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Gallipoli, embezzlement and a death in the bush: John Curtin's first war

Public lecture by JCPML Visiting Scholar Dr David Day on 23 February 1998.

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John Curtin is fixed in the popular imagination as the sixty year old prime minister, the defender of the nation in the Second World War. But there was another John Curtin and another world war in which he played a prominent role, not as an elderly and ailing defender of the nation but as a young and strident opponent of war and a staunch defender of the working class. How these two roles are reconciled is one of the central quandaries for any biographer of John Curtin. How did a man who described war in 1914 as the 'assassin's trade' come to be directing a war in 1941? How did a man who talked of revolution in the First World War come to practise reform in the Second World War? Part of the answer lies in the events of 1915.

On 25 April 1915 Australia became a nation. Or so the newspaper editorials claimed. Australia, intoned the Melbourne Argus, had made its 'European debut as a fighting unit of the Empire ...' The shedding of Australian blood on the distant Gallipoli battlefield marked the end of an age of relative innocence for the new Commonwealth of former colonies. It also challenged the optimistic assumptions of those Australians who had been marching to a different beat, who had been anticipating the inevitable victory of socialism and who now watched with dismay as the army of Australian workers was diverted down the path of militarism and imperialism. For the young and idealistic John Curtin, it would be just one of the pressures that pushed him later that year into a personal crisis of faith.

This personal crisis, which had been slowly building over the previous year, suddenly became public in November 1915 when Curtin, after just being re-elected as secretary of the Timber Workers' Union, abruptly resigned for reasons that his biographer, Lloyd Ross, claimed to find 'difficult to understand'. In resigning, Curtin had turned his back on a secure and relatively well-paid position to plunge into a boozy period of self-examination and reflection. But the reflections from the bottom of a beer glass are not often clear or comforting, particularly to a person prone to depression. By June 1916, he had sunk as far as he could go and was admitted to hospital in a vain attempt to toss the drink for good. It was a sad interlude for a man who had been brimming with the optimism of the new century and who had been set on achieving victory for socialism.

What were these pressures that crowded in upon Curtin in the first twelve months of the Great War-what he described to his future wife Elsie as 'the circumstances of the time'-such that they prompted his breakdown, producing perhaps the most significant turning point in his life and steeling him for the challenges that he would later have to face as prime minister in the Second World War. The pressures were many. In fact, it is not so much surprising that he broke down when he did, but that he held out for so long.

Curtin had come to the Timber Workers' Union in 1911 after nearly a decade of activity within the Melbourne socialist circle. Like many people, Curtin was searching for a cure for society's ills, hoping to harness the prevailing optimism of the age, with its notions of inexorable progress, into an unstoppable revolt against capitalism. The idea of progress had taken particular hold on the human imagination in the nineteenth century as the marvels of the industrial revolution transformed people's lives. Curtin grew up during this age of marvels, an age that saw the introduction of telephones and electricity, of steam ships and motor cars, and which promised a future of even greater marvels. Among the books that have survived from John Curtin's library is Alfred Wallace's *The Wonderful Century: The Age of New Ideas in Science and Invention*, first published in London in 1903. And Curtin, like most people, seems to have imbibed its central thesis. In 1915, he published an article in the *Timber Worker* which canvassed the tremendous technological advances that

had been recently achieved and which looked forward to the marvellous advances, such as airships and the 'stupendous force' of radium, that were in sight. It was not so much 'future shock' as 'future anticipation'. And the future that Curtin anticipated included a society organised on socialist lines.

The industrial revolution had not only brought technological marvels but had also produced a new social class-the proletariat. And it was in this new class that socialists such as Curtin placed their hopes for the future. They saw the organised proletariat as the engine of progress and its rightful beneficiary. The problem was that, as yet, the proletariat was more the victim than the beneficiary. However, just as progress was inexorable in its advance so too would be the future dominance of the proletariat and the consequent collapse of capitalism. Curtin and many of his socialist contemporaries believed this with a religious zeal.

In embracing such a notion of socialism, Curtin was able to fill the spiritual void left empty by his discarding of Catholicism. His shift from the Catholic church had been by way of the Salvation Army where his passion for social reform combined with his need for religion. It was as a short-lived devotee of the Salvos that Curtin first stood on a street corner propagating a message of hope and faith. But Curtin soon left their uniformed ranks, perhaps driven out by his inability to follow their temperance creed or, more likely, by a conviction that the relief they provided to the poor and down-trodden did not offer a long-term solution to their plight. It was, as he later disparagingly described it, mere 'charity-mongering'. For a time, Curtin dallied with rationalism but remained unsatisfied. His shift to socialism in 1902 finally satisfied his need for an all-embracing faith while allowing him to retain his attachment to reason.

