

PEACE FOR IRON

Curtin's secret deal

Through the remarkable friendship between John Curtin, who would become Australia's wartime leader, and the Japanese ambassador, a clandestine peace deal was sought just days before Pearl Harbor.

BY BOB WURTH



JOHN CURTIN, AUSTRALIA'S revered World War II leader, sought a secret peace deal with Japan as late as mid-1941, just months before the war in the Pacific broke out, according to a new history.

More than 60 years after the Pacific war, evidence found in Japan reveals that Curtin reached an agreement with Japan's first ambassador to Australia, Tatsuo Kawai, for Japan to guarantee Australia's freedom from attack in exchange for Japan's access to iron ore in Western Australia.

After a series of confidential meetings aimed at preventing war, Curtin, then opposition leader, called off his efforts to trade iron ore for peace. Nevertheless, when the Labor leader became prime minister in October 1941, his foreign minister H.V. "Doc" Evatt tried to broker a last-minute peace agreement between Japan and the United States.

Despite the failure of the peace efforts, the unlikely Curtin-Kawai friendship continued. The ambassador's papers uncovered in Japan reveal that the ambassador became devoted to Curtin and his family – and to Australia.

TWO FACES Tatsuo Kawai was a pacifist who harboured one of Japan's worst war criminals

Just nine days before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Kawai alerted his friend that the outbreak of war was unstoppable.

It was a friendship that survived Curtin's death just months before the war's end. In 1959, Kawai made a sentimental journey to Perth to visit Curtin's widow, Elsie. Kawai's son Masumi, alerted by his father, became chief of Mitsui Australia, starting vast iron ore mines for export to Japan in the 1960s.

A new history by Bob Wurth, *Saving Australia, Curtin's Secret Peace with Japan* (published next week by Lothian Books) contains these sensational new discoveries – discoveries that will reshape the way historians view the war in the Pacific and the role of John Curtin.

The Bulletin presents an edited extract.

John Curtin was opposition leader when he first met the urbane Kawai at a dinner in Kawai's honour at the governor-general's Canberra residence, Yarralumla, in March 1941. It was the start of Kawai's conversion to pacifism and a lifelong devotion to Curtin. Australia then was at war against Japan's Axis partners. Curtin, a former pacifist, was close to gaining the majority in the House of Representatives.





“THE TWO
MEN BECAME
INCREASINGLY
CLOSE, BARING
THEIR HEARTS”

TSUNEO HATTORI KAWAI'S SENIOR AIDE

PLAIN TALKER

Curtin agreed to the iron ore deal just months before Pearl Harbor (above), according to Kawai's papers



PATRIOT GAMES
 This page, clockwise from left, a Curtin card to the Kawais; Kawai with G-G Lord Gowrie; with Billy Hughes; at his retreat (with war criminal Tsuji), below. Opposite page, Curtin's widow Elsie; Kawai with Nazis in 1940

Before coming to Australia, the chubby-faced Kawai had been the strident spokesman for the foreign ministry in Tokyo and a roving ambassador to America and Europe, including Nazi Germany. He was a pioneering advocate of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere – the name Japan gave its expanding empire in Asia and the Pacific – and a friend of warmongers, some later charged with war crimes. But Kawai was also his own man. His rebelliousness was always close to the surface. Friends and family called him “a man of two faces”.

Japan’s consul in Melbourne, and Kawai’s right-hand man in 1941-42, Tsuneo Hattori, recalled in 1968 the first meeting of Kawai and Curtin: “Tatsuo was deeply impressed with Mr Curtin’s simple, unpretentious manner of speaking. Mr Curtin also appeared to take note of Tatsuo’s solid character. Before he left, he made a promise to meet with Kawai soon. Following that, the two men became increasingly close, baring their hearts to one another and exchanging opinions.” Kawai

also recorded the meeting in verse:
*Introduced to Mr Curtin,
 Leader of the Opposition,
 I shake his hand:
 I will never forget his face*
 A rapport based on frankness began to build in their meetings. Curtin’s sole objective was to do everything he could to prevent war with Japan. Kawai was charmed by Curtin: “And in this world, in a strange country, this politician of such distinctive character appears,” Kawai wrote.
 During five years’ research, I discovered Kawai’s previously unpublished writings, poetry and photographs. Kawai records that in April 1941, the two men met again at the Labor Party office in Melbourne. According to Kawai’s version, written in 1962, Curtin asked: “Is there no hope now of Japan getting out?” Kawai had replied: “Actually, no, it is not an issue of whether there is hope or not. It is an issue of getting out or not. We must thoroughly think this issue through, then cut open a path to that.”

