

The Curtin-MacArthur Legacy-The Australian/American Alliance, Trade and Defence Partnership

On 27 December 1941, just under three weeks after the Japanese 'infamous' attack on Pearl Harbour and the subsequent sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* north of Singapore, the *Melbourne Herald* in Australia published an article written by Australian Prime Minister John Curtin in response to a request from the newspaper for a New Year's Message to the Australian people.¹ At the time, and continually in retrospect, this article is seen as marking one of the most significant 'turning points' in Australia's history and while some have suggested that it was not necessarily 'a dramatic turning point in terms of the orientation of Australia's foreign policy' it was certainly a 'crucial moment, or at least an iconic one'.² The most famous passage in the article, certainly one indicative of a monumental change, was contained in one short paragraph:

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.

The message continued

We know the problems that the United Kingdom faces...We know the dangers of dispersal of strength but we know too, that Australia can go and Britain can still hold on.³

In the previous paragraphs Curtin had asserted that 'we refuse to accept the dictum that the Pacific struggle must be treated as a subordinate segment of the general conflict' but instead stated that 'Australia asks for a determined plan evoking the greatest strength at the Democracies' disposal, determined upon hurling Japan back' and that the Pacific struggle should be 'one in which the United States and Australia must have the fullest say in the direction of the democracies' plan'.

There is no doubt that in many respects Curtin's New Year Message in the weeks and months that followed 'marked the beginning of a shift in Australia's sense of military dependence from Britain to America'⁴ or more broadly was at least the point at which for the first time 'Australia lifted its primary allegiance from Britain to the US'.⁵ The truth is that the story was more complex than this even within the term of Curtin's prime ministership as when in 1944 he made significant efforts to provide for the postwar era a structure to enhance the unity and functioning of the British Commonwealth of Nations. At the same time the Curtin-MacArthur relationship, forged in the wake of the events of the first few months of 1942, must be seen as the forerunner of the US-Australian partnership which developed and has persisted through ANZUS and SEATO, the Vietnam War and—in the twenty-first century—the Iraq War and in the wake of 9/11.

The New Year Message article was certainly controversial 'causing Churchill to be outraged and Roosevelt to suggest that it smacked of "panic and disloyalty".⁶ The debate will continue as to the extent to which Curtin himself or his speech writer Don Rodgers was the real author of the article . Rodgers' claim was that Curtin made 'little or no change to the draft' but even those who accept that a hand other than Curtin's had a major part in the writing of the message agree nevertheless that it definitely 'reflected Curtin's views'.⁷ It is worth mentioning here also that one interpretation of Curtin's actions and utterances is that even throughout these difficult years he was focussed on using the war 'to force through the social changes' that had been held back for (in his view) so long by conservative politicians.⁸ In other articles and on other occasions I have already made clear my view that Curtin's government really did use the wartime situation to produce fundamental changes in the role of government in determining social and economic conditions which are still in evidence today.

Again there is no doubt that throughout the nineteenth century and the twentieth century to this point in time Australia had relied upon 'the worldwide reach of the British navy to protect it against possible invasion'. Given the twentieth century mode of warfare, for an island nation such as Australia naval power was all important as its primary means of defence though Curtin in the 1930s began to urge the need for air force protection as becoming increasingly urgent. Certainly, in the words used by Prime Minister Menzies in the 1950s and 1960s Australia had the need for a 'great and powerful friend' and this search dated back to the first decade of the twentieth century when 'the relative decline of the British Empire and the concomitant rise of the Japanese' caused 'a succession of Australian governments to worry about the day when Japan might challenge their occupation of the lightly populated continent'.⁹ Furthermore, the signing of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902 effectively implied that Britain would increasingly rely on Japanese naval power to safeguard its interests in the 'Far East' as its European commitments increased and this in turn would lead to an ever-growing focus of British Naval power nearer home or in parts of the Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea.

