

Jump TO Article



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The abandonment of Australia in 1942

an edited address to the Institute on 29 October 2013 by

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Mr Wurth examines the first few months of Australia's war with Japan beginning in December 1941, especially from the perspective Australia's prime minister, John Curtin. Curtin clearly saw the war as a 'battle for Australia'. Newly available evidence suggests that, in early 1942, for a time Australia was abandoned by its allies; and that Curtin was on the verge of mental and physical collapse.

There are two key issues raised in my new book, *The Battle for Australia*, which take the debate about the Japanese wartime threat to Australia further than we might previously have appreciated.

Firstly, evidence indicates that for some months in late 1941 and early 1942 Australia was truly abandoned; primarily by 'the mother country' Great Britain, but also, initially, by the United States, the nation that in time would come to Australia's rescue. This early abandonment was insidious considering Australia's significant assistance rendered to Britain in the fight against Nazi Germany before and after Japan entered the war.

The policy had deeper ramifications than the mere rhetoric of the era emanating from Australian Prime Minister John Curtin and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill as they jostled about reinforcements for the Far East and the question of British assistance to Australia.²

I discovered documented confirmation in Britain of a more conscious decision by Churchill to significantly downplay the Japanese threat to Australia while Churchill actually believed quite the reverse. He did not predict a massive invasion of the Australian continent. But he did predict that Japan would establish bases in northern Australia.

The second key point is that Australia's prime minister, John Curtin, at the start of 1942 was a man on the brink. His deeply depressed state surfaced continually during the war years. Curtin's depression was so severe that he verged on the edge of a mental and physical collapse, capable at any time of putting a sudden end to his wartime leadership.³

A strong example is Curtin rather astoundingly abandoning defence headquarters in Melbourne in January 1942 at a most crucial hour. On the advice of his doctor and the urging of his senior colleagues, he took a series of slow trains home to Perth and as a result missed no less than twelve meetings of the Australian

War Cabinet and the Advisory War Council (Wurth 2013: 129, 141-144).⁴

Japan Prepares to Move South

War with Japan was becoming ever more likely in the Australian spring of 1941. But Australia's home defence increasingly had been compromised by the significant demands from Britain for Australian soldiers, sailors and airmen to fight in Europe, the Middle East, the Mediterranean and North Africa.

The Vichy French colonies of north and then south Indo-China were occupied by Japan during 1941. The way was being paved for the occupation of Thailand and British Burma. A southward thrust through Malaya could present Japan with the great strategic prize of British Singapore. With Singapore rendered impotent, the Dutch East Indies and a vast stretch of scattered islands of New Guinea and others to the west above Australia, like Timor, were at risk (Long 1973: 33, 38, 103, 114, 116).

John Curtin became Prime Minister in October 1941. He became alarmed about the inadequacies of the British defence of the Far East and spoke of 'ominous portents' on the Pacific horizon.⁵

Lieutenant-General Sir Iven Mackay was appointed commander-in-chief, Australian Home Forces. In late October 1941 Mackay found Australia: "... virtually naked, militarily . . . because all I can see is more than 12,000 miles of Australian coastline, and so little wherewithal for defending the points that really matter" (Chapman 1975: 234). Mackay gave priority to reinforcing the great industrial centres of New South Wales and Victoria and wanted to abandon much of the remainder of Australia, a policy that Curtin's War Cabinet could not accept.

Singapore Inadequately Defended

Australia's special envoy to Britain, Sir Earle Page, inspected Singapore before arriving in London where he met Prime Minister Churchill in early November 1941.

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²Day (2000), pp. 438-439, 440, 442-443, 452-455, 459, 466, 483-484, 496-497; Wurth (2013), pp. 71, 73, 83, 88, 91, 98-100, 121-125, 206, 221-202, 232-240, 265, 273-274, 326.

³Curtin's depression, see 41 index references in Wurth (2013).

⁴Also: Ross Gollan, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 January 1942 and *Sun Pictorial*, Melbourne, 24 January 1942.

⁵Curtin on 'ominous portents': *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 October 1941.

Page, former Australian Prime Minister, sought immediate aid in the form of reinforcements and aircraft for Singapore. Page had already discovered that the protection of England from German bombing and invasion had absolute precedence. Singapore was seen as being important as a 'main fleet base'. But there was no eastern British fleet. It became clear to Page that the British Cabinet had given Singapore and Malaya a low defence priority (Mozley 1963: 298-309).

