John Curtin
An Atypical Labor Leader

Kim E. Beazley
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The John Curtin Memorial Lecture, 1971
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In 1970 Dr John Dedman generously founded an annual lecture to commemorate the name of John Curtin, distinguished Labor leader, war-time Prime Minister, and also Prime Minister during the period of this University's effective conception. The University is extremely grateful to Dr Dedman for his generous and appropriate gesture.

It was fitting that the first John Curtin Lecture, delivered just one year ago, should have been given by Dr Lloyd Ross, who had just completed some years of research preparing the life of Curtin. His subject was *John Curtin for Labor and for Australia*, and the lecture has been published by the Australian National University Press to inaugurate an annual series in the name of this lecture.

Dr Lloyd Ross gave a broad picture of Curtin the man, the Labor leader, and the political leader, and it is entirely appropriate that this inaugural lecture should be followed by another which also probes into our political history and John Curtin's role in it, this time particularly with regard to war and foreign affairs. As with the first lecture, we are fortunate in having another lecturer who has not only a profound knowledge of that history, but has also had a long and close association with the party led to power by John Curtin.

Mr Kim Beazley is West Australian born, a one time teacher and college lecturer. He has been closely associated with this University as a member of its Interim Council and since 1949 of its Council, and as one of its graduates, with a Master of Arts with Honours in History. His thesis for this degree, completed in 1967, was 'Caucus as an instrument for determining the Policy Tactics of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party in the Com-
monwealth Parliament 1901-1960'. He has also been closely associated with the subject of the present lecture through almost continuous involvement with the movements to which John Curtin dedicated his career, including membership of the Executive of the Parliamentary Labor Party and as Labor Representative for Fremantle since 1945.
Why ‘Atypical’?

Curtin was a distinctive figure in the succession of Australian Prime Ministers in that in the face of a situation of severe unemployment he singlemindedly pursued in his thinking and planning the objective of full employment. Much of his thought in the 1930s was devoted to this before he became leader. Like his defence policies, his economic policies were the fruit of prolonged thought and study.

He was even more unusual in that from 1935 onwards he sought to shift the emphasis of Australian defence to air power and to industrial self-sufficiency. This should not have been unusual, but it was.

He was unusual among Australian leaders of any political persuasion in that, from 1936 onwards, he faced in detail the likely consequences for Australia of the Nazi philosophy of Lebensraum—living space for a Nazi people—and at the same time thought through the consequences for Australia of the Japanese aim of the ‘Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere’. The Nazi aim had to mean war in Europe and hence it had to mean the diversion of the British defence effort to Europe. The Japanese aim meant war on Australia’s doorstep.

Lyons and Menzies followed the current British hope that war in Europe would be averted by an accommodation with Germany. So did significant figures in the Labor movement like Frank Brennan. The United Australia Party Government in 1936 foolishly pursued the policy of diverting trade away from Japan, which helped discredit the Japanese liberal policy of trying to live by trade, not conquest.

Curtin was atypical of Australian Labor leadership as it had
been up to his time in that he believed he could pursue the policies of full employment and defence preparedness while unifying a divided Labor movement and at the same time capturing middle-class and farmer support. In 1935 such convictions took a super optimist, or perhaps a super realist.

Constant reiteration of the 'favourite themes of empire' by Hughes, by Bruce, and by Lyons had created quite unreal estimates in Australia of the British capacity to exert naval and military power in the Pacific.

There was little prospect in the thirties of Britain being able to rearm herself and Australia at the same time. Britain had no aircraft, no tanks, and no guns to sell to Australia. As for warships, as Curtin himself pointed out, under the terms of the Washington Treaty any ship added to the Australian Navy was an automatic deduction from the British Navy. Curtin's defence speeches between 1935 and 1939 do not conform to many of the speeches made from behind him, certainly not to the speeches of Frank Brennan and E. J. Ward. Not many would have given him much of a chance of winning back into the Labor fold the New South Wales Labor Party, which had broken away under Lang, and of pursuing at the same time the big issues which interested Curtin.

Individual attributes of strength in Curtin are found in one or other of his predecessors or successors as Labor leaders. What is unique is his combination of so many strengths and interests. I believe that he alone had a peculiar ability to communicate with the electorate through an unfriendly press by constant, simple, positive statement. The burden of an unfriendly press is taken by most Labor leaders as something to be expected every day, like the sunrise. It is an occupational hazard. On the other side of politics, when Bruce and Menzies lost their hitherto sustained press support in the elections of 1929 and 1943 respectively, they crashed badly. Curtin had to win the middle-class and the farmers and unify the Labor movement without any press support at all.

Curtin resembled Scullin in his sensitivity and careful attention to detail. He resembled Charlton in his concern for the ordinary man. 'The first generation of Western Australian wheat growers', he told a young man, 'broke their backs. The second generation broke their hearts. The third may enter the promised
This summary of suffering and hope in a Western Australian industry is perfectly concise and perfectly accurate and it is the product of observation and thought about the battler in the wheat belt whose plight had always engaged Curtin's sympathy. Curtin resembled Chifley in his application and in his grasp of detail. He had Fisher's concern for the dignity of the wage-earner, but not Fisher's dourness. He was without doubt the deepest thinker of any of Labor's leaders on the issues of defence and foreign policy. He resembled Watson, the first leader, in his range of activity in the Labor movement and in his careful journalistic presentation of a case. He was very different from Watson, however, in his concept of Australia as a nation and not a colony. This concept of nationhood he shared with Dr Evatt, but his approach to foreign affairs was more pragmatic and broader than that of Evatt, in that he took into consideration more intensely strategic factors and the realities of military power.

Curtin was unlike all other Labor leaders in his gauging of the limits of consent of public opinion.

