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John Curtin as war leader and defence minister

Public lecture presented by JCPML Visiting Scholar Professor David Horner on 5 October 2006.

It is both a privilege and a pleasure to be here this afternoon. It is a privilege to be invited to speak to a distinguished audience at the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, following in the steps of a succession of prime ministers, party leaders and eminent scholars. I thank Curtin University and the Director of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, Ms Imogen Garner, and her staff for that honour.

But as for the pleasure, initially I was not too sure. As I prepared for my visit I faced the prospect with some trepidation. Firstly, I knew that I was coming to the home of John Curtin to place the record of its favourite son under scrutiny. And secondly, as an ardent Sydney Swans supporter, I faced the real possibility of addressing a lot of glum locals. Fortunately, after the events of the weekend I do not need to worry about that. Congratulations to the West Coast Eagles.

Nonetheless, it is a great pleasure to have cause to revisit this city, where in the past I have undertaken research, particularly at some of the military establishments, while writing books on the Australian Defence Force and the Special Air Service Regiment.

Indeed it was at the headquarters of the SAS Regiment, at Swanbourne, in February 1998 that a ceremony took place that has some resonance with the topic of this afternoon's lecture – John Curtin as War Leader and Defence Minister. On that occasion in 1998 the Prime Minister, John Howard, and the Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley (who delivered the lecture here in 2001), went out to the barracks to wish the troops, 'Godspeed, safe return and a very successful mission', as they

headed off for Kuwait to take part in what was expected to be an attack on Iraq. Both Howard and Beazley understood that as political leaders they were responsible for sending young Australians off to war. More than half a century earlier, in May 1944 John Curtin visited RAAF bomber squadrons based at Lincolnshire in England and watched the aircraft roar down the runway bound for Europe. As the bombers neared the coast of France he sent them a signal: 'Good luck - Curtin'.

The extent to which political leaders in a democracy should take a 'hands on' role in military affairs in times of war or conflict has always been a matter of contention. The French Prime Minister during the First World War, Georges Clemenceau, once declared: 'war is too important to be left to the generals.' The experience of the First World War drove home the notion that in a democracy, political leaders should take a strong hand in directing war strategy as well as marshalling the nation's resources.

For a country like Australia in the First World War, the practice of this theory was less clear. When the Australian Government sent the First Australian Imperial Force (the AIF) overseas it effectively handed control of it to British authorities. This meant that the first time that the Australian Government knew of the landing of Australian troops at Gallipoli was after the event. Nonetheless, as the war developed, the Australian Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, realised that he needed to become involved in military matters. Thus after visiting the troops in France in 1916, and noting the heavy casualties, he began his efforts to introduce conscription. In 1918 he was back in France, where he took a strong role in matters such as selecting the commander of the Australian corps, and later, demanding the relief of Australian troops from combat. It was a foretaste of the problem faced by successive Australian political leaders in the wars in which the Australian armed forces were placed under the control of larger coalition partners. Indeed this has been the case in all of Australia's wars.

Although responsibility for the conduct of war rests upon politicians, almost invariably they lack the detailed military knowledge possessed by their military advisers. Yet in war or times of national crisis political leaders cannot avoid close involvement in military strategy, which is, after all, the execution of government policy. There is great danger, however, when the politician over-rides considered

military advice. To what extent then should politicians interfere in the conduct of the war? There are times when political leaders have been accused of interfering too much. President Lyndon Johnson's selection of bombing targets in North Vietnam is a case in point. After that war the US military tried to put in place structures to limit the President's opportunities to interfere. But a recent book, Eliot Cohen's *Supreme Command*, suggests that great victories are more often achieved precisely when national leaders involve themselves in the pursuit of policy.

It is against this sort of criteria that Curtin's performance as leader during the war must be judged.

John Curtin became Prime Minister on 7 October 1941 – I note that in two days time this will be 65 years ago – and he died in harness on 5 July 1945. During that time, as the Japanese thrust south, Australia faced the most serious crisis in its history. To many people, the mere correlation of this challenge with his term of office has been enough to suggest that Curtin was Australia's greatest war leader. One writer has even referred to him as the 'saviour of Australia'. But as the official historian, Paul Hasluck, commented, "'Saviour of Australia' may seem to be true if it means that, on the political scene, Curtin was the one who was crucified but in all other meanings it deserves a wider and more critical assessment'. In this lecture I offer at least part of a reassessment.

