John Curtin
HOW HE WON OVER THE MEDIA
CARYN COATNEY
The life of John Curtin is one of Australia's most remarkable stories. He overcame childhood hardships to become the prime minister in turbulent times. Drawing on newly uncovered archival material, Caryn Costney delves behind the scenes of dramatic events, revealing that Curtin was more complex, determined and shrewd than before imagined. She sheds fresh light on this era by showing how he won the media and the public over to help in meeting the unprecedented challenges that were facing Australia at war.
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Caryn Coatney, PhD, has received global awards for writing on John Curtin's secret media talks. She has been an investigative news journalist in Australia and internationally and worked in many fields of communication since 1990. Dr Coatney completed a Fellowship at the Australian Prime Ministers Centre in the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House, Canberra. Her awards include the Outstanding Research Award from the Global Conference on Business and Finance and the WA Media Award for community leadership. She has published in leading books and journals including Communication, Politics & Culture, Global Media Journal – Canadian Edition, Journalism History, Labour History, the Queensland History Journal and the Review of Business & Finance Studies. Dr Coatney is a Journalism Lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland.
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AUSTRALIAN SCHOLARLY
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Preface

‘Our cause is the cause of human liberty.’
— John Curtin

Some 75 years ago, John Curtin set out on his regular morning walk to his prime minister’s office during Australia’s heightened war crisis. He had slept restlessly the night before, but he strode firmly in the mild Canberra sunshine, bearing the youthful appearance and straight back of a one-time athlete. Accompanying Curtin, his associates were talking of the previous night’s news that the enemy had sunk more Allied vessels, including the new British battleship, HMS Prince of Wales, during the escalating Pacific battles on 10 December 1941. Three days earlier, Japan’s raids on the United States naval base, Pearl Harbor, had caused Curtin to make Australia’s first independent declaration of war. Listening to his team’s anxious predictions about Australia’s lack of defence, he looked forward to the cool air of his prime minister’s office, decorated in blue leather with a blue rug. Soon, he would recline in his swivel chair, putting one of his feet on his uncluttered desk in studied confidence to talk confidentially with a ‘circus’ of reporters, most of whom he knew when he was a labour-oriented journalist. Before reaching the office, a colleague tentatively suggested his concern for the future. He replied: ‘Nobody squeals about a few goals down at half time.’

Curtin’s sense of determination resembled the persistent optimism of the US Civil War President he admired, Abraham Lincoln. They were both self-educated men who cultivated a strong sense of destiny to rise from their impoverished circumstances and become known as great war leaders. Curtin was a master tactician in persuading journalists to liken him to Lincoln. ‘Have no doubts,’ he said to reporters during an informal chat in London, ‘self-reliance is the key to the future.’ Reporters agreed to publish images of Curtin as a hero who led Australia to victory in World War II. He displayed a genius for initiating, developing and overseeing innovative techniques that made the best use of the latest
media technology to persuade journalists to promote his war leadership. As a former hard-hitting, anti-conscription journalist, he developed his use of the mass media to enlist support for Australia's role in global battles until his death, about a month before Japan's surrender.

This particularity might be expected to have solicited the interest of researchers in media and political studies. It was a period in which the formation of the mass media was rapidly expanding. Already a skilled communicator, Curtin was appointed to be the prime minister on 7 October 1941. He was well-known for his passionately anti-conscription views during World War I. Yet there are no previous published findings on the specific character of his mass communications strategies to secure the support of the self-proclaimed 'circus' of senior Canberra Parliamentary Press Gallery journalists. This book will refer to Curtin's journalism strategies as well as his use of wider mass media strategies and to a significant extent, these categories overlap.

The book is based on my completed PhD into Curtin's wartime media strategies. Thanks to my publisher, Nick Walker, the book has developed into an account of Curtin the man and prime minister. This provides new views of Curtin from the perspectives of the journalists, who frequently travelled with him, mainly talked with him twice a day and shared his confidences. Previous research has largely overlooked these reporters' oral histories and autobiographies. Their insights revealed a more complex personality than the myth of a simple man they had presented to the public.

With a practiced manner, Curtin generated media images of easily joking with American and British journalists. In private, however, he often seemed aloof. As a young man, he had been shy during his five-year courting of Tasmanian girl Elsie Curtin from his home in Victoria; this mainly consisted of writing letters until his marriage proposal. Although he had left his Melbourne school by the age of 14, he had mastered the journalist's practice of two-fingered typing. He continued his studies to cite and discuss poetry with reporters. During his prime ministerial trip to the US, his press secretary circulated a list of the books he was reading during his ship voyage to indicate his knowledge of American politics and culture in 1944. He also cultivated media images that linked his leadership to the British royal family. Even so, he appeared more comfortable talking with servicemen and servicewomen at Lord's cricket ground during his 1944 visit in London. This book reveals Curtin's ability to persuade journalists to support a stronger Allied offensive from Australia.

Curtin's media skills provide insights into how contemporary democratic governments may manage information needs during sensitive international conflicts. This book asserts that Curtin's mass communication strategies provide lessons for contemporary democratic leaders, particularly when they are using the media to explain their foreign policy goals to public audiences.
Acknowledgements

The Director of Australian Scholarly Publishing, Nick Walker, has been a great source of support for this book. I owe him a special thanks for his invaluable advice, creative ideas and professionalism.

This research was supported by the Australian Government under an Australian Prime Ministers Centre Fellowship, an initiative of the Museum of Australian Democracy. This was also supported by a grant from the University of Southern Queensland Faculty of Arts (now the Faculty of Business, Education, Law and Arts).

I am grateful to the following scholars for their productive discussions: Rhod McNeill, Bryce Barker, Steve Micklethwaite, Bobbie Oliver and Martyn Hirst.

Moreover I am indebted to the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library team for their generosity in answering my queries. I have also received similar assistance from the Australian War Memorial, the J S Battye Library of Western Australian History, the National Archives of Australia, the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia and the National Library of Australia.

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Introduction

Inside central London's bomb-ravaged, medieval Guildhall, the city's elderly officials sat closely together as Australian Prime Minister John Curtin strode to the podium, hooked his thumb into his high-cut waistcoat pocket and declared they were at the eve of events to overcome aggressors. Some three years after the Nazi blitzkrieg, Curtin was visiting Guildhall to accept the Freedom of the City of London award on a spring day in 1944, but he was mainly thinking of Australia. Secretly, he had been imploring a select group of Canberra-based journalists to help him to persuade the exhausted Australian public to keep supporting the nation's fighting forces in the brutal, extended Pacific battles. Australia sent more servicemen and servicewomen to fight in World War II than Great Britain and the United States on a per capita basis. About one out of every seven Australians was participating in military service. Since Curtin became the nation's leader on 7 October 1941, he viewed his first international trip as an opportunity to publicise Australian sacrifices to the Allied media that often had overlooked Pacific war reports.

In London, many Fleet Street reporters and broadcasters met him for the first time as the Right Honourable John Joseph Ambrose Curtin PC, a Privy Councillor. They soon realised that he preferred plain John Curtin. Previously, they had only read, heard and watched his well-rehearsed, carefully scripted media messages that he sent from Australia to secure more Allied military assistance during the Axis attacks that included Sydney, Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. To British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who was patiently listening to Curtin's speech in Guildhall, these attacks were mostly more raids on Australia, but he would not say this publicly. Although Churchill told other prime ministers that Curtin's Australian-oriented statements impressed him, he intended to focus on public affirmations of unity about the Allies' 'best Hitler first' strategy in war theatres far away from the Pacific region. Curtin, however, was more interested in talking with international journalists.