

national archives of australia



1941
-
1945

*... the leader of the government,
the leader of the nation ...*

john curtin

GUIDE TO ARCHIVES OF
AUSTRALIA'S PRIME MINISTERS

by David Black and Lesley Wallace

A National Archives of Australia and
John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library Joint Publication

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John Curtin

Guide to Archives of Australia's Prime Ministers

David Black and Lesley Wallace

*National Archives of Australia
and
John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library*

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Abbreviations

APC	Administrative Planning Committee
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
AFPAC	US Army Forces Pacific
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
AJA	Australian Journalists' Association
ALP	Australian Labor Party
AMF	Australian Military Force
ANU	Australian National University
AWM	Australian War Memorial
AWU	Australian Workers' Union
CBE	Commander of the Order of the British Empire
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CMF	Commonwealth Military Forces; also, Citizen Military Forces
ERA	Electronic Research Archive (JCPML)
HMAS	His Majesty's Australian Ship
HMB	His Majesty's Bark
HRH	His/Her Royal Highness
ILO	International Labour Organisation
JCPML	John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library
JP	Justice of the Peace
LWO	Labor Women's Organisation
MHR	Member of the House of Representatives
MML&A	MacArthur Memorial Library and Archives
MP	Member of Parliament
MRA	Moral Rearmament Association
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NFVLS	National Film and Video Lending Service
NLA	National Library of Australia
NSW	New South Wales
PM	Prime Minister
PWC	Prime Minister's War Conference
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
SA	South Australia
SCAP	Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers
SWPA	South-West Pacific Area
UAP	United Australia Party
UK	United Kingdom
UNCIO	United Nations Conference on International Organization
US/USA	United States/United States of America
USAFPAC	United States Army Forces Pacific
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
UWA	University of Western Australia
VSP	Victorian Socialist Party
WA	Western Australia
WAAF	Women's Auxiliary Air Force (UK)
WAAAF	Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force
WRANS	Women's Royal Australian Naval Service

Introduction



John and Elsie Curtin in the garden at The Lodge, 27 April 1945. JCPML00376/29.

In the darkest days of World War II John Curtin rose to become Australia's fourteenth prime minister. He led his country through extremely difficult times, which took a toll on his personal health. Today he is regarded as one of Australia's most successful leaders and a great hero.

John Curtin

John Curtin, the son of working-class Irish immigrants, was born in 1885 in Victoria. He grew up in an era of increasing social unrest, when

workers were beginning to assert their rights to decent pay and working conditions. His background, with its poverty and struggle, and the influence of socialists like Tom Mann and Frank Anstey led to Curtin's involvement in the Labour Movement and politics.

Curtin became prime minister on 7 October 1941 at a time when Australia had deployed most of its trained troops to defend Britain. On 7 December 1941 the Japanese attacked the American base at Pearl Harbor and war began in the Asia-Pacific area. As prime minister, Curtin then faced what no other Australian prime minister before or since has faced – enemy attacks on the Australian mainland and the possibility of invasion.

Curtin's subsequent actions changed the foreign policy of Australia and signalled a fundamental shift in the way Australians regarded themselves and their country's place in the world. The traditional allegiance of Australians to the British Empire shifted in the face of the practicalities of alliance with, and reliance upon, the United States in their battle for survival against the Japanese.

Curtin was not only a great wartime leader – he also formulated policies for Australia's postwar reconstruction, including planning for full employment, assisted immigration and improvements in social security. Under his leadership, the Australian Parliament passed landmark legislation, including an Act which established a uniform taxation scheme and removed the power of the states to collect income tax. His government also ratified British legislation establishing the independence of Dominion parliaments.

Curtin died in office on 5 July 1945, six weeks before the Japanese surrender and the return of peace and security to Australia.

Elsie Curtin

Elsie Curtin, wife of Prime Minister John Curtin, was the daughter of Abraham Needham, a Tasmanian union official and political associate of Curtin.

Elsie was a great support to Curtin, raising their children and handling the family's other domestic affairs. She was a lifelong champion of the Labor cause. In addition to assisting her husband with local electorate and electoral matters, especially when he was absent in Canberra, she played a very active role in the Labor Women's Organisation, becoming a life member of its Fremantle branch and serving as its state president between 1944 and 1946.

Over the years Elsie was involved in a variety of community activities, including serving on the Married Women's Court and acting as a visitor to Fremantle Prison. She was awarded life membership of a number of organisations, including the Perth Branch of the Association of Civilian Widows, the Royal Association of Justices and the Women's Justice Association. In 1970 she was made a Commander of the British Empire for 'services to the community' and for 'encouragement' to her husband during the years of World War II. She died on 24 June 1975 and is buried beside her husband in Karrakatta Cemetery.

A timeline of their lives appears at Appendix 1.

National Archives of Australia

The [National Archives of Australia](#) preserves and cares for a diverse archival collection documenting the relationship between the Australian Government and the Australian people – a rich resource for the study of Australian history, society and people.

The collection spans almost 200 years of Australian history. Its main focus is material documenting Australian government activities since Federation in 1901. The Archives has significant holdings of nineteenth-century records about functions transferred by the colonies to the Australian Government at the time of Federation and subsequently.

Access to the National Archives' collection is provided free of charge in public reading rooms located in each capital city. Researchers are assisted by specialist Archives reference staff and are provided with reference tools to help them identify and use the records in the collection. These reference tools include the [RecordSearch](#) and [PhotoSearch](#) databases, guides, publications and Fact Sheets. Researchers unable to visit a reading room may seek information and help by telephone, mail, facsimile or email.

The National Archives' website (www.naa.gov.au) provides more information about the Archives, its collection and the services it offers. A visit to the site will help you determine whether the Archives holds records relevant to your research.

John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library

The [John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library](#) (JCPML), located at the Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Western Australia, was established to honour Prime Minister John Curtin, whose inspirational leadership and political courage unified Australia during the darkest days of World War II.

The JCPML collection contains records about John Curtin and his family, including books, ephemera, objects, photographs, audio-visual material, and published and unpublished official records. A number of Curtin-related themes are also supported by the JCPML research collection, including Australia's relationship with the United States of America, foreign policy, postwar reconstruction, refugees and immigration, international trade and tariffs, the role of prime ministerial wives, and how government and the public service conducts itself.

The JCPML website (john.curtin.edu.au) provides researchers, teachers, students and members of the public with information about John Curtin and records held in the JCPML and in the collections of other archival institutions.

About this guide

This guide aims to make it easier for researchers to access records relating to John and Elsie Curtin in the National Archives, the JCPML and other collections. It is a companion publication to the National Archives' *Australia's Prime Ministers* website (primeministers.naa.gov.au).

The guide contains:

- basic biographical information about John and Elsie Curtin;
- descriptions of records created by John Curtin, including official records, correspondence and private papers; and records about him including photographs, memorabilia, oral histories, and films and other audiovisual material; and
- descriptions of records of, or about, Elsie Curtin.

This guide is comprehensive, but because the collection of the National Archives alone runs to an estimated 250 kilometres of records, only a proportion of records of likely interest to readers could be located and identified. Accordingly, the search has targeted the most significant sources of relevant material and is focused on public collections in Australia. Records held by the National Archives are listed first, followed by those held by the JCPML and then by those in other national collections, and finally by those held overseas.

Record descriptions

National Archives' records on John Curtin have been grouped under relevant headings, and within each section the descriptions of series and items are then organised chronologically as far as possible. The records on Elsie Curtin are not grouped under headings but are arranged chronologically as far as possible. Each entry in the guide describes a group of records maintained together as a series. A series consists of items, which are often individual files (sometimes volumes, sets of cards, photographs, etc), received into custody by the National Archives from a creating agency or person. Series usually consist of many items, but occasionally they may consist of just a few items or even a single item.

The description for each series gives its content and function. The entry concludes with a list of items selected from the series. In many instances, particular series have been found

to contain material relevant to several sections and these have been included in each section as appropriate. The full description of each series is given only on its first appearance. As a general rule, this guide identifies rather than analyses the records. Researchers should make their own assessment of the value of information in an item.

Records on John Curtin from the [John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library](#) are grouped under relevant headings and within each section series descriptions are arranged alphabetically by the creating agency or person. A similar approach is adopted for records held in other libraries and archives. These collections are arranged by location and then alphabetically by manuscript collection or chronologically, depending on the material.

A sample description of a [National Archives](#) record appears on the following page, while a sample description of a John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library record from the JCPML [Electronic Research Archive](#) (ERA) appears on page 11.



