John Joseph Ambrose CURTIN, PC

Prime Minister 7 October 1941 to 5 July 1945

- John Curtin became the 14th prime minister, and the third within three months, following the defeat of Arthur Fadden in parliament after just six weeks in office.

- Joined the Political Labor Council, forerunner of the Australian Labor Party in Victoria 1901. Regularly involved in political gatherings at the home of Victorian Labor politician, Frank Anstey, meeting influential figures including British socialist and union activist, Tom Mann.

- Initially joined Tinsmiths Union. Became prominent member of Victorian Socialist Party formed out of Tom Mann's social questions committee 1906. Secretary of the Victorian Timber Workers Union 1911-1915. Advised Australian Workers Union during expansion of its activities in Riverina 1915.

- Took leading role in anti-conscription campaign in 1916 as secretary of Trades Union Anti-Conscription committee. Established *Timber Worker* 1911. Editor of *Westralian Worker,* 1917. Joined Australian Journalists' Association 1917, becoming West Australian state president in 1920.

- Appointed by Bruce government as Australian delegate to the International Labor Organisation in Geneva 1924. Unsuccessfully stood for seat of Perth 1919, and the seat of Fremantle 1925. Appointed by Bruce government to Royal Commission on Child Endowment 1928.

- Elected as federal member of the House of Representatives for Fremantle 1928-1931. After losing seat in the 1931 federal election, represented the West Australian government on the Commonwealth Grants Commission 1933-1935. Won seat of Fremantle amidst concerns about Australia's security 1934. Leader of the Opposition after James Scullin's resignation due to ill health 1935.

- Served on Advisory War Council 1940. Led Labor Party to victory in 1943 federal election, but died in office on 5 July 1945 six weeks before the Allied Forces' victory against Japan. Briefly succeeded by his deputy leader, Francis Forde.

Main achievements (1941-1945)

- Widely respected for his strong and inspirational leadership of the nation during the Second World War.

- Resisted pressure from British and American leaders to protect Australia's interests during the critical months of 1942.

- Secured Anglo-American agreement in 1944 to shift balance of Australia's war effort to producing food and supplies.

- Laid groundwork for Australia's post-war development.

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Personal life

- Born 8 January 1885 at Creswick, Victoria, son of Irish immigrants. Died in office on 5 July 1945.

- Father resigned from police force when Curtin was five. Family moved to Melbourne and ran various hotels, but destitute by 1898. Lived in rental houses in an Irish Catholic part of the Melbourne suburb of Brunswick until 1917.

- Educated in state and Catholic schools. Became the family bread-winner at 14, eventually becoming an estimates clerk in a South Melbourne factory 1903-1911.

- Curtin left the Catholic Church and joined the Salvation Army then became a rationalist. A keen reader. Played with Brunswick football and cricket teams. Honed his speaking and social skills with the Victorian Socialist Party.

- Arrested and gaoled for three days for defying government's call-up order for military camp 1916.

- Married Elsie Needham 21 April 1917 in Perth, after a five-year relationship maintained largely by correspondence.

- Worked as freelance sports journalist after losing seat of Fremantle 1931.

- Struggled periodically with ill health.

Life after politics

- Curtin was the second prime minister to die in office.

Character

- A charismatic, compelling orator, capable of great intensity and passion, commanding respect from political opponents and hardened journalists. Modest, sincere, reserved, honest, selfless, and steadfast. Showed great strength of character while protecting Australia's interests in wartime.

Did you know?

- Curtin's first job was as a messenger boy with bohemian magazine *The Rambler* edited by artist Norman Lindsay, who was also from Creswick.

- First article, published in the Victorian Socialist Party journal, dealt with 'revolutionary international socialism'. Later influenced by success of first British Labour government to advocate social change through parliamentary means.

- Opposed local conscription and Australia's participation in First World War. Persuaded Victorian labour movement to commit to an international workers' strike against war.

- Deviated from Labor's traditional anti-conscription policy to enable conscripted Australian forces to serve in the south-western Pacific 1942.

- Widely respected for his role as prime minister during Second World War, in spite of depression and alcohol addiction that had plagued his earlier life. His gravestone reads 'His country was his pride/His brother man his cause'.

Sources

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