



# PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP  
SPEECH AT MORNING TEA, VICTORIA BARRACKS, MELBOURNE,  
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## **E&OE PROOF COPY**

Thank you Kim (Beazley), members of the Curtin family, very distinguished guests, members of the Cabinet and Ministry and ladies and gentlemen.

It is a very fitting occasion, I think, for us to meet in this the 50th anniversary of the end of the War and the 50th anniversary of John Curtin's death. Although John Curtin's life was a life dedicated to working Australians in the Labor movement, in the trade unions, in the Labor Party and in the Federal Parliament, he found that his ministerial life, his Prime Ministerial life was dedicated, of course, to the prosecution of the war. On this 50th anniversary of the cessation of hostilities, of Victory in Europe and Victory in the Pacific for the democracies over the fascists in Europe, in Japan and in the Pacific, on this occasion, I think, it is important for all of us to remember those who prosecuted that war, directed it and fought it and those who died in the course of it and those who suffered and those who were left behind. Because to have such a conflagration as the Second World War was and to have this country under threat of occupation, to rest control of the region from an enemy at great personal sacrifice has to be remembered. It must mean something. It has to mean something and it has to keep on meaning something.

We always, be it Anzac Day or other times, remember these times, but this anniversary has, perhaps, broken away from the stylised remembrance or commemoration of the people and the events to something far more heartfelt. It is because we know that we can identify in our lives with what half a century means. It is not so long ago to know that these events were taking place and, in a sense, coming here as we are today, we can somewhat recreate them. If only by the reminiscences of the people who were involved as we have heard from Jim (Maher) this morning and the recollections of our great leader at the time, John Curtin, as we have heard from his grandson.

I think that there is these constant linkages that the country seems to make and certainly the Labor Party makes. Kim Beazley is my Deputy and Deputy Prime Minister. Of course, his father won the seat that John Curtin's death

caused the vacation and he came here very praiseworthy of John Curtin and kept that linkage going to pass it on to his son who has kept it going and, of course, being both natives of Perth they have had that linkage with the Curtin family over these years.

We have all appreciated those contacts and those linkages so that the continuity is there. We feel that sense of continuity and it makes us stronger.

Today, when the Cabinet meets in the War Room, in peace 50 years later, I think, there will be as there is already, a moving quality about it and we appreciate the peace and we appreciate what we have been given and we appreciate what Curtin and his Cabinet and his government and the people of this country were able to do in those desperate times with much less to do it with than we have today.

So, I think, it is an occasion for reflection on that and also on John Curtin. I think it might have been John who said that not much is written of him and that is pretty true. But, again, in this sort of society, what is written doesn't necessarily matter. It is what is thought and what is felt. There is no doubt that the great affection for Curtin has remained right through the post-war generation and because they were the ones who taught it to us, that generation - my parents generations - taught it to us, and it has come to us. And, it may not be in the biographies or autobiographies or the histories, but it is there. Maybe someone will write more of it down and pick up some of Jim's Manuka reflections and the rest which are important to gauge the personality of John Curtin.

I think the thing about him was he did feel for his fellow Australians. You can see by the references we have and the knowledge we have of him, how much of a burden the war was on him and how he felt responsible for the Australian forces which were deployed at his direction. He felt a singular responsibility for them. I think, that in such a desperate situation with a large continent with a very small population under an assault from an implacable and indefatigable enemy there is the singular loneliness of that leadership position which must have borne very heavily on him. We know that he was haunted by the knowledge of the suffering in battle and the deprivation and captivity of Australian forces.

I think what we appreciate about him most was he was not only passionate, but pragmatic and resolute. Pragmatism came in the 1970s and 1980s to be a word which has been used in other respects in more derogatory terms, a derogatory reference, but pragmatism if one denotes from that learning the lessons of history and doing what is honourable and practical at the time, John Curtin made the opportunities, took the opportunities to do things in the best interest of Australia and he made new alliances - the one with the United States is the most famous - and he did things which he thought were calculated to best serve this country and the allied interests.

So, he was practical (inaudible) is all sweetness and light, it never was. He had many critics and he had critics when the stress on him was the greatest,

which was more the pity. But, he was resolute, he was decisive and that is what the country needed. It needed somebody who believed in Australia and Australians and who was resolute, decisive, inventive and pragmatic. They were all things that he was. That is, I think at its core why we appreciate him most. He was genuinely a leader and he took decisions and he stuck with them despite the criticism.

For a generation of people he became the embodiment of what it is to be a good Australian. What it means to be a good Australian. If you say to anyone 'who do you think was a good Australian?' Many people would say John Curtin. They would think of him, perhaps, first because of the plainness of his life, the simplicity, yet the strength of purpose, the passion, the love of his country, his commitment to it, all of these things, I think, come to make him perhaps the idealised view of what a good Australian is and that has been a real guiding light for the rest of us, particularly the post-war generation, who had to try to take some lessons from the ruins of the Second World War.

Today, let's remember his courage and his faith and his virtue and the fact that, I think, as most agree and even those most close to him agree, that the burden of the war probably led to his untimely death and the great pity was that we never saw his skills employed in peace time. That he never had the opportunity to do the things in peace that his life was really prepared for and that while we had the benefit of his leadership and his skills in war, we never had them when he would have most liked to employ them. That is, I think, sad but we were then, again, fortunate that the mantle was passed to another great leader in Ben Chifley who took up the job of post-war reconstruction.

I hope that by holding this Cabinet meeting here today, will not only dually honour John Curtin, but rekindle the memory of his leadership and that of his government and the commitment of all those Australians to the war effort. Some things have been said here today, Jim mentioned the reference to no matter whether one was a messenger or Prime Minister, it was a national effort and, I think, the commitment by people and Mr and Mrs Salisbury amongst them here today who have served here, that sort of general commitment to people in the war effort was a national commitment by all Australians. He led that commitment and he died just as the war was finishing and where his successful prosecution had been complete.

This is an opportunity to remember John Curtin, perhaps without the written histories, but to remember and appreciate him and say for those of us in the Labor family, in this government, that we are very proud to be here as the Labor government of Australia in the War Rooms where the Labor government of the 1940s won the peace for this country. To be here with the members of the family of John Curtin and with those who worked with him and were close to him. Thank you.

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