Prime Minister John Curtin addressing the press soon after his arrival in London for the Imperial Conference of Empire Prime Ministers, 1944. NAA: A5954, 661/12

①	LIBRARY MATERIAL, DEWEY DECIMAL NUMBER SERIES, 1911–62	A1203
②	Recorded by: 1911 Department of Home Affairs (I) (CA 8) 1911–62 Prime Minister's Department (CA 12)	
③	Quantity: 3.60 metres (Canberra)	
④	This series consists of various reports, ministerial statements and documents relating to matters as varied as immigration, taxation, royal commissions and international affairs. Some material in this series dates back to 1903. It includes records relating to the Royal Commission on Child Endowment or Family Allowances, on which John Curtin served as a commissioner.	
⑤	Report of the Royal Commission on Child Endowment or Family Allowances together with evidence, 1928	A1203, 362/7/AUS/1
⑥	This item contains correspondence relating to a letter from John Curtin in October 1927 to the commission regarding representation of parties to the commission by counsels. This item is digitised.	

Key

- ① This information gives the **series title** and the date range of the records that make up the series. The **series number** is shown on the upper right-hand side.
- ② This shows the **person** or **government agency** that created the series. It also shows the **date range** during which each series was **created** or **recorded**. This date range does not necessarily correspond to the **contents date range** of the records, which appears in the series title. The CP (Commonwealth person) and CA (Commonwealth agency) number are unique identifiers allocated by the Archives to each person or agency. These numbers can be used to retrieve more information about the person or agency, and the records they created, from the Archives' online database, [RecordSearch](#).
- ③ This shows the **total volume of records** in the series. The office of the National Archives at which they are held is shown in brackets. If copies of records are held in other locations, this is indicated here.
- ④ This is a **brief description** of the series.
- ⑤ This shows the **title given to the item by the person or agency that created it**. The dates of the earliest and latest document on the file are shown. The item's **identifying number** appears on the lower right-hand side of the description. This number **must be quoted** when requesting a copy of the record or access to it.
- ⑥ This describes the **main contents** of an item. Note that **it does not describe** every document on the file.

①	CURTIN FAMILY. PERSONAL CORRESPONDENCE, 1912-44	SER0206
②	Quantity: 44 items	
③	This series comprises mainly correspondence from John Curtin to Elsie Curtin (nee Needham).	
④	Letter from John Curtin to Elsie Needham, 24 August 1914	JCPML00402/5
⑤	Curtin writes to Elsie, who was then in South Africa, of his campaigning for election to the Victorian State seat of Balaclava 'Town Hall to Street-corner, to Sunday School Rooms & Cottage meetings'.	

Key

- ① Provides information about the **creator** of the records ('Curtin Family'), the **series title** ('Personal correspondence') and the **date range** of the records that make up the series. The **series identifier** is shown on the upper right-hand side. Please note that some JCPML series and item titles have been edited in this guide for the sake of brevity.
- ② Quantity information indicates the **extent** of the records in the series.
- ③ This is a brief description of the series.
- ④ Provides the **title** and **date** (or date range) of files or items in the series. The file or item identifier appears on the lower right-hand side. This identifier must be quoted when requesting a copy of the record or access to it.
- ⑤ This provides a **brief description** of the file or item.

Access to the records in the National Archives

Many series described in this guide are listed in [RecordSearch](#), the National Archives' online catalogue, which is available in the reading rooms of all offices of the Archives, at the Australian War Memorial and on the Archives' website (www.naa.gov.au). Indexes and inventories, available in reading rooms, may also be useful. Reference staff can assist researchers to use these lists.

Access to archival records is governed by the *Archives Act 1983*, which gives a right of access to most Commonwealth government records that are over 30 years old. Records over 30 years old are said to be in the *open period*. In rare instances, the government may release records less than 30 years old, under the accelerated release provisions of the Archives Act.

Some records are exempt from these access provisions (eg court records, some parliamentary records and some records of governors-general). Researchers are able to access all other open period records, including those held by agencies, unless those records contain information that falls into certain categories, called 'exemption categories', which are defined in section 33 of the Act. There are 15 exemption categories and information that falls within them is said to be 'exempt information'. Before the Archives releases records for public access, it examines them to ensure that they do not contain exempt information (see Fact Sheet 46).

Most records (97.5%) are wholly released for public access while 2% are released with some exempt information deleted. Only 0.5% of records are wholly withheld because they consist entirely of exempt information. Most exempt information is withheld to protect personal privacy, but defence, security and intelligence sensitivities are the next most common reasons for exemption.

Officers of the Archives are delegated under the Act to examine records and make decisions about whether they can be released. This is done in consultation with departments and agencies. Examination of records may often take a day or less, but if they require referral to agencies or overseas, it may take weeks or months. The Archives informs its clients of delays in this process.

If a researcher applies to see a record that is exempt from public access, the Archives will provide a written statement of reasons identifying the exempt information, the exemption category that applies and why it applies. Details of all records containing exempt information are available on [RecordSearch](#). The access status will show OPEN, OPEN WITH EXCEPTION, WITHHELD PENDING AGENCY ADVICE OR CLOSED, while the reason for restriction will show the category or categories under which the information is exempted.

A researcher may appeal against an exemption and the Archives will review its decision, but if it is confirmed, the researcher may then appeal to the independent Administrative Appeals Tribunal (see Fact Sheet 12). There is no charge for obtaining access or for applying to the Archives to review its decision, but an application fee applies for appeals to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal.

Regardless of the type of research they undertake at the National Archives, researchers will only be able to examine open period records (ie 30 years of age or older) that do not contain sensitive information or those released under the accelerated release provisions of the Archives Act.

Control records in the National Archives

Control records are created and maintained by a recordkeeping agency to help identify and retrieve records in a specific series. Agency control records include such registry tools as file registers, movement registers, subject indexes and name indexes. In this guide, control records are listed as the 'control series' of a series.

Digitised copies of records

Digitised copies of some National Archives records are available through the *Australia's Prime Ministers* website at primeministers.naa.gov.au and are available for viewing on RecordSearch. Most of the JCPML records are available online through ERA (dtl.lis.curtin.edu.au).

Citing the records

The correct citation of archival records in the National Archives, the [JCPML](#) and in other collections is important both when requesting the records and when referring to them in

written or published works. Using proper citations will not only help staff to locate records more readily, but will also help other researchers to find that material.

The correct form of citation for records held by the National Archives of Australia is expressed as follows: the name *National Archives of Australia* followed by a colon, the series number followed by a comma, and then the item number. An example is:

National Archives of Australia: A981, INT 22

The name *National Archives of Australia* may be abbreviated to 'NAA' provided the full name has been used in the first citation. National Archives Fact Sheet 7 provides further information on citing the records and can be located on the website (www.naa.gov.au/publications, and follow links).

The correct citation for records held by the JCPML is 'John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library. Collection title. File or item title. File or item ID'. For example:

John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library. Records of the Curtin Family. Letter from John Curtin to Elsie Needham, 24 August 1914. JCPML00402/5.

The name *John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library* may be abbreviated to 'JCPML' provided the full name is identified in the first citation. Further information and examples are provided on the JCPML website (john.curtin.edu.au/era/copyright.html). Please note that in this guide the citation of JCPML records has been abbreviated for reasons of brevity. In this guide, for example, the above item will appear as 'Letter from John Curtin to Elsie Needham, 24 August 1914' plus the item number (see also p. 11).

For other archives and libraries, the name of the institution should be provided, followed by the reference or call number of the collection. An example is:

National Library of Australia: MS 4744

Locating additional information

Additional information on the papers of John Curtin can be located by searching on the National Archives' [RecordSearch](#) database, the [JCPML ERA](#) and the databases of other institutions. Further information on records relating to John Curtin can also be found through the *Australia's Prime Ministers* website (primeministers.naa.gov.au). This website has research maps that lead researchers into the collections of a number of archives, both within Australia and overseas.

State archives also hold records relating to service in state legislatures and interaction between prime ministers and state premiers. Appendix 2 is a 'Who's who' of key players in the Curtin story, while further reading on John Curtin can be found in Appendix 3. Addresses of the National Archives' reading rooms are in Appendix 4 and addresses of other archival institutions holding material on or about John Curtin are in Appendix 5.

1

John Curtin



Prime Minister John Curtin, c1942.
NAA: A1200, L8949

John Curtin, the only Australian Prime Minister to represent a Western Australian seat in the House of Representatives, led his country during the most critical phase of World War II. However, like his United States (US) counterpart, Franklin Roosevelt, Curtin did not live to see the final victory. At 4 am on 5 July 1945, in The Lodge, the prime minister's residence in Canberra, he became only the second Australian Prime Minister to die in office, barely six weeks before the Japanese capitulation was announced on 15 August.

