

NATIONAL WINNER
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
JOHN CURTIN



SAMANTHA TANG

SEFTON HIGH SCHOOL, NSW

TITLE: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOHN
CURTIN

The Life and Times of John Curtin

“If ever a man was born to lead this nation into time of peace and in the paths of peace it was John Curtin. If ever a man was born to apply his vision of what Australia at peace could be, his vision of what Australia at peace should become in his time, he was John Curtin.”

- Gough Whitlam

John Curtin served as Australia's Prime Minister from October 1941 to July 1945, during the height of World War II. He is remembered as a remarkable leader, and his contributions to Australian society continue to be admired within the scheme of politics and by the general public to this day. Curtin is remembered and celebrated because his commitment and policies strengthened Australia during a time of great uncertainty. Upon being elected as Prime Minister, he introduced significant wartime policies, which fortified Australia's security. These included his foreign policy and his call for the return of two divisions of Australian troops. On the home front, Curtin's control over resources, tax regulations and post-war regulations were also fundamental in strengthening Australia both during and after the war. It was due to the successful nature of Curtin's contributions that he has now been immortalised into Australia's history as a commendable leader whose life is worthy of celebration.

An important aspect of Curtin's Prime Ministership which he is remembered for is his foreign policy during the war. Shortly after becoming Prime Minister in 1941, Australia's security was put under threat by growing Japanese aggression¹, particularly after 'Japan launched her sudden and unprovoked war against Great Britain and the United States²' by bombing Pearl Harbour³. Curtin responded to this threat by looking to the United States for defensive assistance:

I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs to our traditional links of kinship with the United Kingdom...We shall exert all our energies towards the shaping of a plan, with the United States as its keystone, which will give our country some confidence of being able to hold out until the tide of battle swings against the enemy.⁴

John Curtin recognised Britain's failure to support Australia due to the conflict it faced in Europe⁵ and Australia's consequent need for military support from the United States. Although his remark was the centre of much controversy, it was seen that the United States proved to be an important ally in the war, whereby it provided most of the air power and sea transport for operations. Using Australia as a base, the United States assisted in ensuring the Japanese could not progress its campaign into Australia. More

¹ Darlington, R., Hospodaryk, J. 1999, *A History of Australia Since 1901*, Heinemann, Victoria. P92

² 'Heavy Damage; Casualties in Hawaii, 3000' *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 9th December, 1941, P1

³ Darlington, R., Hospodaryk, J. 1999, *A History of Australia Since 1901*, Heinemann, Victoria. P92

⁴ Australian Prime Minister John Curtin, in the Melbourne Herald, 27 December 1941 – accessed through Darlington, R., Hospodaryk, J. 1999, *A History of Australia Since 1901*, Heinemann, Victoria. P92

⁵ Darlington, R., Hospodaryk, J. 1999, *A History of Australia Since 1901*, Heinemann, Victoria. P92

importantly, however, Curtin's foreign policy marked the beginning of Australia's transition from being a nation reliant on its motherland, Britain, to a nation characterised by greater independence from its traditional ties. Such independence was later demonstrated in 1945, when Australia signed the ANZUS Treaty with New Zealand and helped to establish the United Nations⁶. Thus, Curtin's foreign policy has him remembered and celebrated by Australians because it fortified Australia's security and enabled him to liberate Australia to become a more independent nation.

In terms of his wartime policies, Curtin also responded to the Pacific threat through ordering for two divisions of Australian troops to return home in February 1942. These two divisions consisted of the 6th and 7th infantry divisions and had been situated in the Middle East and intended to move towards the Dutch Indies⁷. Upon the fall of Singapore on 14 February and the bombing of Darwin on 20 February, whereby 'opening shots in the Battle of Australia were fired on the mainland...when two Japanese aircraft made two heavy raids on Darwin'⁸, Curtin realised that the war coming closer to Australia's doorstep and insisted that these divisions return to Australia to defend their homeland against the threat of the Japanese, who had already landed on the northern coast of New Guinea⁹. Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, instead ordered for the seventh division to relocate to Burma, where they were to reinforce British troops – this was done without consultation with Curtin¹⁰, who did not 'agree to the proposal that 7th A.I.F. Division should be diverted to Burma'¹¹. Curtin's insistence of the return of these soldiers was met with opposition from both Churchill and US President Frank Roosevelt, who wanted at least one of the divisions to divert to Burma, where it could maintain China's participation in the war and establish a base for future operations¹². In a war of cables, the leaders of these nations exchanged tense words.

