real. In my own home (I was six years old at the time) I still recall the air raid shelters in our backyard and the blackout on our windows and, can I add, the party staged for us by the Americans in gratitude for the hospitality we showed their sailors and airmen while they were based in Perth, (also Curtin's home town by that time).

Whether Curtin was Australia's greatest ever prime minister is a question which will always be debated with significant historians on both sides of argument but there can be no doubt that at the time he was seen as a person who could be trusted absolutely. Indeed, in August 1943 on the one and only occasion that as a war prime minister Curtin and his party faced the electors they won their greatest ever victory and captured every seat in each of the two houses (House of Representatives and Senate) in Western Australia, the state which had become his home. Moreover, during the critical war years as a rabid socialist and committed trade unionist Curtin was able to develop a very significant relationship based on trust and mutual respect with Douglas MacArthur, a larger than life American general whose political views could not have been more divergent from those to which Curtin had been committed all his life.

Let me first then relate the main outlines of Curtin's life and the stages which led him eventually to being entrusted with the responsibilities of prime ministership only a matter of weeks before Pearl Harbour and the fall of Singapore. Born in 1885 and the eldest of four children of Irish-born parents Curtin was the son of a police sergeant who through ill health was forced to leave the police force in 1886 and subsequently moved with his family from hotel to hotel in Melbourne seeking to make a living as a hotel manager. The young Curtin left school at the age of fourteen and held a variety of jobs including seven years as an estimates clerk with a manufacturing company before becoming secretary of the Timber Workers Union at the age of 26. During his early years in Melbourne Curtin 'read voraciously, often at the Melbourne Public Library' and developed what can be described a 'growing and increasingly firm commitment to the socialist cause'? The English socialist agitators who most influenced Curtin's outlook significantly favoured the process of joining the newly formed political Labour parties and seeking to 'capture political power in order to abolish the 'class state''. When their approach became more radical Curtin while strongly committed to their objectives nevertheless 'always maintained his links with organized political labour'.<sup>3</sup> From 1911 to 1915 Curtin occupied the position of secretary of the Timber Workers' Union a post he left in a time of growing despair with the outbreak of World War One and what he perceived as its crushing impact on his fellow workers. During 1916 he also spent some time in a nursing home dealing with the effects of alcoholism linked with severe depression.

In that same year, in a move which was to have its ramifications more than twenty-five years later, Curtin became an organiser of the National Executive of the Interstate Trades Union Congress on Conscription and then secretary of the National Executive of the Anti-Conscription Campaign. The Labor party had been split asunder by Labor Prime Minister Hughes' two attempts by referendum (both unsuccessful) to override his own party's opposition to the adoption of conscription for military service in Europe and the Middle East. In the course of the controversy Curtin spent a few days in gaol for refusing to obey a government proclamation for single men to list for military service<sup>4</sup> but his life was restabilised when he moved to Western Australia to become editor of the trade union newspaper. At the same time on the domestic front too Curtin's life took a turn for more security and support with his marriage and the birth of his two children by the early 1920s and this notwithstanding his periodic slumps into chronic depression.