Curtin is atypical because he was so versatile in all these political skills. He became, therefore, the only Federal Labor leader so far to have set the Party on to a long term of office.
It would be fair to say that Curtin revolutionised the foreign policy, defence policy, financial and banking policy of Australia and of the Labor Party. This is not to say that every new idea presented by him in these fields was exclusively his, though some of the most significant ideas undoubtedly were. It is simply to say that he led a government which was brought to power by his political skill and sensitivity, and it was a government more dependent on the ideas and the electoral prestige of its leader than any before it.

A Force for Unity
The most distinctive feature of Curtin's career as a Labor leader was his ability to sense sentiment in the Labor movement, even though he was prepared to cut across it if he believed it was wrong (as over the question of the National Register in June 1939). He unified that sentiment usually by a defined and principled moral stand. The minutes of the meeting of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party on 15 June 1939 give a very clear instance of this, and they will be referred to later. With this ability to sense and unify sentiment in the Labor movement was coupled his ability to sense and unify public opinion. The fruit of this was the massive landslide to Labor in the elections of 1943; but the roots of it lay in the trend of the working class vote, and then the middle class vote, back to Labor after 1935—that is, after Curtin assumed the leadership.

It is not adequate, though it is a partial truth, to attribute the trend to national unity behind Labor from 1941 to 1943 simply to the war. In that time Curtin made conscription of manpower and conscription for military service a national policy. W. M.
Hughes, as a Labor Prime Minister, had also governed the nation in a war, but his abrasiveness had wrecked the unity of the Labor movement and divided the nation on the conscription issue. Curtin assumed leadership of the Parliamentary Labor Party by a majority of one vote on 1 October 1935. His career of nearly ten years leadership is still the longest term for an Australian Federal Labor leader. It was a time when the Labor Party was split by the secession of the New South Wales Labor Party—the secession, in effect, of historically the strongest Labor State. The Labor Party (N.S.W.) was led by J. A. Beasley and it mostly held the initiative on the floor of the House. Curtin's career thus began with a divided Party, and he set about unifying it. In this respect his experience is the opposite of Hughes and Evatt, who began leadership with a unified movement and led a split in Hughes's case, or witnessed a significant secession in Evatt's. This statement is not, at the moment, intended to attribute responsibility. It is simply to state a fact.

Labor Rarely in Power

Federal Labor has had eleven leaders—Watson, Fisher, Hughes, Tudor, Charlton, Scullin, Curtin, Chifley, Evatt, Calwell, and Whitlam. Of these, six have been Prime Ministers—Watson, Fisher, Hughes, Scullin, Curtin, and Chifley. The first three Labor leaders had become Prime Ministers in the first sixteen years of Federation. Of the next eight leaders three have been Prime Ministers whose terms of office have been spread over a period of fifty-five years, and their Prime Ministerships aggregate not much more than a decade within those fifty-five years.

By the outbreak of World War I it appeared that Labor would be the normal government of the country.

After World War II Labor had held the Treasury benches for only four years out of twenty-six. Of the present Parliament only Mr Calwell on the Labor side has ever been a Minister, and in the House of Representatives only five Labor members have sat behind a Labor Government.

Curtin launched the Labor Party on its longest experience of office—power continuously for eight years.

Fisher and Curtin were responsible for the two creative periods of Federal Labor, and no adequate biography of either has yet appeared. Both experienced office in war time, Curtin alone,
of all Labor leaders who have been Prime Minister, never experiencing office in time of peace. In Fisher's third term of office, 1914-15, the war was remote from Australia's shores in Europe and the Middle East. In Curtin's term of office the country believed it was facing possible invasion. Fisher gave up office to take up the High Commissionership in London—a disastrous decision for the Labor Party, for it let in Hughes, who wrecked the Party almost within one year by his handling of the conscription issue.

Curtin continued in office as a wartime Prime Minister till his death at the age of 60 in 1945, and he left the Party more united than at any other time in its history.

A Man of His Generation
Curtin, the seventh Labor leader, was born in 1885, only eighteen years after the first Labor leader, J. C. Watson, who was born in 1867. Watson became Labor leader at the age of 34, Curtin at 50. When he became leader, Curtin had less than ten years to live.

Curtin was the son of an Irish police sergeant. He left school at the age of 13. In his time responsible young men were studious despite inadequate educational backgrounds. He was one such young man. Night school was a vital component in the education of Scullin and Chifley, but action, discussion, and reading in the Labor movement seems to have been the educational experience of Curtin and Watson. Before First World War I the Labor movement provided more informal education and more social association than it does for the Labor supporter today.

Curtin's thinking was influenced by Frank Anstey, a radical Labor member of the Victorian Parliament and for over twenty-five years a member of the Federal Parliament.*

Anstey was a sceptical, rationalistic, self-taught intellectual, a brilliant though not always a grammatical speaker, and a man who sought to understand finance as the key to social change and

* Dr Lloyd Ross dealt last year with Curtin's friendship with Anstey. Hughes used an old letter of Anstey's, quoting a part of it out of context, as the basis for a sedition charge against Anstey. Anstey fled the country. Hughes had him detained by Scotland Yard in Britain. When Hughes went to sea himself en route to Britain, the Acting-Prime Minister, W. A. Watt, requested Scotland Yard to release Anstey. A prosecution for sedition was also initiated against Curtin in connection with the conscription campaign. He was fined, not imprisoned.
incidentally, as the ground of his criticism within the Party of men like Fisher and Theodore. Anstey's deficiencies of educational background led him easily to a 'plot' theory of finance, expressed in a lurid pamphlet *The Kingdom of Shylock.* In its incipient anti-Semitism it might have found a place among milder Nazi publications. He was a critic of Fisher and Theodore, but Fisher's contributions to financial practice and Theodore's to financial theory leave Anstey for dead. Theodore was the first Keynesian in Australian public life. Curtin was the first Prime Minister to apply Keynesian theory and he amended Fisher's Commonwealth Bank Act to give power to the Bank to act in accordance with Keynesian principles, and to assume responsibility for maintaining full employment, a Keynesian objective.