Curtin's conversion to socialism provided him with a world view that was both comforting and inspiring. It also provided him with an alternative church to the one that he had forsaken. The socialist group with which he was most closely involved-the Victorian Socialist Party-came complete with many of the familiar trappings of a church. It had a Sunday school for the children, who would recite the ten commandments of socialism, baptisms for the new-born and funerals for the departed. But it was much more than that. Its cooperative bakery put bread on the

workers' tables while its cobbler provided shoes for their feet. It had 'a brass band, orchestra, choir, dramatic club, gym, [and] teenage groups É' There were evening lectures in city theatres, street corner meetings in working class suburbs and high teas in the socialist hall. There were picnics in the bush and camps in the mountains. As Bertha Walker wrote, the party 'aimed at fulfilling the requirements of its members in every phase of life's activities'. Curtin was involved in many of its activities, from speaking on street corners and lecturing on political economy, to teaching the young girls to dance and playing jacks with the children.

Socialism not only provided an alternative church for Curtin but also, it seems, an alternative family. This operated on several levels. There was the sense of being part of the mass family of the working class instead of, in Curtin's case, the family of Irish Catholics. Belonging to the socialist family allowed Curtin to step outside of the sectarian boundaries that so circumscribed people's lives at the time. There was also the sense of being part of the extended family that was the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP). The party had been consciously established by Tom Mann as an inclusive party, a family party that would encompass women and children as well as the men who usually dominated political activity. And there was the sense of being part of the individual families within the VSP. Curtin developed especially close relations with the members of several such families.

It is likely that this notion of socialism as an alternative family was one of the prime attractions for Curtin, whose relationship with his own family had obvious difficulties. Not only had he abandoned the church to which they still belonged, but he had the pressures that devolve upon an eldest son when the father becomes incapacitated. Curtin's father had retired from the police force through ill-health when Curtin was five and later had failed in his alternative employment as a publican trying to ply beer to depression and drought-battered customers. As a result, Curtin's childhood was marked by a dramatic decline in the family's fortunes and the forced elevation of the studious Curtin to the position of breadwinner. His mother Kate also assumed a more important role within the family as they sought to weather the economic adversity and keep one jump ahead of the rent collector. While

Curtin accepted the responsibilities that were thrust upon him, it would be unusual if he did not also feel resentment at having to do so.

This change in family circumstances is unlikely to have occurred without a consequent decline in Curtin's image of his father and of his father's authority within the family. It would not have helped that Curtin senior was later known around Brunswick as 'Bumble', because of a limp, and that this nickname attached itself to Curtin as well. It is perhaps for these reasons that Curtin largely drew a veil of silence over his early life, rarely reminiscing about it other than to leave the general impression of having endured hardship as a youth.

One of the attractions of socialism for Curtin may well have been that it provided him with two alternative father figures, Tom Mann and Frank Anstey, who provided figures of strength, authority and advice. (There was also a third father figure-his future father-in-law Abraham Needham-with whom Curtin developed a close personal and intellectual relationship prior to his marriage to Elsie Needham and who moved in with them after Curtin's move to Perth and subsequent marriage to Elsie in 1917.) What is relevant to Curtin's crisis in 1915 is the weight of responsibility that devolved upon him as the eldest son and family breadwinner and the frustrating consequences this had in possibly delaying his marriage plans.

Once Curtin had made his personal commitment to the socialist cause, he had to face the question that all socialists confronted at that time-how best to achieve their desired aim. The failure of industrial action in the 1890s had pushed socialists down the political path in the expectation that a Labor government would be able to create socialism through legislation. But then the limited achievements of early socialist parties, combined with the readiness of leading Labor politicians to abandon their principles as they assumed the comfortable trappings of political power, forced a reassessment of the political path.

Curtin was among those who were suspicious of the parliamentary road to socialism, believing instead that a combination of industrial action and propaganda would win the workers to socialism. He dedicated himself to urging the demise of fractious craft unions and fostering in their place the growth of industry-wide unions capable of

being coalesced into a union confederation that he expected would be sufficiently strong to overthrow capitalism. Although he stood as a Labor candidate in the 1914 federal election, it did not signify a reversal of his anti-parliamentary views. It is likely that his principal purpose was to use the election as just another platform from which to broadcast his views. He certainly had little hope of winning the safe conservative seat.

Curtin fought the 1914 election against the background of the war's outbreak. Initially, he saw the far-off conflict as having a positive effect on his crusade for socialism. According to Curtin:

' Progress makes headway most rapidly in the periods when the world is torrent-tossed and thunder-stricken. All the great historic epochs are marked by blood and battle.'