During the 1920s as editor of the *Westralian Worker* as well as the secretary of the local branch of the Australian Journalists Association (AJA) Curtin might be said to have served his final political apprenticeship while developing a close and effective relationship with the local Western Australian Labor party Premier Philip Collier, another Labor leader who had been strongly opposed to military conscription during the First World War. It is significant that when Curtin had been editor of *The Timber Worker* he identified himself primarily as a unionist and on taking the editorial post in Western Australia he immediately applied to join the AJA and within a few months was a member of the committee. By June 1919 he was vice president and in September 1920 he was 'elevated to the presidency 'with the complete confidence of the committee, and of the rank and file'.<sup>5</sup> From the outset as AJA president Curtin developed contacts with leading academics at the University of Western Australia and arranged for them to help present a series of courses to his Association members on such issues as British colonial policy, economics and 'elements of English prose'. His aim has been described as 'to bring University teachers and journalists, who are all engaged in forming and informing public opinion into personal touch with each other'.<sup>6</sup> During his time at the *Worker* Curtin expanded the Association membership significantly and sought in a variety of ways to 'politicise' the journalists. As it eventuated the close relationship he developed with journalists was to be a crucial feature of his dealings with the press during his days as prime minister in the 1940s.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of his own political outlook, by contrast with his pre-war revolutionary attitudes Curtin strongly condemned the 'harsh treatment' of Germany in the aftermath of the Great War in the process describing France as 'one of the villains of the piece with their desire for 'revenge and an ungenerous trampling on a fallen foe'.<sup>8</sup> He strongly supported the concept of the League of Nations but came to see it as 'merely the instrument of the dominant powers' though in the process supporting the attempts made by Woodrow Wilson to develop a 'new charter for civilisation'.<sup>9</sup> As for Australia he was concerned at the extent to which it was becoming 'an appendage of Britain and the Empire' and a country 'hobbled economically by the chains of Empire'.<sup>10</sup> During these formative years he became increasingly convinced of the necessity to work through the Australian Labor Party rather than breakaway socialist parties and he ran unsuccessfully as an endorsed ALP candidate for Perth in the 1919 federal election and again in 1925 on that occasion for Fremantle when he was defeated by 6000 votes and the seat was won by an independent. Three years later in 1928 at his

fourth attempt (including one in Victoria in 1914), he was elected to the House of Representatives to represent Fremantle, one of the only five West Australian seats in the 75 member House of Representatives.

Curtin's success in 1928 can be attributed to a number of factors. These included the growing disputation between the non Labor Bruce-Page government and the trade union movement and the first signs of the incipient economic downturn which underpinned the Wall Street Crash in October 1929. Probably most significant however was the decision of popular small goods manufacturer and successful independent candidate in 1925 William Watson not to recontest the seat. In his absence Curtin polled over 49% of the primary votes and won the election by 1,500 votes out of a total of more than 39,000 after the preferences had been distributed.

Curtin's first term in the national Parliament ended abruptly when he was forced to face the electors in October 1929 after serving only twelve months. The early election resulted from prime minister Bruce and his governing Nationalist being defeated on a no confidence vote in the House of Representatives and in the ensuing election Bruce lost both office and his own parliamentary seat. (Interestingly, the only occasion since 1929 when an Australian government has been defeated on a vote of confidence in the House of Representatives was in October 1941 and led to Curtin becoming prime minister.) As it was, for a prime minister to lose his personal seat in Parliament was an unprecedented event at the time and one which has only occurred once since, namely in 2008 when defeated Prime Minister John Howard also failed to retain his own parliamentary seat. Labor won the 1929 election returning to power after a gap of twelve years and there were several predictions that Curtin was certain to be included in the new Scullin Labor ministry. Indeed, according to one of Curtin's biographers it was said of Curtin at the time that 'the Labor Party had added to its ranks an orator whose worth as a fighting force seemed invaluable'.<sup>11</sup> However, when the Labor members elected their ministers (as was the practice at the time) Curtin was not one of those included and as it eventuated the Scullin Government's term in office (1929-1931) became disastrous years for Curtin and his party alike with hopeless divisions in their ranks as to how to meet the challenges posed by the Great Depression and Australia's level of debt to the United Kingdom. The Government was also completely hamstrung by a hostile Senate when it tried to deal with the economic problems through parliamentary measures. Perhaps the most significant event during this period was the acceptance by the Scullin Labor Government of the so-called Premiers' Plan calling for drastic cuts in expenditures including those on social welfare measures and in this regard Curtin implacably rejected his party's government's decisions to accept this plan. As part of his major speech in Parliament opposing the Plan Curtin contended

I am opposed to the plan in its entirety, because the variations of interest rates are contingent upon my acquiescence in the reduction of payments to old age, invalid and war pensioners, and because implicit in the plan is an abandonment of the whole conception of the Labour movement in regard to the reconstruction of society.

