



CURTIN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Curtin's call: What our 14th prime minister would make of the federal election campaign

JCPML Anniversary Lecture presented by Sally Warhaft on 29 June 2016.

It is an honour to be here today to deliver the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library Anniversary Oration. Before I begin I would also like to recognise the traditional owners of this land and pay my respects to Elders past and present, and to all elders here today. I would like to thank the Vice-Chancellor and the Library for this invitation and Julia Gillard for her kind introduction. It is a measure of the Library's importance that Ms Gillard, and before her Paul Keating, have served as its patrons. I would like to also thank the staff and librarians here – their work is cherished and appreciated. And thank you all for being here this evening.

Speaking as I will about what Australia's 14th Prime Minister might have made of the 2016 election campaign in front of our 27th prime minister, Julia Gillard, is a privilege, because Julia Gillard is the only person in the room who truly understands what is involved in this contest. Just observing modern election campaigns can be painful and exhausting. Julia Gillard endured one of the nastiest, tightly fought battles in our history. One thing I'm sure of is John Curtin would take his hat off to you. He would be very proud of what you and your government achieved.

Delivering a speech in honour of one of Australia's most admired leaders is a delight, and I have enjoyed thoroughly the past few months thinking about this talk. In fact, it has been the single most interesting thing about the 2016 federal election campaign. I might have gone out of my mind without this deeper topic to contemplate.

For obvious reasons this oration usually focuses on John Curtin's wartime leadership and foreign policy. It was his great achievement as a leader – guiding the nation through a hellish conflict and keeping Australia safe. But I thought today, with the election upon us, it was an opportunity to look at other aspects of Curtin's style and thinking, with a focus on our political culture and the changing nature of election campaigns.

Here we are, just three sleeps to go, before Australia goes to the ballot box, after the longest campaign in history. I suspect the last few days will feel like months to those involved. Don't stuff up now, so close to the finishing line!

I might begin by telling you briefly what I think about this election campaign, before discussing what John Curtin might have made of it.

I love politics. My first memory of politics – and one of my first memories at all -as a very small child was the dismissal. I recall my father taking me on his shoulders to Westerfolds Park on the outskirts of Melbourne during the campaign that followed and him pinning an oversized badge on me which read: 'We love Gough'. I asked him 'Why do we love Gough, Dad?' 'Because he needs our love right now, that's why'. I follow the minutiae, and dread things like the prospect of voting on-line or only voting every four years instead of three. I love polling day so much, walking to the local primary school, I choose the busiest time of the day to do it so the queue will be at its lengthiest and I can enjoy it just a little longer. This wonderful, undemocratic but entirely decent Australian tradition of compulsory attendance at the ballot box.

Yet, like many millions of Australians, I've found this election campaign almost impossible to connect to. I look forward to it being over. I can't think of a single thing about it that will be remembered in 50 years, or 2 years, or even this time next week. Unless, of course, Malcolm Turnbull loses.

Bill Shorten has surprised many people this year. He's done a good job. Releasing policies, often setting the agenda, and defining the opposition in sharp and genuine contrast to the government. He hasn't pretended to be innovative. I suspect part of the reason he's done so well is by bringing a bit of old school persona to his travelling

show, sticking with core Labor values and focusing hard on health and education. It has been a very unpretentious campaign.

Malcolm Turnbull has campaigned with confidence but is facing a much tighter contest than he may have been prepared for. He seems self-assured with his plan for jobs and growth and focus on innovation. He seems to believe he will win the day, although the very recent inclusion of the words 'stability' and 'majority' into his rhetoric are telling.

Yet, after eight long weeks, what more do we really know about these two men and their plans to govern? Eight weeks without a memorable speech, without a proper debate, with tired campaign journalists hopping on and off buses and planes, not knowing where tomorrow will take them, all this sameness.

I suppose, whatever the result of the election, and whatever the flaws of the two contenders, we can at least be grateful that Australia will be led either way by a reasonably intelligent and thoughtful human being. We need only look towards America – and their own election campaign – without any pangs as to the basic decency of our leaders.

John Curtin knew a fair bit about election campaigning. He knew what it was like to win – to win well, win by a fraction – and to lose.

