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The Politics of Curtin's War

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A new book by John Edwards explores the political life and relationships of Australia's 14th Prime Minister, John Curtin ([John Curtin's War, Volume 1: The Coming of War in the Pacific, and Reinventing Australia](#))

What Paul Keating said at the launch of John Curtin's War has attracted more publicity than the contents of the book itself. The cliché is that all publicity is good publicity, but the Keating-generated controversy has in many ways done this work a disservice. Author John Edwards, who includes economic adviser to Keating in his extensive CV, no doubt thought getting his former boss along to do the launch would generate attention and sales. Keating certainly did the former and presumably the latter, but at quite considerable cost to the credibility of Edwards' book on Labor's wartime Prime Minister.

Rather than being judged on its merits, it risks forever being associated with Keating's partisan rant.

Keating painted a simplistic version of history in which conservatives in general, and Robert Menzies in particular, were appeasers and defeatists in the lead-up to World War II, while, in contrast, Curtin and Labor were the local equivalent of Winston Churchill, a figure whom Keating rightly admires.

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Curtin as hero, however, has not always been Keating's position. In his 'Placido Domingo' speech in 1990, Keating described Curtin as a 'trier', a characterisation which earned him a rebuke from Bob Hawke, who was the real target of Keating's message that Australia had never had a great leader. Now, without the need to create a narrative to tear down Hawke, Keating has elevated Curtin to a higher status.

Across his career, Keating has got many things right, and his iconoclastic language has often added colourful rhetorical icing to his substantial policy cake. However, when he is wrong, Keating's epithets make his errors sound even more ridiculous. In this case, his book launch speech reached its nadir when he described Menzies as 'a woeful coward'.

It was hard to see what Menzies could have done which would have satisfied Keating. When in the leadup to 1939 he supports attempts to avoid war he is an appeaser; when war starts and he



sends Australian troops to fight Hitler, he is a lackey of British imperialism selling out Australia's interests.

Following the launch, Edwards sprang to Keating's defence with an opinion piece which sought to draw a sharp distinction between Curtin and Menzies. It restated his opinion in the book that Curtin was not an appeaser. Arguing that someone was not an appeaser because 'he wanted no involvement in Europe at all' is actually a cop-out, as it really amounts to much the same thing as appeasement. It means Curtin was not an advocate of Australia doing anything to oppose Hitler.

Of course, when war in Europe actually broke out, Curtin supported Australia's involvement.

Labor's advocacy of a more independent defence policy in the 1930s had been something of a mirage. This was a policy in theory only. In practice, as Edwards repeatedly demonstrates, the ALP did not pursue any of the practical measures that would be required to put such a policy in place. In 1936, Curtin delivered a 'far-sighted speech' which drew attention to how a Japanese threat may manifest itself, but Labor continued to complain about any actual measures which increased Australia's defence preparedness to meet such a threat. Edwards argues that there was a 'gaping contradiction' between the defence self-reliance Curtin advocated and 'his opposition to the means to obtain it'.

As well as highlighting this fundamental contradiction in Labor policy, Edwards provides a more nuanced and more interesting description of the similarities and differences between Curtin and Menzies than the Keating-generated controversy may lead one to expect. From October 1940, the two leaders served together on the War Council, an all-party body established by Menzies as Prime Minister to coordinate the war effort on a bipartisan basis. The Council was able to function effectively because 'the political differences between Menzies and Curtin were muted'. Not only did they work well together, but they appear to have developed a genuine feeling of mutual goodwill. After Menzies ceased to be Prime Minister in August 1941, he wrote to Curtin thanking him for his 'magnanimous and understanding attitude'. Curtin replied the same day thanking Menzies for the 'consideration and courtesy' he had always shown him and described the personal friendship between them as a 'a very precious thing'. Curtin had equally harmonious relations with Menzies' brief successor as Prime Minister, Country Party Leader Arthur Fadden.

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In fact, as so often in politics, the wartime leaders had more difficulties with internal critics than they did with each other. Menzies rise to the top job had been marred by a vicious attack on him by Country Party leader Earle Page. On the Labor side, the 1930s were a particularly rough period of internecine strife, most notably with the supporters of Keatingmentor Jack Lang's dissident Labor group in NSW, who left the official Labor Party, returned, quit again and finally rejoined. In the Federal Parliament the Lang group was led by 'Stabber Jack' Beasley, who redeemed himself by becoming a solid supporter of Curtin during the war.



After the 1940 election produced a hung parliament, Labor hot-heads such as Eddie Ward and Arthur Calwell wanted Curtin to precipitately move a vote of no confidence in the House of Representatives to bring down Menzies, but Curtin showed commendable restraint; restraint which proved to be both in the national interest and politically astute. An addition to the Labor caucus in 1940 was the ultraambitious Bert Evatt, whose behavior Edwards several times describes with the word 'pertinacity', one of the kinder descriptions which could be applied to Evatt.

Edwards acknowledges that although Curtin had consistently warned of a Pacific war, when he became Prime Minister in October 1941, he 'did not prepare for one with much greater urgency than Fadden or Menzies'. Like his predecessors, 'he relied on the promised British Navy Indian Ocean task force'.

Within two months such a war was a reality. Many had thought that Japan would enter the war, although opinions varied as to whether this would be northward to attack the Soviet Union or southward. What was a genuine surprise to the vast majority of people was how successful Japan was once they did launch their assault. The rapid advance of Japanese forces through south-east Asia, culminating in the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, came as a genuine shock to most people. Edwards does not believe that the lack of resources Britain had in this theatre of war was somehow a betrayal of Australia, describing such accusations as 'a fiction'.

The immediate aftermath of the fall of Singapore was undoubtedly the most critical moment in Australia's modern history and the responsibility for responding to it fell to Curtin. His famous pitch for American support 'free of any pangs' was a sensible response and far less radical than many have claimed.

The fact that he handled the crisis well has seen Curtin considered to be at, or very near, the top of any rating of Australian Prime Ministers. Given this fact, it is hard to justify a comment by the publisher in a blurb for this book that he is 'one of the most underrated' of the nation's leaders. However, despite his status, Curtin has not been particularly well-served by his biographers. Edwards' work does not fulfil the need for a thorough biography, as it pays scant attention to Curtin's life until he assumed the leadership of the Labor Party in 1935, but it is probably the most insightful about Curtin in the period that it analyses in detail.

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Edwards emphasises the difficulties faced by a Prime Minister representing a Western Australian electorate in the days before reliable interstate plane travel. Having not seen his wife and children since August the previous year, it was understandable that Curtin wanted to head home to Perth in January 1942, but long slow train journeys across the Nullarbor were not ideal in the circumstances of the war. As he journeyed west, colleagues in the War Cabinet could reach him by telegram in Kalgoorlie. There were numerous other ways in which politicians' lives were



different three quarters of a century ago, but there was one innovation by which Curtin brought a touch of modernity to politics. He employed journalist Don Rodgers on his staff, and Rodgers claimed to be the first full-time press secretary in Australian politics.

This is Edwards' second book about Curtin. The thesis of the previous work, *Curtin's Gift* published in 2005, was that Curtin had been overvalued as a wartime leader and undervalued as an economic reformer. It will be interesting to see in the second volume of *John Curtin's War* whether Edwards maintains this view. This first volume takes a while to find its feet, but finishes strongly, which augurs well for the second installment.

Hopefully, the publisher will at least not repeat the indignity Edwards suffered here by having his name excluded from the cover of the printed book. They may also want to choose someone to launch the second volume who does not distract so much from the message of the work.

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