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Curtin's battle for Australia: relevant questions for 2011

Public Lecture presented by JCPML Visiting Scholar Graham Freudenberg on 27 October 2011.

It's a great honour to be the Visiting Scholar at the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, especially in the month and year of the 70th anniversary of the coming of the Curtin Government.

If I had been smart enough to use the resources of the Library when I was writing my book on Churchill and Australia about three years ago, I might have avoided at least one blunder. It relates to the visit John Curtin made to Perth at the end of January 1942. I wrote:

The Prime Minister had been persuaded by his Cabinet colleagues to take a break. Astonishingly, he chose to cross the continent by train to his home in Perth, a four-night journey, and was absent from Canberra for this critical fortnight..... The editor of Documents on Australian Foreign Policy notes that Curtin 'took a holiday', and that unfavourable press comment on his absence led him to justify his journey by the implausible excuse that he was consulting the Premier of Western Australia on naval policy at the request of the British Admiralty. My personal speculation is that Curtin made the judgement that unless he could get away for a spell, he would break down completely.

I thought I'd check this out; so, among my many requests to Lesley Wallace, I asked for the material in the Library about this visit, and Kate Robertson supplied it in profusion. Reading it, I now stand embarrassed at my presumption.

The inference is really that Curtin needed some special justification to be in Perth at all at such a time. At work was what I might call the Pacifentrism of our thinking about the war against Japan. So, 70 years on, I glibly called 'astonishing' the fact that an Australian Prime Minister should place himself on the western side of the continent three weeks before the fall of Singapore, or 'implausible' the idea that he should want to consult the Western Australian authorities on naval and defence matters concerning the Indian Ocean theatre – where in fact most of the actual fighting at that time was taking place, where the Japanese Navy was re-locating after Pearl Harbor, the theatre for which the joint command structure hammered out between Roosevelt and Churchill in Washington over Christmas (ABDA – the American, British, Dutch and Australian Zone) was specifically designed, with the joint commander-in-chief, General Wavell, headquartered in Delhi. And, above all, the 6th and 7th Australian divisions were about to cross the Indian Ocean from the Middle East – their provisional destination at that time the Dutch East Indies, not Australia.

First, let me say, the thick file of newspaper reports Kate sent me disposes of any suggestion there was something secret about the visit. The fact is that Curtin's visit to Perth would never have attracted the attention of historians except that it coincided with one of the most controversial cables between Churchill and the Australian Government; it was sent in Curtin's name but written by Evatt. This was the 'inexcusable betrayal' cable. It was sent in response to information from the Australian Government Representative in London, Sir Earle Page, that out of the blue Churchill was proposing to evacuate the British forces, including the 8th Australian division, from Singapore as a lost cause, and concentrate instead on the defence of Burma. I emphasise that the words 'inexcusable betrayal' referred to a proposed evacuation in January 1942, not to the actual Fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942. It is hard to imagine a greater shock to Australia. Not only was Churchill proposing the nullification of 20 years of British and Australian defence planning (the Singapore defence strategy), the assurances of two years under which Australia had sent the bulk of its forces, land, air and sea, to the Mediterranean and the Middle East, but he was contradicting his own emphatic insistence of the two months since Pearl Harbor that Singapore must be held at all costs – 'the only vital point'. I myself am critical of

Curtin for allowing Evatt too much say in framing his early messages to Churchill, but I do not include the 'inexcusable betrayal' telegram of 23 January. Nor is there any evidence that Curtin himself thought that it was intemperate language – and it wasn't.

Certainly, in coming to the West, Curtin could not have anticipated that the Australian Government would have to respond to such a stunning proposal as the evacuation of Singapore at the eleventh hour. But in this case, the relevant question is not whether his absence from Canberra was justified, but whether his presence in Perth was justified. I make a simple answer: 'Look at the map'. I wish I had done so before indulging in my psychological speculations. Or, alternatively, consulted the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library. There I would have found Curtin's own answer, given because he had been incensed by a report on the BBC News that he was 'taking a holiday': 'Let it be known that where I am today is as much the Commonwealth of Australia as any part of its territories'. Of course, in saying that, it's possible that Curtin was also reminding his fellow West Australians that a few years earlier, they had opted to secede from the Commonwealth of Australia.