In Curtin's time, now almost 90 years since he was first elected for Fremantle, campaigning and communication in general was a much slower affair. Leaders had a lot more time to themselves, to think, to get advice, to shape their messages. Just imagine travelling by car or train from Canberra to Sydney or to Melbourne. In the 1937 election, Curtin travelled 9000 miles by train – almost 10 hours a day. This offered forced hours of time without even a transistor radio. He used that time to think and to talk with trusted advisors. Sometimes he would read a book. Time was not always used responding to things.

Taking time out to think and reflect was important to Curtin. He tried to do it every day (even as prime minister, in his parliament house office, he would unfold a heavy iron bed from a cupboard and rest). We might say that could never happen now,

there's just too much to do. But Curtin had a lot to do, and a lot on his mind. The world today doesn't allow much room for quietly sitting still. This affects democracy, it changes it, and it demands too much of individuals in charge.

Although there are many things about today's campaigning that Curtin wouldn't recognize, some things haven't changed as much as we might think – they've been refined and professionalized.

Curtin used cinema newsreels to communicate to Australians, in a precursor to television which was still years away. There is a suggestion he had trouble adapting to the new technology, with his passionate soapbox style of speaking not readily transferring to the screen. But in a tradition still deployed – no matter how privileged you are – he attempted to portray himself as an ordinary Australian. (Something not outside his reach, given his background. Malcolm Turnbull is struggling with this but still obviously feels compelled to give it a go.) There's a famous bit of footage showing Curtin walking out the gate of his Cottesloe home and wandering down the street, just like any man.

One thing Curtin didn't do, as far as I know, is engage in confected images designed to portray rigour and vigour. He never came across as robust because he wasn't. As is well known, he was beset with health problems throughout his parliamentary life and increasingly, once he became prime minister. When the Japanese attacked Darwin during the war, Curtin was in St Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne recovering from a heart attack. Election campaigns knocked him flat for months afterwards. It is probably fair to say that being prime minister killed him.

Who knows what he would think of Bill Shorten jogging in minus-three degrees in the Canberra fog on the morning of the second leader's debate. He might have thought it crazy. It's hard to imagine the leader of the opposition doing this for fun. Curtin certainly would have felt some sympathy for Malcolm Turnbull with his flu last week while perhaps quietly chuckling at a Q&A tweet declaring 'the flu virus obviously votes Labor'. If he knew what a tweet was.

What Curtin would surely find incomprehensible are the leaders' debates. The three of this campaign have been an embarrassment. The first was broadcast only on pay-TV. Fancy that, deliberately excluding 70% of your potential audience. How is that possible? Our leaders are not entitled to a warm-up. And it's a shame, because it was probably the best of the three – a community hall style event with a bunch of undecideds - though that's not saying much.

Curtin presented himself at every opportunity as a national leader. And surely that would mean offering your message to as many people as possible, every time?

The second debate, held on 29th May at the National Press Club and broadcast by the ABC was a major set piece of the campaign. What this has come to clearly mean is a major chance to make a mistake. Better not to say anything at all than to risk, well, anything. Just ignore the questions and repeat the message: 'Jobs and growth'... 'Health and education'... 'Our positive plans for the future'... 'Our economic plan for Australia'. It was unbearable. Everyone seemed so tense. What's the point?

The third and final debate was the 'innovative' Facebook event, which took place on Friday evening, 17th June (again, it could not have been timed better to deter the younger people it was presumably pretending to attract). It was more of the same. I kept wishing Bill Shorten would make NBN jokes – about all the people who couldn't stream it because they didn't have the bandwidth. But what they really didn't have was the inclination.

Interestingly, it was the first time no leaders' debate was screened on free-to-air commercial television. Channel 7's News Director remarked, "We certainly thought long and hard about the mainstream appetite for election debates and decided it wasn't great." The most surprising thing in this comment is they thought 'long and hard'. They made the right call.

John Curtin was masterful in his use of the media, especially radio, but also print. This was in part because he was attuned to it – he was, himself, a journalist who worked as an editor and a freelance writer. His editorials for the Westralian Worker

were read outside of the labour movement and he wrote much of the content for the whole broadsheet.

