Chapter 1

'**Citadel for the British-speaking race'**

Introduction

In June 2008 Julia Gillard, then deputy prime minister, addressed a gathering of the Australian American Leadership Dialogue in Washington DC. Speaking in the lavish State Department dining room that overlooks the Lincoln Memorial, Gillard drew on the familiar rhetoric of shared values and common interests that define the relationship between Australia and the United States. The occasion was widely seen as her debut on the foreign policy stage – a chance to show the supposed 'movers and shakers' of the alliance and the Washington power elite that she had the necessary mettle to handle international affairs. When Gillard took over from Kevin Rudd as prime minister two years later, it was the text of this speech to which many journalists and analysts turned to try and discern what her prime ministership might mean for the direction of Australian foreign policy.

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Gillard's speech traversed the traditional terrain of cultural exchange and shared military sacrifice. She recalled the cooperation between Australian and American soldiers on the Western Front in the First World War, and emphasised that Australia had been the only country to fight alongside America at every major conflict since. But her words were securely anchored to the memory and legacy of a Labor hero, the former party leader and prime minister, John Curtin. Gillard was keen to point out that the ANZUS alliance, though officially signed in 1951, 'reflected the judgments – clear, accurate, brutally frank judgments – of an Australian Labor Prime Minister a decade earlier'. Conceding that her audience would be all too 'familiar with John Curtin's declaration in December 1941 about the need for Australia to "look to America"' for its national security, Gillard instead quoted the words he had spoken on the day following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. She recalled that during an evening broadcast on 8 December 1941, the prime minister had explained to the people of Australia the imperative to defend the continent '"as a place where civilisation will persist"'.[1] Gillard's speech was apparently well received by those present, and it attracted warm endorsements from the Australian press. Paul Kelly declared that the deputy prime minister had been 'inducted into the political culture and rituals of the alliance' and could now be counted one of its 'true believer(s)'. The *Herald*'s Peter Hartcher joined the chorus of celebration: Gillard's 'Curtin call' was an 'excellent debut', proving that she 'has come a long way since the Victorian Socialist Left'.[2] One could almost hear the collective sigh of relief amongst the commentariat: if the leading light of Labor's left-wing could utter such statements, the alliance was in safe hands.

But what went undetected by journalists was that Gillard's depiction of Australia as a 'place where civilisation will persist' was only the tail-end of a much longer quote from Curtin's speech – a speech in which he had famously declared that Australia was at war with Japan. In the section of that momentous broadcast from which Gillard drew inspiration, Curtin had actually said:

> We Australians have imperishable traditions. We shall
> maintain them. We shall vindicate them. We shall hold this
> country, and keep it as a citadel for the British-speaking
> race, and as a place where civilisation will persist.[3]

It was a fiery address in which the Labor leader, who for the previous 20 years had regularly voiced his abhorrence of war, sounded his 'tocsin' to the 'Men and Women of Australia'. He depicted a Pacific Ocean 'reddened with the blood of Japanese victims' and foreshadowed an attack on Australia if the Japanese had their 'brutal way'. At the close of his remarks that evening, Curtin had reached for verse from a work by the 19th century English poet Charles Swinburne, 'The Eve of Revolution', beckoning his Australian listeners to 'Hasten thine hour and halt not, till thy work be done'.

The missing words from Gillard's speech say much about the way the legend of John Curtin has been inoculated against any association with Australia's once fervent identification as a 'British' country. On the face of it, an omission of this kind was understandable. Gillard clearly could not draw on the outdated language of Australian Britishness in speaking about the alliance with the United States. But in one fell swoop the entire meaning of Curtin's original speech had been changed, and changed utterly. Gillard's stress on 'civilisation' was no doubt carefully pitched to an American ear, one that would be more receptive to the language of universalism and the struggle against a totalitarian foe. But when Curtin referred to 'civilisation' – as he often did in his wartime speeches – he was depicting Australia as a trustee and guardian for British civilisation in the Pacific. In the face of an external enemy he, like many of his contemporaries, had no hesitation in defining his country in these terms.

