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Curtin's Empire

James Curran's book *Curtin's Empire* was launched by Stephen Smith MP on 5 May 2011.

Thank you for that introduction.

It's a pleasure to return to the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library at Curtin University, a most fitting venue for the launch of *Curtin's Empire*.

Thank you, James, for inviting me to do so. I was pleased, in March 2010, to announce James as the 2010 recipient of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Fulbright Scholarship in Australia-United States Alliance Studies. That this book is in part a result of his hard work in the Fulbright program only confirms my view at the time that he was a worthy recipient. Ambassador Beazley – who as we all know is an authority on these matters – encouraged me to accept James' invitation to launch this book, describing James as “a lovely bloke and a very good diplomatic historian”. Ambassador Beazley, however, well knows that when it comes to Curtin, an Australian Labor Party Minister for Defence from Western Australia scarcely needs encouragement. Curtin is a hero both to Western Australians and the Labor Party. His influence on successive Labor Governments – the Chifley, Whitlam, Hawke, Keating, Rudd and Gillard Governments – has been profound. James makes this point more generally. Curtin's memory and his influence are powerful, and the public discussion about his legacy continues. It will be sparked again by the publication by Cambridge University Press of this book. But there is agreement on some essential points: On any analysis, John Curtin was a great Australian Prime Minister. Indeed, one of our greatest. John Curtin was also a great Australian Defence Minister, whose tenure by war's end saw Australia with the world's fifth largest navy and fourth largest air force. As both a wartime Prime Minister and a wartime Defence Minister, Curtin shouldered great responsibility on behalf of our country. In his December

1941 Call to America speech, Curtin encouraged Australia to think through problems itself and to apply an independent and creative approach to international challenges.

He articulated a clear-eyed vision of Australia's place in the world, supporting a new global order based on international law and setting the stage for our Alliance relationship with the United States. Curtin led Australia through a world war and helped shape Australia's post-war public policy, on both the foreign and domestic fronts. He was emotionally torn by the tragedy of the war, but was pragmatic, hard-headed and clear-eyed when it came to protecting and defending Australia's national security interests. This required Curtin not just to stare down enemies, but friends as well. It required complex, subtle and nuanced responses not just simple ones. Curtin forged a close and essential relationship with the United States, one that has matured into the friendship and the Alliance that we see today, an Alliance that has been adhered to by successive Australian Governments, and one which today could not be stronger.

Or in James' own words to me when inviting me to launch the book, "why Curtin wanted to reinvigorate the concept of imperial defence and how he thought the Empire could be made to work better to protect Australian interests". James has thrown a spotlight on documentation which supports a view that Curtin's turning to America was much more complex and arduous than these days we might sometimes appreciate. Or as Ambassador Beazley himself wrote to me: "as the war progressed, one of the manifestations of Curtin's determination to control as much of Australia's external environment as we could was to seek mechanisms for reviving the old imperial defence system. In the course of his efforts, he got the Labor Party Conference of 1943 committed to the idea that the imperial defence system should be revived with the caveat that its writ in the Asia Pacific region should largely be controlled by Australia and New Zealand... All this is outlined more effectively than I could do in James' work."

It is this struggle and process of invention, in addition to its consequences for Australia, that remain important to us today. It is important because Australia must continue to make its way in a dynamic region and a changing and challenging global world order. The Asia-Pacific region has changed much since Curtin's time. Australia

has greatly benefited from the Asia-Pacific region's long period of peace, security, stability and prosperity. We owe this in part to the United States, its enduring presence in our region, and its network of Alliances and partnerships, including with Australia. We owe this in part to the creation and growth of regional institutions like ASEAN and its related forums, institutions that continue to build habits of dialogue and cooperation in the region. But we also owe it to the efforts of successive Australian Governments, following in Curtin's footsteps and legacy, to shape Australia's strategic environment in cooperation with our regional partners.

Australia's contemporary, comprehensive relationship with China, for example, has been underpinned by the Whitlam Government's early recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1972. The Hawke Government push for APEC's establishment in a rapidly growing region built consensus around open markets, trade and investment. The Keating Government elevation of APEC to a Leaders-led organisation consolidated APEC as a driving force for economic growth and prosperity in our region. Since coming to office, the Rudd and Gillard Governments have both advocated the need for a regional Leaders' meeting which can consider both strategic and security matters, as well as economic matters, with all the relevant countries of our region in the same room at the same time. That's why we very much welcome the entry of the United States and Russia into the East Asia Summit this year, and why Australia so strongly supported the inaugural meeting of the ASEAN Plus Defence Ministers Meeting in Hanoi at the end of last year.

John Curtin, living in a very different time and looking out to a very different region, would not necessarily have foreseen the detail of these developments. But he would recognise the judgments about Australia's national and national-security interests that lie behind them. He would recognise the process of argument and advocacy, of setback and progress, inherent in defining and advancing our national security interests amid the Asia Pacific Century. We continue to look to John Curtin for the example he set on such important matters of national interest. James has shed further and intriguing light on Curtin's challenges and his leadership within the context of that struggle to maintain and enhance the national security interests of

Australia and its people. For that we thank you and we wish Curtin's Empire, now duly launched, every success.

Response by James Curran

Minister for Defence The Hon Stephen Smith MP, Acting Vice Chancellor, Director of the John Curtin Library Imogen Garner, Members of the Western Australian Parliament, Distinguished Guests including Beverly Lane, grand-daughter of John Curtin, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Firstly, can I thank the Minister for his stimulating and insightful speech to launch this book – a speech that will go straight on the reading list for my students at Sydney University who are interested in the study of Australia's relations with the world. I appreciate the time you have taken out of your schedule to be here this evening. May I also thank the staff of the JCPML – especially Lesley Wallace, Kate Robertson, Candice Junkin, Amanda Bellenger and David Wylie: I deeply appreciate your enthusiasm for this event and for all the hard work that you have put in to make it happen. Of course, no one interested in the life of John Curtin can do without the services offered by the JCPML and its collections, particularly those that are available online. I pay a grateful tribute to the library and its website.