⁶ Carman-Brown, L. 2004. *Independent Foreign Policy* <http://john.curtin.edu.au/aspirations/foreign.html>

⁷ Black, D. Biography of John Curtin. April 2010, <http://john.curtin.edu.au/resources/biography/details.html>

⁸ 'The War Comes to Australia' *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 20 February, 1942

⁹ Mason, K. J., 1992, *Experience of Nationhood*, McGraw-Hill Book Company Australia Pty Limited, New South Wales. P172

¹⁰ Black, D. Biography of John Curtin. April 2010, <http://john.curtin.edu.au/resources/biography/details.html>

¹¹ John Curtin's cable to Winston Churchill from Canberra. 19 February, 1942

¹² Black, D. Biography of John Curtin. April 2010, <http://john.curtin.edu.au/resources/biography/details.html>

“We could not contemplate that you would refuse our request and that of the President of the United States for the diversion of the leading division to face the situation in Burma.”¹³

Churchill ignored Curtin’s wishes for the return of these divisions, as was evident in his cable to Curtin on 22 February 1942. Curtin’s determination saw him reply vigorously to this opposition, whereby he stressed the importance of Australia’s vanishing outer defences and exposed vulnerability¹⁴. In doing so, he forced Churchill to concede, thus successfully negotiating the return of most of these divisions to their Australian homeland, whilst allowing only a small proportion of the 6th division to dispatch at Ceylon¹⁵. In doing so, Curtin strengthened Australia’s defence. His ability to negotiate the return of these divisions exemplified his commitment to the protection of Australia, his initiative, determination and the genuine concern he displayed for the safety of those serving in the war; having already lost men in the British campaign in Greece and Crete, he was not prepared for the continued loss of troops under British military mistakes¹⁶. Thus it can be seen that the return of the 6th and 7th divisions to their Australian homeland is an important reason for the memory and celebration of John Curtin.

On the home front, Curtin’s control over resources and Australian lives was fundamental in maintaining Australia’s economy and strength during the war. This was enabled after the National Security Act was passed in 1939, such which gave the government control over human resources in the duration of the war¹⁷. One means by which Curtin expressed this control was through his call for austerity, which involved a call to cut consumption, go without luxuries, not waste resources and live simply.¹⁸ It was pushed upon the Australian public particularly through the media, which often provided advice on financial stringency. “If parsley is home grown, the stalks may be put in with the macaroni when cooking, to give it more flavour.”¹⁹ Articles like this were prevalent during the war, and were important in ensuring all Australians could play a

¹³ Winston Churchill’s cable to John Curtin from London, 22 February 1942. Accessed through Mason, K. J., 1992, *Experience of Nationhood*, McGraw-Hill Book Company Australia Pty Limited, New South Wales. P171

¹⁴ John Curtin’s cable to Winston Churchill from Canberra, 23 February 1942. Accessed through Mason, K. J., 1992, *Experience of Nationhood*, McGraw-Hill Book Company Australia Pty Limited, New South Wales. P172

¹⁵ Black, D. Biography of John Curtin. April 2010, <http://john.curtin.edu.au/resources/biography/details.html>

¹⁶ Mason, K. J., 1992, *Experience of Nationhood*, McGraw-Hill Book Company Australia Pty Limited, New South Wales. P172

