

# **Policy Launch Speech: John Curtin, Opposition Leader (ALP)**

**National Broadcast from Perth, 9pm, Wednesday August 28, 1940**

“The country is at war.

The Commonwealth of Australia entered this war, not of any act of itself, but because Germany, pursuing a ruthless policy of aggression, forced war on the British Commonwealth of Nations. The entire guilt lies with Germany.

The Australian Labor Party stands inflexible in support of the British cause. We are upholding that which is just. We are struggling to maintain the democratic rights of our people and the free institutions of our nation against an enemy that has broken every pledge and which, if it were to succeed, would despoil not only our inheritance as free men and women but also every hope we have for a better and truer social order.

The future of Australia depends on what is done during this war. Whatever has been done; whatever must be done; and all that we can hope to do in the future, are predicated by the stern realities of the war in which we are engaged.

As the very first principle of its policy, the Labor Party proclaims the imperative necessity for a full utilisation by the Australian Government of all the productive and financial resources of the country.

The old order of profit-making and personal interests must be subordinated to the necessities of ensuring our security as Australians and preserving inviolate the soil we occupy. This is the condition upon which to develop the maximum strength of our people in opposition to the forces arrayed against us. Labor will be unflinching in its determination to wage this conflict to a righteous end. To lose the cause for which we are standing would be to lose everything Labor regards as fundamental to the preservation of the best things we have had in mind as reasonable human objectives.

Thus, Labor policy for the war and for the election means that the present and the future are involved in the successful prosecution of the war. The Labor Party is determined that the alliance of Nazi and Fascist philosophies shall not triumph. Were that to happen, sheer might would be enthroned and licensed to impose oppressive forms of government on peoples; simply because the rule of force would be the only law.

Labor is a peace-loving party. Its struggle has always been on behalf of the weak against the strong; for the poor, for those who never had a chance as against those whose privileged positions enabled them to prosper - even though millions suffer.

It is natural, therefore, that, in this crisis, the Labor Party should give its uttermost to maintain representative government and to ensure that the principles of social progress; of liberty; and the rights of citizenship shall not be swept away in a maelstrom of militarised might.

In order to stiffen our resistance to the zenith of its power, and to build up a striking force that will be invincible, the Labor Party wealth; primary and manufactured materials; the physical strength of manual labour and the mental brilliance of trained minds, must be all fully available to the Australian Government in the face of the imminent danger that confronts us.

We must mobilise the nation's capacity to the uttermost point of efficiency to win out.

There must be no quibbling regarding the availability of everything necessary for the national effort. Manufacturers and businessmen must submit to their output, and the nature of that output, and the activities in which they engage, being so directed that there will be a minimum of waste and a maximum of efficiency and order. This applies to industry as a whole; to commerce; to finance; and to all the various interests and sections of our society.

The workers in every sphere, too, must realise that the great effort that they are called upon to make can best be made when it is guided along the most carefully planned lines.

There will be much criticism of such a policy - criticism that will lead to all sorts of catch-cries - but this policy to which Labor is pledged was declared by the Commonwealth Labor Conference. It involves full recognition of trades unions; the safeguarding of Australian standards; the maintenance of the rights of unionism; and also the active participation of Labor organisations in the successful prosecution of the national effort.

This policy has been formulated for one, great, over-riding purpose, namely, to achieve the protection of our people. The people are, and always should be, the supreme consideration of any Australian Government. It follows, as a matter of course, that their rights must be respected to the maximum.

National duty and the maintenance of our conceptions of personal and civic liberty only become incompatible under totalitarian systems of government and the dictatorships that characterise them.

In war, as well as in peace, the Labor Party stands for the principle that, in matters of government, the consent of the people should be sought at regular intervals. While giving tremendous authority to the government, we have insisted that the authority of Parliament over the government is an authority derived from the people and which the people must determine. Just as the government can be saved from blunders by having to consult the people; thereby giving opportunity for both the government and the Parliament to have their blunders corrected.

Our political system is a system in which the people should be the masters. They should be able to reprove, correct and, even, dismiss the blunderers.