He told the readers of the *Timber Worker* that they were not witnessing the triumph of militarism and imperialism but their death throes:

' Militarism and despotic domination are making their last stand in their last ditch. The official cut-throats of the universe are rending each other in one final orgy of disaster.'

Once this conflict between the rival empires was over, Curtin predicted that the labour movement would be able to sow the seeds of its own fair future in the ashes of the capitalist past. But the war soon would shake the foundations even of Curtin's faith.

Initially, events seemed to give credence to Curtin's optimism. The results of the 1914 federal election saw the number of Labor voters increase by over fifty percent to more than one million. That was more than one million soldiers in the socialist army, as Curtin was wont to put it, and proved that the movement was not 'something ephemeral'. But the movement was divided by the war, with national and imperial loyalties competing with the socialist faith for the allegiance of the labour movement. As an internationalist, Curtin could not conceive of fighting in a war against what he saw as his fellow workers. However, many of his comrades in the

labour movement either abandoned their faith in the socialist creed and joined the colours of the King, or saw no essential conflict between the two. Curtin, though, kept the pages of the *Timber Worker* staunchly socialist and as anti-war as he dared.

Just days before the landing at Gallipoli, Curtin's optimism and sense of purpose seemed undimmed. On 9 April 1915 the *Timber Worker* carried an account of the increasing union membership in Australia and the tentative moves towards union amalgamations which together suggested to Curtin that the workers were 'realising that the class war ... is a vital truth' and that the hoped-for One Big Union would ultimately be 'an accomplished fact'. A practical sign of Curtin's confidence was seen in an advertisement by the New South Wales branch of the union for two organisers to recruit country members to the cause. They were offered a salary of six pounds a week and a motor bicycle, although they had to provide their own petrol. The Victorian branch had already appointed two such organisers to cover its State. So, on this front at least, the outlook seemed promising. But how did Curtin reconcile his over-riding commitment to the class war when Australian men, including many of his socialist comrades, were about to fight a real war on the other side of the world?

Portraying the socialist movement as a church, and socialism as being akin to true Christianity, was one way that Curtin was able to take refuge from the barbs of the patriots and to excuse his absence from the ranks, although his poor eyesight would have given him automatic exemption. Like other socialists of the time, Curtin also likened the labour movement to an army which doubtless helped to assuage the guilt and the doubts about their manliness that were raised by them not enlisting in the regular army. In the case of Curtin, who had proved his manliness on the sporting field, but who remained plagued with doubts about his physical courage, the need to feel part of this alternative army still loomed large. In a front page article in the *Timber Worker* sixteen days prior to Gallipoli, Curtin tried to arouse support for the coming Eight Hours Day procession through Melbourne streets by likening the labour movement to a 'marching army of the proletariat'. Describing it as 'the army of the Brave', Curtin painted a stirring picture of this socialist army marching 'with war in its heart [as it] flings itself forward to the rescue of the oppressed, the disinherited and the robbed'.

The events at Gallipoli changed the nature of the war for Australians, and in different ways for Curtin. It was no longer tenable to liken a peaceful procession of unionists through Melbourne streets to a marching army. The initial surge of patriotism at the outbreak of war now returned in tidal wave proportions, drowning the voices of those men and women who tried to stand in its way. Once news of the terrible casualties reached Australia, along with stirring reports of great courage under fire, Curtin moderated his anti-war rhetoric, announcing in a solemn, black-bordered page that: 'We mourn with those whose homes are desolate, whose hearts are anguished'. At the same time, while saluting what he called the 'magnificent courage' of 'our brothers', Curtin was careful to draw a lesson from their sacrifice, suggesting that once it was redirected back home to the socialist cause, it 'may help us to win É social emancipation'. In the meantime, he counselled his readers to 'consecrate' themselves 'anew to the movement which builds for social justice and the world's peace' and to look forward to 'the day when the world will be governed by the workmen of the world, and war made impossible'. Curtin's enjoinder was in vain. Far from strengthening the labour movement, the war almost destroyed it. Imperial loyalty, rather than socialist fervour, swept through Labor's ranks, leading among other things to the expulsion of Frank Anstey from the party for continuing to question the war from a socialist perspective.