I know that some of my views might be unpalatable to those who believe that John Curtin was Australia's greatest prime minister. I note however, that Dr John Edwards, who was a fellow at the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library in 2000, wrote in his book, *Curtin's Gift*, that while Curtin as warlord 'was not in the class of Churchill and Roosevelt, to see him in this diminishing way ... is to miss the real Curtin story'. He went on to argue that Curtin laid the economic foundation for modern Australia. I do not have the background to pass judgment on Curtin's economic legacy, but we do Curtin a disservice if we do not at least look at his role as war leader in a dispassionate manner.

Soon after the outbreak of the Second World War the Menzies Government had split the Department of Defence into four departments: Defence Coordination, Navy, Army

and Air. Menzies, the Prime Minister, took on the additional portfolio of Defence Coordination and appointed ministers for the Navy, Army and Air. These other ministers became members of the War Cabinet, but primarily they concentrated on the administration of their service. Responsibility for strategic policy rested with Menzies.

Once he became Prime Minister, Curtin retained this structure. Like most of his colleagues, Curtin was vastly inexperienced in matters of strategic and defence policy. Nonetheless, as Minister for Defence (as well as Prime Minister) within two months of taking office he was responsible for the security of the nation against a ruthless Japanese enemy which was advancing rapidly south. Australia was in a desperate position. Most of its trained soldiers were overseas, mainly in the Middle East. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) had few aircraft in Australia, many of the larger vessels of the small Royal Australian Navy (RAN) were in distant waters, and the home defence force, the militia, was poorly trained and equipped.

Curtin relied heavily on the advice of the three Service Chiefs of Staff and particularly on the advice of the Secretary of the Department of Defence, Frederick Shedden. The mechanisms for the conduct of the war were the War Cabinet, which was a small committee of senior government ministers, and the Advisory War Council, which included both government and opposition members. Shedden was secretary of both committees, and the Chiefs of Staff appeared before both. The agenda papers for the meetings were usually prepared by the Department of Defence under Shedden's guidance.

In the emergency of late 1941 and early 1942 Curtin's War Cabinet introduced a number of important measures. He began to mobilise the Australian community, making it clear that an 'All In' war effort was required. He urged Britain to reinforce its forces in Malaya, guarding the vital Singapore base. He sought to persuade the British and American war leaders that Australia's security should not be overlooked. And once it became obvious that Britain could provide little help, he appealed directly to the United States.

A crucial decision concerned the return of the 1st Australian Corps. The British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, had ordered the transfer of the 6th and 7th Australian Divisions (1st Australian Corps) from the Middle East to the Far East but, after Singapore surrendered to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, Churchill wanted to divert the 7th Division to Burma. With Japanese aircraft bombing Darwin, some members of the Australian government were close to panic. Curtin himself was admitted to hospital with exhaustion, but supported by Shedden and the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant-General Vernon Sturdee, he took the lead and made the crucial decision to order the return of the 1st Australian Corps to Australia.

Churchill resisted Curtin's request but, after a night of agonising, the Australian Prime Minister was adamant, and Churchill had to comply. If the troops had gone to Burma they might not have returned to Australia until 1943, even if they had not been captured – a more likely outcome. As it was, the first troops of the 7th Division were in action on the Kokoda Trail in August 1942. Other units defeated the Japanese at Milne Bay that same month.

Undoubtedly, Curtin made the right decision, but there was much more to Curtin's role as war leader than this decision. The central factor in his conduct of the war was his relationship with the American general, Douglas MacArthur. When MacArthur was appointed Supreme Commander of the South West Pacific Area (SWPA) in March 1942 Curtin quickly realised that the appointment would ensure the security of Australia. Having been defeated in the Philippines, the Americans wanted a firm base from which to launch their counter-offensive against the Japanese. MacArthur's arrival gave confidence to the Australian government and the people.

With MacArthur's arrival Curtin established the Prime Minister's War Conference, which generally consisted of himself, MacArthur and Shedden. For a while this was the key body for the conduct of the war, but once MacArthur moved his headquarters from Melbourne to Brisbane its importance declined. Curtin's only source of alternative advice was General Sir Thomas Blamey, Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Military Forces, and Shedden, who generally supported MacArthur. When Blamey's advice was contrary to MacArthur's, Curtin, on Shedden's urging, supported the American general.

Curtin's relationship with MacArthur has become one of the key points of contention over his performance as war leader. The Second World War official historian, Gavin Long, claimed that by accepting MacArthur's appointment the government 'made a notable surrender of sovereignty'. In other words, Curtin gave MacArthur almost a free rein in deciding when and where Australian forces would be deployed. In my view, given Curtin's lack of military experience, Australia's limited military capability and the magnitude of the Japanese threat at that time, perhaps there was little alternative. Curtin maintained good relations with MacArthur, whose strategic concepts in 1942 were not at variance with those of the Australian government. But having handed strategic direction to MacArthur, Curtin failed to monitor MacArthur's intentions as thoroughly as the situation required, and as I will detail later, this was to have disadvantageous consequences for Australia.