The Government that was elected in 1937 is not now in office. In the past three years, five Ministries have been formed and there have been, since the people elected the present Parliament, three Prime Ministers.

There has been a recurring shuffling of Ministerial responsibility. There are few of the members supporting the Government who have not been in it at one stage or another. The present Prime Minister himself retired from the Lyons-Page administration. The Country Party has been in and out and again in the Ministry. Out of office, it has been highly critical of the Government and in office its members have pursued discordant activities with the result that the political position during the last year has been so unstable, and the administration so confused, as to make it eminently desirable to call for a fresh direction from the people.

This opportunity now confronts you.

In the Labor Party's 1937 policy speech it was said that 'the chief strength of Australian defence must lie in aviation.' That policy was assailed by our opponents. Events have proved that Labor was right. After 12 months of war, it has been shown that Germany's advance has been because of marked superiority in the air, coupled with mechanised forces on the ground. In its dying stages, France appealed to the U.S.A. for 'clouds of aeroplanes.'

Had Labor's 1937 policy been adopted, the state of our preparedness to-day would be such that there would be less room for disquietude than, unhappily, is the case to-day.

Mobility must be the keynote of Australia's land forces. Modern equipment must be provided, not only for the men to bear and to utilise, but transport to carry them. In 1938, when the Government's defence policy was announced in altered form, the Australian army was not adequately mechanised. Mechanisation of the army since then has barely scraped the surface of one of the most pressing needs we have in building up our defensive competence.

Australia's defence must be constructed on the basis of a maximum supply of aircraft and personnel and an equally strong supply of mechanised land strength, manned by men fully trained in modern mechanised technique.

Not only did the Government fail to satisfy the urgent need which Labor made clear in 1937 - that Australia's first line of defence must be in the air - but the various changes in the Empire Air Scheme became so confusing that intending recruits for the R.A.A.F. entered other arms of services.

Labor has demonstrated its fitness to govern and, as proof, I cite these extracts from the 1937 policy speech of Labor as showing clearly that even before the war the Labor Party foresaw what would be required. Here are some examples of what we said three years ago:-

'The defence of Australia has to be proportioned to our ability to sustain and provide for our defence and we must take into account the changing character of modern warfare.'

'The primary need of Australia is the building up of industries until every possible requirement to self-defence can be supplied within the Commonwealth. Self-sufficiency is now a supreme national necessity.'

'We must have the essential industries to feed, clothe and transport on sea, land and air the forces of the Commonwealth.'

'Supplies for every branch of our armed forces must be assured.'

That is what we said. But we also said:

'Munitions of all kinds must be manufactured in Australia.'

'We need more aerodromes and more aeroplanes.'

'We need oil and petrol reserves and storage.'

'We need more docks for the navy.'

'We must exhaust every possibility of exploiting the natural and artificial sources of oil.'

All that was essential to preparedness and the Government stands indicted that in NO ONE instance of the requirements stated above did it act on a comprehensive scale until war had been declared. Two invaluable years were lost.

How vastly changed would be Australia's position to-day, three years ago, when Labor said these things, we had commenced establishing defence industries; building aeroplanes; manufacturing munitions; providing storage for oil and petrol; building necessary docks and making this country self-reliant.' How less onerous would be the problem of overseas funds had Labor's outlook been accepted.'

What, then, must be done?

We regard the primary responsibility of any Australian Government as being to pivot the whole of its plan upon the security and integrity of its own soil and people and, thereupon, the contribution it can make to the common cause.

It is our duty to make certain that this nation is quickly and efficiently organised on a maximum defence footing.

A strong air power is indispensable. That can best be done in complete collaboration with the Empire Air Scheme. Labor stands for this.

Steps should be set in motion to place land and shore defences on a better basis. Labor proposes that this be done.

The Prime Minister, the Minister for the Army and another Minister should be independent of any particular department. They should deliberate as a committee, exercising a general superintendance over the whole administration in respect of war effort.

We need men who can engage in ship construction. If time does not allow of the building of ships, they should be acquired. Australian workmen can build ships quickly, efficiently and economically if the Government will set about it.