This minor affair has become part of the wider debate about the nature and extent of Australia's danger in 1942. It is, of course, entirely proper that historians should reassess so great a question, but much current revisionism is targeted directly against John Curtin's war leadership – most influentially by the former Principal Historian of the Australian War Memorial, Peter Stanley, starting with his paper at the 'Remembering 1942' Conference in Canberra in May 2002. These are some of Peter Stanley's expressions:

The Curtin Government exaggerated the threat..... the enduring consequence of its deception was to skew our understanding of the reality of the crisis of 1942..... the rhetoric and actions of the Curtin Government abetted and fuelled popular disquiet..... one of the lasting legacies of his whipping up of fear of invasion has been a persistent heritage of bogus invasion stories..... He [Japan] wasn't coming south: he was never coming south. John Curtin knew as much by the middle of 1942. Curtin's insistence that he was has skewed our understanding of the impact of the

Japanese threat on Australian history..... Why did Curtin continue to bang the invasion drum?

I am not here disputing the revisionist analysis of Japanese intentions, although I commend the comprehensive and convincing account of my predecessor as Visiting Scholar, Bob Wurth, in his book, 1942. My purpose today is to answer the charges against Curtin of exaggeration, deception and exploitation of the invasion threat. Why did Curtin continue to bang the invasion drum? The short answer is that he didn't.

To portray Curtin's great speeches and his decisions after mid-1942 as banging the invasion drum is grotesque. It is to distort the nature and purpose of Curtin's war leadership. It mistakes utterly his strategic concept – his strategic vision – and his efforts to convince the Australian people that it was something worth fighting and dying for and, not least, something worth working and paying for. 'Fight or work' – that was always his central message. It is absurd to focus all this through the single question of whether or not the Japanese would or could have invaded and occupied continental Australia. The truly relevant question is whether or not Curtin gave Australia the political leadership that its actual and potential situation imperatively demanded.

In a way it was Churchill who started the controversy, and such is the power of his reputation that it is still being conducted in the terms he set in his arguments with Curtin 70 years ago. For it was none other than Churchill who first set actual invasion – by six to ten Japanese divisions – as the sole benchmark for the redemption of his repeated assurances that he would cut all losses in the Middle East and the Mediterranean to save 'the kith and kin'. It was the only standard of danger or threat to Australia that Churchill would accept.

Another version of the 'invasion that wasn't' argument questions whether there was ever a Battle for Australia. The denial comes especially from those who resist, resent and ridicule the implied comparison with the Battle of Britain. In the 'Finest Hour' speech on 18 June 1940, just before the Fall of France, Churchill said: 'What General

Weygand has called the Battle of France is over. The Battle of Britain is about to begin.' In his national broadcast after the Fall of Singapore, Curtin said:

The fall of Singapore can only be described as Australia's Dunkirk. It will be recalled that the fall of Dunkirk initiated the Battle of Britain. The fall of Singapore opens the battle for Australia.

Note the difference – subtle but significant – the Battle of Britain, the Battle for Australia. I suggest that the preposition defines the proposition, and with complete accuracy. For if what was to come in the next nine months, the subjugation of the Dutch East Indies with Timor, the build-up of a base at Rabaul, the prolonged bombings of Darwin and Broome, the two attempts to seize Port Moresby – at that time, dare I point out, as much the capital of an Australian territory as Pearl Harbor, Honolulu, was the capital of an American territory – the Papuan and New Guinea campaigns, the Solomons and Guadalcanal – if all this was not the Battle for Australia, what was it?

And I do draw the parallel. The Battle for Australia was about keeping Australia fighting effectively in the war against Japan, as much as the Battle of Britain was about Churchill's imperishable decision to keep Britain fighting against Nazi Germany.

We now know that Hitler's over-riding objective was not the conquest of Britain, but to knock Britain out of the war; and from Fortress Europe rampage in the East. He shelved the invasion plan, Operation Sea Lion, in September while the Battle of Britain was in full flight. And from December 1940 he concentrated everything on Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. After that, there was never any chance of a German invasion of Britain.

The Japanese objective, after they had overrun South-East Asia, was comparable – to consolidate their gains by effectively knocking Australia out of the war, to prevent its use as a base, by isolating Australia and cutting its vital lines with the Allies – in both oceans. For a country like Australia, air and sea interdiction would have been as fatal

as land invasion. Their defeat in this objective is rightly called the Battle for Australia.

Of course, we will always be revising history; and Churchill and Curtin cannot be exempt. Here is the most recent assessment by the journalist-historian, Max Hastings, in his book, *All Hell Let Loose*:

The prospect of an imminent invasion was less plausible than Britain's chiefs of staff supposed and Churchill publicly asserted, because the Germans lacked amphibious shipping and escorts to convoy an army across the Channel in the face of an immensely powerful British Fleet. Hitler's heart was never in it..... Privately, Churchill was always sceptical about the invasion threat but he emphasised it in his rhetoric and strategy-making throughout 1940-41 as a means of promoting purposeful activity among both his people and the armed forces

[and later]

Churchill deliberately and even cynically sustained the spectre of invasion until 1942, fearing that if the British people were allowed to suppose the national crisis had passed, their natural lassitude would re-assert itself. (p.80; p.91)

Now, I don't necessarily endorse this, only pointing out that it is the same sort of thing now being said about Curtin – but with this huge difference: Hastings, who rightly admires Churchill, offers it as an explanation and justification; the Australian revisionists bring it as an accusation and condemnation.