The point is not to expose the routine cutting and pasting of the modern speechwriter – though this is a particularly egregious example of the practice – or the excitable nature of some media reportage. Gillard is by no means the first political leader to draw selectively on the words of former party icons: it is in the very

nature of political rhetoric that the embarrassing sentiments of the past will be quickly and quietly shuffled aside. It is simply to stress that Curtin's particular concept of the British Empire is barely recognised or acknowledged today. This part of the former prime minister's worldview and policy record has been airbrushed from history, fit neither for domestic nor international consumption.

Gillard joins a long list of Labor leaders who have invoked Curtin as a means of channelling powerful party and national myths. Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke, Paul Keating and Kevin Rudd all summoned the memory of the wartime leader at various points in their prime ministerships. For Whitlam, Curtin was at heart a great reformer forced to put aside his social vision and instead lead the nation in war; for Hawke, he was the epitome of 'consensus' leadership, a man who could bring the country together in a time of existential crisis; for Keating he was the ultimate symbol of Australian resistance to British duplicity; the perfect foil for bourgeois Australian Anglophiles with their 'compromised nationalism'. For Kevin Rudd, Curtin was the ticket to a Labor tribalism that his own past and political career so clearly lacked.[4]

In popular culture too the presentation of Curtin's legacy to a new audience has only amplified the claims that his period in office has something profound to say about Australian 'nationalism'. The director of a recent ABC telemovie about Curtin's wartime leadership (*Curtin*, 2007) was moved to say that he couldn't 'think of a more profound story about a more complex character in a more complex time in our history. There's nothing so big, not even Whitlam. And this is pivotal to who we are'. The actor William McInnes, who played the role of Curtin, opted for a more straightforward assessment of Curtin as 'the guy who took Australia away from England and looked to America . . . it was a seismic shift in the way Australians see themselves and what they were'. Geoff Morrell, starring as Ben Chifley, looked to the period to bring some perspective to the Howard Government's commitment of Australian troops to the 'war on terror' in Iraq and Afghanistan. He felt that there was 'an interesting parallel to present-day politics.

At that time we really were just the providers of fodder for the protection of the Empire. To have a prime minister who stood up to these foreign leaders and who genuinely had the interests of the people at heart, that really does bring into perspective some of the stuff going on today'.[5] Ultimately, however, the telemovie was more revealing of the ongoing tug-of-war over Curtin's memory than the inner psyche or political philosophy of the man himself.

These are only the most recent manifestations of how Curtin's period as prime minister continues to exercise a powerful grip on the way in which some Australians understand that period in their history and its implications for the nation's identity, the question of its 'independence' and how Australia ought to act in the world. In a land that has seen no civil war or engaged in no act of military rebellion against the 'mother-country' to act as the baptismal font for a self-sustaining national mythology, the Curtin story offers a tale rich in the vital ingredients of nationalist drama and human experience.

Yet there is by no means a consensus concerning the Curtin story. Indeed few Australian prime ministers, save perhaps for Robert Menzies or Gough Whitlam, have left such a contested legacy. On the one hand, it is the painful tale of a reluctant war-lord. In this reading the Labor leader is viewed primarily as a paci-fist forced to take on the mantle of national leadership in a time of crisis; a nervous, angst-ridden man who would pace the moon-lit grounds of the prime minister's Lodge in Canberra fearing for the safety of Australian troops returning from the Middle East to defend Australia against the Japanese advance. On the other hand, it is the stirring epic of a decisive leader, prepared to put Australia first, lock horns with Winston Churchill, forge a new alliance with the United States and thus become the 'Saviour of Australia'.[6]

But the tension between Curtin the resolute commander-in-chief and Curtin the worried, wavering leader too often means that we receive a picture of the man as a sum of his tortured parts rather than a singular political phenomenon. In his 1999 biography the historian David Day even created a balance sheet of Curtin's

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contradictions, depicting a torn leader who 'heightened Australia's sense of nationalism by standing up to Churchill in 1942 and yet . . . later went against Labor Party policy to approve the appointment of a British-born governor-general'; and who 'looked to America free of any pangs as to Australia's traditional relationship with Britain and yet was soon holding America at bay and seeking to resuscitate the discredited system of imperial defence'.[7] Here the two worlds of Australian nationalism and loyalty to the British connection are inherently contradictory: two tectonic plates of the national firmament grinding uneasily against each other. It is as if Curtin's celebrated nationalism is seen as being fundamentally at odds with his periodic lapses into imperial patriotism. Because there remains such a need to hold Curtin up as the great hero of Australian 'independence' – in effect, to ennoble him as Australia's George Washington – his commitment to Britain is often depicted as a strange anomaly.

