



## **LIBRARY LECTURE: Becoming John Curtin and James Scullin—their early political careers and the making of the modern Labor party**

Presented by Liam Byrne, Parliament House, Canberra on 17 March 2021

As Prime Ministers, John Curtin and James Scullin have defining—and tragic—places in our national story.

Scullin’s political consciousness was awoken in the Great Depression of the 1890s. He witnessed working people bearing the cost of an economic cataclysm that they did not create. He dedicated his political life to ensure this wouldn’t happen again.

Throughout the 1920s Scullin argued Australia was over-exposed economically and risked being drawn into another disaster. Labor returned to office, with Scullin as prime minister, just weeks before we were dragged into the Great Depression. Scullin’s time in office will be forever remembered as a time when workers suffered for an economic cataclysm they had not created. That is his tragedy.

John Curtin also came of age during the Depression of the 1890s. His early working life was marked by a series of short-term jobs, and the frustration of never having the security to help provide for his family. As a young socialist, he warned that capitalism as a system was plunging toward war.

When the First World War did come, Curtin was also drawn to national attention, predominantly through his role in opposing conscription, but also as a strong advocate for socialism—as he understood it. Curtin, famously, came to office somewhat reluctantly in October 1941. He died in office on 5th July 1945, widely seen as a war casualty. The nation mourned him. Though he died just weeks in advance of victory in the Pacific War he left an enduring legacy.

Having learned from the experience of the First World War and its aftermath, and from Scullin’s experience during the Great Depression, the Curtin Labor government pursued a vision of a post-war future which sought to avoid these mistakes. Curtin promised the nation ‘Victory in War—Victory for the Peace’.

Reconstruction, as it was known, was about insisting that human life should be measured by something more than abstract economic markers. Its fundamental basis was full employment, but it also included expansion of various forms of state aid, a mass programme of immigration, and new ambitions for housing, schooling, and training the nation. It transformed Australia. But Curtin did not live to see it. That was his tragedy. Though he had spent a lifetime campaigning against militarism, Curtin did not govern a single day in peace.

Scullin had become a mentor to Curtin during his years of government. Though they had once been political rivals, they had been drawn together through time—not the least by the shared experience of power in moments of such extraordinary crisis. Scullin was not a part of Curtin’s ministry, but his office was placed between the prime minister’s and that of the Treasurer—Ben Chifley. In a radio

broadcast he mourned Curtin. He talked of those who had mercilessly attacked the Prime Minister, borrowing a line from the poet Thomas Bracken:

The poison shafts of falsehood and derision are oft impelled against those who mould the age.

The Curtin government moulded the age. It actively created a new era in our history. It repudiated the established orthodoxies that insisted government and economic management could only be done in a particular way. A way that prioritised the market—and diminished the place of labour. A way that considered abstract economic indicators as more important than the lived reality of the bulk of the populace when measuring the health of a society. An orthodoxy that had failed when the Great Depression hit—and an orthodoxy that failed when the necessity of total war became apparent. Curtin's government instituted a new order—a new sense of the possible. In so doing, it fundamentally transformed our economy, our politics, and our society.

To understand how it did so, we need to analyse the broad structural factors that made change possible: economic relationships, political institutions, social attitudes. But we also need to understand the individuals who made this history. This is what I sought to do in *Becoming John Curtin and James Scullin*. I wanted to tell the story of how they became the leaders we know in our history books. I wanted to tell the real human story of two working class kids who joined the labour movement with dreams of changing Australia for the better, and who reached the pinnacle of power because of these aspirations.

Curtin and Scullin had very similar backgrounds: they were born nine years apart in small towns either side of Ballarat to Irish parents. In fact, much of their lives were lived in a form of parallel. Both were from the working class, left school in their early teens, and experienced the Great Depression of the 1890s firsthand. The depression's influence can't be overstated. Each learnt from that cataclysmic event the ills of market capitalism if allowed to operate untrammelled—a lesson that endured throughout their lives.

When the 1890s Depression hit, Scullin was in his teens. Like most working-class kids at the time, he had already left school and entered the workforce to help support his family. He worked down the mines for a period, and then laboured in whatever jobs he could find in the Victorian timber industry. This was dangerous and exhausting work—as John Curtin would discover when he later became Secretary of the Timber Workers' Union.