Let me be very clear: I am not saying that if it was good enough for Churchill, it was good enough for Curtin. In Curtin's case, there was no gap between the public and private view, no deliberately-created gap between the rhetoric and the reality, as it was known, perceived or assessed at each stage by his advisers and commanders, especially MacArthur.

It is just plain wrong to claim that Curtin's speeches and actions focussed solely on an invasion that never materialised, long after the threat had ceased to exist, if it had ever existed. It is a classic case of ignoring the contemporary documents, to bolster

retrospective theories. I am indebted to Gough Whitlam for many things, and not least his standing rule: 'Go to the documents'. And, of course, the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library is a splendid source of such documents.

Take, for example, the most famous Curtin document of all – the New Year's Message published in the Melbourne Herald on 26 December 1941 – the so-called 'turning to America' statement, 'free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom'. This has become so overloaded with the burden of Australian political history, and arguments about the origins of the American Alliance – and distorted not least by Churchill's extraordinary reaction against it – that it is almost impossible to recall what it really was, a message to the people of Australia about their likely prospects for 1942. And the key paragraph is a clear and cool statement of the plan Curtin was already developing for Australia's role – a strategy from which he never deviated. He wrote:

We are therefore determined that Australia shall not go, and we shall exert 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 the enemy.

Peter Stanley hears only the banging of the invasion drum. By contrast, I see the words of the one political leader among the Allies who propounded a definite strategy for the war against Japan and who made prodigious efforts, month in, month out, to mobilise his own nation and people around that strategy, while recognising the preponderant role of its great Ally.

That strategy and that effort were never based exclusively or mainly on the threat of invasion. 'We are not thinking only of the immediate security of Australia', he said in a broadcast to America on 13 March 1942. 'Our minds are set on attack rather than defence.' In a long cable to Churchill on 4 March 1942, he wrote:

The loss of Australia and New Zealand would mean the loss of the only basis for offering action by the Allied nations against the Japanese from the Anzac area. The defensive aspect is, of course, vital if these bases are to be held. The basis of our

planning must be not only to ensure the security of Australia and New Zealand, but to use them as areas from which action will be launched.

This was the core of it – to stop and repel, with Australia as the base for the offensive. The strategy seems so obvious now, but it was by no means self-evident to the powers-that-be in London or Washington. It was not until the arrival of General MacArthur on 17 March 1942, sent here by Roosevelt for political as much as military reasons – that Curtin found a powerful ally, with clout in the place where it was needed most – Washington. This was the enduring basis of their wartime partnership, a closeness that itself is now subject to much revisionist and pseudo-nationalist criticism in some Australian circles.

MacArthur and Curtin both strongly opposed the alternative strategy agreed to by Roosevelt and Churchill in Washington during the Christmas of 1941. This was the 'Beat Hitler First' strategy, with its explicit corollary that the Asian war was to be a holding operation. In practice, the doctrine never prevailed, partly because the Japanese failed to co-operate – they weren't held anywhere until Milne Bay – partly because Churchill himself opposed a premature second front in Europe, partly because Roosevelt could not over-ride the pressures from the public and the US Navy to avenge Pearl Harbor and, ultimately, because of America's overwhelming resources. But Curtin saw that the doctrine of a mere holding operation would prolong the war by giving the Japanese time to consolidate their vast gains. This was why, with MacArthur's advice and support, he was so vehement in putting the case for reinforcements and a greater share of resources for the South-West Pacific Area.

Perhaps the most serious charge Curtin's critics bring against him is that, for political purposes, he continued to exaggerate Australia's danger long after it had passed – Peter Stanley uses the word 'deception'. He asserts that Curtin knew as much by the middle of June '42 – presumably after Midway but before the Japanese thrust to Port Moresby, before Milne Bay, Kokoda, Buna, Gona, Guadalcanal. That is the stage – June or July 1942 – when, according to Stanley and others, Curtin should have stopped skewing Australian history and banging the drum.