¹⁷ See *ibid.* P181

¹⁸ See *ibid.* P178

¹⁹ ‘Pretend they are Potatoes’ *The Argus*. 8 October, 1942

role in maintaining the nation's economy whilst it engaged in an economically demanding war. Curtin led by example by leading a simple lifestyle and investing long hours at work. Success of this call for austerity was evident in the decline of the production of luxury goods and a more concentrated effort in war-related industries²⁰. Curtin's control over resources was also characterised by the introduction of rationing in 1942. Items like clothes, tea, butter and cigarettes were rationed with the use of ration books²¹. Although the restrictions implemented by Curtin upon the Australian public made life difficult, they were essential in ensuring the needs of Australians could be met under the economic strain of the war. For example, food rationing ensured that the supply of food would be maintained in the event of an enemy attack. Thus, in controlling resources and lives, Curtin maintained ensured Australia's economy and people could support the war effort, and it is for this that he has been remembered and celebrated.

Curtin also introduced policies for Australia's post-war reconstruction. In 1942, he set up the Department of Post-War Reconstruction to assist in the transition from war to peace²². This Department was responsible for introducing a number of commissions and training, including the Commonwealth Housing Commission, Secondary Industries Commission and Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme²³. These commissions and schemes were essential in ensuring that Australia maintained a high employment level, strong economy and quality of life following the war. For example, the Secondary Industries Commission sought to do this by: reviewing the war time development of secondary industries; defining a policy for the future development of secondary industries in post-war Australia; and to investigating and reporting on other matters relating to industrial development as required²⁴. The Commonwealth Housing Commission was also important in maintaining adequate housing numbers particularly with an estimated shortage of 250,000 to 300,000²⁵ homes following the war. Also in

²⁰ Mason, K. J., 1992, *Experience of Nationhood*, McGraw-Hill Book Company Australia Pty Limited, New South Wales. P178

²¹ See *ibid.* P181

²² Unknown Author. Look Ever Forward – Post War Reconstruction. October, 2009, <http://john.curtin.edu.au/shapingthenation/activities/reconstruction%28answers%29.html>.

²³ See *ibid.*

²⁴ Queensland State Archives Series ID 44, Secondary Industries Commission, Correspondence Files through *Secondary Industries Commission, Correspondence Files*

<http://www.archivessearch.qld.gov.au/search/SeriesDetails.aspx?SeriesId=44>

²⁵ Carman-Brown, L. 2004. *Social Services and Immigration* <http://john.curtin.edu.au/aspirations/social.html>

relation to post-war reconstruction, Curtin introduced a number of welfare policies, including widows' pension, maternity allowances and unemployment, sickness and special benefits.²⁶ These policies were fundamental in ensuring that the livelihoods of Australians could be sustained in the post-war period by financially assisting families. For example, the changes he introduced to maternity allowances removed the means test and provided an additional grant of 25 shillings per week for the four weeks preceding and four weeks following the birth of a child²⁷. These policies ensured the government could provide social security specifically to the disadvantaged and maintain a high standard of life for all Australians. They showcased Curtin's strong leadership of a wartime Australia, whereby he instigated policies for both the present and the future. For doing so, Curtin has been revered in memory and celebration.

In conjunction with his social security policies, Curtin also introduced changes to the tax system. He transferred the responsibility of collecting income tax from the states to the federal government in 1942²⁸. This was enacted after the Income Tax (War-time Arrangements) Act was passed through the High Court in July 1942. By transferring this responsibility to the Commonwealth, Curtin was able to integrate the economy, and allow the federal government to gain direct access into the nation's 'purse' – its income tax treasury. This meant the government could gain sufficient funds to implement major policies and projects both during and after the war. For example, in 1949, it enabled the government to carry out the Snowy Mountains Scheme²⁹, which was extremely important in restoring Australia's economy. Thus, the change in the tax system instigated by John Curtin is a reason for his ongoing legacy within Australia.

It is clear that John Curtin is worthy of celebration within Australian society. As both the leader of the Australian Labor Party and more importantly, as Australia's Prime Minister, Curtin's actions and policies were fundamental in maintaining Australia's strength amidst times of insecurity. Upon being elected as Prime Minister, he instigated a number of wartime policies, whereby he sought assistance from the United States and ensured for the return of two divisions of Australian troops. These policies were

²⁶ See *ibid*

²⁷ See *ibid*

²⁸ Black, D. Biography of John Curtin. April 2010, <http://john.curtin.edu.au/resources/biography/details.html>.

