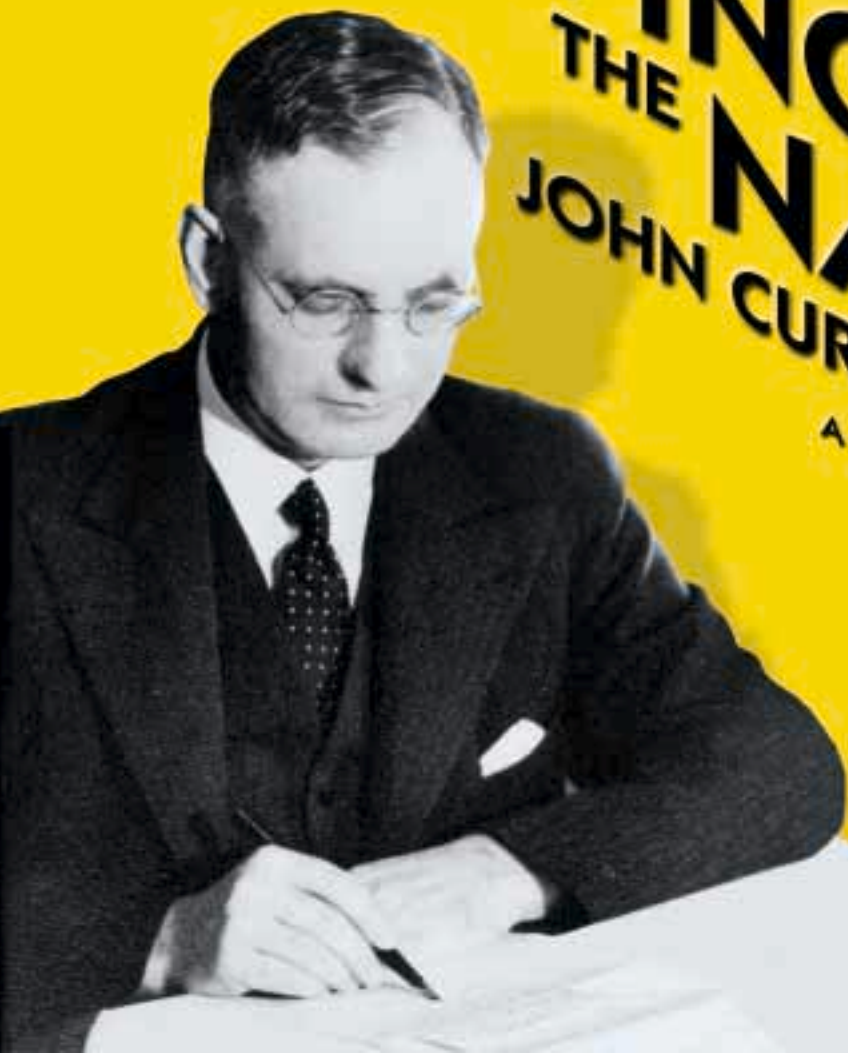




SHAPING THE NATION JOHN CURTIN AND AUSTRALIA

A John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library exhibition



The ideals that reached their climax at the end of the century in the federation of the Commonwealth were interpreted by each according to his needs and experiences. To Curtin, they were an almost fanatical belief in the future of a new Australia for the people, the importance of mateship, comradeship, solidarity; hopes of a world of peace, prosperity, equality and security; the federation of Australia and of the world.

(Lloyd Ross, 1977, p.6)

When Australia became a nation in January 1901, John Curtin was just sixteen years old. Both Curtin and the new nation were filled with youthful enthusiasm and hope for the future. And yet, both of them also carried the traces of social, political and economic inequality. For John Curtin came from a family which had experienced the problems of the 1890s depression.

What then, were the dreams and fears of young Australia, an Australia here represented by John Curtin? What was the young nation like at the turn of the century? What issues motivated the nation and its citizens? How was that youthful enthusiasm tempered and shaped by experience as the years went by?

In following the development of John Curtin's political thinking and career, this exhibition traces the development of Australia into full adulthood – to the moment when it had to stand apart from Britain and defend its own soil. This exhibition is an exploration, through the eyes of one of Australia's most prominent early citizens, of what it means to be a nation.

Working Man's Paradise?

Throughout the nineteenth century, Australia developed a reputation as a working man's paradise. It was seen by many settlers as a place that was free of the social hierarchies of 'home', a place that offered employment and the means to a comfortable life for all.

