John Curtin: Prime Minister and Journalist

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In his first Australia Day radio talk as a wartime prime minister, John Curtin affirmed: 'The flameless freedom, first lit by our settlers, kept aglow by the generations who followed, is not extinguishable by any enemy'.[1] The next day, Australian newspaper publishers praised his 'forceful' speech,[2] emphasised his 'nationhood' slogans,[3] supported his appeal to 'mobilise all we have'[4] and reproduced his words prominently.[5] Striving to promote Australians' fighting contributions in the battle against totalitarian enemies, Curtin publicised national ideals of democracy, courage and liberty by developing innovative media techniques. During his term from 7 October 1941 to 5 July 1945, he opened new democratic opportunities for audiences to use the media to engage with the parliament, government and other political leaders. About one out of every seven Australians participated in military service during World War II (hereafter the war);[6] this contrasted with approximately one in every ten Britons[7] and about one in every 12 Canadians[8] and Americans.[9] To persuade citizens to support the nation's military role, Curtin became the first wartime prime minister to deliver

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[1] John Curtin, 'Australia Day Radio Broadcast', *Digest of Decisions and Announcements and Important Speeches by the Prime Minister* (hereafter *Digest*), no. 16 (24 January 1942): 14; Curtin, 'John Curtin's Speech On Australia Day', 26 January 1942, no. 81941, National Film and Sound Archive, Acton.

[2] *The Argus*, 27 January 1942, 1.

[3] *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 January 1942, 7.

[4] *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 January 1942, 1.

[5] *The Argus*, *The Canberra Times*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 January 1942.

[6] Curtin, 'Prime Minister's Review, May, 1944', *Digest*, no. 81 (4 May 1944); National Archives of Australia, 'Boer War to Vietnam' (2010), <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/explore/defence/conflicts.aspx#section3>; Parliamentary Library, 'Anzac Day 2010' (2010), <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/anzac/stats.htm>.

[7] Joe Hicks and Grahame Allen, 'A Century of Change: Trends in UK statistics since 1900', research paper 99/111 (London: House of Commons Library, 2009), www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp99/rp99-111.pdf.

[8] Statistics Canada, 'Estimated population of Canada, 1605 to present' (2009), <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/98-187-x/4151287-eng.htm#table2>; Veteran Affairs Canada, 'Canada and the Second World War 1939-1945' (1998), http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=history/secondwar/canada2/intro.

[9] Kenneth Paul O'Brien and Lynn Hudson Parsons, 'Introduction: The Home-Front War', in *The Home-Front War: World War II and American Society*, ed. Kenneth Paul O'Brien and Lynn Hudson Parsons (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995); U.S. Census Bureau, 'Historical National Population Estimates: July 1, 1900 to July 1, 1999' (2000), www.census.gov/popest/archives/1990s/popclockest.txt.

regular Australia Day broadcasts to national and international radio listeners.[10] Likewise, he used the relatively new media of radio and cinema newsreels to communicate more frequently to public audiences than previous Australian leaders.[11] Also this prime minister gave more radio talks than did the wartime United States President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, known for his 'fireside chats'.[12] Moreover, Curtin held more frequent, interactive and open-ended news conferences than Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill and Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King.[13] His media relations provide valuable lessons on how a political leader may successfully communicate to public audiences during a global crisis.

Behind the scenes of 'Curtin's Circus'

Since he had been a 'street corner speaker',[14] labour-oriented newspaper editor and journalists' union president, Curtin developed unusually candid relationships with senior Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery reporters. The Melbourne *Herald's* Joseph Alexander recalled that these mainly conservative journalists called themselves 'Curtin's Circus' because 'they went everywhere' with the Australian Labor Party prime minister. Also Alexander said they 'shared his confidence to an extent previously unknown in the history of the press in Australia'.[15] Another *Herald* writer, Allan W. Dawes, remarked to readers that: 'It is easier to be friends with John Curtin, I think, than with almost any other member of the Federal Parliament ... He is a hard reader and an indefatigable worker'.[16] Journalists light-heartedly commented on 'Honest John's' austere appearance,[17] with *The Sunday Sun* 'FACT'S Canberra correspondent' reporting that he was not concerned about wartime clothes