**Timing, and the Art of the Possible**

Curtin thus built on Fisher and Theodore. It is also clear that he deliberately rejected Chifley's later policy of nationalisation of banking, and he did so because of his assessment of what the public would accept. Chifley tested out Curtin's assessment and verified its correctness by defeat in 1949 and again in 1951. Curtin's 1945 Bank Act was politically challenged after his death in the elections of 1946, and Chifley was easily returned on Curtin's Banking legislation, and subsequently defeated on his own.

At the meeting of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party of 19 February 1945, the Curtin Government's banking legislation was introduced to the Party by Chifley, as Treasurer. The failure of the Scullin Government's financial proposals to pass an anti-Labor Senate some twelve years earlier, and the failure of the Commonwealth Bank Board in 1931-2 to co-operate with that Government's proposals, constituted the embittering experience underlying the determination of both Chifley and Curtin to reform the banking system in 1945, when Labor had a majority in both Houses. The changes were embodied in the Commonwealth Bank Act 1945 (No. 13 of 1945) and the Banking Act (No. 14 of 1945). Commenting in the House on 9 March 1945 Chifley said, 'It is the Government's view that a government bank should participate in active competition with the private banks.'
The legislation gave the Treasurer final authority over the Commonwealth Bank. It provided for the continuance in peacetime of wartime banking controls, especially the system of 'special accounts' whereby all or part of a private bank's increase in resources might be frozen in a compulsory special deposit in the Central Bank. The Commonwealth Bank could also determine the general advance policy to be followed by private banks. The Commonwealth Bank was given the power of compulsory purchase of foreign currency from the private banks, for financing Australia's overseas obligations for imports and for interest. The Commonwealth Bank was given power, with the approval of the Treasurer, to make regulations controlling rates of interest on private bank advances, private bank deposits, and rates of discount chargeable by private banks, or by any person, in the course of banking business.

After Curtin's electoral defeat in 1931—he had been elected on the pro-Labor wave of 1929—he had spent a year studying finance, and prior to re-election in 1934 he had been advocate for Western Australia on the Commonwealth Grants Commission. The legislation was in part the fruit of this research and in part the fruit of Chifley's experience on the Royal Commission on Banking. It was Curtin, however, who accurately defined in practice the acceptable limits of a radical financial policy. When Curtin originally took office there were still hundreds of thousands of unemployed. A fear of unemployment was a factor in the thoughts of all servicemen who awaited demobilisation after the war. The objective of full employment was an election winner as well as an intrinsic part of the Keynesian financial credo. Treasury authority over the banking system was now acceptable to the public. The debate in the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party showed, however, that Curtin thought that nationalisation of banking was not acceptable to public opinion.

When the Banking Bills of 1945 were submitted to the Party meeting with the recommendation 'that the bills dealing with the Banking legislation be introduced into the House', T. P. Burke, the Member for Perth, moved as an amendment 'That the present Bills be withdrawn and a Bill introduced giving the Government power to acquire the business and assets of the private Banks as a going concern.'

This was to be part of what Chifley himself was to propose in
1947, but on this occasion Chifley said nothing. Burke, in the course of his remarks to Caucus, reminded Curtin of a brilliant speech advocating the nationalisation of banking which Curtin had made at St Mary's Hall, West Leederville (W.A.) in 1931. Curtin commented drily, 'Yes Tom. I remember that speech. I also remember that that year I lost my seat.'

Clarity of Decision
Curtin's ability to choose the politically defensible position was exhibited before the outbreak of war and before he became Prime Minister on an issue which could have wrecked the Labor Party.

In the six months before the war the United Australia Party Government provided for a National Register preparatory to the rational use of manpower in event of war, and possibly preparatory to conscription.

The National Register was actively opposed by the Communist Party and subsequently the ACTU opposed the relevant legislation.

The minutes of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party for 15 June 1939 show Curtin's handling of the issue. The Parliamentary Party had set up a body for Trade Union consultation with the Parliamentary Party, the Labor Advisory Committee. In this excerpt from the minutes the Mr Crofts referred to was Charles Crofts, Secretary of the ACTU.

The minutes read:

The leader Mr. Curtin, reported that a meeting of the Labor Advisory Committee was held at Canberra last Friday, June 9th. The meeting had been called as the result of a letter having been received by the Secretary of the Party on June 8th from the Secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions enclosing resolutions carried at a meeting of the full Executive of the ACTU held on May 21-23, 1939.

The letter from Mr. Crofts intimated that the decisions of the ACTU on the National Registration and Supply and Development Bills were forwarded to the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party with two requests:

(1) That all Federal Labor members should pledge themselves not to fill in the information as laid down in the National Registration Bill.

(2) That the Party be requested to assist the Trade Union Movement in its efforts to defeat the National Register Act.
Mr. Curtin said that he had ruled that no members of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party should give a pledge to any organisation of any sort or description, other than the pledge specified in the platform and constitution of the Party and which the member had signed as a candidate for selection by the ALP. There could be no other obligations entertained. He emphasized that the Party's constitution and platform prescribed that the Party was a constitutional Party and that changes in the laws were to be effected in accordance with the procedures set out in the platform.

He had told the Advisory Committee that any request which he might receive as a member of the Party would be referred to the State Executive of Western Australia which was the only body to which he was competent to give a pledge; and he felt that as the matter was a Federal one that the Western Australian Executive in the nature of things would be obliged to refer the request to the Federal Executive.

'I told the Committee,' said Mr. Curtin, 'That it was treading dangerous soil to lay down a policy of revolt against a law. You ask us in effect to set ourselves up as a non-law observing Party and thereby encourage the setting up of another “New Guard”. I would not allow bankers or the Chamber of Manufactures to disobey the law were a Labor Government in power.'

After citing the motions which had been submitted by the ACTU Committee Mr. Curtin said that he had also directed attention to the resolution which provided that meetings should be called under the direction of the Trades Councils in the various States. He said that this course could not be followed as the resolutions framed in such circumstances could be of a character which would not conform to the platform of the Party and that meetings held in this connection should be controlled by the State Executive of the States, which was the organization to which members of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party had given their pledge . . . .

