

Prime Minister Curtin and the Australian union movement

In writing about Australia's wartime Prime Minister John Curtin for an American audience it usually seems appropriate and highly relevant to focus on Curtin's parallel experience (a rather loose comparison perhaps) with Abraham Lincoln and his log cabin to White House journey. Born in 1885 in a humble home in Creswick, a gold mining town near Ballarat in Victoria with the boom days well behind, John Curtin the future Australian prime minister had to work himself up from having ceased formal education at the age of fourteen while experiencing near poverty after his father's illnesses prevented the latter from continuing with a career in the police force. To go back a little further Curtin's father had come from Country Cork in Ireland and had 'strong Fenian convictions'.¹ In 1873 at the age of 19 the future prime minister's father had arrived in Adelaide and from there moved to Victoria and one reason suggested by Curtin's biographer David Day for this decision was that South Australia was distinctive for its 'prevailing Protestantism and relative lack of Irish settlers, particularly women'.² Significantly, many of the Irish immigrants to Australia in these years sought occupations either within the church or 'service of the British Crown'. Thus in his book *The Irish in Australia* Patrick Farrell suggested that 'the ambition of Irish Australian parents' was for their boys to become either 'priest, publican or policeman'.³ John Curtin senior fitted this label nicely in the sense that when ill health forced him out of the police force he moved around Melbourne and Victoria endeavoring to make a living managing hotels.

Earlier, Curtin's father's move to Creswick, where he was apparently one of four policemen stationed in the district, seems to have resulted as a consequence of his involvement in an incident reported subsequently as 'insulting a woman'⁴ and, whatever the truth of the accusation, this episode apparently had the effect that Curtin senior did not secure promotion during his time in Creswick. The conditions of work were harsh and Curtin senior experienced the breakdown of his health which led to the family leaving the area when the younger Curtin himself was five years old and this only after his father had spent nine months on sick leave. As it was, in March 1890 the family moved to the working class suburb of Brunswick in inner Melbourne and, in the words of Curtin's most recent biographer, his father's choice to take a payout from the police force rather than a pension (and the consequent periods of depression) left the younger Curtin with 'the responsibilities that devolved upon an eldest son in a family that was still growing'.⁵ After four years in Melbourne, and with numerous failures and foreclosures in the hotel industry, the Curtin family moved back to the countryside to the wheat growing town of Charlton where although all the family were involved in the Catholic Church there was no Catholic school in the town. Indeed, over the whole of his school career until the age of thirteen Curtin attended seven schools of which four were secular state schools. Finally, in 1898 when Curtin was thirteen the family moved back to Brunswick where it was to remain and as biographer David Day has suggested

It would be in that solid working-class suburb, with its core of Irish Catholic inhabitants, that the 13-year-old Curtin would grow to manhood and gradually come to make his life-long commitment to socialism.⁶

Despite this, for a time at least

the Irish Catholic origins of Curtin's parents were evident in the brogue of their voices and in the regularity of their attendance at the local Catholic church.⁷

However, notwithstanding 'Jack Curtin's immersion in this milieu' the shift to Brunswick would see him come to reject both the Catholicism of his parents and his Irish background.

By modern standards Curtin's education and constant change of school may have seemed erratic but notwithstanding the constant change of environment he did attend school regularly and David Day suggests that he developed an 'enthusiasm for education, an enthusiasm that would sustain him all his life'.⁸ It was also in his early years of spasmodic employment that Curtin became involved for a time with the Salvation Army which seemed at first to offer a way out of poverty and depression through the choice of living a disciplined and abstemious life. However, that approach soon did not suffice either and in the process Curtin was drawn to 'a more intense involvement with politics' and to socialism in particular through the influence of British-born Frank Anstey, a future long serving federal member of Parliament. It was Anstey who, in Curtin's own words, 'introduced me to the Labor movement'. In David Day's words 'socialism had taken the place of religion'.⁹

Another strong influence on Curtin's conversion to socialism was British Labor agitator Tom Mann, who like the young Curtin focussed on 'how to reform society at large' to rectify the misfortunes and failings of industrial capitalism.¹⁰ It was in this context that the dilemma for Curtin, and indeed for many others, including Tom Mann himself, came to be about whether securing parliamentary representation for the incipient Australian Labor party (founded in the 1890s) rather than a more revolutionary approach would be the basis of the successful move to socialism.