I should add too that it is of course for me highly significant that we are having this event in the Kandy-Jane Henderson foyer, because it was Kandy-Jane, also here tonight, who organized for me to be the 2004 JCPML visiting scholar – a real thrill for me at a time when my first book on Australian prime ministers had just been published. Can I also register a special thanks to Professor Geoff Garrett, CEO of the US Studies Centre, who has flown from Sydney for tonight's event and who has been a tower of strength and support behind my work on this and other subjects. I first began thinking about John Curtin's view of the British Empire when I was looking at the way in which Prime Ministers from Whitlam to Howard understood Australia's Federation certainties and were then forced to revise them in the light of changing domestic and international circumstances. I recall being struck by the fact that John Curtin, this Irish-Catholic, anti-conscriptionist Labor leader, was arguing for a closer

form of imperial cooperation at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference in London in 1944.

And I recall not being entirely convinced by the way that some studies either quickly passed over this advocacy for Empire or explained it away – for some, it was simply a ‘makeweight’ to American hegemony, for others a piece of pure political pragmatism – Curtin wrapping himself in an imperial toga to curry favour with an electorate depicted as waiting with baited breath for the next prime ministerial pronouncement of loyalty to King and Empire. In other words, so the myth ran – this proposal of Curtin’s was not the ‘real’ Curtin speaking. For some historians and commentators, it was a fake, a phony – some sort of terrible ghoul rising from the grave to give Labor nationalists the very worst kind of imperial nightmare.

In recent years however there has been more of an attempt to understand the outlook and orientation of this generation of leaders, not to roll them up in red maps of empire but to unravel the complex interplay between their loyalty to Britain and their willingness to defend particularly Australian interests that arose from specific geopolitical anxieties. This book attempts to excavate Curtin’s view of Britain and the empire and to try and come to some conclusions about what it means for the political culture of his times and the future of Australian strategic policy as he saw it. On three levels, I think, there is broad significance in some of the findings that I present here. Significance for our understanding of John Curtin and his intellectual evolution; for the Labor party’s journey towards a credible foreign policy in the inter-war years, and, of course, for Australia as it looked out on the shape of the post-war world. First – John Curtin. Here is someone who cut his political teeth on the bread and butter issues of improving the lives and lot of the ordinary worker. Who when he first came into politics approached international affairs not its own terms but in so far as it affected domestic politics. Who was not originally concerned with conceiving a grand strategy for how Australia should act in the world, but for how Labor could meet the conservative charge that it was ‘disloyal’ to both nation and empire. And who throughout the 1920s and 30s was nevertheless giving powerful voice to Labor’s view of Britain and the Empire – that Australia should be treated as an equal, not a subordinate colony; that it was ok for Labor to express its commitment to Britain, but

not pander to the conservative militarist patriotism that often went with it. That one could be respectful towards the monarch but not get weak kneed at the prospect of getting close to the royal person. And who when he became Labor leader and Prime Minister went to great lengths to hold his fractious party together and give it a credibility and coherence in foreign and defence policy, and who came to espouse the view that the time was ripe for increased cooperation within the Empire: that this was the best way for Britain to keep pace with the emerging superpowers and the best way to safeguard Australia's own interests.

Second – the significance for Labor. This proposal of Curtin's and the overwhelming endorsement it received from the rank and file was nothing less than a transformation in the party's approach to world affairs: a party that had been torn apart by the conscription debates of 1916-17, a crisis that roiled domestic politics and forced the party to turn inwards. This led to a great suspicion in the party of being entrapped in another imperial war that wouldn't have the consent of the Australian people. And consider what Curtin faced in holding his party together amidst the worsening strategic climate of the 1930s – how's this for a potentially explosive cocktail of factional, ideological and religious division within Labor ranks at the time: liberal internationalists who placed their faith in the League of Nations; international socialists who looked to the Soviet Union as their model; Catholics who hated communism as the enemy of religion, and isolationists who wanted to turn their backs on the world altogether. By December 1943, however, they were giving an overwhelming thumbs up to Curtin's ideas for the post-war empire and Australia's role in it.

Finally, the significance for Australia. The key point here I think is to stress that the 'look to America' statement was not a fundamental reordering of Australian strategic priorities. This is not a new point or finding – many esteemed scholars have made that point before, and I am all too conscious of the debt of gratitude I owe to those works. But I think what Curtin's proposal shows is that even after the dark days of 1942 Australian political leaders, far from abandoning the Empire, sought to revive it and make it work better for the protection and advancement of peculiarly Australian interests. They believed that the disaster at Singapore might finally convince their

counterparts in London that the Australians did deserve their place at the Empire policy table; that the empire could be made genuinely more representative of its constituent parts, not araldited to the princely corridors of Whitehall but a moveable feast, equally at home in Ottawa, Canberra, Pretoria, Wellington and London; that the problem of providing for the defence of all the British peoples could be at last resolved. But above all, what I hope to have showed here is Curtin as a creature of his culture. There was a real political argument over Empire in the 1920s and 1930s, one that traversed both ideas of loyalty and concepts of strategy. Indeed, I think there a lot more work to be done on Labor and the Empire in this period.

Needless to say, none of this detracts from Curtin's record as a war leader and his considerable achievements in laying the ground for the post-war peace. Curtin is not depicted here as a sycophantic, genuflecting, forelock-tugging toady, but as a leader who wanted the empire to work better for Australia and to better protect and advance distinctively Australian interests in the post-war world.

Thank you.