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Dependence

Fellow Australians. It is my melancholy duty to inform you that, in consequence of the persistence by Germany in her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her, and that, as a result, Australia is also at war.

It was Sunday evening, 3 September 1939, and gathered around their wireless sets Australians were hearing the solemn voice, laden with a sense of historical occasion, of their young Prime Minister, Robert Gordon Menzies. On Lyons' death in April Menzies had attained the prime ministership, but not without an ugly personal attack from Country Party leader, Earle Page, which drew attention to his failure to serve in the Great War. Now, in announcing the new war, Menzies called for 'calmness, resolution, confidence, and hard work', implying a very different mood from that of 1914. Yet he still identified Australia as a 'Dominion' of the 'Mother Country', and the formula of words chosen deliberately suggested that Britain's declaration automatically committed Australia.¹

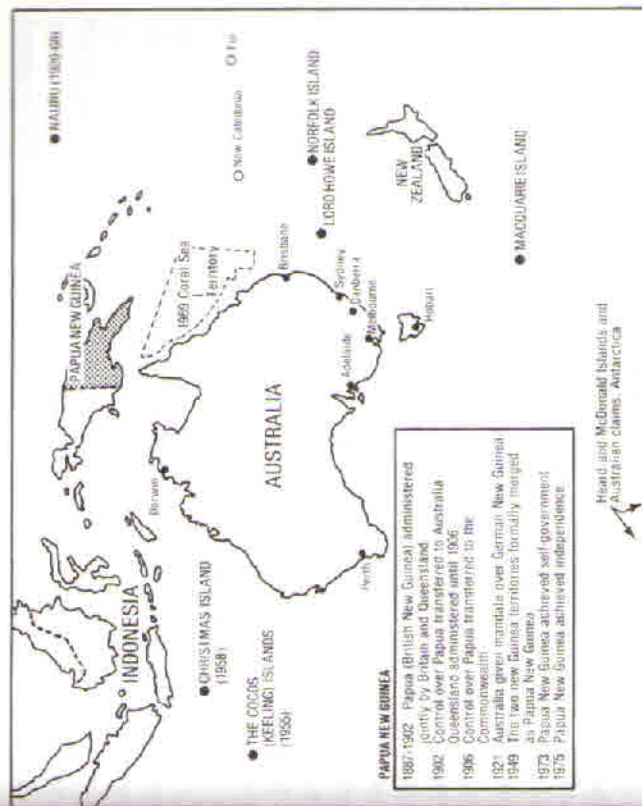
The terms of Menzies' address to the nation disguised the fact that a reassessment of Australia's role in its region and the world at large had already begun. In a speech following his appointment as Prime Minister Menzies had emphasised that while in its approach to European affairs Australia had to depend on British guidance, in the Pacific we had 'primary responsibilities and primary risks'. The Australian perspective was necessarily different, for 'what Britain calls the Far East is to us the near north'. It followed that in its immediate region Australia needed its own diplomatic representation, and in 1940, ambassadors to Japan, the United States and China were appointed. And although, for Menzies, the unity of the British Empire remained a prime consideration, implicit in this diagnosis was the realisation that British concern with European events might be at the expense of Australian – and imperial –

interests in the Pacific region. Furthermore, the External Affairs Minister had made it clear that although in the situation of 1939 Australia supported British policy in Europe and therefore felt bound by it, this did *not* mean that 'in any and every set of circumstances' a British declaration of war 'should or would automatically commit Australia to participation in that war'.² In 1914 Australian loyalty had been unquestioning as the eager AIF sought admission to the European world at war: in 1939 the commitment to Britain, although similar in form, was made in the context of an emerging assessment of Australian priorities.