Curtin was alive to the problem because he had met Britain's Far East commander-in-chief, Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, in Melbourne on 16 October. When grilled by Curtin about the paucity of modern aircraft in Malaya and Singapore, Brooke-Popham surprisingly admitted that he had made 'all representations short of resigning' in his efforts to secure air power.⁶

Page met the British chief of the air staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, who admitted that Singapore was inadequately defended. Page cabled Curtin: "...Portal expressed the incredible view that, if Singapore were lost, it could be picked up again later" (Freudenberg 2008: 317). Note those words. As war with Japan loomed, Churchill misled the Australian Government about the true state of British priorities.

Churchill knew the full extent of the threat to Singapore. His assistant, General Sir Henry Pownall, predicted in his diary on 15 November 1941, that Japan would go to war soon and that Singapore would be an early target. Yet Churchill had told Sir Earle Page only three days earlier that if Britain moved forces to the Far East they might 'remain inactive for a year'.⁷

Before daylight on December 8, Curtin's press secretary, Don Rodgers, knocked on the door to Curtin's hotel room in Melbourne and told the Prime Minister of the attacks on Pearl Harbour and across the Asia-Pacific region (Souter 1988: 344).

Beat Hitler First

Soon Prime Minister Churchill arrived in Washington on a mission to secure the support of President Roosevelt to ensure that the war with Japan would be regarded as 'secondary' in importance. Churchill presented a paper that had nominated 1943 as the year when Britain and America would send expeditions to 'recover places lost to the Japanese'. But Britain had been well able to meet German attacks on British soil by the end of 1941. The serious threat of a German invasion had passed.

In Washington, Churchill said Britain did not wish to discourage the United States from regaining its naval power in the Pacific after Pearl Harbour. Nor did it seek to discourage the United States from what he called 'the precise secondary overseas operations' in the Pacific, so long as the 'absolute first priority' was Europe.

At the White House on Christmas Day 1941 Churchill responded bitterly to Curtin calling the British response to Far East defences a 'penny packet' approach. Churchill later commented condescendingly that 'every allowance had to be made for the state of mind into which the Australian Government was thrown by the hideous efficiency of the Japanese war machine'.⁸

Less than two weeks into 1942, Curtin and a great many Australians were deeply alarmed at statements by the two politicians managing the naval affairs of Britain and the United States. Their statements reflected the 'Beat Hitler First' policy that Churchill and Roosevelt had agreed to in late December 1941. Churchill's First Lord of the Admiralty, Albert Alexander, said: "If we knock them (the Germans) out we can do what we like with Japan afterwards. In the meantime we must hold on to the Far East".⁹

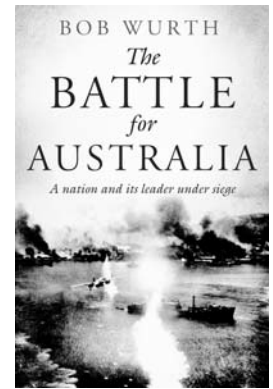
Two days later the United States Secretary for the Navy, Frank Knox, in Washington, added: "We know who our greatest enemy is. It is Hitler and Hitler's Nazis; Hitler's Germany. It is Hitler we must destroy. That done, the whole Axis fabric will collapse. Finishing off Hitler's satellites will be easy by contrast."¹⁰

The suggestion that countries defeated by Japan might be recovered later was originally raised by Churchill to his chiefs on 18 December 1941. Curtin was alarmed. Australian editorial writers were indignant.¹¹

Churchill's doctor Lord Moran (Charles Wilson) recorded that Churchill had one great fear – that Japan, rather than Germany, might become the primary United States focus of attention. Churchill's chief military assistant, General Hastings Ismay, noted with some surprise the United States support: "We had not expected our American friends to see eye to eye with us on this question without considerable argument . . ." (Ismay 1960: 243).

Australia's Home Defences

Australia's home defences in late 1941/early 1942 were poor. In December 1941, Australia had a four-division expeditionary force – the second AIF. Three divisions, the 6th, 7th and 9th, were serving in the Middle East or North Africa, often with great distinction. Yet Australia at home was barely equipped to defend itself.



The cover of Bob Wurth's book on which this paper is based.

⁶Brooke-Popham and Curtin statements: Advisory War Council meeting 16 October 1941, National Archives of Australia A2682, vol. 3; Brooke-Popham report on the Far East, 12 March 1942, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, London, 6/3/16.

⁷Page report to Curtin 14 November 1941 on meeting with Churchill 12 November 1941; Pownall diary, 15 November 1941, LHCM; Page diary entry National Library of Australia, MS1633, folder 2345.