Labor supporters, he argued, could have

no respect for a party, certainly not their own party, if, in a time of great national crisis, it can see no alternative but to carry out and apply the policy of its opponents.<sup>12</sup>

Eventually, breakaway Labor members forced another early election and in December 1931 the official Labor party suffered a crushing defeat. On this occasion, Curtin who had won Fremantle by 6000 votes in 1929 was defeated by more than 5000 votes by former member William Watson who returned to win a second and what proved to be a final term as an independent.

Looking back in hindsight it can be said that the three years between 1931 and 1934 when Curtin was out of Parliament and for a time had no paid employment (to the extent that for a time he wrote columns about sporting events for the paper of which he had previously been editor) were destined to make or break his career. He was able to draw a small salary while working as a publicity officer for the Labor Party but his credentials with his immediate colleagues in Western Australia were impeccable because of his refusal to accept the Premiers' Plan and his employment prospects improved when the State Labor Party under the leadership of close colleague Phil Collier regained power in 1933. At that time Curtin was appointed chairman of an advisory council to prepare Western Australia's case for special assistance under the newly created (and still extant) Commonwealth Grants Commission. It seems also that during these years he came to grips with and brought under control his personal drinking problems which had surfaced from time to time going back to the difficult days in World War One. During the years out of Parliament he also wrote numerous articles for the press in which he urged a breakaway from the deflationary aspects of the Premiers' Plan and in his writings he was still urging that 'the labour movement is a movement for socialism; it seeks to supersede capitalism... [but] it is in part at least an administrator of the present system'.<sup>13</sup> He also maintained his earlier assertions that making Germany repay its 'reparation obligations' had been disastrous and that war debts must be cancelled and reparations cease'. In this context he lauded 'those Europeans including German socialists who had insisted that 'the supreme loyalty is to mankind, and not to the tribe, the race'.<sup>14</sup>

Curtin's opportunity came with the federal election called for September 1934 and his hopes were greatly boosted with the news that William Watson did not plan to stand again for Fremantle. His party credentials were also boosted as one 'who had opposed the Premiers Plan and who had a plan of his own for boosting national credit and stimulating the still laggard economy'.<sup>15</sup> As it transpired Curtin was one of four ALP candidates at the 1934 election who succeeded in winning seats back for Labor compared with 5 new members for the Lang Labor forces from New South Wales which had also opposed the Premiers Plan but were at odds with the federal Labor party. Indeed their leader J T Lang had been sacked as Premier of New South Wales by the State Governor (and Queens representative) when his government refused to meet its debts to the Commonwealth Government. In a three cornered contest in Fremantle Curtin led his Liberal challenger Florence Cardeii-Oiiver (herself destined to go on to become the first female cabinet minister in any Australian state government) with a margin of a little over 2.500 votes on the primary count The preferences from the Social Credit Party candidate, despite apparent Labor leanings, went more than 60% to Cardeii-Oiiver but Curtin won the seat with a majority of just over 1000 votes securing about 51% of the final votes.

Viewed in hindsight anyone who in 1934 would have suggested that within a year Curtin would be the leader of the Australian Labor Party in the national Parliament would have been regarded as drastically overoptimistic or ill informed. Curtin's previous parliamentary experience amounted to three years; he had not been a minister in a Labor government; and he had only just returned to Parliament after a three year absence. Instead in September 1935 when the aging and weary Leader Scullin, a man 'worn down by the trials of leadership'<sup>6</sup> and whose reputation had been unalterably scarred by the failure of his government during the Depression, finally announced his intention to resign Curtin won the ensuing ballot by one vote.

The reasons suggested for Curtin's success are many and varied but include his persistent opposition to the Premiers Plan, his powers of oratory 'that had few equals in the parliament'<sup>17</sup>, his location in Western Australia and consequential isolation from New South Wales–Victorian disputes and the benefits of his pre 1917 contacts in Victoria. Perhaps above all in the words of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the party believed him 'to be the man who will lead it out of the political wilderness into the promised land'.<sup>18</sup> His opponent Francis Forde from Queensland was not seen as a man of vision and had supported the Premiers Plan but remained Curtin's deputy from 1934 to 1945 when he was again passed over for the leadership following Curtin's death.

