

Successful drama marks Curtin anniversary

On 5 July each year the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library commemorates the life of a great Australian – Prime Minister John Curtin. This year the JCPML marks the occasion with a special edition of our newsletter remembering John Curtin 60 years on from his victorious 1943 election and with the world premiere of the play, *Shadow Of The Eagle*.

The JCPML worked in partnership with the Perth Theatre Company to develop *Shadow Of The Eagle* and the partnership was acknowledged in 2002 with a State Arts Sponsorship Scheme award and an Australia Council grant. Focused on the historic first meeting between General Douglas MacArthur and Prime Minister John Curtin, the play achieves something very few Australian plays attempt – an examination of the role of a significant Australian and the effect he had on the social and political development of Australia.

'History is about real people dealing with real issues and *Shadow Of The Eagle* provides the dramatic environment to bring to life on the stage one very important real moment in time in our nation's history,' says



From left to right: Actors Geoff Kelso (Curtin) and Michael Loney (MacArthur), Lesley Carman-Brown, Alan Becher (director) and Kandy-Jane Henderson. Photo: Jon Green

David Black, JCPML Historical Consultant.

Set against the backdrop of the fall of Singapore and bombing of Darwin in the lead up to an expected invasion of Australia by the Japanese, Curtin must convince MacArthur to help save Australia.

'Our main challenge was dramatising an event about which there is very little

evidence, either official or anecdotal,' explains Alan Becher, Artistic Director of PTC and director of *Shadow Of The Eagle*. 'A combination of facts and insights, coupled with the extraordinary pressure both men were under, led us to explore some possibilities of what might have occurred during this historic meeting at such a critical moment in Australia's history.'

Continued on backpage



Spectacular win for Curtin in 1943!

The first and only election that Curtin contested as Prime Minister of Australia was a dramatic victory for him and for his Government, producing, according to the Commonwealth Parliament's bicentenary historian, 'a spectacular two chamber victory, including the greatest landslide ever to have occurred in the House of Representatives'. (1) Fought out on a campaign of 'You can't have Curtin as a leader unless you vote for Labor' the election results were testament to the public's overwhelming confidence in Curtin as their national leader and a vindication of his 20 months in office.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the 21 August 1943 election which was far and away the greatest victory ever recorded by the ALP at the federal level and was without precedent in that it provided the first and only instance when one party, the Australian Labor Party, won every seat contested in either House in John Curtin's home State, Western Australia.

When Curtin was sworn in on 7 October 1941 as prime minister, he lacked a majority of his own followers in both houses of the Federal parliament. This left the Curtin Government relying on two independents from Victoria, AW Coles and Alex Wilson, to provide the necessary support to allow his Government to take power. Only four days earlier these two men had joined with the ALP to vote the Fadden Government out of office. In the Senate at this stage there were 19 non-Labor members and 17 from the ALP while in the House of Representatives there were 36 Labor members, 36 non-Labor members and two independents holding the balance of power.

During the difficult last months of 1941 Curtin's skill as a parliamentary tactician was put to the test and Souter describes him as the 'the best manager of an evenly divided

parliament since Alfred Deakin'. (2) All his skill was needed, for example, when dealing with the bills which gave the Commonwealth

complete control over income taxation, a development which has never been reversed. On more than one occasion in 1942 and the first half of 1943 the Senate endeavoured to amend or even reject government legislation and it took compromise and skill to keep the government's programme reasonably intact.



