

Could Curtin have been so blind?

IF, as Bob Wurth's new book *Saving Australia* claims, John Curtin was in secret negotiations with the Japanese shortly before they entered World War II, much of Australia's historical mythology is stood on its head.

Some on the Left have been ready to accuse the conservatives of appeasement, ineptitude or treason in the war. Paul Keating once claimed "that nest of them almost cost us victory", and told Alexander Downer (whose father was a prisoner in Changi) that "50 years ago your class was supporting" the Axis.

Marxist journalist Humphrey McQueen claimed: "There are reasons [not stated] for believing the Brisbane Line ... marked the border between those parts of Australia which would be conceded to the Japanese to be administered directly by them and those sections of Australia which would be run by a Vichy-style government in Canberra ... Australia's ruling class was capable of conceiving treachery of this order."

Wurth claims the then Japanese ambassador to Australia, Tatsuo Kawai, reported that before Pearl Harbor, Curtin approached him with a secret deal to give Japan access to West Australian iron ore in return for Japan not attacking Australia. Further, Curtin's foreign minister H. V. Evatt tried to broker a peace agreement between Japan and the US.

The ambassador may have been

Revelations about the wartime PM confound the mythology, argues Hal G. P. Colebatch

indulging in wishful thinking or misinterpreted Curtin. Yet the words quoted seem plain: "If Japan will [boost trade] with 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."

In some ways the story accords with Curtin's parochial thinking and naivety outside the trade union sphere. The British Empire was fighting for its life against Nazi Germany and losing. The only hope — for the whole future of civilisation as well as in realpolitik — was for the US to get into the war before Hitler won.

From this aspect, buying peace with Japan — if that meant keeping the US out of the war — was the worst, not the best, course of action possible. Far from "saving Australia", it would guarantee eventual defeat of the British Empire, Nazi domination of Europe and the Middle East and, as prime minister Robert Menzies warned in 1939, leave Australia with a precarious hold on its independence, a hold even more precarious with a Japanese base on its soil.

For Curtin, the union movement was a sacred thing, and he seemed to only slowly come to understand what total and global war meant. In

November 1939 he claimed: "The paramount thing about this war is that, however the war ends, its termination must see Australia with a united, well-organised, clear-thinking labour movement."

If the war had ended with a German or Japanese victory, the Australian labour movement would have become well-organised indeed, though not quite along the lines Curtin probably had in mind.

As late as June 24, 1941, Curtin told parliament: "The Labor Party has no objection whatever to the Germans practising Nazism in Germany."

In 1943 he was still saying: "Trade unionism — the right of workers to organise for industrial or political purposes — is the real thing at stake in this war."

He took only feeble and reluctant action against the strikers who were crippling Australia's war effort. All this points to an absence of joined-up thinking and an inability to see the global picture.

Further, with Japan determined on attacking the US, merely giving it access to Australian iron ore would not have bought peace, though it would have shattered Allied unity. The idea of Japan running an iron ore mine in a neutral Australia while

fighting a war (in alliance with Nazi Germany?) against the US (and the rest of the British Empire?) is preposterous. Can Curtin have seriously contemplated this?

If Curtin undertook these negotiations without informing the Advisory War Council, on which he sat (and whose business was recorded in minutes) or without informing Menzies privately, such behaviour seems at least approaching treason. That seems quite out of character for Curtin, whose honesty and patriotism have never been seriously questioned and who worked himself to death in the service of his country. Curtin, as he himself said, was no great warlord but he was no traitor either.

There is, however, a further point raised: If Curtin knew from the ambassador that war was inevitable, why did he apparently not pass the warning on? If the Allies had been alerted and given more time to prepare, they could have given a better account of themselves and would still have had a *casus belli*. Not only Pearl Harbor, but also Malaya, Singapore, The Philippines and the Dutch East Indies could have been better prepared against surprise attack. It is even possible that they would not have fallen.

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