Curtin's father—a police officer—was struck down by illness in the 1890s. Curtin was unable to find steady employment. He was deeply marked by the experience of insecurity. Economic depressions rarely have a clearly identifiable end to those most exposed to them. But by the time of the early Federation there had been enough of a recovery for more secure work to become available for working-class men like Curtin and Scullin.

Curtin was employed at the Titan factory in Brunswick—where his family had moved from Creswick largely due to his father's illness. Though it was a great relief to Curtin to have ongoing work, it exposed him to other negative aspects of working-class life. He would talk of the drudgery, the feeling of alienation, the sense that his true skills and ability to contribute would never be recognised. He later described it:

I calculated, measured and otherwise evolved the precise cost to a gentleman profiteer of importing wire from Germany.

It was not fulfilling. He began to search for greater meaning. He wanted to know more about the world. He haunted the public library. He joined the discussion group of the radical (then) state MP Frank Anstey. He wasn't alone in this search for ideas and meaning.

Scullin had begun work managing a grocery on in Ballarat's south —it was good work, but he too, wanted more. He was a voracious reader, and he threw himself into projects for self-improvement. This included his avid participation in the Catholic Young Men's Society and the South Street Debating Society. Here, he underwent a process of self-motivated education that he, like most working-class kids, were denied in the formal system of schooling—largely the preserve of the social elite.

In 1903, the famed British labour leader Tom Mann visited Ballarat. Mann was undergoing an extended stay in Victoria, and was working at the time as the ALP's state organiser. Inspired by the great Mann's words, Scullin joined the ALP that year. Over the next two years Mann went on to organise for Labor with great courage, and to fight internally for the party to adopt a socialist objective.

One of the biggest barriers to this was the grouping of Labor moderates, particularly the large and powerful group around the Australian Workers' Union. Socialists and moderates were engaged in an ideological clash over the future of the party. Intellectually, this was extremely creative—forging a febrile culture of debate and argument that young activists, like Curtin and Scullin, were exposed to.

The AWU's Victoria-Riverina branch moved its headquarters to Ballarat under the leadership of its secretary Edward Grayndler, who would go on to be its national secretary for many years. Scullin came to Grayndler's attention in 1906—the year that Scullin took on the sitting Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin, for his seat of Baallarat in the federal election.

I don't have time here to discuss this campaign in the detail—as I do in the book. But it was significant for all involved. It was the last election fought between the 'three elevens' before the fusion of the anti-Labor parties in 1909. But it also provides insight into the way politics was done at this time.

Scullin did not expect (for most of the campaign) to win the seat, he was flying Labor's standard. But he undertook this task with great determination and pride. He would regularly address audiences for speeches of ninety minutes to two hours, which would then be followed by extensive question and answer sessions. Deakin did the same, by the way. The candidates were respectful towards each other personally, even when they castigated each other's policies. Deakin accused Labor of being a party of dreamers. Scullin rejoined that while Labor was not a party of utopian delusions, that governments should, in fact, "look ahead." Governments should have a vision of the future they wanted to achieve. Government did not exist just for day-to-day management, but to create long-term change.

Reflecting his gendered view of politics, common at the time, Scullin argued that a government was 'like a father' who 'looked into the future, and saw that his family was provided for when they grew up.' Labor's objective was simple, he argued, the securing for 'all citizens the full result of their labour.' But he conceded, this objective was not yet fully achievable—it was a task for the future. And so Labor would also tackle immediate problems while building toward this fuller goal.

Scullin ran an impressive campaign, even scaring Deakin into believing he might lose his seat at one point. This proved an exaggerated threat and Deakin won easily. But this fear did reflect the energy and skill of Scullin's campaign. As a result, he was drawn under Grayndler's tutelage. He learnt a great deal from Grayndler and his moderate brand of Labor politics—still oriented to transformation, but without the same immediacy and desire for abrupt breach that marked socialist politics in the party. Scullin later referred to Grayndler as his 'guide, philosopher, and friend.'

Through this association Scullin was drawn into the orbit of the powerful network of the AWU. He was hired as an organiser for the union—in the same area Mann had focused on just a few years before. This set him up for his successful run for the seat of Corangamite in the 1910 Labor landslide federal election. When he lost that seat at the following election this connection to the AWU led to

him being appointed as editor of the newspaper the Ballarat *Evening Echo* in 1913. This newspaper was controlled by the AWU, and was the only Labor daily in the state. Scullin would one day quip that he had become an editor without being a journalist, just as he became Prime Minister without ever being a minister.