In this context in 1908 the Deakin Government's invitation for a visit to Australia by the American Great White Fleet reflected both the hope that this might have the effect of encouraging the Americans to 'accept some obligation to defend its white counterpart in the Pacific' while also reminding the British of their inherent responsibilities for the Empire in the Far East. The visit produced 'nothing concrete'¹⁰ at the time but it had caused a sensation and there had been 'widespread adulation from the populace' and 'small-scale protests from socialists'. It is difficult to avoid reference to the irony of Curtin being one of those joining the demonstrators opposing the visit of the fleet in the light of his famous message more than thirty years later but it was a very different world in 1908 when to rabid socialists the USA was the very epitome of a 'grinding military machine'.¹¹

One Labor politician who did look ahead was American-born Labor Cabinet Minister King O'Malley who warned in 1912 that in the event of war Britain would likely 'look after herself even if her possessions beyond the sea had to be sacrificed'.¹² Nevertheless, no significant policy change occurred during the 1920s and 1930s and this was foreseen by Curtin in 1936 when he made the perhaps obvious statement that for Australia relying on the British Government 'to send forces to our aid is too dangerous a hazard upon which to found Australia's defence policy'.¹³ Robert Menzies, who became prime minister in 1939, has been criticised by historians for failing to make a more positive approach to the US for assistance, in some instances to avoid sharing British commercial interests. However, significantly, the first Australian envoys appointed by the Menzies Government in early 1940 (and this after the start of the war against Germany) as the starting point of Australia's own overseas diplomatic corps at the highest levels were sent to Washington and to Tokyo.

Thus the New Year Message came at an absolutely critical time in the wake of Pearl Harbour with Japan but also the United States now both fully involved in the war and with the limitations of potential British aid shown up in devastating fashion with the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*. Indeed the extent of Curtin's fear of Japan was manifest in that during the New Year's Message he also called on Russia to declare war against Japan (a development which Britain certainly did not wish to see occur when the struggle against Germany was at its peak and which in fact did not in fact occur until mid-1945).

In discussing the New Year's Message David Day has focussed on the more broadly based outrage among conservatives that a prime minister from an Irish Catholic background and with a strong anti-conscriptionist record should be seen to be 'as somehow disloyal to Britain'.¹⁴ By contrast, the general public reacted favourably to the message and especially as subsequent events included the fall of Singapore leaving Australia seemingly wide open to potential attack. The negative reaction from Churchill and Roosevelt for its part was the consequence of the developing stance of the two leaders that the Allies would concentrate their efforts 'on defeating Germany first'. Furthermore, too, given the outrage in the US over Pearl Harbour ('a day that will be remembered in infamy') Churchill wanted to ensure 'there was no backsliding by Roosevelt'.¹⁵

One needs to be quite clear concerning the actual situation which developed in the wake of the New Year Message. On the one hand Russia did not declare war on Japan and the British and American governments focussed on their overall strategy 'of defeating Hitler first' and did not concede to Australia any kind of a leading role in formulating or even contributing to the Pacific War Strategy. At the same time, with the loss of the Philippines the US needed Australia 'as a launching pad and a source of supplies for American forces' and out of this emerged the appointment of MacArthur to exercise command over forces which initially at least consisted of a high proportion of Australians. Significantly—and this point needs emphasis—throughout 1942

and indeed until very late in 1943 no British troops, airmen or naval forces were sent to reinforce the defence of Australia while in the same period Australia sent airmen to serve in units of the Royal Air Force, allowed some naval ships to serve with the Royal Navy and the ships to serve with the Royal Navy, and the 9th Division fought in the Middle East until El Alamein. As it was then Australia was forced to rely on the Americans for military manpower; [and] for much of its munitions' while it was the American navy in mid-1942 which effectively secured Australia from invasion with the crucial battles of the Coral Sea and Midway Island.¹⁶

In this MacArthur Memorial Week of course one of the crucial areas for focus is the degree to which the Curtin-MacArthur relationship harmonised with these broader issues of strategy. On the one hand