In the words of his most recent biographer, John Curtin 'continues to be regarded with admiration and affection across the political divide'.¹ Many people would agree with the assessment of his immediate predecessor as Prime Minister, Arthur Fadden, that Curtin was 'one of the greatest Australians ever'.²

This is all the more remarkable given his personal and political problems during and after World War I (the 'Great War') and the internal difficulties that plagued

the Australian Labor Party (ALP) when he first became its national parliamentary leader in 1935. It is testimony to the way Curtin met the challenge of leading his country that between 1940 and 1943 he converted a slim majority of 641 votes after preferences in his seat of Fremantle to an absolute majority of nearly 23 000.

In the epilogue to his two-volume work, *The Government and the People 1942-1945*, which was part of the official history of Australia during the war, Sir Paul Hasluck, who came from the opposite side of the political fence, summed up Curtin's contribution:

Curtin did not fight hard to become Prime Minister and showed some reticence about assuming office. Having come to the heavy responsibilities and finding them greatly increased by a new turn in the war that was already being waged, he grew in wisdom, character and strength with the added burdens that were laid on him. His own dedication was complete. He held back nothing from his service to the nation [and]...he had lived out his own text: 'I ask every Australian, man and woman, to go about their allotted task with full vigour and courage...We shall hold this country and keep it as a citadel for the British-speaking race and as a place where civilization will persist'.³

Early life, 1885–1914

John Joseph Ambrose Curtin was born in Creswick, Victoria on 8 January 1885, the eldest son of John Curtin (born 1853) and Catherine Bourke (born 1856), Irish immigrants who had married at St Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne in June 1883. When Curtin was only five years old his father was forced through ill health to resign from the police force and seek employment as a publican. For the next eight years the family lived in increasingly impoverished circumstances, first in Melbourne and then in a succession of country towns before returning to Melbourne where Curtin's mother assumed the main burden of supporting her husband and four children. Curtin himself left school at thirteen and worked in a series of jobs before securing longer-term employment with the Titan Manufacturing Company in 1903.

Having left the Catholic Church, and after a short spell with the Salvation Army, Curtin turned to rationalism and then to socialism under the influence of Frank Anstey, a member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly and later the Member of the House of Representatives (MHR) for the Victorian electorate of Bourke, who was described as a 'messianic figure whose political language was studded with religious allusions'.⁴

Although an active ALP member, Curtin also joined the more radical Victorian Socialist Party (VSP), which had been established by the British trade union leader Tom Mann in 1906. In the socialist movement Curtin found both political ideals and an important medium for personal and social relationships. After Mann returned to the United Kingdom (UK), where he later became a leading light in the British Communist Party, Curtin served as the Secretary of the VSP. In 1911 he left both this position and his job with the Titan Manufacturing Company to become the Secretary of the Victorian Timber Workers Union.

Soon after, in his union capacity, he met his future wife, Elsie Needham, daughter of Abraham Needham, a prominent Australian radical activist who had migrated to Tasmania after a spell in South Africa. Curtin's visit to Hobart in 1912 was part of his strategy to unite the timber workers into an Australia-wide federation, and Needham, at that stage a parliamentary candidate, was one of six leading members of the local Labour Movement nominated as a 'provisional committee of advice' on how to reorder the affairs of the local union.⁵

World War I and conscription, 1914–17

The outbreak of the war in 1914 found Curtin seeking to have the Labour Movement commit itself to measures designed to prevent war. However, political necessity in a federal election year in which Curtin contested a Victorian seat for the ALP swept aside the peace resolutions he had achieved with the Victorian Trades Hall Council.

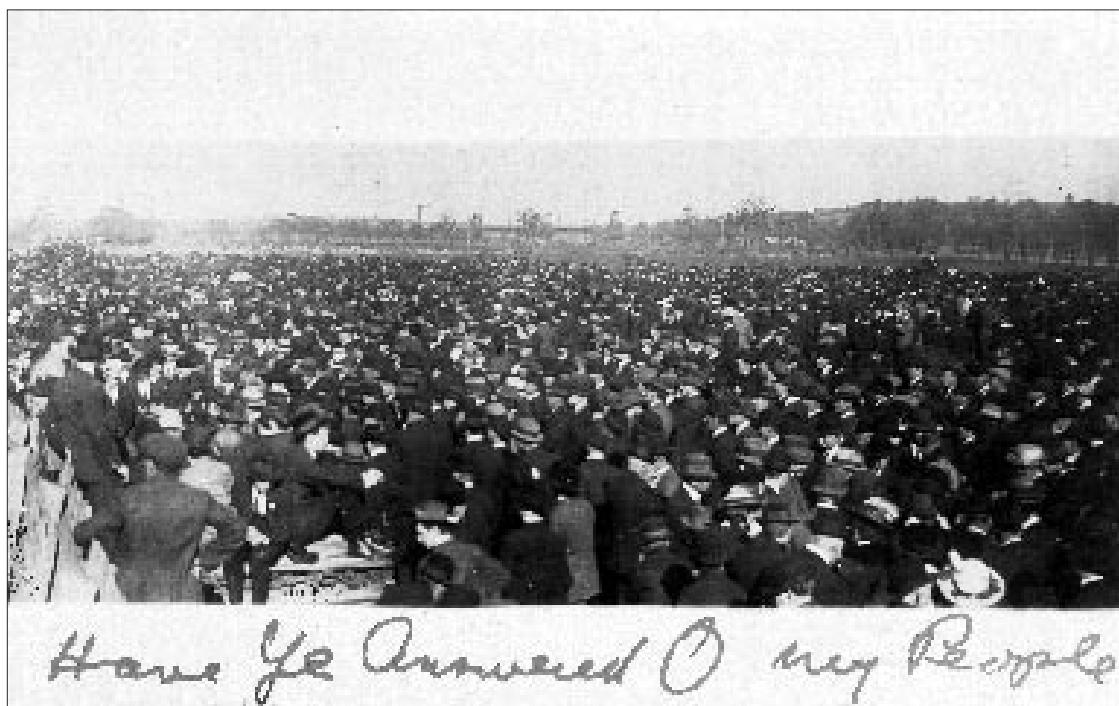
Curtin was also finding it increasingly difficult to persuade the timber workers to respond to the socialist causes espoused in his articles in the union's journal and in November 1915 he resigned as union secretary. This decision seems to have arisen not only from his frustration with the timber workers' lack of commitment to the wider ideals of working class advancement, but probably also as a consequence of problems in dealing with issues of declining union membership and of embezzlement within the union office.⁶

Despite this growing disillusionment he 'operated with the energy of a tornado',⁷ working first for the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) in the Riverina district and then for the Trades Union Anti-Conscription Committee. However, in mid-1916 he had to seek admission to hospital to deal with his growing drinking problem. Backed by the support of friends, he returned to the fray and celebrated the defeat of the first conscription referendum in October. In December that year he was jailed for failing to respond to a call-up, only to be released a few days later. Even as Prime Minister William Morris ('Billy') Hughes was expelled from the ALP and formed a new Nationalist Ministry, Curtin found personal salvation through the influence of friends and colleagues with his appointment as editor of the *Westralian Worker*, a paper then owned by the AWU in Western Australia.

Editor of the *Westralian Worker*, 1917–28

Curtin arrived in Perth at the beginning of 1917 with the task of reversing the previous editorial policy of the *Westralian Worker* and voicing strong opposition to Hughes and his continuing efforts to introduce conscription. In his new position Curtin now had the means to marry Elsie, who had followed him to the west, and the ceremony took place in a private home in April 1917. Over the next few years the couple had two children, Elsie and John, and in 1923 moved into their own redbrick home in the seaside suburb of Cottesloe.

As editor, and with his reputation as a speaker and socialist advocate from the east, Curtin soon became a leading figure in the Labour Movement in the west. He developed a close collaboration with Philip Collier, another fervent anti-conscriptionist who had become the leader of the Western Australian Parliamentary Labor Party in 1917 after the defection of former Premier 'Happy Jack' Scaddan to the pro-conscriptionists. As he and Collier celebrated the defeat of the second conscription referendum in December that year, Curtin was fined for making a statement 'likely to cause disaffection to His Majesty' when he urged 'rebellion' on the crowd if conscription were forced upon them.⁸



John Curtin wrote 'Have Ye Answered O My People' on the front of this postcard of crowds at an anti-conscription rally, 21 October 1916. On the back he noted, 'Not a bad crowd to bang at'.

JCPML00687/15/7

Despite his more settled life style in the west, Curtin's personal problems did not disappear overnight. He had to cope first with the death of his father early in March 1919 and then, seven weeks later, with the loss through influenza of his close friend Frank Hyett. Labor had performed poorly in both state and federal elections in WA in 1917, and in December 1919, at a time when he was suffering from neurasthenia, Curtin reluctantly contested the federal seat of Perth and was soundly defeated. In the aftermath he was unable to return to full-time work for several months. Without the assistance of his in-laws, who had come to live with the family towards the middle of 1919, he would have been hard pressed to meet both his editorial and family responsibilities.