⁸Churchill with Roosevelt in Washington and 'Beat Hitler First' policy: Churchill's defence committee memo, 'The Pacific Front', 17 December 1941, and '1943', 18 December 1941, Churchill Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, CHAR 4/235; Gilbert (1986), pp. 11-15; Wurth (2013), p. 430.

⁹A.V. Alexander statement, *The Canberra Times*, *The West Australian*, *The Courier-Mail*, 12 January 1942.

¹⁰*The Times*, London, 13 January 1942.

¹¹*The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Argus*, 14 January 1942; *Time* magazine, 9 February 1942.

There was a national shortage of 18,000 rifles.¹² We had no tanks.

Queensland's massive coastline was defended by just 16,500 Citizen Military Forces (CMF) soldiers. The Northern Territory had less than 7000 troops, with two militia battalions and an Australian Imperial Force (AIF) independent company moving north from South Australia. Darwin was within easy bomber range of Timor. Western Australia was despairingly exposed, with a total of 8000 scattered troops defending a huge coastline (Wurth 2013: 66). The islands of Papua and New Guinea were poorly defended. In the whole of New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides, there were less than 2200 Australian troops. At Port Moresby there were just over 1000 Australian servicemen. Australia was wide open to powerful forces now pressing southwards (McCarthy 1959: 11-12).

John Curtin sounded the alarm on 11 December at a war loans function in Melbourne: "Today the war rages in Australian waters; the enemy is seeking the earliest possible hour in which he can set foot on our soil."¹³

Holding Port Moresby was crucial. A Japanese occupation of Moresby would mean that Mitsubishi bombers could hit towns and cities all the way down the Queensland coast from Cooktown to Rockhampton. The 49th Infantry Battalion had arrived in the first week of December 1941. From the start of January 1942 the 39th and 53rd Infantry Battalions joined the 49th. The soldiers were young and inexperienced and their training meagre. At first, these inexperienced troops in Moresby were employed more as labourers than as soldiers. After the first air raids, discipline deteriorated. Soldiers looted civilian property. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in Moresby in January 1942 could muster only six Hudsons, two Catalinas and two Wirraways (Ryan 1972: 1215).

The United States movement of weapons and forces to Australia began in the form of aircraft evacuated from the Philippines, but it was a trickle. Four ships with 4000 American troops aboard had landed at Brisbane on 22 December 1941. Some United States merchant ships began to arrive carrying aircraft in crates, but they had to be assembled as scarce skilled staff permitted.

Prime Minister Curtin

Nothing can more accurately reflect the state of Prime Minister John Curtin's acute depression than the events of 21 January 1942. Events were rushing to a climax. Curtin had awoken that day to press reports quoting his Minister for Labour and National Service, Eddie Ward, announcing that the Curtin government was about to introduce the nationalisation of industry and commerce. This was untrue. Curtin gave Ward a thorough dressing down.¹⁴

¹²Rifle shortage: Curtin note to Forde, 3 February 1942; NAA A367; M1416, 46. Tonkin on Curtin and defence situation: JCPML00019/1.

¹³Digest of Decisions & Announcements (Australian Parliament), no. 11.

¹⁴*The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Advertiser*, Adelaide, 22 January 1942.

On 21 January, the Japanese were continuing to make rapid progress through Malaya. The Australian, British and Indian troops were in constant retreat. The Australian Malaya commander, Major-General Gordon Bennett, blamed the British for unnecessary withdrawals.¹⁵ That day War Cabinet was meeting in Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, dealing with reports of Japanese victories. Curtin had missed the previous day's war cabinet meeting.

He was engaging in an exchange of urgent and secret cables with Churchill. Weeks earlier Australia's representative in Singapore, Vivian Bowden, had cabled that the air position in Malaya was "assuming landslide proportions". War Cabinet on 21 January agreed to tell Churchill that his plan for the coordination of the war against Japan was just hopeless as far as Australia was concerned.¹⁶

Later in the sound-proofed war cabinet room, Curtin gave in to the urging of his close senior ministers and agreed to go home to Cottesloe, north of Fremantle, to rest. Curtin's escape was at the most inopportune time imaginable. He took a series of slow trains home. Ministers promised to keep in close touch, which in reality was barely possible. His deputy, the Army Minister Frank Forde, would chair all important meetings.