Of course he is not the only prime minister to have worked as a journalist – in recent times Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull both did too, but it wasn't a vocation for them as it was for Curtin. (I think the only other thing he had in common with Tony Abbott was winning his party leadership by a single vote – something Curtin certainly used to better effect than Abbott)

He proudly wore his Australian Journalism Association badge throughout his decade in parliament and he brought every bit of his experience with the press to work for him in public office.

Curtin lived in times of incredible innovation: in modern science, technology and society. He lived through the introduction of the telephone, the motorcar and electricity. At a 1937 campaign event in his birthplace of Creswick in Victoria, there still was no electricity lighting the town. Three years later in Canberra, Paul Hasluck - newly appointed in the public service and later Australia's Governor-General – would ride his horse to work, leaving it to graze in a paddock. These things would change in the course of Curtin's life, remarkable changes. We hear so much at the moment about innovation, but innovation is nothing new.

Curtin was not especially innovative but he was adept at employing changes in the technology at his disposal, especially the radio. (Although his fear of flying was a let down given flight was perhaps the greatest innovation of his time. This undoubtedly affected his relationships with other world leaders in the war). The potential of radio he did understand. Curtin delivered his 1943 campaign policy speech via a live radio broadcast from a studio in the national capital, the first prime minister to do so. He was also the first to address the American people, famously broadcasting in March 1942, and again when making an independent declaration of war against Japan. ('This is our darkest hour...')

As prime minister, Curtin held twice-daily private briefings with the press in his office, where he confided in them highly confidential information about the war,

showed them classified cables and got journalists to see things from his point of view. The cordiality and informality in these off-the-record briefings would obviously not be possible now, in the modern era of gotcha politics and leaks.

He also cared about the quality of journalism. While President of the Western Australian District of the AJA, Curtin started courses for journalists at the University of Western Australia and recruited lecturers including Walter Murdoch, who taught 'elements of English prose', 'prose writers of the 19th century' and 'brief studies of Shakespeare, Carlyle and Tennyson' to the fortunate journalists in attendance. He successfully pushed for the journalism course to be upgraded to a diploma and might be partly to blame for the proliferation of journalism courses we see today – without prospective jobs at the other end of these degrees.

Of course, Curtin was not immune to the power of propaganda. He understood the importance of repetition, saying "however nauseous to those engaged in it, repetition is considered proof by the general public". And he understood a sales pitch. Ad slogans used for the 1943 campaign declared 'If you want Curtin, you must vote Labor.' Curtin was a brand, a product of his time. In all of this he had the assistance of the first full-time prime ministerial press secretary, fellow journalist Don Rodgers.

Without doubt, Curtin's most useful skill was as a speaker. He was not in the top tier of Australian orators – a Deakin, Hughes, Menzies or Keating – but he was very well practiced at it by the time he lived in the Lodge. Stump speaking was his bread and butter during his years working for the socialist cause, standing on the banks of the Yarra River in Melbourne week after week, often in front of hostile crowds, with no microphone.

In this he was far ahead of leaders today. Bill Shorten and Malcolm Turnbull are not gifted orators. Shorten's speech at the Labor Campaign Launch on 19th June was interesting – for the first 30 seconds. He sounded like he might really try to rouse something – "Women and Men of Australia! We gather as one united party: ready to serve, ready to lead, ready for government." And then he lost his nerve somewhat. The tone diminished in confidence at the very moment Curtin would have raised it. This is not a criticism of Shorten – what a task – and if it's not going to happen

naturally then toning down is probably for the best. But it serves to demonstrate how most of us can learn to be competent speakers – but to be great is rare indeed.

Malcolm Turnbull on the other hand – like a lot of things about him – we tend to think he should be a gifted speaker, and somehow measure up to the idea of himself he likes to project. Confidence can help a speaker, but it's not the most important thing and it's not necessarily a prerequisite for success. Turnbull's offering at the Liberal Party's campaign launch – held inexplicably just three days ago – was lackluster and entirely forgettable, like most of this campaign.

It is hard to define what makes a great orator – the one who soars above all others and compels you to listen, even to things you thought you were not interested in. One certain ingredient is the speaker will be completely his or herself. Curtin was unusual – his disposition lent itself more obviously to being a persuasive writer. A former workmate remarked about his studiousness, and “a tenderness about him”. Yet when he stepped to the podium, inside or out, his words captured everyone's attention. Of course, the better he got the more people turned up to hear him. His mentors in the Labour movement – Anstey and Mann - had taught him to project “with his head arched back until his high-cut collar was cutting into his neck” so that all could hear him.