However, from June 1943 there was a prolonged no confidence debate forcing Curtin to dissolve Parliament on 7 July. For the prime minister himself the election would be both a test of his leadership and also his capacity to win back support in his own seat of Fremantle which he had come perilously close to losing in 1940. According to Ross Gollan, Canberra correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald*: '[S]traws in the electorate wind will be watched very closely on [Curtin's] behalf. There have been recent rumours that Mr Curtin may again have to fight hard... In circles close to Mr Curtin there is... a determination that he shall be in his own constituency for the campaign's climax. Some of these circles hold that it would be better in the long run for Labor to lose the election and retain Mr Curtin as



Election material on these pages: John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library. Records of the ALP WA Branch. Correspondence of ALP State Executive. 1914-1948. Original held by Battye Library: MN300/State Executive

leader than to win an election at which Mr Curtin lost his seat.' (3)

Shortly before the election was called Curtin had told the Australian people that after 20 months during which his Government had had 'the solemn duty and grave responsibility of maintaining intact our country' Australia was now ready to be used as a base 'from which to launch both limited and major offensives against Japan'. (John Curtin, JCPML00456:1). At the same time during the campaign which followed Curtin explicitly promised that his Government would not 'during the war socialize any industry'.

The appeal succeeded triumphantly and Labor won 49 of the 74 seats and the Opposition parties 23 with Coles and Wilson retaining the other two seats. Labor was equally triumphant in the upper House – winning all the contested Senate seats in all six States and hence assumed control of the Senate with 22 of the 36 members as from 1 July 1944 when the newly elected Senators took their seats. In the interim Labor increased its Senate representation to 18 with the inclusion of the first ever woman Senator – Dorothy Tangney from Western Australia.

The big gains came in NSW, where the ALP's representation rose from 16 to 21 of the 28 seats; South Australia where Labor now held five of the six seats compared with one before the election; and Western Australia where the ALP won all five House of Representatives seats compared with two in 1940. The three additional seats in the West included Forrest, where a minority of nearly 5000 votes was turned into an absolute majority for the ALP over all other candidates of nearly 3000 votes; Perth, where former Speaker W M Nairn saw his absolute majority of 13,000 votes turn into a minority of over 7000 votes after preferences; and John Forrest's old seat of Swan which

Labor won with a small absolute majority after losing by 7000 votes in 1940. In the Labor stronghold of Kalgoorlie sitting member Herbert Johnson had an absolute majority of over 10,000.

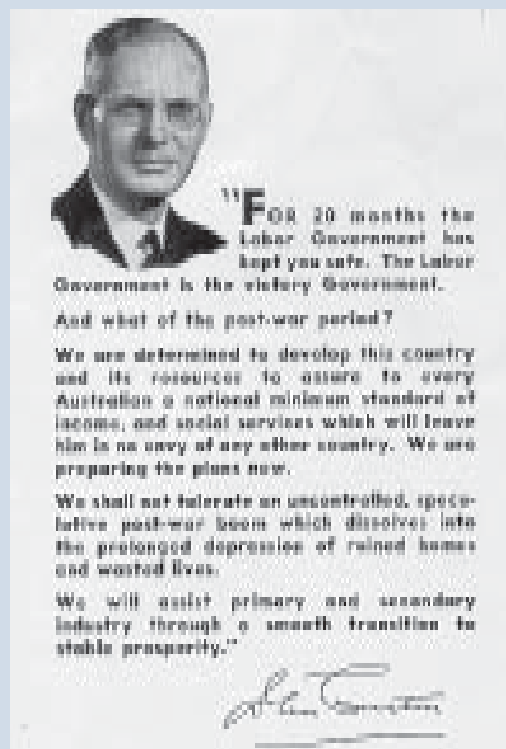
Most spectacular of all, however, was Curtin's own vote in Fremantle. In 1940 he had survived by only 641 votes. In 1943 – in an almost unbelievable turnaround – he polled 45,352 primary votes compared with a total of 22,442 for his two opponents, a swing of 19% (from nearly 48% to just under 67%) on the first preference vote.

In his last speech to the electors Curtin had specified three tasks for the incoming government: to 'direct the coming offensive against Japan', 'be responsible for Australia's part in the peace conference' and 'for demobilization and post-war reconstruction'. In performing these tasks the Curtin Government from 1 July 1944 was the first Labor federal government to control both Houses of Parliament since the conscription split in 1916.

