



CURTIN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

The art of the possible

Speech given by Lieutenant General John Sanderson AC, Governor of Western Australia at the launch exhibition *The art of the possible* on 14 February 2005.

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In many ways, while not the last of lands to be swept up in colonisation, Australia represents the high watermark of that great period of European expansion during which the newly formed nation states, buoyed by the Industrial Revolution and advanced military technology, competed with each other to generate power and fortune offshore in the territories of other people.

And as that tide has receded and the peoples of Asia, Africa and the Middle East have reasserted control over their traditional lands and regions of interest, Australia has had to find ways of adjusting to the new realities of the global balance of power and a changing neighbourhood. The most significant 20th Century markers along the way were:

Firstly, the act of federation which created the Australian nation from six former colonies in 1901,

Closely followed by the First World War in which the European empires poured out their life's blood and the life's blood of their colonies on the battlefields of Europe, putting to death at the same time the ailing Ottoman Empire, and unleashing on the globe the revolutionary forces of Marxism/Leninism,

The Second World War that activated the revolutionary forces of nationalism in the colonies and saw the establishment of the United Nations, and

The end of the Cold War in 1989 and the collapse of the Russian Empire, which heralded the end of European power in Islam and the Far East.

It is this latter phase that is still being played out today that draws us into our contemporary dilemma of where Australia stands as a middle, and dare I say it, emerging continental power in a changing world.

Which makes the subject of our gathering today, the changing focus of Australia's Foreign Policy, that much more important. I am very pleased to be invited to the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library as part of the 60th anniversary of that great Australian's death to launch this exhibition – The Art of the Possible: Creating an Independent Australian Foreign Policy.

Despite the pervasive anxiety about its isolation, Australia really didn't have a distinguishable foreign policy prior to the Second World War. It was represented essentially by Great Britain in its strategic dealings, having no diplomatic representation outside London.

While the shift in the balance of power away from the British Empire must have been reasonably obvious to those who were steeped in the Great Game, as the strategic manoeuvre of the great Powers was sometimes known, Australia remained essentially British and threats to its interests were generally seen to be synonymous with threats to the interests of the Empire.

Even though it was now the British Commonwealth, most Australians basked in the fact that the map of the world remained comfortably Empire pink from East to West and from North to South.

Britannia, together with the emerging new player, the United States, seemed to be unchallenged in ruling the waves.

Australia was not alone then in the wishful thinking that has always, and continues, to play a major part in strategic decision making – a human weakness to only see and hear what you want to see and hear. Besides this flaw that it shared with the rest of the western world, Australia's dependency has always owed something to a

reluctance to accept the full cost of establishing the foundations of a longer term strategy. How to be taken seriously and given a seat at the table while avoiding excessive financial commitment has always therefore been a primary consideration in peacetime.

In war things had been different. The vast majority of the 102,000 Australian killed in action or who expired as a result of wounds received on the field of battle, died before 1942 defending the Empire – a good enough reason to be taken seriously by the British you would think.

It has been said that after the terrible losses of Passchendaele and Verdun, Great Britain and France lost the capacity to make the high sacrifices needed for Empire. Survivors of those great battles also bore the brunt of the Great Depression of the late 20s/early 30s, contributing to their lack of enthusiasm for war. Whatever the reason, it suited everyone to play down the emerging threats to the balance of power in Europe and the Middle and Far East, and the momentum of the nationalist movements in Asia and on the Sub Continent.

Imperial planning, as we now know, through both its flawed assumptions and miscalculation of the unprecedented ferocity of the enemy, left all corners of the Globe and Empire at the mercy of Axis forces. This forced Australia to recognise that it had to make new arrangements if it was to continue to exercise any independence at all. In fact, at the end of 1941, not just Australia, but the whole world, Europeans, Russians and Chinese included, was dependent on the Americans entering the war on the side of the allies – not simply as a logistic base and supplier, but adding its vast manpower to the allied cause in the field, the air and at sea. This was a truly global war.

Looked at in this context, Curtin's decision to throw Australia's lot in with America does not seem a matter of choice. Who else was there? Certainly, national morale is unlikely to have stood up to the sort of scorched earth defence that was the planned alternative to having trained Australian formations back home and American naval and air forces on the approaches.

It was of course a matter of priorities. Instead of putting the Empire first as Churchill, the great Empire strategist desired, Curtin put Australia first. He then threw the nation's weight behind its new found champion in General Douglas MacArthur, whose personal interest and priorities in avenging a strategic defeat coincided most closely with Australia's interest in preventing the Japanese from gaining a foothold on our shores and driving them as far away and as quickly as possible.