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[10] Curtin, 'Australia Day broadcast'; Curtin, 'Broadcast By Prime Minister', *Digest*, no. 52 (26 January 1943): 3-5; *Morning Bulletin*, 25 January 1943, 3; *The Canberra Times*, 25 January 1941, 2, 25 January 1942, 1.
[11] John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library (hereafter JCPML), 'Index to John Curtin's speeches', 2007; National Film and Sound Archive, 'Australian Prime Ministers' (2008), http://screensound.gov.au/the_collection/collection_spotlights/apms/index.html.
[12] JCPML, 'Index to Curtin's speeches'; Elvin T. Lim, 'The Lion and the Lamb: De-mythologising Franklin Roosevelt's Fireside Chats', *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2003).
[13] Lim, 'Fireside chats'; C. J. Lloyd, *Parliament and the Press: The Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery, 1901-88* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1998); *Time*, 12 June 1944, JCPML.
[14] *The Herald*, 4 October 1941, JCPML.
[15] Joseph A. Alexander, interviewed by Mel Pratt, 1971, JCPML.
[16] *The Herald*, 6 October 1941, JCPML.
[17] *Time*, 23 August 1943, 34, JCPML.

rationing because he had 'never been a fancy dresser'.[18] Amid the intense activity in the

Parliament House lobbies, Curtin frequently passed by a senior journalist and paused to give

a news tip. He explained to journalists that he feared for the safety of the 6th and 7th

Divisions early in 1942.[19] Reversing Churchill's orders, Curtin had stopped these troops

from travelling to Burma and made them return secretly to Australia, without air cover or

weapons, to defend the homeland.[20] As Curtin told a group of newspaper editors and

publishers, he would keep alerting them to critical war manoeuvres 'so they will not

inadvertently trespass' upon military secrecy. In his view, the correspondents might have

easily learned about the troops' movements through other, non-governmental sources.

Therefore he would provide accurate information to them to explain the need for censoring

the news from the public.[21] During Curtin's extraordinarily informative, twice-daily media

conferences, he and Australia's first full-time prime ministerial press secretary, Don

Rodgers,[22] obtained journalists' assurances that they would refrain from publishing these

secrets.[23]

Forging closer links to American and British audiences

Becoming the first prime minister to give a direct radio talk from his country to US

audiences, he described Australians as 'the Anzac breed' who were 'hallmarked as pure

metal'. During the peak American radio hour, he explained that: 'Our men stormed Gallipoli.

They swept through the Libyan Desert. They were the 'rats of Tobruk''.[24] His speech was

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[18] *The Sunday Sun*, 14 June 1942, JCPML.

[19] Alexander interview; Alexander, Papers 1833-1957, 17-18 February, 2 March, 13 March 1944, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

[20] Winston Churchill to John Curtin, 20 February 1942, A816, 52/302/142, National Archives of Australia, Canberra; Curtin to Churchill, 22 February 1942, A816, 52/302/142, National Archives of Australia.

[21] Curtin, 'Conference On Newspaper And Broadcasting Activities In Relation To The War Effort', 10 February 1942, MSS 0653, Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

[22] Donald Kilgour Rodgers, interviewed by Mel Pratt, 1971, JCPML.

[23] Caryn Coatney, '"Curtin is Doing a Splendid Job": How a Wartime Labour Prime Minister Won Press Support, 1941-45', in *Labour History in the New Century*, ed. Bobbie Oliver (Perth: Black Swan Press, 2009); '"History is theatre'': The secrets to the success of the Curtin and Roosevelt mass media strategies, 1941-1945', *Melbourne Historical Journal*, no. 38 (2010); 'John Curtin and Franklin Delano Roosevelt: A Cross-National Case Study of Media Agenda Setting in the U.S.-Australian Alliance, 1941-1945', *68th Annual Midwest Political Science Association National Conference. (*Chicago: Midwest Political Science Association, 2010), http://conference.mpsanet.org/Online/Search.aspx?section=27&session=21.

[24] Curtin, 'Radio broadcast to the United States', *Digest*, no. 22 (14 March 1942): 11.

broadcast by 700 radio stations throughout the US and also reached listeners in Canada, Great Britain, Europe and South America on 14 March 1942.[25] A New York *Time* magazine writer likened Curtin's eloquent rhetoric to the words of the American Civil War poet, Walt Whitman, because his talk 'should have roused the fight in the entire U.S. public'.[26] He was overturning the intended insult made by the Nazi radio propagandist, 'Lord Haw Haw' (William Joyce), who had derisively labelled the Australian and British servicemen, fighting German General Erwin Rommel's forces, as the 'rats of Tobruk' in 1941. Curtin became so popular in the US that magazine publishers displayed his picture in New York subway posters.[27]