I myself stated misleadingly that not until 10 June 1943 did Curtin declare Australia out of danger and announce that 'the chief risk was now marauding raids which from time to time will cause heavy losses'. But, in fact, six months earlier, on 18 January 1943, Curtin made a statement which seems to have escaped the notice of the revisionists. It is worth quoting in full:

I am grateful to the commander in chief of the Allied Land Forces (General Sir Thomas Blamey) for the illuminating exposition he gave of the New Guinea campaign in his broadcast last night.

With a full heart, I endorse all the tributes he has paid to the men under his command. They have stood between the enemy and Australia with a heroism and devotion to duty under difficulties greater than any fighting men have ever previously faced. We owe to them the fact that in our great cities, our women and children need not look to the sky with fear and anxiety.

We have however a vast task in front of us. New Guinea is an episode in the struggle. We have still to defeat the enemy as a Power.

And in a specific reference to the Broome bombings some months earlier, Curtin said:

It is true that the desperate situation of months ago has been changed now to one of great defensive capacity, but the line of Japanese-occupied islands still stands astride us. That is Australia's battle line today.

I maintain that this is not merely ringing rhetoric, but a realistic assessment of the situation up to the end of 1942. I suggest that that was when Curtin should have changed his emphasis. And that is exactly what he did, in January 1943.

On the same day, 18 January 1943, Curtin outlined in Parliament the government's manpower program for the coming year. It puts his whole approach in its true perspective.

Finally I say to the critics that this is not a static war. It is an ever-changing struggle causing new conditions to arise, and it is the adaptability we display to meet these conditions which will determine whether we are bringing our maximum strength to

any situation at any given time. As things stand at present, the strength of the fighting forces must be maintained.

Curtin's actions matched his words, because at this very time, from late 1942, he was engaged in the most difficult and painful exercise of his career – persuading the Labor Party to accept a limited measure of conscription for overseas service, to cover the whole of the South-West Pacific Area as far as the Equator. The whole rationale of the proposal was to enable the conscript Citizen Forces as well as the all-volunteer AIF to advance and fight well beyond Australian territory. Its purpose was to ensure that Australia play the fullest part possible in the defeat of Japan. If Curtin had still been arguing that mainland Australia was still threatened with imminent invasion, he would have given his opponents in the Labor Party their strongest argument: every man was needed in Australia. Opponents like Calwell and Ward did in fact make that very argument.

Here, at the sharpest, we have the truly relevant questions, the real tests, about Curtin's leadership. He was Prime Minister of Australia because he was leader of the Australian Labor Party. He had to unite his fractious party before he could hope to unite the nation. Until the election of October 1943, he held office with a minority government dependent on the support of two anti-Labor independents. It was the supreme test of Australian parliamentary democracy. He had to mobilise Australia for an all-out war effort – or, more aptly, an all-in war effort – leading a party which, like himself, was deeply anti-militarist. Here I make the comparison not with Churchill but with Billy Hughes. Hughes used his great eloquence to divide his party and his nation over conscription. Curtin used his to unite.

The records in this Library show how he did it. I commend in particular his Australia Day broadcasts in 1942 and 1943 and his speeches at rallies in February 1943 in support of the Liberty loans. In these great speeches there are some things which may jar today. These days, Australian Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers visiting Washington quote the parts on democracy and cooperation with America but edit out the bits about White Australia. Paul Hasluck thought that Curtin sometimes adopted a too hectoring tone and that his rather wowsery attitude to Australian leisure habits was misplaced, perhaps reflecting his own problems. There is an

impatience, even authoritarianism, in some passages, suggesting nerves stretched to the limit. But the cumulative effect is democratic leadership of the highest order. And it is on the totality of Curtin's achievement that both the perception and reality of Curtin as a great wartime leader rest today, as it did 70 years ago. It is a further measure of his humanity and his greatness that it was the last role and title he would have chosen for himself.

Graham Freudenberg

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In 1961 Graham was appointed press secretary to the then leader of the Australian Labor Party Arthur Calwell. Over the next 40 years Graham wrote over a thousand speeches for several leaders of the Australian Labor Party at both the New South Wales state and federal level. These leaders included Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke, Neville Wran, Barrie Unsworth, Bob Carr and Simon Crean.

On 11 June 1990 he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in recognition of his service to journalism, to parliament and to politics. In June 2005 he was inducted as a life member of the NSW ALP.

He is the author of four books to date:

A Certain Grandeur – Gough Whitlam in Politics, Penguin, 1977.

Cause for Power – the Centenary History of the NSW Labor Party, Australian Labor Party, 1991.

A Figure of Speech (autobiography), John Wiley & Sons Australia, 2005.

Churchill and Australia, Pan Macmillan, 2008.