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Staking out Australia's 'effective voice' in the world:

John Curtin and the war correspondents, 1941-1945©

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Abstract: To raise global awareness of Australia's role in Pacific conflicts, World War II Prime Minister John Curtin elicited Allied journalists' cooperation to publicise remarkably unrestrained commentaries during the censorship era. This paper reveals new insights into Curtin's development of the correspondents' bases as instruments of public diplomacy to persuade the other Allies to involve Australia in the war planning and peace negotiations. Through a rare analysis of confidential cables, secret news talks, radio chats and unscreened newsreels, this paper shows that these journalists worked with Curtin for more Allied recognition of Australia rather than reporting independently on different battle zones.

John Curtin led Australia on a controversial path when he was the prime minister who focused on the conflict in the South-West Pacific during World War II. He expanded his media relations with Allied journalists in that zone and aimed to generate enthusiasm for a massive international effort to escalate the military offensive from Brisbane.[1] Soon after he became the prime minister in October 2014, he transformed Australia's press relations, publicity, and censorship systems to recruit Allied journalists as his close confidants. He tried to shape their news coverage of the South-West Pacific conflict. Also he developed the Allied correspondents' roles in Australia as instruments of public diplomacy to sway public opinion and the attitudes of the White House and Whitehall.[2] His campaign included conducting candid Allied press briefings to a greater extent than the other democratic leaders.[3] He developed Australia's fledgling radio and newsreel media that encouraged remarkably unrestrained news commentaries.[4] This campaign influenced Allied journalists to support an accelerated offensive from Brisbane, which became the headquarters in the South-West Pacific. The media support helped his case for Australia to assert an "effective voice" in peace talks.[5] Yet his press tactics emphasised the correspondents' need to be more independent and provide balanced reporting of the different war zones.

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Curtin initiated media strategies to win Allied news correspondents' backing of his wartime leadership. Referring to his labour-oriented journalism background, he formed egalitarian relations with visiting correspondents.[6] Yet he risked losing his press endorsement when his South-West Pacific war priorities ran contrary to the other Allies' emphasis on the European conflict to "beat Hitler first".[7] Singapore's surrender had caused many Allied correspondents' exodus to Australia in early 1942. As a result, Curtin eased the censorship rules to persuade the journalists to report more freely on his views about Australia's vulnerability to enemy attacks.[8] Previously, the strict Australian censorship had discouraged correspondents.[9] For example, *Time* magazine's Sherman Parker had complained about his "great distress" over the censorship delays.[10] In response, Curtin changed the rules to "a more flexible and 'intimate' system".[11]

The relaxed censorship rules encouraged the Allied reporters. The Australian government began directing the censors on "[t]he need for liberty in handling press messages."[12] They were told to get "the writer and censor together" to iron out difficulties "without a moment's necessary delay."[13]

The visiting Allied journalists began cooperating with Curtin.[14] For example, Curtin worked closely with CBS commentator Cecil Brown, who was a member of the "Murrow Boys," a team devoted to the gripping broadcasting style of Edward R. Murrow from war-torn London. Curtin helped Cecil Brown to deliver one of the first independent news broadcasts from Australia to American listeners in February 1942.[15] American newspaper editors gave "sensational front page prominence" to Brown's grim analysis of the Allies' Pacific retreats. The editors also noted that British censors had earlier suppressed Brown's reporting from Singapore. Brown later admitted that Curtin had dictated a statement of "honesty" for his CBS broadcast.[16]

Curtin also promoted the foreign press correspondents.[17] He worked closely with the *Chicago Sun's* HR Knickerbocker, who reported from Australia:

> It is the bounden duty of the U.S. to strain every nerve and every effort to ship to Australia, to-day and to-morrow, every available fighter bomber and masses of army marines and navy.[18]

Knickerbocker's statement coincided with Curtin's radio broadcast to Australians that, "[i]t is now work or fight as we've never worked or fought before". They appeared to cooperate to deliver consistent news messages.[19] Curtin used the media for his own self-promotion, but he also persuaded the correspondents to lobby for more Allied military aid for Australia.[20]

The visiting Allied correspondents appeared as highly credible. They were among the first journalists to be interviewed on Australian radio and newsreels for their opinions of the war in early 1942.[21] An Australian tabloid praised Knickerbocker as "probably the man most hated by the Nazis" because Hitler had imposed "a price on his head."[22]