In 1903 Curtin secured his first permanent and relatively well paid job as an estimates clerk and it was during the next few years that he experienced the intellectual conflict arising from Tom Mann's crusade to have the Australian Labor Party, first founded in the 1890s, become truly socialist. Thus in 1905 Curtin became part of the newly founded Victorian Socialist party (VSP) and wrote numerous articles concerning 'Revolutionary International Socialism'.¹¹ During this period it can be said that the VSP operated in many respects 'as a church' conducting Sunday schools, baptisms and funerals. For Curtin too the movement operated almost like an extended family but as time went by the lack of apparent progress and concerns about the direction which the Labor Party was taking caused him increasing problems especially when a Labor conference in Brisbane accepted a proposal to introduce compulsory military training for Australia's youth. In this context David Day refers to the 'ironic' decision by Curtin to join in a demonstration against the visit of the American Great White Fleet in 1908 when thirty-three years later as prime minister he was to make his famous appeal for the Americans to help Australia against the Japanese.¹² In 1908

however his central concern was that growing military machines would lead to conflicts which undermined the 'growing unity of the international working class' and the Japanese defeat of the Russians in 1905 only served to raise defensive nationalism above international socialism. As it was too in 1908 when the VSP had established a Cosmopolitan Committee Curtin was writing a letter, one of a series to a young female socialist whom he never actually met in person, telling her that although he had at one point praised the work of Sir Walter Scott the latter was in fact 'a pronounced Nationalist...who loved his country' when it was better to 'love humanity'.¹³

Curtin's internal conflict concerning supporting the Victorian Socialist Party as distinct from the mainstream political Labor Party entered a new phase at the end of 1909 with the departure of Tom Mann who, as already indicated, had been the source of his inspiration and support for moves to find this path to revolutionary socialism. Instead, despite a stint in 1909–1910 as secretary of the Victorian Socialist Party, in the succeeding phase of his life Day suggests that Curtin had come around to the view that it was most advantageous to support workers through the organised trade union membership in order 'to achieve socialism'.¹⁴ In explaining Curtin's position at the time Day argues that Curtin 'did not swap Catholicism, and later Salvationism, for atheism' but rather rejected churches which he saw as 'unseemly supporters of capitalism'.¹⁵ At this time too Day considered that Curtin was 'certainly' interested in rationalism. As for party politics Curtin greeted Labor's historic win in the 1910 Victorian election with an article suggesting that voters had to choose between 'Tory twaddle and Labor lies'.¹⁶

A major turning point in Curtin's life came in March 1911 when he was appointed secretary of the Timber Workers' Union. One issue which was subsequently to cause him trouble and frustration was the time he had to spend administering the union's disability and death insurance scheme, as a consequence of this being a union dealing with an occupation with a high accident rate. For Curtin, his real task as a union leader was to further the cause of socialism amongst the working class and when the union launched its own journal in 1913 with Curtin as editor this carried numerous articles on socialism.¹⁷ Even with the outbreak of war in 1914 and promises made by federal Labor Opposition leader Andrew Fisher during his successful electoral campaign to defend Britain 'to the last man and last shilling' Curtin contended that

militarism has always been an obstacle in the way of the working class advancement and the realization of universal brotherhood.¹⁸

Nevertheless, Curtin was endorsed as the ALP candidate for a Victorian seat in the August 1914 federal election and he polled well in an unwinnable seat: significantly during the campaign in an interesting pointer to the future he referred to a defence strategy in which more reliance was placed on 'airships' rather than naval vessels. The fact that the ALP had won government comfortably on the basis of strong support for the war placed Curtin with his strong emphasis on internationalism and working class action in an increasingly difficult position with some of his newspaper articles hardly likely to foster the recruiting drives with which the federal Labor government became increasingly involved.

