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Curtin: A hero or appeaser?

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New documents highlight John Curtin's close association with the fascist Japanese envoy on the eve of Pearl Harbor – how will history judge the Labor prime minister's record, asks Bob Wurth

Last May, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer accused John Curtin and other Labor leaders of a pattern of weak leadership, particularly on the issues of appeasement, isolationism and shirking international treaty obligations.

In my new book *Saving Australia*, I reveal documents from Japan showing that Curtin secretly negotiated an agreement in pre-war 1941 to support Japanese access to West Australian iron ore in return for safety from attack. Do these revelations give new weight to the argument that Curtin was indeed an appeaser?

In April 1941, Curtin as Leader of the Opposition sat in the ALP office in Melbourne opposite Tatsuo Kawai, the first Japanese minister, effectively ambassador, to Australia. Kawai had arrived only weeks earlier. He was widely known that was a fervent expansionist. In Japan he had spoken in praise of Hitler. Among Kawai's friends were warmongers of the worst order.

According to Kawai's written account of the meeting, the two frankly discussed "how to disentangle the present, increasingly grim Japan-Australia relations" and that boosting trade was the only real answer:

"Following that" Kawai wrote, his demeanour formalised as he said, 'If Japan will do that [boost trade] for us, then it would be OK for the subordinate Australian side to lift the seizure of the Yampi Sound, but Japan must guarantee Australia's safety.'"

Curtin pointed out that he was close to assuming the Prime Ministership and was in a position to speak freely to the then current leader, Robert Menzies.

Kawai later commented of Curtin: "I was deeply impressed by his attitude and character. From that moment, my feelings of friendship towards him grew rapidly."

The Australian Government had banned iron ore mining and exports from Yampi Sound, in Curtin's home state of north west Western Australia, after Japanese interests had been granted generous mining leases by the state government.

Curtin had been supportive of the Japanese iron ore access, three years earlier acknowledging in Parliament that the iron ore could be used for munition or armaments manufacture.

There is no question that Curtin was an appeaser of Japan before the war. The Australian Parliament of May 1939 was a theatre of appeasement and underlined the confusion that Australia's leaders on both sides had about the rapid changes in world affairs.

Downer speaks of Curtin appeasing Hitler. In May 1939 in Parliament Menzies' new Foreign Minister Henry Gullett referred to Hitler's 'dark deeds' but then in the same breath spoke of the Fuhrer's 'great record of service to his people'. Gullett was sure that 'the great Japanese people' wouldn't wage war against 'her closest friends' in the British empire.

Curtin, in the same sitting, desperate to keep Australia out of another war, said Australia 'had no quarrel with the people of Japan'. Curtin added: 'We lay it down that what they do is their business and we feel that Japan will fully reciprocate in this connection.' Kawai, at the time Japan's official spokesman for the foreign ministry in Tokyo, told reporters that Japan 'deeply appreciated' the views from Australia.

The Kawai and Curtin families became close. During his time in Australia, Kawai would dine at the Curtin house at Cottesloe as the Japanese were taking over southern Indo-China in July 1941. The two families over the generations exchanged cards and letter, gifts and photos of grandchildren, some of which I found in Japan, and visits. Kawai would return to the same house in 1959 and dine with widow Elsie Curtin, with whom he had been corresponding for years.

To be sure, Curtin, firstly as Leader of the Opposition, had a major influence on the Menzies Government during 1941. It was Curtin who began warning the Advisory War Council of the threat from Japan. As Japan's belligerency mounted, Curtin constantly changed his stance about Japan and began sounding the alarm.

In February 1941 Curtin told the War Council that if and when the situation favoured, 'Japan would make war against Australia tomorrow.' Curtin led the Council on defence issues. With Menzies overseas, Curtin and acting Prime Minister Arthur Fadden took the unusual step of meeting the Press together, dramatically declaring that Australia's very existence was at stake.

Curtin girded the Government to prepare for the possibility of war with Japan at a time when Australia's attention was firmly fixed on helping Britain. On February 14 1941, the Advisory War Council heard reports that raised the spectre of Australia being abandoned by the great powers and being forced to fight a holding war with Japan.

The British believed that the capacity of the Japanese 'should not be over-stated'. But Curtin demanded that Australia be put on a war footing. 'Even if America intervened in a war with Japan, he said, Australia initially would have to stand alone. At Curtin's urging he and acting Prime Minister Fadden issued yet another joint warning, declaring that the war had moved to 'a new stage involving the upmost gravity.'

Prime Minister Robert Menzies was of course the worst appeaser of all. The warnings about Australia's danger issued by Fadden and Curtin were undermined by Menzies in London: 'I do not believe in the inevitability of a conflict in the

Pacific' he said. 'There is no difficulty which is not capable of being resolved by frankness.'

A Yampi Sound peace agreement would have significantly assisted the Japanese war effort. It would have had dire longer-term consequences for Australia; at least compromising Australia's standing with Britain and the US. Curtin clearly had second thoughts about the Yampi Sound proposal, and by the time he assumed power in October 1941, as Japan's belligerency became more strident, implementation of any personal agreement with Kawai on Yampi Sound simply was out of the question.

Curtin quickly terminated his appeasement of Japan before most other Australian politicians and was shocked that his own frontbenchers continued to push for appeasement. But Curtin did not close the door to Kawai. He allowed his foreign minister Herbert 'Doc' Evatt to continue negotiations with Kawai to see if there could be any honorable peace solution.

Evatt's association with Kawai was also close but unlike Curtin he allowed the urbane and charming Japanese ambassador to pull the wool over his eyes. As foreign minister, and attorney general, Evatt consistently prevented his own security service and military intelligence from placing stricter conditions on the Japanese in Australia, who were under a loose form of house arrest.

Evatt even wrote to Kawai after war had broken out telling him that he was "above suspicion". He wasn't, and Evatt was naïve. I discovered in Japan that Kawai and his staff were gathering intelligence and getting it back to Japan in 1942 through a collaborator.

How did Kawai come out of the war? He became a pacifist and was ostracised in wartime Japan for his love of Curtin and Australia. Soon after the war he was appointed vice minister for foreign affairs. He devoted his life to Curtin and trade with Australia as head of the powerful Japan-Australia Society.

Kawai's son Masumi told me that it was John Curtin who forever changed his father's life. If anything, Curtin's reputation as war leader is enhanced by the revelations of his dealings with Kawai.

Bob Wurth is author of *Saving Australia, Curtin's secret peace with Japan* (Lothian Books, 2006).