It is important to note at this stage that those who voted for Curtin in 1935 because he would bring them electoral victory had to wait until 1943 for that to occur and only after Curtin had already become prime minister achieving that office through the problems of those opposed to him. For much of that time Curtin's major mission was to reunite his own party by dealing with the powerful Lang Labor forces in New South Wales and more broadly to rescue the party 'from the debilitating effects of the Great Depression'.<sup>19</sup> He also had to come to terms with the rapidly deteriorating situation in Europe beginning the very day after his election as leader with the necessity to react to Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia an issue on which the Catholic wing of the Labor party was taking a very different attitude to the party's left. He also focussed on defence policy placing increasing stress on Australia's need, as he had first argued as early as 1918, to make much greater use of developing a 'modern, efficient mobile air force, capable at striking at and destroying sea-borne invaders'.<sup>20</sup> In November 1936 he launched a broadside asserting that

The dependence of Australia upon the competence, let alone the readiness, of British statesmen to send forces to our aid is too dangerous a hazard upon which to found Australia's defence policy...

Great wars in which Australia's security is to be imperilled will not be European wars. They will be wars in the South Pacific. The delay in despatching the British fleet to our aid would be bound to be prolonged. This delay would provide an enemy the opportunity to capture or damage the Singapore base.<sup>21</sup>

At the time of the 1937 election, however, Curtin was criticized both for being isolationist and 'hostile to Australia's historic reliance on Britain'<sup>122</sup> and Labor gained only two additional seats in the Parliament giving it 29 seats in the 74 member House though the party did well in the Senate election. Moreover, time was to prove to be on Curtin's side in his increasing concern about the threat posed by Japanese belligerence in China even while it was rapidly becoming one of Australia's major trading partners. Nevertheless, in 1938 and 1939 Curtin went through difficult times personally as 'Australia drifted towards war' led by men (including prime minister and ex Laborite Joseph Lyons) 'who felt largely unable to influence the course of events'.<sup>23</sup> When Lyons died in 1939 he was succeeded by Robert Menzies who became at one and the same time a highly capable but often unpopular Prime Minister and in September 1939 committed Australia to the involvement in the European war which Curtin had dreaded after the experience in 1914-1918 but which meant that 'resistance to armed force and aggression' was inevitable.

From the outset Curtin was particularly concerned that Australia was sending expeditionary forces to assist in Europe and the Middle East while Australia itself was 'relatively undefended'. As the Labor leader too he desperately wanted to avoid the kind of split which had developed during World War One in the labour movement over the conscription debate with the Irish Catholic wing of the party particularly hostile to such involvement. Thus from September 1939 to August 1941 Curtin continued to grapple with divisions within his own party especially concerning the divisions between the Catholic and pro-Soviet Russian-sympathisers respectively and more broadly a strong movement within the left of the ALP to avoid all involvement in European affairs. With the fall of France and Italian entry into the war pressure built up not only for Australia to make an approach to the USA for assistance but also for Curtin to agree to the formation of a national all party government as had been agreed upon in Britain. Although he persistently declined to make such a move, Curtin, in the months leading up to the election due in September 1940, had been obliged politically to support an all-out war effort and he accepted Menzies' offer for the right to participate in the Advisory War Council which met for the first time in October 1940. By that time, however, the 1940 election had altered the situation markedly with the Menzies government losing 7 seats to Labor and having subsequently to rely on the support of two independents to remain in power. Of critical importance as it eventuated too was an air crash in Canberra shortly before the election when three cabinet ministers were killed and subsequently A.W. Coles, one of the two independents on whom the government's survival came to depend was elected for a vacancy created by the crash. Paradoxically, even as his own party moved to within striking distance of a parliamentary majority Curtin himself had a tense struggle to hold on to his parliamentary seat in Fremantle winning by only 641 votes and that only after securing an unexpectedly high proportion of the Independent candidate's preferences.