For a time Curtin had been optimistic that the end of the war would pave the way for successful socialist revolutions, but by 1922 the tenor of his editorials in the *Westralian Worker* indicated that he had come to accept that parliamentary action by social democratic parties, including the ALP, 'was the only practical means of social change'.⁹ In editorials written just before and after the State Labor Congress, Curtin told his readers, 'Congress assembles with the tide of reaction almost at the flood' and that the procedure for 'Labor's Social Revolution was to be "progressively constructive and reconstructive"'.¹⁰

As Curtin went through this conversion from revolutionary socialism to parliamentary gradualism, he lost one of those who had urged him to keep faith with the cause: his father-in-law, Abraham Needham, died from a heart attack on 18 August 1922.

In the meantime, however, Curtin's journalist achievements at the paper were 'widely recognized, outside as well as inside the Labour Movement'.¹¹ In addition to his 'forceful and at times emotive' editorials in the paper, much of the content on the other pages came from Curtin's pen. He also held the post of president of the Western Australian district of the Australian Journalists' Association (AJA) from 1920 to 1925. In this capacity he put a great deal of energy into seeking 'to improve its members' education as well as their wages and working conditions'. In association with a number of academics at the University of Western Australia, he arranged lecture programs without fees and formal examinations as well as informal discussions at nearby cafes. While trying to foster links between the AJA and the wider trade union movement, he also developed good working relationships with the main newspaper proprietors in Perth.¹²

In 1924, the same year as Labor under Collier regained the Western Australian Treasury benches, Curtin was appointed by the Federal Bruce-Page Nationalist-Country Party coalition Government to represent the Labour Movement at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conference in Geneva. His experiences on his first overseas trip heightened his interest in the activities and potential of the League of Nations.¹³ However, they also served to confirm his view that the opportunity to overthrow capitalism by revolutionary means had passed.

Back in Western Australia in 1925, he found himself declared 'black' by the communist-led Seamen's Union when he backed the Collier Government's use of police on the waterfront to allow passengers through the union's picket line.¹⁴ He failed again at his third attempt to enter Federal Parliament at the 1925 election - this time for the seat of Fremantle - and continued his editorial work as well as lecturing to journalists at the University of Western Australia. He also served on the federal Royal Commission on Child Endowment or Family Allowances, for which he was one of two signatories to a minority report rejecting the majority finding to maintain the status quo.

In November 1928 political success finally came his way when he was elected MHR for Fremantle and took his seat on the Opposition benches behind incumbent leader James ('Jim') Scullin. In his last editorial for the *Westralian Worker* before leaving Perth, Curtin sounded his clarion call to:

...the men who have control of the political and industrial machinery of Labor – with the leaders of the workers' party... They must not fail us. A vast – almost heart-breaking – responsibility rests on them.¹⁵

Ups and downs, 1928–35

Curtin spent nearly a year on the Opposition backbenches before the Bruce–Page Government was forced to the polls. Labor regained power in the election for the House of Representatives held in October 1929, though it was still in a hopeless minority in the Senate. Somewhat surprisingly, Curtin was overlooked for the one Western Australian position in the Scullin Ministry. The impact of the Great Depression ultimately destroyed the Scullin Government following a landslide United Australia Party (UAP) win in the federal election in December 1931, and sent Curtin back into the political wilderness along with another future Prime Minister, Ben Chifley. This experience was especially disillusioning for Curtin, and he was critical of his own government for compromising with its opponents and accepting the cost-cutting implicit in the 'Premiers' Plan' instead of calling a fresh election to secure a mandate for its own radical credit creation policies. His later commitment to full employment policies and banking reform were a direct consequence of the bitter experiences of the Scullin Government years.

Back in the west Curtin worked as a freelance sports journalist for the *Westralian Worker*. He wrote articles for the ALP (including paid articles for Western Australian newspapers) from an office in Trades Hall until 1933 when Collier, back as Premier after three years in opposition, employed him to write the Western Australian Government's submission to the newly formed Commonwealth Grants Commission.

Despite suggestions he should return to Victoria to contest the federal seat being vacated by Frank Anstey, his long-standing colleague and mentor, Curtin stood again for Fremantle in 1934. He won Fremantle narrowly in an election in which Labor regained only a handful of the seats it had lost in 1931, while the breakaway Lang Labor forces in New South Wales won five additional seats, giving them a total of nine federal seats. Amid ever-increasing emphasis on issues of national security, Curtin was elected to the front bench and, less than a year later, when Scullin stood down in September 1935 he won the federal parliamentary leadership by one vote from Scullin's deputy, Queenslander Frank Forde.

Among the reasons for Curtin's success, over and above his pledge to abstain from alcohol, were his union background and impeccable loyalty to ALP principles during the crisis years of the Great War and the Great Depression. In addition, he had the advantage of living in Western Australia, a state where the ALP had been in opposition throughout the worst years of the Depression, far removed from the feuds bedevilling the party in the east.¹⁶

Leader of the Opposition, 1935–41

Curtin's most immediate task as leader was to restore Labor unity and in the process sideline the Lang Labor forces in New South Wales, a group to which he had been implacably opposed from the outset. In February 1936, following a unity conference in New South Wales, he succeeded in securing the return of the Lang Labor members to the Federal Caucus of the ALP, though problems with the Lang Labor group recurred on and off again until as late as 1941.

On the foreign policy front Curtin had to steer a course between widely divergent views within his own party – for example, during the Spanish Civil War, the ALP Left urged support for the incumbent Spanish Government while other Labor factions, including the party's Catholic wing, totally repudiated such an approach. On this, and on the issue of supporting sanctions against Italy over its invasion of Abyssinia, Curtin essentially sought to avoid adopting a definite policy.¹⁷

In Parliament he advocated a defence policy of self-reliance with a build-up particularly of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). However, he could not avoid the charge of isolationism at the 1937 federal election, at which the Lyons Government was returned comfortably to power, although Labor did make gains in the Senate. Soon afterwards both Government and Opposition leaders alike were relieved when war seemed to have been avoided with the Munich Agreement of September 1938. Curtin also was far from enthusiastic about the provocation to Japan offered by the Port Kembla waterside workers when, at the end of 1938, they refused to load pig-iron for export to Japan.¹⁸

Isolationism was swept aside by the rapid course of events in 1939. In May that year Curtin managed to dissuade the Australian Council of Trade Unions from boycotting a manpower survey. When war broke out in September 1939 he backed Australian participation while opposing the introduction of compulsory military training. He also warned against leaving Australia undefended with the dispatch of a voluntary expeditionary force to the European front, a move that Prime Minister Robert Menzies eventually confirmed on 28 November 1939.

However, Menzies, who had won the UAP leadership in May 1939 following the death of Prime Minister Joseph Lyons, found it difficult to maintain electoral support during the period of the 'Phony War'. At the same time, despite fresh problems with Lang Labor, which had opposed a New South Wales' ALP conference motion condemning the possibility of war against Russia, Curtin managed to hold the party together. Following the federal election of September 1940 the Menzies Government was in power only with the support of two Victorian independents, Arthur Coles and Alex Wilson. Ironically, Curtin himself in Fremantle faced what seemed certain defeat early in the count until he was saved by late postal votes from servicemen and a substantial leakage of preferences from an unendorsed Nationalist Party candidate.

In the aftermath of the election Curtin found himself at the head of a significantly augmented party that included Ben Chifley and Dr Herbert Vere Evatt, who had stood down from the High Court of Australia to contest the New South Wales federal seat of Barton. Only a week after the outbreak of war in 1939 Curtin had opposed the idea that Labor should enter a national government of all parties such as would eventuate in the United Kingdom a few months later, contending that he and his party would 'better be able to do our duty for the country, usefully and forcefully, as unfettered watchdogs of the

public interest'.¹⁹ Now, in the wake of his narrow victory in the election, Menzies again offered Labor membership in a national government and Curtin again refused. Instead Menzies agreed to Curtin's counter proposal for the establishment of an advisory war council. This arguably gave Curtin a much-enhanced awareness of war policy issues without having to take any of the responsibility for, or suffer any community backlash against, the wartime controls that continued until Japan came into the war.

Menzies was overseas for four months in the first half of 1941 and during his absence Curtin and Acting Prime Minister and Country Party leader Arthur Fadden issued a joint statement warning of the deterioration of the security situation in the Pacific. Curtin also agreed to the dispatch of the Australian 8th Division to Singapore after British Prime Minister Winston Churchill promised to send part of the British fleet to the region if Australia's strategic interests were threatened.