The despatch of troops to the European theatre was conditioned by concern about Australia's own defence. While appointing an ambassador to Japan reflected a need for good relations with this Pacific power, it could not disguise fears of Japan as a potential aggressor, fears which grew with the fall of France in 1940, for this was seen as likely to tempt Japan to enter the fray. Yet for many Australians the war continued to seem somewhat remote, and some concern was expressed by those in authority that commitment and morale were weak. They found some evidence in a report by anthropologist Elkin, based on a survey, which concluded that 'apathy and antagonism' to the war effort were not limited to a particular social class, and that often they had their roots in 'the depression years'.³

Perhaps one reason for the guarded response to the conventional appeals for patriotic unity was the perceived intensification of conflict among the politicians themselves. The 1940 federal elections resulted in a dead-heat between the main parties, with two independents choosing to keep the Menzies-led Anti-labor coalition in office. Although Anti-labor leaders, influenced by the advent of a national government in Britain under Churchill, called for a similar regime here, they did so in full knowledge of Labor's traditional fear of losing its identity in alliances or coalitions. They could calculate that the war was capable of dividing the Labor Party, just as it had in 1916. Labor joined the War Advisory Council, set up to provide an official channel of communication between government and opposition, but that was as far as it was prepared to go.

In this delicately poised situation, it was the Anti-labor parties which began to show signs of disintegration, so that pious calls for a national government on their part began to seem less plausible. Menzies' leadership, which had never been unquestioned, now came under fire: his acknowledged ability and eloquence were not sufficient to overcome the suspicion provoked by his ambition and arrogance. But uncertainty about leadership was symptomatic of a



Map 6 Australia's overseas territories (source: J. C. R. Camm and J. McCurton (eds.), *Australians: A Historical Atlas* (Sydney 1987))

deeper malaise in the UAP, which had been hastily fashioned in the depression crisis, and which lacked coherence in organisation and ideology. When Menzies abandoned office in August 1941 the UAP was so debilitated that it conceded leadership of the coalition to its junior ally, the Country Party, but within a month the two independents withdrew their support and this government also collapsed. Thus Labor assumed office little more than two months before Japan bombed the American fleet at Pearl Harbor.

The new Prime Minister, John Curtin, had been largely responsible for rebuilding and re-uniting the Labor Party, and since the dead-heat of 1940 had carefully prepared the party for the responsibilities of government. Curtin was to die in office in July 1945, before the war was over, and this element of self-sacrifice has helped make him, as one historian puts it, 'a secular saint, virtually a martyr, in the Australian tradition'. A pacifist by temperament, Curtin might have appeared an unlikely war leader. But while he could not relish war in the Churchillian manner, he had the capacity, through example and commitment, to inspire others. Many remarked on his outward coldness and loneliness, yet one of his

political opponents remembered him as 'a kindly warm-hearted man'. In earlier years he had had an intermittent problem with drink. His drinking had expressed a longing for what he once called 'the humanity of fellowship', and becoming a teetotaler was a bitter acknowledgement that that fellowship was illusory.⁴ He was a man who subsumed disappointment in dedication; but he was also a skilful politician and a masterly parliamentarian.

Although the entry of Japan into the war was not unexpected, Pearl Harbor was an immense shock. Within a couple of days the British HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* had been sunk; Hong Kong fell on Christmas Day; and Singapore, which had always been regarded as the lynchpin of imperial defence in the Pacific, was suddenly seen as vulnerable. The Australian nightmare of an Asiatic invasion had taken alarming shape. The one advantage of Pearl Harbor, from an Australian point of view, was that it ensured the USA's participation in the war. However the lack of a formal alliance, and Roosevelt's commitment to a 'beat Hitler first' strategy, made for uneasiness and anxiety, whilst Australia's own preoccupation with the Pacific was also a cause for strain in its relationship with Britain.

It was in this context that Curtin wrote a New Year's message for the Melbourne *Herald*, published on 27 December. Curtin, who had been a journalist in his youth, began by quoting the Australian poet Bernard O'Dowd:

That reddish veil which o'er the face
of night-hag East is drawn . . .
Flames new disaster for the race?
Or can it be the dawn?

It was an appropriate image of apocalyptic crisis, but it was Curtin's belief that it was within our power to 'provide the answer'. Part of Curtin's message therefore concerned community morale:

In the first place the Commonwealth Government found it exceedingly difficult to bring the Australian people to a realisation of what, after two years of war, our position had become. Even the entry of Japan, bringing a direct threat in our own waters, was met with a subconscious view that the Americans would deal with the shortsighted, underfed, and fanatical Japanese.