Anstey's expulsion, combined with Curtin's increasing frustration with his work as a union official, caused Curtin to question his own role in the labour movement. Neither the trade union nor the parliamentary path seemed any longer to have socialism as its end point. As union secretary, Curtin was frustrated about the prospects of enlisting the workers in the socialist cause or even of getting his fellow officials to see beyond their narrow concerns to the bigger socialist picture. Moreover, the Labor Party, once more in government, proved a bitter disappointment. It not only embraced the war effort but failed to protect its working class supporters from the economic ravages that came as a consequence of war. As Curtin caustically observed in August 1915:

'It is true that Labor Governments rule Australia, and it is also true that all the things we set out to accomplish have not been accomplished. Unemployment, slums,

unrest, boys in the gutter, women in the streets, avoidable disease, monopoly, high prices, low wages, hunger, starvation and misery are here despite our mastery of the political machine.'

Not only that. In expelling Anstey, the party was attacking perhaps the primary keeper of the socialist faith within its ranks.

Curtin threw his support behind his old friend and political mentor. The July 1915 issue of the Timber Worker carried what Curtin called a 'momentous article' by Anstey which roundly criticised the Labor Party for betraying its principles, claiming that it was 'more Tory than the Tory'. As the call for reinforcements for the front became more shrill, Curtin's anti-war stance became increasingly isolated within the labour movement. But still he stuck to his principles. When a 'monster demonstration', backed by the Trades Hall Council and the Labor Party, was mooted for Melbourne's Exhibition Building to raise money for wounded soldiers, the Timber Workers refused to support it. Arguing that the care of wounded soldiers should be the responsibility of the national government, Curtin claimed that the Labor movement 'loathes with all its soul the spectacle of empty benevolence and collections and the like'. Curtin's rejection of the 'monster demonstration' placed him at odds with the bulk of the labour movement and added to the crisis of faith that had gradually been enveloping him.

It was at this time that Curtin wrote a long and nostalgic article in the Socialist newspaper commemorating the ten years since the inception of the Victorian Socialist Party. Although personally remaining true to the socialist faith, maintaining that 'outside Socialism there is no redemption', Curtin's faith in the inevitability of socialism was clearly being challenged by the times. There was recognition in his article that his would not be the generation that would usher in socialism but would instead have to pass the standard to the next generation. Instead of the former days of hope, when there were 'giants in the land' and 'magic in the air', they were now faced with what he called 'these days of proletarian eclipse'. After having rejected the parliamentary road to socialism and opting to pursue industrial organisation, he was increasingly disillusioned about his working class foot soldiers-'the great mob' as he now cynically described them. The move from

craft to industrial unionism was proving to be painfully slow, with his fellow union officials showing themselves to have a sense of their own vested interests that was distressingly similar to that shown by labour's parliamentary representatives. His arguments for union amalgamations went largely unanswered, even within his own union which seemed more concerned with resisting the predatory moves of the Australian Workers' Union than putting an end to what Curtin blasted as 'suicidal sectionalism', with the workers at one timber mill being represented by no less than fourteen different unions.

While Curtin continued to use the pages of the Timber Worker to exhort the union's members to prepare for the class war, much of his time was spent in chasing overdue subscriptions and enrolling new members. After a successful recruitment campaign conducted in the timber camps of the bush in early 1914, Curtin planned a similar campaign in the timber yards of Melbourne, announcing that he would be 'interviewing personally members who are behind in their contributions'. He berated such back-sliders for playing hide and seek whenever he appeared and promised that 'Not one mill and not one man is going to be missed', that each man 'will be given every chance of demonstrating the faith he possesses.':

'In every yard and mill the tocsin will sound; the call to meeting will reverberate again and again, until every man has made response.'

But they mostly stayed away from his socialist lectures, ignored the union meetings and the Eight Hours Day parade and tried to avoid paying their dues.

At the same time, they seemed to Curtin to be forever besieging the union office to make claims for accident insurance. In such a dangerous industry, insurance against accidents provided a compelling reason for membership. To Curtin, though, it was a time-wasting distraction from the principal task of defeating capitalism. Despite arguing repeatedly that these benevolent functions were 'incidental to our work', he was unable to have them hived off to a joint union body. Moreover, his earlier success as secretary in dramatically building up the union was now at risk.

Between 1911 and 1914, the membership of the union in Victoria had increased under Curtin's leadership by more than fifty percent, from 2,410 to 3,724. This was mainly achieved through an intensive recruitment drive among rural members, in which Curtin played an active role criss-crossing the Victorian countryside by train, cajoling the rough-hewn workers in their isolated camps to join together behind the newly-designed banner of the union. However, his achievements as secretary began to unravel in 1915 as the number of new members slowed markedly and hundreds of existing members joined the forces or were transferred to other unions on leaving the depressed timber industry. Overall, the total membership declined by nearly 147 members in 1915 and more than four hundred members the following year.

