

Labor's great wartime heroes

This October marks 75 years since John Curtin became prime minister and Ben Chifley was appointed treasurer. The wartime duo of Labor reformers continues to cast a long shadow over Australian politics, even though they seem remote from contemporary times.

In Canberra, there is a statue of the two venerated Labor icons that reimagines them walking to Parliament House in the 1940s. It prompts memories of an age when there was a greater degree of comity across the aisle and politicians garnered respect from voters.

Two new books about Curtin and Chifley give readers a fascinating insight into the men behind their statuesque modern-day image. One deals with how Curtin manipulated the media and honed his oratorical skills. Another looks at the private life of Chifley told through stories passed from generation to generation in the Chifley family.

Caryn Coatney's *John Curtin: How He Won Over The Media* is an academic study that reveals the secrets behind Curtin's powerful wartime broadcasts, stirring parliamentary debates and his spellbinding oratory delivered to enraptured audiences at home and abroad.

Curtin, a former journalist, used the media to present himself as a strong wartime leader through the power of his speech. As Coatney shows, his voice projection and hand gestures were planned and rehearsed. The diaries of Canadian prime minister Mackenzie King divulge how these tactics helped Curtin become in public what he was not always in private.

Coatney quotes King's diary, noting he was impressed with Curtin's private presentations to Winston Churchill, his public speeches and his handling of journalists' queries.

But King saw Curtin as privately "self-absorbed" with a "lack of any gracious manner", someone who "seemed more interested in ascertaining the effect of his media messages than meeting dignitaries" on a visit to Ottawa.

More than any other contemporary politician, Curtin understood how he could use the emerging mediums of radio and film "to promote his war leadership" and "enlist support for Australia's role in global battles".

The images voters saw on movie screens were of a "man of the people" at ease with workers and children.

Curtin used radio more than Franklin

Troy Bramston

John Curtin: How He Won Over the Media

By Caryn Coatney

Australian Scholarly Publishing, 218pp, \$39.95

Remembering Ben Chifley

By Sue Martin with Jane Chifley and Elizabeth Chifley

Inspiring Publishers, 306pp, \$26.95

Roosevelt, who made his Fireside Chats a feature of his presidency.

Confidential briefings to journalists, including the sharing of secret cables from Churchill, were another element of Curtin's tactics. He traded information with journalists and proprietors and enlisted them to his cause. Coatney uses journalists' diaries, memos and correspondence to show how Curtin's courted the media.

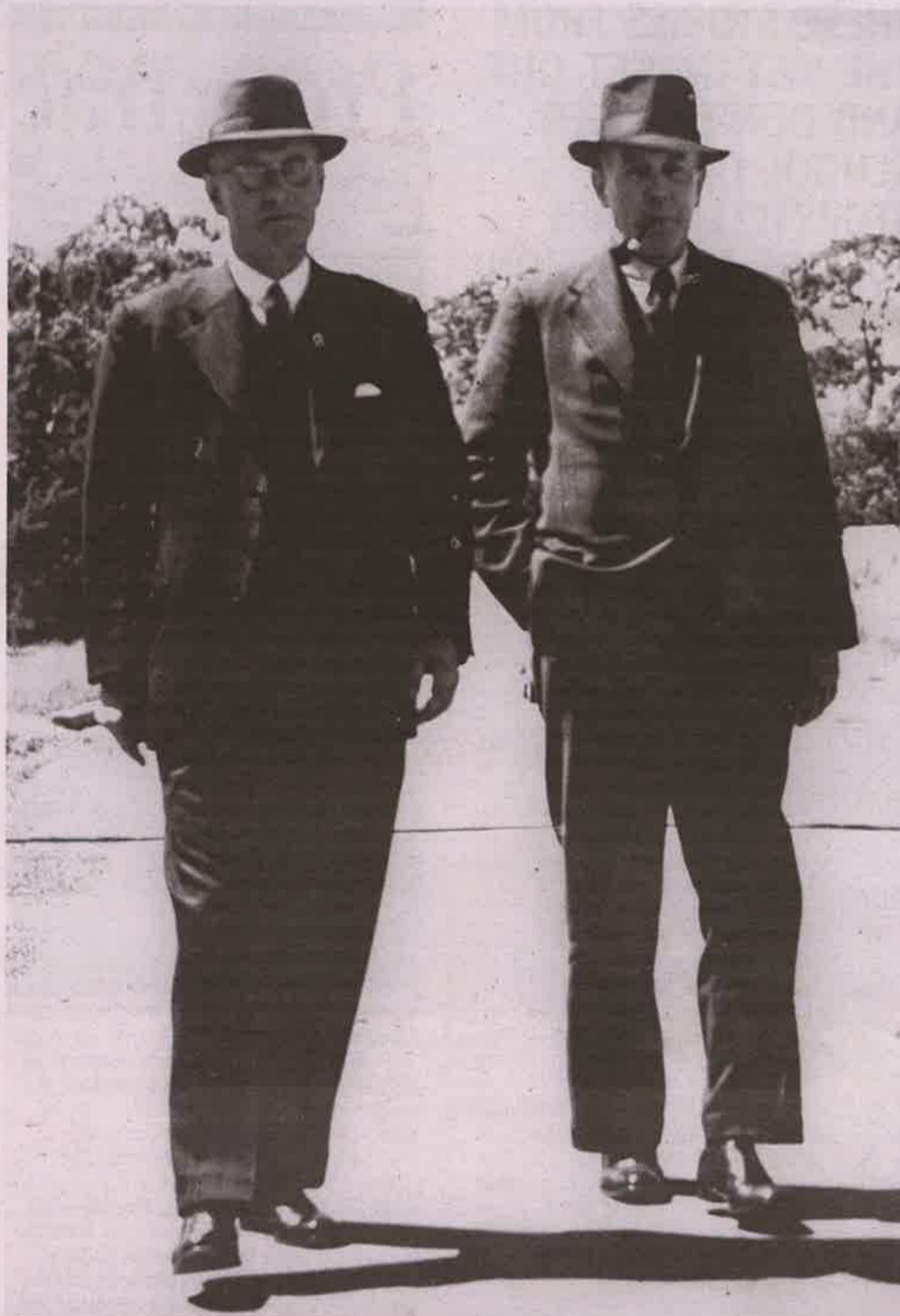
As he battled personal demons and deteriorating health, there was no one Curtin looked to more than his party comrade, cabinet colleague and friend Chifley.