Kawai had merely intended the April meeting to be a courtesy visit, “yet somehow it became a lengthy, personal conversation, a frank discussion on how to disentangle the present, increasingly grim Japan-Australia relations”. Kawai said he and Curtin agreed that trade was the key to restoring deteriorating relations.
 “Our conversations then went on to discussion of specific measures,” Kawai wrote in Japanese in a paper for the Japan Australia Society in Tokyo, illustrated by a photo of John and Elsie Curtin. “Following that, his [Curtin’s] 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’.”
 The Australian government, led by conservative prime minister Joe Lyons, had imposed a ban on iron ore exports in 1938 after Japan had secured the rights from the state government to mine and export iron ore from Yampi Sound, in remote north-west

KAWAI COLLECTION

WARTIME PRIME MINISTERS



JOSEPH LYONS
1932-39



EARLE PAGE
1939



ROBERT MENZIES
1939-41



ARTHUR FADDEN
1941



JOHN CURTIN
1941-45

Spies on the loose

How Herbert "Doc" Evatt unwittingly compromised Australia's national security.

Former envoy to Canberra Taijiro Ichikawa admitted in 2002 that the Japanese ambassador Tatsuo Kawai had continued to gather intelligence while under house arrest in Melbourne after the outbreak of war in the Pacific. Ichikawa was 96 at the time, but there was no sign of impaired memory.

It was another confirmation that Kawai had supervised intelligence-gathering while under what was a very loose form of house arrest in his mansion.

Efforts by security staff to tighten the isolation of the Japanese diplomats were rebuffed by H.V. Evatt, attorney-general responsible for security.

The Japanese were allowed to keep their still and movie cameras. When neighbours reported seeing the Japanese scaling the fence to their estate in 1942, they were told by security officials to mind their own business.

Further confirmation of intelligence-gathering comes from Australian archives which record that a notebook found in 1941 belonging to one of Kawai's male secretaries contained details of Australia's war effort and industries, including munitions and aircraft production.

Despite his respect for prime minister John Curtin, Kawai clearly saw spying as a duty.

Even before war with Japan began, Australian security officials were concerned at the freedom of movement allowed to Japanese officials. Just before warning Curtin of impending war in November

1941, Kawai had taken a launch trip around Sydney Harbour telling the skipper to go close to a destroyer, HMAS Warramunga, being built at Cockatoo Island.

The Commonwealth Security Service's Sydney chief, Captain B. Tyrell, in a scathing report that went to Evatt, said Kawai was making a fool of Australians and castigated the government's slackness: "The Australian government tacitly admits that Japan can be a full Axis partner and at the same time be a free and independent agent to be accorded all due rights and privileges." Evatt was unmoved.

Later, after war began, when military intelligence cut Kawai's newspapers and demanded an escort be present when the Japanese met the Swiss consul in Melbourne, Kawai protested to Evatt. "That I have never been a party of any harmful course to the interests of our two countries must have been appreciated by you and your prime minister," he wrote. Evatt restored Kawai's newspapers and unescorted access to the Swiss consulate, and apologised. Only publications dealing directly with Australian military preparations were withheld.

Kawai and his staff were permitted visits to hairdressers, the Kodak shop, doctors and dentists. Kawai's offsider Tsuneo Hattori would ride his bike to the city to make deliveries and pick up parcels. Kawai was allowed access to mail and telephone services within Australia.

John Burton, Evatt's young assistant at the start of the war who went on to become head of external affairs, told the author: "I think Evatt agreed with the colonial causes of Japanese aggression, but he never expressed his views on this. His job was to fight the war, which meant dealing with UK and US military planning."

Evatt's trust in Kawai was naive. In early 1942, Army Minister Frank Forde complained that when troop convoys left Australia, their departure was recorded over Radio Tokyo.