Words were his stock in trade. His home on Cottesloe had a verandah on three sides – he wished it went all the way around - which he used in winter to pace and think out his speeches. The beach was another place he walked to memorise quotes, so he didn't have to swap his glasses while speaking.

A journalist observed: “His voice rasped with emphasis, sobbed in emotion. He shouted. He whispered. He spoke of the greatness of the Labor Party's past, the grandeur of its future. Hard bitten delegates fell into a trance – and when he stopped, they cheered.”

Despite all the efforts made by Bill Shorten and Malcolm Turnbull in the past 8 weeks I think it's fair to say nobody has fallen into a trance from their speeches. Perhaps a few journalists have fallen asleep.

It would be a good but unlikely development in Australian politics if old-fashioned speeches could make a comeback – real speeches, designed to persuade, to explain and help people understand complex ideas. When they hit their target they are unbeatable. The doorstep interview, designed as it is to carry a line of the day, monotonously and endlessly repeated for the next news bulletin, should be supplanted as the main messenger. We won't see a reengagement of citizens into their political futures until it is.

Curtin used speech to build moral authority. It took a long time, but that authority was there when he and the nation most needed it. He was a mightily unusual person to be destined for this. He failed three times to win a seat in parliament and lost his seat in 1931. He suffered from terrible depression and anxiety. And he was an alcoholic who wrestled with his addiction probably all his life, whether he was on the booze or off it. In those days alcoholism was a highly stigmatised disease, far more than today, without much in the way of effective treatment. On top of all his other battles, this one, more than likely, was his toughest.

I would like to talk about women briefly, because everyone else is talking about women. Yet given this bright spotlight, it has been frustrating in this year's campaign.

John Curtin was no saint when it came to women's liberation. He was conservative and resisted women moving into the workforce, particularly as a younger man. He blamed working women for the low birth rate in Victoria and could not understand why women might enjoy the independence of working outside the home. However, he did preside over some important policies for women, and the first female representatives in our federal parliament were elected under his watch – Dame Enid Lyons for the Liberal Party in the Lower House and Dorothy Tangney for Labor in the Senate. Curtin introduced the Widow's Pension in 1942 and other social security measures during the 40s. He understood the vulnerability of women and children working in factories, perhaps heightened by his own upbringing, which was at times impoverished and dependent on his mother as breadwinner.

Obviously today we're back to having men in charge. I hope everyone feels relaxed and comfortable about that. Both leaders talk endlessly about women and equality, and Bill Shorten in particular has highlighted this issue at the forefront of each major campaign event.

Yet the policies concerning women in this election year don't come close to equaling the focus. Yes, Labor offers more money for childcare, and sooner, and as the mother of toddlers on waiting lists for another much-needed day of childcare I have a keen interest.

But I have a much deeper interest than the massive inconvenience to my work by the hopeless pressures on childcare centres. (Which are run, I might say, almost entirely by very poorly paid women.)

I am the mother of 15-month-old twins - a baby boy and a baby girl. It's an extra remarkable thing to be parenting two babies of different sexes concurrently, but not as interesting as it will be in 20 years time. Because if things don't change, I will have to watch my daughter work harder, think herself less entitled, and be paid less than her brother. She will also collect less superannuation. These are massive structural and cultural issues, which neither party is really taking seriously. I wonder if I should start to teach my daughter now by paying her 30% less pocket money than her brother, just so she'll be used to it.

Innovation is not a Facebook debate and it's not just about science and maths, important as they are. It's not even a world-class policy for broadband (although that would have been terrific). Real innovation is cultural, it's about being honest about the economy and honest about women's role in the economy. If politicians were serious about boosting productivity and improving an economic outlook, which right now is a lot bleaker than we're being told, we would have the best childcare system in the world. We would have equal pay - and companies found short on this would be fined for it. Or taxed, since that's inexplicably a greater insult. We would have equal representation in our parliaments. We would be planning for the inevitable care of a large proportion of our population who are retiring and ageing. Who do we expect will look after these people when they need it? Women? But they're juggling the babies.

Who will work to raise the taxes to pay the health care costs this generation will depend on? Will women do that too?