²⁹ Unknown Author. Look Ever Forward – Post War Reconstruction. October, 2009, <http://john.curtin.edu.au/shapingthenation/activities/reconstruction%28answers%29.html>.

paramount in the maintenance of Australian security, which was particularly needed after the bombing of Darwin and the fall of Singapore. In addition to Australian defensive security, Curtin also maintained Australia's economy through means like controlling resources and the lives of Australians, whereby he introduced rationing and called for austerity, and through implementing changes to the tax system. In combination with his wartime policies, Curtin also successfully implemented measures for a successful post-war Australia – these measures addressed issues like employment and welfare. Thus, it can be seen that John Curtin made immense contributions to Australian society, most of which allowed Australia to progress and strengthen as a nation. These contributions are the reason why Curtin 'continues to be regarded with admiration and affection across the political divide'³⁰ today.

Word Count: 2229

³⁰ David Day, 'John Joseph Curtin' in Michelle Grattan (ed.), *Australian Prime Ministers*, New Holland Publishers, Sydney, 2000, p. 218.

Bibliography

Reference Books:

1. Darlington, R., Hospodaryk, J. 1999, *A History of Australia Since 1901*, Heinemann, Victoria
Provides a brief overview of the threat of war on Australian soil and Curtin's consequent change in foreign policy.
2. Mason, K. J., 1992, *Experience of Nationhood*, McGraw-Hill Book Company Australia Pty Limited, New South Wales
Briefly explores Curtin's foreign policy and also provides a detailed outline of his homeland policies, including his call for austerity and rationing.
3. Day, D. 2000, 'John Joseph Curtin' in Michelle Grattan (ed.), *Australian Prime Ministers*, New Holland Publishers, Sydney.
Useful in providing an understanding of public opinion towards John Curtin.

Websites:

1. Black, D. *Biography of John Curtin*. April 2010,
<http://john.curtin.edu.au/resources/biography/details.html>. Retrieved 06/08/10
An extremely useful, comprehensive analysis of Curtin's Prime Ministership, covering both his wartime policies and home land policies.
2. Unknown Author. *Look Ever Forward – Post War Reconstruction*. October, 2009,
<http://john.curtin.edu.au/shapingthenation/activities/reconstruction%28answers%29.html>. Retrieved 15/08/10
Provides an insight into Curtin's post-war reconstruction policies; however, it is limited in detail.
3. Carman-Brown, L. 2004. *Social Services and Immigration*
<http://john.curtin.edu.au/aspirations/social.html>. Retrieved 15/08/10
A detailed overview of Curtin's welfare policies useful in understanding their benefits to the Australian public.
4. *Secondary Industries Commission, Correspondence Files*
<http://www.archivessearch.qld.gov.au/search/SeriesDetails.aspx?SeriesId=44>
Retrieved 14/08/10
Allowed for access into Queensland State archives, which detailed the aims of the Secondary Industries Commission. However, it failed explore the impact of this commission on Australia.
5. Carman-Brown, L. 2004. *Independent Foreign Policy*
<http://john.curtin.edu.au/aspirations/foreign.html>. Retrieved: 15/08/10
Useful in understanding Australia's growing independence under the leadership of John Curtin; however, it failed to comprehensively explore Australia's alliance with the United States.

Newspaper articles:

1. 'Heavy Damage; Casualties in Hawaii, 3000' *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 9th December, 1941
Useful in detailing the Australian response to the bombing of Pearl Harbour, although it did not provide any information on Curtin, himself.
2. 'The War Comes to Australia' *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 20 February, 1942
Useful in providing an understanding of the response of Australia to the Darwin bombings, and the consequent need for Curtin to make a military response.
3. 'Pretend they are Potatoes' *The Argus*. 8 October, 1942
Provided an insight into the use of propaganda in enforcing austerity upon the Australian public.