But the part which was to attract attention was that in which he asserted Australia's need to have 'the fullest say', together with the United States, in the Pacific struggle:

Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links with the United Kingdom.

We know the problems that the United Kingdom faces. We know the constant threat of invasion. We know the dangers of dispersal of strength, but we know, too, that Australia can go and Britain still hold on.⁵

Given Labor's historical lack of enthusiasm for the imperial connexion, expressed more in gestures than any argued alternative, this public turning to 'America' aroused Anti-labor concern, but the wider community seems to have accepted the realism of Curtin's diagnosis. Churchill, understandably, was cross, and Roosevelt also, it seems, privately expressed 'the greatest distaste' for Curtin's statement, which suggested 'panic and disloyalty'.⁶

The context of Curtin's remarks makes it clear that he was not advocating any abject dependence on the United States: on the contrary, the article was an urgent call for sacrifice directed to *Australians*. 'I demand [emphasis added] that Australians everywhere realise that Australia is now inside the fighting lines.' Only those who knew the peculiar strength of the Australian attachment to Empire and 'Home' could fully appreciate why Curtin might feel it necessary to stress, even 'distastefully', the new political realities.

This New Year's message in a Melbourne evening newspaper, which Curtin himself can hardly have expected to gain such exposure, has subsequently come to be regarded as one of the critical documents of Australian history, cited as a 'turning point' in Australia's relationship with Britain. In fact ties with Britain were, as we shall see, to remain strong, but Curtin's message, in its recognition of British inadequacy, might have tempted 'the somewhat lackadaisical Australian mind' (Curtin's own phrase) to surrender itself to a more fundamental psychology of dependence. This was not Curtin's intention, yet some of his words were capable of encouraging it. The self-conscious dismissal of 'any inhibitions of any kind' suggests a kind of abasement, while 'Australia looks to America' ambiguously conveys a hint of presumptuous expectation. Perhaps Roosevelt was right in detecting a hint of panic: after all, Curtin himself was concerned with identifying the problem of morale. There is evidence, too, that Curtin was later to concede privately that the appeal had been a mistake.

Since 1941 Australia has 'looked to America', and in doing so has comfortably avoided taking much responsibility for its own

Evatt had had a brief career in New South Wales politics before being appointed to the High Court bench at the age of 36. A learned and innovative judge, Evatt found time to write several books on subjects ranging from the Rum Rebellion to the dismissal of premier Lang in 1932; however his energies demanded wider outlets, and in 1940 he seized on the war situation to justify his stepping down from the bench to enter federal politics in the Labor interest. When Japan entered the war, Evatt saw to it that unlike 1939, Australia made its own formal declaration. He was always eager to assert Australia's interest in the allies' conduct of the war, often irritating both the United States and Britain. As planning for the peace began, Evatt emerged as a busy and determined spokesman for the small nations, seeking to ensure that their interests were not overlooked in the deals negotiated between the Big Five (the United States, Soviet Union, Britain, France and China), and at the San Francisco conference in 1945 had some success in modifying the Great Powers' dominance in the creation of the United Nations. After the war Australia was sympathetic to the emergent post-colonial countries, particularly Indonesia, and in 1948 Evatt's international role was recognised in his election as President of the General Assembly of the United Nations.

It was remarkable, however, that while Labor was criticised in 1941 for turning too abjectly to the United States, in the post-war era it was the government's failure to cement the American alliance which attracted political censure. Evatt's independent policy was overtaken by the Cold War and the politics of anti-Communism. With the fall of China to the Communists in 1949, the United States was increasingly preoccupied with the threat of international communism, while Australia still feared the resurgence of Japanese militarism. On the home front Anti-labor had risen phoenix-like from the ashes in the form of the Liberal Party, founded by Menzies in 1944, and seized on communism as an issue, pointing to the communist influence in the trade union movement, and linking it to the government's perceived socialist tendencies. In 1949 Menzies led the Anti-labor coalition to a decisive electoral victory, promising, amongst other things, to ban the Communist Party.