MacArthur's presence suggested that massive American assistance would be forthcoming to defend Australia while his appointment as supreme commander relieved Curtin of some of the burdens of making those military decisions that had caused him so much angst.¹⁷

However, as it eventuated 'the massive American assistance' was not readily forthcoming and even in combination the two leaders found it difficult to significantly influence the distribution of resources in the war effort. At the same time there is general agreement however that a 'mutual respect and even affection...quickly developed between the drab, socialist politician and the colourful, conservative general' in a situation where the gap between them was bridged by 'an overwhelming commitment to secure the defence of Australia'.¹⁸ This mutual respect lasted throughout the war until the period in the second half of 1944 when MacArthur moved his military headquarters away from Australia to Hollandia.

In terms of the evolving alliance with the United States it is important to acknowledge Curtin's claims in his New Year message that the Pacific area was 'primarily one in which the United States and Australia must have the fullest say in the direction of the democracies' fighting plan'.¹⁹ This of course ran directly counter to Churchill's views and one factor crucial in the evolution of war policy was (according to David Day) Churchill's fear concerning the impetus that Curtin's message 'threatened to provide to Roosevelt's critics in the United States'. Certainly, he judged that Roosevelt 'had taken a considerable risk in supporting the "Germany first" strategy at a time when the natural inclination of the American public was to concentrate on hitting back at the Japanese'.²⁰ To some extent this gave Churchill the excuse he needed effectively to release Britain from 'her formal obligation to defend the Dominion'²¹ while contending, as in his cable to Curtin on 12 December 1941, that the 'accession of the United States as a full war partner makes amends for all and makes the end certain'.²² Welcome as the American involvement was it

is interesting that even during the critical phase for most of 1942 and the first part of 1943 there was a degree of public resentment in Australia towards the American presence as was evident in the so-called 'Battle of Brisbane in November 1942' when rioting broke out between Australian and American soldiers in the streets of Brisbane²³ and this in the period when MacArthur had his headquarters in Brisbane.

At the time of MacArthur's arrival there were only 25,000 American troops in Australia but by early June 1942 with the decisive success at Midway Island plans were proceeding apace for attempts to set up defensive placements in New Guinea to counter Japanese encroachments in the area. At the military level harmony was maintained during the critical years of 1943 and 1944 and in this regard Curtin's ability to have his party and Parliament accept the modification to the party's opposition to military conscription to allow those conscripted for service in Australia and its territories to serve also in specified other areas south of the equator avoided the embarrassment of a situation where US soldiers could be conscripted to defend Australia while at the same time their Australian partners could not follow them across the territorial boundary.

Some important modifications to the developing Australia-US alliance emerged during the war itself. The first in January 1944 involved Australia's capacity or rather lack thereof to influence events in the Pacific as evidenced by the aftermath of the signature at the beginning of 1944 of the ANZAC Pact between Australia and New Zealand 'without any prior consultation with Britain or the US' and this just after the British, US and China had made plans at Cairo for the Pacific without any consultation with Australia. The subsequent refusal of the British and the US governments to attend a Pacific Conference arranged by Australia meant effectively that Australia learned that it had to consult with both Britain and the US in relation to territorial arrangements even in its own region.

Taking this a step further Australian politicians at first reacted unfavourably to suggestions by visiting American politicians that the US 'should retain control after the war of the Pacific bases that had been built with American money and defended with American blood'.²⁴ Subsequently, however, in the postwar period Labor cabinet minister Dr Evatt tried to use an offer to hand over to the US the naval base at Manus Island built during the war as a means of ensuring American commitment to the defence of the area but this approach was also rejected.²⁵