After Frank Forde's eight-day prime ministership in July 1945, Chifley won a ballot for the Labor leadership and became the fifth prime minister during World War II.

But as Sue Martin recalls in *Remembering Ben Chifley*, he decided not to contest the leadership and was happy to remain treasurer. Chifley was so distraught at Curtin's death that he could not attend the funeral and returned home to Bathurst. It was only when former Labor leader Jim Scullin urged Chifley to nominate for leader, and said it was Curtin's dying "wish", that he sought the prime ministership.

This is just one of the stories from Chifley family lore recorded by Martin in a fascinating book written with the assistance of her sisters Jane and Elizabeth Chifley. They have collected stories told by their father, John Chifley, who was Chifley's nephew, along with tales from other family members and friends.

While he sat at his desk in a small office in Parliament House — Chifley did not use the prime ministerial suite — the phone would often ring with meat orders for the Manuka butcher. The shop's phone number differed by only one digit from Chifley's direct line. Rather than embarrass the callers, usually "housewives", Chifley would take their orders and then phone them through to the butcher.



The book shares anecdotes from Chifley's childhood living with his grandfather, his work in the railways and imprisonment during the 1917 strike, his excommunication from the Catholic Church and rivalry with NSW premier Jack Lang. Predominantly self-educated, he ordered a parcel of books from Dymocks every month and retained much of what he read.

There is no Labor leader more loved than the

down-to-earth, pipe-smoking Chifley. His only security when occasionally staying at The Lodge was a one-eyed guard dog named Nelson. He refused to wear a dress suit to dinner with George VI. And he believed an array of external forces were out to destroy his government: the banks, the communists, the Catholics, the media, the CIA, MI5 and the FBI.

Mary Elizabeth Calwell, the daughter of for-

Recognise what governments have not

Nigel Parbury

It's Our Country: indigenous Arguments for Meaningful Constitutional Recognition and Reform

By Megan Davis and Marcia Langton
MUP, 227pp, \$29.99

"We are here and you have to deal with us." As recounted by Fred Chaney in his foreword to *It's Our Country*, so said the Yorta Yorta native title claimants in 2002 when the full bench of the High Court dismissed 5-2 their appeal against the judgment of the full bench of the Federal Court, which had upheld Justice Howard Olney's ruling that the "tide of history" had "washed away" their traditional observances and way of life.

It's Our Country contains essays by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal specialists, academics and business and community leaders. Each sets out their view on meaningful constitutional recognition, and "their visions for

reform". The book is edited by Megan Davis, director of the University of NSW law school, and Marcia Langton, foundation chair of Australian indigenous studies at the University of Melbourne. It's closely argued, well written and often graphic ("the airtight cage of poverty"), as befits "polities" (nations) of poetic storytellers.

Importantly, the contributors did not have to think only about what might be considered "achievable", the editors say. "We asked authors not to be constrained by the ideological minefield of deeply held views from both the left and the right ... regarding matters such as 'rights' in the constitution."

Upfront it's made clear that the word country in the title does not mean the whole of Australia (though some argue it does) but the indigenous sense of "landscapes defined and bound by custom and hereditary rights, shaped by a priori spiritual forces and imbued with spiritual power".

This book will shock some Australians. But the editors write: "It is our wish that you hear what successive governments have failed to

hear and develop a better understanding of why many communities will not settle for the approaches that have already been tried and failed: symbolism, gradualism, minimalist approaches."

The essays here catalogue bad faith, let-downs, broken promises, appalling statistics of indigenous morbidity, mortality, incarceration: wall-to-wall disadvantage. Almost worse is how not just indigenous affairs but indigenous people are political footballs in the main game of politics, especially federally in recent years: now is the lowest ebb of commonwealth policy and programs for 40 years.

A case in point is the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, devised by Tom Calma for Labor, sidelined by a hand-picked indigenous advisory council when the Coalition gained office, now to be defunded. In her essay Kirstie Parker is outraged by the government's "lack of respect".

It is telling that the most experienced administrators among the essayists, in mainstream bureaucracy and at the indigenous coalface, are

the most trenchant critics of government and its processes.

It is notoriously difficult to pass a referendum to change the Australian Constitution, harder than anywhere on earth. And it would seem that any minimalist referendum, certainly by May 27 next year, to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum, is dead in the water before the process even starts, whenever that might be. Five years and four processes, and still no question to put to voters; the hard truth is that certain of the expert panel's proposals are likely to be unacceptable to some politicians, and very likely to many voters, though repeated polling shows a healthy majority of Australians favour recognition.

There is concern the Recognise campaign seems to be heading for a symbolic, minimalist or gradualist (not now, later) formulation. Perhaps unfairly: the Recognise campaign is directed by Reconciliation Australia and based on the proposals of the expert panel and the select committee of the commonwealth parliament. And surely someone like rugby league star Greg