Wartime scholars noticed the visiting correspondents were acting as crusaders. Some academics in 1943 were criticising the Pacific bias in the war reporting from Australia; however, the correspondents benefited from their privileged status.[23] Curtin's press secretary, Don Rodgers, recalled that the prime minister was "at great pains to see" to the foreign correspondents' comfort.[24] For example, visiting correspondent Joseph C. Harsch recollected that he ordinarily slept on a ship deck with the servicemen, sharing army baked beans and unpalatable tea with them. Once Harsch arrived in Australia in early 1942, the Governor-General Lord Gowrie invited him to Government House in Canberra for a weekend that included horse-riding. Harsch reminisced: "The prime minister's office obviously had enlisted the governor general's help in persuading one American reporter to think more kindly of the Australian government."[25]

The correspondents viewed Curtin as an egalitarian colleague and portrayed him as being "friendly."[26] His media strategies were encouraging the war correspondents to act as unofficial military spokespeople for the South-West Pacific zone. Some Allied officials were concerned, however.[27] The South-West Pacific emphasis sometimes clashed with the Allies' priority to "Beat Hitler First."[28] Therefore Curtin prepared to visit other Allied leaders to ease the tensions and increase sympathy for Australia's plight.[29]

Curtin held unusually informal interviews overseas and attempted to create a collegial atmosphere by referring to his journalism background when he arrived in San Francisco in 1944. For example, he told reporters that he had been a "newspaperman" whose work had been affected by "years of [censors'] blue pencil in World War I.""[30] His interview included an impromptu, off-the-record discussion. CBS commentator William Winter remarked that

Curtin's interview "was the most comprehensive held in San Francisco" because his answers "were the frankest we have had."[31]

Roosevelt was supporting Curtin's U.S. media statements; however, the president was keen to retreat from journalists because he was unwell and secretly resting in South Carolina.[32] Roosevelt's press secretary, Stephen T Early, privately mentioned his concerns that Curtin might "leak" information about the president's condition to the press. Early privately commented, "I feel very certain, knowing something of the desire of these people [the Australian officials] for publicity, that unless a brief statement is made, much more will come out through your visitors or their contacts in Washington." Yet the Australian visitors kept Roosevelt's health secret.[33]

Curtin carefully rehearsed newsreel messages. He practised forceful hand gestures and rhetoric in front of the cameras to emphasise Australia's cooperation with the Allied democracies.[34] Press secretary Don Rodgers managed the filmed publicity to ensure the newsreel commentators would "say the right thing and the right pictures were taken".[35] Curtin's newsreel and radio messages were widely circulated in the Allied press, which had shifted from some editorial criticism of Australia's defence policies.[36]

Attempting to mask controversies with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Curtin received applause from international reporters applauded for seeming to speak with complete frankness in London in 1944.[37] Curtin also meticulously planned for a separate BBC talk in London, stressing his approval of the "beat Hitler first" strategy to gain British listeners' support. Likewise, he tried to appeal to listeners by depicting Australia as a "bastion" of democratic ideals and the "gallant", "British way of life". Yet he said that "a certain minimum effort must be maintained in the Pacific".[38] London news owners acknowledged Curtin's thinly veiled call for the Allied powers to contribute more to the Pacific struggles after Hitler's fall. An editorial writer for London's conservative *Evening Standard* commended "[t]he fresh mind and language" reflected in Curtin's broadcast because his Pacific emphasis was "of service to us all."[39]

During their London war talks, Curtin and Churchill began to respect each other. British media commentators were pressuring Churchill's administration to retaliate over Singapore's defeat. Britain's humiliating loss of Singapore had nearly caused Churchill to lose the prime ministership in 1942.[40] Two years later, Canadian leader Mackenzie King

observed Curtin and Churchill together at a London conference. Mackenzie King confided in his diary that he admired Curtin's straightforward, direct manner and also noted he "equally admired Churchill's restraint in listening to the presentation as Curtin made it ... Churchill admitted that the presentation had made a deep impression on him".[41] Curtin privately urged Churchill to commit to a Pacific naval force by emphasising the importance of restoring "British prestige" in the region.[42]