1906 was also the year that Curtin was drawn into the orbit of a similarly influential powerbroker—but one aligned to the socialist left of the party. That year, Tom Mann founded the Victorian Socialist Party, a group that overlapped significantly with the ALP, effectively functioning as a faction. Curtin was drawn into the Socialist Party and the ALP, becoming close to Mann who acted as his mentor. Curtin did not have South Street—so his education was in the Socialist Party. He attended its speakers' and economics classes. His first published written work was in its newspaper. His first public lecture was at one of its regular meetings.

A report of his first public lecture in the party newspaper stated that he was 'not quite at his ease, nervous one might say, and he never stirred from the spot nor raised his hand in gesticulation.' But despite this, it was said that his speech was 'so crammed with knowledge, and so evidently part of himself that the audience listened spellbound.' So began the career of one of Australia's greatest parliamentary orators.

Through involvement in the Socialist Party and the ALP Curtin was also drawn into a network of intellectuals, activists, and powerbrokers. In 1911 this led to his appointment as Secretary of the Timber Workers' Union in Victoria, his first position of real influence and power. In 1913 he used this to launch a newspaper, the *Timber Worker*, which he used to give voice to his ideas about the path forward for the labour movement and the necessity of socialism.

In one of those striking parallels between their lives, Curtin and Scullin became labour movement newspaper editors in the same state in the same year. Curtin was giving voice to Labor's socialist section—and Scullin the moderates. Curtin and Scullin came to attention because of their beliefs and their convictions, and through these connections, came to act as intellectuals and powerbrokers of these sections of the movement. They had come a long way in just a few years because of the connections they had made in the movement—and the guidance of the powerful Grayndler and Mann. The younger men had attracted the attention of these influential figures because they had genuine belief and conviction in the cause of labour. They wanted to change the world. And this provided the basis for their rise through the ranks of the labour movement.

It is important to remember that in the early twentieth century there was a huge amount of creative energy in Australian politics. A new country had been forged with Federation, and there was excitement and contest over what that country would look like.

There were, of course, huge negatives to this creativity—one of the major points of confluence between conservatives, liberals, and labor alike was support for racist policies of exclusion and of dispossession. We should not forget or excuse that. But there was also a sense that Australia was experimenting with new social and economic policies that could deliver a more egalitarian society than existed elsewhere. In this context, Labor became the first workers' party in the world to govern a nation. There was a sense that all things were possible 'down under'. It felt as though the labour movement was on the advance. Hopes were high and dreams were big. It seemed a matter of when Labor would fundamentally reconstruct Australia, not if. And then came the First World War.

Curtin and Scullin took starkly different positions on the war. Scullin came to be a supporter of the war effort—though with some reluctance. As well as being a labour loyalist, he was a staunch Catholic. The conflict violated his belief in the brotherhood of man. But he believed the war to be an unfortunate necessity, driven by the aggression of the German autocracy. Scullin feared that workers would pay the price of the war. To prevent this, he favoured a referendum that would permanently

transfer powers over the economy, most importantly over prices, to the Commonwealth government. This referendum was promised by the Federal Labor Government—but not delivered.

Curtin was an opponent of the war, which he believed only served the interests of imperialism, not Australia. He also warned that workers would bear its cost, militarily on the battlefields and economically on the home front. But the war was illustrative. The government intervened in the economy on an unprecedented scale for the war effort. If the government could do so to wage war, Curtin argued, then 'it is imperative, urgent and logical that it organise factories, workshops, mines, farms, and forests to supply the materials requisite for the equipment of life'. Victory in war, victory for the peace.

Curtin was of a more radical mind than Scullin. Scullin was content to put pressure on the Federal Labor government to introduce the referendum to change the constitution. Curtin dismissed what he called the government's 'flimsy excuses' and wrote in his newspaper that 'if the constitution stands between the toilers of the nation and bread and meat, then smash the constitution.' The issue came to a head when the well-regarded Labor Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, was replaced in his post by Billy Hughes.