A 'new approach to empire government'

In August 1943, however, in preparation for his visit to London the following year for a conference of Commonwealth prime ministers, Curtin announced to the Labor Party and the Australian people his vision for the post-war British Empire. Speaking to the United Commercial Travellers Association he called for a 'new approach to empire government'. It was simply no longer sufficient for Britain 'to manage the affairs of Empire on the basis of a government sitting in London'.[8] At the core of his thinking was the need to create a permanent imperial secretariat or 'Empire Council' that would oversee the introduction of a new era in imperial affairs once the war was over. Curtin wanted this new machinery to 'provide for full and continuous consultation' between Britain and her overseas dominions – Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. He envisaged more frequent prime ministers' conferences that could be held in all parts of the Empire, not just London, with a secretariat of high-level officials to provide advice on matters of common interest. As Curtin himself put it, such a body in its ability to meet

at all corners of the Empire would represent 'everything inherent in Dominion status' and thus symbolise the ideal of organic imperial unity – an Empire truly representative of its constituent parts, not confined to the corridors of Whitehall but a 'movable venue', equally at home in Ottawa and Canberra, Pretoria and Wellington, and therefore equally attentive to the needs and interests of all parts of the British world.[9] Curtin was trying to find the means by which the British peoples around the globe could face the world as one.

These aspirations for the nation's role in the British Empire have been given short shrift by Australian scholars and political leaders. In both cases there has been a great reluctance to believe that Curtin's heart and soul were in this call for greater imperial unity in the post-war world. Day dismissed Curtin's vision as a cunning electoral ploy to win over the hearts and minds of the Australian people in a federal election year. Curtin thus had 'little to lose from posing as an imperial convert' and had simply 'wrapped the party in the Union Jack to win the 1943 election'.[10] Day also struggled to come to terms with why Australia 'rushed back into the arms of the mother country' following the fall of Singapore in 1942. Surely after that debacle, he reasoned, Australians should have realised the folly of their traditional reliance on Britain for defence and charted a more 'independent' future. From that act Day divined again a deeper truth about the nature of Australian nationalism, that 'there was no revolution, no upheaval of the toiling masses yearning to be free from the yoke of an imperial master'.[11] His views were given a powerful political imprimatur in 1992 when Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating provided the foreword to the third and final volume of Day's study of Anglo-Australian relations during the Second World War, *Reluctant Nation*. Keating, a prime minister who saw himself as the agent of a more distinctive 'nationalism' for Australia in the early 1990s, agreed with Day's lament that Australians had failed to grasp their 'possible independent destiny' as a result of the Second World War. 'The idea took hold', Keating bemoaned, 'that Australia belonged to a British family of nations, and for her material, cultural, spiritual and military benefit should never leave

the fold'.[12] Both Day and Keating were giving voice to a view of Australian history as a tale of arrested development – the conviction that a true, distinctively Australian nationalism had been constantly thwarted by an outdated and irrelevant attachment to Britain and the Empire.

An alternative assessment has been to classify Curtin's proposal as merely the expression of a strategic need for a 'great and powerful friend'. Thus, as the threat of a Japanese invasion receded and as American forces began to look northward to the Philippines and Tokyo, Australians came to the view that they could not rely on the United States in the post-war era and therefore had no other option but to reaffirm their commitment to Britain and the concept of imperial defence. Peter Edwards has suggested that Curtin's proposals for an Imperial Secretariat followed a frank assessment given to him by General Douglas MacArthur, the American Commander-in-Chief of the South West Pacific Area. According to Edwards, Macarthur told Curtin 'bluntly that Australia had no other choice. It should certainly not look to Uncle Sam as a protective big brother'.[13]

Such treatments of Curtin's desire for a common foreign policy fail to appreciate that this episode connects to fundamental concerns that Australia had about its relationship with Britain and the British Commonwealth from the end of the 19th century down to the 1960s. They also do not treat Curtin's worldview as a serious expression of his idea of Australia. The proposals for an imperial secretariat that he took to the party and the people were connected to a long-standing tradition in Australian foreign policy – that of desiring closer cooperation with Britain inside a united Empire.[14] This gave expression to the Australians' own sense of being British and also their need for defence against Asia, especially Japan.