We're half serious in this country right now about women. And that's a big improvement. The spotlight on family violence and the calling out of bad behaviour are milestones. But we have a very long way to go. Just nine months ago we still had a prime minister named Tony Abbott. A man who stood in front of signs so appalling without ever apologizing or even understanding the wrongness of it and was then able to become prime minister. If instead of Bob Brown's Bitch that sign had said Bob Brown's Jew Boy, or Ditch the Poofter, it is unlikely he would have gotten away with it.

For all the talk about women and equality right now, it's hard to detect policy or breakthroughs going on at the moment that are much more substantial than those Curtin achieved. And the mindset may not be that different to Curtin's in the end: an assumption that women will simply keep doing everything they're doing and putting up with it because that's what they do. Until political parties stop tinkering, bribing and pretending, and start matching their rhetoric with sweeping change, their words about equality for women will come to nothing.

And therein lies the problem at the heart of this campaign: words that mean very little.

Malcolm Turnbull says there's never been a better time to be Australian. What does that even mean? What does it mean to the very large number of people who aren't prospering in the incredible riches and liberties of our nation? What does it mean to Indigenous people in impoverished remote areas? What does it mean to people suffering mental illness? Or alcoholics? Or the young people who choose to end their own lives in ever increasing numbers?

How great it is to be an Australian right now really depends on who you are. As it always has. The night Paul Keating defied the odds and won the 1993 election, he talked about the great possibilities awaiting Australia, but he also shot out a

warning: we needed to progress compassionately. He had a message for those who thought the unemployed could be forgotten: We are not going to leave them in the lurch and we are going to put our hand out and we are going to pull them up behind us.

He didn't succeed entirely, ultimately, but he gave it everything he had. Now, in many areas of Australian life, we don't even really try. And when we do, it's a whisper. Helping people is so out of vogue. The truth is there's never been a better time to be a better Australia.

Of course I can't really say what John Curtin would make of this campaign. As Paul Keating remarked in this oration a few years ago, "His new world is our old one". We didn't know him. But here's what I think: he would be amazed at the society we live in, the wealth, the technology, the progress. And he would be mightily perplexed at how we put it all to use. Why would we corner ourselves into such a stilted, disingenuous and monotonous culture of political campaigning? Why would we maintain this tiresome co-dependency with a media just as dumbfounded about where to turn for inspiration as the politicians seem to be? It has to change. Our politics must change. And it must become less adversarial, less nasty.

Curtin was criticized for being too chummy with Robert Menzies and Arthur Fadden. It didn't do his career any harm. It didn't make him less of a leader. He wasn't afraid to note the achievements of the opposition and he concentrated on his own government's record in election campaigns rather than negative attacks. And never, it seemed, with much self-regard or a sense of his own place in history. When he died, Menzies and Fadden carried his coffin.

Most politicians are pretty decent people. I've only ever met two I didn't like. And they are always at their best and most appealing when they work together.

I was in Kerobokan prison in Bali last year, doing what little I could for Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran in the terrible months leading up to their executions. Australian politicians from all parties came together on the forecourt of parliament house before dawn for a candlelight vigil to express their dismay. They stood side by

side. How rare that is. Tanya Plibersek's beautiful speech in the parliament and Julie Bishop's anguish – she did everything you could ask – were a reminder that politicians are human beings. But we hardly ever see it.

People are sick and tired of confected politics, with its worn-out rulebooks and methods that seem designed to encourage disengagement. Everyone knows this but nobody has done anything about it. And now we are seeing a reaction in the wealthy western democracies – the rise of Trump and the Brexit result are both expressions of disenchantment and frustration. Both are mistakes that will be very hard to undo. People are sending their message to the political elites. And we're seeing how ill-equipped they are in responding.

How will this express itself here in Australia? We may very well get a glimpse on Saturday night. So far, our political parties aren't listening and so our turn will come. We don't want to make mistakes here that we can't undo but we will if we don't change. And when we do change, we must hope that it will be for the better.

Those on the inside are mightily attached to things the way they are. Power is so seductive. We would appear to need two politicians with the famous humility of John Curtin at once – one on each side of the dispatch boxes – to agree and insist on some new rules. I suppose stranger things have happened in Australian politics. It might be possible.