The reporting of this statement in detail in the minutes is symptomatic of the importance the ruling was believed to have. The direct quotation in inverted commas in the minutes from Curtin's speech is most unusual for those minutes, and must have been inserted to strengthen the ruling and to emphasise his personal responsibility.

It is a very good example of Curtin's clarity of mind. It sets out the constitutional position with great precision. It characterises clearly the dangerous nature of revolt against the law the ACTU was advocating. As a constitutional party the Parliamentary Labor Party could have nothing to do with the proposal. By making the statement a ruling from the Chair Curtin took all the pressure of the ACTU upon himself and set all members
free from that pressure. What is more, the UAP government was deprived of electoral ammunition and the public knew exactly where the Labor Party stood. It is clearly part of the build up towards the ALP's distinct electoral gain in the Federal election of 1940.

**Early Action**

Curtin's administrative apprenticeship was as the Secretary of the Victorian Timber Workers' Union from 1911 to 1915. Perhaps more important as an experience in trade union affairs was his membership of the Trades Hall Council's Disputes Committee. He first appears on the records of Federal Labor as the sender of a telegram to the Federal Conference of the ALP in Adelaide in 1915—the last Conference to bask in success, and unity and public acceptance for some thirty years. The telegram asked why, since Federal Labor controlled both Houses of the Federal Parliament and five of the six States, there was no price control. The answer, if any, is not recorded. Hughes was Attorney-General and his interests were to attain the Prime Ministership and to decide the issues of the battlefield. The story of the prices and inflation in World War I is utterly disastrous, and the runaway of the cost of living caused great hardship. The price control of World War II was by contrast most efficient, reflecting that Curtin's interest as a man of 30 continued twenty-six years later.

**Parliamentary Manner**

There is a tendency in some quarters to believe that a man who venomously attacks his opponents is a stout Party fighter. This is almost totally incorrect, for most men who show rancour in the House show it within the Party as well. E. J. Ward, for instance, who attacked Labor's opponents with great animus in the House, also once helped to bring a Labor government down, and was noteworthy for his personal attacks on Curtin. Some men use personalities without malice, as did Mr Calwell when he referred to the front bench opposite as 'a gibbering array of pathological exhibits'. Curtin seemed incapable of personalities of any kind, and that was certainly a factor in his ability to unify the Party.*

* Yet under severe provocation he complained in the House that a member had "the voice of a bull and the mentality of a troglodyte"!
He was himself viciously attacked. He never struck back. There was never anybody sitting behind him nursing wounds or, for that matter, no casualties of his tongue sitting opposite either. As Editor of The Westralian Worker for a decade after 1916 he was scrupulously analytical and fair. An article he wrote on Sir John Latham's efforts at a disarmament conference was a model in this respect. When J. C. Watson, Labor's first leader, died in November 1941, Curtin stopped the proceedings of Caucus to pay tribute to him. Watson had left the Labor Party on the conscription issue—expelled in fact—at a time (1916) when Curtin was Victorian Secretary of the Anti-Conscription League.

Yet Curtin's appreciation of Watson was warm and is enshrined in the minutes in this tribute to an expelled man. If Watson's was an expulsion for departure to the political 'right', Maurice Blackburn's expulsion a generation later was for a departure to the political left. Blackburn nearly brought down Curtin's government on the conscription issue in the very darkest days of the war, but Curtin's friendship was unaffected.

This ought to be usual in politics, but it is not. Curtin was a civilising influence in Australian politics. He is like a figure from the first decade of federation—the era of Fisher, Deakin, Barton, Watson, and Higgins. Hughes, characterised in a famous remark by Deakin as 'like an ill-bred urchin dragged screaming and kicking from the tart shop', was the most notable exponent of vituperation in the Federal Parliament's first decade. Hughes also injected into Australian politics, where it remains today, its special characteristic of malice—the vague and nasty accusations that those opposed to you are somehow guilty of treason. This is almost invariably used against the Labor Party. The attacks on Whitlam on the subject of his China visit are recent examples. E. J. Ward, however, turned the tables by his so-called 'Brisbane Line' story—the 'treason' charge that the UAP Government intended to abandon North Australia to the Japanese. Curtin, to Ward's annoyance, repudiated the charge, and finally went to the lengths of appointing a Royal Commission to examine an allegation that relevant Defence Department files were missing. It was a squalid distraction from the tasks of war, an unnecessary burden, and an intrusion into Curtin's own portfolio of Defence, since Ward's allegations concerned documents allegedly belonging to the Defence Department.
Curtin gave to Menzies the grace of denial, and to Ward the opportunity to prove allegations that the 'revelation' would be demonstrated by documents missing from the Defence files. He was not able to do so. There were no missing documents.

There was no evasion by Curtin of the facts relating to how the Brisbane line story began. Since Menzies had fallen in August 1941 and Fadden's Government fell in October 1941, it would have been surprising if Japan had been a concern of theirs to the point of detailed military planning, for Japan did not enter the war until December 1941. Australia was not noted for alert government. Curtin set the facts of the Brisbane line out in a letter to Fadden.

The facts are that Sir Iven Mackay was appointed Commander-in-Chief, Home Forces, by the Menzies Government. On Japan entering the war the Commander-in-Chief Home Forces, submitted to the Minister for the Army proposals relating to the defence of Australia. . . . This involved holding what is known as the Brisbane line. The Government rejected the submission.

The operative words are 'on Japan entering the war'. This means after Pearl Harbour. It means that the Brisbane line suggestion was made to the Curtin Government, was not part of the plans of any government, and was specifically rejected by Curtin.

The episode forced an early election. Curtin was worried at the effect of the whole affair on public opinion, for Coles and Wilson, the independents upon whom Curtin relied for his majority, were unfavourably impressed. Curtin's openness about it, however, nullified any adverse electoral impression and the General Election of August 1943 was a Labor landslide.

