



Ms Sally Warhaft and the Honourable Julia Gillard.  
Image: Alana Blowfield.

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# INFORMATION UPDATE

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## 17th JCPML Anniversary Lecture presented by Ms Sally Warhaft

by Emertius Professor David Black

Author and journalist Sally Warhaft delivered an extraordinarily appropriate 17<sup>th</sup> JCPML Anniversary Lecture. Her lecture was to assess what our 14<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister might have made of the 2016 election campaign.

The lecture came three days before polling day, which brought to an end what was widely assessed as one of the most uninspiring federal election campaigns in living memory.

In setting the scene for her lecture, Sally focused on Australia's "political culture and the changing nature of election campaigns". The consequence in her view was: "Eight long weeks without a memorable speech, without a proper debate, with tired campaign journalists hopping on and off buses and planes...all this sameness".

In Curtin's day by contrast "leaders had a lot more time to themselves, to think, to get advice, to shape their messages". Taking time out she contended was to Curtin, time "to think and reflect, time to think and talk with trusted advisors...time was not



Emertius Professor David Black. Image: Alana Blowfield.

*always used responding to things".*

Sally thought it was likely Curtin would have found today's leader debates incomprehensible; in particular broadcasting the first debate on pay-television only, thus "deliberately excluding...70% of the potential audience".

By contrast: "Curtin presented himself at every opportunity as a national leader... surely that would mean offering your message to as many people as possible, every time?"

Curtin played to his strengths; he was *“masterful in his use of media, especially radio but also print”* and this arose from the fact that *“he was himself a journalist who worked as an editor and a freelance writer”*. In this context *“he brought every bit of his experience with the press to work for him in public office”*.

Sally focused on his 1943 campaign policy speech delivered by radio, and his famous broadcast to the American people in March 1942, affirming that: *“Australia is the last bastion between the West Coast of America and the Japanese. If Australia goes, the Americas are wide open”*.

She also noted Curtin’s twice daily briefings with the press, where he showed journalists *“highly confidential information about the war, and got journalists to see things from his point of view”*.

Sally’s viewpoint was blunt and to the point: *“The cordiality and informality of those off-the-record briefings would obviously not be possible now in the modern era of gotcha politics”*.

It is interesting that Sally considers Curtin’s most useful skill was *“as a speaker”*. He was not *“a Deakin, Hughes, Menzies or Keating... not in the top tier of Australian orators”* but he was very well practised.

In Sally’s major published work *Well May We Say: The Speeches that made Australia*, the two offerings from Curtin are broadcast speeches. In certain respects *“his disposition lent itself more obviously to being a persuasive writer. Yet when he stepped on the podium, inside or out, his words captured everyone’s attention”*.

Sally posed that Curtin used speech to build moral authority, and *“that authority was there when he and the nation most needed it”*. This was despite being a defeated candidate in three



The Honourable Julia Gillard. Image: Alana Blowfield.

## Lofty traditions: signing the John Curtin Gallery lift

The John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library Foundation Patron, the Honourable Gough Whitlam and his wife Margaret started a tradition of signing the John Curtin Gallery lift. The Honourable Paul Keating added his signature while Patron and the current Patron, the Honourable Julia Gillard has continued the tradition.

While attending the 2016 JCPML Anniversary Lecture in late June, Ms Gillard signed the Gallery lift inside panel, which would be one of the more unusual places a former Australian Prime Minister has been asked to sign their name.

elections and coming perilously close to losing a fourth in 1940.

This happened during what she described as his toughest battle of all; his battle with alcoholism. In Sally’s view, Curtin’s capacity to overcome substantial difficulties was because he was always completely himself, what Sally regards as the *“one certain ingredient”* for being a great orator.

Relating this back to the recent election campaign, her conclusion was that Curtin as a speaker *“was far ahead of the leaders today”* and that as orators they demonstrate that *“most of us can learn to be competent speakers—but to be great is rare indeed”*.

She felt Malcolm Turnbull was someone who people would think of as a gifted speaker, but his offering at the campaign launch *“was lacklustre and entirely forgettable, like most of this campaign”*.

The latter part of Sally’s address was centred on a subject near to her heart, namely the position of women in politics and more broadly in society itself. She does not overstate her case—in her view Curtin: *“was no saint when it came to women’s liberation...He was conservative and resisted women moving into the workforce, particularly as a younger man”*.

However, he did preside over



Ms Sally Warhaft presenting the JCPML Anniversary Lecture. Image: Alana Blowfield.

some important policies for women – the first female representatives in federal parliament “were elected under his watch—and it was his government which introduced the widows pension and a range of other social security measures”.

Yet several decades later Sally told her listeners: “If things don’t change, I will have to watch my daughter work harder, think herself less entitled and be paid less than her brother. She will also collect less superannuation. These are massive structural and cultural issues, which neither party is taking seriously...”

“For all the talk about women and equality right now, it’s hard to detect policy or breakthrough policy going on at the moment that are much more substantial than those Curtin achieved. And

*the mindset may not be that different to Curtin’s in the end: an assumption that women will simply keep on doing everything they’re doing and putting up with it because that is what they do.*

*“Until political parties stop tinkering, bribing and pretending, and start matching their rhetoric with sweeping change their words about equality for women will come to nothing”.*

In conclusion Sally accepted that: “I can’t really say what John Curtin would make of this campaign... he would be amazed at the society we live in, the wealth, the technology and the progress. And he would be mightily perplexed at how we put it all to use. Why should we corner ourselves with such a stilted disingenuous and monotonous style of political

*campaigning?”*

She noted that Curtin wasn’t afraid to note the achievements of the opposition and he concentrated on his own government’s record rather than making negative attacks. When he died Robert Menzies and Arthur Fadden carried his coffin.

In Sally’s view what Australia needs is “two politicians with the famous humility of John Curtin at once—one on each side of the despatch box – to agree and insist on some new ground rules”.

Watch the 17<sup>th</sup> JCPML Anniversary Lecture at <http://john.curtin.edu.au/events/speeches/warhaft.html>