Secondly, it is significant that during 1944 Curtin developed plans for closer post war relations with the British and the Empire. Already at the end of 1943 he had gone against precedents set earlier by Scullin in securing the appointment of an Australian born Governor-General and this against opposition from then King George V when he arranged in 1944 for the appointment of the Duke of Gloucester, brother of King George VI, as Governor-General. Earlier in a speech (designated at time as his 'fourth empire speech') to his party in December 1943 he emphasised

what was seen as 'his newfound attachment to the empire'²⁶ with his vision for the creation of a permanent imperial secretariat which could be shifted among the different capitals of the Empire while at the same time ensuring that Australian domestic policies such as the White Australia Policy 'would not be subject to international interference'.²⁷ In the process he envisaged 'a common policy in matters that concern the Empire as a whole' but essentially he wanted Australia recognised by the British as the leading British nation' in the Pacific. Indeed, in this context while attending the Imperial Conference in London in 1944 he had told various audiences that Australians continued to regard themselves as 'trustees for the British way of life' and wanted Australia to be recognised by the British Government as the 'leading British nation in the Pacific'.²⁸ As it was, however, he received little support from the other dominions at the 1944 Imperial Conference while at the same time the war had ended without any arrangements in response to an Australian request for a postwar defence treaty with the US. Certainly, Curtin's famous article at the end of 1941 had not overnight led to the creation of the American Alliance in the sense we view this today.

In this respect the policies pursued by the Chifley Government between 1945 and December 1949 are of particular interest. Thus, for example, because of Australia's commitment to the Empire dollar pool Day has argued that Chifley was 'particularly determined to keep petrol rationing in place and prevent petrol prices from being reduced'. To utilise dollars to purchase petrol and in the process to stop petrol rationing would be

To imperil the recovery of Britain's economy, which also had a Labour government and which still remained the major market for Australian produce.

Certainly too it can be argued that

the Chifley government's very public support for Britain carried on from Curtin's position, as expressed during his trip to London in 1944, and was at least partly motivated by a desire to avoid Labor being portrayed as disloyal'.²⁹

Writing several decades earlier L F Crisp had made the same point in his political biography of Ben Chifley. As late as May 1949, according to Crisp, Chifley insisted that Australian rationing 'was no more than fair and reasonable' and had to be maintained because of a 'startling decline in dollar earnings by the sterling area'. In the same period Australia was depreciating its currency against the dollar in step with Britain this in the process having the effect of increasing the price of a significant group of Australian exports. By the time the British government organised a relief arrangement with the oil companies 'for the Australian Labor government it was too late'.³⁰

It was not until nearly five years after the end of the war, and shortly after the accession to power of the Menzies-led non-Labor government in December 1949, that Australia committed itself to a war for the first time 'without Britain having already done so'. Indeed Australia's declaration of war on Japan in December 1941 itself had been the first time ever that Australia had declared war in its own right by contrast with the announcement by Menzies as late as 1939 that 'in consequence of a persistence by Germany in her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her and that, 'as a result Australia is also at war'.³¹

Significantly, the 1950 War, the Korean War, while authorised by the United Nations Security Council (during a period when the Soviet Union was boycotting the Council) was essentially American-led. Subsequently, as a follow up to its involvement in the war the Menzies Government negotiated the ANZUS Treaty in return for Australian acceptance of a soft peace treaty with Japan whose support was regarded by the Americans as critical in the fight against Communist influence in Asia. In this context it should be noted that Australia's preference was for a wider NATO type treaty but Britain and Canada among others refused to be involved. Even then as the Australian government entered into the ANZUS Treaty—the signing of which might arguably be regarded as the genuine beginning of the American Alliance—Australia was also assisting Britain in its fight against insurgents in Malaya, allowing the British to conduct weapons trials (including atomic weapons) on its own shores. It was probably the Suez Crisis in 1956 which marked the major turning point when Menzies initially supported Britain and not the USA, against the wishes of many of his senior colleagues, and the following decade saw the British progressively retreat from its east of Suez territories including Singapore. At the same time the US influence rose steadily with increasing capital investment in Australia and the Vietnam War and the American influence was equally observable with the developing mass resistance to continued Australian participation in the war.