There was a more dramatic drop in the union's revenue, from £3,869 in 1914 to £3,216 in 1915. More worrying, in both 1914 and 1915 the union's expenditure was exceeding its revenue, forcing it to dip into its limited reserves to make up the difference. The problem seems to have centred on the commissions paid to the union's voluntary officials in the country camps to collect subscriptions and recruit new members. As well, the salaries and other costs involved in having two rural organisers visiting the camps does not seem to have matched the resulting revenue that was raised by their activity. As if this was not sufficient burden, Curtin was also beset at this time by the sudden discovery that more than £200 was missing from the union's funds.

It was an embarrassing lapse by Curtin, who prided himself on his financial management skills after his years as a cost clerk. Arguing in his annual report that 'the position is not anything like hopeless', Curtin blamed it on union officials who were elected from the ranks to do accounting tasks for which they had no special training or qualification. In fact, Curtin was covering for his assistant who had used Curtin's absences in the bush, and resorts to the bottle, to defraud the union. In a letter to Elsie, Curtin came clean about the fraud:

' You will remember "dear", "delightful", and "pleasant" Mr Schumke, my "faithful", "diligent" Assistant Secretary. Well for ten months-ever since January-he was systematically embezzling the money of the Branch and I could not make it out until one day I suddenly called in the Auditors and he cleared. We got him back in three

weeks time and arranged with his father to guarantee the amount we have proved to be taken-Total £234-9-2. One rotten episode sending John nearly silly.'

One reason why the episode sent John 'nearly silly' was the reflection upon his reputation. It was a grievous embarrassment for a man who prided himself, above all else, on his integrity. In its wake, stricter book-keeping arrangements were introduced and the office staff and country organisers were reduced in number.

An unexpected pressure of a different kind came suddenly in October 1915 when the shocking news reached Melbourne that union activist and former organiser, Steve Reynolds, had been killed at an isolated timber camp at Wye River in the Otway Ranges south west of Melbourne. A massive log he was sawing had begun to move from under him, tossing Reynolds to the ground in front of the rolling log. It took three days for the body to be carried over a rough bush track and thence by train to Melbourne for burial. Curtin joined other union officials, together with Reynolds' widow and six children, in mourning at their comrade's funeral. It would be surprising if this terrible tragedy did not cause Curtin to reflect further on the unsatisfying direction of his own life. As it happened, the issue of the Timber Worker that carried news of Reynolds' tragic death also carried the news of Curtin's sudden resignation.

Reynolds' death and Schumke's fraud added to the personal pressures crowding in upon Curtin. In January 1915 he had turned thirty, an age that forces people to assess their past achievements and the future direction of their lives. There was much for Curtin to be disturbed about in such an assessment. In 1912, he had found the love of his life, Elsie Needham, but he would not marry her until 1917. It is unclear what kept them apart for so long, although it is usually ascribed to Curtin's drinking. It may also have been due to the responsibility he continued to bear for his parents and his consequent inability to embark financially upon marriage and the establishment of a separate household. Curtin's salary as union secretary allowed his parents to afford more comfortable and secure lodgings in Brunswick but it also locked him, as the eldest son, into providing for their continuing welfare. Having a family of his own must have seemed ever more elusive, particularly with the equally elusive Elsie away in South Africa for much of 1915. Curtin got a promise of marriage from her before she left. His bouts of drinking would also have seriously consumed

his income. While he found himself unable to abstain from alcohol, he was forced to abstain from marriage with Elsie despite impressing upon the readers of the Timber Worker the importance of early marriage.

By suddenly resigning when he did, Curtin gave vent to his frustrations with the labour movement, and with his life as a whole. In a post-resignation letter to Elsie, Curtin revealed that he had been thinking of resigning for some time but had held back in order to fight the 1914 election and issues arising from the war. Now he claimed that there was nothing further he could do within the union, that 'every man is in the Union, the newspaper is a going concern, revenue is assured' and everything was 'routine'. This was not quite true, as he must have realised. The revenue was being squeezed, membership was declining and the industry was in a war-induced slump. There was much for an energetic and sober secretary to do. But there was little scope within the union for an ardent socialist and committed anti-militarist in the face of a war that was sucking into its angry vortex the loyalties and lives of his fellow unionists. So, as he informed Elsie, he planned to retreat into his 'shell to ruminate, prepare and qualify ... for ... the hour of duty and the day of golden opportunity' that he still anticipated would come when the war was done. In a reference for their departing secretary, Curtin's comrades on the union's management committee saluted his 'exceptional talent and ability' and predicted that 'his future in the great Labor Movement is assured'. They were more right than they could have imagined. But there were many more days of despair to be endured by Curtin before that future would be realised.