Curtin made a similar clear-cut decision about the action of another stormy petrel. The Labor member concerned was a strong opponent of conscription. In the course of his campaign against this he made a personal attack on Curtin, declaring that Curtin would finish up on the other side (the anti-Labor side) leading a National Government.

At the Party meeting of 24 March 1943 Curtin left the chair and F. M. Forde replaced him. Forde read a letter from Curtin.

Dear Mr Forde,

In view of the accusation made against me . . . i.e. 'that I will finish up on the other side (the anti-Labor side) leading a National
Government', I invite the Party either to dissociate itself from the accusation or appoint another leader. Obviously if the charge has a semblance of justification, the Party is in an invidious position, entrusting its leadership to a potential traitor.

Yours faithfully,
John Curtin

The minutes go on to record that the member concerned . . . withdrew the statement he had made and expressed regret for what had occurred. Senator Cunningham moved 'That this Party has complete confidence in our leader Mr Curtin'. Seconded Mr Connellan. On being put to the meeting it was carried unanimously.

The episode illustrates that, under attack, Curtin did not resort to counter-accusation. He noted the charge made against himself. He drew out the full implications of the charge. He asked the Caucus to act according to its beliefs as to the merits of the charge. It is noteworthy that this action produced an apology and enhanced unity. He was constantly the target of abuse but never the source of it.

He stated his philosophy in this regard at the Federal Labor Conference of November 1942, called to consider the conscription issue, presented as an extension of compulsory military service in a defined area beyond the Commonwealth and its Territories.

Curtin had moved that

the Government be authorised to add to the Defence Act, in the definition of the Commonwealth which at present defines the Territories to which this Defence Act extends the following words 'and such other Territories in the South West Pacific Area as the Governor-General proclaims as being Territories associated with the defence of Australia'.

He was strongly and personally attacked by Senator Donald Cameron, the Minister for Aircraft Production, who felt that there was a case for the limits of conscription to be extended to New Guinea but not to Timor. His reflections on Curtin were of an extremely wounding character. The Victorian ALP, which Cameron represented, was militantly opposed to the proposal.

Curtin replied:

Rabaul is farther from the Australian mainland than Timor. It is not possible for me to be a good Labor man when I conscript men for Rabaul and New Guinea and to become a suspect Labor man for
doing the same thing in respect of Timor. As both places are vital to the one strategy of the one cause there can only be one policy. The strictures of the Minister for Aircraft Production upon myself make me unhappy, but what is irrelevant can be endured.

Here again there is no counter abuse. The illogic of Cameron's position is exposed, the personal attitude declared irrelevant. Curtin argued what was right, not who was right. He threw a mantle of unity over contending personalities because he stood for issues bigger than himself and them.

The Bigger Issues

The clarity of his thinking and precision of his action were demonstrated in more important fields than Caucus and Conference, however, as is implicit, indeed, in his references to Timor and Rabaul, just quoted.

He pitted his view of what was strategically sound against Churchill himself—a bold attitude of mind when one considers how dominant in Allied strategy Churchill was.*

Curtin's greatest crisis month was probably the month of February 1942.

Against Churchill's wishes, Curtin had recalled the Australian divisions from the Middle East to face the new threat of Japan. When these divisions were in the process of recall on Orient liners, on 20 February, Churchill cabled Curtin to suggest that the 7th Division A.I.F. should be diverted to Burma to resist the Japanese invasion. In anticipation of Curtin's consent, Churchill ordered the convoy carrying the nearest brigade to steam for Burma.

It was estimated it would arrive on 27 February. On 22 February Curtin cabled Churchill a refusal, contending that the movement of Australian forces to Burma was not a reasonable hazard of war. He drew Churchill's attention to Australian losses earlier in the war in Greece and more recently in Malaya because of defective air power, and he drew attention to Japanese air superiority in the Bay of Bengal.

Churchill was determined. He replied that part of the 7th

* It should be remembered that on Churchill's mind was the whole war; on Curtin's the narrower question of the defence of Australia. Churchill acknowledged later that concentration on a narrower field might, within that field, lead to a sounder judgment.
division had already been diverted towards Burma, temporarily, and that this fact would give the Australian Government a chance to reconsider its decision!

On 23 February Curtin cabled his reply:

Java faces imminent invasion. Australia's outer defences are now quickly vanishing, and our vulnerability is now completely exposed. With A.I.F. troops we sought to save Mayala and Singapore, falling back on the Netherlands East Indies. All these northern defences are gone or going. Now you contemplate using the A.I.F. to save Burma. All this has been done, as in Greece, without adequate air support. We feel a primary obligation to save Australia, not only for itself, but to preserve it as a base for the development of the war against Japan. In the circumstances it is quite impossible to reverse a decision which we made with the utmost care.

At this stage Curtin's government was represented abroad by three political opponents, all of whom Curtin valued as men, and one of whom has attacked this decision.

The opponents were S. M. Bruce, High Commissioner in London; R. G. Casey, Ambassador in Washington; and Sir Earle Page, Australian representative in the War Cabinet in London. Page had been travelling to London to represent the Fadden Government when it fell. Curtin asked him to carry on.

Page in his book *Truant Surgeon*, published posthumously, assumes throughout that the Australian divisions could have saved Burma. It is perhaps a tribute to the dominating influence of Churchill in the Imperial War Cabinet that Page had this attitude, but nowhere in the book does he quote Curtin's vital cable or attempt to refute the argument derived from dominant Japanese air power. Page assumes, quite gratuitously, that the troops would have reached Burma. Page finally assumes that historians will vindicate his judgment as against Curtin's.*

This has not so far proven to be the case, and it seems likely that Churchill concealed from Page the view of the British commander in Burma, as he certainly concealed it from Curtin.