There are, however, some different views. Dr John Edwards, who I mentioned earlier, wrote: 'It is true Curtin mostly went along with MacArthur in military matters, but in important respects Curtin's handling of the relationship with the US general was brilliant.' Dr Edwards argues that MacArthur's presence enabled Curtin to seek resources from the United States, and that MacArthur never asked the Australians to do something they did not want to do. That is, Curtin consciously used MacArthur to Australia's advantage.

Professor Peter Edwards, who delivered a public lecture here in 2001 (and who was my predecessor as Official Historian) has a more sophisticated view. As he pointed out, at a meeting in June 1942 MacArthur reminded Curtin that while Britain had a responsibility to help defend Australia, the United States had no such responsibility, and rather its interest in Australia was merely as a base from which to attack and defeat the Japanese. Thus, Curtin was not starry-eyed about the US alliance.

Professor Edwards accepts that there was an 'unmistakable surrender of sovereignty', but he suggests that 'Curtin was a more confident and able wartime leader than he is usually portrayed'. It was for this reason that Curtin consciously tilted back towards Britain in the later stages of the war.

The subtlety of this view – that Curtin was not browbeaten by MacArthur and that he worked out a relationship in which Australia was given almost equal partnership with

the United States in the Southwest Pacific Area – is brought to life in the outstanding play *Shadow of the Eagle*.

Let us now look at some other issues concerning Curtin's role as war leader. The first is the claim by that by his leadership Curtin saved Australia from invasion. I do not believe that this argument can be sustained. As I have explained elsewhere, the Japanese never really planned to invade Australia. Although Curtin and his military advisers could be excused for expecting such an invasion between February and June 1942, after the Battle of Midway, in which Australia played no part, it was clear that it would not eventuate.

Yet another claim is that Curtin deliberately exaggerated the threat to Australia, even though he knew that the country was no longer in danger of invasion. There is some truth in this, and that from mid 1942 to mid 1943 Curtin, urged on by MacArthur, used the threat of invasion to maintain the momentum of the Australian war effort and to request further American support for the Southwest Pacific Area. However, I do not think that Curtin should be heavily criticised for this. If the Japanese had captured Port Moresby and had secured Guadalcanal in August-September 1942, the strategic situation could have been transformed. But there are other examples where Curtin's reliance on MacArthur might be noted.

One example was during the fighting on the Kokoda Trail in September 1942 when MacArthur asked Curtin to send Blamey there to take charge. Although Blamey was confident that the situation was in hand he went, but the commander in New Guinea, Lieutenant-General Sydney Rowell, saw Blamey's arrival as a loss of confidence in his ability. There was a disagreement and Rowell was dismissed – a direct result of MacArthur's domination of the military establishment and of Curtin's subservience to him on military matters.

A second example of MacArthur's influence came in October 1942 when the War Cabinet discussed the problem of sending additional forces to New Guinea in view of the depletion in numbers of volunteer AIF troops in Australia. The Australian militia, mainly conscripts, was restricted by law to service in Australian territory. At that stage the Australian Army was fighting in New Guinea, which was Australian

territory, but when the fighting moved forward to Dutch New Guinea it would not be possible to deploy the militia. Yet conscripted American soldiers were already serving in New Guinea.

At Curtin's request, Shedden discussed the problem with MacArthur, who said that it was nothing to do with him but went on to suggest that the government needed to find a way 'to amalgamate the AIF and the AMF [militia] by some formula which, while not giving any credit to the Opposition, would enable the Government to get out of what he felt would become an increasingly difficult position'.

Curtin felt his responsibilities deeply. Although he had been jailed briefly in the First World War because of his opposition to conscription, in November 1942 he announced that he would be instituting measures to allow Australians conscripted for service within Australia to continue fighting the Japanese as the battlefield moved northwards. After persuading a special federal conference of the Australian Labor Party Curtin successfully moved the bill through Parliament – a remarkable political achievement. There were sound military and diplomatic reasons why Australia should have taken this action, and many people in Australia would have supported it; nevertheless, it was a matter for the Australian government, not a foreign general.

A third example of MacArthur's influence over Curtin concerned the command of the RAAF. In April 1942 a relatively junior officer, Air Vice-Marshal George Jones, had been appointed Chief of the Air Staff and soon found himself embroiled in a bitter dispute with Air Vice-Marshal William Bostock, the commander of the RAAF's operational forces, which came under the command of MacArthur's Allied Air Forces.