EYES AND EARS

Kawai with aide Tsuneo Hattori at the Melbourne mansion where they were held under loose house arrest



Western Australia. The Lyons government had been fearful of Japan establishing a physical foothold on Australian soil.

Kawai continued: "Speaking to me from his heart, he [Curtin] added, 'Don't take what I have said thus far as the candid words of someone in no position of responsibility. My Labor Party is the opposition at the moment, but it holds an equal amount of Lower House seats to the two Coalition parties, and it is only the chairman's seat that we are short of. I am also in a position whereby I can speak sufficiently to Prime Minister Menzies.' I was deeply impressed by his attitude and character. From that moment, my feelings of friendship towards him grew rapidly."

Kawai, encouraged, sent a covert dispatch about Curtin to his foreign minister, Yosuke Matsuoka: "Whilst he is not a scholar of Japan, he does possess an awareness and understanding of Japan's real ability, culture, and morals or the difficulties at hand. A deep thinker on issues pertinent to Japan-Australia relations, he listens with an open mind to debate over the friendship between the two countries and is a magnanimous man of considerable calibre."

Curtin was walking the tightrope of appeasement. Three years earlier, he had told parliament that "iron ore may be used for the manufacture of munitions and for aggressive purposes by warlike countries", but he still urged that the iron ore embargo be lifted, fearing Japan could be pushed over the brink by denying her raw materials.



FRANK FORDE
1945



BEN CHIFLEY
1945-49

Californian in a kimono

Ambassador Kawai's secretary and hostess was a young American woman.

Tamaye Tsutsumida was 19 and living on her family's farm in California in 1939 when she was chosen to attend a new school in Tokyo: the Heishikan, the "Public Service to the Emperor School". It was her first step on the road to Australia – and personal tragedy.

The Heishikan, a nationalistic cram school for Japanese Americans, was established by Tatsuo Kawai, then director of the information bureau of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Most of the graduates, with their language skills, were destined for diplomatic service.

Kawai, 30 years Tsutsumida's senior, initially was attracted by her keen intelligence. She was well read – her father had taught her the Japanese and western

classics – and she was also quietly outspoken. She needed little encouragement to state her views – according to her family, they were pro-American.

When Kawai was appointed ambassador to Australia, he selected Tsutsumida to be his private secretary and hostess. She resided with him at Carn Brea mansion in Auburn, Melbourne. Tsutsumida often appeared in her kimono at functions, and she was frequently mistaken for Kawai's wife, who had remained in Tokyo with their five children. It was Tsutsumida who accompanied Kawai to dinner with John and Elsie Curtin at their Cottesloe house in July 1941.

When war came, Tsutsumida was one of more than 20 Japanese staffers under house

arrest at Carn Brea. She faced an agonising choice: return to her family in the US, stay in Australia or go to wartime Japan. In August 1942, she elected to go to Japan with Kawai as part of an exchange of diplomatic staff.

Back in Tokyo, she defied regulations and wore Western clothes, make-up and permed hair. After the war, she continued to work for the foreign ministry until she became ill with tuberculosis. Kawai moved her into his cottage at Manazuru to recuperate. He blamed himself for not noticing Tsutsumida's early symptoms:

*The disease worsens
I fail to pay attention
to your changing tastes;
How I regret my neglect*



A Yampi Sound peace agreement in 1941 would have assisted the Japanese war effort and compromised Australia's standing with Britain and the US. Kawai discussed the Japanese involvement in Yampi Sound when dining at the Curtin house in Cottesloe, Perth, in July 1941. At the time, Curtin introduced him to WA premier John Willcock, a strong supporter of Japanese mining at Yampi Sound.

Japanese spokesmen in mid-1941 began warning of the "encirclement" of Japan by the West. Prime Minister Menzies had sent troops to Malaya and Australia was accused by Japan of threatening Thailand. Curtin, still opposition leader, revealed to the Advisory War Council that Kawai had used intimidatory language in threatening to break the encirclement of the western powers. Curtin's policy was to leave the door open to talks with Kawai, but from late July, he became the first in the ALP to end the wholesale appeasement of Japan. As time went on, he was appalled that his colleagues continued to believe in appeasement, as had Menzies and his government. Although trade to Japan had been restricted in the late-'30s, Menzies, as attorney-general in 1938, had forced wharfies to load pig iron for Japan, earning the tag "Pig Iron Bob".

