

Alexander Downer: Labor has a history of blind pacifism

New evidence shows John Curtin was an appeaser, says our Foreign Minister

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BOB Wurth's new book, *Saving Australia: Curtin's Secret Peace with Japan*, confirms what some of us have argued for some time: that until he became prime minister in 1941, John Curtin was not prepared to confront tyrannical regimes. This has been the pattern of Labor leaders since World War I.

Wurth reveals previously unpublished documents from Japan that show Curtin negotiated a secret peace deal with the Japanese in April 1941, just before the outbreak of war in the Pacific. Under the deal, Australia would give Japan access to iron ore mines in exchange for a guarantee that Japan would not attack us. At the time of the deal, Curtin was Opposition leader but was only months from becoming prime minister. The war in Europe was already advanced, with Australia a full participant.

The deal was an act of weakness and isolationism, and its effects, had it been implemented, would have been catastrophic. It would have provided an important boost to Japan's subsequent ability to wage war by supplying key raw material for the manufacture of weapons and armaments. Moreover, any such deal would have only emboldened Japan in its intentions against the US, Britain and their allies.

The uncovering of this secret deal is an astounding revelation but it is not a surprise: Curtin had form. He had consistently been a pacifist, wanting to appease tyrannical regimes, and called for Australia to remain firmly isolated from the world's great struggles. In response to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, for example, Curtin opposed sanctions and stated that "the control of Abyssinia by any country is not worth the loss of a single Australian life".

Later he said that "to be drawn into war in spite of everything would be bad enough, but deliberately to indicate our willingness to be a participant for or against certain European groups would be a piece of national madness". Even Hitler's escalating demands for Czechoslovak territory did not "justify resort to force in Europe" according to Curtin.

Most telling are his comments in parliament in response to Germany's invasion of Russia in June 1941. While Robert Menzies quoted Winston Churchill's stirring words resolving "to destroy Hitler and every vestige of the Nazi regime", Curtin condemned the invasion but went on to say "the Labor Party has no objection whatever to the Germans practising Nazism in Germany".

Curtin's view was that Australian soldiers should never be engaged in Europe under any circumstances. It was a view based on a blind commitment to pacifism and underpinned by the notion that Australia was "but a minor power, a small nation remote from the great centres" and incapable of playing any substantial role in the international fights against tyranny.

The Labor Party has continued the Curtin policy of pacifism and isolationism to this day. When it comes to great international challenges, be it Nazism or global terror, the Labor Party has adopted the position that Australia is a tiny, isolated backwater that has no responsibility to do any of the heavy lifting. Labor has lacked the courage to combat evil.

It clings to the vain hope that by shrinking and hiding Australia may avoid the firing line of tyrannical regimes and terrorists.

For example, Labor's weakness reached farcical levels in 1954 when, as Opposition leader, H.V. Evatt wrote to Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov asking whether the Soviets were spying on Australia. Unsurprisingly, the answer was no. Evatt shared that response to howls of disbelieving laughter in parliament.

In the early 1970s when the Soviet Union annexed the captive nations, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, then prime minister Gough Whitlam ensured that Australia was among the first nations to recognise the legitimacy of the Soviet Union's actions. No ifs, no buts. No concern for the oppressed and helpless people of the annexed lands.

Of course, let's not forget that Labor's great split in the 1950s and '60s occurred because anti-communist elements believed Labor was not strong enough in combating totali-

tarian communism. They were right.

Kim Beazley sits squarely in this Labor tradition of weakness. Whereas Curtin said that it didn't matter if Germany was run by Nazis, Beazley thought that we should have left Saddam Hussein in power; we were wrong to help our allies get rid of him. "We are a small country in a world of giants," Beazley says. Can you hear Curtin's echo?

Beazley and his predecessors happily take the protection offered by others (particularly the US) in dealing with the tough issues and guaranteeing our freedom. But they feel no compulsion for Australia to do its part. They even try to convince the Australian public that they are in favour of the US alliance. Yet, at the same time, they snipe at the US at every opportunity and they fail to acknowledge that allies stick by one another.

The past 100 years has seen immense global threats where the freedoms we take for granted have been at stake. The threat posed by global terrorism and its totalitarian ideology is the latest such challenge. It is a battle being waged in Afghanistan and Iraq, through counter-terrorism operations in Southeast Asia and national security measures here.

Australia needs leaders who have the moral clarity to see right from wrong. We need to stand up for what we believe and live up to our responsibilities, as a significant country, to contribute to the global struggle. It is our duty and it is most definitely in our best interests.

Curtin did fulfil his responsibilities (and partly redeemed his reputation) once he became prime minister in October 1941. After two years of atrocities in Europe and the outbreak of global warfare, he accepted the role that history had delivered to him. He steeled his resolve and abandoned his pacifism to provide the nation with solid wartime leadership.

The Labor tradition and philosophy, however, remains firmly built on the pacifism, isolationism and weakness that characterised most of Curtin's political life.