In late 1915 Hughes engineered the disposal of the proposed referendum to provide new economic powers to the commonwealth. He spent early 1916 touring Britain, and when he returned, announced that Australia would go to the polls that October to vote on the introduction of conscription. This was opposed by the union movement and large swathes of the non-parliamentary Labor Party.

Conscription brought Curtin and Scullin to national prominence for the first time. In late 1915 Curtin had resigned his union post. In early 1916 he checked himself into a rehabilitation centre for his alcoholism. It seemed he was down and out. Scullin, at that time, was a locally well-regarded but not particularly well-known labour editor.

Once the referendum was announced Curtin was approached by his socialist friends in the labour movement who were spearheading a campaign against the measure. They needed someone with a unique set of skills in organising, writing, and speaking to lead the campaign. Curtin was their man. It was a sort of redemption. As one powerful unionist at the time—later a minister in Curtin's government—noted about him, his 'characteristic for leadership almost seemed to lie dormant until some great crisis.' In a whirlwind of activity Curtin excelled as the national secretary of the campaign against conscription, winning fame among the movement.

Scullin, meanwhile, came to renown as a forceful voice against conscription in Labor's only Victorian daily. His newspaper was smuggled by unionists from Ballarat into Melbourne. It sold in the tens of thousands. Curtin himself often talked about his endeavours to get the *Echo* onto the Melbourne streets to combat the pro-conscription dailies. Once more, their political journeys were bound to each other.

In the October vote, the anti-conscriptionists won a narrow victory. In the wake of the vote, Curtin was arrested for having defied a call-up of military aged men. He was imprisoned on Pentridge for three days before his early release. It made him a martyr. His fame grew.

In December 1916 Labor held a special conference. James Scullin, just the year before the little-known editor of a provincial newspaper, had grown in stature so much that he moved the defining motion of the conference. This motion expelled the Labor Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, from the ALP. This did not just expel Hughes. Hughes's crime was opposing the union movement when the unions had determined upon their opposition to conscription. By expelling Hughes, the AWU-backed Scullin was making it clear: Labor was the union party. Its policies would be defined by the labour movement as a whole—not whoever was leader at that particular time. Labor was, and would remain, a labour party—not a nebulous progressive party as exist elsewhere in the world.

As the war came to an end it was clear that the old world order was collapsing—but it was unclear what would take its place. Victory in the war looked increasingly assured—but would there be a victory for the peace? In 1917 Curtin moved to Western Australia, assuming the editorship of the union-backed *Westralian Worker*. He and Scullin filled endless editorials in their respective papers querying the shape of the world to come. The war ended. An influenza pandemic struck. Heroes of the war returned—many finding few jobs and little support. But still the question seemed to be unanswered: what would be the shape of the new world order? This questioning was the background to Labor's adoption of its socialisation objective in 1921.

Once more, Curtin and Scullin were on opposite sides of the debate—driving the ideological contest as influential labour intellectuals. Curtin believed that the years following the war were an immediate opportunity for change. Capitalism, Curtin argued, was in crisis. Soldiers returned from war just to be, he said, 'worked to death when they get back.' Instead of all having reasonable employment, some workers were forced to toil deep into the night, while others starved, desperate for hours. The system had created, he argued, 'an inevitable showdown between Capital and Labor.' Scullin, on the other hand, believed there was the possibility to end capitalism 'by orderly and constitutional means.' Both believed in mass transformation. Both believed workers had suffered disproportionately, and there needed to be a fundamental recalibration of Australia's economic and political life to prevent this happening again.

But whereas Curtin believed in immediate upsurge—Scullin believed, just as he had argued in 1906, that the ultimate objective lay some time off. For this reason, both men became prominent advocates for the socialisation objective in 1921. But with different interpretations of its meaning. Both attended the union congress in early 1921 that endorsed the objective. Both were part of the committee that shaped the terms of the proposed objective at the congress.

But when the ALP proper assembled in Brisbane to debate whether it would accept the objective proposed by the unions, there was a twist of fate. Curtin had fallen ill and couldn't travel from Perth to Queensland. History sometimes moves through such accidents. Scullin was at the conference. He, and his AWU backers, were successful in ensuring the motion was accepted but as an objective—not part of the party's fighting platform. This rendered it as an abstract aim—not an immediate priority. The immediate fight for socialism would not be on—the objective would, instead, function as a lodestar—or, as Scullin surmised, it was 'ultimate not immediate.' Labor had a vision—but lacked the power to bring it into being.