Towards the end of 1915 Curtin resigned from his role with the Timber Workers Union citing his health and 'the stress and storm of trade union responsibility'¹⁹ but his new role at the larger Australian Workers Union left him increasingly compromised by his opposition to the introduction of military conscription towards which the Labor federal government was moving. In mid-1916 he suffered a major breakdown but after a period of convalescence he returned to the anti-conscription campaign which led to a major split in the ALP, the election of a non Labor government which included many former Labor members and two bitter referendums on military conscription. Both referendum proposals were lost not the least because of the strong opposition from Irish Catholics and at one stage during the campaign Curtin was sent to gaol for a few days for failing to comply with the government's registration requirements.²⁰ At this low point in his life Curtin's private life and career were resurrected by his friends being able to secure for him appointment as editor of the *Westralian Worker*, the Labor newspaper in Western Australia and it was in Perth that he married Elsie Needham, daughter of a prominent Tasmanian Labor trade unionist and to whom he had proposed marriage several years earlier.

Between 1917 and 1928 as editor of the party's official journal, and for most of those years as secretary of the local branch of the Australian Journalists Association, 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 leader, and for several years 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 had 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'.²¹ 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'.²² More generally, 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 when he regularly gave journalists advance news of military events and strategies and was able to rely on their respecting his confidences at all times.²³

In terms of his own political outlook, by contrast with his pre-war revolutionary attitudes, Curtin during the 1920s 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'.²⁴ He strongly supported the concept of the League of Nations but came to see it as 'merely the instrument of the dominant powers'²⁵

though in the process still supporting the attempts made by Woodrow Wilson to develop a 'new charter for civilisation'²⁶. 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'.²⁷ During these formative years he became increasingly convinced of the necessity to work through the Australian Labor Party and 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 the earlier foray in Victoria in 1914), he was elected to the House of Representatives to represent Fremantle, one of only five West Australian seats in the 75 member House of Representatives.

It is not too much to say that from 1928 onwards Curtin's role in the Australian Labor movement was firmly set in the parliamentary party political sphere. Critically however, he was also to prize his position within the journalism profession and, as indicated above, this was to be of considerable significance while he was prime minister. Between 1929 and 1931, however, he went through the most disastrous phase of his political career and it seemed for a time one from which he would not be able to recover. Indeed Curtin's career on two memorable occasions was to be marked by the immediate onset of significant domestic and international events. Thus on 12 October 1929 the Labor party led by James Scullin won an early election brought about by the defeat of the non-Labor coalition Bruce-Page Government in Parliament on a key issue of confidence but barely had the Scullin Labor Government ministers (not at this stage including Curtin himself) been sworn in when the last week of October 1929 saw the series of spectacular stock market crashes which marked the Great Depression. Ironically, just as Scullin was forced to face a national and international crisis within weeks of being elected prime minister so when Curtin was to assume power as prime minister after the then government was defeated on a parliamentary vote in October 1941 it was only two months later when the Japanese attacked the American fleet at Pearl Harbour and precipitated the greatest potential crisis in Australia since European settlement.

For Curtin his experience as a back bencher in the Scullin Government from 1929 to 1931 was at the time politically disastrous. Nevertheless, in a very real sense the experience of those years paved the way for him to become prime minister in 1941. In endeavouring to deal with the worst of the Great Depression the Scullin government was effectively hamstrung by (a) its lack of adequate representation in the Senate in Canberra (b) its inability to exercise control over the government central bank because of opposition from private bank representatives and (c) a disastrous three way split in the ALP both to the left and the right. Given these circumstances Curtin urged his leaders to ask the Governor General for a new election for both Houses of the Parliament but the Prime minister would not take the political risk. Curtin was also particularly strongly opposed to the so-called Premiers Plan agreed to at a conference of State Premiers whereby the depression would be dealt with by strict economies requiring reductions in pensions, wages and government spending.²⁸ There is no doubt that even as a backbencher Curtin's loyalty to traditional Labor Party principles in these years and his constant opposition to policies impacting significantly on the lower income members of the

community were major factors in the decision of the party to choose him as party leader in 1935 over a more experienced opponent.