It is beyond my brief to fully evaluate which party inaugurated the Australia-American Alliance and at which point of time. Curtin's article in December 1941 did not set in train an irresistible sequence of events leading to the Australian-American Alliance: the full development of this had to await the rise of Communist China and the struggles in Asia in Korea and then Vietnam. What can certainly be said, however, is that at no stage was Australia's own security so directly imperilled as when the Japanese attacked the American fleet at Pearl Harbour, captured the 'impregnable' British base at Singapore and bombed Australian territory for the first and only time since white settlement in 1788. The risk which had been incipient for much of the twentieth century with the rise of Japan and Britain's increasing incapacity to defend its far flung imperial territory came brutally into focus in December 1941 and produced the MacArthur-Curtin partnership for which there is no parallel probably in the history of either country. Historian David Day puts it this way when referring to words uttered by then opposition leader Kevin Rudd just prior to the 2007 election at which he was elected prime minister, that it was the Labor

government of John Curtin which had been the first to initiate the close defence relationship with the US, which was later enshrined in the ANZUS Treaty and which continues 'to be central to the foreign policy of this over anxious nation'.³²

Nor would the story be complete without reference to the rapidly growing American investment in the Australian economy and perhaps even more to 'the growing American influence on Australian culture including its political culture as evinced by the developing opposition to the Vietnam War and the struggle of the indigenous people for greater recognition and economic and social change'. In this regard too must be added the critical role played by General Douglas MacArthur during his years as Administrator of Japan which firmly established Japan as a non-militarised part of the western alliance and with strong American cultural links. This in turn is reflected by the fact that with the exception of issues arising from the dispute over whaling in the southern oceans Japan has become Australia's closest ally in Asia with this very year (2014) seeing the signing of a free trade treaty with Japan. The links with Japan are all the more remarkable given the ultra hostile perception of the Japanese in Australia immediately post 1945 as a direct consequence of the treatment of Australian prisoners of war. The American alliance and its strong links with Japan paved the way for the rapid resumption of Australia's major trading links with Japan post 1955.

The changing pattern of Australian trade figures is a striking indication of the changes brought about by the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War period linked with the changing make up of Australian society from the 1960s onwards. In particular, perusal of the tables in the Appendix to this article gives an indication of the rapidly accelerating decline in the trade with Britain in the post war decades and the rise of the American market and of course most spectacularly of trade with Japan and China. In terms of the mother country: 'Britain's share of the Australian import market for example, declined from 48 per cent in 1951 to less than 36 per cent in 1960 while the United States' share grew from over 8 per cent to over 16 per cent...and in the 1960s the United States replaced Britain as the principal market for Australian and New Zealand beef and veal exports'.³³

In broader terms, over the whole period trade between Australia and the United States fluctuated with the key period between 1997 and 2003 when for four of those years the US was Australia's most important trading partner. Machinery and transport equipment were the leading components of the Australia-US trade with manufactured products generally dominant amongst goods purchased to the US while food and live animals were more significant in the exported items from Australia.

As already indicated the most spectacular developments of course related to the extraordinarily steep rise in trade with Japan (from the mid 1950s) and China (more especially in the last ten to twenty years). Essentially, World War Two from one perspective led to added focus on the 'populate or perish' syndrome' with the message that 'we cannot continue to hold our island continent for ourselves and our descendants unless we greatly increase our numbers'.³⁴ This in turn led to the developments which paved the end of the White Australia Policy stemming from the assertion from a number of quarters that 'geographically we are Oriental, we are not European' and in this sense 'we are not bound up with the fate of Europe but with the fate of Asia'.³⁵

Alongside these very relevant observations it is worth emphasising—and this is difficult to measure objectively—that from several points of view the post Second World War years have seen the US emerge as the major cultural influence on Australia from a number of viewpoints. Issues like constitutional and political rights for indigenous people; the Vietnam War and protests against military conscription and environmental issues have strengthened the connection. Alongside these political aspects in terms of popular culture symbols the US in many respects has come to supplant the UK as the major source of inspiration and innovation for many aspects of Australian life. In turn this Americanisation process was part of the range of developments which made the rapprochement possible with Japan. What happened in 1942 may not have been the ultimate turning point but certainly Curtin's New Year Message for 1942 was truly iconic in its immediate impact and its long term consequences.