After Japan's invasion of Indo-China and threatening action towards Thailand and the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) in mid-1941, Curtin had second thoughts on Yampi Sound. By the time he became PM in October, implementation of the personal agreement

with Kawai on Yampi Sound had become impossible. Yet the Curtin government, through minister for external affairs and attorney-general Herbert Vere Evatt, continued to negotiate with Kawai to avert war.

Evatt clung to hope despite Japan's belligerence, speaking of the chance for "a new chapter in the history of the relations between the leading Pacific powers". Just 10 days before war with Japan, Evatt in parliament singled out Tatsuo Kawai, who was in the public gallery: "In these very difficult times, I consider it to be my duty to pay tribute to the frank and friendly attitude of the Japanese minister in this country." Evatt had been very sympathetic to Japan's pre-war plight and saw injustice in the West's treatment of Japan, now hit by increasing trade sanctions. He called the sanctions "a pin-pricking policy". Evatt even embarrassed his leader, Curtin, by calling the threats from Japan "exaggerated".

Curtin's friendship with Kawai was far from a one-way street. On November 29, 1941, Kawai was escorted to Curtin's office in Parliament House. Curtin asked simply: "Is it to be war?" Kawai said what no other Japanese would contemplate: "I'm afraid it has gone too far; the momentum is too great." As Kawai left, Curtin exploded into action. Staff began checking on the flow of Japanese people and money from Australia. Elsie Curtin remembered her husband being given "a flying start" by a Japanese official.

By that time, Evatt and Curtin feared that talks going on in Washington between

“ I DEPARTED,
SILENTLY PRAYING
FOR HIS GOOD
HEALTH AND A
BRAVE FIGHT ”

TATSUO KAWAI ON HIS FRIEND CURTIN IN 1942

Japan's representatives and US Secretary of State Cordell Hull were about to break down. The Australian peace initiative then became a two-pronged affair through Kawai in Australia and Australian envoy Richard Casey in Washington. Evatt threw all his energy into diplomacy, banking on a settlement. In an extraordinary telephone call to Washington, Evatt told Casey to intervene in the US-Japan talks if possible: "You should do anything and everything in your power to prevent the complete breakdown of the Hull-Kurusu conversations." Casey went to the Japanese Embassy and had a long talk with special envoy Saburo Kurusu, who showed every desire for a peaceful solution, but gave Casey nothing to take away.

Evatt saw Australia as mediator in the Washington talks and a wider forum involving Pacific nations. Up until only days before Pearl Harbor, Evatt remained confident he could broker a settlement. Australian commanders were forbidden to speak officially about a



TRAGIC FIGURE
Kawai's aide Tamaye Tsutsumida was torn between cultures

Refused entry to the United States, Tamaye Tsutsumida died in Tokyo in 1953, aged 33. At her memorial service in

his Tokyo house, Kawai wept openly for the feisty teenager and wrote a beautiful *tanka* verse to her memory:

*Now you have passed;
how empty it feels
the summer mikan in the garden
will bloom early this year
The flowers by the bedside
that made you so happy;
I put them in that vase
and stand them by your image
The image stands on its back,
looking over and protecting me
until the end of my time.*

Japanese threat and could do so only to their generals in private correspondence.

When war finally came, it fell to Evatt to hand Kawai a copy of Australia's decision to declare war on Japan. But the outbreak of war did not diminish their mutual respect. As the Japanese advanced towards Singapore, Kawai expressed "deep regret that the relations between the two countries should have come to such a pass".

Kawai and hundreds of Japanese nationals were returned to Japan in August 1942. In an interview never published in Australia, Kawai told foreign correspondents in Melbourne: "I have failed in my mission and I am returning to Japan a bitterly disappointed man. The outbreak of war was the greatest blow I have received in my life. Those Australians who know how I struggled to avert war in the Pacific will understand when I say my spirit has been broken. The gods decreed that Japan and Australia should go to war, and it is a case of kill or be killed, but there is no bitterness in my heart toward Australia."

Kawai's thoughts were of Curtin: "After being detained for seven months and without even an opportunity to bid him farewell I made my departure from Australia, silently praying for his good health and a brave fight."