However, before this opportunity came about, and as a consequence of Labor's disastrous defeat in the December 1931 election, Curtin had to experience three years out of Parliament and without a settled income to support his wife and two children. Initially he worked as a freelance journalist for the *Westralian Worker* the paper of which he previously been editor and received some help from the Labor party employing him as a publicity officer. During this period he also wrote numerous articles for the local press concerning potential remedies for the critical economic situation. Then following Labor's return to office in the State Parliament in April 1933, Curtin was given a lucrative position as chairman of a committee framing a submission on behalf of Western Australia to the newly formed Commonwealth Grants Commission. The establishment of the Grants Commission had occurred in response to the passage of a referendum of Western Australians approving secession from the Australian Commonwealth for Western Australia and was designed to respond to claims that Western Australia needed to receive federal grants to compensate the State for its problems arising from high tariff protection for secondary industries at a time when the Western Australian economy was largely based on primary industry exports. For a time it appeared as if Curtin might seek to re-enter federal politics for a Victorian seat but eventually he decided to stand for Fremantle the seat which he had held from 1928 to 1931. The election was called for 15 September 1934 and in his biographer's words Curtin was able to stand as a man who had opposed the Premiers' Plan²⁹ and this in an election when the breakaway Lang Labor Party which had strongly opposed the Premiers' Plan gained more seats from their conservative opponents than did the official Labor Party.³⁰

In the new Parliament Curtin was on this occasion elected to what would now be called the shadow ministry and brought to the party insights not only into traditional Labor policies of social reform and industrial relations but also defence and international relations at a time when worrying developments in Europe were creating doubts about Australia's capacity to defend itself and the problems in placing so much stress on protection by the British Navy. A year later Scullin resigned and Curtin won the election for party leader by one vote, a result due both to his loyalty to Labor principles during the Depression period and also possibly the fact that he was not directly involved in power struggles between the New South Wales and Victorian parties.

In the five years between Curtin's election as leader and the September 1940 election which brought Labor back to the brink of government Curtin had to deal with the ever deteriorating international situation in Europe and growing concern about Japanese intentions in South East Asian and the Pacific. Alongside of these issues he had to restore unity in the ranks of his party and in this regard he had early success at a unity conference in early 1936 when the significant Lang Labor group were readmitted to the party caucus. Curtin's own views were also being reshaped centred on achieving 'the maximum of socialist benefits within the limits of the capitalist system'.³¹ One of his earliest immediate tasks was to lead his party at the 1937 federal election and the results were disappointing with only a very small gain in the House of Representatives though Labor was more successful in

the Senate. Then in 1938 and 1939 the Labor Party itself and Curtin as its leader were caught between maintaining their commitments to measures of parliamentary socialism and pursuing the argument that Australia would be placing itself in a very dangerous position if it maintained its reliance on the British Navy and ignored the necessity to develop Australia's own home defence. On one issue, however, Curtin's stance at this stage was firmly maintained and this related to his opposition to the 'conscription of human life' for service in the armed forces.

Between the outbreak of war in September 1939 and the general election of 1940 Curtin had significant issues to deal with concerning his party and the union movement generally. In March 1940 Labor won a by election in a government seat made vacant by the appointment of the incumbent to one of Australia's first ever overseas diplomatic appointments in its own right instead of in conjunction with Britain. However, almost immediately after this success the New South Wales branch of the party split into three warring factions a situation largely brought about by the objections of the party's left to the war to the extent it would require an attack on the Soviet Union hence the name 'Hands-off- Russia' resolution.³² At this stage the Soviet Union was not an ally of Germany in the war but did have a non-aggression pact with Hitler and had participated in partitioning Poland. More generally, the ALP and the Australian Council of Trade Unions, the leading trade union organisation, only narrowly refused to adopt proposals for a negotiated peace and a declaration that the war was an imperialist conflict and in the federal Parliament Curtin had seven of his nominal caucus, namely the Lang Labor group, leave the party and sit on the cross benches.

The pressure on Curtin developed further in May and June 1940 with the fall of France to the Nazis and the entry of Italy into the war, a situation which made it increasingly unlikely that Britain would be able to send ships from the Mediterranean to help defend Australia against any attack by the Japanese. Curtin, nevertheless, refused to bow to outside pressure to enter into a national government of all parties as had occurred in Britain but instead argued for Labor to be included in an advisory war council and this at a time when the Labor Party at a national conference accepted Australia's 'complete and indissoluble unity with the Allies' and the party also withdrew its opposition to Australia's expeditionary force agreeing to the sending of reinforcements from Australia. At the same time the conference did resolve, however, that the 'entire resources of Australia' should be devoted to 'the urgent and adequate defence of Australia'.³³