David Black

Appendix

The changes in Australian trading patterns as a consequence of the war and the subsequent relative decline of the UK and increase in the Asian connections are very striking. (Sources *Official YearBooks of Australia*, relevant issues.)

Exports (%)

Country	1938-1939	1946-1947	1952-1953	1972-1973	2013
UK	54.45	29.01	41.23	9.68	3.1 (8 th)
China	2.46	1.96	0.08	0.52	28.1(1 st)
Japan	3.97	1.81	9.64	31.10	16.1(2 nd)
USA	2.95	15.40	6.64	12.21	4.8(4 th)
Sth Korea					6.9(3 rd)

Imports (%)

UK	41.64	36.52	41.76	18.63	3.6(7 th)
China	0.02	0.56	1.01	1.21	14.5(1 st)
Japan	4.22	0.34	0.91	17.93	6.5(3 rd)
USA	15.09	19.49	16.57	20.87	12.3(2 nd)
Sth Korea					3.0 (19 th)

- 1 The article is reproduced in full in David Black, *In His Own Words: John Curtin's Speeches and Writings*, Bentley; Paradigm Press, Curtin University, 1995, pp. 194-196.
- 2 David Day, '27 December 1941 Prime Minister Curtin's New Year Message: Australia 'Looks to America' (hereafter cited as 'Australia Looks to America'), in Martin Crotty and David Andrew Roberts, *Turning Points in Australian History*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2009, p. 130.
- 3 Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 195.
- 4 Tom Millar, *Australia's Defence*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, p. 22 cited in Day, '27 December 1941...', p. 129.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Day, *The Great Betrayal: Britain, Australia and the Onset of the Pacific War 1939-42*, North Ryde: Angus and Robertson, 1988, pp. 228-229 cited in Day, *John Curtin A Life*, Sydney: Harper Collins, 1999, p. 438.
- 7 Ibid., p. 439.
- 8 Ibid., p. 440.
- 9 Day, '27 December 1941...', pp. 129-130.
- 10 Ibid., p. 131.
- 11 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 115.
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- 12 Letter from O'Malley to Andrew Fisher, Fisher Papers, National Library of Australia, cited in Day, *27 December 1941*, p. 131.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., p. 133.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., p. 135.
- 17 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 463.
- 18 Ibid, p. 464.
- 19 David Day, *The Great Betrayal. Britain, Australia and the Onset of the Pacific War 1939-42*, North Ryde: Angus and Robertson, 1988, p. 226
- 20 Ibid., p. 228
- 21 R.J. Bell, *Unequal Allies*, Melbourne, 1977, p. 48 cited in Day, *The Great Betrayal*, p. 229.
- 22 Ibid., p. 211.
- 23 Day, 'Australia "Looks to America" ', p. 135.
- 24 Ibid., p.136.
- 25 See, for example, *Sydney Morning Herald* 29 February 1952.
- 26 Day, *John Curtin a life*, p. 525. For a fuller explanation of the 'fourth empire' concept see Black, *In His Own Words*, pp. 238-239.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Day, 'Australia Looks to America', p. 138.
- 29 David Day, *Chifley*, Sydney: Harper Collins, 2001, p. 451.
- 30 L.F. Crisp, *Chifley*, Sydney: Harper Collins, 2001, pp. 312-313.

31 Quoted in Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 157.

32 Ibid., p. 141.

33 Trevor Reese, 'Economic Changes 1951-68' in Norman Harper, *Australia and the United States. Documents and Readings in Australian History*, Melbourne; Thomas Nelson (Australia), 1971, p. 211.

34 Arthur Calwell speaking in the Australian House of Representatives on 2 August 1945 and cited in F K Crowley (ed) *Modern Australia in Documents 1939-1970*, Melbourne: Wren Publishing, 1973, p. 126.

35 See, for example, Reverend E.H. Burgmann (Anglican Bishop of Goulburn, NSW) cited in *ibid*, pp. 137-138.