On his return to Australia in May, and beset by dissension in his own party, Menzies offered to serve under Curtin in a national government, an invitation again rejected by Curtin despite pressure from within his own ranks, especially from Dr Herbert Vere Evatt, who wanted power at the first opportunity. On 28 August Menzies resigned and Arthur Coles, who had temporarily rejoined the UAP, resigned in protest to revert to his independent status. The subsequent stopgap government led by Fadden lost power when Coles and the other independent, Alexander Wilson, crossed the floor of the House to secure the passage of a no-confidence vote on the Fadden Government's Budget by 36 votes to 33.

This was the eighth – and to date, the last – occasion on which a government either lost office or was forced to an election following a vote in the House of Representatives. On 7 October 1941 Curtin was sworn in as Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Coordination (later Defence), heading a nineteen-man ministry with Frank Forde as his deputy, Ben Chifley as Treasurer and effectively number two in the Cabinet, and Dr Evatt as Attorney-General and Minister for External Affairs.

Prime Minister, 1941–45

WARTIME LEADER IN THE CRITICAL YEARS 1941 TO 1943

Informed by his involvement in the Advisory War Council, in the weeks following his assumption of the office of Prime Minister, Curtin generally continued the policies of the previous government. However, he did insist that the Australian 9th Division be relieved from the siege of Tobruk. In mid-November 1941, the Royal Australian Navy cruiser HMAS *Sydney* was lost with all hands in an engagement with the *Kormoran*, a German raider disguised as a merchant cruiser. On 1 December 1941 the War Cabinet held an emergency meeting in Melbourne amid rapidly growing concern over Japanese belligerence.

On the morning of 8 December, barely two months after taking office, Curtin was awoken by his press secretary to the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, and Australia for the first time in its history independently declared war on a foreign power. Before the month was out, and in the aftermath of the loss of the British warships HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* and the growing recognition that the British response would be

inadequate for the defence of Singapore, Curtin delivered his New Year's message to the Australian public in the form of an article published in the *Melbourne Herald* of 27 December 1941:

Without any inhibitions of any kind I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free from any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.

We know the problems that 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, and we shall devote all our energies towards the shaping of a plan, with the United States as its keystone, which will give to our country some confidence of being able to hold out until the tide of battle swings against our enemy.²⁰

When Singapore fell to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, Curtin in a press statement told the Australian people:

The fall of Singapore can only be described as Australia's Dunkirk...[The] fall of Dunkirk initiated the battle for Britain. The fall of Singapore opens the Battle for Australia...What the Battle for Britain required, so the Battle for Australia requires...Our honeymoon has finished. It is now work or fight as we have never worked or fought before...²¹

Four days later – and after the first bombing of Darwin, the first 'physical contact of war within Australia' – Curtin, from hospital where he had been admitted with gastritis, was asking Australians each to 'vow that this blow at Darwin and the loss it has involved and the suffering it has occasioned shall gird our loins and nerve our steel'.²²

Against this backdrop Curtin and Churchill engaged in a war of cables concerning the control of two divisions of Australian troops returning from the Middle East with the Dutch East Indies as their original intended destination. While Curtin was urging that these troops should now return to Australia to take part in the defence of their homeland against a possible Japanese invasion, Churchill, supported by US President Roosevelt, wanted at least one of the divisions to be diverted to Burma to help keep China in the war and provide a base for future operations against Japan itself.

When Churchill unilaterally ordered the diversion of the Australian 7th Division to Burma, Curtin, who was 'unable to sleep for days at a time'²³ while the troops were crossing the Indian Ocean, countermanded this order, telling the British Prime Minister that 'it was quite impossible to reverse a decision which we have made with the utmost care'.²⁴ He did, however, allow a significant number of troops to stop off in Ceylon as a temporary measure, but only after the main body of troops reached Australia safely was Curtin released 'from great darkness and unhappiness'.²⁵

On 14 March Curtin became the first Australian Prime Minister to address the American people,²⁶ referring in his broadcast to Australia as 'the last bastion between the West Coast of America and the Japanese'.²⁷ Four days later General Douglas MacArthur arrived in Australia to take up his appointment by Roosevelt – 'with Curtin's agreement'²⁸ – as

Supreme Commander of the South-West Pacific Area. The nature and consequences of the working relationship that was to develop between these two men of such strikingly different personalities have become both the stuff of legend and the source of historical controversy, especially concerning the degree to which Curtin was justified in an apparent surrender of national sovereignty.

However, despite the problems arising from the Allied decision to concentrate on a 'Hitler-first' strategy, a decision of which Curtin only became fully aware in May 1942, the American naval victories of the Coral Sea and Midway Island in May and June effectively removed the immediate threat of invasion. The Coral Sea victory also provided Curtin with the setting for his 'most stirring war time speech', in which he called on each Australian:

...who today is being defended by these gallant men in that engagement...that he owes it to these men, and to the future of the country, not to be stinting in what he will now do for Australia.²⁹

As the months went by Curtin's task increasingly became one of sustaining the total war effort in the face of 'growing public complacency'.³⁰ During the struggle for New Guinea, when Port Moresby was under serious threat, for a time Curtin's 'sea of austerity' required rationing of a whole variety of civilian goods, with added taxes on alcohol, tobacco and cinema and theatre tickets, the reduction of greyhound and horse racing, and restrictions on meals at restaurants and cafes.³¹

Fortunately, 'his intensity and passion made a profound impact' on the nation at large³² and a high degree of cooperation was achieved. By October 1942 the US Ambassador to Australia, Nelson Johnson, felt able to assure President Roosevelt that Curtin had succeeded in lifting the 'black blanket of despair' from his fellow countrymen.³³

One major source of concern to Curtin for much of the war was the ongoing conflict with sections of the trade union movement on the coalfields, which at times drove him to the point of despair;³⁴ however, despite numerous outbreaks of industrial conflict, no major strike took place. In this regard, Curtin was greatly assisted after his government lifted the ban on the Communist Party, which, as a consequence of Hitler's invasion of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, now gave total ongoing support to the war effort.



Prime Minister John Curtin shaking hands with General Douglas MacArthur, Sydney 8 June 1943
JCPML00376/69.

In any case, by mid-September 1942, the tide was turning as the Japanese were being pushed back along the Kokoda Track in New Guinea. Kokoda itself was retaken on 2 November while the great Allied victory at El Alamein two days later provided the opportunity for the Australian 9th Division to be brought home from the Middle East.

In late October, confronted with arguments about the responsibility Australia owed to its Allies in pursuing the offensive into territory occupied by the Japanese, Curtin decided to seek to persuade the ALP to change the party policy that to this point had prevented Australians from being conscripted to fight outside Australian territory. Given his party's - and his own - strong opposition to conscription during World War I, Curtin had a battle on his hands when he raised the issue using the term 'one army under one command' at the party's national conference in November 1942 and again at a special conference in January 1943.³⁵

Despite strong opposition from Arthur Calwell and others, Curtin won the day by confining his proposal to extend conscription to an area south of the Equator and east to the Solomon Islands,³⁶ arguing that essentially all he was doing was modifying the definition of 'Australian territory' to enable full Australian involvement in campaigns in 'islands outside the political administration of Australia but strategically vital to Australia'.³⁷

Ironically, this made little practical difference in the conduct of the war since no Australian conscripts in the Australian Imperial Forces fought outside Australian territory, except for militia units in Merauke in Dutch New Guinea.³⁸ However, politically and psychologically this was a crucial triumph for Curtin, which both defused the situation within the ALP and also led to divisions within the Opposition ranks in terms of the formation of the breakaway 'National Service Group',³⁹ as well as removing a potentially damaging issue from the agenda for the forthcoming 1943 election campaign.

ON THE HOME FRONT

The conversion of the Australian economy to the needs of total war has been described as a 'massive achievement'.⁴⁰ A critical element in this regard was the Curtin Government's achievement of effectively excluding the states from collecting income tax. In July 1942 the High Court ruled as constitutional a series of Acts passed by the Australian Parliament that provided, among other things, for Commonwealth financial assistance to the states provided they did not attempt to collect their own income taxes. The Commonwealth's action followed the refusal of the states to cede this power voluntarily for the duration of the war, but the effect of the High Court's ruling on the uniform tax case was to bring about an extraordinarily significant permanent change in federal-state relations. The Government also introduced legislation to enable it, rather than the states, to collect an entertainments tax.

Opposition within the ALP to the increased taxation, especially of lower income workers, that flowed from the new tax scales was eased by the government's decision to use some of its newly found flow of income to introduce Commonwealth widows' pensions. At the beginning of 1943 the Curtin Government created a 'National Welfare Fund', which was financed from the Consolidated Revenue Fund, 'as an integral part of the Government's plans for the social security of the people'.⁴¹ Unemployment, sickness and pharmaceutical benefits followed during the Curtin Government's second term (1943-45), but plans for an effective national scheme of hospital and medical benefits ran into problems with strong opposition from the medical profession.