In the next few weeks Curtin came under pressure with strong criticism from within his party for his perceived 'readiness to fall in line with the Government's proposals'³⁴ with his critics arguing that the war would be used to undermine hard won improvements for the working class. For Curtin, however, with an election due shortly he wanted to avoid the possibility of a major split in the party over its involvement in a European War such as had happened in 1916 and 1917. Arguably, and despite continuing splits within the New South Wales Party, Curtin was in the words of his most recent biographer indicating a 'gradual embracing of nationalism' and a 'retreat from revolutionary socialism'. In his own words at the time

This is not a bosses' country. It is a workers' country and Labor Party has given its utmost for the defence of that country...However much we may

be opposed to the Government, we are not opposed to the country which the Government governs.³⁵

Then in September 1940 against the odds and somewhat surprisingly Labor came within a couple of seats of winning the federal election with the Menzies government left for its survival dependent on support from two independents. It was an extraordinary election in that Curtin almost lost his own seat in Parliament even as he came within an ace of being prime minister and also that Labor won additional seats in New South Wales the state where the party had been and was still seriously divided. As it was, in the short term, Curtin had to continue to manage his previously divided party and this at a time when there were Labor members who advocated that the ALP should join in a national government. This he continued to resist while in the process securing Labor representation on the Menzies Government's Advisory War Council as he had earlier requested.

Where did Curtin stand at this stage in terms of the union movement? There are suggestions over the years he had become deeply cynical arguing that

Labor politics in Australia are governed by Trades Unionism and the latter will spend thousands and thousands of pounds on its routine administration and not a farthing to mould the New Social Order.³⁶

Despite this concern there is no doubt that Curtin had a

continuing [indeed lifelong] commitment to the labour movement and a determination to ensure that the Labor Party emerged from the war strong and undivided.³⁷

David Day in his biography of Curtin published in 1999 summarised the situation well when he asserted that in World War One Curtin believed that the outcome of the war would not affect the class war and there was no point in 'sacrificing workers' lives for a British victory since the plight of the Australian working class would not be improved by it. By contrast, this time with the threat of a Japanese invasion 'the future of the labour movement was at stake along with the life of the nation itself'. It was therefore incumbent on the movement to put the security of Australia before all else and for Curtin to extend the maximum amount of cooperation to the war effort of the Government. But that did not mean joining a national government.³⁸

As it was Curtin continued to face ongoing problems within the party from those who wanted all out opposition to the Menzies Government and on at least one occasion he had to offer his resignation to gain agreement. Despite these problems the party was able to reunify further in February 1941 with the Lang Labor members returning to the fold and during these difficult months Curtin became increasingly committed to the idea that Australia's defence depended and was heavily over-reliant on the British in Singapore and hence on 'the defence of this part of the Empire'. As events in the Mediterranean made Australia's position increasingly grave Curtin continued to appeal to the labour movement that the 'cause of Labor' had always been the 'cause of Australia'. Furthermore, he sought to broaden the Party's political appeal claiming that 'Labor protected the interests

of the basic wage earners and the great body of middle-class citizens [while the conservatives were burdened with the class interests of the wealthy and the war profiteer'.³⁹

The critical turning point came in August 1941 when prime minister Menzies was forced out of office by his own party and Country Party leader Arthur Fadden who became prime minister in Menzies' stead was increasingly seen as a stop gap leader. When the opportunity came in October with the decision of the two independents (disillusioned by the problems within the non Labor government) to vote against the government on a matter of confidence Curtin, notwithstanding his ongoing health problems, seems to have effectively overnight assumed the role of prime minister with a realisation that he had widespread national support. In these circumstances significantly he accepted that he did not have the mandate to implement the Labor party's full policy while contending that the government could and would adopt a realistic 'step by step' application of party policy.⁴⁰

As it eventuated, even during his three and a half years as a Labor prime minister, Curtin still had to contend with ongoing problems with the trade union movement. Serious troubles developed in March 1943, for example, shortly after he had finally managed to carry through the ALP conference and the Parliament modifications to government policy on military conscription to enable soldiers to be conscripted for serve outside Australian territories though only south of the equator and west of the Solomon Islands. During 1942 the number of industrial strikes had fallen away for a time but increased again in 1943 as the threat of Japanese invasion eased. The most significant difficulties for Curtin were on the coalfields in New South Wales and even his large election victory in August 1943 did not prevent further problems. Curtin's own diagnosis of the problem on the coalfields was that it centred on 'youths of military age and men engaged in dual occupations as well as mining'⁴¹ and emergency regulations were implemented for a time giving the PM the power to 'sack coalminers and enlist them in the army or employ them elsewhere'. However, these powers were little used and seemingly in practice proved to be 'a damp squib'.⁴² but in 1944 Curtin expressed his views forcefully:

I put it to the workers as a class, they have been given much by the Government. Equally they have a responsibility not only to the Government and the nation but they have a duty to their class...Victory alone can affect the desired change. Without victory, the workers as a class, and Australia as a nation, vanish.⁴³

Even the passage in 1944 of legislation empowering a Commonwealth Coal Commissioner, where necessary to take over operational control of a mine (with compensation to the mine owners) in the opinion of war historian Paul Hasluck 'brought no solution to the problems of discipline and no improvement in the recurrent industrial stoppages'.⁴⁴

If Curtin had to contend throughout his prime ministership with pressure both from his parliamentary colleagues and the union movement that threatened to compromise his position as Australia's war time leader the fact remained that he enjoyed constant huge public support to the extent that the ALP won federal elections in 1943 and 1946 (the year after Curtin's death) that gave them 8 years in

power at the national level which what was at the time (and remained so until the 1980s) Labor's longest ever term in power at the national level. Significantly too, the opportunities provided by wartime circumstances and control of Parliament (especially from 1944 onwards) enabled the government to make profound changes in the Australian political system which have endured until the present day.

Thus, for example, by legislative enactment and judicial decision making the Curtin Government obtained complete control of income tax collection in Australia (and not limited to time of war) and used its access to the resulting substantial revenue inflow to establish many of the trappings of the welfare state—nationally provided widows pensions, unemployment benefits, the first steps towards a full scale national health scheme, Commonwealth funding of state-owned universities, and payment of benefits to university students. To cement this further in 1946, the year after Curtin's death, the only successful referendum sponsored by the Australian Labor Party (and carried successfully in all six states) enabled these highly significant additional Commonwealth powers to be written into the Australian Constitution. These additional powers taken in conjunction with the provisions of Section 96 of the Australian Constitution which authorised the Commonwealth 'to grant financial assistance to any State on such terms and conditions as the Parliament thinks fit to the States' and became crucially significant once the Commonwealth had control of the major sources of revenue in the country. To all this must be added major reforms of the banking system which enabled the government where necessary to limit or extend the powers of the newly established Reserve Bank Board to monitor and control the Australian financial system. Curtin of necessity had to place national responsibilities ahead of advancing the interests of the working class but to use the title of one recently published book *Curtin's Gift*,⁴⁵ the steps taken by his government gave future Australian national governments a much greater capacity for central control and provision of nationwide social reforms.

Looking back over the whole of Curtin's life David Day refers to Curtin's visit to London in 1924, the year in which the British Labour Party had begun its first (short-lived) term in office. In Day's view Curtin 'returned to Australia convinced that the climate for revolution had passed and that the collapse of capitalism would probably not occur in his lifetime.'⁴⁶ By contrast in the era when he was growing to manhood he had thought and written preparing 'for the day when the masses would rise up and overthrow capitalism'.⁴⁷ But even in the early years when he was strongly under the influence of English socialists such as Tom Mann and held official posts in the Victorian Socialist Party he also maintained connections with the political movement, the Australian Labor Party, and in this sense his fierce opposition to World War One and conscription did not prevent him from accepting endorsement as an ALP candidate at a time when the party was firmly committed to the war. Subsequently the ALP split over conscription enable him to maintain his opposition to the war while remaining loyal to the wider Labor movement before the party split over conscription brought his views and those of the official party into line.

During the 1920s even as Curtin accepted that 'the imminent collapse of capitalism was unlikely' he believed that 'the unity and strength' of the labour movement was

essential to the achievement of limited reform which would make for a better Australia.⁴⁸ When he did become the party's federal leader in 1935 maintaining party unity was effectively his prime task and in Day's words the 'outbreak of the Second World War raised the spectre in Curtin's mind of the Labor Party imploding just as it had during the previous War'.⁴⁹ At one level his prime goal in the events leading up to October 1941 and even beyond then was to ensure that the party's 'hard-won unity would not be imperilled'.⁵⁰ In this context the preservation of the nation was the essential prerequisite for raising the living standards of ordinary Australians an approach reflected in his epitaph 'His Country Was His Pride His Fellow Man His Cause'. Curtin's leadership was of course the ultimate key to his success and his success in this regard came in varying degree from his oratorical skills; his integrity and humility which led one of his opponents to express gratitude that he (Curtin) had not lost his parliamentary seat in 1940 contending (in an interview with the author many years later) that 'he [Curtin] was the only Labor man we could trust'; and perhaps above all his total loyalty to the party itself during the dark days of the conscription crisis and the depression era.

