

John Curtin 1885 - 1945

Regarded by many as one of Australia's greatest Prime Ministers, John Curtin assumed office just six weeks before the bombing of Pearl Harbor and led Australia through the darkest hours of World War II. No prime minister has had a more profound effect on Australia and no man has given more in the service of his office.

Curtin was born in the Victorian mining town of Creswick on January 8, 1885. His parents were Irish immigrants. His father worked first as a policeman, then as a publican, and the family moved frequently from town to town. His much interrupted education ended when he left school at 14 and began to supplement the family income - as a printer's apprentice, a labourer, a clerk, and a newspaper copyboy.

Curtin's interest in social issues and the plight of the working class led him to become actively involved in the labour movement and he joined the Victorian Socialist Party in 1906. He soon became known as an eloquent and inspiring speaker, and this ability enabled him to unite the people of Australia in a way unprecedented then and unsurpassed since.

In 1917 he moved to Perth as editor of the "Westralian Worker". He first entered politics in 1928 as the Member for Fremantle in the House of Representatives, but his term was cut short when Labor was defeated in 1931 and he lost his seat. However, one year after re-entering parliament in 1934, he was elected parliamentary leader and when the Fadden government collapsed, Curtin became Prime Minister in October, 1941.

He had a remarkable grasp of economics, and in four years his government overhauled the national economy, creating full employment in the process. He and his cabinet made a number of other revolutionary changes in the fabric of Australian life, particularly in the liberalisation of social welfare and immigration policies.

It was in foreign policy, however, that he changed Australia forever, moving it from a nation with an inward perspective, regarding itself as a colonial satellite of Great Britain which sided automatically with the Mother country, to a nation with a broad, international outlook capable and prepared to make its own decisions. The British wanted the Australians to continue fighting in the Middle East; Curtin insisted they were needed closer to home. The government turned to the USA and Curtin became a close friend and colleague of General Douglas MacArthur in the battle against Japan.

Curtin's appeal to America for support and protection has been seen as the beginning of Australia's alliance with the United States. By standing up to Churchill, he ensured that Australia's interests were not overridden by Britain's. Curtin's actions have been hailed as a milestone on Australia's road to independence.

As a wartime leader, he was able to transcend party differences by appealing for national unity and his government worked hard to formulate a plan for a better post-war Australia. Those closest to Curtin spoke of his constant agonising over the crucial decisions he had to make and these undoubtedly contributed to his final illness.

In the end, the anguish and the long, hard hours taxed his uncertain health, and he died on July 5, 1945 at the age of 60, less that six weeks before the end of the war. General Douglas MacArthur hailed him as "One of the greatest of the wartime statesmen. The preservation of Australia from invasion will be his memorial monument."

More than 20,000 people attended his funeral service at Karrakatta Cemetery. Described by Fadden as "the best and fairest" of all his political opponents, Curtin had been "the right man in the right place at the right time" and deserves the accolade as one of his country's greatest prime ministers.