The official British history of *The War against Japan* vindicates Curtin, not Page. The series of histories is published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Volume II, by Major-General

* The Japanese diverted their main thrust to India. Churchill's strategic conception was sound, but all the evidence suggests disaster would have overtaken the convoy at sea or the Seventh Division on land.
S. Woodburn Kirby and others, is sub-titled 'India's Most Dangerous Hour'. Published after full access to documents and records it refers to the views of the British commander in Burma, Lieutenant-General T. J. Hutton, in these terms:

When the diversion of the 7th Australian Division was mooted Hutton refused to indulge in wishful thinking. He warned the authorities that to send large convoys to Rangoon at that late hour was to incur a very considerable risk, for the enemy air force was well established at very short range, and the air defence, even before the air battles of February 25-26, was very slender. Nevertheless, he signified that he was prepared to hold Rangoon till their arrival though he could not promise that the presence of part or all of the Australian divisions would in fact change the course of events at the last moment, for he was certain that Rangoon could not be held. In this he was correct, for the last minute arrival of an Australian division could have affected the situation no more than the arrival of the 18th Division did at Singapore.

Page's criticism is based on the assumption that the only consideration in Curtin's mind was that the 7th Division should reach Australia for Australia's own defence. President Roosevelt was offering an American division to replace the 7th Division in Australia. That is not the point. The point is the likely destruction of the 7th Division at sea.

Curtin had had an object lesson in air power very recently. On 15 February, a week before Curtin's exchange of cables with Churchill, the United States cruiser Houston, the U.S. destroyer Peary, the Australian sloops Swan and Warrego, two American and two Australian troop transports left Darwin at night for Timor. On board the transports were the 2/4th Australian Pioneer Battalion and the 148th U.S. Field Artillery Regiment's 49th Battalion. They were to reinforce in Timor a largely Australian garrison and 400 Dutch troops, which, with a squadron of RAAF Husdens and a battery of Australian coast artillery had been sent to Timor by Curtin on 17 December 1941, ten days after Pearl Harbour.

The convoy was detected by a Japanese sea plane and shadowed. The Japanese had developed a strong naval air base at Kendari in the Gulf of Tomini in the Celebes, Netherlands East Indies.

On 17 February thirty-five Japanese bombers attacked the convoy. It escaped by extraordinary good fortune, but General
Wavell, the British commander in India, who exercised supreme command at this time over all Allied forces in South and South East Asia, considered that the risk to the Darwin-Timor convoy was too great. He ordered its return to Darwin, where it arrived on 18 February. Obviously Wavell’s considerations of the folly of an approach to Timor unsupported by air power were equally valid as indications against an approach to Burma unsupported by air power. The Orient liners would have been sitting ducks.*

The assessment of Lieutenant-General T. J. Hutton that the arrival of an Australian Division would not save Rangoon and that the convoy carrying them would be in grave peril was not conveyed by Churchill to Curtin. Instead he sent to Curtin an appeal of the Governor of Burma, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, for Australian troops. The whole proceeding savours of sharp practice.†

A formidable body of evidence had been built up of the power of air attack on unready warships, or warships without adequate air cover, during the current war. On 11 November 1940, aircraft from the British aircraft carriers *Eagle* and *Illustrious* sank three Italian battleships in Taranto harbour, for the price of the loss of only two aircraft. The devastating effect of air attack on the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941 needs no emphasis. On 10 December 1941 the British capital ships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, despite their powerful anti-aircraft batteries, were sunk by air attack off Malaya when they ventured near to air bases without air cover.

In the last peace-time Federal election Curtin, in his policy speech in Fremantle Town Hall on 20 September 1937, had declared himself an apostle of air power. After having said he would maintain the Australian Navy, he had gone on to say,

In recent years the character of modern warfare has changed remarkably. The development of aerial services has effected a complete revolution not only in having brought communities closer together in point of time but also in endangering the civil population in time of war to an extent without precedent in history. It is foolish to say that Australia can sustain a sea going navy adequate to Australia’s

* Wavell favoured the diversion of Australian forces to Burma, however.
† Curtin had to complain to Page on 26 February that he was not adopting the Australian point of view. Page was not like Bruce and Casey, a civil servant, but an Opposition member.
needs. Australia's expenditure on defences which are within Aus­
tralia's ability to sustain should be on those forms of defence which
have become increasingly important and which are within our
capacity to provide, while at the same time ensuring at least an
approximate equality with the forces an enemy could employ against
us.
The strength of Australian defence must be in aviation.

Curtin went on to point out that the Lyons Government had
ninety-six aircraft, 'while there is not far away from us a power
equipped with a sea-borne plane strength of not less than 300
planes.'

He was, of course, referring to Japan. He went on to argue that
for a capital outlay of £7,500,000 Australia could have an aerial fleet
of 25 squadrons or 300 planes. Ships of the Australian navy which
cost double that have been towed out to sea and sunk as obsolete.
Twenty-five squadrons equals the existing sea-borne planes of any
nation which could be regarded as a potential danger to the Com-
monwealth.

If we cannot afford, as we cannot, a floating navy equal to that of a
world power, it is yet within our means to sustain an aerial fleet
equal to any that can be brought against us.

Aerial defence represents one of the features of the Australian
defence services which the Labor Party will develop and strengthen
to the utmost efficiency.

In this systematic thinking on defence Curtin is unlike any
other Labor leader except perhaps Hughes. His conception of
Australian self-reliance in defence is more developed than
Hughes's.

In 1914 Fisher had handed over the Royal Australian Navy to
the Admiralty, and thereafter the Australian and New Zealand
Governments passed through anxious moments about the
adequacy of escorts for the original Anzacs. At certain times the
action of these governments was a gamble with the lives of their
troops, and New Zealand Ministers had considered resignation
on the escort question.

Fisher was a cautious man but he had not possessed a highly
developed sense of his right to a judgment independent of that
of the British Admiralty.