The next time Labor governed federally, Scullin was prime minister. But he was overrun by the very events he would spend the 1920s warning about. Curtin was a critic of Scullin in caucus. The Member for Fremantle believed Labor should be bolder in its opposition to the conservative austerity agenda that prevented Labor from realising its plans to ameliorate the devastation. Scullin was in an almost impossible situation. It is a tragedy that his lifetime of contribution to Labor and to Australia has been almost completely erased by his brief tenure in the prime ministership.

There is a great deal that this period reveals about how not to deal with a global economic crisis. But I don't want to plot spoil too much of my book's unconfirmed sequel. And history always has plenty of lessons on what not to do. More useful, at our contemporary juncture, is picking up on the positive lesson from this story. Curtin and Scullin debated, contested, changed, and learned over the course of their journeys.

When Curtin came to office, he brought these decades of learning with him. His stoic and successful wartime leadership cemented his place in our history. But we should not forget what allowed him to be the leader he was. Curtin was no longer the radical of his earlier years—but he understood the need for a big-picture vision of what Australia could become. His government did not just offer toil and

hardship, it promised that all the effort required to wage total war would be justified once peace had come, when a new, fairer, more equal Australia would be built.

This is what Curtin meant when he promised ‘Victory in War—Victory for the Peace’. This was a pledge to break with the economic and political consensus that had prevailed for decades (if not longer) before, reaching its culmination in the Great Depression. The market, which had proven incapable of providing for working people throughout the years of economic distress and devastation, would be forced to justify itself. The state would assert its power—demonstrated so clearly throughout the war years—to direct economic activity. Economic success would be judged not by abstract markers such as balance sheets or profit rates that most citizens would never see. Instead, it would be judged by concrete and real improvements in people’s lives. Labour would be decommodified, its dignity restored, and full employment would underpin the new social contract. The Curtin government moulded the age. It actively created a new era, transforming our economy, our politics, and our society. It defied the inherited orthodoxies and expanded the bounds of the possible.

When I started writing my book, *Becoming John Curtin and James Scullin*, I was convinced there were many important lessons anyone interested in contemporary political change could learn from them. I sent the final edited version to the publisher in January 2020. I launched the book on the 75th anniversary of John Curtin’s death, 5 July 2020. In the meantime, the entire world had changed. That we were at the end of something was clear—but just what would take its place was not.

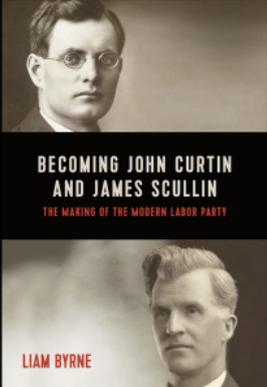
At this time, it seems to me the lives of these two men—and their lifelong projects of social transformation—are more relevant than at any other point since the end of the Second World War. This is a time of immense global crisis, in which Australia has to make decisions right now that will shape our future. It is a time, once more, for those who would mould the age.

See attachment for slides presented during the lecture.

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Attachment—Slides presented at ‘*Becoming John Curtin and James Scullin*’  
Parliamentary Library Lecture



BECOMING JOHN CURTIN  
AND JAMES SCULLIN  
THE MAKING OF THE MODERN LABOR PARTY

LIAM BYRNE

Becoming John Curtin and James Scullin: their early political careers...

And why their stories matter today.