Curtin's position then at the beginning of 1941 was still very vulnerable with ongoing problems and divisions within his own party and with the numbers so evenly divided in Parliament he still faced much criticism within the party. However, instead, in a dramatic series of events Menzies in August 1941 was forced out of office by his own party and his successor Country Party leader Arthur after 'forty days and forty nights' in power also lost office when the two independents changed sides and voted for Curtin to become prime minister: he was sworn in on 7 October 1941. Two months later as Curtin was still in the final throes of establishing a ministry dependent on two independents for its survival and with a substantial minority of seats in the Senate the

Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour and for the first and only time in its history Australia made its own declaration of war, in this instance against Japan. (By contrast In September 1939 Menzies had simply stated that Britain's entry into war against Germany meant Australia was also at war).

Curtin's term as prime minister was probably the most important ever since Australia became a federated nation in 1901. On the one hand there was his role as wartime leader centred on the very special relationship with MacArthur which is dealt with at length in other sources. At the same time, it is important to focus on what Curtin as prime minister was able to do and achieve for the citizens of his own country in the three years until November 1944 after which time his health problems strictly limited the time and extent to which he could devote himself to prime ministerial duties. Perhaps the most significant and enduring of all the major domestic policy changes he was able to make was the introduction of what has become known as the uniform tax legislation by means of which (and backed by the High Court, the Australian counterpart of the US Supreme Court) the Australian State governments (including Labor controlled governments) were debarred from collecting income tax. Instead the Commonwealth was authorised under Section 96 of the Australian constitution to provide financial assistance to the States 'on such terms and conditions as it thinks fit'.

One major consequence of this acquisition of financial power by the Commonwealth was to facilitate the introduction of a wide range of nationally based social service benefits including unemployment benefits, widows' pensions, health and medical benefits and services and allowances for students and, significantly, after Curtin's death the constitutional right to pay these benefits was achieved by a referendum in 1946 with voters in all six states voting in the affirmative.<sup>24</sup> In the realm of banking too the Curtin Government established what became known over time as the Reserve Bank of Australia with the function of overseeing the finances of all the Australian banks. Then again In terms of international law the Curtin government secured the passage of the Statute of Westminster Adoption Act which, taken in conjunction with the Australian Acts in the 1980s, has legally confirmed Australia's international as a separate entity not subject to British oversight. A number of other significant government actions affirmed the status of women, national regulation of broadcasting, concessions to Aboriginal servicemen and extension of repatriation benefits to women in the armed services.<sup>25</sup>

In retrospect it is necessary to see the Curtin prime ministership in distinct phases. From October 1941 until somewhere towards the end of 1942 prevention of Japanese invasion of Australia and occupation of Papua New Guinea were the central issues. It was during this period that the arrival of Douglas MacArthur in Australia was one of the most highly significant moments in Australian history and the partnership between the Prime minister and the general was forged and became the stuff of legend. By the beginning of 1943 prevention of invasion was replaced by the focus on winning the battle for Papua New Guinea and during this time Curtin conceded the right for members of the all volunteer militia to be conscripted to serve in other than Australian territory though only within strictly defined boundaries and in all cases south of the Equator. In Curtin's case of course this was especially significant given that he had been ardent opponent of conscription during World War One and had to use all his political capital to persuade his ALP colleagues to accept this move. It was in 1943 too that despite some controversies Curtin's

government was returned to power at the general election with the most decisive majority ever achieved by the Australian Labor Party in any federal election since 1901 and Curtin himself won his own seat, Fremantle, by 23000 votes compared with 600 in 1940.