In April 1943, in an attempt to overcome the problem, the government decided to appoint a British officer to command all of the RAAF. But MacArthur advised against it. A year later, Curtin again tried to appoint a British officer, and once more MacArthur advised against it. On this occasion, Shedden did not support MacArthur, and advised Curtin that the Americans preferred 'the divided arrangement, because they can play one side off against the other'. Considering the effect of these arrangements, Shedden warned Curtin: 'Some day there will be an outcry about the

relatively poor RAAF effort in the South-West Pacific Area in relation to the resources allocated to the air effort'. Curtin still accepted MacArthur's advice.

The fourth example concerns the manpower crisis that had emerged in mid 1943. The Australian government was finding it increasingly difficult to meet all the demands on Australian manpower, but also seemed incapable of deciding how to allocate it. Curtin sought assistance from MacArthur, who suggested that Australia provide a maximum military effort until Rabaul was captured, and then reduce its military commitment to a land and air expeditionary force, enabling resources to be devoted to food production. MacArthur went beyond advising Curtin on strategic policy, and offered direct comment on balancing Australia's war effort, a matter that should have been the prerogative of the Australian Chiefs of Staff.

General Blamey thought that MacArthur's strategic policy was no longer appropriate for Australia. MacArthur wanted Australia to continue to provide services for the American troops, even to the extent of a reduction in the Australian combat forces. While MacArthur claimed that it was in Australia's interest to provide a substantial striking force, by October 1943 he was actually making plans to reduce Australia's offensive military role.

The government wanted to maintain sufficient forces to guarantee an effective voice in the peace settlement, but not all the tasks could be achieved with the manpower available in Australia.

The War Cabinet was unable to balance the demands of the military, for an increased role in offensive operations, against those who saw Australia's most important duty as the supply of food and war equipment. Paul Hasluck wrote that there was an 'absence of clear, firm, exact and prompt determinations on policy by those responsible for the higher direction of the war in Australia'. The economic official history perceived 'a lack of leadership from the Prime Minister and the War Cabinet... An important part of the problem which could not be readily resolved was MacArthur's domination of Curtin'.

Curtin was under MacArthur's spell, and in October 1943 he said that if MacArthur 'had been born in Australia and gone to [the Royal Military College] Duntroon he could not have shown higher concern for Australia's interests'. A month later, in a wireless broadcast, Curtin said that he 'was indebted to General MacArthur for the high statesmanship and breadth of world vision he has contributed to the discussion. The complete integration of our concepts, which has been a source of such strength, will continue to the end'. These sentences had actually been written by MacArthur himself; he had requested Curtin to add them to his statement.

In the April-June 1944 Curtin visited Washington and London to gain approval from Churchill and Roosevelt for the restructuring of Australia's war effort. In London, Curtin showed little interest in British proposals to send men, ships and aircraft to Australia to support a British-Australian offensive into the Netherlands East Indies and Borneo. Blamey, accompanying Curtin, supported the proposal and on return to Australia began investigating base support for the idea.

Curtin preferred to stick with existing arrangements under MacArthur, but there was poor communication between the Prime Minister and General Blamey. The resulting confusion enabled MacArthur to avoid using Australian troops in the Philippines, despite his explicit promises to Curtin. Even when Curtin found that MacArthur's claim that the Australians were not ready was false, he applied no pressure on the Americans.

It is difficult to know whether Curtin was blinded by his loyalty to MacArthur, or whether, in his heart, he was happy for Australian lives to be spared. But the question still remains as to whether Curtin in his own mind 'had chosen what he thought best or whether he did what he could not avoid doing'.

In the same vein, Curtin appears to have made little effort to determine whether Blamey's offensive operations in Bougainville and New Guinea in early 1945 were appropriate. It must be admitted that Curtin became ill in late 1944, but when MacArthur told him in October 1944 that 'if he were doing the job himself, he wouldn't jeopardise a single Australian life in an offensive in these back areas', Curtin took no further action. Blamey has been criticised for conducting these campaigns. I

believe that there is a case for supporting these campaigns, but the decision to conduct them, and any criticism for doing so, should rest with the government.

Belatedly, in Parliament on 24 April 1945 Curtin said that the Government accepted full responsibility for the operations, but two months earlier he had explained his approach to Parliament:

I make no pretence of being, in any way, a strategist in defence matters. I have a plain and simple rule to which I have adhered. It is that in all matters relating to the operational direction of the war, the sole responsibility shall rest upon the High Command. The duty of the Government consists in allocating to the High Command such forces as it seeks and such equipment as it calls for.