We have to be certain that we are using the type of munitions for which we can be assured of a continuous supply. Let us have a balanced organisation, so that we shall know that we have munitions for whatever guns we use!

Much more will have to be done in regard to reserves of oil, petrol and rubber.

To secure maximum productive efforts, all idle employable labor must be absorbed into industry.

War and other services must be speeded up on a planned scale, aiming at the highest efficiency and the most economic use of the resources at our command.

National training for defence shall be carried out in terms of the existing Defence Act; to be maintained at the highest point of efficiency and providing for an adequate system of physical training throughout Australia.

Necessary provision shall be made for the re-inforcement of the A.I.F. divisions; the extent of European participation by volunteer army to be determined by circumstances as they arise; having regard to the paramount necessity of Australia's defence.

The Government broke its pledge to volunteers and reduced their pay from 8/- to 5/- a day when it introduced compulsory training. A Labor Government will pay 8/- a day to the militia men. To the member of the A.I.F. a Labor Government will pay 8/- a day (including 1/- a day deferred pay); 3/- a day to his wife and 1/6d. a day for each child. That will mean 87/6 a week for a soldier, his wife and one child as against 77/- a week paid by the Menzies Government.

A vexed problem since the last war has been the administration of the Repatriation Act. In 1937, we undertook that a Labor Government would liberalise the Act to cover children born subsequent to 1931. We now say that a Labor Government will review the whole operation of the present Act and will legislate to provide for the soldiers, sailors and airmen, and their dependents, of the present war in the light of the many anomalies, injustices and hardships which were discovered by Labor in the Act covering the last war.

Three related monetary measures must be taken so that industrial and economic preparedness, which are the essence of national defence and security, shall be assured. They are:

1. National control of banking and credit, to ensure its adequacy in putting to work the idle hands the Government failed to employ in peace-time and in using the full physical and man-power resources of the nation to carry on the war.
2. National control of interest rates, to keep to the minimum the monetary and capital costs of the war and production and industry generally.

3. National direction of investment, so that existing activities and proposed activities will not be permitted to follow expenditure of capital on lines not helpful to the war effort and the post-war reconstruction.

The Commonwealth Bank is the logical instrument to function for effecting these monetary measures and for providing the machinery for post-war reconstruction.

Meeting the costs of the war and laying the foundation for post-war reconstruction make it imperative that Labor's policy in regard to monetary and banking control be carried out completely.

No Government can govern that deliberately excludes itself from the responsibility of determining monetary policy. We cannot fight this war without governmental responsibility for ensuring that men and materials are related, and no financial impediment to such relationship can be tolerated - let alone condoned.

The nation will fight with its physical resources. It must not be crippled because of any failure on the part of its financial machinery.

In its conduct of the financial, economic and productive phases of war programme, the Government has evidenced a pronounced leaning towards vested interests.

It has built up a system of boards and commissions, the representation upon which being largely composed and, in any event, dominated by representatives of undertakings whose only concern in the past has been the piling up of huge profits and resistance to any effort to ameliorate the conditions of those employed in that process.

There can be no disputing the statement that these interests adhere to their principal objective - that of profit-making - and have not, overnight, subordinated everything to the common good.

The Labor Party has been concerned with the growing grip that the interests have obtained on the instrumentalities of government and a Labor Government will take the first opportunity to review this system built up by the Menzies Government.

The incidence of taxation for war purposes has imposed heavy penalties on the working class and those persons on the middle-range incomes, with the higher incomes have been let off with a lighter impost.

It will be our task to review the incidence of taxation so that taxes will conform to the principle of the individual's ability to pay. The revision incidental to this programme will need to be carefully worked out and will be preceded by a survey of all taxation, Commonwealth and State. Our purpose is to ensure that taxation will not so prejudice the living and economic standards as to reduce them below what is essential for the physical welfare of the nation.

Reconstitution of the Australian Wheat Board, so as to provide for the growers electing their own representatives, will be our first major act in dealing with

the wheat industry.