In the most critical stages of the Curtin-MacArthur era the rapid pace of events needs to be highlighted. Curtin became prime minister in October 1941 and in December 1941 the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour led to Australia declaring war on Japan, the first and only time in its history has ever declared war officially on any country (as already indicated in 1939 then prime minister Menzies simply declared that because Britain was at war Australia was at war). The whole of Australia's military strategy to this point had been that in return for Australia supplying expeditionary forces, the all volunteer AIF to fight for the British on land and in the air, the British Navy would protect Australia against the ever growing threat of the southward expansionary aims of the Japanese. In this context of course the British naval base at Singapore was the lynchpin. These comfortable assumptions vanished with Pearl Harbour, the sinking of the British ships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, the bombing of Darwin in early March followed by a raid on Broome in the northern part of my home state of Western Australia. And then in the middle of March 1942 MacArthur having been ordered to leave the Philippines arrived in Australia and before the end of the month had come south to Melbourne where he made his first base. To say he received a hero's welcome is a massive understatement and his arrival not only had a huge effect on morale but it also assured Australia of American assistance even if the extent of this was dependent on repeated and constant urging.

How then did MacArthur come to achieve the command of the Allied land forces in the South West Pacific Area and with the immediate and total support of prime minister Curtin and the Australian government? The path was set with Curtin's famous New Year Message, when he told the Australian people that 'without any inhibitions of any kind" Australia was looking to America for support and that 'Australia can go and Britain can still hold on'.<sup>26</sup> And subsequently whether Curtin himself nominated MacArthur for the Supreme Commander post or accepted the American invitation with alacrity does not alter the extraordinarily effective relationship between these men with massively differing personalities. In MacArthur's so often quoted words

Mr Prime Minister, we two, you and I will see this thing through together. We can do it and we will do it. You take care of the rear and I will handle the front.<sup>27</sup>

Between 1942 and spring in 1944 the two men worked together, one on the military front and one on the political front which included adding to the pressure MacArthur could bring to bear on Roosevelt for additional commitments of Allied forces to the Pacific campaign. By the time MacArthur moved his headquarters north and outside of Australia the focus was on recapturing territories occupied by the Japanese and within weeks of MacArthur's move north Curtin had the first serious heart attack which brought about his death less than eight months later. There is no doubt that in working with MacArthur Curtin was in essence diminishing his own nation's sovereignty by allowing a foreign general so much authority even if the commander of the Australian Land forces within MacArthur's overall command was an Australian, General Sir Thomas Blamey. From Curtin's point of view, and that of the electors as it eventuated, the sacrifices of sovereignty produced results well worth the outlay.



It is important to conclude this account of Curtin's life and achievements by focussing on the extraordinarily different personalities of these two wartime leaders. On the one hand there was MacArthur, a physically powerful and extraordinary personality who did not ever carry out any task in any manner other than in a total full blown and dramatic context; a man whose political views were well to the right on any assessment of ideology, who must surely on more than one occasion have visualised himself as becoming the president of his homeland, and one who was subsequently to make a huge and undoubtedly positive contribution to the rebuilding of Japan as a peaceful democratic country. Curtin by contrast was clearly to the left on any political dimension though very much less revolutionary and far more nationalistic in 1942 than he had been in his younger street corner orator days. For much of his lifetime Curtin had needed to overcome substantial personal issues including a significant problem with drink and deep phases of depression and he had only acquired power on a most uncertain basis when MacArthur arrived. Together however these men forged a partnership which might be described as 'a marriage of convenience' with MacArthur's presence seen as symbolic of 'massive American assistance...to defend Australia' and also one that relieved Curtin from the burden of making many very difficult military decisions.

To tell the whole story it is at this point necessary to point out that during 1944 Curtin visited the UK and made a significant attempt to establish a new structure for the postwar British Commonwealth. The seeds of the American connection had been sown and although the links with Britain were still omnipresent and politically significant Curtin received little support at the 1944 meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers for his proposal for a more formalised Empire Council structure. Back in Australia too the government's attempts to gain significant new powers constitutionally for the Commonwealth as an entity were rejected by the voters. Then in November 1944 Curtin was admitted to hospital with serious heart problems and except for two or three months in the first part of 1945 he was either in hospital or confined to the lodge until his death in July 1945. Those who have attempted to survey his life invariably cite the words which appear on the headstone of his grave

His Country Was His Pride

His Brother Man His Cause

In the years since 1945 his name has been memorialised in various forms—Curtin University and the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library; a federal electorate in Western Australia; the John Curtin School of Medical Research in Canberra; a suburb in Canberra; and the John Curtin College of the Arts. The family home in Cottesloe is now owned by the National Trust and on 14 August 2005, the sixtieth anniversary of VP Day a statue of Curtin was erected in Fremantle.