In this political transition there were some paradoxes. Labor, traditionally ambivalent towards the imperial connexion, found reason at times to reassert Commonwealth ties. Sometimes the motive was a pragmatic desire to maintain a counterweight to American dominance of the region; but sentiment was also a factor, particularly with Labor in office in Britain (1945-51), engaged in



8.1 General MacArthur, with Prime Minister Curtin on the left and Governor-General Lord Gowrie on the right, on the occasion of his being given the Knight Grand Cross of the Military Division of the Order of the Bath.

survival. Unwittingly, Curtin might have administered 'the somewhat lackadaisical Australian mind' a drug rather than a tonic.

In February 1942 Singapore fell. A few days later the bombing of Darwin caused such local panic that a royal commission was appointed to investigate. The arrival of General MacArthur in March - he had just been appointed supreme commander of the allied forces in the south-west Pacific - provided a measure of reassurance. Australia was to be the base for the eventual counter-offensive against Japan. MacArthur conveyed an image of glamour and strength, and he and Curtin, dissimilar as they were, struck up a rapport. As American troops arrived the alliance took tangible shape. On to the slouching, well-mannered visitors were projected Australian hopes - and resentment.

Nevertheless the Labor government, which had a massive election win in 1943 and was confirmed in office in 1946, sought, within the alliance framework, to establish an independent foreign policy. Instrumental in this was Herbert Vere Evatt, the pugnacious and controversial external affairs minister. A lawyer by training,



8.2 The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II is saluted by a loyal Western Australian retailer. 'My husband and I' (the phrase for which the Queen became well known during the 1954 royal tour) are dwarfed by two curved-top refrigerators, symbols of the new consumerism.

transforming the mother country into a welfare state. Chifley, who had succeeded Curtin as prime minister in 1945, was sympathetic to Britain's post-war economic problems. In 1947 Australia made a \$A25 million gift to Britain to help in the balance of payments crisis, and one factor in Labor's defeat in 1949 was Chifley's reintroduction of petrol rationing, a measure designed to support sterling vis-à-vis the American dollar.

On the other hand the high priority the Menzies government gave to forging a formal alliance with the United States caused some tension in its relations with Britain. In 1950 Australia was anxious to be among the first to come to America's aid in the Korean War, a gesture made easier and more politically acceptable by the war being theoretically fought under the aegis of the United Nations. At one stage there was great alarm in the Australian cabinet when it seemed that Britain might beat them to the gun with an offer of land troops. It was a war which seemed to express the moral commitment of anti-communism, and American gratefulness for Australia's speedy response contributed to its readiness to sign the ANZUS Pact with Australia and New Zealand in 1951. This pact, partly designed to assuage Australian fears about the 'soft' peace treaty with Japan, seemed to be the guarantee of security which a nervous Australia



8.3 The Queen with the Lord Mayor, Frank Roberts, at the Brisbane State Ball. An eager phalanx of Brisbane matrons inspect their young sovereign and appear satisfied.

sought, but it deliberately excluded Britain. The British were miffed, but had little alternative but to accept the treaty.

In this context it seemed necessary to reaffirm the *sentiment* of the British connexion. Even during the war, when Britain's irrelevance to Australia's survival was so starkly demonstrated, concern for the fate of the mother country was considerable. Menzies, in spite of his private criticisms of Churchill, helped propagate the myth of the British leader, and Australians, both during and after the war, eagerly despatched parcels of 'Food for Britain'. Sentiment and nostalgia reached a peak, however, with the Royal Tour of 1954, the first tour of Australia by a reigning monarch. The young Queen Elizabeth, 'radiant' throughout a taxing schedule, was received with extraordinary rapture. While politicians and functionaries (and their courtseying wives) jostled at huge receptions, balls and garden parties to bask in the magic of royalty, a huge popular chorus of devoted subjects thronged the streets. Menzies hailed 'a second Elizabethan era in British history' in which Australians would share. In Sydney the *Catholic Weekly*, expressing joy, thanksgiving and gratitude for the Queen's visit, proudly noted that she was greeted by a Catholic premier and a Catholic lord mayor.⁷ If, in practical terms, the British connexion now meant less, it could, for that very reason, be