On that critical day Rabaul on New Britain island was being bombed. Australia waited anxiously for the expected Japanese invasion of the Australian territory. Australia's Lark Force of some 1400 men had been ordered to stay and defend Rabaul, even though there had been ample opportunity to evacuate them. Lark Force would become 'hostages to fortune', as termed by the defence chiefs in Melbourne. Curtin had agreed to leave the force to their fate.¹⁷ Soon a message from Rabaul arrived from the commander of RAAF No. 24 Squadron, John Lerew: "Waves of enemy fighters shot down Wirraways. Waves of bombers attacking aerodromes. Over one hundred aircraft seen so far." (Gillison (1962: 356)

The RAAF Wirraways were shot out of the sky and the aircraft would be downgraded to fighter-trainer status, leaving Australia then without a single fighter.¹⁸ Curtin warned: "Anybody in Australia who fails to perceive the



John Curtin, Australia's wartime prime minister
[Photo: Wikipedia commons]

¹⁵Gordon Bennett diary, State Library of NSW, MLMSS, 773, 23 January 1942; Bennett (1944), pp. 146-147.

¹⁶Bowden to Evatt, 24 December 1941, NAA A981, WAR 33, Attachment B; Dire defence situation: Situation reports no. 85 & 86, 21-22 January 1942, Combined Operational Intelligence Centre, AWM 54 423/12/1 & 2.

¹⁷Rabaul and Lark Force, Situation report no. 88, Combined Operational Intelligence Centre, AWM 54 423/12/1 & 2; Defence of Rabaul NAA MP729/6, 16/401/493; Lark Force 'hostages to fortune', Royle to Casey, 12 December 1941, NAA A1608, L41/1/5.

¹⁸Air Vice-Marshal Bill Bostock reports to War Cabinet, minutes of 23 January 1942, A5954, 807/2.

immediate menace to Australia which this attack constitutes must be lost to all reality. The peril is nearer, clearer, deadlier than before.”¹⁹

The Prime Minister believed that while Australia in the longer term might be recovered after invasion, in the interim the country could be ravaged and Australians largely decimated. In promises of Britain coming to Australia’s aid, Curtin was being deceived and he knew it. One report at the time had the Prime Minister wrapped in a rug, nerves on edge, energy sapped, deeply brooding in the dark of his temperance hotel room in Melbourne. Curtin was now contemplating a dreadful apocalyptic scorched-earth policy. Industrial plants, oil refineries, power and gas plants, all forms of communication and transport, bridges, major roads, dry docks, mines and food supplies – all wilfully blown up, set alight or bulldozed into rubble.²⁰

As Curtin walked out of Victoria Barracks that Wednesday evening, the destruction plans were on the agenda for the War Cabinet (MacArthur 1964: 151).

Curtin retreated by rail from Melbourne. In his luxurious carriage behind troops travelling in barely converted cattle trucks, Curtin trundled across Victoria into South Australia and entered the long, hot haul over the Nullarbor.

On 23 January the train pulled into a desolate watering stop at Karonie, 69 miles short of Kalgoorlie. Karonie was a flyspeck on the Nullarbor (Averies 1973: 221). A summer washaway had blocked the track up ahead. Curtin sat for hours in growing frustration with his anxieties and loneliness, stranded on the Nullarbor. The *Sydney Morning Herald’s* political journalist Ross Gollan noted that Curtin’s absence took place at the ‘most critical juncture of [Australia’s] history’.²¹

Curtin’s only link to his military chiefs, his ministers and indeed the world, was a telegraph pole with a single strand of wire that ran to a shed. Inside was a Morse code key connected to the Commonwealth Railways telegraph network.²²

Overseas communications mostly were sent in Curtin’s name. Yet Curtin was not writing these important messages.²³ For a few vital days ministers were getting the gist of Curtin’s thinking from hurried, scratchy telephone calls or coded telegrams. One of the messages Curtin received was that unions with members in munitions production were planning to take holidays. Curtin wondered if they were lost to all reality with the enemy ‘at Australia’s doors’.²⁴

The train got underway and that evening stopped at Kalgoorlie. Curtin’s mood picked up. A big surging crowd

greeted Curtin and buoyed him.²⁵ The same happened when the train eventually pulled into Perth station, where his family and many hundreds were there cheering.²⁶

Curtin tried to rest when he got home, but there was no relief. He continued his war of words with Churchill. On 27 January, Curtin cabled Churchill: “In the air, we are left almost defenceless against our enemies.” He emphasised Australia’s massive contribution to Britain’s defence, including 6500 aircrew and 2300 ground staff who had left Australia for the Royal Air Force. In addition, six squadrons of the RAAF were operating overseas in Europe.²⁷