These messages intrigued Churchill. Enthusiastically, Churchill formed the British Pacific Fleet that contributed to the advance on Japan.[43] A *London Times* reporter commented that British public opinion favoured their military taking a more prominent role in the Pacific war.[44] An unscreened newsreel showed Curtin and Churchill sitting awkwardly together in London.[45] But Churchill privately told an American diplomat that he had developed great confidence in Curtin. Churchill confided that of the commonwealth prime ministers, Curtin had been the most constructive at their conference in London in 1944.[46]

By this time, the Allies had overturned their losses in the Pacific during early 1942. Even so, the correspondents had been renewing their calls for an escalated offensive from Australia.[47] For example, *Time* magazine reported that the American journalists were increasingly impatient in Brisbane with the passive Pacific campaign.[48] Curtin generated mainly positive news coverage of his major goal to strengthen the Australian defence.

Likewise, the White House began warming to Curtin. The news media portrayal of "Honest John" Curtin influenced the U.S. government's attitudes towards his leadership.[49] After his U.S. trip, Roosevelt was increasingly including Australia in the democratic alliance to support the development of Asia-Pacific nations. As Roosevelt remarked to Australia's Minister to China, "the Americans and the Australians could work together on a liberal policy on these matters". The U.S. president also mentioned that "he had liked Mr. Curtin very much".[50] Furthermore, the Australian government's press briefings influenced U.S. officials to hold more background talks with journalists. The other Allied governments and journalists increasingly recognised Australia's value as a regional partner.[51]

In conclusion, Curtin set out to elevate Allied wartime correspondents' roles to a greater extent than the other democratic leaders. First, he removed many censorship rules. Secondly, he initiated open, direct talks to individual journalists. Thirdly, he sponsored fledgling media to help journalists give relatively unrestrained commentaries on the need for a military advance from Australia. He extended privileges to the visiting correspondents,

winning media cooperation to persuade other Allies to escalate the South-West Pacific offensive. The expanding electronic news media provided Curtin with opportunities to portray messages of trust about his leadership and the need for Australian defence. His radio talks and newsreel messages were targeted to mass audiences. He appealed to a shared democratic heritage among the Allies, generating mainly positive news coverage of Australia's wartime role. The international journalists helped Curtin to position Australia as a valuable ally in that region. His seemingly candid talks encouraged more foreign correspondents to report from Australia. The briefings also revealed a need for the reporters to move beyond this supposedly dependable source and conduct their own investigations to represent a balanced view of the different Allied war zones.

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[2] J.A. Alexander, "Papers 1833–1957, 1941," National Library of Australia, Canberra, NLA MS2389; and Donald Kilgour Rodgers, interview by Mel Pratt, April 29, 1971, John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library [hereafter JCPML], Bentley, JCPML00497.

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[5] **Curtin, "Prime Minister's Statement, February, 1944," *Digest* 75 (February 9, 1944): 19.**

[6] Cecil Brown, *Suez to Singapore* (New York: Random House, 1942); William J. Dunn, *Pacific Microphone* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1988); Joseph C. Harsch, *At the Hinge of History: A Reporter's Story* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press Athens, 1993); and Rodgers, interview by Pratt.

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[8] "American Correspondents"; Australian Department of Defence, "Censorship," Feb. 1942, NAA, SP109/3, 315/16, 23, 26, 29; "City Still Holds," *Daily News* (Perth), Feb. 14, 1942; "Criticism Featured," *Cairns Post*, Feb. 14, 1942; and "'Pessimistic Broadcaster' in Australia," *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), Feb. 14, 1942.

[9] Australian Department of Defence, "Censorship of Outward Press Copy," 1942, NAA, SP109/3, 315/16, 29.

[10] R.J.F Boyer to Williams, July 10, 1941, NAA, SP109/3, 315/16, 100.

[11] Australian Department of Defence, "Censorship of Outward Press Copy," 29; Harsch, *At the Hinge of History*; and Edgar George Holt, interview by Pratt, May 23, 1978, JCPML01059.

[12] W.P. Ashley to F.M Forde, Jan. 10, 1942, NAA, SP109/3l, 315/16, 36.

[13] Bonney to R.L. Curthoys, Feb. 20, 1942, NAA, SP109/3, 315/16, 5.

[14] Australian Department of Defence, "Censorship of Outward Press Copy."

[15] "American Correspondents"; "City Still Holds"; "Criticism Featured"; and "'Pessimistic Broadcaster' in Australia."

[16] "US Author's Criticism of Australians," *Argus*, Oct. 29, 1942, 12.

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