We know most of the story now. After a courageous and desperate covering force battle by the Militia, the 7th Division Second AIF fought the Japanese to a standstill on the Kokoda Trail and the 6th Division now joined by the Americans drove them back past Kokoda onto the coastal plain in a fight to the death to destroy the Japanese beachhead. By the end of December 1942, after victory at Kokoda, the Coral Sea and Midway the tide in the Pacific had turned and the Americans were on their way to Japan. It was nearly another three years and many bloody battles before victory in the Pacific but there was really little doubt that it would come.

These dramatic events provide a cornerstone in Australian history. From the perspective of the subject that draws us together today, it is the behind the scenes activities of the Curtin Government and the Minister for External Affairs Dr Evatt in particular that raises the greatest interest. Despite the declaration in the 1931 Statute of Westminster, that:

'the self-governing dominions of the Empire were fully independent states, free from any British control, and able to form their own Defence and foreign policies',

the experience of the early years of the Second World War for both Australia and New Zealand was essentially one of being taken for granted – just like any other colony. Menzies melancholy statement automatically committing Australians to war against Germany in 1939 would have added to this assumption of unquestioning commitment. His agreement without consultation with Australian military leaders to the use of the 6th Division in the military failure in Greece would have further reinforced this view.

Faced with the prospect of being similarly taken for granted in the post war wash up, the time had arrived in 1942 to generate some strategic leverage.

To prove that there are some distinct advantages in having New Zealand outside the Federation, the building of an alliance with our neighbour to generate that leverage for the future was the first real act of independence in Foreign Policy for both countries. The ANZAC Agreement of 1944 raised eyebrows in both Britain and America.

Conservatives within our own country expressed concern that this would be taken as an affront. When you analyse it, the sentiments behind this move have been a part of Australia's posture ever since, and point to a real concern when our two nations differ over the extent to which they support the moves of big powers.

What is truly gratifying about the period that this exhibition celebrates is not so much the individual acts and statements made by Curtin during the transition to an independent foreign policy, but the overarching strategic awareness that it portrays of the changed nature of the post war world and the need for Australia to engage in a way that could give her some influence in shaping the outcomes.

Australia could no longer aspire to be a bastion of white British supremacy in the southern hemisphere – a sentiment that had underlain the federation debate. She had to begin the process of establishing alliances with her neighbours on a very broad front.

When you think about it, Evatt's influence in the shaping of that post war environment is truly staggering. In 1939 Australia had little influence at all in the international environment. By 1944 it was a significant player in shaping many of the instruments that would define the international protocols and conventions of the next half century and indeed, underlie the strategic debate of the first decade of the 21st Century.

Curtin, Chifley and Evatt were not simply about giving small nations some influence over the power play of the big nations. Through the Bretton Woods Agreement and the Charter of the United Nations itself they struggled to gain recognition of the

rights of individuals in the social and economic development of international policy. Although not completely successful, their influence resounds to this day and has won many friends and gained much influence for Australia along the way. Just occasionally, one wonders whether the true nature of this legacy is fully appreciated by those who today contend in the international environment on our behalf.

You must make your own mind up about these things. Professor David Black has written an outstanding essay on this period of changing outreach with the same title as this exhibition. I recommend it strongly to everyone. To my mind, it is essential reading for those who are concerned about where we are going in this next phase of global development.

This exhibition is a timely reminder that strategic surprise is always around the corner, and when it comes it is national unity and resilience generated from the words and deeds of national leaders that not simply carries the day, but lays the foundations for a better tomorrow.

That we continue to generate strategic power from our cultural affiliations is undeniable, but today, Technology, Geography and Economics are the key drivers of our future. The emergence of China as a potentially great economic power with an imposing history and culture in this part of the World where we live, demands a rapid maturing of Australian strategic thinking and action. We need new friends and new alliances, and we need to build on the credibility established for us among the smaller nations by the actions of those entrusted with national leadership back at the great turning point of World War Two.

Nothing is linear about these new circumstances in which we contend and the potential for chaos is high. Our historical predilection to follow the strategic interests and policies of those who live on the other side of the world should be tempered by the same sort of hard nosed view of our future that grew out of the crisis of 1942 and was played out with such commitment and passion for Australia and its people by Prime Minister John Curtin and his wartime cabinet.

On that note, ladies and gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to open this exhibition of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library: *The Art of the Possible: Creating an Independent Australian Foreign Policy 1901-1945*