Curtin's conception of air power, expressed originally in the
1937 policy speech, led him to a correct estimate of the dangerous
gamble intended by Churchill in the Bay of Bengal, and his sense
of independence led him to resist Churchill. The foresight of 1937 had not won him the election, though he gained seats. Nor did all his defence thinking show foresight. In his 1940 policy speech he announced that the Labor Party was opposed to petrol rationing. As Prime Minister he was to find it impossible to wage war while the country motored as usual. He may have correctly gauged air power, but he underestimated the effect of Japanese and German submarine warfare. Petrol and oil, because of this warfare, became known as 'sailor's blood'.

Foreign Policy

Two factors successively deprived Australian Labor of a foreign policy. Initially it was loyalty to Britain expressed in the assumption that foreign policy was exclusively the prerogative of British statesmen.

J. C. Watson had held this view during the Boer War. In his speeches he contended peace and war were questions for the British Government.

Fisher and Pearce had been content at the Imperial Conference of 1911 to hear British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey inform them they might be consulted on foreign policy issues 'when time and place and subject matter permit'.

The Federal Conference of the Labor Party in 1918 came out with a thoroughly unpopular but thoroughly sound foreign policy for peace as part of its revolt against W. M. Hughes and all he stood for. It was in favour of a League of Nations, for the freedom of the seas, for self-determination of Poland, Belgium, and Ireland, and critical of commercial and dynastic rivalry.

Labor then relapsed into total isolation until 1937. In 1935 F. M. Forde, caretaker leader before Curtin's election as leader, had moved in Caucus a dramatic 'non-participation' resolution against any Australian action in respect of sanctions or collective action against Italy in the war in Ethiopia.

Curtin had become a member of the League of Nations Union in Western Australia in the early 1920s. In 1928, as editor of The Westralian Worker, he wrote a defence of President Wilson's Fourteen Points as the basis of peace in 1918 and denounced the betrayal of this responsible lead given by the U.S. President.
'Clearly,' he wrote, 'both sides bound themselves . . . by the terms of the Fourteen Points. It was not Wilson who broke the pact, but Lloyd George and Clemenceau . . .

'The source of civilization's disaster is to be traced to the precipitancy with which Lloyd George forced the Khaki election immediately after the Armistice was signed. To exploit the political passion of the electorates for his "coupon" candidates the British Prime Minister dragged the Fourteen Points from their pedestal of a moral charter for all nations, to the coalition gutter where demagoguery spat upon them as the price of mob votes.'

This was an unusual approach for any Australian politician in 1928.

'Free of Any Pangs'

There is a tendency to comment upon Curtin's New Year message of 1942 as a break with Australian tradition—I mean the celebrated passage about 'looking to America'.

Yet the truth is that Australian leaders had been talking one way and making assumptions another for years, and their assumptions were, in fact, the assumptions underlying Curtin's New Year message.

J. M. McCarthy in his study 'Australia and Imperial Defence; Cooperation and Conflict 1918-1939' in *The Australian Journal of Politics and History* for April 1971 refers to a report of the United Kingdom High Commissioner in Canberra to his Government that Lyons expected no help to come from the United Kingdom in event of war. The report is dated 28 November 1938. Vainly hoping for supplies from Britain, Australia had rejected American aircraft in 1935, but began to seek them in September 1938.

Curtin's revolutionary statement was simply an articulation of the truth everybody in government after 1936 should have known:

The Australian Government therefore regards the Pacific struggle as primarily one in which the United States and Australia must have the fullest say in the direction of the democracies' fighting plan. Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom. We know the problems the United Kingdom faces. We know the constant threat of invasion.
We know the dangers of dispersal of strength. But we know, too, that Australia can go and Britain can still hold on. We are therefore determined that Australia shall not go . . . .

It is arguable that the passage 'free from any pangs as to our traditional links of kinship' was unnecessary. It was probably a shock necessary for Australia after generations of false expectation and false comment. Hughes, for instance, had been privately furious with Lloyd George for seeking to involve Australia in war with Turkey over the Chanak question in 1922, and sets out his criticisms in his book *The Splendid Adventure* published in 1928. But in the House in 1922 he had declared that Kemal Ataturk aimed to seize the Suez Canal as the front door to Australia, and probably rouse the Moslems of India. Hughes himself set out to rouse the RSL for another crack at the Dardanelles. This speciousness in making British politicians and their motives into a kind of Goddess Britannia, all-seeing, all-benevolent and all-powerful, paid off as conventional wisdom with the Australian electorate. As an illusion it needed to be abruptly dispelled. Curtin's method, and the timing of the moment to dispel it, were probably correct.

In his experience as Prime Minister Curtin had the disadvantage of a fairly weak cabinet, the advantage of a change in the Communist Party line, and, though he did not know it, the advantage of a change in Japanese strategy.

As to the Cabinet, Chifley, Dedman, Evatt, and J. A. Beasley were his strongest Ministers. Others were sound or adequate, but there was a long tail.

As to the Communist Party in those days, it is possible that millions were prepared to die for the Kremlin who had never been near Russia. This was shown, for instance, in partisan movements and resistance movements. The definitions current in the Communist Party were that an 'internationalist' was one who at all times and places and under all circumstances advanced the power, the policies, the influence, the interests and the prestige of the Soviet Union. Similarly, a socialist was defined by the Communist Party with identical words. These are, of course, definitions neither of a socialist nor internationalist, but of a Russian patriot. In accordance with these definitions the Communist Party
of Australia, after the Soviet entry into war because of Hitler’s attack, threw their influence against strikes. They were not particularly successful with the N.S.W. coalminers. Nevertheless this fact diminished some of Curtin’s burdens, though coal plagued him throughout the war.

As to Japanese strategy, the fact that General Yamashita, the Japanese conqueror of Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies, was not successful in persuading his government to attempt an invasion of Australia, that Government choosing instead to throw the weight of its army, navy, air force and ‘navy of supply’ at India and Burma, saved Australia from the ultimate stresses. It is probable that Japan would have met with a major disaster, for her lines of communication would have been very much exposed. However that may be, Curtin was spared this burden. The bitter campaign in New Guinea thus became strategically peripheral.