Kawai arrived at Yokohama in October 1942 with the ashes of four Japanese killed in the midget submarine raid on Sydney Harbour in May. Kawai was now out of favour because

of his friendship towards Australia and was banished from public life. Towards the end of the war, he worked secretly with pacifist Shigeru Yoshida, later prime minister, to end the war. He was in China sounding out a peaceful settlement when the atomic bombs fell. Soon after the Japanese surrender in 1945, Kawai was appointed vice-minister for foreign affairs and given other senior posts. But after he told his staff not to kowtow to the Americans, Yoshida sacked him.

Kawai's son Masumi said his father's character changed as a result of his friendship with Curtin: "John Curtin was a gentleman who impressed my father deeply. More than anyone! I think that is the reason why my father changed after his Australian life."

Kawai had a magnificent thatched retreat cottage overlooking the sea at Manazuru south of Tokyo, which first I visited in 2002. There I discovered 42 photograph albums recording Kawai's life, including evidence of his friendship with the Curtins. After the war, Kawai and the widowed Elsie began to exchange greetings and rekindled the friendship which lasted generations between the families, including the exchange of letters, photographs, gifts and visits.

Kawai resurrected the Japan Australia Society in 1946 and as president put all his efforts into renewing trade and friendship with Australia. In 1950, Menzies, re-elected PM the year before, secretly visited Kawai's villa and discussed trade and a peace treaty. But here one of Kawai's great contradictions arises. By only weeks, Menzies missed seeing Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, operations planner for the attack on Malaya and Singapore, whom Kawai had been harbouring at Manazuru. Tsuji was wanted by the Allies for the mass murder of many thousands of civilians after the fall of Singapore. Tsuji wrote a book while living under Kawai's protection in which he admitted being a war criminal.

Tsuji was directly implicated in the Bataan death march in the Philippines, giving orders to slaughter any prisoners who could not go on. He also was responsible for many Australian deaths. Japan's official war history series *Senshi Soshō* says Tsuji, as a staff officer, misrepresented Imperial Headquarters by issuing orders to begin "in all haste" the Kokoda campaign to capture Port Moresby without awaiting the results of an operational study of the treacherous route across the Kokoda track. Tsuji was never arrested for his crimes and later became a member of the Japanese parliament in the 1950s.

In 1959, Kawai returned to Cottesloe, Perth, to visit Elsie Curtin, who had learned as the years went by of the marriages of Kawai's three sons and two daughters and of the arrival of seven grandchildren. Over the years Kawai, too, received all the news of the Curtin offspring. Arriving in Darwin

in 1959, Kawai said he had been dreaming of Australia for 17 years: "John Curtin was one of my best friends. I have not forgotten your country and I have never forgotten John Curtin. This has been my first chance to come back."

Kawai and Elsie enjoyed dinner again in the same Jarrad Street house in Cottesloe where they had dined in the dark days of July 1941. Then on a hot Sunday, Elsie took Kawai to Karrakatta cemetery in Perth. Kawai knelt at Curtin's grave, prayed and wept. What happened next would have made Curtin smile, for it was quintessentially Australian. Kawai in floppy boxers, thin and balding, plunged into the surf at Cottesloe Beach with the Curtin family.

Tatsuo Kawai lived to see the Japanese exploit Yampi Sound for the mutual benefit of Japan and Australia. In 1960, the Australian government lifted the ban on iron ore exports. BHP exported Yampi Sound iron ore to Japan from 1965 for 28 years. Kawai also lived to see his son play a major role in Australia's iron ore exports. In the 1960s, Masumi Kawai became Mitsui's general manager in Australia, a partner in huge mines at Mount Newman and Robe River.

AFTER THE STORM The serene Manazuru Peninsula where Kawai retreated to his cottage



On the Buddhist altar at Kawai's memorial service was a picture of an Australian in an old battered bush hat. Friendly correspondence and contacts between the Curtin and Kawai families persisted from the end of the war until 2001 when Curtin's surviving daughter was admitted to a nursing home.

Masumi Kawai, who visited the Curtin house at Cottesloe dozens of times, commented on the relationship: "I don't know why my

father loved John Curtin and Elsie Curtin, but he did." ●

An edited extract from *Saving Australia, Curtin's Secret Peace with Japan*, published next week by Lothian Books, rrp \$34.95.
www.savingaustralia.com