This dream came to an abrupt end in the 1890s when a deep and widespread economic depression affected the eastern colonies. There were high levels of unemployment, continuous strikes and no support for those affected, leading to social unrest.

It was against this backdrop that the decision to become a nation was taken by the citizens of all six colonies. Not surprisingly, while there was a lot of hope for the future, Federation also represented a moment of fear – a moment in Australia's history in which we looked inward rather than outward and sought to put up barriers to protect ourselves.

John Curtin's own experiences at this time reflected those of the majority of working Australians. In his case those experiences drove him to fight throughout his life for basic securities for all workers. This struggle strongly influenced the way Curtin thought about Australia and the role of Federal Government.





The Socialist Orator

John Curtin's experiences as a child during the 1890s made a deep impression on him. He sought to escape the poverty and hardships of his family by joining both the Victorian Socialist Party and the Australian Labor Party. He believed that the socialist movement offered practical help for those who, like him, were experiencing the ill effects of capitalism. In his youthful enthusiasm he believed that the revolution would come and that, one day, all the workers would put their own class interests above those of the nation and the leaders of industry. Until about 1924, Curtin used his oratorical and journalistic skills to work towards the socialist revolution.

Cover. John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, Curtin Family, 1937 Federal Election Souvenir photograph of John Curtin, JCPML 00376/57.

1. John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, Curtin Family, John Curtin with parents John and Kate, Melbourne 1885, JCPML 00004/1.

2. John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, West Australian News Ltd, Newspaper Publisher, John Curtin, probably in his early 20s, when he was a member of the Victorian Socialist Party, n.d., JCPML 00409/1. (Original held by West Australian News Ltd.)

From Revolutionary to Federal Politician

While John Curtin never lost his faith in the possibility of a just and fairer society that was organised around the rights of the worker, he did slowly lose the revolutionary zeal of his youth. His work as a journalist in Perth, his increasing involvement in the Labor Party and the slow realisation that change could be effected by parliamentary means eventually saw him standing successfully as the Federal member for Fremantle in 1928.

John Curtin came to believe that a strong central government provided the best way of ensuring the welfare of citizens, education for all, the ability to defend the nation and full employment. In his view, the provision of all of these things was not only the responsibility of Federal Government – it was also the way to ensure that the interests of the workers would be looked after.

3. John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, Curtin Family, John Curtin speaking at opening of South Beach, Fremantle, c.1930s, JCPML 00376/160.

4. John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, Curtin Family, Prime Minister receives the "First lady" and President of the American Red Cross, Eleanor Roosevelt September 1943, JCPML 00376/87.

The National Leader

The coming of World War II and the collapse of the United Australia Party government gave John Curtin the opportunity to put his dreams into practice. The fact that he took office during wartime gave him unprecedented powers while his decision not to form a government with the opposition meant that he could maintain the Labor platform.

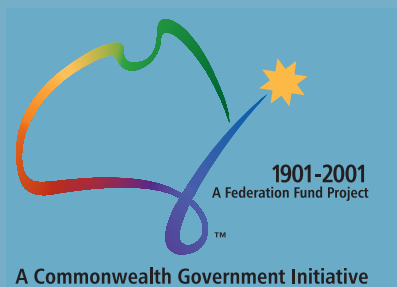
Curtin's commitment to strengthening Australia's autonomy as a nation was strongly signalled when he became the first prime minister to make an independent declaration of war – on Japan, Finland, Hungary and Romania – independently from Britain. At the same time he also sought help from the United States of America, realising that Britain could not come to Australia's aid. Curtin's policies mobilised the nation and led to unprecedented national unity, demonstrated by Labor's landslide victory in the 1943 election.

Despite the war, John Curtin made sure that his government remained committed to the worker. He worked to implement social welfare legislation, increased the pay of soldiers so that their families could survive and ensured that the government had access to Commonwealth Bank funds to prevent a depression. He also looked towards the future, towards the kind of society he wanted Australia to become after the war. As early as 1943 he set up the Department of Post-war Reconstruction which was responsible for putting in place the beginnings of the social – welfare state which came to fruition under Chifley.

Under John Curtin, Australia had demonstrated its independence from Britain, grown in confidence and gained a sense of identity and purpose. Fifty years on and at the Centenary of Federation, Australians continue the process of shaping their nation.

Sponsors:

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