**Six Revolutions**

Curtin's government seems to me to have carried through six revolutions. I have mentioned Treasury authority over the Commonwealth Bank, the Keynesian doctrine of finance for public welfare, and revolutions in defence and foreign policy, which latter includes the development of the Department of External Affairs and the extension of Australian representation overseas.

A fifth revolution was in relation to unemployment.

Throughout the 1930s, for no better reason than party political propaganda, the Commonwealth Government spent its time resolutely refusing to find out the truth about unemployment. It wanted to leave primary responsibility to the States.

The only unemployment figure known to the Commonwealth officially was (in 1933) the ‘number of unemployed trade unionists reporting’ and in that year the number was 104,035. The census of the same year, however, revealed that the figure was 563,300—five and a half times as many. Happily, after the Census, the Commonwealth reverted to ‘the number of unemployed trade unionists reporting’ and in 1939 this figure was down to 45,967. The National Register of the same year, however, showed the number as 298,000.
War organisation under Curtin absorbed these. The Curtin Government adopted full employment as its objective and attained it. The objective was attained without a massive inflow of foreign capital, as is the case at present.

The sixth revolution was the change in attitude to immigration, to bear fruit under Mr Calwell, as Minister for Immigration, and his successors in that portfolio. The transformation of Labor's traditional reservations against immigration was in part a consequence of the success of the full employment policy.

**Personal Philosophy**

John Curtin, according to Mrs Elsie Curtin, his widow, who still lives in the family home, rated as major influences on his early life the great Socialist, Tom Mann; Jack Gunn (Labor Premier of South Australia); John Cain (later Labor Premier of Victoria); Frank Anstey M.P., at one time Deputy Leader of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party; and Frank Hyett, a notable figure in the Victorian Labor Party. Yet Curtin's mind was extremely flexible. E. J. Ward, for instance, could deliver two pronouncements on British foreign policy in relation to Nazi Germany and passionately regard them as both true. If Britain fought Nazi Germany it was because they were trade rivals. If Britain did not fight Nazi Germany it was because British Conservatives desired a Nazi triumph over Communism. Therefore nothing could be right. Frank Brennan could hold that the German conquest of Sudetenland, the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia, in 1938 was a beautiful example of self-determination. In the Labor movement, as in Conservative circles, it is not unusual to blame the victim, such as Tibet, or Czechoslovakia, for the prospect of facing the aggressor is frightening.

Curtin never displayed this psychological technique of evasion of the unpleasant.

Those early influences on Curtin are Rationalist influences. When Curtin stood against W. A. Watt for the Victorian seat of Balaclava in 1914 his name on the ballot paper was John Joseph Ambrose Curtin. The family now call the 'Joseph Ambrose' part 'Church names'—presumably Baptismal names—from his Catholic background.

A writer in *The Canberra Times* some years ago described
him as an atheist, but this is an incorrect description at any rate of his last years.

He found a faith through his association and friendship with the Reverend Hector Harrison, Presbyterian Minister of St Andrew’s Church, Canberra—a constant visitor to the Hotel Kurrajong where Curtin stayed in his Opposition years.

Curtin was Minister for Defence as well as Prime Minister. His secretary as Minister for Defence, Mr Fred McLaughlin, was associated with Moral Re-Armament and one simple piece of political advice he constantly gave to Curtin was to ‘argue what was right, not who was right’. Curtin in September 1942 made a broadcast calling ‘for the moral and spiritual rearmament of Australia’ to give backing to its physical rearmament. He was very struck with an MRA musical ‘Battle for Australia’, which he saw at Bryant’s Playhouse—a garden theatre then at 11 Parsley Road, Vaucluse, and run by Mrs Beryl Mayor, nee Bryant—and responding very much to its spiritual message he had the Parliamentary dining room turned into a theatre. In the presence of the Governor-General, the Cabinet, diplomats, and members of both Houses, the play was presented there.

He wrote to its producer, Ivan Menzies, the Gilbert and Sullivan star, suggesting it be filmed.

In 1944 Curtin, with Fred McLaughlin, had to make the then grim and risky flight across the Atlantic in a military plane. The 3,000 mile trip was then a doubtful matter if engine trouble occurred. ‘Well Fred, we are in the hands of the Almighty and dependent on the skill of this Australian crew’, he said. In his last illness he sent for McLaughlin, indicated he would try to battle through, but asked that, if he should die, the Reverend Hector Harrison should conduct the services in Canberra. This, Curtin made clear to McLaughlin, he meant as a testimony to his faith, and to his friendship with Hector Harrison.

The Curtin Government’s financial and social policy prepared the way for a quite different Australia from the Australia of the 1930s and pre-war, and laid the foundation of modern developments. Perhaps we should note, in this University, that through Mr Dedman and Dr Coombs the Curtin Government ‘laid the
keel' of the ANU, and hence began a University policy for the Commonwealth.

He was the most effective of the ten Labor leaders who have completed their careers as leaders. His motives were singularly free from rancour and his tongue singularly free from invective. He could unify. With a mind free from shibboleths—the blind adherence to anti-conscription and isolationism as dogmas and not as policies which might be suitable to a particular time, for instance—he was able to see the facts and to tailor his policies accordingly.

Democratic government involves the mobilisation of public consent to policies conceived to be for the public good.

He won that consent. Certainly the policies he pioneered seem to have been for the public good. By contrast, the policies of the thirties seem to be those of blind chance. They were characterised by drift in defence, drift in the economy, and neglect of people in unemployment. Curtin had argued at all times for intelligent, positive government and attracted public opinion to his ideas. He pulled into Ministerial or Parliamentary office some of his Party critics. They never had occasion to complain of him and received from him unfailing courtesy, but not the endorsement of what was wrong.

He brought to public life the traditions, the rationality, the breadth of vision and the good manners of Parliamentary life at its best. He was a rare man.