In terms of international law and status, the passage of the Statute of Westminster Adoption Act in the second half of 1942 was of considerable legal significance. Even before its adoption by the Australian Parliament, the enactment of the statute by the British Parliament in 1931 amounted to a declaration 'that the imperial parliament would exercise no supervisory powers over the legislation of self-governing dominions'. However, the Lyons and Menzies governments had made no formal moves to ratify the Act because of continuing dependence on British naval power in the event of a threat to Australia's security. They had asserted that Australia's effective independence was more than adequate without legal statement.⁴²

The passage of the 1942 legislation, piloted through the Australian Parliament by the Minister for External Affairs, Dr Herbert Evatt, removed legal constraints relating to extra-territoriality and the *Colonial Laws Validity Act 1865* (UK), thus allaying legal doubts about the extent of the government's constitutional powers to pursue the war effort and to plan for postwar reconstruction.⁴³ Opposition by a number of non-Labor politicians to ratifying this statute was mainly on the grounds that it might have the long-term effect of weakening ties with Great Britain but this was certainly never part of Curtin's or Evatt's intentions.

The Curtin Government also secured the passage of the *Australian Broadcasting Act 1942*, which replaced the *Australian Broadcasting Act 1932* and provided a comprehensive code that covered both the national broadcasting service and what the government described as the 'necessary minimum regulation' of commercial broadcasting.⁴⁴ The Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) was reconstructed to consist of five commissioners, and a parliamentary standing committee was given the power to investigate all broadcasting matters.

Other legislation passed during the life of the first Curtin Government included the *Dairying Industry Assistance Act 1942* and its amending legislation (1943), which provided for a subsidy to, and the regulation of, industrial relations in the dairy industry; the *Women's Employment Act 1942*, which was concerned with allowing women to undertake work 'previously performed by men or not performed at all in Australia'⁴⁵ and also (in the pre-equal pay era) with the fixing of terms and conditions for women so employed; the *Commonwealth Electoral (War-Time) Act 1943*, which gave the vote to those aged between 18 and 21 who had served or were serving in the armed forces outside Australia; and the *Australian Soldiers Repatriation Act 1943*, which amended earlier legislation by extending its provisions to members of the women's fighting services.

THE 1943 ELECTION

Towards the middle of 1943, with the deadline for the federal election only weeks away, the Opposition stepped up its attack on the Minister for Labour and National Service, the Right Honourable Edward ('Eddie') J Ward, and his accusations (first voiced in October 1942) that the Menzies and Fadden governments had agreed to a plan, known as the 'Brisbane Line', for concentrating Australian defence forces in east-central Australia.

Curtin, while privately describing Ward as a 'ratbag',⁴⁶ let the issue run for a time before suspending Ward from his Ministry and establishing a royal commission⁴⁷ to investigate the issue. The royal commissioner, the Honourable Charles John Lowe, subsequently ruled that he could not make a finding because Ward had used parliamentary privilege to refuse to give evidence.

In early July, after surviving a no-confidence motion on 24 June by 27 votes to 26, Curtin obtained a dissolution of the House of Representatives with an election scheduled for 21 August 1943. During the election campaign Curtin, who made the first ever national policy speech from Canberra, concentrated both on his government's success in the conduct of the war and his schemes for postwar reconstruction while his party emphasised that 'You can't have Curtin if you don't vote Labor'. Many electors were probably also reassured when Curtin, in Perth three days before the election, promised that 'my government during the war will not socialize any industry'.⁴⁸

The result was Labor's greatest ever landslide federal election victory – winning 49 of the 73 seats in the House of Representatives and all nineteen Senate seats being contested. From 1 July 1944 the Curtin Government would have a commanding majority in both Houses of the Federal Parliament, the first time a Labor national government had been in this position since before the conscription split in 1916. The election was also notable for the election of the first women members of the Australian Parliament – Dame Enid Lyons, widow of former Prime Minister Joseph Lyons, in the House of Representatives, and Dorothy Tangney from Western Australia to fill a casual vacancy in the Senate.

1943 TO 1945

For Curtin and his government the later years of the war have been described as 'a time of frustration rather than mastery'.⁴⁹ While Curtin and his ministers grappled with the competing demands of industry and the armed services, General MacArthur's war strategy was increasingly based on limiting direct participation by Australian troops, including their total exclusion from the invasion of the Philippines. In this sense 'Australian strategy was increasingly dictated by the constraints of allied diplomacy'⁵⁰ and as a consequence the links between Curtin and MacArthur became less and less significant, which in turn seemed to imply a lessening of Australian participation at the peace table.

Curtin's own health also had become a matter for ever-increasing concern. In retrospect it seems that after a major overseas trip to the UK and the US in April-June 1944, he was 'never the same man again'. After heart trouble forced him into hospital in November, he did not return to duty until late January 1945 and made only one more major parliamentary speech before the onset of his last illness in April 1945.

On the international front, Evatt, in a speech to Parliament in October 1943, had listed Australian priorities as including Australia's right to 'take part in all aspects of the post-war settlement',⁵¹ Australia's predominant interest in the Pacific regions, the 'pivotal' position of Australian-New Zealand collaboration and the right of smaller nations to play their part in planning for the United Nations.

For his part, Curtin – perhaps, it has been suggested, in response to the post-election return of Menzies as Opposition leader – placed great emphasis on modernising Australia's traditional links with Britain and the Commonwealth. In an address to the Federal ALP Conference in December 1943, Curtin had proposed the development of machinery for the imperial coordination of policy between the meetings of British Commonwealth prime ministers that were inevitably periodic. In this regard, he possibly hoped that Australia would have more scope for independent action and contribution to policymaking than would be possible through the Australian-US relationship. Certainly this seems to have been the major motive behind the Anzac Agreement between Australia and New Zealand,

which was signed on 21 January 1944 after a conference in Canberra between delegates from the two nations.

The Anzac Agreement, as formulated by Evatt, sought the establishment of a regional zone of defence comprising the South-West and South Pacific areas that was based on Australia and New Zealand.⁵² In this regard, the signatories agreed that 'it would be proper for Australia and New Zealand to assume full responsibility for policing or sharing in policing such areas...[in the region] as may from time to time be agreed upon'.⁵³ The agreement has been described as akin to the 'Monroe Doctrine' that the US had asserted for the Americas, with its declaration that 'no change in the sovereignty or system of control of any of the islands of the Pacific should be effected' without the concurrence of the signatories and that the US 'should not retain control over bases built on British territories, including Australia and New Zealand'.⁵⁴

Curtin's trip in April, May and June 1944, first to Washington and then to attend the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London before returning via Canada, had two central objectives. On the first issue he achieved Anglo-American agreement to the view that the Australian contribution to the war effort would increasingly be directed to the provision of food and other supplies rather than military personnel. His second objective concerning the establishment of postwar Commonwealth collaborative machinery in the form of a secretariat based in London did not attract any support – in retrospect he was twenty years ahead of his time.

Nevertheless, he had established his credentials in terms of maintaining the British connection – while in the UK he was awarded the freedom of the City of London – and six months earlier he had secured the nomination of the King's brother, His Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester, to succeed Lord Gowrie as Governor-General. From a personal point of view, however, Curtin would have regretted Lord Gowrie's departure in the second half of 1944 after eight years in the post, as he had developed a warm friendship with the Governor-General and his wife during many a lonely weekend in Canberra.

Curtin found the Anzac Agreement somewhat of an embarrassment when meeting with Roosevelt in the US in 1944, but he strongly supported the concept of an international security organisation in place of the League of Nations that had so disappointed him in the interwar years. While he had always given Evatt strong backing in his role as Minister for External Affairs, Curtin did not particularly like him – hence his decision in 1945 to appoint Frank Forde as leader of the Australian delegation to the United Nations Conference on International Organization held in San Francisco, California to establish the United Nations. However, by the time Forde and Evatt arrived at San Francisco, Curtin was in hospital and it was Evatt who secured the publicity with his energetic – if at best only partly successful – campaign to enhance the status of the 'middle powers' in the world organisation.

On the domestic front ever-increasing attention was being given to the issue of the postwar world. Until February 1945 Curtin's loyal and most influential lieutenant, Ben Chifley, was at the helm of the Department of Post-War Reconstruction, which was established in December 1942. Alongside the expansion of social welfare benefits, funded from the greatly increased taxation revenue available to the Commonwealth since the uniform taxation legislation of 1942, was a range of issues relating to Keynesian planning for the postwar economy, which had the 1945 'White Paper on Full Employment' as its centrepiece. In

this regard, available evidence shows that Curtin played a considerable personal role in influencing the final text of the White Paper.⁵⁵

Curtin also gave total backing to Chifley's legislative reform of the banking system, which aimed at ensuring government control of the monetary system – an issue close to Curtin's heart (as it was to Chifley's) after the difficulties the Scullin Government faced with the Commonwealth Bank Board during the Great Depression. Other important developments included the negotiation of a Commonwealth–state housing agreement and the establishment of various rural and regional reconstruction bodies.