Our policy provides for: 3/10 1/2d. f.o.r. at ports for the first 1,000 bags (3,000 bushels.) When there is an increase in the price of wheat above 3/10 1/2d., half of the increase in regard to the guaranteed wheat to be set aside to enable the pool to repay the advances made to it and to build up a reserve fund, and the other half to be paid to the growers.

This would mean that should the world price for wheat reach, say, 4/10 1/2d a bushel, 6d. would go to the grower and the other sixpence would be retained by the pool for the purposes enumerated.

In order to protect the consumer, millers would pay a special price of 4/- a bushel, irrespective of any increase or decrease in world price; thus ensuring that the public will be able to get bread at a reasonable price. This plan makes the Flour Tax unnecessary and it will, therefore, disappear.

The scheme would be financed by the Commonwealth Bank, and be guaranteed by the Commonwealth Government.

The marketing of primary produce generally demands that the Government secure as many vessels as possible to transport primary produce overseas; and to commence immediately the building of vessels for this purpose. This would restore the Commonwealth Line of steamers, which would ensure transport of primary produce overseas and save primary producers millions of pounds in freight charges.

It is very necessary that relief be planned for necessitous primary producers against the ravages of drought; fire; flood; and pests and also to ensure the establishment of grain and fodder reserves against periods of drought.

These are matters calling for collaboration between the Commonwealth and State Governments and will be dealt with positively and vigorously.

The fruit problem makes necessary a review of the constitution and methods of the Fruit Acquisition Board.

The Labor Party is opposed to the petrol-rationing system to be introduced by the Government. It is equally opposed to the proposal put forward by the former Leader of the Country Party (Sir Earle Page).

A Labor Government will endeavor to correct the bungling of the Government in this matter in which it wasted previous months. Had tariff action been taken over a wide field of imports, as Labor had suggested, our external funds problem would not be now so acute. There could have been a greater importation of petrol, and increased reserves of petrol established, although other not so essential imports would have been lessened.

This, combined with a gradual scale of rationing over the larger period, would have conserved the major interests of our economic life, without ruthless disturbance of the motor industry.

The Labor Government undertakes to deal with this problem with a minimum of delay, on the basis that the transport services of Australia are essential to the mobility of the defence forces and that petrol reserves are equally indispensable for an expanded air programme.

The Labor Party repeats the pledge given in 1937 that, when returned to power, it will utilise Australia's great coal resources for the production of oil as a means of reducing unemployment on the coalfields and as a vital necessity to defensive self-reliance.

Wheat, sugar and other vegetable products will be exploited as sources for the supply of spirit. There will be no delay in vigorously drawing upon the natural resources of the country to provide fuel and power for industry and transport.

Labor will take early steps to develop the dolomite deposits from which magnesium metal is produced. Capital equipment will be required and it will be the business of the Labor Government to ensure that, in regard to this indispensable material for war purposes, Australia becomes self-reliant.

Railways are the arteries of Australian commerce and the chief means for the internal transport of men and materials. The standardisation of gauges has definite relation to this problem. It will be dealt with as part of the programme to give mobility to our mechanised forces.

Of all the war-time creations of the Government, the Department of Information has the sorriest record. Its cost has been enormous, compared with the results achieved. It has, for about nine months, cost approximately 55,000 pounds.

It will be recalled that the first Minister for Information was superseded by the Prime Minister himself. But the Prime Minister, in point of fact, appointed Sir Keith Murdoch as dictator. The result was the promulgation of regulations which gave a power over Press, radio and motion picture productions that went far beyond anything in any British country.

The public outcry against that action represented not only indignation at the usurping of the functions of a free Press, but also disgust with the bungling and utter failure of the department to fulfil its main objective.

A Labor Government will re-organise the whole department so that its function will be to tell more and to restrain less.

The Labor Party has been, for some years, dissatisfied with the way in which commercial radio stations have been linked into chains. The necessity for a rectification of this position was so strongly stressed by Labor that two Parliaments ago it was taken up by the then Postmaster-general.

But nothing was done. The links have been even more tightly forced since then so that, to-day, there is a tie-up of newspapers and radio stations that threatens the traditional privilege of democratic people to read and hear diverse points of view, upon which they may base their own opinions.

