

PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF CURTIN HOUSE,  
PERTH

20 APRIL, 1975

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. and Mrs. McLeod, Mr. and Mrs. John Curtin, Jnr., Sir Paul and Lady Hasluck, Mr. and Mrs. John Tonkin, Ladies and Gentlemen :

A year ago on the eve of the campaign for the 1974 Federal elections, I laid the foundation stone for John Curtin House in Canberra. That building, now nearing completion, will be the national headquarters of the Australian Labor Party.

Today, 2,000 miles across the continent, I have the privilege of officially opening Curtin House as the headquarters of the Western Australian branch of the Australian Labor Party.

So, in the national capital, where John Curtin lived and worked as the Party's Leader and Australia's Prime Minister, in the city where he died truly on active service and in this western capital, near his home, his family's home, his chosen resting place, in these two capitals, the Australian Labor Party associates his name and memory with its continuing and living work. By so doing, we do not so much honour an imperishable name which requires no memorial in stone, but rather dignify ourselves and our Party by being able to associate our work with that name. He would have been delighted to think that the work which will go on in this building, in this site, should be associated with his name.

We are all sorry that Mrs. Elsie Curtin can't be here. I'm sure we are all thinking of her because on Tuesday, it will be her 58th wedding anniversary. I know, because it will be my 33rd wedding anniversary on Tuesday. A few years ago, Mrs. Curtin wrote to Margaret and me and pointed out that our wedding took place on their 25th anniversary.

The name of these two headquarters in Canberra, in Perth, symbolises John Curtin's commanding place in the history of our Party and expresses our recognition of that place. But in proclaiming him as our chief of men, we also acknowledge a higher claim - for while being our Leader, he was the Leader of the Nation. The circumstances of the time, his position as Prime Minister of a Nation at war and his own qualities, made him pre-eminently the authentic leader of the Nation.

Yet for John Curtin there was no contradiction in his role as Party Leader and as the Nation's Leader, nor is there any contradiction in the honour which we as Party members pay him as our Party Leader and the honour which we as Australians pay him, as our Nation's Leader. Indeed, in John Curtin's case, his service to the Party was a crucial and decisive part of his service to the Nation. The intimate relationship between the two roles has been finely perceived and is finely expressed by Sir Paul Hasluck who, with his wife, honours us with their presence today.

On the 25th anniversary of the Pacific victory, which John Curtin did not live to see, nearly five years ago, Sir Paul unveiled a memorial at the civic centre, Cottesloe. He spoke not only as Australia's Governor-General at that time, but as a friend, a fellow journalist and a public servant under John Curtin.

Let me repeat here at the opening of Curtin House in Perth, what I quoted at the laying of the foundation stone a year ago in Canberra at John Curtin House. Sir Paul said this on that occasion at Cottesloe nearly five years ago:

"In 1935 he was elected to the Leadership of the Parliamentary Labor Party. This decision of Caucus was one fateful - both for the Party and for the Nation. When Curtin became Leader, the Party was dis-united and divided. He lifted it away from its divisions and its failures and helped it to re-discover some central purpose, even if he couldn't at once remove all of the more deep-seated differences. In doing so, he made the Labor Party fit to govern and gave the Nation the alternative Government which under our democratic usage, was required once the formation of a war time National Government was found to be politically impossible. If he had not succeeded so well in the years between 1935 and 1940, there would not have been a viable alternative Government at the critical point in 1941 when one had to be found. As Leader of the alternative Government, he found himself Prime Minister, largely as the result of the sound, useful work he had done as a Party Leader in restoring the health of his own Party. He accepted office as the destiny of the Party."

This generous tribute is all the more valuable coming as it does from one who could speak, not only as a public servant, an historian, a statesman, but as one throughout his own long and distinguished political career was a good Party man, an honourable partisan. Both his tribute to John Curtin and his own career illustrated one of the great truths of our democratic system. The strength of the system depends upon the strength of the two great opposing Parties. In our parliamentary democracy, partisanship, honourable partisanship, is not seldom the highest patriotism. Democracy in Britain and Australia faced the supreme physical test for survival in the war during which John Curtin was our Leader. In our own time, when democracy everywhere faces tests and challenges of a very different kind, its strength and survival, rests, I believe, on the strength of the two Party system.

John Curtin not only re-built a broken Party, he not only restored the Party's confidence in itself, he restored its confidence in the idea of leadership. He gave it confidence to lead the Nation by giving it confidence in him as its Leader. This was the essence of his contribution to the future of the Australian Labor Party.

For a generation and more after the great catastrophe of the First World War, the Australian Labor Party lost faith in the very concept of leadership. John Curtin restored it. Not, of course, in any sense of an imposed dictatorship, or unchallenged, unquestioning authority, but in the sense that the leadership must provide coherence and cohesion to the Party and its programme. Curtin's success in re-establishing that trust as Leader, has left the Party as a whole, in his debt and equally has left all his successors in his deep debt.

I am proud to acknowledge my own debt to him as his successor, as Leader of the Australian Labor Party, as his successor as Prime Minister of Australia.

Ladies and Gentlemen, with John Tonkin, I now unveil the plaque to commemorate the official opening of Curtin House, the headquarters of the Western Australian branch of the Australian Labor Party.

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