One of Curtin's last administrative acts relating to the war was on 20 May 1945 when, from his hospital bed, he supported MacArthur's request to use the 7th Division to land at Balikpapan in Borneo, even though the operation served no strategic purpose and was opposed not only by Blamey but by the corps and divisional commanders involved.

Curtin has been accorded recognition, even by his opponents, as one of Australia's great prime ministers. He restored cohesion to the Labor Party, rallied Australia in the dark days of 1942, and put aside his party's socialist aims in the pursuit of national unity. His most important contribution to national strategy was his concern to maintain national cohesion.

Curtin, however, did not appear to have any overall strategic view of his own, except to demand that the Allies devote more resources to the Southwest Pacific Area, and once MacArthur arrived he was content to accept the general's approach, which at that time mirrored his own. His major decisions, such as to rely on America, to demand the recall of the AIF and to change the conscription act were urged on him by his political and military advisers, although the decisions were certainly in accord with his own opinions. Nonetheless, as Lloyd Ross observed, 'It is safer for a country to have a Prime Minister like Curtin than an amateur strategist like some members of the Advisory War Council'.

Curtin's remoteness from responsibility for military strategy is emphasised by the fact that he never visited a battle zone. During the critical fighting in New Guinea Blamey suggested to Curtin that he might visit Port Moresby, but MacArthur advised against it and he never went. It is difficult to discover any reason why he did not visit New Guinea at a later stage. As far as I can determine, the only time he visited troops in an operational area was when he visited RAAF units in Britain in May 1944 – the occasion I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture.

Many laudable reasons can be offered as to why Curtin stayed away from the troops. Perhaps he understood the humbug of politicians trying to play at being generals. But while a prime minister should not seek to interfere with his field commanders, direct contact with his fighting troops reinforces his role as the leader who bears the ultimate responsibility for the success of a campaign. Such visits are important not only for the servicemen, who despite their cynicism actually enjoy them, but also for the political leader who can see for himself the execution of his decisions. Personal contact of this kind is perhaps even more important if the prime minister has never seen battle.

Paul Hasluck has been accused of bias against Curtin for ideological reasons. Nonetheless, a close study of the documents on Australian strategic policy appears to justify his judgement 'that eventually Curtin, the whole man, will emerge as a greater figure than Curtin the Prime Minister in war-time. In the Prime Ministership he spent himself unreservedly and the labour hastened his end, but it was a time of frustration rather than mastery'.

So what can we conclude about Curtin as war leader and defence minister. In some ways, after MacArthur arrived, Curtin took the easy way by handing over military decision-making to a general. Some might say that given the power of the United States, he had little option, but it is a dangerous practice for any political leader not to take a close interest in operational matters. This is not to suggest that Curtin failed. He was faced with a devilishly difficult situation in dealing with the Americans. In the main, his approach worked, but much could have been done better. After they first met, MacArthur is supposed to have said to Curtin: 'You take care of the rear and I will handle the front'. This statement is often held up as evidence of their close

working relationship. The concept, however, flies in the face of widely accepted practice.

These days the Prime Minister and his Defence Minister take very close control of decisions about the deployment of Australian forces. By 2003 Prime Minister Howard and his ministers had the immense advantage of having had more than seven years of experience handling other crises such as East Timor, 9/11 and the Solomons. Curtin's only experience – and it was invaluable – was a year sitting in the Advisory War Council. There is, however, a danger that the pendulum can go too far the other way. One would hope that Mr Howard listened very carefully to his military advisers before deciding to deploy forces to join the United States in its attack on Iraq in 2003. Perhaps he did; we will not know until an official historian can consult all the records.

Whatever the answer is, there is no doubt that Australia has much to learn by examining the role of John Curtin as war leader and defence minister in the Second World War. Modern day Australian political leaders still measure their policies concerning the US alliance against the experiences of Curtin's war-time government. They know that they need to work hard to ensure that Australia gains what it needs from the alliance.

But how do we ensure that political leaders have the necessary competence and preparation to deal with strategic and defence issues? In this respect, public debate plays a key role. We need informed journalists who focus on the important issues, and knowledgeable academics who both explore the possibilities for current policy and illuminate the issues by explaining our history. I commend the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library for making it possible to discuss the great issues concerning the security of Australia. No Australian political leader has had to deal with the threat to Australia such as that faced by John Curtin. The ultimate test of a war leader is the nation's survival. Australia survived and prospered. And for that John Curtin can take the largest credit.