Prime Minister Churchill

Churchill had supported the return of Australian troops from the Middle East for the defence of Australia.²⁸ The story of Churchill diverting the homeward bound 7th Division towards Burma, without Australian approval, and Curtin’s decision to turn them back again on course for home, is well known (Churchill 1966: 136-151)²⁹. But the following scenario is less known; Churchill addressed an open session of Parliament saying: “... there is no question of regarding the war in the Pacific as a secondary operation. The only limitation applied to its vigorous prosecution will be the shipping available at any given time.”³⁰

On the 24 February 1942 Churchill, in a despondent mood, told King George VI, the following, according to His Majesty’s diary: “Burma, Ceylon, Calcutta and Madras in India, and part of Australia, may fall in to enemy hands” (Wheeler-Bennett 1958: 538).

Later at a secret session of the House of Commons on 23 April 1942, Churchill said Britain did not see that the Japanese would get great advantages by invading Australia ‘in force’. But Churchill added: “No doubt the Japanese will do their utmost to threaten and alarm Australia *and to establish lodgements and bases on the northern part of Australia* in order to procure the greatest locking up of Allied forces in that continent.” (Author’s emphasis)³¹

This is the same leader who disparagingly asked of Curtin: “Do you think you are in immediate danger of invasion in force? It is quite true that you may have air attacks but we have had a good dose already in England without mortally harmful results.”

In public in January 1942 Churchill had said that the Pacific would never be a ‘secondary theatre of war’. Yet Churchill told a secret closed session of the House of Commons in April 1942: “I now leave the lesser war – for such I must regard this fearful struggle against the

¹⁹Curtin quoted in *Life* magazine, 2 February 1942, p. 18, and in Australian newspapers.

²⁰Curtin brooding in the dark, wrapped in a rug: *Daily Telegraph*, 16 August 1942, JCPML00964/68. Curtin’s apocalyptic scorched-earth policy: War Cabinet preliminary discussion, 24 January 1942, NAA A5954, 807/2.

²¹Ross Gollan, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 January 1942.

²²Richie Bright, *Morsecodians Fraternity of Western Australia*.

²³*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 January 1942, *West Australian* 26 January 1942.

²⁴*Sun Pictorial*, Melbourne, 24 January 1942.

²⁵*Melbourne Herald, The Advertiser, Adelaide, Daily News, Perth, The Sydney Morning Herald, Sunday Times*, Perth, 24 January 1942.

²⁶*The Mail*, Adelaide, 24 January 1942; DDA no. 16, 24 January 1942.

²⁷Curtin to Churchill, 27 January 1942, Churchill Archive Centre, Cambridge, CHAR 20/69A (49-50).

²⁸National Archives (of Britain), CAB 65/29/8, p 25.

²⁹Also: NAA A816, 52/302/142; NAA A3196, 1942, 0.5424.

³⁰House of Commons, official report, 27 January 1942.

³¹NA CHAR 9/155A/34, (also included in this speech is Churchill on Japan as the ‘lesser war’).



Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime prime minister
[Photo: Wikipedia commons]

Japanese – and come to the major war against Germany and Italy.”³²

In his history series on United States naval operations, Samuel Eliot Morison, a friend of President Roosevelt who became a rear admiral, wrote of the era: “Nobody seemed able to stop the Japanese and in Washington there was even serious talk of abandoning Australia and New Zealand to the enemy” (Morison 2001: 246-247).

General George C. Kenney, commanding general of the 4th United States Air Force, was appointed Allied air chief in the South West Pacific, to be based in Australia. Kenney wrote: “The thing that worried me most, however, was the casual way that everyone seemed to look at the Pacific part of the war. The possibility that the Japs would soon land in Australia itself was freely admitted and I sensed that, even if that country were taken over by the Nipponese, the real effort would still be made against Germany.” (Kenney 1987: 10-11)

Australia can be thankful particularly to United States Admiral Ernest J. King, for his advocacy of the swing from the defensive to the offensive in the Pacific and his undermining of the ‘Beat Hitler First’ policy (Brands 2009: 680-681).

Conclusion

Curtin’s torturous leadership and his depression, I believe, led to his premature death at the age of sixty on 5 July 1945, before the surrender of Japan (Wurth 2013: 403-406). Curtin’s enduring legacy though will stand the test of time. As the national leader, John Curtin, despite his faults, asserted the paramount interests of Australia and of the Australian people.

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³²NAA A3195, 1942, 1.1112.