When visiting London, Curtin praised 'British freedom and liberty' in a radio talk on 8 May 1944,[28] as well as referring to the cricketer, Don Bradman, a symbol of 'resilience and identity' for many Australians.[29] After the controversial 'Bodyline' tour, when English fast bowlers had targeted their deliveries at Bradman's small physique between 1932 and 1933, British cricket fans focused more on '[s]hared values of sportsmanship' and 'fair play' instead of 'winning at all costs'.[30] The Melbourne *Argus* reported that during Curtin's 'morning shave' in London, he chatted amiably with his English barber about Bradman's future; the story enhanced his egalitarian appeal.[31] A London *Times* journalist also noted his passion for the sport that proved the 'adage that wherever two or three Australians are gathered there shall be cricket'.[32] While Curtin appealed to common interests that he shared with international audiences, he portrayed Australians as heroic defenders of democracy.

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[25] *The West Australian*, 16 March 1942.
[26] *Time* (23 March 1942), http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,802270,00.html.
[27] *The Sun*, 9 October 1942, JCPML.
[28] Curtin, 'Broadcast By The Prime Minister From London' (JCPML, 8 May 1944).
[29] Brett Hutchins, *Don Bradman: Challenging The Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 17.
[30] Richard Holt, 'Bradman and the British', *ESPNcricinfo* (2002), http://www.cricinfo.com/wisdenalmanack/content/story/154886.html.
[31] *The Argus*, 20 May 1944.
[32] *The Times*, 19 May 1945, 2.

Bringing parliament to the people

Furthermore, Curtin practised his rhetoric and forceful hand gestures in film rehearsals and expanded television news. He was willing to work with a film director during multiple takes and the call for 'action!' As in many of his filmed speeches, he did not refer to notes during these rehearsals. Through the director's use of eye-level, close-up camera shots of Curtin, he projected the cinematic image of being a confident and candid leader.[33] To involve more Australians in national events, his government started radio broadcasts inside the parliament,[34] admitted the first Cinesound film cameras in the Canberra electoral tally room,[35] and pursued the development of fledgling television news.[36]

Front page tributes

As US correspondents portrayed Roosevelt's death as a shock, similarly many Australians were reportedly astonished by the loss of Curtin. Both nations' citizens seemed genuinely surprised by the news because journalists cooperated with censorship policies by avoiding pictures of Roosevelt in his wheelchair and Curtin in a hospital.[37] Curtin wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt and new President Harry S. Truman that Australians were deeply 'shocked' by Roosevelt's death on 12 April 1945.[38] Similar statements were made about Curtin after he died on 5 July 1945, only weeks before the Pacific war's conclusion. Many Sydney residents were quoted as saying they were not 'prepared' for the tragedy because they 'didn't think it was so near'.[39] American newspaper owners published tributes to Curtin on their front pages.[40] Journalists lauded the resolve that he had shown in trying to remain at his post to help achieve a war victory.

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[33] National Film and Sound Archive, *Parliament in Session*, no. 76084 (1944).
[34] *The Canberra Times*, 9 May 1945.
[35] National Film and Sound Archive, *Australia Goes to the Poll*, no. 233824 (1943).
[36] *Parliamentary Papers*, Australian Prime Ministers Centre, Parkes, 1945.

[37] Megan O'Shaughnessy, 'Review of *The Hidden Campaign: Roosevelt's Health and the 1944 Election* by Hugh E. Evans', *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, no. 6 (2003); *The Daily Mirror*, 5 July 1945; *The Herald*, 24 May 1945; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 June, 6 July 1945; *Truth*, 8 July 1945.
[38] Curtin, 'Death of President Roosevelt', *Digest*, no. 99 (1945): 34.
[39] *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 July 1945.
[40] *The Chicago-Tribune*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, 5 July 1945.

Media legacy

In conclusion, Curtin initiated important precedents in political reporting, press conferences, off-the-record talks, radio broadcasts, films and television news. He used inclusive, egalitarian rhetoric to promote Australian heroism, sacrifices and democratic ideals while establishing common bonds with international public audiences. Through his enthusiastic development of the media, he maintained mainly positive relations with journalists and generated mostly favourable news coverage about his foreign policies. He bestowed a powerful media legacy for Australians because he opened new democratic opportunities for public audiences to engage with the parliament and political leaders.

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