Curtin is remembered fundamentally as the man who led his country through its darkest hour(s). Yet he did this not only by his extraordinarily effective partnership with his political opposite Douglas MacArthur but also at the same time bringing about changes in the national law making structure which brought great social advances to his beloved Labor⁵¹ and the Working Class and this in the midst of clashes with his fellow trade unionists that drove him to the point of despair. If socialism never really became his religion his loyalty to the working class movement with trade unionism as one of its prime moving forces meant as it eventuated that it could be shared with his love of country without doing an injustice to either.

David Black

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- 1 David Day, *John Curtin a life*, Sydney: Harper Collins, 1999, p. 3
 - 2 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
 - 3 Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, Sydney: New South Wales University Press, 1993, pp. 112–113
 - 4 For the details of this episode see Day, *Curtin A Life*, p. 6. The statements by the woman concerned can be found in the Victorian Public Records Office.
 - 5 Day, *Curtin A Life*, p. 28.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, p. 44
 - 7 *Ibid.*, p. 47
 - 8 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
 - 9 See *ibid*, pp. 63–65.

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- 10 For a preliminary discussion of the influence of Tom Mann on Curtin see David Black, *In His Own Words: John Curtin's Speeches and Writings*, Bentley, WA, Paradigm Press, Curtin University of Technology, 1995, pp. 2–3
- 11 See *ibid.*, pp. 4-8 *passim*.
- 12 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 115.
- 13 See David Black (ed.), '*Friendship is a sheltering tree*', John Curtin's letters 1907 to 1945 Bentley: John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, 2001, pp. 18-19.
- 14 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 128.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- 16 *Socialist* (Melbourne), 1 April 1910.
- 17 See Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 8.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 13: see also Serle, 'John Curtin' in John Ritchie (ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol.13 Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1993, pp. 550–551.
- 20 See Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 16 and Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 233.
- 21 See *ibid.*, p. 269.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 276.
- 23 Clem Lloyd and Richards Hall (eds), *Backroom Briefings: John Curtin's War*, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1997, p. 4 cited in Day, *Curtin A Life*, p. 495.
- 24 *Westralian Worker*, 8 May 1925. See Black, *In His Own Words*, pp.70--75.
- 25 *Westralian Worker*, 8 June 1923.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 8 February 1924.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 2 March 1923.
- 28 For an example of Curtin's opposition to the Premiers' Plan and wish for the Government 'to go to the country and put its fortunes to the test' see Black, *In His Own Words*, pp. 96-98 based on a speech delivered in the House of Representatives on 24 June 1931.
- 29 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 337.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 336.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 353.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 378–379. Specifically, the conference resolved to 'oppose efforts of the anti-Labour government to change the direction of the present war by an aggressive act against any other country with which we are not at war, including the Soviet Union' (see Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 261).
- 33 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 380.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 382.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 383.

- 36 Letter from John Curtin to Lloyd Ross, 30 July 1935 cited in Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 390.
- 37 Ibid., p. 390.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Interview with Curtin by Richard Hughes, *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney cited in Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 405.
- 40 *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 1 November 1941 cited in Day. *John Curtin A Life*, p. 417.
- 41 *Commonwealth Government: Digest of Decision and Announcements and Speeches by the Prime Minister [DDA] (Right Hon John Curtin, No. 65, 14 October 1943, p. 17.*
- 42 See Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 501.
- 43 DDA 1 February 1944, p. 7 cited in Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 234.
- 44 See Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 237.
- 45 John Edwards, *Curtin's gift: reinterpreting Australia's greatest Prime Minister*, Crows Nest N.S.W.: Allen and Unwin, 2005.
- 46 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 577.
- 47 Ibid., p. 579.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid., p. 580.
- 50 Ibid., p. 581.
- 51 See endnote 45.