This mass moulding of public opinion is not in the people's best interests and a Labor Government will review the whole position of the Australian Broadcasting Commission and commercial radio broadcasting enterprises.

In 1937, the Labor Party undertook, if returned to power, to provide 1 pound a week for a widow, who has dependent children, and 10/- a week for each child so dependent. Safeguards would ensure that the payment would not be made where there was no necessity for it.

That pledge we now repeat as representing Labor's realisation that the child is the most important asset that Australia possesses and that a social service of this kind to a widow is a humane, apart from being an economic, provision.

It was my privilege to be a member of a Royal Commission that reported on a system of family allowances. The Labor Party declares that a Labor Government will introduce pensions for widows with dependent children.

Furthermore, a plan of family allowances for families where the children number more than two under the age of 16 years will be devised in accordance with the proposals adopted by a Federal Labor Conference.

We cannot expect to have a physically fit manhood to defend the nation in the years ahead unless proper nurture is assured to the children of each generation.

The Labor Party undertakes that a Labor Government will liberalise the law and regulations governing invalid and old-age pensions so that these persons will, in future, be given better treatment.

In view of the increased cost of living, pensions will be increased to 25/- a week.

A Labor Government will put into operation the Commonwealth Housing Act. With the exception of a trifling amount, nothing has been expended under this Act which was passed by the Bruce-Page Government 15 years ago.

A Labor Government will accept the problem of proper housing conditions for the people as a Commonwealth responsibility.

In view of the general dissatisfaction at the methods of arriving at the Commonwealth basic wage, Labor repeats in this policy speech its previous declaration to remove any restriction which, at present, prevents the Statistician from collecting data from a much wider range of commodities.

Furthermore, action will be taken to develop the conciliation machinery of the Conciliation and Arbitration Act in order to avert industrial disputes and to promote agreement and concord in industry.

The powers now being exercised in regard to the prosecution of the war are powers which it will be necessary for the Commonwealth to possess in dealing with post-war reconstruction.

It would be utterly unrealistic to assume that the powers which the Commonwealth Parliament exercised in the pre-war era would be adequate to undertake the increased responsibilities which must devolve on the National Parliament in the future life of this nation.

The Labor Party says that the sovereign responsibility resides with the people and the National Parliament must be compelled to give effect to the people's will in carrying out the measures required to serve the people's welfare.

It has been made manifest in this policy speech that all we have and hope to be are dependent on the successful outcome of the war.

The major aspects of this policy speech, therefore, are essentially related to the conduct of the war.

Labor, however, keeps clearly in mind the importance of the civic and social order. Unless the rights of the people are respected; unless the interests of all the people are made paramount over those of vested interests, profit-makers and the acquisitive elements of the community, we may win the war yet lose the peace.

Since the outbreak of war, Australians have been asked to join the armed forces and to make heavy sacrifices in many other ways for the preservation of freedom and democracy. The response by the people of Australia has been magnificent.

But the words 'freedom' and 'democracy' must be more than a slogan. They must represent real and living things in the lives of ordinary men and women.

A heavy toll was exacted from the workers in the last war. In recognition of their sacrifices, many promises were made - but only partially kept. Expected social advancement was limited by the fetters of a society that remained acquisitive and unequal.

The Australian Labor Party insists that, while the immediate task is the successful prosecution of the war, attention must be given to the planning of our future so that we shall be in a position to honour our promises to those who will bring us victory. We must shape our course now so that we shall have a complete democracy.

The Australian Labor Party is the only political party with a forward-looking policy. It visualises post-war reconstruction to be in the nature of a new social order based upon democracy and the rights of all men and women to enjoy the fruits of honest toil. It rejects dictatorship, either from the Left or the Right, and recognises as inalienable the right of the people to decide how, and by whom, they shall be governed.

The Australian Labor Party is convinced that tragic poverty and economic disorder will disappear when we are bold enough to mobilise the confidence and goodwill of scientist, technician, trade unionist and industrial leader for the tasks of peace. This is imperative for war; it is essential for peace.