Curtin's life story is the story of one who constantly battled the odds and for whom the personal issues associated with drink and depression frequently threatened to block or even terminate his political career and indeed his life. He remained faithfully loyal to his political party and to his country throughout all his ordeals, unexpectedly secured the leadership of his party and seven years later became prime minister of his country in both instances very much against the odds. In the end ill health ended his life in sight of the ultimate victory in the

greatest battle of his life and in some ways almost unbelievably in partnership with a man who physically, politically and in almost every other apparent respect was as unlikely an ally as one could imagine. When everything is taken into account John Joseph Curtin can truly be regarded as one of the greatest if not unquestionably the greatest prime minister in Australian history. His huge electoral victory in 1943 reflected perhaps his greatest quality of all, his ability to earn the trust of the great majority of his fellow countrymen at the time they most needed a leader to show the way.

And what can one say as an Australian about the part played by MacArthur. In the words of one leading historian, no person who spent such a short time in Australia (barely two and half years) made such an enormously significant contribution to its history. At what can only be called Australia's darkest hour in the wake of Pearl Harbour, the fall of Singapore, the bombing of Darwin and Broome, MacArthur gave the USA its special and very substantial place in our history and psyche and while there have been some ups and downs along the way the MacArthur-Curtin partnership was surely the first major step (indeed giant step) in a relationship between the two former colonies of Great Britain that will surely continue to stand the test of time.

David Black

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- 1 John Curtin is the name under which his birth was registered but he was baptised as John Joseph Ambrose Curtin.
- 2 David Black, *In His Own Words: John Curtin's Speeches and Writings*, Bentley, WA: Paradigm Books, Curtin University of Technology, 1995, p. 1.
- 3 Ibid., p. 8
- 4 Ibid., p. 23; David Day, *John Curtin A Life*, Sydney: Harper Collins, 1999, p. 233.
- 5 Ibid., p. 269.
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- 6 Ibid., p. 276
- 7 See in particular, Clem Lloyd and Richard Hall, *Backroom Briefings: John Curtin's War*, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1997.
- 8 *Westralian Worker*, 8 May 1925 cited in Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 73.
- 9 *Westralian Worker*, 1 June 1923, cited in Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 74.
- 10 *Westralian Worker*, 2 March 1923, cited in Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 70.
- 11 See Geoffrey Serle, 'John Curtin' in John Ritchie (ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 13, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1993, p. 552 and cited in Black *In His Own Words*, p. 85.
- 12 Extracts from a speech made in the House of Representatives 24 June 1931 cited in Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 97.
- 13 From article by Curtin in *West Australian* 12 November 1932 cited in Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 111.
- 14 *West Australian* 17 December 1932 cited in Black, *In His Own Words*, pp. 114-117 passim.
- 15 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 337.
- 16 Ibid., p. 341
- 17 Ibid., p. 342.
- 18 Ibid. See *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 October 1935.
- 19 Ibid., p. 344
- 20 Ibid., p. 346. See also Black, *In His Own Words*.
- 21 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 351 and Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 142 (See House of Representatives 5 November 1936).
- 22 Day, p. 353.
- 23 Ibid., p. 366.

- 24 The successful passage of this referendum is significant in that this was and still is the only occasion  
when a Labor Party referendum proposal received the necessary voter support to satisfy the  
constitutional requirements for approval
- 25 For the best overall survey of the achievements of the Curtin Government see John Edwards,  
*Curtin's Gift: Reinterpreting Australia's greatest Prime Minister*, Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin,  
2005.
- 26 For the full text of this New Year Message see Black, *In His Own Words*, pp. 193-196
- 27 See, for example, Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 202; Day, *John Curtin a life*, p. 463..