While the establishment of a separate Department of Immigration did not occur until after Curtin's death, the appointment of Arthur Calwell as Minister for Information after the 1943 election paved the way for the active postwar migration policy that Curtin had strongly favoured. On the education front, planning was under way in 1944 and 1945 for the establishment of the Australian National University and the provision of Commonwealth scholarships to university students.

One serious setback for Curtin and his government, however, was the crushing defeat of Evatt's attempt to gain greatly increased constitutional power for the Commonwealth with his 'Fourteen Powers' referendum in August 1944. Curtin certainly favoured the general principle of constitutional reform to enhance the power of the Commonwealth and told a convention of federal and state representatives in November 1942 that as the Commonwealth pursued objectives such as improved labour standards, economic advancement and social security, it would find that 'at every turn in the problem of post-war reconstruction we shall be confronted by some constitutional barrier'.⁵⁶

At the same time, wisely as it turned out, he was far from enthusiastic, after several states had failed to legislate in terms of the November 1942 agreement, about asking electors to endorse a large-scale 'package proposal', and on his return from overseas took little part in the campaign. Politically, the successful 'No' campaign greatly assisted Menzies in his moves for the reunification and rejuvenation of the non-Labor parties, which culminated in the formation of the Liberal Party of Australia towards the end of 1944.

FINAL DAYS

After suffering a coronary occlusion in November 1944, Curtin was hospitalised in Melbourne. His daughter Elsie came to Melbourne to be with him as he slowly recovered and then his wife came to Canberra and stayed with him at The Lodge until he resumed official duties on 22 January 1945. Almost immediately he had to defend his government against charges that moves to nationalise Australia's internal airlines were part of a wider 'socialist agenda'. These moves were blocked by the High Court and subsequently the Chifley Government established Trans Australia Airlines in 1946 and acquired Qantas in 1947.

At the same time, in a speech to government and industry representatives, Curtin described government action to prevent rising unemployment as the necessity of an 'enlarged role' for government. On 28 February 1945 he made what might be described as his last major parliamentary speech, which dealt with the war effort (past and present) and canvassed the prospects for an international peacekeeping organisation, warning that 'countries cannot always have their own way, if they really wish to live in amity'.⁵⁷

On 18 April Curtin paid his parliamentary tribute to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had died six days earlier. At the end of the month Curtin was admitted to a private hospital in Canberra and, with Frank Forde absent at the San Francisco Conference, it fell to Chifley, the Acting Prime Minister, to announce the German surrender on 8 May. After several weeks in hospital, Curtin returned to The Lodge and remained there with his wife Elsie until his death on 5 July. After services in Canberra and a lying-in-state in King's Hall on 6 July, his body was flown to Perth and he was buried at Karrakatta Cemetery on Sunday, 8 July before a crowd estimated at over 20 000. For much of his life Curtin had not been a religious man and there is conflicting evidence about the extent to which he maintained his beliefs, but it was at Curtin's own request, made in his final weeks, that the funeral service was conducted by his friend, the Reverend Hector Harrison, a Presbyterian.

Curtin's deputy, Frank Forde, who had returned from the San Francisco Conference only a few days before Curtin's death, served as Prime Minister for only one week, still the shortest term ever for any Australian prime minister. On 12 July the Labor Caucus elected Ben Chifley to the leadership by a substantial majority and his government was sworn in on the following day, with the only change from Curtin's last Ministry the inclusion of a Western Australian, Herbert V Johnson, to replace Curtin himself. Chifley had always been a valuable personal and political ally and confidante to Curtin, and his weeks as Acting Prime Minister after Curtin's hospitalisation in April undoubtedly contributed to the ease of his victory.

For Geoffrey Serle, the 'great justification of Curtin as Prime Minister is not merely that there was no viable alternative government in 1941–45, but that his contemporaries acknowledged that no other politician was fit for the task'.⁵⁸ At Australia's most critical hour Curtin 'successfully projected himself as national leader, inspiring respect from cynical Australians as few Prime Ministers have done. His achievements all derive essentially from character...'⁵⁹

In terms of ideals, the inscription on his gravestone perhaps best sums up Curtin's outlook and contribution to Australia:

His country was his pride
His brother man his cause.

Notes

¹ David Day, 'John Joseph Curtin' in Michelle Grattan (ed.), *Australian Prime Ministers*, New Holland Publishers, Sydney, 2000, p. 218.

² Geoffrey Serle, *For Australia and Labor. Prime Minister John Curtin*, John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, Bentley, 1998, p. 31.

³ Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1942–1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1970, p. 634.

⁴ Day, 'John Joseph Curtin', p. 219.

⁵ David Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 1999, p. 146.

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 205–211.

⁷ Day, 'John Joseph Curtin', p. 224.

- ⁸ Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, p. 251.
- ⁹ Dianne Sholl, 'John Curtin at the "Westralian Worker" 1917-1928: an examination of the development of Curtin's political philosophy as reflected in his editorials', BA (Hons) thesis, University of Western Australia, 1975, p. 38.
- ¹⁰ *Westralian Worker*, 2 June and 4 August 1922.
- ¹¹ Fred Alexander, 'John Curtin the Prime Minister', in Lyall Hunt (ed.), *Westralian Portraits*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1979, p. 228.
- ¹² Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, pp. 275-276 and Alexander, 'John Curtin the Prime Minister', p. 228.
- ¹³ Alexander, 'John Curtin the Prime Minister', p. 228.
- ¹⁴ See Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, p. 291-296.
- ¹⁵ *Westralian Worker*, 7 December 1928.
- ¹⁶ David Black, *In His Own Words: John Curtin's Speeches and Writings*, Paradigm Books, Curtin University, Bentley, 1995, p. 122.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, Serle, *For Australia and Labor*, p. 18 - 'Abyssinia and Spain were irreconcilable issues on which Curtin deliberately decided not to lead'.
- ¹⁸ Serle, *For Australia and Labor*, p. 19.
- ¹⁹ From a radio broadcast by John Curtin, 10 September 1939, the text of which was printed as a pamphlet by the Western Australian State Executive of the ALP headed 'Australia and the War, Labor's Standpoint', cited in Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 160.
- ²⁰ Cited in Black, *In His Own Words*, pp. 194-195.
- ²¹ Commonwealth Government, *Digest of Decisions and Announcements and Important Speeches by the Prime Minister (the Hon. John Curtin)*, No. 19, 16 February 1942, p. 7.
- ²² *ibid.*, No. 19, 19 February 1942, p. 9.
- ²³ Day, 'John Joseph Curtin', p. 233.
- ²⁴ Curtin to Churchill, 23 February 1942, cited in Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 200.
- ²⁵ Day, 'John Joseph Curtin', p. 234.
- ²⁶ Lloyd Ross, *John Curtin: A Biography*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1977, p. 275.
- ²⁷ *Digest of Decisions and Announcements and Important Speeches*, No. 22, 14 March 1942, pp. 10-12.
- ²⁸ Day, 'John Joseph Curtin', p. 234.
- ²⁹ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates* (House of Representatives), 170, 8 May 1942, pp. 1060-1061.
- ³⁰ Day, 'John Joseph Curtin', p. 235.
- ³¹ Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, p. 480.
- ³² Geoffrey Serle, 'John Curtin', in John Ritchie (ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 13, 1940-80, University Press, Carlton, Melbourne 1993 (4), p. 556.
- ³³ Day, 'John Joseph Curtin', p. 235.
- ³⁴ See, for example, Black, *In His Own Words*, pp. 205-206 and 233-237.
- ³⁵ See Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1942-1945*, p. 338 and generally pp. 326-352.