This book, then, offers a different interpretation of John Curtin's 'worldview' and the way in which he understood Australia's identity and its place in the world. It aims to show how he came to see himself as the architect of a new form of Empire and why he thought that this new phase of imperial cooperation was

an 'inevitable development'. The chapters that follow trace out the deeply laid and culturally rich sources of Curtin's proposal for a more closely integrated concept of Empire in the post-war era – as one way of illustrating the centrality of Britishness in Australian ideas of selfhood at this time. As a Labor man of Irish Catholic descent who had been an anti-conscriptionist leader in the First World War, Curtin is an excellent anti-intuitive subject for this purpose. Moreover, the book demonstrates that his attitude to Britishness and Empire were not the eccentric initiative of a maverick but a response to the world drawn from widely held beliefs about national identity.

Curtin's ambition for an Empire Council was no will-o'-the-wisp effort. It was not a proposal he picked from the bureaucratic shelf merely to have something to say about Australia's post-war position and its relationship to the Empire. As prime minister he expended a great deal of time and energy in giving form and substance to these ideas, not least in taking them to his party and the Australian people for endorsement.

For his party, this in itself was remarkable. Over the previous two decades Labor had been living with the aftershocks arising from the bitter conscription referenda of 1916 and 1917, when the party had split and its credibility on questions relating to international affairs, especially its attitude to Empire, had been brought into question. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, many in Labor ranks nurtured deep suspicions of being entrapped in another 'imperial' war in which the Australian people would have no say. As a result, their conservative opponents ruthlessly exploited Labor's internal divisions and tagged the party as 'disloyal' to Britain, a label that undermined the party's claims to be defender and protector of the national interest. Despite these frictions and fissures, however, Labor's political troubles on these international questions never developed into a full-blown platform of anti-Britishness, and separation from the 'mother-country' via the inauguration of an Australian republic was never placed on the party platform. It is testament to the deep currents of British race patriotism in Australia's political

culture at this time that no leader or senior figure in the federal par-
liamentary Labor Party could hope to be elected in adopting such a
stance.[15] It also helps to explain why Curtin, when setting out his
policy for the Empire's future, could give it a history of its own.
He told a Labor Party conference in late 1943 that his new 'Empire
Council' would come to occupy an important chapter in 'the his-
tory of the British race' and that it would be seen as a vital stage in
the 'British race's great experiment in a British Commonwealth'.[16]

Curtin's reading of the history of the Empire would ultimately
prove to be at odds with those of his Commonwealth colleagues,
particularly those in Canada and South Africa. In the 1920s, Cana-
dian prime minister Mackenzie King and South Africa's Jan Smuts
had pushed hard for the bonds of Empire to be progressively loos-
ened, for Britain to allow her dominions to enjoy greater auton-
omy and independence within the Empire. This was due neither
to the flowering of a novel vision of nationhood in these societies,
nor because Smuts and King saw any domestic political advantage
in presenting themselves as lukewarm on imperial ties. Rather, it
demonstrated a conviction that as a result of their sacrifices for the
Empire in the First World War, they had earned the right to a
greater say in the making of policy and the freedom to determine
their own affairs – to sign international treaties in their own right
and to be free to decide whether or not to join in any future war
involving Britain.

Viewing these events as an editorial writer for a labour news-
paper in Western Australia, Curtin predicted that Australia too
would ultimately traverse what he called the 'more "breakaway"'
path taken by Canada and South Africa, and that it would not fol-
low New Zealand, which he claimed 'had no aspiration to get rid
of its Downing St nurse', 'declines to assume the status of an adult'
and instead wishes '"never to grow up"'. It was unlikely, Curtin
thought, that Australia would ever 'adopt the servile attitude' of its
friend and ally across the Tasman.[17] By the time he became prime
minister, however, Curtin would have to come to terms with a very
different history, in which Australia and New Zealand had shown