**John Curtin**

Prime Minister  
1941-1945





## James Scullin

Prime Minister 1929-1932

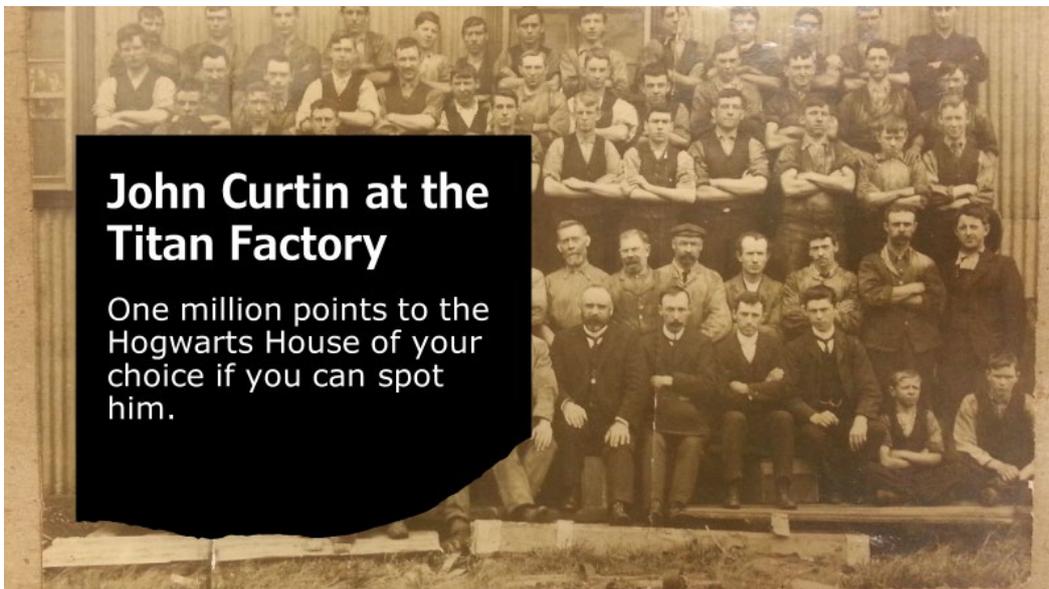
### Mr. Scullin's Eloquent Tribute "He Was My Friend"

The following eloquent tribute to his friend and colleague John Curtin, was broadcast on the radio network on the evening of M-

"The poison shafts of falsehood and derision are often impelled against those who mould the age."

### John Curtin at the Titan Factory

One million points to the Hogwarts House of your choice if you can spot him.





## From the *Tocsin*

'Tom Mann, to Labour men, should be of as much importance as Melba to musicians or musical critics. And Labour men in Melbourne may be depended upon to roll up in their thousands to see and hear him.'



Scullin at the AWU Hall in Ballarat





Unsuccessful in unseating Alfred Deakin in 1906, Scullin won the seat of Corangamite in 1910.

He lost it in the swing against Labor in 1913.

## Edward Grayndler

Secretary of the Victoria/Riverina branch of the AWU and then its national secretary.

He is buried just inches from Scullin at the Melbourne Cemetery.



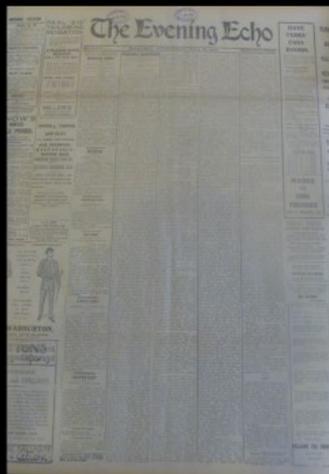
## The young Jack Curtin

On the left is one of his early articles against militarism in the *Socialist* newspaper.





A *Punch* satire of Curtin after he argued that workers – who were exploited and treated like machines – had the right to loaf.



Scullin edited the *Evening Echo*.

He had many skills. Unfortunately, graphic design was not one of them.



Curtin published this cartoon in his newspaper, *The Timber Worker*, soon after war was declared.



The AWU made its opposition to conscription clear.

Scullin gave voice to this opposition in Victoria through the pages of the *Evening Echo* newspaper.



A postcard from Curtin showing an anti-conscription crowd he spoke to as head of the 'Antis'.

'There was nothing in any of the proposals to justify the statement that they were dictated to by a revolutionary movement outside, which was not Labor. He stood for the political Labor Party and bowed to no extreme section. **The objective they carried was ultimate and not immediate.**'

**James Scullin at Labor's 1921 Brisbane conference.**

"I give you the Labor Government's policy in a phrase:  
Victory in war, victory for the peace."

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**AT THE DAWN OF A VICTORIOUS AND BETTER DAY**  
*Prime Minister John Curtin's Inspiring Policy Speech*  
*For Victory in War, For Victory in Peace, You Must Return Your Labor Government*

4 and 5 years of Australia's  
in lead of the Government  
in 20 months has been  
before they are given to