- ³⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 341 for a map of the relevant territory.
- ³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 337.
- ³⁸ Gavin Long, *The Six Years War. Australia in the 1939–45 War*, Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service, Sydney, 1973, p. 296.
- ³⁹ Gavin Souter, *Acts of Parliament. A Narrative History of the Senate and House of Representatives, Commonwealth of Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Burwood, 1988, p. 356.
- ⁴⁰ Serle, 'John Curtin', p. 555.
- ⁴¹ Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1942–1945*, p. 385.
- ⁴² Souter, *Acts of Parliament*, p. 298.
- ⁴³ David Lowe, 'Australia in the World', in Joan Beaumont, (ed.), *Australia's War 1939–45*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1996, p. 166.
- ⁴⁴ See NAA: A432, 1948/25, 'Legislative and Administrative Record of Curtin and Chifley Governments'.
- ⁴⁵ Geoffrey Sawer, *Australian Federal Politics and Law 1929–1949*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1963 (74), p. 133.
- ⁴⁶ Souter, *Acts of Parliament*, p. 356.
- ⁴⁷ 'The Royal Commission into Alleged Missing Documents relating to Defence Plans', also known as the 'Brisbane Line' Royal Commission.
- ⁴⁸ Souter, *Acts of Parliament*, p. 358.
- ⁴⁹ Serle, 'John Curtin', p. 556.
- ⁵⁰ Joan Beaumont, 'World War II', in Graeme Davison et al. (eds), *Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998 (99), p. 695.
- ⁵¹ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates* (House of Representatives), 176, 14 October 1943, p. 570.
- ⁵² Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1942–1945*, p. 480.
- ⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 481.
- ⁵⁴ See Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, p. 528 and Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1942–1945*, p. 483.
- ⁵⁵ See Tim Rowse, 'Curtin and Labor's Full Employment Promise', paper presented at *From Curtin to Coombs: War and Peace in Australia*, Seminar at Curtin University of Technology, 25 March 2003.
- ⁵⁶ *Digest of Decisions, Announcements and Important Speeches*, No. 46, 24 November 1942, cited in Black, *In His Own Words*, pp. 218–219.
- ⁵⁷ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates* (House of Representatives), 181, 28 February 1945, p. 173 cited in Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 250.
- ⁵⁸ Serle, *For Australia and Labor*, p. 47.
- ⁵⁹ *ibid.*

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Records in the National Archives

The National Archives of Australia holds significant records relating to John Curtin. Many of these records have been digitised and are available for viewing online through the National Archives' [RecordSearch](#) database.

The records are listed chronologically as far as possible under the following headings:

- Early life and career to 1935
- Leader of the Opposition, 1935–41
- Prime Minister, 1941–45
- Death and memorials, 1945–82
- Portraits and photographs, 1885–1945

Early life and career to 1935

FULL COURT CASE RECORDS, ANNUAL SINGLE NUMBER SERIES, 1903–73

A10078

Recorded by: High Court of Australia, Office of the Registry, Perth (Western Australia) (CA 8195)

Quantity: 5.76 metres (Canberra)

This series documents appeals from decisions made in the Perth Supreme Court by single Justices of the High Court and, later, appeals from decisions made in the Federal Court. It contains one item relating to John Curtin.

John Curtin v Hugh Annan Corbett, 1917–19

A10078, 1918/1

This file relates to an appeal by Curtin against the decision of the Court of Summary Jurisdiction, that statements Curtin had made were 'likely to cause disaffection to His Majesty' under the *War Precautions Regulations 1915*. Curtin had been found guilty and fined £15 plus costs and ordered to pay a surety of £25 for good behaviour, which was a heavy financial imposition at the time. The determination by the High Court of Australia is not recorded on the file, although the case is otherwise well documented.

MISCELLANEOUS PAPERS, 1906-21**M4124**

Recorded by: The Hon. Edward John Russell (CP 679)

Quantity: 0.72 metres (Melbourne)

This series consists of photographs and negatives of a small number of papers collected by Senator Edward John Russell. This series includes personal correspondence from prime ministers William Hughes and Andrew Fisher and leaflets from the *Labor Call* and the *Australian Worker*. One item in this series relates to John Curtin.

'How to vote' pamphlet picturing six Labor Senate candidates, 5 September 1914**M4124, 4**

This item includes a pamphlet for 'J Curtin, candidate for the Balaclava electorate', which states the ALP's platform and record of accomplishment. The item title on [RecordSearch](#) lists the other candidates' names (S Barker, A Blakey, E Findley, A N McKissock and E J Russell).

LIBRARY MATERIAL, DEWEY DECIMAL NUMBER SERIES, 1911-62**A1203**Recorded by: 1911 Department of Home Affairs (I) (CA 8)
1911-62 Prime Minister's Department (CA 12)

Quantity: 3.60 metres (Canberra)

This series consists of various reports, ministerial statements and documents relating to matters as varied as immigration, taxation, royal commissions and international affairs. Some material in this series dates back to 1903. It includes records relating to the Royal Commission on Child Endowment or Family Allowances, on which John Curtin served as a commissioner.

Report of the Royal Commission on Child Endowment or Family Allowances together with evidence, 1928**A1203, 362/7/AUS/1**

This item contains correspondence relating to a letter from John Curtin in October 1927 to the commission regarding representation of parties to the commission by counsels. This item is digitised.

Royal Commission on Child Endowment - minutes of evidence, 1928-29**A1203, 362/7/AUS/2****CORRESPONDENCE FILES, CLASS 5 (ROYAL COMMISSIONS), 1921-50****A460**

Recorded by: Prime Minister's Department (CA 12)

Quantity: 6.75 metres (Canberra)

This series consists of papers relating to particular royal commissions. Papers for each commission generally include correspondence relating to its establishment and procedures, transcripts of evidence, reports and subsequent correspondence consequent on the report. Some material in this series dates back to 1906. It includes records relating to the Royal Commission on Child Endowment or Family Allowances, on which John Curtin served as a commissioner.

Child Endowment - main file personnel - accommodation, 1927-29**A460, A5/32A**

Royal Commission - Child Endowment - general, 1927-28	A460, B5/32
Royal Commission on Child Endowment - financial, 1927-30	A460, D5/32
CORRESPONDENCE FILES, ALPHABETICAL SERIES, 1927-42	A981
Recorded by: Department of External Affairs (II) (CA 18)	
Quantity: 146.89 metres (Canberra)	
This series contains files and records on External Affairs subjects, including League of Nations and Committee of Imperial Defence material, and files from the Prime Minister's Department. It includes records relating to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conference Curtin attended in 1924. These items are digitised and available for viewing on RecordSearch .	
ILO - sixth conference - reports, 1906-29	A981, INT 24
This item includes reports from the 6th session of the ILO held in Geneva, June-July 1924, by the Australian Employers' Delegate (W C F Thomas), the Australian government delegate and the delegate representing the workers of Australia (John Curtin).	
ILO conferences - sixth conference - agenda, 1923-25	A981, INT 20
ILO - sixth conference - delegates, 1923-24	A981, INT 21
This item includes correspondence regarding the appointment of commissioners, administrative matters, travel and other matters. It includes cables to and from Curtin, along with state nominations for labour delegates.	
ILO sixth conference - financial, 1923-25	A981, INT 22
This item contains letters, cables and accounts relating to delegates, particularly Curtin. It also contains expense sheets and delegates' commissions to ILO.	
ILO - sixth session - recommendations and conventions, 1924-26	A981, INT 23
This item includes copies of the recommendations adopted at the sixth conference regarding the utilisation of workers' spare time and the responses of the states to the recommendation.	
CORRESPONDENCE OF THE COMMISSION, 1928	CP660/30
Recorded by: Royal Commission on Child Endowment or Family Allowances (CA 2444)	
Quantity: 0.18 metres (Canberra)	
This series consists of one item containing correspondence relating to the general administration of the commission. It includes lists of witnesses (by state) and a summary of points for the commission's consideration.	
Royal Commission on Child Endowment - correspondence, 1928	CP660/30, 1

CORRESPONDENCE FILES, ANNUAL SINGLE NUMBER SERIES, 1929–**A432**

Recorded by: 1929– Attorney-General's Department (CA 5)
 1958 Deputy Crown Solicitor's Office, ACT –
 portion relating to Deputy Crown Solicitor's
 matters (CA 832)

Quantity: 2021.79 metres (Canberra); 352.62 metres (Sydney);
 0.56 metres (Darwin)

This is the main correspondence series of the Attorney-General's Department. Some material in this series dates back to 1901. It includes records relating to the Royal Commission on Child Endowment or Family Allowances, on which John Curtin served as a commissioner.

Royal Commission on Child Endowment, 1927–29

A432, 1929/219**TRANSCRIPTS OF HEARINGS AND RELATED HEARING DOCUMENTS OF COMMONWEALTH GRANTS COMMISSION, 1933–73****A2776**

Recorded by: 1933 Prime Minister's Department (CA 12)
 1933–73 Commonwealth Grants Commission (I) (CA 261)
 1973 Grants Commission (CA 1535)

Quantity: 17.82 metres (Canberra)

This series contains transcripts of hearings of the Commonwealth Grants Commission and some related material, including published reports, government or semi-government statistical publications and other material produced as evidence by the states during the hearings. It contains many items relating to the commission on which Curtin represented Western Australia.

South Australia – evidence, 1933

A2776, SA 1933

John Curtin represented Western Australia at these proceedings in South Australia.



From left to right: William Morris Hughes, John Curtin and HRH the Duke of Gloucester, Canberra, 1945. NAA: M1218, 9