The five and a half year period which followed when the ALP could implement its legislative programme without disruption in either House of the Commonwealth Parliament was only paralleled by the Fisher Labor Government (1910 to 1913) and the Fisher and Hughes Governments from 1914 to 1916, and has never since been repeated.

Little wonder then that the 1943 election has a special place in the electoral history of Australia's oldest surviving political party.

Professor David Black,
JCPML Historical Consultant



WA Premier John Wilcock (left) welcomes John and Elsie Curtin to Perth to during the 1943 election campaign. JCPML00376/128



References

- (1) Souter, Gavin (1988) *Acts of Parliament*, Melbourne University Press, p.358
- (2) Souter, Gavin (1988) *Acts of Parliament*, Melbourne University Press, p.350
- (3) Gollan, Ross *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 April 1943 (JCPML00683:89)



JCPML00425/58

Without Classification

Asked whether she saw herself as a family woman or a career woman, Hazel Hawke, then wife of Bob Hawke, Australia's Prime Minister from 1983 to 1991, answered 'I don't classify myself'.

Without Classification: Hazel Hawke is the JCPML's newest online exhibition containing images, documents, sound and video from Hazel Hawke's years in the Lodge along with dynamic poster art from the 1980s. The online version is based on an exhibition which was jointly organised by the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library and the John Curtin Gallery and which was open to the public in November 2002.

Hazel Hawke shaped her own role as prime minister's wife, becoming a strong and active leader in the community and the exhibition vividly reveals the issues that she was passionate about. Her informed interest in humanist and social concerns, and her desire to make these central to her role as wife of the Prime Minister, meant that through her voice she had something in common with the bold and impassioned messages and imagery emblazoned on art posters during the 1970s and 1980s.

According to exhibition curator, Margaret Moore, 'The point of intersection in the voice of Hazel Hawke and the ideals of poster or street art is not always in content, though this is sometimes the case. More so it is in the way that with hindsight they each can be understood to have offered a public maturing within the Australian context of freedom of speech, particularly on the position of women and Aboriginality.'

Visit the exhibition at <http://john.curtin.edu.au/hazelhawke/index.html> to explore the themes of welfare, women and Aboriginal Australia and audio and video footage of Hazel Hawke.

Successful drama marks Curtin anniversary cont'd from front page

According to *Australian* reviewer Victoria Laurie, '*Shadow Of The Eagle* is gripping and original theatre. But to work as theatre, *Shadow of the Eagle* has to convey big events through gripping personal interplay. By mid-play, Kelso [playing John Curtin] and Loney [playing Douglas MacArthur] had woven their magic, creating a tense psychological turning point aided by a carefully crafted, laconic script.'

An extensive educational program has also been developed to help year 10 to 12 students interpret the play and understand the social and historical context behind the meeting.

The play had its world premiere on 24 May. Special guests for opening night were JCPML Foundation Patron, the Hon. Gough Whitlam, Margaret Whitlam and Curtin's grandchildren, Barbara Davidson, John Curtin and Beverley Lane. *Shadow Of The Eagle* had a short season at Kalgoorlie in June and is expected to tour regional eastern states next year. ■

Centenary Medal Awarded to JCPML Archivist

Congratulations to Kandy-Jane Henderson on being awarded a Centenary Medal. The medal was presented in recognition of her service to the community as Archivist of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library.

This distinctive commemorative medal marks the achievements of a broad cross-section of Australian society at the commencement of a new century. The JCPML is proud that Kandy-Jane has been named as one of the many outstanding people whose services have helped the community.

JCPML Challenge Bank Reading Room Visitors

Pat Barblett
Pauline Coggin
Elizabeth Edward
Janet Fletcher
Philippa Hair
Jenni Jeremy
Darryl McIntyre
Tupou Rainima
Clive Smith
Glenda Smith
Yossi Tissona

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