There must be no hesitation to assume control of the means of production where that is essential in the public interest. In the economic life of the nation, no private interest can be allowed to stand against the welfare of the majority. Irrational privileges which disfigure our present order should be abolished. Economic freedom must be made real by giving security and a rising standard of living to all who, by their labor, make civilised life possible.

We must substitute co-operation for competition and public service for private profit. The war has emphasised more than ever that the best national effort cannot be put forward unless on the basis of economic planning. The resources of the nation are at the command of the Government. The extent to which these are organised in a planned way will be the measure of success.

After the last war, no attempt was made to go forward in the light of experience. On the contrary, there was an indecent haste to get back to the state of things that existed in pre-war times. Demands made then for an efficient economic system went unheeded. Let there be no repetition.

The Australian Labor Party is the only political party in the Commonwealth which has a written programme for all to see. That programme contains a working plan for a new economic order. It places first emphasis on the importance of financial power in the economics of the country and declares for the direction and control of credit resources and banking to be vested in the Commonwealth Bank, operating under the powers and responsibilities defined by the Commonwealth Parliament.

Banking is a vital public service and, as such, should be subject to public control.

The direction of investment is a public trust to be determined in the public interest, instead of being left to the chance of private decision.

Labor will set up a National Credit Advisory Authority to collaborate with the Government and the Commonwealth Bank to plan the investment of national credit and thus utilise to the fullest extent the real wealth of Australia. In this way, it will be possible to plan future primary and secondary industrial development.

Individual initiative and ability must not be restricted, but must be directed to the service of the community. The grotesque waste of man-power and wealth arising from unregulated private capitalism must be ended.

Labor's aim is to build upon a sure foundation. The method by which the material needs of life are produced must be planned so as to break the fetters put upon social progress by the dominance of private gain. Once the foundations are truly laid, the superstructure will be transformed to fit into the new order.

Labor faces the future confident that, by the application of the political principles to which it is pledged, the unavoidable difficulties which must follow the war can be overcome with a minimum of hardship.

The political alliance of the people under the banner of Labor is a guarantee of social progress, of social progress, of social justice, of a new era in which the public interest

will be paramount. With such a guarantee, there can be no fear of dictatorship, either of the Right or of the Left.

Post-war reconstruction will be complicated by the return to civil life of our men in the armed forces. In the last war, this was a problem of considerable magnitude and will be again.

If we do not plan for this eventuality now, we shall be unworthy of the [?] imposed upon us by those who offer themselves in our defence. In planning for post-war reconstruction, provision must be made for the absorption of these men as rapidly as possible into the community life of Australia.

The Australian Labor Party feels that, in this matter, it has a particularly heavy responsibility. The great bulk of the forces is drawn from the ranks of the workers. Labor, therefore, is determined that they shall not be the 'forgotten men.'

The fulfilment of this programme depends, first, upon victory in the war. But, we assert, that while every effort is being applied for victory some attention can be given to the known problems of war's aftermath. It should be our aim to make this country a mighty fellowship in which the happiness of each will be assured by the effort of all.

[?] that the men and women of our generation are capable of [?] a state of society as visualised here. If we show the will and determination to achieve these things, all else will be added unto us.

The Australian Labor Party, therefore, confidently appeals to this Commonwealth of free people for support.

Its programme was fashioned by men and women in close and daily contact with the everyday lives of the people in field, factory and workshop. The wisdom of the world's best thinkers has been drawn upon in pursuit of a way out of the world's anguish.

Let us hope that the war in which Australia, in common with the rest of the Empire, is engaged will elevate the conscience of our nation to new and nobler purposes.

Two fundamental and outstanding conclusions emerge from the programme which the Labor Party has just submitted to you. The first is: The war must be won. The second is: The peace must be won for the masses; the workers; the producers; the soldiers. We have to plan with the entire resources of this nation to win the war and we also have to plan with the entire resources of this nation to win the peace.”

Source: Compiled from original documents in the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library (Records of the ALP National Branch. JCPML00421/2) and The Melbourne Herald, Canberra Times and Sydney Morning Herald.