

WHO WAS JOHN CURTIN?

John Curtin was born in Creswick, Victoria on 8 January, 1885, the oldest of four children born to Irish immigrants, Kate and John Curtin. Curtin's much interrupted education ended at 14 when he began to supplement the family income with a variety of jobs. In 1903 he took on the job of an estimates clerk with Titan Manufacturing Company.

In 1911 he left Titan to become Secretary of the Timber Workers Union. Within two years Curtin had coordinated a loose association into a tight and effective union and was instrumental in introducing a Workers' Compensation Act in Victoria. On a working trip to Tasmania in 1912, Curtin met Elsie Needham and the couple formed a lasting friendship, corresponding regularly over the next few years.

The outbreak of war in 1914 brought the controversy of conscription and in 1916 Curtin became secretary of the National Executive of the Anti-Conscription Campaign. In 1917 he moved to Perth, Western Australia, to become editor of the *Westralian Worker* newspaper, marrying Elsie Needham and starting a new life.

After a period of stability and domestic contentment, in 1928 Curtin was elected to the House of Representatives as a member for the seat of Fremantle, Western Australia. His term was cut short when the Australian Labor Party was defeated in 1931 but he regained Fremantle in 1934. A year later he was elected leader of the Australian Labor Party.

As Labor leader Curtin faced several major difficulties and his immediate task was to unite the party which had been split since 1931 by disagreements on how to tackle the problems of the Depression. He managed to bring all the disparate factions within Labor together to form an effective and unified party. By the time of the 1940 elections Labor was in a strong position, both within the party room and as an effective opposition party in parliament. When the coalition government lost majority support in parliament and collapsed, John Curtin became prime minister on 7 October 1941. He remained in office until his death on 5 July 1945.



**THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE:  
CREATING AN INDEPENDENT  
AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY**

**An exhibition from the  
John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library,  
Curtin University of Technology**

*The Art of the Possible* explores Australia's growing independence in the realm of foreign policy from 1935 to 1950.

Any analysis of Australia's foreign relations in the 20th century must include a focus on Australia's progression from 'dependence' to 'independence'. Under wartime Prime Minister John Curtin's skilled and pragmatic leadership, Australia's refusal to see itself as a colonial outpost serving only British interests created the possibility of a new direction in foreign policy. The central problems faced by Curtin during World War Two are essentially the same problems Australia faces today:

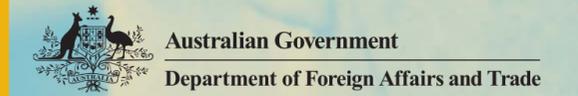
- the need to resolve its geographic position in Asia in relation to its European background; and
- the need for security by a small to middle power.

The John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library (JCPML) As Australia's first prime ministerial library the JCPML honours the contribution of wartime Prime Minister John Curtin, works towards the advancement of knowledge and the enrichment of culture, and provides a gateway for the community to learn about its past in order to build a better future. It aims to fulfil this purpose by developing a unique research collection and a varied outreach program for the educational sector and general community. It has been established at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Western Australia. The JCPML has digitised material in its own collection and dispersed John Curtin-related materials held around the world and now provides electronic access and linking to these items through the JCPML Electronic Research Archive (ERA).

Contact details:  
Telephone: + 618 9266 4205  
Facsimile: + 618 9266 4185  
Email: jcpml@curtin.edu.au  
Website: <http://john.curtin.edu.au>  
Postal: GPO Box U1987 Perth, Western Australia, 6845  
Address: Gallery/JCPML (building 200A), Curtin University of Technology, Kent Street, Bentley, Western Australia, 6102



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